

Reading the lives of the saints can be quite daunting and even oppressive, as one realises how far one is removed from their achievements and manner of life. It is as if Christ were speaking to us more immediately. After all, when we read the gospels, we can excuse ourselves by saying, 'Well, of course, what we are seeing here are the acts of a unique individual, both God and man. In the saints, we are dealing with humanity itself, and their example is all the more humbling.' But this is an evasion, for these men and women are witnesses, not to the power of humanity, but to the power of God; that is, to the possibility of God in their lives – or, better, of their lives in God. They are so attuned to Christ that his life has now become theirs. They live as if Christ. For St. Gregory in particular, that meant exercising that ultimate power of binding and loosing others from their sins - a power to a degree given to us all - but to a man, not only priest and bishop, but Pope, this power becomes both all the more visible and all the more burdensome, as we hear in his own words:

*The disciples received as their lot the pre-eminence of celestial judgement, so that in God's stead, they retain sins for some and for some they forgive them...It is a magnificent honour, but that honour carries with it a heavy burden...Reasons, therefore, must be reflected upon and then the power of binding and loosing is to be exercised. (Homilies on the Gospels: 2,26,4)*

It demands wisdom and, more than that, the grace of compunction, both for the one who seeks forgiveness and the one charged with giving it. The disciples themselves must first be aware of their own sinfulness and need of God's forgiveness before, and while, they exercise this ministry for others. What is so moving about Gregory's example is his acute awareness of his own personal frailty. This is the beginning of the road to God: a royal highway.

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