St. Gregory the Great

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Foreword

The distinction between intellectual Catholicism and popular Catholicism has been made more than once in an invidious spirit of destructive criticism.

It has been said that the Catholicism of the crowd is something very different from the Catholicism offered to the intellectual elite.

We need not reject in principle this distinction; but there is no earthly reason for our opposing popular Catholicism to intellectual Catholicism. Christianity has indeed an immense attraction for what is best in man's intellect, but it has also a distinctly popular side. It is a life full of poetry and romance, replete with practical issues; it has all the charm of true myths without any errors; it is a religion which a whole people may make into a racial and national thing, in the true sense of the terms, with traditions and heroes and wonders and miracles far beyond the imagination of the ancient mythologies. If Catholicism be truly the presence of the Son of God amongst Bien, the marvellous, far from being the unusual and exceptional, ought to be the natural atmosphere in which a Catholic people has its being.

It has always seemed to me that St. Gregory the Great is the most perfect embodiment of that happy union of intellectual and popular Christianity. St. Gregory is truly one of the Church's great Doctors, a worthy successor of St. Augustine of Hippo in the supremacy of mind.

St. Gregory's contribution to Christian theology is immense. But St. Gregory is also the author of the book of the *Dialogues*, that wonderful and fascinating compilation of the pious legends of his period. St. Gregory is the great administrator whose genius for ruling no man has ever doubted, yet he is best known to us as the teacher of sacred music, surrounded by juvenile choristers whom he initiates into the mysteries of ecclesiastical psalmody. The Holy Ghost, under the figure of a Dove, is perched on his shoulder in order to keep him from erring, not only in matters of Faith but also in matters of musical harmony.

The voluminous writings of St. Gregory, his vast epistolary activities, reveal to us a Catholicism both intellectual and popular, which has not changed since his day. In every page of the *Dialogues*, for instance, you find anecdotes which fit to a nicety into the Catholic life of an Italian village of our own day. We act, we pray, we believe, we fear, we hope, as did the Catholics all over the world in the days of St. Gregory. We say Masses for the dead, we expect the deliverance of souls from Purgatory, we believe in the miraculous, in small things and in great, as did the people who figure in St. Gregory's *Dialogues*. Our infidelities to grace and our shortcomings are the infidelities and shortcomings of monks and nuns and other good people who tried their best for the love of Christ in the Italian towns and villages, of which St. Gregory makes such an elaborate and accurate enumeration. Many go straight to Heaven at death, in the days of St. Gregory, perhaps oftener than we dare to hope in our own days. Many there are who are seen in the flames of Purgatory asking for Masses and confessing the peccadilloes that made them unworthy of a speedy ascent to Heaven. St. Peter is seen assisting at the death bed of some favourite client of his, whilst on the other hand, some careless Catholic is frightened out of his wits by the presence of the old enemy when the last hour approaches. There are haunted houses, and houses full

of angelic influences; there are miracles of the first magnitude, and there is divine intervention in favour of the Christian housewife whose hens are being stolen by a wily fox. In a word, St. Gregory's fertile pen portrays for us a complete, all-round, healthy Catholic life, such as the Middle Ages have known it, such as we love it ourselves. The background of all that multitudinous life of intensely practical Christianity is the monumental assertion of the intellectual truths of our Faith.

Anyone who makes us love St. Gregory the Great does our Faith a great service. The present well-written volume cannot fail to endear the great Pope to every reader. But we ought not to stop there: we ought to read St. Gregory himself. There are good English translations of large portions of his works. The *Dialogues*, for instance, are accessible to everyone. St. Gregory's charm is contagious. You seem to be living in the sixth century, and you feel that you have met in your own lifetime the very class of people whom St. Gregory describes so well.

The great Pope was surrounded on all sides by the ruins of the Roman Empire; the Roman Eagle had lost "all its feathers." Gregory felt this great downfall most keenly, as he was a Roman of the Romans. Yet there is a constant vein of optimism in his view of things. There is a kind of playfulness of divine mercies which gives a charm even to such reprobate barbarians as Totila, king of the Goths. The heathen Barbarians were putting Catholic Italy to fire and sword; and Catholic Italy, full of faith in God's mercies, smiled at the Barbarians and converted them to the Faith of Gregory, the successor of Peter.

AUSCAR VONIER, O.S.B.

Abbot of Buckfast.

1

Rome in His Boyhood

Saints are always an interesting study. We ourselves are groping upward in the darkness towards the heights which they have scaled and kept; and we are fain to help our steps along the slippery crags by the footholds which their hands have carved. The interest intensifies when the saint we study is a man of action whom the world cannot even affect to despise, a man who has stamped his impress upon his time and upon our time, a man in whose writings we may read the story of his own soul, and learn things worth knowing of the men with whom he dealt.

Such a saint is Gregory, the great pope whom God gave to His Church in her need, at the close of the sixth century.

The men of his generation conceived of him as far and away their foremost man, his influence owned alike by Byzantine Emperor and Lombard lords, by Franks in Gaul and Visigoths in Spain. His firmness and forbearance stamped out heresy and schism in Vandal Africa. His letters followed his missionaries to the coast of Kent, urging them to encourage whatever was harmless in the time-engrained customs of those heathens of good-will. Leave them, he advised, their beer feasts at Yuletide, and (in the form of good roast beef) the oxen fattened for the sacrifice. But, at the same time, lure them gently to the love of Christ by the story of the son of God, a Babe for their salvation and crying with cold in the manger at Bethlehem.

This was the secret of St. Gregory's power. Deep down in the heart of every man with whom he had to do, he saw some latent good and fostered it. And thus he roused the Romans round him to reorganize order out of chaos, and restore all things in Christ. And thus he tamed the German tribes, singling out what was best in their feudalism, and breathing into it the spirit of the Gospel. We cannot read aright his life, unless we have a clear idea of the world into which he was born.

Rome had long out-lived her palmy days. To the eyes of Gregory she sat on her Seven Hills a discrowned queen dying of old age. "In former years vigorous with youth, strong to multiply the race of men, but now, weighed down by the very weight of years, and hurried on by increasing maladies to the very brink of the grave." Elsewhere he applies to Rome the words of the prophet to Judea: *Enlarge thy baldness as doth the eagle*. "Rome enlarges her baldness like the eagle, since in losing her people she has lost, as it were, all her plumage. The feathers have fallen even from the wings with which she used to swoop upon her victims. For all the mighty men are dead by whom she made the world her prey." And into this decaying civilization swarmed the barbarians, jostling one another for their place in the sun.

