

Feast Day of St. Gregory the Great
September 3, 2016
1 Corinthians 4:6b–15
Psalm 145:17–21
Luke 6:1–5

Today the Church celebrates the life of Gregory the Great. At the age of 50 was elected 64th Pope by the clergy and people of Rome on September 3, 590 and served til his death in 604. His papacy was direct and firm. Gregory lived in a time of perpetual strife. As one historian has written:

"It is impossible to conceive what would have been the confusion, the lawlessness, the chaotic state of the Middle Ages without the medieval papacy; and of the medieval papacy, the real father is Gregory the Great."

He was a man very aware of the daily challenge and struggle to grow in holiness. One quote captures his honesty :

"Perhaps it is not after all so difficult for a man to part with his possessions, but it is certainly most difficult for him to part with himself. To renounce what one has is a minor thing; but to renounce what one is, that is asking a lot" (St. Gregory, Homilies on the Gospels).

It is this very theme that is at the heart of today's Epistle reading.

At the heart of the reading is the idea that the Corinthians were a people who thought they were privileged because they lived in a city that was next to Athens the centre of Greek culture. Paul wanted his readers to recognize that they were living and thinking in a way that was informed by their culture and not by the Gospel.

So he writes to them in an a direct way as a father to his children. Although his words in the passage have an edge to them he wants to convey this message:

I love you and want you to grow up well, not spoiled. There are a lot of people around who can't wait to tell you what you've done wrong, but there aren't many fathers willing to take the time and effort to help you grow up.¹

In this passage he exhorts them to mature in gratitude and mature in graciousness. He wants them to realize that their lives are a gift from God and that they are not to buy into the celebrity spirit so characteristic of Corinthian values.

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (1 Co 4:14–16). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

There was a pride characteristic of the Corinthian Christians and thus they did not cultivate a spirit of thankfulness. They did not fully appreciate that their lives were sheer gift. Instead there was a kind of arrogance more in keeping with the attitude of their Roman rulers where they lorded their prideful attitude over others. And so Paul ironically says:

Quite apart from us you have become kings!

Of course their kingship, like their riches and self-satisfaction, is only illusory, for if they truly participated in the kingship of Christ, who got there through the cross, Paul would be reigning with them: **I wish that you had become kings, so that we also might become kings with you.** The play is upon authentic and inauthentic kingship. In baptism they share the royalty of Christ, but their behavior is a travesty of it.²

If they were to cultivate true gratitude they would also cultivate true graciousness. So instead of their being a celebrity spirit there would be a generous spirit. One-up-men-ship was the norm in Corinth. This attitude was understandable given the kind of competitive debating that was the life-blood of the city. Everyone would have their favorite debater who would have a kind of star status. How different was a status of Paul. Listen to how he compares himself and his companions with Corinth's celebrities:

We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.¹¹ To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless,¹² and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure;¹³ when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.³

Paul wants them to grasp that we are to live with the kind of freedom that is not looking for human respect and acclaim but rather with an attitude that is conformed to Jesus Christ. When such an attitude is cultivated graciousness displaces competitiveness and gratitude displaces pride. Is such a reorientation hard? Indeed it is and requires a decision to each day to renounce what one is according to merely human standards.

It was this reorientation that all father's in God want their children to understand so that we can grow up well and not spoiled in Christ.

St. Gregory pray for us to renounce who we are apart from Christ.

² Montague, G. T. (2011). *First Corinthians* (p. 86). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

³ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.* (1993). (1 Co 4:10–13). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.