THE HAVEN OF THE MONASTERY AND THE HARVEST OF SOULS

Monasticism and Missions According to Gregory the Great

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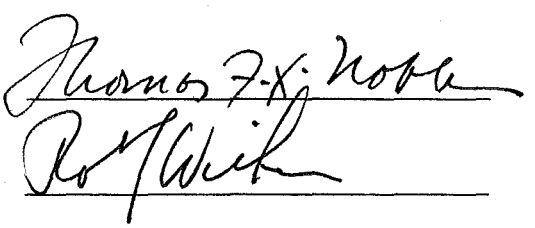

At long last, anxiously running from all these cares, I sought the haven of the monastery.
--Epistle to Leander, Moralia in Job

The zeal that burned within him to harvest souls for God was strong enough to enable him to govern his monasteries and to find time, besides, for preaching in the churches of the surrounding hamlets and villages and for visiting even private dwellings, everywhere turning the hearts of the faithful to love their eternal heavenly home. --Dialogues

[To] convert a sinner by preaching the word of God to him and aiding him with our prayers is a greater miracle than raising to life the physically dead. --Dialogues

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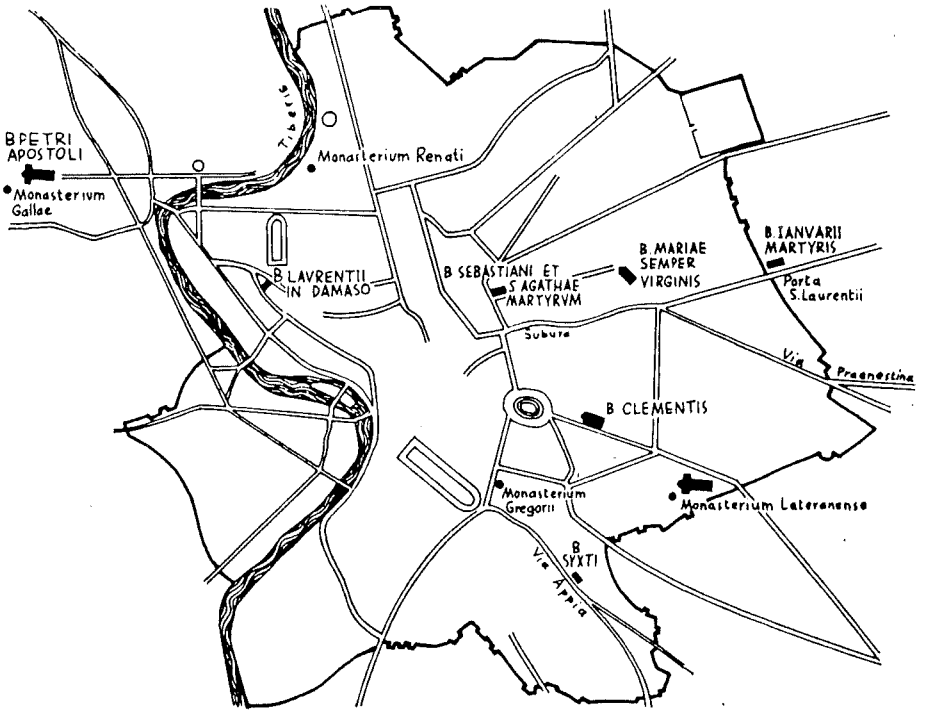

Rome During Gregory's Pontificate

Introduction
The Expectation of the Nations

> A leader shall not fail from Judah, nor a ruler from his thighs, until that which has been laid up for him shall come; and he shall be the expectation of the nations.
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> --Genesis 49:10

Monasticism and missions, at first glance, would seem to have little to do with one another, and one who purposed to link them together would be making strange bedfellows indeed. Put simply, monasticism is characterized by a life of contemplation, carried out in withdrawal from the activities of the world. Mission, on the other hand, requires that a missionary go into the world and actively bring the message of truth and salvation to those who are outside the faith. But despite the apparent differences, contemplation and action were not seen as incompatible in the early Middle Ages, and one figure in particular is especially notable for his attempt to unite the two--Gregory the Great.

Gregory's famous reluctance to leave behind the monastery for active service in the Church stands firmly beside his longing to see the Church actively preach the faith in England. In this thesis, I intend to examine in some detail Gregory's own thinking about contemplation and monastic piety, on the one hand, and the wider concerns of social responsibility, on the other. In particular, I wish to show that, in the course of his struggle to reconcile the two within

himself, he fashioned an image of the ideal saint who successfully accomplished what he himself could only struggle to do. He presents this ideal saint in the Dialogues through the example of holy men, preachers, and monks, who are both exemplary contemplatives and active servants of God, engaged in the Church's mission on earth. The ultimate expression of this mission is the preaching of salvation to the world. Therefore, missionaries and preachers can be seen as models of the active/contemplative in action.

I first became interested in Gregory when I read the early medieval account of his life that records one of the more memorable stories passed down from the Middle Ages. The now-familiar story recounts the meeting in Rome of Gregory, then living in St. Andrew's monastery, and certain "fair-skinned and light-haired boys" from the north, who were in Rome probably waiting to be sold as slaves. Hearing of the arrival of these newcomers and intrigued by reports of their appearance, Gregory sent for the boys to learn more about them. He asked them from what race they came. "The people we belong to are called Angles," they said. To this Gregory responded, "Angels of God." He then asked them the name of this people's king, and they answered, "Aelli," to which Gregory promptly replied, "Alleluia, God's praise must be heard there." Continuing, he asked them to what tribe they belonged, and they responded, saying "Deire." Gregory replied in turn, "They shall flee from the wrath of God (de ira dei) to the faith."[1]

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[1]Vita Gregorii by an anonymous writer. See chs. 9,10. The text and a translation are found in Bertram Colgrave's The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great. By an Anonymous Monk of Whitby (1968). Col-

Although the writer of this story does not indicate what happened to the boys, he does say that Gregory was so moved by the encounter that he approached Benedict, then pope, and requested permission to travel to England to preach the Gospel. "It would be a wretched thing," said Gregory, "for hell to be filled with such lovely vessels." Benedict was persuaded, but the people of Rome were not. Learning of Gregory's departure, they gathered in three large groups along the road to St. Peter's, along which Benedict was walking, and cried out to him, "You have offended Peter, you have destroyed Rome, you have sent Gregory away." By the time Benedict passed all three groups he had no choice but to recall Gregory, who then returned to Rome, where he would spend the remainder of his life. Although he would not go personally to England, Gregory did organize a mission during his pontificate that indeed carried out what he was prevented from doing himself.[2]

Few stories from the Middle Ages rival this one for homeliness or richness of detail. Like Augustine's account of his own conversion in the garden or the tale of Francis and the wolf of Gubbio, this single vignette gives a special slant on the life and personality of an integral character in the history of the Church as his reputation took shape in later generations. Told by an unknown monk from Whitby, and repeated by Bede, this story paints a picture of an

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grave dates the vita to the late seventh or early eighth century. Bede adds that the boys were slaves: Historia Ecclesiastica 2. 1.

[2]Anonymous Vita Gregorii ch. 10. At the time of these events, Pelagius, and not Benedict, must have been pope.

early medieval saint longing for the salvation of others: "It would be a wretched thing," says Gregory, "for hell to be filled with such lovely vessels." In these words the writer would have us see in Gregory a selfless concern for the spiritual well-being of others. Gladly would this man of God leave behind his life in Rome to rescue distant souls from the perils of hell. The point of the story, of course, is that it explains Gregory's own interest in the Anglo-Saxons, but even so it does not explain adequately Gregory's wider interest in missions, which was not confined to the Anglo-Saxons.[3]

With this story as a point of departure, I began to examine more closely Gregory's missionary effort and to look for sources of inspiration that perhaps spurred him on. But, looking back through the centuries before Gregory, I soon discovered how difficult it is to find another after Paul whom we remember for having shared this same desire.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus told his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And, lo, I will be with you until the end of the Age" (28:19-20). These are words that would have been familiar to Christians from the earliest days of the Church to Gregory's time and beyond, and they were certainly at the heart of

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[3]Mayr-Harting, among others, acknowledges factual errors in the story of the Angle boys but nevertheless accepts that it offers, at the least, a legitimate explanation of Gregory's motives (The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England [1972], p. 60).

any missionary effort by the Church.[4] In these words Christ gave the early Church both a command and a promise--the command being simply that his followers preach the gospel to all nations, and the promise that throughout it all he would protect his own and come again to gather them up at the end of the world. Armed with this promise of aid and protection, the Church was to go confidently into the world.

How diligent the Church was in heeding Christ's words is not easy to determine. One only has to look at how much attention has been devoted over the years to how the Church grew in the centuries after Christ to realize that the answer is not self-evident.[5] The Church historian Eusebius, looking back on the early part of the second century when the last of the apostles had died, would have us believe that there was a concerted effort at evangelism by the Church:

> Very many of the disciples of the time, their hearts smitten by the word of God with an ardent passion for true philosophy, first fulfilled the Saviour's command by distributing their possessions among the needy; then, leaving their homes behind, they carried out the work of evangelists, ambitious to preach to those who had never yet heard the message of the faith, and to give them the inspired

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[4]On the significance of Mt. 28:19-20 to the Church, see, among others, Harnack, The Mission and Expansion of Christianity, pp. 40-43; and Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600) (1971), p. 123. Although these words are not generally attributed to Christ, I attribute them to him in the following discussion simply because that is how Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages would have understood them.

[5]In addition to classic treatments by Gibbon, Troeltsch, and Harnack, there has been a flourish of recent studies, including those by Jaroslav Pelikan (The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church, 1987), Robin Lane Fox (Pagans and Christians, 1986), and Ramsey MacMullen (Christianizing the Roman Empire, 1984). For the earliest period, see Wayne Meeks, The First Urban Christians (1983). This list is by no means complete.

> gospels in writing. Staying only to lay the foundations of the faith in one foreign place or another, appoint others as pastors, and entrust to them the tending of those newly brought in, they set off again for other lands and peoples with the grace and cooperation of God.[6]

According to Eusebius, waves of evangelists spread out across the Empire throughout cities and towns, founding great numbers of fledgling churches along the way before moving on, mission completed, to lands beyond the Empire's borders. But, in fact, after the missionary activity described in the Book of Acts, it is very difficult to trace the Church's growth to see whether such activity continued in any significant way. If anything, it is likely that the Church was not carrying out an organized missionary effort. References to Christians by pagan writers are almost nonexistent until well into the second century because, put simply, Christians were not highly visible or vocal.[7]

In reality, the process of expansion during the second and third centuries was a slow and gradual one, taking hold primarily on the local and individual level and mostly within the cities and, to a lesser degree, towns of the Empire.[8] Christian numbers were growing, but not in the dramatic fashion that Eusebius portrays. In fact, it

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[6]Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica 3:37.

[7]See MacMullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire, pp. 33-34; Robert Wilken, The Christians as the Romans Saw Them (1984); and W. H. C. Frend, "Town and Countryside in Early Christianity" (1979), p. 34.

[8]On the Church's numbers and patterns of growth, see MacMullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire, p. 17 ff. (esp. 32 n. 26); Fox, Pagans and Christians, pp. 272-93; and Frend, "Town and Countryside in Early Christianity," pp. 34-36.

has become increasingly clear that Christianity did not penetrate the Empire through any organized preaching effort. The Church's immediate impact upon the life of the Empire was not highly visible, at least in ways that would openly distinguish it from other religious groups.[9] Ramsey MacMullen, like Harnack and others before him, stresses the similarity between the Christian Church and other religious groups vying for people's allegiance during this period. Referring to Eusebius's account of the prevalence of Christian evangelists, he points out that there were many "visionaries, evangelists, and fakes," making their rounds throughout the Empire. In the midst of such competition, preacher/evangelists from one group were probably no more successful than were those from another. In actuality, evangelists were probably less effective than miracle workers, whose remarkable feats were more likely to turn heads and find attentive ears when passed on by word of mouth.[10] Indeed, as MacMullen points out, personal testimony of the everyday sort--the "face-to-face encounters" of master and servant, friend and neighbor, soldier and soldier--were the most fruitful seeds sown in the hearts of people in the Empire.

This gradual success of the Church in the cities and towns was not matched, however, in the pagan countryside, and surely was even

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[9]An example of this is the way in which local congregations of Christians resembled social groups and clubs such as burial societies already prevalent in the Empire at this time. See Wilken, The Christians as the Romans Saw Them, p. 31 ff.

[10]MacMullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire, p. 25 ff. Rowan Greer's interesting study, The Fear of Freedom (1988), shows the importance of miracles and miracle workers to the Roman Church.

less beyond the Imperial frontiers. Within the Empire, W. H. C. Frend notes that it was not until late in the third century that Christianity seriously began to take hold in the countryside.[11] And, according to Clare Stancliffe, when Martin became bishop of Tours in about the year 370 the countryside around Tours was practically "untouched by the new religion."[12] This began to change only gradually through the work of Martin and his successors so that by the year 600 "the country areas were tolerably provided for."[13]

When considering the impact of Christianity outside the Empire, one has to be cautious about Eusebius's claim that "many evangelists" were being sent out to preach the gospel during the late second century. He mentions only one who went beyond the borders of the Empire--Pantaenus, who was sent from Alexandria to India. There, according to Eusebius, he found a group of believers who still had in their possession the Gospel of Matthew left behind by the apostle Bartholomew.[14] If Pantaenus's mission to India did occur, it was probably an isolated incident of which there were only a few others, such as that of St. Patrick, during the next several centuries in the

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[11]Frend, "Town and Countryside in Early Christianity," p. 39. See also Fox's treatment of the "winning of the countryside" in Pagans and Christians, pp. 287-93. For local studies, see C. E. Stancliffe, "From Town to Country: The Christianisation of the Touraine, 370-600" (1979), pp. 43-59; Eugen Ewig, "Les Missions dans les Pays Rhénans" (1976), pp. 37-44; and Karl Ferdinand Werner, "Le Rôle de l'Aristocratie dans la Christianisation du Nord-Est de la Gaule" (1976), pp. 45-73.