When Constantine the Great removed the seat of empire from the Tiber to the Bosphorus, he meant his new capital to act as bulwark against the Persian king. But the real danger came, not from voluptuous Asia, but from the hardy race of tough fighters who dwelt amid the forest swamps and bleak uplands north of the Danube and east of the Rhine. Already in the second century Tacitus had warned his countrymen against the manly virtues of the Teuton. "The freedom of the Germans is the thing to dread, and not the despotism of the Persian King. Long may it endure and harden into a habit that, if they cannot love us they may at least go on hating one another. Fortune can give us nothing better than that our enemies disagree."

Even while Tacitus wrote, Rome was bargaining with the barbarians to fight her campaigns. Soon her best legions were German mercenaries, officered by leaders of their own race and choice. And the legions, as we know, controlled politics in the West, selling the empire to the highest bidder, and murdering their puppet in the purple, when he would not or could not meet their demands. It was German meeting German, when in the fourth and fifth centuries hungry tribes migrated into the Empire, lured by "the goodness of the land and the nothingness of the people "and seeking shelter from the Slays and Huns pressing on their rear.

The Franks, the most capable of assimilating civilization, merely crossed the Rhine and adopted the language and the religion of the conquered regions. Gaul lost nothing by the change of masters. This is the solitary instance in history of Germans fraternizing successfully with Celts and Latins. The Saxons, on the other hand, remained heathen. A few tribes sailed across the North Sea in the wake of the Angles and the Jutes. But the greater number filled up the gaps in the Fatherland left by Angles, Swabians, Lombards and Burgundians. They enlarged their frontiers also by settling in Alsace. The word Saxon is writ large to-day all over the map of Germany.

The other tribes headed South and in theft Arrogance counted Christianity as part of their place in the sun. The Emperors had made the Arian heresy fashionable. The Arians had a code of morals far from rigorous and baptised their neophytes without probation. So Arians they all became.

At last the Empire of the West collapsed.

In 476 the Herule Odoacer murdered the last of the imperial mannikins and proclaimed himself king of Italy. To avenge this crime, and at the same time to rid himself of troublesome neighbours, the Emperor of the East commissioned Theodoric the Ostrogoth to depose

the usurper. Theodoric crossed the Alps with two hundred thousand of his countrymen, restored order, and assumed the title of king with the sullen acquiescence of the Court at Constantinople. This was in 493.

He fixed his capital at Pavia to keep in touch with the northern frontier, and for the thirty-three years of his reign the peninsula had peace. One third of the land was held by the Goths in military tenure. The natives kept their own laws, their own language, their own religion. At Rome the citizens had bread and games, the Senate was soothed with high-sounding titles, a public architect was salaried to keep in good repair the city aqueducts and monuments.

All went well while Theodoric lived. All might have gone well after his death in 526 had the Goths been true to his daughter Amalasunth, had the Emperor Justinian dealt fairly with the unfortunate and gifted princess. But openly he proclaimed himself her protector, and secretly he schemed for her death, The rebels strangled her with her veil in 535, and the murder furnished the pretext for the campaigns in Italy of Justinian's generals, Belisarius and the exarch Narses.

Rome changed hands more than once during the four years fighting that followed. In 540, the year St. Gregory was born, the fields had lain fallow for two years. The people fed on acorns or starved to death on the open moor, and the very vultures turned in disdain from the fleshless corpses. The Greek garrison in the city included Moors, Huns, Persians and, of course, Germans. Military discipline was extremely lax, the imperial officers greedy of gain. The soldiers compounded for their worst offences by a money payment, and so robbery usually accompanied deeds of violence.

On the other hand, Totila, King of the Goths, gained everywhere the goodwill of the peasantry by his strict observance of the rules of war. He had his troops well under control. There was no lawlessness.

Every deed of frightfulness was deliberately planned. Towards the close of 545 Totila laid siege to Rome. Bessas, the imperial general, held the city with three thousand troops. A brave man was Bessas, but utterly callous to the sufferings of the poor. There was grain in the public granaries, but the market price of provisions rose with the pressure of famine, till even the wealthiest could scarce afford the price. A quarter of wheat sold for thirty pounds. Dogs, rats and cats were dainties difficult to buy. The poorer citizens lived on nettles which they cooked with care, to prevent the blistering of their lips and throats. The alms of the church, the whole income of the noble-hearted among the richer citizens served but as a drop in the ocean.

A mass meeting was held on the Palatine. The little Gregory could see it from his home on the Coelian Hill. He could hear the famished howl of the desperate crowd:

"Feed us or kill us or allow us to leave Rome." But Bessas suffered none to depart unless they paid him well .

Belisarius made valiant attempts to raise the siege. With the few troops at his command he forced Totila's position on the Tiber. Bessas, however, failed to assist him by a sally. Perhaps he could not. His garrison was on short rations; the civilians refused to man the walls; the sentries, if they chose, slept at their posts for the officers no longer went their rounds. At length on the 17th of December 546, four Isaurian soldiers turned traitor and admitted the enemy. And as Totila marched his men in by one gate, Bessas fled for his life by another. He had not even time to remove or hide his ill-gotten hoard. The remnant of his horsemen rode hard at his heels.

The Goths paced slowly through a network of deserted streets—the silence unbroken, save for their own shouts and blare of trumpets, or by the occasional shriek of some agonizing , citizen whom they dragged from his hiding hole and killed. Totila gave stern orders that

no woman should suffer hurt or insult. Nor did he approve of indiscriminate slaughter. Only the senators and the leading citizens did he doom to death.

These unfortunates with their families sought sanctuary in St. Peter's great basilica. Was the Senator Gordianus one of those who knelt round the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles? And did his little son, Gregory, lift up his innocent voice in prayer? The boy was seven years of age, quite old enough to understand what was going on.

A copy of the Gospels in his hand, the Archdeacon Pelagius stood forth, to speak Totila fair. "God hath made us your subjects," he told him, "and as your subjects we have a right to be dealt with in mercy."

