

ST. LEO THE GREAT PARISH

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GETTING TO KNOW OUR PATRON SAINT . . .



Saint Leo the Great, also known as Pope Saint Leo I, was born into a Roman aristocratic family. His response to the call of the Lord transformed him into one of the greatest popes of Christian history. In fact, he was the first pope to be given the title "the Great."

Details pertaining to Leo's place of birth are not known, but it is believed his

ancestors come from Tuscany.

By 431 he had become very well-known deacon of the Church serving the church under the pontificate of Pope Celestine I. Leo was widely respected for his love for the Lord, intelligence and persuasive nature. He was also gifted in bringing reconciliation between disputing groups of Christians.

That is why he was often sent out to settle disputes, both secular and theological. The current pope died while Leo was visiting Gaul at the request of Emperor Valentinian III. His task was to bring peace between one of Gaul's chief military commanders and the chief magistrate. Leo was then unanimously elected as the next pope to succeed Pope Sixtus III in 440. His swift election reflected the respect he had garnered among the people from his service to the Lord and the affection the faithful had this pastoral and wise servant of the Lord.

Pope Leo was deeply dedicated to his service as pope. He saw himself as privileged to sit in the Chair of St Peter, as the servant of the servants of God. He worked diligently as "Peter's successor." Over time, Leo became known as one of the best administrative popes of the ancient Church. But, he was so much more.

During his reign, he tirelessly fought to preserve the unity of the Church and its faith; and to ensure the safety of his people against invasions from armies which sought to destroy the Church and the Christian influence on culture.

Along with his dynamic faith and outstanding theological wisdom, Pope Leo I was also courageous. Rome had been sacked in 410 and the Roman government was in shambles and was incapable of defending the country from invaders. As Atilla was making his way toward Rome, destroying city after city along the way, what was left of the Roman senate begged Leo to dissuade the barbarian from sacking Rome. He agreed and led Rome's defense against Attila the Hun's invasion on Italy by taking on the role of peacemaker. Attila with his Huns broke into Italy, and marched through its burning cities as they neared Rome. Leo went out boldly to meet him, and prevailed on him to turn back and not pillage the city. He had no army. He simply had courage and faith. So he rode on horseback to meet the oncoming army and began to persuade Attila to turn his army away from Rome. And amazingly he did.

Astonished to see the terrible Attila, the "Scourge of God," fresh from the sack of Aquileia, Milan, Pavia, with the rich prize of Rome within his grasp, turn his great host back to the Danube at the Saint's word, his chiefs asked him why he had acted so strangely. He answered that he saw two venerable personages, supposed to be Sts. Peter and Paul, standing behind Leo, and impressed by this vision he withdrew. In 455, a Christian historian named Prosper wrote of the encounter "...for when the king had received the embassy, he was so impressed by the presence of the high priest that he ordered his army to give up warfare and, after he had promised peace, he departed beyond the Danube.

Initially the people of Rome rejoiced and praised God, but about six months later they began to come up with an alternative explanation about why the barbarians had been turned away. They claimed that it was the old pagan gods that had come to their aid. In response Leo gathered the people of Rome together and began to preach to them. He told them that the reason why they were spared the barbarian invasion was not because of horoscopes or the pagan gods but that "the one true God loves you and cares for you."

Only three years later, Leo had another invader knocking on the door of the holy city. This time, the Vandal, Genseric, came upon the nearly defenseless walls of Rome. Unfortunately, Leo was not as successful this time in persuading the invaders. They did not kill and slaughter as they had done in other places, but after 15 days, they took many treasures and captives back to Africa with them.

Immediately, Pope Leo set out to repair the damages and evils the Vandals had done, he sent priests with alms to minister to those who were taken to Africa and, he replenished, as much as he could, the sacred vessels and art that was stolen by the invaders.

Pope St Leo focused heavily on the pastoral care of his people. He inspired and helped to foster charitable work in areas of Rome affected heavily by famine, refugees and poverty. To him, being a Christian was not only about embracing the fullness of the Gospel theologically but living it out in a world filled with hurt, suffering and needs.

Pope Leo I was renowned for his profoundly spiritual sermons. With his words, Leo could reach the everyday needs and interests of his people. It was his reputation as an "instrument of the call to holiness, well-versed in Scripture and ecclesiastical awareness" that helped him to become one of the greatest popes in the history of the Church.

Leo died on November 10, 461. He wished to be buried as close as possible to St. Peter's tomb. His body was first laid in the entrance of St. Peter's basilica but was later moved inside the basilica in 688.

Pope Leo I's papacy has been described as one of the most important in the Church's history. Nearly 100 sermons and 150 letters of Leo I have been preserved; one of them is still, to this day, used in the Office of Readings on Christmas.

His feast day is November 10.

~ Angela Anno