[12]Stancliffe, "From Town to Country," p. 43.

[13]Ibid, p. 51.

[14]Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica 5:10.

West.[15]

The Christian writer Prosper of Aquitaine describes briefly the ways in which Christianity reached beyond the imperial Roman frontiers during the fifth century in his pamphlet The Call of All Nations. However, he does not mention any organized missionary effort on the part of the Church. He refers only to barbarians accepting Christianity when joining the Imperial army and Roman Christians carrying their religion with them when taken captive by barbarians.[16] Commenting on Prosper and the general lack of evidence for a concerted missionary effort, E. A. Thompson states flatly that

> in the fourth and fifth centuries the Catholic Church was not interested in diffusing Christianity outside the frontiers of the Roman Empire. It is significant that in the whole range of West Roman Christian literature only one writer--Prosper in The Call of All Nations--troubles to tell us specific ways in which Christianity managed to cross the frontier, and even he does so in a very few lines of the modern printed text. Augustine has one or two remarks on the subject. . . . To all the other writers of that period the question was of no interest whatever, and hardly one of them refers to it, still less discusses it. And even Prosper treats it as a very minor topic indeed.[17]

If the Christian poet Prudentius (348-ca. 410) is in any way

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[15]On the Church's apparent lack of interest in its missionary calling to other lands during the third and fourth centuries, see, for example, E. A. Thompson, "Christianity and the Northern Barbarians," in The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century (1963), ed. Arnaldo Momigliano. See also Thompson's more recent treatment of the subject in the context of Palladius and Patrick in Ireland in Who Was Saint Patrick? (1985), pp. 58-65.

[16]De Vocatione Omnium Gentium, Book II, chap. 27 ff. (Ancient Christian Writers, no. 14). Migne includes this work with others by Prosper but classifies it as being of questionable authorship. E. A. Thompson, however, attributes it definitively to Prosper (Who Was Saint Patrick?, p. 58).

[17]Thompson, Who Was Saint Patrick?, p. 62.

representative of Christian attitudes of the day toward the barbarian, then one need not look far for reasons why the Church expressed scant enthusiasm for converting those outside the Empire. Prudentius writes in one place that "Roman and barbarian are as far apart as the quadruped is distant from the biped, or the dumb from that which can speak."[18] Such deep-seated prejudice against barbarians was certainly not unusual among Romans, and Christian Romans were evidently no exception.

Prudentius's attitude, however, contrasts considerably with that of Gregory as described by the anonymous monk of Whitby, who attributes to Gregory the remark about the Anglo-Saxon boys that, "It would be a wretched thing for hell to be filled with such lovely vessels." Elsewhere in the vita, the monk adds this further comment: "According to Gregory, when all the apostles bring their own peoples with them and each individual teacher brings his own race to present them to the Lord in the Day of Judgment, he will bring us--that is, the English people--instructed by him through God's grace."[19] Bede himself echoes this sentiment when he relates the story of Gregory's meeting with the Anglo-Saxon boys, prefacing it by saying that it

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[18]Prudentius, Contra Symmachum II. 816-19. See also the example of Symeon the "Mountaineer," whose work among a wilderness people living on the Euphrates is recorded by John of Ephesus in his Lives of the Eastern Saints (Robin Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians, pp. 289-90, and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Asceticism and Society in Crisis (1990), pp. 95-97). Gregory himself was certainly not beyond derision of pagan practice. See, for example, epistles IV. 27,29.

[19]Anonymous Vita Gregorii, ch. 6.

"explains Gregory's deep desire for the salvation of our nation."[20]

These comments by Bede and the monk of Whitby about Gregory's love for the English and his efforts on behalf of their nation reveal a theme that was common among Anglo-Saxon monastic writers following Augustine's mission to Canterbury. Gregory was seen as the father of the English Church.[21] However, behind such statements can also be detected the trace of an understanding of missions, which Jaroslav Pelikan has referred to as "the expectation of the nations."[22] As with so much else in the history of the Church, this "expectation" goes back to the words of Christ in Matthew, quoted above: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And, lo, I will be with you until the end of the Age" (28:19-20).

Despite the absence of any real missionary effort on the part of the Church before Gregory, there was, however, the beginning of a theory of missions in the early Church developed from the words of

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[20]See Historia Ecclesiastica II. 1.

[21]For the classic treatment of Bede's eschatological view of history see Wilhelm Levison, "Bede As Historian," in Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings, edited by A. Hamilton Thompson, pp. 111-51 (esp. 121-23). On Bede's view of the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon nation see Henry Mayr-Harting, The Coming of Christianity to England, pp. 44-46; and Georges Tugene, "L'histoire 'ecclésiastique' du peuple anglais: Reflexions sur le particularisme et l'universalisme chez Bede."

[22]Jaroslav Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, pp. 55 ff.

Christ.[23] Christ's words in Matthew not only encapsulated the Church's understanding of its teaching mandate, they also tantalized the imaginations of early Christians with the hope of his return at the end of the age. Many in the first century expected Christ to return before the end of their lifetimes, but as the century passed and the end refused to begin Christians were forced to rethink their understanding of their mission on the earth. Speaking of the apocalyptic hope and its sway over the early Church, Pelikan writes:

> Each major tenet of primitive Christian belief must be understood in this apocalyptic context: the very charter of orthodoxy, the command of the risen Lord to the apostles to make disciples and to teach them to observe everything that he had commanded, was predicated on the promise and the prophecy that he would be with them until the consummation of the age. When that consummation was postponed, it could no longer serve as the premise for affirmations of Christian doctrine, which had to be transposed into another key.[24]

The early Christian apologists were the first to begin publicly this process of transposing doctrine into another key. Perhaps initially disappointed by the delay of Christ's return, they readily confronted the prospect that he might not return in their lifetimes and began to consider how the Church should remain vigilant during its extended sojourn on earth. Indeed, if there was disappointment among Christians because of the delay of the parousia, early Christian spokesmen did not voice it. Tertullian is often quoted for his description of

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[23]By missionary theory I mean the theoretical grounding for missions--primarily its scriptural basis--rather than a practical strategy for carrying out missionary work.

[24]Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, pp. 123-24. See also Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium (1970), p. 29; and Fox, Pagans and Christians, p. 265 ff.

Christian worship in which he declares: "We pray also for the Caesars, for their ministers, and for all who are in high positions; for the commonweal of the world; for the prevalence of peace, and for the delay of the end."[25] And before Tertullian, Justin Martyr (ca. 130) wrote that God was delaying the end because he wanted Christianity to spread throughout the world.[26]

Paul had warned Christians of the perils of predicting the end when he compared it to the capriciousness of a thief in the night. They could not hope to guess the time, but Paul assured them that they were not in the dark as were others so that Christ's arrival should catch them by surprise. And, in another effective image, he likened the end to the travail of a woman in labor--inevitable, to be sure, but unpredictable even more so.[27]

Christ himself had also prepared his followers for the prospect of his delayed return with the parable of the ten virgins who were waiting to meet the bridegroom. Five of the virgins were wise and brought extra oil so that they would be prepared should the bridegroom return late in the night. When, in fact, he did return late, the five wise virgins were rewarded by their beloved.[28] The message to Christians was to remain faithful witnesses to the truth so that when Christ returned he would find followers in all corners of the

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[25]Tertullian, Apologia 39:2. Emphasis mine.

[26]Justin Martyr, Apologia 1:45.

[27]I Thessalonians 5:1-4. See Fox, Pagans and Christians, p. 266.

[28]Matthew 25:1-13.

earth. The postponement of the parousia thus was not meant to detract from the Church's mission of proclaiming the message of Christ.

As it became clear to Christians that the Church was here to stay and that an imminent return would not save them from confrontation with the world, the efforts of Justin, Tertullian, and other apologists to present Christianity to the world gained an added dimension. In particular, it became necessary to begin the task of positioning the Church with respect to the claims of other religious groups. This entailed distinguishing Christianity from Judaism, out of which the Church had emerged, and also the pagan religions of the Empire. To this end, according to Pelikan, the Christians found a "proof text" in Genesis 49:10 that summarized nicely the relation of Christ and the Church to other religions and built upon Christ's words in Matthew: "A leader shall not fail from Judah, nor a ruler from his thighs, until that which has been laid up for him shall come; and he shall be the expectation of the nations."[29]

Through this text, the Church found a way to "schematize" its place in the Empire with respect to other competing religions. Specifically, the Church was able to assert the partial validity of the revelation to the Jews and thus affirm the historical mission of Israel. But with the Jewish prophets, God's revelation to mankind remained incomplete; hence the need for Christ, God's final

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[29]Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, p. 56. See also the chapter entitled "The Light of the Gentiles" in Pelikan, Jesus Through the Centuries (1985).

revelation to mankind, who fulfilled all that the Jewish prophets had foretold. Furthermore, as the "expectation of the nations," Christ represented not only the consummation of Jewish prophecy but the culmination of pagan efforts, misguided as they may have been, to discover the truth. Seen in this light, Christ was the goal toward which all peoples, Jew and pagan, had been striving. The final step in this progression of thought was to designate the Church, Christ's successor on earth, as his ambassador to the nations.

As I have tried to suggest above, however, the Church as an institution was not particularly effective in carrying out in practice what it had so carefully delineated in theory. References to the "expectation of the nations" certainly continued to be a central theme in apologetic discourse, but apparently with little practical effect. Augustine, for example, in The City of God cites several passages from the Old Testament, including Genesis 49:10, that speak of the anointed one who shall come to "all nations." He offers them as testimony of God's grand design in history; namely, the inevitable victory of the Church on earth.[30] But though he and other writers speak of the "expectation of the nations," they do so in theoretical discussions of the Church's mission in history rather than in practical terms of an actual missionary effort to reach foreign lands.[31] Augustine, writing at a time when the Empire had been officially Christian for some thirty years, describes the Church's slow but

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[30]Civitas Dei 18:45-50.

[31]See also Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica 1:6, and Sozomon, Historia Ecclesiastica 1:1.

steady march through history, triumphing over persecution and heresy. But he is content to describe what is in effect the gradual filling out of the borders of the Empire; he does not discuss the Church's attempt to reach beyond those borders. In On Catechetical Instruction, one of the only such practical handbooks of its kind in the early Church, and where one might expect to detect some interest in the work of evangelism, Augustine concerns himself only with those who come to the catechizer for instruction: "For very rarely, nay, never, does it happen that anyone comes to us with the desire to become a Christian, who has not been smitten with some fear of God."[32] Augustine makes no mention of any active effort to bring newcomers to catechism.

In truth, eschatology may have been useful for the Church in its apologetical encounter with non-Christian thinkers, but evidently it was ineffective by itself in inspiring a practical missionary effort from the Church. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that historians have recognized other sources besides eschatology that underpinned Gregory's missionary interest. This is not to say that he did not have an apocalyptic view of history, for he clearly did, but he appears to have balanced his expectation of the end with a thoroughgoing concern for the present.[33] Years after he completed the Moralia, Gregory went back and added an illuminating passage to

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[32]De Catechizandis Rudibus 5.

[33]On Gregory's apocalypticism, see Claude Dagens, "La fin des temps et l'église selon saint Grégoire le Grand," pp. 273-88; Carole Straw, Gregory the Great, p. 1; and R. A. Markus, "The Sacred and the Secular: From Augustine to Gregory the Great," pp. 92-96.

the text in which he exulted over the triumph of his mission to England:

> By the shining miracles of his preachers, God has brought to the faith even the extremities of the earth. In one faith has he linked the boundaries of the East and West. Behold! the tongue of Britain which before could utter only barbarous sounds has lately learned to make the Alleluia of the Hebrews resound in praise of God.[34]

In this triumphal passage, Gregory is obviously aware of the larger significance of his missionary efforts in England, but if he is thinking about eschatology he is interested primarily in the unfolding drama as it is being played out immediately before him, and of which he has an active part. What captivates Gregory about the apocalyptic vision he shares with others of his day is not the end of the age but what God will accomplish in the interim through his Church on earth. He is interested in the immediate and practical power of the Gospel to transform society through the Church on earth. It is for this reason that R. A. Markus observes that alongside Gregory's eschatology there exists a "surprising assurance and confidence about the life of the Church."[35] The dozens of holy men and women who dot the pages of the Dialogues may believe (as does Gregory) that the end is at hand, but their desire to harvest souls is grounded in a more immediate concern to bring unbelievers to God: "[To] convert a sinner by preaching the word of God to him and aiding

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[34]Moralia in Job 27.11.21. The Moralia was completed by 591 (c.f. epistle i. 41) some five years before the start of Augustine's mission to England. The above passage clearly was added later. See preface to the CCSL edition (143, p. vi) of the Moralia by Marc Adriaen.