Totila left them their lives, but sent them to fortresses in the Campagna. The few hundred citizens who survived the siege were also ordered out of Rome. The deserted city was given over to pillage, some buildings were set on fire, a third of the circuit of its walls destroyed. It was rumoured that the Gothic king meant to turn the capital of Christendom into a sheep-walk.

The rumour reached Belisarius on his sick-bed, and he wrote in protest to Totila: "If you win the war, Rome will be the fairest jewel in your crown. If you lose, Rome spared will plead your cause."

Totila stayed the destruction and withdrew his troops. He came back in 549 to find corn-fields waving in the city squares. This time he laid himself out to win hearts—issued orders for rebuilding, gave a chariot race in the Circus Maximus at his own expense, and invited all the exiles to return.

Most of the senators accepted; for Rome was now the safest place for a Roman noble. The scene of the war had shifted, first to Sicily then to Sardinia, and the fame of Totila's victories at last roused the Emperor to effective action. The chief command at Ravenna was given to Narses, a puny little man with brains, who knew Italy well, both

land and people. Moreover he was an orthodox Catholic, popular with the soldiers. and had the name of being the only minister who could get from Justinian all the money he asked for.

A great battle took place in 552. Six thousand Goths lay dead on the field, and Totila mortally wounded was borne away to, die. Within a month his blood-stained tunic and his jewelled helmet were laid at the Emperor's feet. Within the twelvemonth the Ostrogoths as a nation disappeared from history.

Certain Greeks, who love to belittle their own great men by praising the enemy, write highly of Totila and cite traits of his chivalry and largesse. Even St. Gregory, who looked upon him as "always evilly disposed "admits in his *Dialogues* that "he was not so cruel as before he had been "after his visit to Monte Cassino in 542, when the great St. Benedict foretold to him the things which afterwards came to pass.

"Much evil dost thou do, much evil hast thou done," said the abbot to the king. "Refrain thyself now from unrighteousness. Thou shalt enter Rome. Thou shalt cross the sea. Nine years shalt thou reign, in the tenth thou shalt die."

Later the man. of God told the Bishop of Canossa, who came to him for comfort amid the tribulations affecting the Church:

"Rome shall not be utterly destroyed by strangers, but shall be so shaken with storms and lightnings and earthquakes that it will fall to decay of itself."

St. Gregory, who had the incident third hand, adds his comment. "The mystery of this prophecy we now behold clear as day."

The Rome of the Caesars was indeed, in his boyhood, mouldering away. There was still a senate, with duties dwindled, to the regulation of weights and measures. But the sea and two mountainous peninsulas divided the city from the seat of empire. Rome now paid her taxes to

Justinian at Constantinople. She was not even at the head of the Italian province but took her orders from Ravenna on the Adriatic coast.

From his father's house on the western escarpment of the Coelian Hill, the boy Gregory could look across the Appian way to the mass of ruins covering the Palatine. In the reign of Augustus the elite of Rome lived on this hill in marble mansions, "each one huge enough to be a city in itself." Goth and Hun and Vandal had made but small impression on their solid masonry. But only a handful of buildings was in good repair—just enough to house the imperial officials, and the exarch from Ravenna when business brought him to Rome. All around, and elsewhere on the Seven Hills, the ground lay strewn with broken marble and mosaics, and headless statues carelessly toppled over when the pedestals were rifled of their bronze.

It was the Romans themselves who mutilated their monuments and took from public buildings and deserted temples wherewith to mend and reconstruct their own abodes. The houses were now huddled in the lower parts of the city. It was difficult to get water on the heights since the grand old aqueducts had been suffered to fall out of repair. Malaria was chronic in the pestilential swamps thus engendered, and the Campagna had become a wilderness, with the broken lines of aqueduct arches and the charred remains of buildings to tell of the glories and prosperity of bygone days.

But Gregory's home stood on a healthy height, the Clivus Scaurus or western escarpment of the Coelian Hill, where now stands the church and monastery of San Gregorio. There was never a shortage of water in his father's mansion. The great fountain in the *atrium* was, according to legend, the very fountain where the nymph Egeria gave lessons to King Numa on law and religion. In the Middle Ages it was to be a holy well, where halt and blind and sick of divers diseases would

come to drink, and to kneel in thanksgiving or silent petition before the portrait of the sainted pontiff on the wall hard by.

From the steps of the colonnade which let in air and light to the windowless atrium, the boy Gregory could see below him to the south-west the Thermae Caracallae where once sixteen hundred bathers lounged through the day. The roof was still intact, the painted ceilings beautiful. But the huge swimming bath had long ago run dry, weeds were sprouting through the mosaics on the untrodden pavement, spiders wove their webs across the faces of the marble gods. He may have played here as an infant, under the watchful eye of his nurse, Dominica. As a schoolboy he may have sought here, sometimes, a quiet nook, sheltered from the sun, where he might con the morrow's task.

Outside the Thermae ran the Appian Way, the queen of long roads. Gregory must often have walked along its perfect pavement of smoothly jointed stones; for the Roman section of the Via Appia skirted the bases of the Coelian and Palatine Hills, before merging in the Via Sacra a little to the north of the Coliseum.

The Coliseum, too, was in good repair: no breaches then in the huge weather-beaten mass of masonry. It was still used for acrobatic displays and the feats of performing animals. But the gladiators had fought their last fight in 404. Beast-baitings, too, had ceased. The citizens had no longer the opportunity to applaud indecencies on the very spot where their forefathers had died for Christ. Somehow we cannot picture the boy Gregory as ever seeking amusement in the shows of the Coliseum.

Pagan Rome was mouldering away. Deserted and dilapidated, shunned as the haunts of evil spirits stood the stately temples which erstwhile made its glory. The small bronze shrine of Janus in the

Forum still contained the image of the two-faced god; but some fanatic had wrenched its gates apart from their hinges during the Gothic war.

Hard by, on the Via Sacra, Pope Felix IV had thrown into one two small temples to form the Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian. Here the boy Gregory may often have lingered, drinking in the lessons of its storied mosaics. All through life he loved to see the walls of churches covered with holy pictures, "books of the unlettered "he calls them in a letter to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles:

"Exhort your people to acquire the fervour of compunction by gazing on these historic scenes while they bend the knee adoringly before the Holy Trinity."

