

Homily for Memorial of St. Leo the Great
November 10, 2017

One of the most vivid images I have of the City of Rome is standing in the Ruins of the Palatine Hill that use to be the residence of the Roman Emperors. All that is left there now are the derelict remains of a once glorious Empire. From the Palatine I looked through a detached arch to the Vatican where St. Peter's stands steadfast and secure. This image brought to mind these words of the late Cardinal George, who when Pope Benedict was presented to the world as the 265th Pope, Cardinal George was standing next to him on the loggia. He had a pensive look upon his face. Upon his return to Chicago, where he was Bishop, reporters asked, "Cardinal, what were you thinking as standing next to Pope Benedict?"

He answered:

"I was gazing over toward the Circus Maximus, toward the Palatine Hill where the Roman Emperors once resided and reigned and looked down upon the persecution of Christians, and I thought, 'Where are their successors? Where is the successor of Caesar Augustus? Where is the successor of Marcus Aurelius? And finally, who cares? But if you want to see the successor of Peter, he is right next to me, smiling and waving at the crowds.'"¹

Today as the Church remembers Leo the Great keep in mind the image of St. Peter's and the insightful words of Cardinal George. For as is always the case, the Church lives through the changes and chances of this world. Because of the promise of Jesus, the gates of hell will not prevail against her, because She is founded on the Apostolic Rock.

Leo was Pope from 440 til 461. What a time of seismic changes, that could have toppled the Church if she was only a human institution. 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.

Not only did Pope Leo have to deal with attacks from without he also had to deal with major heretical influences from within. There were those who 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.

¹ Father Barron, Robert. Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith (p. 35). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Jesus in one of his most beguiling parables highlights a man whose dishonesty is commended, not because Jesus condones deceit but because of the point he makes when applying the parable.

for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light

Jesus wants his hearers to realize that there are times when people whose horizon does not look beyond this world are more savvy in securing their temporal futures than are those who know the future has eternal dividends; rewards that are to be attended to with greater diligence than shown by this crooked steward.

Leo the Great showed such holy shrewdness. It is this same shrewdness St. Paul expresses in the reading from Romans. He sees how the Christians in Rome were deepening in the life of virtue and Christ-like thinking. He describes them as:

full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

They were shrewd in their thinking and behavior, and yet Paul had to clarify some things for them. This is because of his vocation:

to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul understood his mission as one that would extend the Gospel beyond his fellow Jews to encompass people from all nations. He offered himself as a priest, one who mediates between God and people, so he would:

win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, 19 by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ

People like St. Paul and St. Leo took to heart the Lord's words to invest wisely in our relationships so as to win for Christ those who in word and deed do not show their allegiance to a temporal empire, even one as glorious as Rome. Rather, we are a people who with Cardinal George have the eyes to discern that the Church does stand on the apostolic rock that can weather the storms that rage against her because of the one who was shrewdest of all, our Lord Jesus Christ who promises to be with her and us through every change and chance of this fleeting world.