[35]Markus, "The Sacred and the Secular," p. 93.

him with our prayers is a greater miracle than raising to life the physically dead."[36] By converting sinners, the saints achieve direct and tangible results that are felt first on the lives of individuals and then on the life of the Church as a whole, as it exists and functions in human society. Ultimately, the work of the saints and the Church extends the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.

Some sixty years ago, Erich Caspar recognized the importance that Gregory placed on the Church's mission in society. In his Geschichte des Papsttums, he argued that to grasp the significance of Gregory's missionary papacy one has to understand what Caspar identified as the developing social vision of monastic piety during the sixth century.[37] This monastic piety, he observed, was not just directed inward, as in the early years of monasticism, but also outward, beyond the walls of the monastery. Therefore, Gregory owed a great deal to currents that were already prevalent in the monasticism of his own day in making the link between charity within the monastery and charity in the world.[38] His importance lay not so much

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[36]Dialogues III.17.7.

[37]Erich Caspar, Geschicte des Papsttums von den Anfängen bis zur Höhe der Weltherrschaft (1933) ii, esp. pp. 457-58. See, also, Henry Mayr-Harting, The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England, p. 54.

[38]More recent research suggests that contemplation was never divorced from action even in the earliest days of monasticism. On the origins of the active/contemplative dichotomy, see Giles Constable, "Monasteries, Rural Churches and the Cura Animarum in the Early Middle Ages" (1982), pp. 353-61; and Thomas L. Amos, "Monks and Pastoral Care in the Early Middle Ages" (1987), pp. 165-170. For a case study of the active role of monks in evangelism, see Philippe Le Maître, "Évêques et moines dans le Maine: IVe-VIIIe Siècles" (1976), pp. 91-101. The social integration of monasticism was probably more pronounced in the East, where the place of the holy man in society

in any innovative thinking but rather in the way in which he articulated and popularized the theme of monasticism-turned-outward for his later monastic audience in the Middle Ages. As Jean LeClercq writes, Gregory's originality was his "power to adapt and alter everything" in "words appropriate to all Christians."[39]

Therefore, it is not my intention in this thesis to show that there was a connection between monastic piety and the active life of evangelism in early monasticism, because others already have shown that this was the case. Nor am I trying to prove that Gregory was the first to make this connection, because this is not the case. Rather, my purpose here is to explore Gregory's thinking in order to understand better how one figure, whose influence on monasticism in the Middle Ages was great, worked out these ideas in his own mind. To this end, I am building on the considerable research that has been devoted of late to Gregory and the relationship in his thinking between the interior and exterior.[40]

Paul Meyvaert, for example, has written suggestively on the

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was more distinct. See, for example, Susan Ashbrook Harvey's recent study of John of Ephesus, Asceticism and Society in Crisis, esp. p. 94 ff.

[39]LeClercq, "The Teaching of St Gregory," p. 6.

[40]Although this list is by no means exhaustive, see, for example, Dagens's magisterial spiritual biography of Gregory, St Grégoire le Grand (1977); several articles on Gregory by Meyvaert, collected in Benedict, Gregory, Bede, and Others (1977); Robert Gillet, "Grégoire le Grand," in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité (6:872-910); R. A. Markus, "The Sacred and the Secular from Augustine to Gregory the Great" (1985); G. R. Evans, The Thought of Gregory the Great (1986); the collection of papers, Grégoire Le Grand, from the Colloques internationaux du CNRS (1986); and, most recently, Carole Straw, Gregory the Great (1988).

relation between humility, a recurrent theme in Gregory's writings and one especially suited to the cultivation of the inner life, and charity, primarily a virtue of the outer life. According to Meyvaert, "If Gregory so tirelessly insists on humility, it is because, in his view, humility creates the climate in which charity can flourish: the purpose of humility is to draw all men together in the bond of charity."[41] Humility is a virtue that can be cultivated with special success within the favorable climate of the monastery--the cenobitic monastery--where the relationships of authority, between monk and abbot, and brotherly love, between monk and fellow monk, curb the human tendency to dwell on self at the expense of others. An important element in these relationships is teaching by word and by example. The abbot, who is spiritually mature, practices charity through the example he provides to the monks under his care, as did Benedict, whose example was "like a shining lamp . . . set on a lampstand to give light to everyone in God's house."[42]

But since Gregory does not limit the bond of charity to the monastery, he must work out how this saint is to operate in his new environment, namely, the world. In his homiletical writings, such as the Moralia and the Homilies on Ezekiel, he expounds on the importance of action as the fruit of the contemplative life.[43] But it is

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[41]Meyvaert, "Gregory the Great and the Theme of Authority," in Gregory, Benedict, Bede, and Others, pp. 11-12.

[42]Dialogues II.1.6.

[43]For instance, see Moralia 6.35.54 ff. See Henry Mayr-Harting's discussion of the Homilies on Ezekiel in "The West: The Age of Conversion (700-1050)," p. 94; and also in the preface to his forthcoming third edition of The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon

in the Dialogues, that Gregory brings these themes to life through his portrayals of the saints acting out the fruits of contemplation beyond the walls of the monastery and in the larger, secular arena. The saint's lamp must shine in the darkness of a much larger world in which the Church's task is more complex. According to Carole Straw:

> The Dialogues present an idealized picture of the saint in society: he is an ambassador between worlds. As such, Gregory's saint follows the tradition of the holy man established in Athanasius's Life of Antony. But Gregory has his own particular agenda of spiritual reform. He wishes to strengthen and purify the corporate life of the Church by emphasizing the importance of hierarchical order and obedience to authority.[44]

Together, these saints make up the body of Christ on earth, redeeming the world through their efforts. It is for this reason that Gregory writes that the greatest act of charity, and the greatest miracle, is "to convert a sinner by preaching the word of God to him and aiding him with our prayers."[45] The success of Gregory's vision in the Dialogues and its subsequent popularity in the early Middle Ages is attested by R. A. Markus who writes,

> Christianity was spread through the work of countless holy men, monks, ascetics, wandering preachers, and wonder-workers. Gregory the Great's Dialogues reveal the importance of the work of holy men in drawing the Italian countryside into the main stream of the bishops', the pope's, and the townsmen's Christianity. The work of monks was everywhere crucial in spreading Christianity. . . .[46]

England.

[44]Straw, Gregory the Great, p. 71.

[45]Dialogues III.17.7.

[46]R. A. Markus, "From Rome to the Barbarian Kingdoms (330-700)," p. 89.

Recent scholarship has indeed gone a long way toward understanding Gregory's thinking and the place of his missionary interest within that thinking. I believe, however, that Gregory was even more explicit in explaining how the active and contemplative could be reconciled in the holy man than has really been appreciated. As ambassadors between worlds, the holy men in the Dialogues maintain a two-way relationship between God, on the one hand, and human society, on the other. In their relationship with God, they reflect the tradition of the holy man in the West. In their relationship to society, they are mediators of God's will and mouthpieces for pronouncing his word. But this dual function is by no means easy to achieve because not only are they joining two worlds, they are also caught between two worlds--between the spiritual and secular, the inner and outer, the contemplative and active.

Therefore, the step from the monastery into the world is not a simple one for Gregory, who, like the early desert fathers, felt that a monk in the world is like a fish out of water. In the pages that follow, I wish to explore just how Gregory thought the step into the world could occur. How could a holy man maintain his relationship with God through contemplation and, at the same time, step outside himself to minister to the world? I would argue that Gregory makes a distinction between the "world" and the "church in the world" so that the saint can preserve his spiritual life even while in the world. The key to this preservation lies in the saint's special relationship to God, which Gregory is careful to articulate. When carefully tended, this relationship not only preserves the saint from the

world, but it also empowers him to go forth into it. The preeminent example, of course, is Paul the Apostle, who was not only the greatest missionary but also an accomplished contemplative, having been raised up to the third heaven in his spiritual ecstacy. But even in such a state, according to Gregory, Paul "did not think it beneath him to consider the needs of the flesh."[47] Similarly, the saints in the Dialogues are prepared to go into the world to do God's work. The missionary envisioned by Gregory is an exemplar of this ideal saint.

Gregory was drawing to a large degree upon his own experience in framing his vision of the active/contemplative. In his own life, he was strongly committed to the monastery, to the city of Rome, and to the Church. Therefore in the first chapter I examine Gregory's early life and career leading up to his entry into the monastic life through conversion, as recorded in his dedicatory preface of the Moralia. I examine, in some detail, his account of his own conversion, because it was an event to which he returned frequently, not just out of sentiment or nostalgia but because it provided a pattern to which he would return in his effort to reconcile the active and contemplative lives.

Gregory did not remain in the monastery long after his conversion. In the second chapter, I take the events of his life after conversion up through his years as pope. Reading the early letters of his pontificate, one could easily conclude that Gregory had

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[47]Dialogues III.17.11.

nothing but disdain for the active life, but in his own experience he tried to reconcile the active with the contemplative. He complained bitterly about the burden of his duties, but he was not opposed to the active life. In effect, he made a distinction between his temporal duties, which pulled him down into the world, and his spiritual duties, which were not only compatible with contemplation but also complemented and grew out of it. Among these spiritual duties were preaching, writing, and his other pastoral work. The source of Gregory's frustration, therefore, was not that he regretted trying to live simultaneously as an active and a contemplative, because he actually advocated a life balanced by the two. Rather, the real source of his frustration was his own inability, as he saw it, to get the balance right.

In the third chapter, I look specifically at the Dialogues, where I believe that Gregory is attempting to demonstrate in practical terms the compatibility between the active and contemplative lives through his portrayal of the saints. Scholars have recognized in the Dialogues an effort by Gregory to portray holy men and rectores alike as saints working together within the same church hierarchy. Holy men are those who are revered for their spectacular acts of mortification and for their conquest of spiritual and natural forces through the power of the Holy Spirit. Rectores are those who hold positions of authority in the Church, namely, bishops, priests, and abbots. By entering the fold of the institutional Church, however, holy men run the risk of being drained of their charismatic power--a problem that Gregory can sympathize with. Therefore, I

argue that one of Gregory's objectives in the Dialogues is to show that the holy man can be assimilated into the Church without losing those essential ingredients that make up his spiritual power. In effect, Gregory is celebrating a carefully developed type of saint, who is both the ideal contemplative holy man and the ideal rector. Benedict, the subject of the entire second book of the Dialogues, is Gregory's prime example. I conclude by examining how Gregory imagines that one of these holy men would understand his social vocation in light of his quest for personal holiness.

Finally, before proceeding with the main body of this thesis, it is perhaps fitting to begin where Gregory ends. After elaborating the works and miracles of dozens of saints in the four books of the Dialogues, he finishes his grand work with an exhortation:

> While we are enjoying days of grace, while our Judge holds off the sentence, and the Examiner of our sins awaits our conversion, let us soften our hardened hearts with tears and practice charity and kindness toward our neighbor. [IV.62.3.]

This passage nicely sets forth the essence of Gregory's logic that I try to highlight in this thesis. He is confident in God's patient unfolding of history, but his expectation of the end does not obscure his attention to the present. While the "Judge holds off the sentence"--in other words, while people have their lives and health and while the world continues to exist--the faithful should be busy with the business of life. This means that God's faithful should carefully cultivate the seeds of contemplation, through tears, and faithfully harvest its fruits by reaching out in charity to their neighbors.

I.
CONVERSION AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

> For a long time I put off the grace of conversion, even after being inspired with heavenly desire, still considering it better to be clothed in the secular habit.
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> --Epistle to Leander, Moralia in Job

In 596, during the sixth year of his papacy, Gregory sent his now-famous mission of monks, headed by Augustine, to preach to the people of England. This mission was one of a number of events that marked a very active papacy. Yet, less than twenty years earlier Gregory had been savoring the life of contemplation and solitude within the monastery of St. Andrew, which he himself had founded in Rome. As Pope looking back on his former life as monk, Gregory would frequently remind himself of the solitude he had left behind and murmur about his stubborn reluctance, even after conversion, to leave behind the cares of this world.

In this chapter I will begin to explore the tension between action and contemplation that was surfacing in Gregory's thinking during his early years up until he was in his mid-thirties. It was during these years in Rome that he began his public career in civic service and then decided to leave that public career for the monastery. As biographers of Gregory have noted, details from this period are sketchy at best. It is not until the eve of his decision to enter the monastery that Gregory himself gives us an indication of

the turmoil that was building inside him. As he would describe it many years later, the cares of the world came to weigh so heavily upon him that he could no longer resist God's persistent calling. Succumbing at last to the "grace of conversion," he spent the next few years in the splendid isolation of the monastery before being summoned back into the public arena. At the time, however, Gregory believed that his conversion signalled the end of his public career and the beginning of a life of prayer and contemplation. These years clearly show the beginning of his struggle between the requirements of the active and contemplative lives. His conversion marks a focal point in his development. Conversion was Gregory's entry into the contemplative life, but it was also a point to which he would return in his later active life. I explore what happened during this conversion and how his notion of the contemplative life emerged from it.