He liked too the idea of transforming heathen temples into places of Christian worship, and suggested it to his English missionaries. After his death such conversions became popular on the banks of the Tiber. The Pantheon began the series in 6og when Boniface IV consecrated it to the honour of Our Lady and all the martyrs. But in St. Gregory's. lifetime Saints Cosmas and Damian was the solitary instance in Rome.

There were churches in plenty—ugly outside, devotional and aglow with colour and gilding within. Classic monuments had contributed piecemeal to their structure. Thus the pavement in St. Paul's Without-the-Walls was a patchwork of nine hundred inscriptions. In St. Peter's-on-the-Vatican, the ninety-two great pillars had capitals and bases which did not match. The columns of Grecian marble in St. Peter's *ad Vincula* had once adorned the Thermae of Titus and of Trojan.

Only one church could rank as a work of art, "the Golden Basilica," which Constantine had built near the Lateran palace of the popes to be "the mother and mistress of all the churches in the city and in the world."

Yet, even in the sixth century, the Catholic world recognized as its real centre, not the fair church of St. John Lateran, but that other basilica built by Constantine "above the body of Blessed Peter." Here Theodoric the great Goth, albeit an Arian, "worshipped with the deep devotion of a Catholic," and left his offering, two silver candelabra, seventy pounds in weight. Hither, as *ex-voto* for his victories, Belisarius brought two silver-gilt candelabra and a golden cross adorned with gems. Hither from time to time the emperors sent pledges of their communion with the Throne of the Fisherman; costly tapestries, jewelled altar vessels and vases of gold and silver, illuminated gospels in rich bindings encrusted with gems. Nor must we forget St. Gregory's own tablet, enumerating the estates which he allotted for the upkeep of the lamps.

St. Peter's holds a more sacred memorial of this great pope. For "When he departed," says Bede, "to the true life where the reward of his labours shall never die, his body was buried in the church of St. Peter the Apostle, before the sacristy." The greater portion of his relics were translated in 1606 to the Clementine chapel within the same basilica.

But fully to satisfy our devotion towards the saint, we must turn our backs on the Vatican and go—as Gregory so often went in life—along the Via Triumphalis which links St. Peter's with the Lateran palace. And, a little before the road ends in the Piazza San Giovanni, we turn aside up the Avenue San Gregorio which leads to the church and monastery of that name.

In the church we venerate a reliquary containing an arm of our saint, his ivory crosier, his marble chair, the recess where he slept, the picture of Our Lady before which he was wont to pray, the marble table with antique supports where once he entertained an angel unawares, the arm of St. Andrew which he brought home to his monks from Constantinople, his statue designed by Michael Angelo but fin-

ished by another hand, and frescoes treating of St. Augustine's mission to the English.

The circerone taps the walls and buttresses of the church, and tells the pilgrims that they date from St. Gregory's time. And so they do. For when the building was reconstructed in the seventeenth century as much as possible of the old material was used, and the architect copied, as accurately as he could, the church erected during the pontificate of this great pope, and which he consecrated in honour of St. Andrew close to the monastery where he himself had lived so many years in holy peace.

The monastery, too, has been rebuilt. A few Benedictines of the Camaldolese congregation are still tolerated here as caretakers of the church. But the Italian Government took over the premises in 1870 and assigned the larger portion as an almshouse for old women.

Centuries have altered the ground level of the Coelian Hill. Yet experts have reason to believe that, beneath the cellars of the monastery, the old Roman mansion, where St. Gregory was born, exists still in good repair and could be excavated without danger or injury to the buildings overhead.

It was still above ground in 872 and the monks in possession for three hundred years, when John the Deacon paid his memorable visit and described the three portraits in the atrium: Gordianus, Sylvia and their illustrious son.

2

A Goodly Inheritance

Gordianis, our saint's father, was a grave, tall, long-faced man with short beard and bushy hair. He wears in his picture a bright brown *planeta*, suggestive somewhat of a chasuble, and stands clasping the hand of the Apostle, St. Peter, in token that he held office under the pope. Indeed, he was responsible for the law business, upkeep of churches and care of the poor in one of the seven regions of Rome.

He came of an ancient and respected line, the Gens Anicia which was famous, says St. Austin of Hippo, for the many consuls it gave the State, for the many virgins it gave the Church. To this family belonged the first Christian senator, the pope St. Felix III, Boethius, "the last of the Romans whom Cato and Cicero could acknowledge as their fellow-citizen," and St. Benedict, the great patriarch of the monks of the west.

Gordianus was a wealthy man. He owned large estates in Sicily and may often have taken his family there for the summer months. But the formative years of Gregory's boyhood were mostly spent in Rome.

Of this interesting period there is little on record. His talents, like his father's, seem to have been of a. practical order. Natural eloquence and will power gave promise of a distinguished career. Paul the Deacon, his earliest biographer, speaks of his sound judgment, as a boy, of his reverence for his teachers, of his tenacious memory.

"If he chanced to hear what was worth remembering, he did not sluggishly let it pass into oblivion. In those days he drew into a thirsty breast streams of learning, which, afterwards, at the fitting time he poured forth in honeyed words."

From his mother, Sylvia, he learned to be tender as well as strong. Her portrait shows a dignified, pleasant-looking matron, still comely albeit wrinkled with age. Her right hand is uplifted to make the sign of the cross. In her left hand she holds a psalter open at her favourite text: "Let my soul live and it shall please Thee, and let Thy judgment help me."

Sylvia inspired her son with her own love for Holy Scripture. He mastered the sacred text so thoroughly in youth that afterwards he could quote it readily, and bring it to bear on whatsoever topic he treated.

St. Gregory has been blamed for using words unknown to classic writers. Be it remembered that when he wrote, Latin was a living language, subject to change. He could not find in Cicero's vocabulary words to express ideas that were far above Cicero's plane. He certainly did not write the Latin of Cicero or even of Tacitus. But he contributed as much as any Father of the Church to form the new Latin, the Christian Latin which was to become the language of the pulpit and of the schools.

