

There are many parallels to be drawn between Pope Gregory the Great and our present Pope Francis – not least their concern for conversion of life and concern for the poor. The former starting with themselves but necessary for all true reform in the Church, and the latter, a sign that the Church's greatness depends on its outreach to those on the margins – its mission is, indeed, always both outward and inward, concerned both with spiritual and the material, in short, incarnational. So Pope Gregory defends the primacy of Rome but, as a servant of the servants of God, eschewing the title 'universal' pope which others wrongly assumed he was really after:

*It is not in words that I would find my greatness, but in manner of life. And I do not consider that an honour which, as I know, undermines the honour of my brothers. My honour is the honour of the universal church. My honour is the solid strength of my brothers ....Away with these words which inflate vanity and wound charity.*

(quoted p.32 *Saints and Sinners*: Eamon Duffy)

And his manner of life included, then, not only negotiating with bishops and Patriarchs but with the Lombard invaders at the door of Rome and an intimate care for the poor of the, by now, generally impoverished citizens on his doorstep.

*In Rome itself he had a detailed register drawn up of every poor person in the city, where they lived, what their names and ages were, and allocated a weekly ration of corn, wine, cheese and oil to each.*

*Food from the Pope's own table was sent to genteel folk fallen on hard times, an exquisitely tactful way of turning a charitable dole into a mark of respect.*

*Twelve poor people ate with the Pope every day.*

(p. 50 *ibid.*)

Indeed, one can see him today, still, eating at the common table in the Casa Santa Marta, and driving around Rome in his humble Ford Focus, deserving the conversion of us all – not least the barbarians of Britain.

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