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When Gregory entered St. Andrew's monastery in Rome for the first time in c. 574, he was about 34 years old and was leaving behind (or so he thought) an active political life in Rome. Born into a wealthy Roman family with a distinguished senatorial lineage, Gregory would have been groomed, from an early age, for a public career of religious or secular service in Rome.[1] There was clearly a tradition of vital ecclesiastical service in his family highlighted

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[1]According to Gregory of Tours, he was "descended from one of the leading senatorial families" ("de senatoribus primis"): Decem libri historiarum X.1. It is no longer believed that he was of the gens Anicia or Decia. See Carole Straw, Gregory the Great (1988), pp. 4-5.

by his grandfather Felix, who became Pope Felix III (483-492), and Felix's nephew, Pope Agapitus (535-536). Gregory's father Gordianus held the office of regionarius, which apparently was an administrative position charged with the management of church property. The family owned various properties in Rome, including a palace and estate on the Caelian hill (the future site of St. Andrew's) and considerable lands in Sicily, over which Gregory may have gained administrative experience as a young man.[2]

Unfortunately, little else is known of Gordianus and even less of Gregory's mother Sylvia. One vignette, however, passed on by John the Deacon, a later biographer, leaves a lasting impression of the piety of both father and mother. It suggests an important feature of Gregory's youth that was perhaps as significant as his anticipated public career.[3] Writing some three hundred years later, John describes two paintings he witnessed while in Rome, visiting Gregory's monastery of St. Andrew. The paintings, one of Gordianus and the other of Sylvia, were commissioned by Gregory in their memory, and John's description of them is careful to elaborate their features in considerable detail. Thus he tells us that Gordianus is dressed in a chestnut-colored robe and shoes. He is a tall man with a long

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[2]For an account of the educational training Gregory would have received, see Pierre Riché, Education and Culture in the Barbarian West (1976). The best general source for Gregory's background is still F. Homes Dudden, Gregory the Great (1905). See also Jeffrey Richards, Consul of God (1980). For the historical setting in sixth-century Italy, see T. S. Brown, Gentlemen and Officers; Richard Krautheimer, Rome: Profile of a City (1980); and Peter Llewellyn, Rome in the Dark Ages (1971).

[3]John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii IV.83-84.

face, distinguished by his dignified expression of gravity. His eyes are green, his beard short, and hair bushy. But even more important than the physiognomic detail is the fact that Gordianus is accompanied by the blessed apostle Peter. Standing beside the seated Peter, Gordianus is grasping the saint's right hand within his own.

Beside Gordianus and Peter, in the adjacent painting, is Sylvia dressed in white. She is described as having fair white skin and a face that reveals the passing of time yet nevertheless is marked by the graceful beauty of age. In the midst of her round face are large bluish green eyes, slight eyebrows, and gentle lips. Unlike her husband, she is by herself, wearing a look of cheerful contentment. Seated, she crosses herself with two fingers from her right hand. In her left hand the psalter lays open to the penultimate verse of Psalm 119, the longest psalm, a long meditation on the blessedness of a life lived in obedience to the commandments of God. The verse reads: "Let my soul live, and it will praise you; and let your judgments help me." John concludes by noting that Gregory resembled both parents, in features as well as in piety.[4]

Nevertheless, the first event in Gregory's life for which there is record involved his public rather than religious life, and it occurred in 572/3 when he was about 32. At that time, he was appointed prefect of the city, the highest secular administrative position in Rome and one which required a great deal of responsibility and judgment on his part. According to the third century jurists, Ulpian

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[4]Ibid.

and Paulus,

> [T]he prefect of the city has jurisdiction over all offenses whatsoever, not only those committed inside the city but also those outside the city in Italy....He shall hear complaints against masters by slaves who have sought asylum at sacred images or have been purchased with their own money for the purpose of being manumitted. He shall also hear the complaints of needy patrons concerning their freedmen, especially if they declare that they are ill and wish to be supported by their freedmen.[5]

In addition to maintaining law and order, as described above, the urban prefect in the sixth century was also in charge of public works and was given the title of president of the Senate. The latter position, however, had been reduced primarily to a formal one since Justinian's Pragmatic Sanction had rendered the Senate essentially powerless in 554.[6]

A good indication that Gregory was effective as prefect can be seen in his subsequent appointments, all of which were within the Church. He was later chosen to fill a senior administrative position in Rome as one of the pope's seven deacons; he was appointed papal legate (apocrisiarios) to Constantinople under Pelagius II;[7] and, of course, he was chosen "unanimously" by the people to be the next pope

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[5]Justinian, Digest 1.xii.1

[6]On the duties of the urban prefect in Gregory's day, see Brown, Gentlemen and Officers, pp. 11-12. On Gregory as prefect, see Richards, Consul of God, pp. 29-30.

[7]Because the date of Gregory's appointment as deacon is not certain it is not clear whether he was summoned by Benedict I, who died in 579, or Pelagius II, Benedict's successor. John the Deacon says that it was Benedict. See Richards, Consul of God, pp. 36-7.

when Pelagius died in 590.[8] His popularity with the people of Rome is perhaps the best indication of Gregory's success in his public career. According to the eighth-century monk of Whitby, the people were "greatly perturbed" when they learned that Gregory, who was by that time deacon, had decided to leave Rome for England. Determined to plead their case with Pope Benedict, they

> divided themselves into three groups and stood along the road by which the Pope went to St. Peter's Church: as he passed, each group shouted at him, "You have offended Peter, you have destroyed Rome, you have sent Gregory away." As soon as he heard their dreadful cry for the third time, he quickly sent messengers after Gregory to make him return.[9]

Despite his effectiveness as prefect, Gregory held the position probably for only a year or two. Exactly why or when he gave it up is not clear, but it was about this time that his father died. His duties as prefect during a time when the threat of Lombard invasion was great, and the additional burden of maintaining the family's wealth and properties after his father's death no doubt weighed heavily upon him. With his growing reputation and popularity came added responsibilities and complications, or "cares of the world," a term he uses frequently in his writings. The feeling of wading through the murky waters of the present world, a world that was decaying and passing away before his eyes, would be a recurrent one for Gregory throughout his life. The opening lines of the Dialogues could just as easily have been written during this time as later in

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[8]Gregory of Tours, Decem libri historiarum X.1.

[9]Anonymous Vita Gregorii, chap.9.

593 when he wrote,

> Some men of the world had left me feeling quite depressed one day with all their noisy wrangling. In their business dealings they try, as a rule, to make us pay what we obviously do not owe them. In my grief I retired to a quiet spot congenial to my mood, where I could consider every unpleasant detail of my daily work and review all the causes of my sorrow as they crowded unhindered before my eyes.[10]

But Gregory was frequently able to find comfort and encouragement in the midst of his grief. Throughout the course of his duties in Rome, he would have met not just those with complaints about business dealings but friends and acquaintances with news of miraculous deeds being performed by the saints throughout Italy. He would write later that the first step of spiritual progress comes when sinners, who are "lying on the ground" in their sins, are "made acquainted with spiritual precepts from the voice of the saints."[11] By this time of his life, still lying in his sins, Gregory was beginning already to hear the voice of the saints from those around him. They were furnishing him with the stories that later would give rich texture to the book of Dialogues.[12]

An indication of Gregory's sociability can perhaps be detected

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[10]Dialogues I.Prol.1. As pope, the comparison between his papal responsibilities and his earlier secular career would not escape Gregory. In a letter to the princess Theoctista he would complain, perhaps coloring his past in a warm hue, that as pope, "I am involved in such great earthly cares as I do not at all remember having been subjected to even in a lay state of life" (Epistle I.5).

[11]Moralia 22.20.47.

[12]On Gregory collecting stories for the Dialogues, see Adalbert de Vogüé's introduction to the Sources Chrétiennes edition (no. 251), pp. 27-29.

behind the remark of Gregory of Tours that he "had been in the habit of processing through the city in silken robes sewn with glittering gems."[13] This comment is clearly meant to contrast the deeply-ingrained sense of pride and dignitas in this most Roman of men, symbolized in the silken robes and glittering gems, with the humility that, according to Gregory of Tours, he gained as a result of his conversion and entry into the monastery. But it is hard to read of his processing through the city without thinking of the Dialogues and the ease with which Gregory recounts person after person whom he knows either by name or by sight. His stories are always filled with detailed accounts of saints "whose lives," says Gregory, "are known to me either from my own observations or from the reports of good, reliable witnesses".[14] In fact, names are so frequent in the Dialogues that it is surprising to find Gregory admitting that he does not know someone's name even though he might remember his or her face, as with one holy woman, whose name he cannot remember, but whom he "recognizes by sight" when he sees her in Rome.[15] His position and his republican sense of duty to the city made him a familiar face in the streets of Rome and made others familiar to him as well.

A telling facet of Gregory's character was that he was par-

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[13]Gregory of Tours, Decem libri historiarum X.1.

[14]Dialogues I.Prol.8. Some have questioned whether characters with names such as Deusdedit and Redempta were real or meant only to be taken allegorically. On the relation of history and allegory in the Dialogues, see Adalbert de Vogüé, introduction to Dialogues, p. 124 ff. See also W. F. Bolton, "The Supra-Historical Sense in the Dialogues of Gregory I."

[15]Dialogues IV.16.2. See, also, epistle III.50.

ticularly fond of talking with old men, from whom he could learn of events from neighboring regions.[16] He tells of one such man named Deusdedit, of whom he was particularly fond during these crucial days in his life before his conversion:

> When I first experienced the desire to take up the solitary life, I was frequently in the company of an old man, a friend of mine named Deusdedit. He was known for his uprightness and was on very friendly terms with the nobility of Rome."[17]

Among the stories Gregory would have heard from Deusdedit and others were those of the marvelous deeds of God's servants--bishops, priests, and monks--whose acts offered daily proof of God's powerful presence in Italy. The pages of the Dialogues, like the Gesta Martyrum, are filled with action stories of the saints faithfully bearing the name of Christ throughout Italy.[18] But he also would have heard and witnessed less dramatic stories about noble men and women in and around the city who were giving up their worldly possessions for the "remota vita." Numerous monasteries were founded in

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[16]See Dialogues I.10.11: "ut mihi senum conlocutio esse semper amabilis solet" (since I always delight in conversing with old men). Gregory says that he spent two days with a "poor old man" who had stories of Fortunatus, Bishop of Todi. He adds that the old man "had been directed to me," suggesting perhaps that others knew of this homely aspect of Gregory's character.

[17]Dialogues IV.32.1. See also Homiliae in Hiezechielem 1.11.5-6, where Gregory admits to his weakness in being drawn into "small talk" and "gossip."

[18]On the audience of the Dialogues and their relation to the Gesta Martyrum see R. A. Markus, "The Sacred and the Secular: From Augustine to Gregory the Great," pp. 91 ff.; and Joan M. Petersen, The Dialogues of Gregory Great in their Late Antique Cultural Background (1984), p. 56 ff. See also Carole Straw's discussion of the Dialogues in Gregory the Great, p. 66 ff.

and around Rome during the sixth century, many of them being established in the mansions of wealthy aristocrats who had donated them to the Church.[19]

In addition to these monasteries, it would not have been unusual at this time to see private dwellings inside the city that had been converted into places for withdrawal, where a less formal kind of monasticism could be practiced. Within Gregory's own family, three aunts on his father's side--Tarsilla, Aemiliana, and Gordiana--had founded a convent inside their home in Rome, where they retired to live. Gregory recounts twice in his writings the glorious death of Tarsilla, whose "life of constant prayer, recollection, and severe self-denial" had taken her to remarkable heights of sanctity. When at last fever struck her down so that she was at the point of death, friends and relatives gathered around her bed to be near during her last few moments on earth. While they were waiting for the inevitable, Tarsilla suddenly looked up, startled by the sight of Jesus approaching. Turning to her visitors, she exclaimed, "Back! Back! Jesus is coming!" As she gazed on this sublime vision, her soul left her body, and the room was immediately filled with a refreshing fragrance, "indicating to all the presence of Him who is the source of all that is fragrant and refreshing." When her body was washed and prepared for burial, it was discovered that her knees and elbows were covered with thick skin "like that of a camel," attesting to the

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[19]According to Krautheimer, there would have been five monasteries in Rome during Gregory's day, increasing to seventeen in 630 (Rome: Profile of a City, p. 78). For a catalogue of monasteries, see Guy Ferrari, Early Roman Monasteries (1957).

"many hours she had spent in pious prayer." [20]

Gregory's aunts were certainly not the only ones he knew who were fleeing the world to pursue the life of pious prayer. It was about this time in Gregory's life when his mother Silvia also withdrew to a retreat, called Cella Nova near St. Peter's Basilica, soon after the death of Gordianus. Gregory also gives examples of numerous others in the Dialogues who followed the same pattern as his mother and aunts. One particular recluse was an elderly woman named Redempta, whom Gregory notes was living in Rome at the time of his own entrance into the monastery. Herself a disciple of a famous recluse named Herundo known for her "great miracles," Redempta had withdrawn from society to live with two of her own disciples inside her home. Together, the three holy women led "a life rich in virtue but very poor in earthly possessions."[21] The sight of women or men such as Tarsilla, Silvia, or Redempta withdrawing from public life in order to live in solitude was therefore not an unusual one in Gregory's day, and it clearly made a lasting impression on Gregory.[22]

Gregory also found that there were others who, unfortunately, were not so virtuous. In his account of St. Benedict's life he

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[20]Dialogues IV.17.1-3. See also Homiliae in Evangelia 2.38.15.