He could always clothe his thought in words which made his meaning unmistakable, but he was at no pains to cultivate elegance of diction. He says himself that his letters abound in uncouth phrases, that his too frequent use of words ending in *m* grates upon the ear, that his faults are flagrant as regards prepositions. He ends his list of shortcomings with the jesting avowal:

"I consider it extremely unbecoming to hamper the flow of heavenly utterance by too rigid attention to the rules of grammarians."

He was prone to deride the preacher "wordy in superfluities, mute in necessaries."

In his *Dialogues*, and still more fully in his homilies, St. Gregory tells the story of his father's three sisters, Tarsilla, Emiliana and Gordiana, who had consecrated their virginity to God, and lived at home, as much apart from the world as in a convent, dividing their time between prayer and good works, and exhorting one another to virtue by word and by example.

Sometimes Tarsilla said sadly to Emiliana: "Methinks our sister, Gordiana, is not as we are. I fear that in her heart she does not keep to what she has promised."

Then would they sweetly chide Gordiana. And she would listen gravely and with downcast eyes, but soon again returned to trifling jests, and sought the company of worldly girls. And the time not given to diversions seemed to her tedious.

Tarsilla died on Christmas Eve. St. Gregory tells us the manner of her death.

"To this holy woman, my great grandfather, Felix, sometime Bishop of Rome, appeared in vision. 'Come' said he, 'I will entertain thee in my home of light." Soon afterwards she fell ill of an ague, and many friends stood round her bed, as is the custom when noble folk lie dying. Suddenly she fixed her gaze on high. 'Away, away!' she cried, 'Make room, my Saviour Jesus comes!' And as she leaned forward to meet the Bridegroom, her holy soul was freed from the flesh and a wonderful fragrance filled the room, so that my mother and the others present knew that the Author of all sweetness had been there."

A few nights later, Tarsilla appeared to Emiliana in her sleep.

"Come," she said joyfully, "I have kept our Lord's Birthday without thee, but we shall be together for the Epiphany."

"If I come," said Emiliana, "who will take care of our sister?"

"Come thou," Tarsilla repeated, "our sister Gordiana is reckoned among the women of the world."

"My aunt Gordiana increased her waywardness," St. Gregory goes on, "and what before was hidden in the desire of her mind she now translated into evil act. Unmindful of the fear of God, unmindful of modesty and reverence, unmindful of her vow of virginity, she married, after a time, the steward of her estates."

Could this be the "Aunt Pateria" who was living in the Campagna in straitened circumstances when Gregory became pope? In the first year of his pontificate he orders his local agent to give her forty measures of wheat, as well as money "to buy boots for her boys." Pateria may well be a clerical slip for *paterna*, "on the father's side."

Gordianus destined his son for the bar, so Gregory naturally focused his studies on Roman and Canon Law. "In the city he was second to none for skill in grammar, dialectics and rhetoric." And despite keen competition on the part of state-aided Constantinople, the Rome of that era still attracted students in theology, law and medicine. Cassiodorus, the cultured statesman turned monk, could write:

"Whereas other districts trade in oil and balm and in aromatics, Rome still distributes to the world the gift of eloquence; and we find it inexpressibly sweet to listen to the men whom she has trained."

Strange to say St. Gregory never troubled to learn Greek, even when in manhood he spent six years in Constantinople, with plenty of leisure on his hands. And thus the wealth of sacred learning in the writings of the Eastern Fathers remained for him locked and sealed. One wonders how Gordianus could have let him grow up ignorant of a language as indispensable to a Roman gentleman in the sixth century as French is to an English one nowadays. It may well be that both father and son resented the secondary position which Rome now held

in politics. This neglect of Greek, moreover, points to a lack of worldly ambition. The boy's aim, as he grew to manhood, was to serve his fellow-citizens, as his father served them, in the pope's employ.

The pope was undoubtedly the great man in Rome, his political position in Italy strengthened by the Emperor Justinian's Pragmatic Sanction of the Ides of August, 554. "Let produce be furnished," thus ran the decree, "let money be received in taxes, according to those weights and measures which Our Piety now entrusteth to the safe keeping of the Most Blessed Pope and the Most Honourable Senate."

Like other Italian bishops, the pope was allowed due weight in the selection of "fit and proper persons to carry on the local government." The Viceroy (exarch) stationed at Ravenna usually allowed him a free hand. The few subordinates in the Government offices on the Palatine did not seriously interfere with his arrangements for the good administration of Rome.

The popes accepted the circumstances and rendered faithfully to Caesar the things he claimed, when this claim did not clash with the higher duty owed to God. Each pope at his accession paid in coin of tribute three thousand gold pieces, just six times as much as an ordinary bishop; and the emperor, as chief patrician, was asked to ratify the choice of the clergy and people of Rome.

Vigilius, who was pope when St. Gregory was born, had represented the Holy See at the court of Justinian during five consecutive pontificates. He had a difficult course to steer at Constantinople, amid simony, intrigue and heresy under a plausible mask. Justinian, himself, was orthodox in faith. But his wife, the Empress Theodora, would fain have men forget her past lapses in the days when she was known as Athenals, the star of the Byzantine comic stage. And so she dabbled and domineered in church affairs and "clung to the Monophysite creed as if it were some new form of sensual gratification."

The Monophysites, who denied Our Lord's Human Nature, had been formally condemned at the fourth General Council of the Church, held at Chalcedon in 451. Three of the bishops at Chalcedon had written formally on the side of Nestorius, and the Monophysites fastened on this fact as a pretext for questioning the validity of the decrees of the Council. Thus began the schism known in history as *The Three Chapters*, a schism long drawn out, which St. Gregory's best efforts failed to heal.

Justinian's Edict of Comprehension forbade the topic to be discussed, and Theodora intruded Anthymus, a dissembling Monophysite, into the See of Constantinople. Pope St. Agapetus, when business brought him to court, unmasked the heretic, deposed and excommunicated him. And Justinian, a moment led astray by anger, knelt spontaneously to ask the pope's forgiveness.

But Theodora hardened her heart. On the death of St. Agapetus she wrote imperiously to the new pope:

"Delay not to come to us; or at least restore Anthymus to his see."

Pope St. Silverius groaned aloud when he read this letter, "I know this affair will be my death."

Nevertheless, putting his trust in God and St. Peter, he refused point blank to hold communion with Anthymus. And the empress set up Vigilius as anti-pope, imprisoned Silverius, and starved him to death, before Justinian could intervene.

