



SAINT LEO THE GREAT
c. 400-461
Pope, Doctor of the Church

One of only two Popes to be called great, Leo was born in the late 4th century, probably of a Tuscan family. He was at Rome as a deacon under Pope Celestine I and Pope Sixtus III (422-440). As a deacon Leo was quite influential. He informed Celestine I about the Nestorian heresy in 430 and assisted Sixtus III and also Archbishop Cyril of Alexandria. In September of 440, Leo was elected Pope.

Leo set about making the Roman church a model for all other churches. He wrote over 96 sermons in which he stressed almsgiving, fasting and prayer, and also clarified Catholic doctrine, especially on the Incarnation. He was a strong advocate against heresy and convened a council of clergy and laymen to dispute the Manichaean beliefs and reinforce orthodoxy. He personally wrote letters to all of the Italian bishops warning of the false teachings.

Leo was an advocate of orthodoxy rather than an original theologian. In 451 the Council of Calcedon was held in Asia Minor and at least 600 bishops attended. Leo sent 3 representatives. Leo's Tome, which he had written, was read to the Council. Included in it were his concise definitions of the doctrine of the Incarnation and the two natures of Christ. His statement on the latter later became the Church's official teaching. However, Leo refused to accept the Council's decision to recognize the patriarch of Constantinople as primate over the Eastern churches.

Leo had a lot of personality and courage. In 452 Leo confronted Attila the Hun outside of Rome and convinced him to turn back, saving the city from being sacked and destroyed. This was done with no help from the Emperor, who hid in Ravenna. In 455, Leo confronted another attacker, Genseric, the Vandal king. This time Leo was only partially successful in stopping the invasion of Rome. The Vandals pillaged the city and took captives and booty back to Africa but did not burn the city. Leo ministered to the distraught people and engaged in rebuilding the city and churches. He also sent missionaries to assist the captives in Africa.

Leo was called the Great because of his untiring stance for orthodoxy and his writings related to such, his firm belief in the supreme authority of the Holy See, and his action on its behalf, such as his authoritative and reasoned approach to events. Leo's actions greatly advanced the influence of the papacy.

Leo was revered by all classes of people and by the clergy and laity. He died on November 10, 461, and his tomb is in the Vatican basilica. Benedict XIV in 1754 honored Leo the Great and his written works by declaring him a doctor of the church.