[21]Dialogues iv.16.2.

[22]See Dialogues III.14.1 and II.23.1. It is interesting to note that most of the women who take up the monastic life in the Dialogues do so in small private homes. Such domestic monasteries were probably in the tradition of Paula, Eustochium, and Melania. Nevertheless, Galla, the daughter of Symmachus, enters the convent attached to the Church of St. Peter (IV.14.1-5). Cf. Petersen, The Dialogues of Gregory the Great, pp. 67-68.

includes a story of two noble women who, like Redempta, had converted their own home into a convent. Confining themselves inside, they found a layman "kind enough to bring them what they needed from the outside world." But, as Gregory says,

> Unfortunately, as is sometimes the case, their character stood in sharp contrast to the nobility of their birth, and they were too conscious of their former importance to practice true humility toward others. Even under the restraining influence of religious life they still had not learned to control their tongues"[23]

And so the good layman, tired of their "harsh criticisms" finally went to Benedict, who proceeded to rebuke the two women, threatening them with "excommunication." It is reasonable to deduce from Gregory's words that there were others in his day, besides these two noble women, who were interested in using the monastery more as an escape from the world than as a place in which to examine their hearts. One can be sure that as Gregory told this story, the fact of his own nobility did not escape him either. In fact, it was made painfully relevant to him through the antics of his aunt, Gordiana, who, to Gregory's great chagrin, showed her true colors after Tarsilla's dramatic death.

Ever since the three sisters had taken refuge in their home, Gordiana (the "incorrigible Gordiana," as Dudden calls her) had been lax in her religious devotion and had thus invited the rebukes of the other two. When Tarsilla died shortly before Christmas, Aemiliana alone was granted a vision a few days later in which Tarsilla said to her, "Come: I have kept the Lord's birthday without you, but I will

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[23]Dialogues II.23.2-3. Cf. Moralia 5.31.55.

keep with you the day of the holy Epiphany." Thinking of Gordiana, Aemiliana replied, "But if I come alone, to whom am I to leave our sister?" Reluctantly, Tarsilla responded, "Come, for our sister Gordiana is reckoned among the women of the world." Indeed, Tarsilla's prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Epiphany when Aemiliana died, also of a great fever. Gordiana was thus left to herself. According to Gregory, "forgetful of the fear of God, forgetful of shame and reverence, forgetful of her consecration, she married after a time the steward of her estates." His final response is to remark, with disappointment, that "Many are called, but few are chosen."[24]

Regardless of some bad examples, however, the pages of the Dialogues are filled mostly with those, like Redempta, whose lives were "filled with virtue." Surrounded by such a great host of witnesses, Gregory was about to enter upon a time of great inner struggle and self scrutiny. The immediate result was that in 574 he gave up the family estates (which he had just inherited upon his father's death) and founded six monasteries in Sicily and one other, St. Andrew's, on the family estate on the Caelian hill. According to Gregory of Tours, he "endowed them with sufficient land to provide the monks with their daily sustenance."[25] He then sold his remaining possessions and entered St. Andrew's.

That this was a particularly difficult time for Gregory is clear

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[24]Homiliae in Evangelia 2.38.15. See also Dudden's masterful account of Gregory's sisters in Gregory the Great, pp. 9-10.

[25]Decem libri historiarum x.1. This is not strictly true because, as others have pointed out, Gregory made a further gift of land to St. Andrew's in 587. See Richards, Consul of God, p. 32.

from his own account of events, which he wrote some twenty years later soon after he had become pope. This brief narrative comes at the beginning of the Moralia in Job in the book's dedicatory preface to Leander, Gregory's close friend and Bishop of Seville.[26] Written in the form of a letter, this preface recalls the occasion when the two first met in Constantinople in 579. Gregory describes the events, occurring while the two were there together, that convinced him to write his commentary. Most importantly, however, Gregory ventures back even further to the days before he knew Leander, to those days in 574 when he finally decided to leave the world and enter the monastery. Describing what he was experiencing inside himself, he writes as follows:

> Not long ago, my beloved brother, we made our acquaintance in Constantinople at the time when I had been sent to represent the Apostolic See in that city, where you were leading the mission undertaken in defense of the faith of the Visigoths. I revealed to you in confidence all that displeased me about myself. That is, for a long time I put off the grace of conversion, even after being inspired with heavenly desire, still considering it better to be clothed in the secular habit. For, it was revealed to me then what I should seek of the love of things eternal, but my accustomed habits bound me so that I could not alter my outward ways. And then when even my spirit was compelling me, as if bound, to serve the present world, the many cares of this world began to surface around me so that I found myself being held back [from the grace of conversion] not just in outward form but, more importantly, in my mind as well. At long last, anxiously running from all these

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[26]From Gregory's comments to Leander in epistle I.41, written in April 591, the dedicatory preface must have been written sometime before that date. The Moralia was based on oral lectures he delivered to the monks while in Constantinople between 579 and 585. Transcribing the lectures into book form most likely took place in the years after he returned from Constantinople and before 591, as Gregory indicates in the dedicatory preface. See Paul Meyvaert, "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's Dialogues: A Response to Francis Clark" (1988), pp. 348-351.

> cares, I sought the haven of the monastery, and leaving behind the cares of the world (or so I credulously believed) I escaped naked from the shipwreck of human life.[27]

This little personal account, which Claude Dagens has called "un fragment d'autobiographie," is the closest one comes to a personal conversion story in Gregory's writings.[28] It is, unfortunately, cryptic in its language and frustratingly brief, particularly when one stops to compare it with St. Augustine's Confessions. Later hagiographers add nothing to it, and the only other ray of light which Gregory himself sheds on it comes in a passage from the Dialogues, already noted above, where he merely mentions his companionship with the old man, Deusdedit, at the time when he "first experienced the desire to take up the solitary life." [I.10.11]

Clearly, this passage is important for the light it sheds on a much earlier period in Gregory's life, a period about which little is known. But it also must be kept firmly in mind that he is writing many years after the fact. Looking back twenty years to the time when he was in his early thirties, Gregory is recalling events long since past with the benefit of hindsight. He is also writing during his early years as pope when he was taking on the vexing duties of office in the midst of mounting health problems.[29]

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[27]Moralia, Epistola ad Leandrum.

[28]Dagens, p.285. Dagens's treatment of Gregory's conversion grows out of his earlier article, "La 'Conversion' de saint Grégoire le Grand" (1969). In the next chapter I will return to this account in the context of his years in office as pope.

[29]See Dagens, "La 'Conversion' de saint Grégoire le Grand," p. 23.

Having said this, what is first apparent in this passage is that he is recalling what he himself calls his "conversion." During the sixth century, "conversion" had a wide range of meanings.[30] On the one hand, conversion in its strictest and literal sense was rooted in the idea of repentance, or a turning toward God from sin and unbelief, going back to its meaning in the early Church. Jesus and John the Baptist were portrayed in the Gospels as teachers demanding repentance (metanoia) and a return to true Judaism.[31] The understanding that conversion entailed a return to Judaism was modified by Paul and the other apostles so that Peter's exhortation early in the Book of Acts that those "in ignorance" must "Repent, therefore, and be converted that your sins may be wiped out" did not mean that gentiles had to keep the Jewish law.[32] Conversion from gentile religion to Judaism came to mean conversion from paganism to Christianity. It was clear that those who were outside the faith--that is, pagans who had not been exposed to Christian teaching--had to be converted and turn toward God before they could become Christians. The idea of repentance and turning from error continued to be a

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[30]For a general study of conversion in the Middle Ages, see P. Galtier, "Pénitents et 'Convertis': de la pénitence latine a la pénitence celtique" (1937). James J. O'Donnell treats the conversion of Cassiodorus, a near contemporary of Gregory, amidst a useful general discussion of conversion during this period, in Cassiodorus (1979), pp. 109-116.

[31]Alan Segal, in his recent study of Paul the apostle, looks at the contemporary Jewish understanding of conversion as repentance and return to Judaism and the way in which this meaning evolves in the hands of Paul. Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (1990), esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

[32]Acts 3:19.

central theme as for example, in the Book of James, where it says, "Brothers, if one of you should stray from the truth, and someone else should convert him, you can be sure of this: the one who converts a sinner from the error of his way will be saving his soul from death and covering a multitude of sins."[33] As part of the Christian understanding of conversion the Church developed the use of catechesis for those who wanted to become Christians but were unfamiliar with Christian teachings. Catechesis prepared candidates who wished to enter the Church for baptism, and it was the means by which the Church could be sure that those candidates were sincere in their profession. Augustine's On Catechetical Instruction (De Catechizandis Rudibus), was written for the instructors in catechesis who had to prepare candidates for baptism. Clearly, Gregory's conversion should not be considered primarily in this category, since he was raised in a Christian household by pious parents and exposed to the Church throughout his life. No doubt, he believed personally that his conversion involved repentance from sin, but he was not converting from paganism to Christianity.

But conversion in Gregory's day had a variety of other meanings as well, reflecting the extent to which Christianity had permeated Late Antique society. As R. A. Markus comments, "To pass from the world of Augustine and his pagan contemporaries into the world of Gregory the Great is to move by imperceptible stages from a world in which the basic question was 'What is a Christian?' to one in which

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[33]James 5:19-20. The Greek verb is epistrepho.

it has become 'How should a Christian live, behave, be a good Christian?'"[34] The preoccupation with the qualitative question of what it means to be a "good" Christian can be seen in the growing gradations of meaning of conversion. In Gregory's day, conversion also would have referred to entry into the monastic life. Those who were thus converted, were leaving behind the life of the world, even if they had been pious laypeople, for the strict life of spiritual service.[35] It is this sense of conversion that Cassian refers to in the Conferences when he speaks of the three types of vocation, or calling, which draws people from "worldly preoccupation" to the service of God.[36] Each kind begins with a different agent, but all three culminate when the one being called is "stirred with a longing for eternal life and salvation, urging us to follow God and to cling with most saving compunction to His commands."[37] In many ways this type of "conversion" is an extension of its earliest meaning, adding the notion of the pursuit of perfection which follows the initial cal-

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[34]Markus, "From Rome to the Barbarian Kingdoms (330-700)," p. 84.

[35]Gregory uses conversion in this sense in epistle XI.30: "Although a mundane law declares that a marriage may be dissolved for the sake of conversion, against the will of one of the parties, yet divine law does not permit this to be done. . . . [One] member cannot enter a monastery while the other remains in the world."

[36]Conferences 3. On Gregory's knowledge of Cassian, see Robert Gillet's introduction to the Moralia (Sources Chrétiennes 32), pp. 89-102.

[37]Conferences 3:3.

ling.[38] Thus Cassian, after citing Paul's miraculous conversion and his subsequent virtues, warns:

> So it is the conclusion that counts. Someone committed by the beginnings of a glorious conversion can prove to be a lesser person because of carelessness, and someone constrained by some necessity to become a monk can, out of fear of God and out of diligence, reach up to perfection.[39]

Conversion, in Cassian's view, did not end with the calling, but required a subsequent pursuit of perfection. The life of the monastery provided the environment for this pursuit, and the one who chose the monastic life must be prepared to reach for perfection.

This is why Cassian objected so strenuously to the so-called "conversi," who were also prevalent in Gregory's day.[40] The "conversi" were those who chose to take up a religious habit of some sort without officially entering a monastery. They remained in the world, but without partaking fully in it. The "conversi" were often the object of criticism by those who believed that they were neither one nor the other. Cassian criticized them for hypocrisy, claiming that "they change not their former vices or past life but only their position and outward dress."[41] That Gregory was not one of the

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[38]In some senses, this notion of conversion is similar to that used in fundamentalist circles today, where those raised within a Christian tradition can still be converted. Their conversion however signals a new single-minded pursuit of holiness which had been absent previously even though the person converted may have been raised within a religious home.

[39]Conferences 3:5.

[40]See Dagens's discussion of the "conversi" and Gregory's rejection of them in "La 'conversion' de saint Grégoire le Grand," pp. 157-59.

[41]Conferences 4:20.

"conversi" seems clear from his own account in which he claims to have remained in his usual dress right up to the time he entered the monastery. In fact, he may have had the "conversi" in mind when writing to Leander, because he makes a special point of his outward dress, saying that he stubbornly put off God's calling, "still considering it better to be clothed in the secular habit." If becoming a "conversus" was an option Gregory considered, it was one he most certainly rejected, deciding that it was a weak compromise between the world and the life of the monastery. Thus, he writes in one of his homilies that, "We often see those who, upon hearing a preacher, are moved as from compunction to change their dress but not their hearts so that they wear the vestments of the religious but without trampling their feet over their past sins."[42]

Finally, conversion during this period could refer to cenobitic monks who had decided to leave the monastery to live in complete solitude and pursue the eremitic life. These monks, according to Benedict,

> have spent much time in the monastery testing themselves and learning to fight against the devil. They have prepared themselves in the fraternal line of battle for the single combat of the hermit. They have laid the foundation to fight, with the aid of God, against their own bodily and spiritual vices.[43]

This description clearly did not apply to Gregory, but the notion of a "conversion" to a higher state of perfection is one to which Gregory would return in his own discussions of the contemplative

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[42]Homiliae in Hiezechielem 1.10.8.