Vigilius went to Rome and was canonically elected pope. He wrote immediately to Theodora:

"We have spoken wrongly, senselessly. Now we will not do what you require. We will not recall an anathematized heretic."

Summoned in his turn to Constantinople, he went. He condemned *The Three Chapters* "without prejudice to the Council of Chalcedon." He refused to preside at a council to which the Western

bishops were not summoned. He would not admit that the emperor had a right to dictate to the Church. After eight years struggle he was allowed to return to Rome, but died in Sicily on the homeward journey (555).

Gregory, at that date, was a boy of fifteen, old enough to take a keen interest in the riots which took place in Rome, when Pelagius came before the electors as the emperor's nominee.

Pelagius was an able and a holy man, and Roman to the core. As archdeacon of St. Peter's he had endeared himself to the citizens by open-handed almsgiving in the lean years of famine, he had earned the gratitude of the senators by his bold front against Totila in 546. But these things had slipped from memory during the years of absence which he spent, safeguarding the interests of the Romans as papal agent *(apocrisarius)* at the court of Justinian. Calumny made itself busy with his name. He had bought his appointment, it was whispered, he had had a hand in the death of Vigilius.

However, the memory of his bygone benevolence stirred enough hearts among the notables to secure him the number of votes required by Canon Law. But only two bishops were found willing to officiate at his consecration, the Archpriest of Ostia had to do duty as the third.

Narses, the exarch, came up from Ravenna with his troops to keep order in the city, and rode with the new Pope to the Church of St. Pancras, whom the Romans regarded as the avenger of perjury. Here, his hand on the martyr's relics, Pelagius swore he was innocent of the charges brought against him. Then the procession passed on to St. Peter's and seated on his throne, the new Pope preached to the people on the sin of simony, and proclaimed his intention of cleansing the Church from its foulness. He kept his word.

In 565 the Emperor Justinian died. A little later Narses was recalled in disgrace. Then the Lombards gained a footing in Italy and all was

frightfulness again. In 572 Monte Cassino was raided and the monks dispersed. The marauders infested the Campagna and brought the Romans to the brink of starvation.

We have no details as to the part played by Gregory amid these stirring events. He helped his father in his regionary duties, and succeeded him in office when the death of Gordianus left him one of the wealthiest men in Rome. His widowed mother retired to a hermitage near St. Paul's Without-the-Walls, to spend the remainder of her life in prayer, good works and pious reading. Her son endowed the basilica to which she attached herself with a yearly grant of oil and wax.

We know he was chief magistrate in Rome at the age of thirty-three. His signature, in this capacity, heads the list of Romans who pledged themselves in 574 to uphold the Fifth General Council of Constantinople. For the Popes recognised this Council as ecumenical, with the proviso "that the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon might in no wise be impugned."

This was Gregory's first contribution to the controversy of *The Three Chapters*, a fight over nothing, so it seems to us now, nevertheless it proved an irritating thorn to St. Gregory all through his career. We shall not refer again to the "very useful letters "which as papal secretary and as pope he wrote to hinder schism from hardening in the Churches of Milan and Istria. The verdict of history has long ago approved the sensible attitude which the Holy See adopted from first to last.

As Prefect of Rome Gregory could now wear the *trabea* of the Consuls, a rich robe of silk, magnificently embroidered and sparkling with gems. Impartial, gracious, open-handed, he soon won his way into the hearts of the citizens, who vented their enthusiasm in cheers whenever he appeared in the streets.

But Gregory shrank from plaudits. The responsibilities outweighed, in his mind, the dignity of his position. He made time to spend long hours in prayer. He courted the friendship of holy monks. There were about twenty monasteries in Rome at the time, and many homeless monks sought refuge within the circuit of the city walls when the Lombards laid waste the Campagna.

Gregory had already founded six monasteries on his lands in Sicily. He now turned his house at Rome into a seventh in honour of the Apostle St. Andrew. Here he, himself, took the habit in the year 575.

The atrium—the great windowless hall with its colonnaded portico and its fountain—remained much as he remembered it in childhood., Here were the portraits of his beloved parents. And here in a small apse within a a ring of stucco, as John the Deacon tells us, our saint after he became Pope, "wisely wished his own likeness to be painted, that he might be frequently seen by his monks as a reminder of his known severity."

John's description of this picture may fitly close this chapter. We cannot better Dudden's translation of it in his *Gregory the Great*.

"His face was well proportioned, combining the length of his father's and the roundness of his mother's countenance; his heard, like his father's, was somewhat tawny and sparse. His head was large and bald, surrounded with dark hair hanging down below the middle of the ear; two little curls bending towards the right crowned a forehead broad and high. The eyes were of a yellow-brown colour, small but open; the eyebrows arched, long and thin; the under eye-lids full. The nose was aquiline with open nostrils. The lips were red and thick, the cheeks shapely, the chin prominent and well formed. His complexion, swarthy and high-coloured, became flushed in later life. The expression was gentle. He was of medium height and good figure; his hands were beautiful, with tapering fingers well adapted to handle the

pen of a ready writer. In the picture he was represented as standing, clad in a chestnut coloured chasuble over a dalmatic, and wearing a small pallium which fell over his shoulders, breast and side. His left hand grasped a book of the Gospels, his right was raised to make the sign of the Cross. A square frame, not the round nimbus, surrounded his head, proving that the portrait was executed during his life time. Beneath the picture was the following distich of his own composing:

"Christe, potens Domine, nostri largitor honoris,
Indultum officium solita pietate guberna."

3

Monk and Business Man

St. Benedict's "tiny rule suited for beginners" had stood the test of sixty years before it won St. Gregory's praise as "marvellously discreet and clear." It was framed originally for men "wisely unlearned" like their founder, who had fled from the haunts of men to build their monasteries in the wilderness and eat their bread in the sweat of their brow. Obviously, it had to be somewhat modified to suit the circumstances of St. Andrew's, a monastery well endowed and established in the heart of Rome. Six hours a day of manual toil was too much, two hours of study not enough.

But the main principles of the Benedictine Order remained intact.

