

[Readings: 1 Cor 2:1-5; Ps. 119; Luke 4:16-30]

Pope Saint Gregory I, also known as the Great, was the Pope of the Catholic Church between 590 and 604 AD.

Gregory was born around 540 in Rome. The exact date of his birth is unknown. Although the Western Roman Empire had collapsed long before his birth, many ancient Roman families still commanded great wealth and influence in the city. Gregory was born into one such family. His great-great-grandfather was Pope Felix III who reigned from 483 to 492. (Astute readers may suspect this to be a scandal, but this was at a time before the clergy took vows of celibacy.) Gregory's family was very wealthy and owned estates on the island of Sicily which provided income.

Gregory was well educated and excelled in all his studies. He also became an expert in law. He excelled so much he became the Prefect of Rome, just as his father had been. Gregory was only 33 years old.

After Gregory's father had died, Gregory had the family villa in Rome converted into a monastery. As a monk, Gregory was hard and strict. When a monk on his deathbed confessed to stealing three pieces of gold, Gregory ordered he be left to die alone. After the poor monk had died, Gregory ordered his body thrown on a dung heap along with the three coins. Then, in a turn of heart, Gregory offered 30 Masses for the deceased monk.

Pope Pelagius II, who reigned from 579 to 590, chose Gregory to serve as an ambassador to the imperial court in Constantinople.

In 590, Pope Pelagius II died, and Gregory was proclaimed pope by acclamation. This was not something Gregory wanted, but he accepted the burden nevertheless. Pope Gregory was famous for the emphasis he put on missionary work. He sent many people out to bring many to Jesus and into the Church. Anglo-Saxon Britain was, at that time, still on the frontier of Christendom. It was Pope Gregory who dispatched St. Augustine (of Canterbury) to Kent in 597 (not to be confused with St. Augustine of Hippo).

Pope Gregory made many changes to the Mass, some of which remain today. The position of the Our Father in the Mass remains where Pope Gregory placed it. He emphasized the aspect of service to the poor for deacons. The number of deacons was increasing in number and they were seen as less essential as extensions of the Bishop than they were in the early Church. Deacons were often tasked with giving alms to the poor, and at least one was assigned to each church and ordained for this purpose.

Pope Gregory may have also established "cantus planus," known in English as plainchant. Most today know this style of singing as Gregorian Chant. The melodious, monophonic music is known throughout the Church and closely associated with medieval monasteries. Gregorian chant gives us the oldest music we still have in the original form, some dating to the centuries just after the death of Gregory. It remains a matter of some dispute just how involved Pope Gregory was in the development of the style. Some music historians argue the credit is a misattribution that rightly belongs to his less famous successor of a century later, Gregory II.

Pope Gregory was well known for his alms to the poor, and he gave quite generously of the riches donated to the Church by the wealthy people of Rome. Everything from money to land was given to the poor in some fashion. He made clear to his subordinates that their duty was to relieve the distress faced by the poor. He ordered his clergy to go out into the streets to find and care for the poor in person. Any clergy who were unwilling to go into the streets and help the poor were replaced. Assets of the Church were liquidated to provide income for alms.

Pope Gregory himself refused to eat until his monks returned from their work of handing out food. He also made certain to dine with a dozen poor people at each meal. Gregory is widely considered to be the first medieval pope, and he was a prolific writer. Pope Gregory suffered from arthritis in his last years. He died on March 12, 604 AD. He was immediately proclaimed a saint by means of popular acclaim. Saint Gregory's relics remain in St. Peter's Basilica to this day.

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The plight of our brothers and sisters who work hard but struggle to make ends meet calls us all to reflect in a special way this Labor Day. Today, we read in St. Luke's Gospel how Jesus, upon returning home to Nazareth, read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue declaring, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor."¹ Sadly, in our times too many people are excluded, marginalized, and politically and economically disenfranchised. The struggle of working people, of the poor, as Pope Francis reminds us, is not first a "social or political question. No! It is the Gospel, pure and simple."² There has been some notable progress in our economy in recent years, but it is also apparent that it is not where it should be for many, and we can all play a productive role in making sure it is a system that upholds the dignity of all people.

Recent economic news and data report that poverty continues to decline, unemployment is down to one of the lowest levels in decades and there has been economic growth with production, stocks and profits rising to record levels. But is this the whole story? Do these developments give an entirely accurate account of the daily lives and struggles of working people, those who are still without work, or the underemployed struggling with low wages?

It is encouraging that poverty has gone down, but still almost one in three persons have a family income below 200% of the federal poverty line.³ Today, there are many families who, even if they have technically escaped poverty, nevertheless face significant difficulties in meeting basic needs. Wages for lower income workers are, by various accounts, insufficient to support a family and provide a secure future.

A recent study examined whether a minimum wage earner could afford an average two-bedroom apartment in their state of residence. Shockingly, in all 50

states, the answer was no.⁴ A recent report from the Federal Reserve shows that four in ten adults could not cover a \$400 emergency expense, or would rely on borrowing or selling something to do so.⁵

Every worker has a right to a just wage according to the criterion of justice, which St. John XXIII described as wages that, "give the worker and his family a standard of living in keeping with the dignity of the human person."⁹

The Church's traditional teaching holds that wages must honor a person's dignity and ability to contribute to the common good of civil society and family well-being. The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of participating in God's creation.

If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected, including the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organizing and joining unions, to private property, and to economic initiative. Business owners and managers have a duty to seek profits to ensure the stability and long-term success of their businesses. However, they also "have an obligation to consider the good of persons and not only the increase of profits."¹³

How are we as Christians, who are members of society, called to respond to the question of wages and justice? First, we are called to live justly in our own lives whether as business owners or workers. Secondly, we are called to stand in solidarity with our poor and vulnerable brothers and sisters. Lastly, we should all work to reform and build a more just society, one which promotes human life and dignity and the common good of all. We also need to recognize the gifts and responsibilities that God has entrusted to each of us.

This Labor Day, let us all commit ourselves "with fear and trembling," to personal conversion of heart and mind and in so doing, "to bring glad tidings to the poor." To the financially poor and to the spiritually poor. AMEN!