[43]Regula Benedicti 1.

life. It is akin to conversion to the monastic life with its subsequent pursuit of perfection as described by Cassian, and it is part of the monastic articulation of the steps of spiritual ascent (or the ladder of perfection) that was popular in contemplative writings throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. These conversions were the links between the various stages of spiritual ascent in the pursuit of perfection.[44] Presumably, the conversion from the cenobitic to eremitic form of monasticism was very near the top of the ladder of spiritual ascent in the temporal life.

In light of the different ways in which "conversion" was understood in the sixth century, it is probable that Gregory himself did not see his own conversion in simply one form. As mentioned above, he was almost certainly drawing upon the language of conversion in its most elementary sense of repentance and turning from sin, but this does not also mean that he was converting from paganism to a belief in Christianity, because he was raised as a Christian within a Christian family and tradition. But, as part of the question, "How should a Christian live, behave, and be a good Christian?", Gregory was concerned with a conversion that leads to a higher form of life, the life of perfection and contemplation, which for him and many

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[44]See Gregory's discussion of conversion in Moralia 24.11.26 ff., where he identifies the three stages of the convert's life, each of which begins with pain and ends with joy. Although he does not speak of conversions between each stage, the process of pain to joy within each stage follows the same pattern as that of the initial conversion.

others of his day meant the monastic life.[45]

In the preface to the Moralia, he begins his conversion account with the initial calling of God. His immediate response at the time was to be "inspired with heavenly desire," yet, curiously, he remained in the world, still clothed in his secular dress and unable to respond to God in a way that was satisfactory to him. He could not convince himself that he had received the "grace of conversion" while remaining in the world. Then, to his great distress, he found that the more he delayed the more he was compelled to "serve the present world." It was then that he began to realize that he could delay no longer, for he found himself actually "being held back not just in outward form, but, more importantly, in my mind as well." He may have been hesitating while trying to decide exactly what to do, but gradually he recognized the danger in this because as he hesitated he sensed that he was being pulled backward, away from God's calling. When it was finally clear to him that he was in an either/or situation, that he had to give up everything or succumb to the enticement of the world, he "sought the haven of the monastery," the culmination of his conversion.

The first stage in this conversion was calling. By using the term, "conversionis gratia," a familiar one in his writings, Gregory makes clear that conversion is initiated by God.[46] In his own case, he is explicit in giving all the credit to the grace of God, stres-

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[45]See Dagens, "La 'Conversion' de saint Grégoire le Grand," pp. 150-52; and St Grégoire le Grand, pp. 247-250.

[46]See Dialogues II.1.2; Moralia 24.11.30; Moralia 24.22.49.

sing the fact that not only did he not initiate his encounter with God but rather he even resisted it, having "put off" the grace of conversion. This is consistent with his other writings in which he speaks of "conversion" strictly in an Augustinian sense of prevenient grace. That is, he believes that the sinner is incapable of any moral progress prior to the intervention of God. Thus, according to Gregory, "We are not able to rise to the good, except the Spirit both raise us up beforehand and strengthen us subsequently."[47]

But it is easy to lose sight of this fact when reading Gregory's more contemplative writings, particularly those in which he is dealing with the experience of conversion. In such cases, building upon his own experience, he delves into the inner recesses of the sinner's heart at the very point where its encounter with God begins. Thus, in the Dialogues, when Gregory discusses repentance, the initial point of contact between God and human, he characterizes repentance as an ascending process of compunction:

> There are many types of compunction, because every kind of fault causes regret in a repentant soul. . . . There are two main types of compunction, however. The penitent thirsting for God feels the compunction of fear at first; later on, he experiences the compunction of love. When he considers his sins he is overcome with weeping because he fears eternal punishment. Then when this fear subsides through prolonged sorrow and penance, a feeling of security emerges from an assurance of forgiveness, and the soul begins to burn with a love for heavenly joys. Now, the same person, who wept out of fear of punishment, sheds abundant tears because his entrance into the kingdom of heaven is being delayed. Once we envision the choir of

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[47]See Homiliae in Hiezechielem 1.10.45: "Ad Bona quippe assurgere perfecte non possumus, nisi nos spiritus et praeveniendo elevet et subsequendo confortet." See also Moralia 24.10.24. On Gregory and prevenient grace, see Carole Straw, Gregory the Great, pp. 138 ff. and Dagens, St Grégoire le Grand, pp. 294-99.

> angels, and fix our gaze on the company of the saints and the majesty of an endless vision of God, the thought of having no part in these joys makes us weep more bitterly than the fear of hell and the prospect of eternal misery did before. Thus the compunction of fear, when perfect, leads the soul to the compunction of love.[48]

Compunction, in Gregory's writings, is the human spirit in pain. This pain is twofold, coming from an awareness of sinfulness and distance from God together with an accompanying longing for God.[49] These are the two compunctions--the compunctions of fear and of love. It is interesting to note in this passage that God is, for the most part, absent until nearly the end of the conversion process when the sinner receives the compunction of love and the "vision of God." The point is not that Gregory is omitting God; on the contrary, God permeates the entire process, but while in the throes of the compunction of fear the sinner is not yet able to see God because of pride and must therefore sink to the depths of despair before the choirs of angels can be seen. Gregory places his emphasis on the actions of the sinner rather than the actions of God, because that is all the sinner can see when in the midst of this turmoil.

Clearly, Gregory's description is not that of a disinterested observer. When he describes the experience of conversion in a sinner, he is drawing from his own experience in order to set forth specific details which he felt were common to all repentant sinners.

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[48]Dialogues III.34.1-2. See, also, Dudden's discussion of the levels of penance which Gregory outlines in his commentary on the first book of Kings (Gregory the Great, pp. 419-426).

[49]On the significance of compunction in Gregory's writings, see Jean LeClercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, p. 38; and Robert Gillet, "Grégoire le Grand," p. 894.

Ever aware of the inner workings of his own heart, he knew what had happened from that first twinge of "heavenly desire." As he remembers his own conversion, he is recalling an experience which involved a period of deepest despair during which God seemed to be absent, a period when he was metaphorically lost at sea with no one anywhere to rescue him. Knowing that God did indeed ultimately rescue him, Gregory was able to go back and recall what it was like when he did not know that God would rescue him. It is with such personal involvement that Gregory descends again each step in the heart's awakening. Once again, he is able to remember clearly the feeling of fear and abandonment which had gripped him during his own conversion so that he can then set forth, in careful detail, the geography of the common soul.[50]

With that first twinge, initiated by God, there comes a sense of guilt that leads, in turn, to compunction. In Gregory's own case, the fault (culpa) that caused him particular regret (and continued to do so) was his attachment to the present world--his entanglement with the "cares of the world." What was supposed to follow from this guilt was a time of "prolonged sorrow and penance," but it was this stage in his own conversion that caused Gregory particular regret, because it seemed to him that he delayed inexcusably long in coming to genuine fear.[51] Like Augustine, he kept saying to God, "A minute,

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[50]See Moralia 24.1.1 where Gregory prefaces his subsequent discussion of conversion by stating that from a single person, conclusions can be drawn for the whole human race.

[51]In Moralia 22.20.48 Gregory calls this step "contempt," which gives way to fear and then love.

just a minute, just a little time longer."[52] When he heard God's calling, he knew what he ought to do, but "my accustomed habits bound me so that I could not alter my outward ways." Considerable time elapsed between the time when he was first "inspired" and the time he acted on it, but he does not say what actually happened during this time. Evidently, there is much behind the story of his own conversion that he does not explain, particularly having to do with the reasons for his hesitations and the reasons for overcoming those hesitations.

A key to understanding Gregory's hesitation might be found in an observation made by Dudden, who, like others, has offered a number of possible reasons as to why Gregory decided to enter the Church. He boldly suggested that perhaps Gregory's reasons for entering the Church were not entirely spiritual and that he was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to further his professional career.[53] According to this thesis, Gregory, as the urban prefect, had risen as high as he could within the civic ranks of Rome. Since Rome was no longer the center of political life it had once been, it offered its aristocracy little hope for advancement, and Gregory certainly knew this.

He could, of course, have headed for Constantinople as many of his peers had been doing for years, having been uprooted by the

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[52]Compare Gregory's sluggish response with that of Augustine's in the Confessions 8: 5,6.

[53]See Dudden, Gregory the Great, pp. 105-6. Dagens counters Dudden in "La 'Conversion' de saint Grégoire le Grand" (1969), pp. 151-52.

upheavals of war tearing apart Italy. The migration eastward was not a new phenomenon, having been a fact of life in the later Empire for over two centuries, but even so Gregory was not eager to leave his home and place of birth for the intrigues of the Imperial Court. Furthermore, Gregory was at heart loyal and patriotic toward Rome and would prefer to remain there regardless of the diminishing opportunities it had to offer.[54] There remained, however, one possibility in Rome for one with Gregory's proven ability and experience, and that possibility was the Church. In sixth-century Italy, the Church was gradually filling the void left by the withering civic structure. Its expanding range of responsibilities included defense and administration of the city, negotiating with the Lombards and with Constantinople, as well as providing for the needs of the poor in the midst of regular plagues and famine. Consequently, able officials and administrators were in great demand, and Gregory would be ideally suited to act on the Church's behalf, as he would clearly demonstrate in years to come. Gregory may have risen as high as possible within the civic ranks, but the opportunity was open for him should he want to enter the Church.

Obviously, it is impossible to know for sure whether Gregory was thinking in this manner, but it is not difficult to imagine that this general line of reasoning at least crossed his mind. It may not have been foremost, and ultimately it may not have been a notion he

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[54]According to Judith Herrin, "Had Gregory been brought up in Ravenna, it is possible that he might have pursued a civilian career longer, but in Rome there was hardly a satisfying career to pursue" (The Formation of Christendom (1987), p. 151).

acceded to in his own heart when he finally decided to enter the monastery. In fact, it is hard to escape the fact that Gregory's account of his conversion is above all the story of spiritual struggle and not one of personal motivation. His upbringing within a religious household and the abundant examples of those around him who had taken up the monastic life surely provided enough reasons, if he needed to look for them, for entering the Church. What is perhaps more startling about Gregory is not why he decided to enter the Church but rather why he hesitated so long.

Therefore, when Dudden suggests that Gregory may have been thinking about his career, and offers it as a positive motivating factor--whether conscious or subconscious--for entering the monastery, it seems more likely that it was instead a negative factor that caused Gregory to waver in his decision. In other words, it is possible that he considered the possibility of a career in the church in just those terms described above and that the very fact of it disturbed him. At the time, Gregory may have been weighing the reasons for entering the Church when this rather natural line of reasoning occurred to him. But, could he honestly enter the Church with such base motives when those around him, including his pious Aunt Tarsilla, had so clearly been inspired by pure intentions? Therefore, if indeed he was thinking about the course of his career, he may have recognized and resisted the thought, and this contributed to his hesitation.[55]

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[55]In Moralia 24.11.26, Gregory describes the hesitation preceding conversion in similar terms.

Gregory's hesitations finally did give way to fear, and fear in turn gave way to a "feeling of security," an "assurance of forgiveness," and a subsequent intense longing for the joys of heaven. Gregory calls this the "compunction of love," which can be so strong that the new believer even sheds tears at the prospect of not being able to enter heaven immediately. Gregory himself was smitten by the compunction of love in the monastery, where he spent the next five years living the remota vita in Rome.

In the Moralia, the first major work written by Gregory after his conversion, he describes in detail the nature of the contemplative life that ensues from conversion. Late in his commentary he addresses the place in Job chapter 31 where Job has defended himself in the face of the comforters. Daring the Almighty to answer his claim to innocence, Job declares that, should God answer, he will give God "an account of my every step." Building upon the word "step," Gregory proceeds to expound the various "steps of virtue" that must be ascended one by one, in "distinct divisions" and by "marked and ordered methods."[56] It is clear that he is describing not just the steps of initial conversion but also the steps of sanctification in the new believer. "For," according to Gregory, "every elect person sets out from the tenderness of his embryo in the first instance and afterwards comes to firmness for strong and vigorous achievements."

Conversion is the entrance to salvation for all repentant

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[56]Moralia 22.20.46-51.

sinners, but, even more, it is the gateway to the inner life for the contemplative.[57] Initiated by God, through the grace of conversion, the young convert is set on the path toward holiness with "the love of God" at the path's end. Although this path is a long one, and "there is no sudden attainment of things above," it is, on the other hand, not a "great labor. . .since one passes from one step to another."[58]

At first, when new believers are still "trembling" in the infancy of their faith, they are weak and therefore not yet able to "withstand some earthly practices." Only gradually are they lifted up to heavenly realms. Gregory is also aware that not all believers attain to the same level of virtue after conversion. While some become "vigorous and strong" others remain "weak and feeble" because "heavenly desire fades away in them." Like his Aunt Gordiana, these are the ones who "while they aim at heavenly things and forsake the pernicious doings of this world, by the littlemindedness of inconstancy fall away day by day from their setting out."[59]

The contemplative's path which Gregory describes is essentially twofold, comprising, on the one hand, a rigorous ascetical life and, on the other, quiet contemplation. Asceticism, or askesis (literally "training"), entails the mortification of earthly desires and dying to self, as articulated by other monastic writers before him, includ-

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[57]Dagens, St Grégoire le Grand, p. 257.