At St. Andrew's, as at Monte Cassino, a postulant of mature age was kept knocking at the gate for some days to try his perseverance. Then he was admitted to the guest house and after some days, to the novitiate. Here an old monk, skilled in the art of training souls, studied his vocation and character, and warned him of the difficulties and discomforts in the hard path of obedience. Three times the whole rule was read in his presence, and the question formally put:

"It thou canst observe it, enter. If thou cant not, *liber discede*, thou art free to depart."

At St. Andrew's, as at Monte Cassino, the monks had "to obey without delay." St. Benedict wrote in his rule: "For the preservation of peace and charity, it is expedient that the entire government of

the monastery depend upon the will of the abbot. Furthermore, the brethren shall obey one another, knowing that by this path of obedience they shall go to God."

To foster the habit of prompt, uncomplaining obedience, great stress was laid on the twelve degrees of humility by which, says St. Benedict, "the monk will gradually ascend to that perfect love of God which casteth out fear, so that whatsoever in the beginning he forced himself to observe, he shall at length do without effort, not now through fear of hell, but for the love of Christ, out of a good custom and a delight in virtue."

St. Andrew's, like Monte Cassino, was a "Castle of God" where the monks clad in the armour of obedience, enlisted under the standard of Christ for strenuous service of labour and prayer.

Divine worship was their principal duty—*Opus Dei* St. Benedict calls it, "the work of God to which all other work must be subordinated." The days and nights were parcelled out into liturgical hours when the brethren met in choir, to stand reverently in the sight of God and His angels, and to sing the Divine praises with heart and voice in unison.

Between times arts and crafts were plied. The work was for the sake of the monk, not the monk for the sake of the work. "If any one be proud of the skill he has in his craft, because he thereby seems to gain something for the monastery, let him be removed from that craft and not exercise it again, unless after humbling himself he obtains leave from the abbot." This was the rule in St. Andrew's as in Monte Cassino. "Let the devil never catch you idle "was a favourite saying with St. Benedict and Hs spiritual sons.

No monk was exempt from his share in the manual work about the house and grounds. Even on Sundays and festivals, "if a brother be unwilling or unable to meditate or to read, he shall be given some work

that he can do." The other monks thought none the worse of those whose temperament needed to be thus indulged. St. Gregory remarks in his *Moralia* from the Book of Job:

"Some men are so restless that if they have leisure from work they labour more grievously, for they suffer greater tumults of heart the more freely they are left to thought. Often those who could contemplate God in quiet fail on account of stress of work. Often, too, those who could fulfil His Holy Will when occupied in human purposes have their life extinguished by the sword of contemplation."

And yet in this busy house each one lived his life alone with God. Silence, strictly insisted on, helped to recollection. Pious reading supplied food for holy thoughts. Some time was set apart each day for meditation on the Holy Scripture—that sea, as St. Gregory was the first to call it, "where a lamb can wade, and where an elephant soon swims beyond his depth." Copies of the Bible multiplied in the library awmries, comments on the sacred text were laboriously collated from the writings of the old Fathers. Treatises were written and homilies composed and delivered by those in whom the abbot recognised a special gift.

A letter from St. Gregory, when Pope, to an abbot whom he found somewhat remiss in his duties, shows the importance he attached to intellectual work. "I do not find that the brethren of your monastery, whom I have met give time to reading. Consider how great a sin it is if, when God gives you sustenance from the offerings of others, you neglect to study His commandments."

Nor would he have the studies entirely restricted to sacred authors. The masterpieces of Latin literature he looked upon as aids to a fuller understanding of Holy Writ.

"The devils know full well," he remarked, that minds well trained in secular learning can more easily reach a high level in things divine.

When they strive to take away from our hearts all inclination to study, it is but to hinder us from forging the lance or sword which would be of use to us in the spiritual combat we all have to sustain."

In the sixth century, especially in half-pagan districts, such a weapon might easily prove too sharp-edged to be wielded with safety. Towards the close of his life St. Gregory was "filled with grief and vehement disgust "when a report reached him that the Bishop of Vienne in Gaul gave lectures on profane authors to his friends.

"I cannot mention it without a blush," he writes in 601, "and I hope it is untrue. For the same mouth cannot sing the prates of Jupiter and the praises of Jesus Christ. Bethink yourself how abominable it is for a bishop to recite verses which are unseemly in the mouth of a Christian layman."

Holy Poverty was very strictly observed. "Let no one presume, without leave from the abbot, to give, receive or hold as his own anything whatsoever, book, tablets, pen, etc." Yet the monks had, for the asking, all they required, "that all pretence of necessity may be removed." The clothing was decent and not too coarse; in winter the cowl was lined with wool.

Flesh meat was forbidden fare. But, except on fast days, there were always two meals. Always at the chief meal a pint of wine was allowed each monk, and there were two hot dishes "because of the infirmities of different people, so that he who cannot eat of one may make his meal of the other."

Special provision was made in the rule for the care of the sick, and Gregory was often on the sick list. The constraint of silence, change m diet, broken sleep, minute obedience, absorption in prayer and study, rough work to which he was unused, all these things tried severely a man not inured to hardship and no longer in his first youth. It was a great change from magistrate to monk, and it soon began to tell

upon his health. In the *Dialogues* he tells of the state to which he was reduced one Lent, when over and above the austerities ordered by the Church and prescribed by his rule, the Benedictine is exhorted "to make some offering in the way of abstinence from food or drink, sleep or laughter, that so he may await the feast of Easter with spiritual joy and desire. Yet he must acquaint the abbot with what he offers, and do it with his consent and blessing."

"I was so sick," writes St. Gregory, "that I often swooned and was continually at death's door unless I did eat something. And when I found that I might not refrain from often eating upon Holy Saturday, a day on which even old people and little children fast, I began to sink more from sorrow than from weakness."

And then he bethought himself of a holy old monk named Eleutherius, "a humble and simple soul, whose tears were of force with God. I went with him, privately, into the oratory and begged him to obtain for me, by his prayers, the strength to fast that day." With humility and tears he fell to his prayers and blessed me after a while and went away. And at the sound of his blessing my stomach grew so strong that all thought of food and all feeling of sickness vanished completely.

"All day long I busied myself about the affairs of the monastery and never troubled about my health. Indeed, feeling myself so well and strong I began to doubt whether I had eaten or not. And I could very well have gone on fasting till next day.

