Gregory Palamas

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See also Ecumenicism; Fathers of the Church; Hesychasm; Spiritual Theology; Thomism; Vision, Beatific

Gregory the Great

c. 540–604

1. Life

Gregory I was born into the senatorial class and was Prefect of Rome in 573. He became a monk in 574, and the pope’s legate (apocrisarius) in Constantinople around 578. On his return to Rome, around 585, he became an abbot, and then pope* in 590. He concentrated as pope both upon the pastoral duties of his mission and upon the development of a theology of episcopal ministry*. 

(a) Gregory was a significant figure in the process by which the Bishop of Rome came to claim and establish a hegemony among the ancient patriarchates*. By Gregory’s time, the papacy, which had always been more autonomous, had largely taken over the running of Rome*; this gave it a temporal authority that was to be important to its subsequent development in the long-running struggle between church* and state during the Middle Ages.

(b) As an abbot, Gregory seems to have preached on the First Book of Kings, the Prophets, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs. In around 591, he completed the Moralia in Job, probably the most widely read of his works in the Middle Ages. In the same period, he worked on the Regula Pastoralis. In 591, ill and unable to preach, he composed sermons on the Gospels*.

While the Lombards were besieging Rome, he gave his Homilies on Ezekiel, which he later published in two books (601). Some have doubted the authenticity of his Dialogues (593–94), which contain, most notably, a life of St. Benedict and accounts of miracles*, and they seem rather to represent Gregory’s attempt at a different literary genre, akin to the lives of the desert fathers. A substantial body of letters survives.

2. Theology

Gregory was not an original thinker. His achievement was to present much of the body of Augustine*’s thought for a popular audience and to integrate something of the spirituality of the eastern tradition in a balanced presentation of Christian life. He worked for the most part through the exposition of scripture, tracing imagery and drawing out meanings whose vividness gave them wide currency throughout the Middle Ages.

(a) For Gregory, preaching* was the means by which a bishop* properly fulfills his function of guardianship and maintenance of the faith*. He was largely responsible for the model of the four senses of scripture* that
scholars used in the West until the 16th century: a literal or historical sense, an allegorical sense, an analogic sense (prophesying eternal life*), and a tropological or moral sense.

(b) Gregory saw the Eucharist* as a manifestation of a harmony in the universe. It is a mediation between the human and the divine, a healing of all divisions. In the Eucharist, the saints are already united with God in this life. Christ* is offered as victim (hostia) and sacrifice* (a thesis stressed by Gregory, and an important contribution) in a humility and obedience that is the pattern for all Christians. The Eucharist’s effectiveness depends upon participation in Christ’s body, which means that Christians must not only practice contemplation*, but also seek to serve their neighbors. Finally, the Eucharist is able to benefit souls after death*.

Gregory himself constantly felt the existence of a tension between contemplation and action, and linked it to the bipolarity of the “inward” (the spiritual) and the “outward” (the bodily). Outwardly, all is distress, change, and decay. Inwardly, there is peace and tranquility, the foretaste of a Heaven that Platonists as well as Christians could long for. The late antique preoccupation with the dichotomy of body and soul* is developed by Gregory with a new richness of imagery. His emphasis on illumination is also typically Platonist in style, but for Gregory it is the divine light of grace* that shows us what we could not otherwise see in our sinful blindness.

(c) Gregory’s use of biblical imagery in speaking of Christ has exerted a major influence on Christian language. Christ, the Church’s Bridegroom, is the model for the intimacy that ought to exist between Christ and the soul. Christ is the gateway by which Christians come into the presence of God. Preachers imitate Christ in this. The church itself is the gateway between this world and the next. Christ’s headship of the church is a paradigm for the bishop’s authority*. Christ is also the Judge who weighs men’s merits with both justice* and loving kindness.

3. Posterity

The Regula Pastoralis was to influence the medieval conception of the role of a bishop. Bernard* of Clairvaux used it in writing the De Consideratione for Eugenius III, and it thus affected theories of papal supremacy in the later Middle Ages.

The Dialogues were important in the success of Benedictine monasticism*, which provided the Rule by which western monks were to live at least until the 12th century. Gregory also advised Augustine of Canterbury, whom he had sent as his missionary to Great Britain, to make a sensible selection from all the existing rites so as to construct an appropriate rite for the new Christians of the island. A number of practices in the liturgy of the West, for example the use of the Lord’s Prayer at the end of the Eucharistic prayer, seem to be indebted to Gregory’s guidance. The Gregorian Sacramentary that was sent by Pope Hadrian I to Charlemagne around 790, and was thereafter circulated widely in the Frankish empire, goes back to Gregory’s pontificate.

- PL 66 and 75–79; CChr.SL 140–44; Homilies on Ezekiel, SC 327 and 360; Commentary on the first Book of Kings, SC 351 and 391; Moral Exposition on the Book of Job, SC 32bis, 212 and 221; Dialogues, SC 260 and 265; Letters SC 370–371; Regula Pastoralis, SC 381–82.
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See also Holiness; Mass, Sacrifice of the; Platonism

Groote, Gerard. See Devotio Moderna

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