[58]Moralia 22.20.46,48.

[59]Moralia 19.27.50.

ing Antony, Cassian, and Sulpicius Severus.[60] Closely allied with this askesis is the pursuit of divine contemplation, which can only occur as the old desires are mortified and replaced with corresponding heavenly ones, through the power of the Holy Spirit.[61] Contemplation is the divine ascent which can only happen when the earthly self has descended to the depths through humility. In this way, the monastic life closely corresponds to the two kinds of compunction which Gregory described as central to conversion. Within the monastery, the compunction of fear is continually roused through askesis, while the compunction of love spurs the heart on to contemplation, the road to God.

Gregory compares the contemplative to Jacob, who laid his head on the stone. To lay one's head down to rest symbolizes withdrawal from the world. But it is not enough simply to sleep, as some lazy contemplatives might do, who are not able to "see the angels" because they are simply laying their heads on the ground of unclean thoughts.[62] When true contemplatives, however, lay down their heads, they are not doing so to rest. They are laying their heads on a stone, which means that they are undertaking a "daily fight against themselves, maintaining a brave conflict, that the mind not be rendered dull by neglect nor subdued by indolence."[63] The life of

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[60]Cf. Dagens, St Grégoire le Grand, p. 260. On Gregory's "Logic of Asceticism," see Straw, pp. 128-46.

[61]Moralia 5.31.55

[62]See also Moralia in Job 6.37.57.

[63]Moralia 5.31.55.

the contemplative is one of active vigilance, not peaceful repose.[64] The ultimate end of this askesis/contemplation, for Gregory as for other monastic writers before him, is the serene vision of God, the mystical, beatific vision.[65]

Gregory knows, however, that perfect contemplation does not come easily or quickly. Contemplatives must undergo an "inner scrutiny" that becomes more and more exact as they go deeper within themselves. As they do so, the compunctions of fear and love, which were present during conversion, continue to operate throughout the believer's ascent. Regular scrutiny creates more fear as they see the sin within themselves, so that even experienced believers continue to "weep for their past sins."[66] In response God grants them further assurance. The process, therefore, is a continual one.

This dynamic relationship between the compunctions of fear and love, experienced first at conversion and then throughout the contemplative's ascent, would be a recurring theme for Gregory. Drawing upon the experience of his own conversion, he would return to that model in his writings on the contemplative life. But his own life would not be confined to the monastery, for he remained there only for another five years before being summoned away from St. Andrew's

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[64]The tension between askesis and contemplation reflects the traditional struggle between otium (rest) and negotium (labor), which in Gregory clearly has classical as well as patristic and biblical antecedents. See Jean LeClercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, pp. 35, 73.

[65]For Gregory on the beatific vision, see, for example, Moralia 5.37.61 ff.

[66]Dialogues 3.34.4.

by the pope to serve the Church in Constantinople, and to his great regret he would never again have the luxury of peaceful withdrawal from the world. He did not, however, relinquish his pursuit of contemplation. In fact, as I shall attempt to show in the next chapter, he made room within his contemplative model for the active life, which had been thrust upon him. Just as conversion had been crucial to his entry into the monastic life, it would be crucial for his understanding of the active life.

II.
The Two Eyes of the Soul

> The two lives, the active and contemplative, when they are preserved in the soul, are accounted as two eyes in the face. Thus the right eye is the contemplative life, and the left the active life. --Dialogues

In Constantinople, Gregory found a friend in the emperor's sister, Theoctista, who was also the governess of the royal prince, Theodosius, at whose baptism Gregory stood as sponsor. Sometime after he left Constantinople, however, Gregory apparently lost touch with Theoctista until, soon after his consecration as pope, he received word from her again. Delighted to have the renewed friendship of someone in whom he could confide his hopes and concerns, he wrote to her confessing the regret and anxiety he felt at having the burden of papal office thrust upon him. "I am now more in bondage to earthly cares," he wrote, "than ever I was as a layman. I have lost the deep joy of my quiet, and while I seem outwardly to have risen, I am inwardly falling down. I grieve that I am driven far from the face of my Maker." Against this gloomy background, he fell to reminiscing about his days in the monastery:

> It used to be my daily aim to put myself beyond the world, beyond the flesh; to expel all corporeal forms from the eyes of the soul, and to behold in the spirit the blessedness of heaven. Panting for the sight of God, I used to cry not only in words but from the depths of my heart, "I have sought Thy face; Thy face, Lord, will I seek."[1]

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[1]Epistle I. 5.

Confronting this distant memory of better days, Gregory had to fight off bitterness at the thought of his present state in which he regularly found it difficult even to begin contemplating God. He told Theoctista, "When my business is done I try to return to my inner self but cannot, for I am driven away by vain tumultuous thoughts." Frustrated both by the past and the present, he sought solace in the Scriptures, hoping to find an example in God's word from which he could draw comfort. He thought of Rachel, Jacob's wife, and Mary, the friend of Jesus, both of whom conjured up in his mind quieting images of the beauty of the contemplative life. But, just as he thought of Rachel, he remembered Leah, and when he thought of Mary, he also remembered Martha, both of whom served God but had been relegated to a life of active rather than contemplative service. The realization that he was akin to Martha rather than Mary was difficult to bear:

> I loved the beauty of the contemplative life, as it were Rachel, barren but far-seeing and beautiful, who, though in her quietness she bears fewer children, yet beholds the light more clearly. But by some judgment, I know not what, I have been wedded in the night to Leah--the active life--fruitful but bleary-eyed; seeing less, but bringing forth more children. I longed to sit with Mary at the Lord's feet, and to hear the words of His mouth; but lo! I am compelled to serve with Martha in outward service and to be troubled about many things.[2]

This maudlin letter to Theoctista was only one of many such letters Gregory wrote to friends and confidants while he was pope, lamenting the burden of his responsibilities and remembering wist-

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[2]Ibid.

fully his golden days within the monastery.[3] Reading these letters in isolation, one could understandably conclude that Gregory had nothing but disdain for the active life. But, alongside these personal lamentations stand other, more positive appraisals of the active life as part of the whole being of the Christian. In the Moralia, written mostly when he was in Constantinople, but edited in later years, Gregory writes of the relationship between the active and contemplative lives, stating that "the two lives, the active and contemplative, when they are preserved in the soul, are accounted as two eyes in the face. Thus the right eye is the contemplative life, and the left the active life."[4] Juxtaposed, the letter to Theoctista and Gregory's statement in the Moralia appear contradictory, but I do not believe Gregory would have seen them as such.

In the last chapter, I looked at Gregory's conversion as his point of entry into the monastic life. Conversion for Gregory meant that he was leaving behind the cares of the world and taking up the life of contemplation. But devotion to contemplation (otium) did not mean an escape from the vigilance and labor (negotium) of askesis. Life in the monastery entailed a rigorous ascetic routine made possible by freedeom from his external secular duties. The events of his life, however, dictated that Gregory would not continue in

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[3]This letter, written in 590, the first year of his papacy, is especially disconsolate. Gregory would recover from this malaise in order to confront the difficult tasks ahead of him as pope, but the themes of this letter would resurface regularly in Gregory's later letters and writings, including the Dialogues and the Epistola ad Leandrum.

[4]Moralia 6.37.57.

solitude. After being called from St. Andrew's, he realized, gradually and painfully, that his duties in the Church were drawing upon him in much the same way that his previous, secular career had. To continue cultivating the inner life, he would have to do so in a setting much less conducive to contemplation.

In this chapter I will look at Gregory's years after the monastery when he found himself unable to live in solitude and powerless to slip loose from the ties of active service in the Church. The height of his service came during the final fourteen years of his life when he served as pope, trying diligently to fill the roles of ecclesiastical and temporal ruler as well as that of spiritual leader. As temporal ruler, he found himself tending to everything from public utilities and distribution of food to defense of the city and diplomacy with the Franks in the West and the Emperor in the East. As ecclesiastical ruler, his work ranged from church reform and promotion of monasticism to an extensive missionary effort that culminated in his crowning achievement, the mission to England. And, finally, as spiritual leader, Gregory preached regularly in the churches of Rome and wrote the major portion of his literary works including his homilies, The Pastoral Rule, and the Dialogues. Throughout all of this, he was determined not to let his work distract from his spiritual labor, for he continued to follow a strict monastic regimen with a gathering of other monks inside the walls of the Lateran Palace.

Gregory may have complained bitterly about the burden of his duties, but the entire span of his career demonstrates that he gave

himself fully to whatever duties and responsibilities lay before him. I believe that the source of Gregory's frustration, therefore, was not that he was living both the active and contemplative lives, but rather that he found himself unable, in the midst of his earthly duties, to get the balance right. In effect, he made a distinction between his temporal duties, which he felt pulled him down into the world, and his spiritual duties, which were not only compatible with contemplation but also complemented and grew out of contemplation. Thus, in this chapter I will look at how Gregory attempted to live both the active and contemplative lives and how he struggled to reconcile them within himself. In the following chapter, I will then look at how he envisioned this reconciliation working ideally in the lives of the saints.

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Gregory did not remain in St. Andrew's for long. He had entered the monastery most likely in 574 and remained there contentedly for some five years. It was this period of his life upon which he would reminisce (as with Theoctista) in the opening passage of the Dialogues:

> I recall those earlier days in the monastery where all the fleeting things of time were in a world below me, and I could rise above the vanities of life. Heavenly thoughts would fill my mind, and while still held within the body I passed beyond its narrow confines in contemplation. Even death, which nearly everyone regards as evil, I cherished as the entrance into life and the reward for labor [I.Prol.3].

In 579, however, Gregory was summoned by the pope to leave the haven of the monastery and come to the aid of the Church and the

city. These years, particularly 579, were disastrous ones for the city of Rome. According to the Liber Pontificalis, famine and the plague were decimating Rome, and the region was being deluged with rain.[5] To make matters much worse, the Lombards were marching toward the city. Previously, in 577, an embassy from Rome had pleaded with the emperor to send support in the continuing struggle against the Lombards, but to no avail. Now, in July of 579, while the Lombards were at the walls of the city, Pope Benedict I, who had held the See for only four years, died from the plague. Clearly, it was one of the bleakest times for the venerable city. A few months later, Pelagius II was chosen as pope and consecrated even before he could be confirmed by the emperor because, as the Liber Pontificalis says, "the Lombards were besieging the city of Rome and were working much havoc in Italy."[6] One of the new pope's first acts was to create another delegation of senators and church officials to send to Constantinople to plead Rome's case with the emperor Tiberius. The most notable member of the delegation was Gregory, who was instructed to remain in Constantinople, even after the delegation's mission was completed, as a permanent ambassador (apocrisiarios) of the pope.

It is not clear whether Gregory still was living at St. Andrew's at the time when Pelagius summoned him. According to his biographer John, he had been called from the monastery earlier by Pope Benedict, who had wanted Gregory to serve directly under him as deacon. Thus,

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[5]Liber Pontificalis, Vita Benedicti I.

[6]Liber Pontificalis, Vita Pelagii II.

according to John, Gregory was already serving in some administrative capacity at the time when Pelagius sent him to Constantinople as apocrisiarios.[7] For his own part, Gregory is difficult to interpret on this matter. Writing to Leander, he is primarily concerned to describe the upheaval he felt upon leaving the monastery after he had convinced himself that he would never again have to venture into the world:

> Just as the ship that is not carefully docked is often tossed by the water from the safety of the bay during a raging storm, so also I suddenly found myself once more on an open sea of secular affairs under the cloak of ecclesiastical office. And because I did not hold on tightly to the quiet of the monastery when I had it, I learned by losing it how tightly I should have grasped it. For, when the virtue of obedience was set against my own inclination in order to enlist me in the service of the holy altar, I accepted it in order to serve the Church only if I could later withdraw again into solitude without penalty. Subsequently, when the ministry of the altar had become burdensome, notwithstanding my unwillingness and reluctance, the further weight of the pastoral care was placed upon me.[8]

Clearly reluctant to leave the monastery, Gregory did so to be of service to the Church. He agreed to be ordained priest because those around him persuaded him that the Church needed him as priest at this most difficult time. Furthermore, they persuaded him by appealing to that part of him they knew he could not deny: obedience. They set before him holy obedience, on the one hand--obedience to God's Church on earth--and his own self interest, on the other. To stay in the

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[7]John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii I.25-26. See also Paul the Deacon, Vita Gregorii, 7, and Gregory of Tours, Decem libri historiarum X.1, neither of whom mentions which pope appointed Gregory as deacon.