Flesh meat was allowed by the rule to the infirm; but Gregory, though always sickly, never seems to have required such dispensation. Plain vegetables, properly cooked, suited his needs. But who could guarantee the cooking, when the brethren in the kitchen were changed each week? Sylvia's hermitage, however, was not far distant, and the abbot was willing she should send every day, hot in a silver dish, the

portion of pulse which she had carefully prepared for him with her own hands. History is silent as to whether any strengthening condiments were mixed with the food. An abbot's wisdom and a mother's love are fertile in expedients.

A pretty story attaches to the silver dish. One day there came to St. Andrew's a stranger with a pitiful tale of his ships wrecked at sea. Gregory, who seems at that time to have had charge of the alms-giving, gave him six crowns, with kindly words of hope. Next day the stranger came again, urging the greatness of his losses and the little help he could get from his friends. And again he received six crowns. Yet a third time he came: he was disgraced for ever, should he meet his creditors without means to pay his debts. The alms-chest was by this time quite empty, and there was no ether money available in the house. But Gregory, who knew his mother's heart, gave her the merit of the good deed and sent the stranger away quite satisfied with the silver dish.

Years afterwards, when Sylvia had long since passed to her reward and her son was Pope, twelve poor men were entertained each day at dinner in the Lateran Palace. And one day, writes John the Deacon, the Pope counted thirteen and asked the attendant for an explanation.

"Believe me, holy Father," replied the man in a confident tone, "there are only twelve, as you yourself gave order."

And, however often they counted the guests during the meal, the servant always found twelve and the Pope thirteen. Moreover, St. Gregory noticed that the poor man seated nearest him frequently altered his features; sometimes he seemed a young man, sometimes old and venerably grey. So when the Pope dismissed the twelve with his blessing, he took the thirteenth by the hand, led him apart and asked him his name.

"Refresh your memory," came the smiling reply. "Know in me the shipwrecked merchant who came to you, when you were writing in your cell on the hill Scaurus. You gave me twelve crowns and the silver dish in which your mother, the blessed Sylvia, sent you your cooked pittance of pulse. And you gave with such cheerful heart that I knew for certain Christ had destined you to be head of His Church on earth, successor and Vicar of Peter the Prince of the Apostles."

"How could you know?" exclaimed Gregory amazed.

"Because I am an angel, sent by God to test your constancy."

We have given the incident in John the Deacon's words, and we accept it as literally true, full fain, however, for further detail. Was Gregory abbot at the time or simply a monk? How far did he yield to natural impulse when he gave away his mother's dish? If fault there were—and the angel had no word of blame for him—we may rest assured the saint speedily and amply atoned for it and grew in humility. But what a light it throws on the straitening of Holy Poverty on a man who had ample funds at his disposal, and who hitherto and henceforth was always solicitous, "lest a poor man who asks to be comforted depart in sorrow."

This constancy in his care for the poor is a feature in Gregory's career on which his biographers are bound to lay stress. Holy Church, herself, emphasizes it in one of the antiphons for his feast.

"Like an eagle, whose shining wings cover the world with their dazzling radiance, he provided for the needs of all, both little and great, in the large-hearted breadth of his charity."

When he entered religion, he was perfectly aware that he put from him all choice in the allotment of his alms. He did not even know whether his superiors would see fit to make use of his administrative ability in the service of the needy. The yoke of Holy Poverty, however,

never seems to have galled unduly. The yoke of obedience sometimes did. He tells us himself:

"It is not very hard for a man to forsake what he has. It is exceedingly laborious for a man to renounce what he is."

Yet in the prime of manhood he deliberately determined to order henceforth his life by rule, whole-heartedly acquiescent in the arrangements of his superiors. He had but a year's novitiate in which to test, whether or not, the strain was beyond his powers, or rather beyond the grace given him from on high. All too quickly passed that precious year. Later on in life, when he was in a position to make changes in the Rule of St. Benedict, he deemed it prudent to lengthen this time of probation in the case of all religious.

We find him writing to a bishop of Naples: "Let Your Fraternity strictly interdict all monasteries from venturing to tonsure novices before they have completed two years in monastic life. During this space let careful proof be made of their life and manners, lest any of them should not afterwards hold fast to his choice. It is a grievous matter when untried men are banded together in the service of any man. How mach more grievous is it to allow untried men to consecrate themselves by life-long vow to the service of the Most High God."

The Holy Pope had, perhaps, his own experiences in mind when he further legislated in 601.

"Henceforth monks shall not be moved to other monasteries, or raised to Sacred Orders, or be employed in any ecclesiastical position, without the consent of their abbot."

It would have been worse than useless for his own abbot to have objected when, shortly after his profession, Gregory was chosen by the Pope then reigning to be one of the cardinal deacons who were charged with the superintendence of the ecclesiastical regions of Rome.

His duties now obliged him to spend several hours each day outside the walls of St. Andrew's. The religious habit won him still greater respect than the *trabea* "aglow with silk and jewels "which he once wore in the streets as prefect of the city. The manifold works of mercy in which he engaged endeared him to the people among whom he worked.

It was quite in the course of business that he halted one day in the market-place and asked questions about the three flaxen-haired, rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed boys from Yorkshire whom he saw there exposed for sale. For the laws of Rome provided that heathen slaves should have leisure and opportunity for religious instruction, and it was the deacon's duty to make sure that these laws were obeyed.

"The pity of it," he mused aloud, "that the Prince of Darkness should hold such bright beings in thrall and that, with such wondrous grace of form, they should lack the inward beauty of the grace of God."

And as he took down on his tablets the needful particulars, he hid his emotion in the string of puns with which Bede has made us familiar.

"Angles? Yes, they have angelic faces and should be coheirs with the angels of heaven! They come from Deira? *De-ira* from the wrath. Verily they shall be snatched from God's ire and called to the mercy of Christ! Their king, you say, is called Ella? Soon shall *Alleluia* be sung in Ella's land!" The monk went on his way with downcast eyes and even gait, with brain and heart aglow. Henceforth those bright faces haunted him through the busy day, and through the prayerful watches of the night. And the slave-dealer, no doubt, became more careful in his treatment of the lads and warned intending purchasers of the interest taken in them by the popular deacon. Perhaps, punning in his turn, he told how Gregory, "the watchman," would follow their