

Equality and Pastoral Rule: Pope Gregory the Great's Inner Conflict

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Gregory the Great clearly expressed a belief in fundamental human equality. This required him to offer some explanation, if only to himself, of his position at the top of the thoroughly hierarchical social and ecclesiastical authority structure of the sixth century. While his biographers have made his difficulty in accepting his episcopal calling well known, they have paid insufficient attention to the role his egalitarian beliefs may have played in creating his distress. Some have minimized or even denied them.¹ While, due to cultural or psychological constraints, he may never have openly acknowledged or even fully recognized the extent of the dissonance, it manifested itself in the burden he experienced in pastoral duties, the anguish he felt over his elevation to the papacy, and his longing for the contemplative life. In 590, the year he was consecrated as Pope Gregory I, known thereafter as Gregory the Great, he wrote a treatise presenting his ideas about pastoral ministry and explaining his reluctance to take the office. That work, entitled *Pastoral Care* in English translation, was the primary text for pastoral ministry for one thousand years afterward and enjoys the reputation of an enduring classic even today.² Evidence from it, supplemented by facts known about his life and gleaned from his correspondence, establishes the existence of his egalitarian beliefs and suggests some ways in which Gregory attempted to reconcile his power and authority with them.

Gregory's egalitarianism

The evidence for Gregory's belief in fundamental human equality includes unequivocal written statements affirming it and objecting to slavery. In *Pastoral Care* 2.6, Gregory lays out an egalitarian foundation as he instructs rulers regarding the disastrous consequences of the failure to remember the basic fact of human equality. He advises, "All who are superiors should not regard in themselves the power of their rank, but the equality of their nature; and they should find their joy not in ruling over men, but in helping them."³ The dangers of forgetting this fundamental truth include violation of the natural order of things, pride, and, ultimately, alignment with Lucifer a...

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