

Homily for Memorial of St. Leo the Great
November 10, 2016

Philemon 7–20
Psalm 146:7–10
Luke 17:20–25

In the Collect for today's Mass we prayed:

“O God, who never allow the gates of hell to prevail against your Church, firmly founded on the apostolic Rock, grant her we pray, that through the intercession of Pope Saint Leo, she may stand firm in your truth and know the protection of lasting peace.”

Leo was Pope from 440 til 461. This prayer not only asks his intercession for us but also captures what characterized his papacy for 21 years. During the 5th century the Roman Empire, which had dominated the world for centuries, was collapsing. Vandals under the direction of Attila the Hun were literally vandalizing that land we now call Italy. When the Hun approached the city of Rome, St Leo was able to dissuade him from attacking the City and the Vandals turned back towards the northern Germanic lands. Three years later Attila returned and attacked the Rome in 455. Under Leo's leadership the city was spared from burning. Pope Leo also had to deal with major heretical influences during his papacy that wanted to undermine the teaching office of the Church. He was also a remarkable administrator and a caring pastor who through his teaching the truth and dealing caringly and compassionately with people took to heart his office as the successor of Peter. Through his years of service the Church did stand firm in the truth and knew the peace that flows from knowing the care of a loving shepherd.

We see something of this same love for the truth and pastoral care in St. Paul's letter to Philemon. Philemon was a Christian who had come to know Jesus through the teaching and pastoral care of St. Paul. St. Paul alludes to the influence he had on Philemon's life when he states

“you owe me your very self”. By this he means, the life Philemon now lives was the result of Pauls' care for him as he nurtured him in the faith. Now Paul is asking that he, Philemon, would welcome back a man by the name of Onesimus who had somehow wronged Philemon. He was a slave who was “owned” by. Onesimus went to Paul, who though imprisoned, was able to welcome Onesimus into his living quarters. In that place St. Paul says he became Onesimus' Father. That is, this man came to faith in Jesus Christ under Paul's tutelage. Now Paul is about to send Onesimus back to Philemon and writes:

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever,¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.¹

Paul wants Philemon to be reconciled with Onesimus and to forgive him for what he had done. Paul says in effect don't exact retribution but rather charge it to my account. For in fact you owe me your very life.

Here we hear the heart of a pastor. One who lovingly teaches the truth and works towards the healing of relationships because of Jesus and what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ. The fruit of such reconciliation is the protection of lasting peace spoken of in our Collect.

This is always the work of those who are called to lead the Church as Popes, Bishops and Priests. We are to help protect the Church from the attacks that come from without, as Leo did from the Vandals. We are also to help teach and extend pastoral care to those entrusted to us in such a way that love for Jesus fosters a deepening love for each other in the body of Christ.

St. Leo pray for the shepherds who serve Jesus' people in our day. May they do so firmly established on that Rock which is Peter so that we may wisely confront the forces that would attack the Church from without and nurture within a community marked by genuine love for Jesus and care and forgiveness towards one another.

¹ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Phm 15–18). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.