[8]Moralia in Job, Epistola ad Leandrum, 1.

monastery at a time when the church was in dire need of able servants could only be to gratify his own desires. Therefore, Gregory's supreme act of self-denial--his withdrawal from the world and entry into the monastery--was turned on its head and set against him. He agreed to be ordained so long as he could later withdraw, when the crisis was over, and return to the monastery. But further duty was laid upon him, and it meant that he would have to leave Rome and St. Andrew's behind for Constantinople, where he would be housed in an "earthly palace," that is the Imperial Court. The immediate effect of all this on Gregory, particularly his spiritual discipline, was dramatic:

> At that time, when I undertook the service of the altar, it was decided for me, without my knowledge, that I should take on the added burden of holy orders to the extent that I should be housed under less restraint within an earthly palace.... This position, after having dragged me from the monastery, then killed my former life of quiet with the sword of daily occupation.[9]

Altogether, Gregory stayed in Constantinople for six years. Considering his sense of duty and the way in which throughout his life he would willingly--if not without some hesitation--do what was asked of him, it is not difficult to believe that his reluctance swiftly gave way to careful attention to the task at hand. Dudden, with his usual shrewd insight, remarks that, "He was in a fair way, had he been left in his retreat, to become one of those saintly marvels, whose self-inflicted sufferings are the admiration of their time, but whose beneficial influence on the world at large is found to be insignifi-

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[9]Ibid.

cant. Fortunately for Rome and Italy, however, Gregory was withheld from this career."[10]

Although forced to remain in the city, he was not willing to let slip away all that he had gained in the monastery for the past five years. Like an athlete diverted from his regular routine but determined not to lose the edge on his fitness, Gregory spent every moment when he was not engaged in his duties in a monastic regimen. Bede writes that,

> he never abandoned his spiritual exercises even amid the concourse of an earthly palace. For some of his fellow monks were so devoted to him that they accompanied him to the Imperial city, and he began to maintain a regular religious observance with them.[11]

These fellow monks were followed by several others together with the abbot, Maximianus, so that Gregory had, in effect, a daughter monastery of St. Andrew's inside the Imperial court of Constantinople. The comfort he derived from their presence was immeasurable, as he confesses to Leander:

> [M]any of the brothers from my monastery, who were attached to me by a kindred spirit, followed after me. This happened, I believe, by divine dispensation so that by their example I might be fixed, like the chain of an anchor, to the tranquil shore of prayer whenever I should be tossed by the ceaseless waves of secular affairs. And, to their fellowship I fled as to the safest bay, free from the billowing waves of worldly distractions. This position, after having dragged me from the monastery, then killed my former life of quiet with the sword of daily occupation. Nevertheless, being among my brothers and through the consolation of diligent reading, I was renewed with the

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[10]Dudden, Gregory the Great I pp. 119-20.

[11]Historia Ecclesiastica ii.1. See also John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii I.33; and Paul the Deacon, Vita Gregorii 7.

yearnings of daily compunction.[12]

It was here that he was joined by Leander for the first time, and the two became fast friends. And it was here that Gregory was persuaded to set forth his meditations on the Book of Job in lessons which he delivered to the brethren and which were the basis for the Moralia. During his stay, several of his companions had to return to Italy, including Maximianus, whose miraculous journey back to Rome Gregory records in the Dialogues.[13] His duties may have kept him from devoting the time he would have liked to the pursuit of contemplation, but his companionship with these likeminded people gave him the solace and encouragement he needed to lift his spirits.

The immediate result of Gregory's mission of appeal to Constantinople was that the emperor agreed reluctantly to send help to Rome. Tiberius was mostly preoccupied with the Persian war in the east, but he agreed at least to muster a small contingent of forces and send them to Italy. According to the historian Menander,

> At that time the war with the Persians in Armenia and throughout the East, so far from being completed, was becoming more and more serious. The emperor could not therefore send to Italy a force sufficient for its requirements. Nevertheless, he collected and sent such troops as he could, and for the rest he earnestly endeavoured to win over to his side some of the Lombard chiefs with promises of great rewards. And in consequence of his overtures several of them actually did pass over to the side of the Romans.[14]

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[12]Moralia in Job, Epistola ad Leandrum, 1.

[13]Dialogues III.36.1.

[14]Menander Protector, Fragmenta Historicum Graecorum 29. Quoted from Dudden, p. 138.

Having achieved all they could expect at the time, even though it was insufficient for the task, the rest of the delegation returned home. But Gregory remained behind to carry on, as instructed, representing the pope and the city before the emperor. He would continue to plead Rome's case, and, when Tiberius died in 582, Gregory would try his luck with Tiberius's successor Maurice, again to little avail. With the Persian war still raging, it became increasingly clear that Pelagius and Rome would have to look elsewhere for help against the Lombards.

Gregory returned to Rome and St. Andrew's in about the year 586, four years before he would become pope. According to John, he became abbot of St. Andrew's after serving under the previous abbot Maximianus, who would leave Rome in 591 to become the bishop of Syracuse. The details of John's account, however, are confused, and neither Gregory nor his other biographer Paul specifically state that he was abbot.[15] But, evidently Gregory did live in St. Andrew's, maintaining an active role as the monastery's founder, and it was almost certainly during this time that he delivered a series of lectures inside the monastery, based on his meditations on the Old Testament books: Proverbs, Song of Songs, the Prophets, Kings, and the Heptateuch; which, according to Gregory, "because of my infirmity I was unable to commit to writing."[16] It was also during this time that he

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[15]See John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii I.6,10,33. Others have deduced Gregory's abbacy from the Dialogues IV.57.8-17. See Dudden, p. 187, and Richards, Consul of God, p. 32.

[16]Epistle XII.6.

apparently came to the marketplace where he discovered the English slave boys.

Although Gregory was living in the monastery, clearly he was not able to enjoy the undistracted solitude he so dearly wanted, for Pelagius needed him on behalf of the Church. Taking up the position he had held only briefly before leaving for Constantinople, he became one of the seven deacons assigned to the seven districts of Rome and under the direction of the pope.[17] As deacon, his duties would have included such civic responsibilities as maintaining the public works and feeding the city's poor.[18] But his duties were not all secular, for it was also during this time that he was given the delicate task of negotiating, on behalf of the papacy, with the schismatic bishops of Istria in northern Italy, to find a resolution to the "Three Chapters" controversy. Despite a terse letter of rebuttal that he penned to the bishops in the Pope's name, he was unsuccessful in retrieving them from their errant ways. The schism which had been smouldering for years continued to flare up throughout Gregory's pontificate.

In late 589 the city of Rome began bracing for another disastrous spell. According to Gregory of Tours, torrential rains flooded the Tiber so that in November of that year its waters covered the city, destroying ancient churches and washing away thousands of bushels of wheat from the papal granaries. In January of the

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[17]Gregory of Tours, Decem libri historiarum X.1.

[18]On the duties of the deacons, see T. S. Brown, Gentlemen and Officers, p. 18.

following year the plague struck, because, according to Gregory of Tours, a "great school of water snakes" and a "tremendous dragon as big as a tree trunk" drowned in the flood and washed up on the shores near the city.[19]

The first victim of the epidemic, which caused "swellings in the groin," was Pelagius. Deprived of their leader, and facing certain devastation, the people affirmed their great trust in Gregory by choosing him unanimously as pope. In the best tradition of the monk-bishop, he was reluctant to the very end, trying to persuade the emperor Maurice not to confirm his appointment. Nevertheless, Gregory wasted little time in exercising his pastoral duties even before he was officially placed in office. While preparations were being made for his enthronement, the plague was raging out of control. Gregory himself paints a stark portrait of the horrors confronting the people:

> I see my entire flock being struck down by the sword of the wrath of God as, one after another, they are visited by sudden destruction. Their death is preceded by no lingering illness, for . . . they die before they even have time to feel ill. The blow falls: each victim is snatched away from us before he can bewail his sins and repent. . . . Our fellow-citizens are not taken from us one at a time, for they are being bustled off in droves. Homes are left empty, parents are forced to attend the funerals of their children, their heirs march before them to the grave.[20]

In the midst of this scene, Gregory stood before the people and exhorted them not to despair. "Our present trial must open the way to our conversion," he told them, retrieving a theme that signalled

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[19]Gregory of Tours, Decem libri historiarum X.1.

[20]Ibid.

to him the light of salvation in his own darkest hour. For a people standing at the threshold of death, conversion was the door separating despair and reconciliation. Seeing the destruction that surrounded them on every side and in every corner of the city, they could despair or they could make their peace with God. They could give up hope and "harden" their hearts, or they could "soften" their hearts and flee to God, "for God is full of mercy and compassion, and it is His will that we should win His pardon through our prayers." As further assurance that God stood ready to receive them, he quoted the psalmist: "And call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you, and you will glorify me."[21]

Now that individual hearts had been reconciled to God, the people as a group could then come in unison before their deliverer. Gregory told them: "Therefore, dearly beloved brethren, with contrite hearts and with all our affairs in order, let us come together, to concentrate our minds upon our troubles."[22] He gave instructions for a mass procession three days hence. In the meantime, the priests, monks, and nuns were to sing psalms and offer up prayers on behalf of the people. Before dawn on the fourth day, the clergy and people gathered at pre-appointed churches throughout the city so that, from every direction, they might converge on the basilica of the Virgin Mary. Gregory of Tours describes the chilling scene:

> At three o'clock all the choirs singing psalms came into church, chanting the Kyrie Eleison as they passed through the city streets. My deacon, who was present, said that

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[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

> while the people were making their supplication to the Lord, eighty individuals fell dead to the ground. The pope never once stopped preaching to the people, nor did the people pause in their prayers.[23]

It was reported that the Archangel Michael appeared, brandishing a flaming sword, which, when placed back in its sheath, ended the scourge. Such was the beginning of Gregory's pontificate.

Even after this remarkable initiation, however, Gregory still resisted taking on the highest position in the Church without demurring one last time. As the effects of the plague dissipated and life was returning to normal, the city prepared for Gregory's consecration. Apparently, the officials of the city suspected that he might try to slip away, and so they placed additional guards at the gates, and, sure enough, he did try to escape. According to Gregory of Tours, "Just as he was preparing to go into hiding, he was seized, carried along, brought to the basilica of Saint Peter, consecrated ready for his pontifical duties, and then given to the city as pope."[24]

This episode and the ensuing consecration in September of 590 were reported by an eyewitness, but an apocryphal story worth noting has grown up around this affair. According to the monk of Whitby, Gregory realized that he could not escape because of the guards watching for him at the gates, so he persuaded some merchants to carry him out in a cask. Once free of the city, he fled to the woods, where he found "the leafiest shades of the bushes" to hide

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[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

himself, and there he stayed, hoping that the people would give up on him and elect another. But, they did not, for they fasted and prayed until Gregory's location was revealed to them through a pillar of light that stretched to the sky above his hiding place in the woods. They easily tracked him down and brought him back to the city for his rightful consecration. His hagiographer concludes with an allusion to Saint Jerome, of which Gregory no doubt would have approved: "Saint Jerome says of those who are promoted to a sacred office that the more they resist it because of their humility of spirit, the more they arouse themselves to every exertion and become the worthier in proportion as they declare their own unworthiness."[25]

During his first year, Gregory found it hard to forget the past and move ahead. As when he first left the monastery for Constantinople fifteen years earlier, he was again hounded by self-doubt and a piercing regret over a peaceful life in the monastery left behind. The finality of his new office and the realization that he could never "withdraw again into solitude without penalty" was crippling to him at first, as many of the early letters in his register attest.[26] But he did recover, and he proceeded with what was a very active pontificate.

In secular affairs, his responsibilities were enormous, encom-

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[25]Anonymous Vita Gregorii 7. Colgrave does not recognize the reference to Jerome, but it clearly echoes Gregory's own sentiments in the Regula Pastoralis I.5,6, et al. (The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great, p. 87, n. 36).

[26]See epistles I.3-7, 26, 29-31, et al. The reference to Gregory's withdrawal into solitude without penalty is from the Epistola ad Leandrum and is cited here earlier.

passing, in broadest terms, the general well-being and safety of the people. This included everything from public utilities (sanitation, water supply, etc.) to control of the judicial system.[27] The famine that had preceded his assumption of office was not an unusual occurrence and is only one example of a desperate civic problem that was left to the Church. It had become customary for the pope to manage the transport of grain from other places to Rome, and Gregory continued this work. In the summer of 591, he wrote to his rector Peter in Sicily to insure that the expected shipments of grain would be sent and to arrange for even more to be stored for later retrieval since the local crop that year had been meager.[28]

Another persistent problem facing Gregory throughout these years was the Lombard threat, and here again the pope was instrumental in protecting the city and papal lands. In managing the soldiers, in dealing with the exarch in Ravenna, and in negotiating with the Lombard chiefs, Gregory found a constant source of responsibility. At times flustered by this fact, he wrote to the quaestor John in Constantinople: "For my sins, I have been made bishop not of the Romans, but of the Lombards, whose promises stab like swords and whose kindness is bitter punishment."[29] These serious concerns, combined with the everyday responsibilities of temporal government and church administration made Gregory pause periodically and ques-

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[27]See Peter Llewellyn, Rome in the Dark Ages, p. 107.

[28]Epistle I.70.

[29]Epistle I.30.

tion whether he was truly devoting the necessary time to his duties as spiritual leader:

> How can I think about what my brethren need, see that the city is guarded against the swords of the enemy, take precautions lest the people be destroyed by sudden attack, and yet at the same time deliver the word of exhortation fully and effectively for the salvation of souls. To speak of God we need a mind thoroughly at peace and free from care.[30]

Although he did not find the peace and freedom from care he sought, Gregory was able to devote considerable attention to his pastoral duties, particularly preaching and writing. Remarkably, he preached dozens of sermons during his first several years in office. His homilies on Ezekiel and on the Gospels were delivered to the congregations of the various churches throughout the city within his first four years. The same is true for his two non-exegetical works, the Dialogues and the Pastoral Care, which were both written between 591 and 594.[31] Because of poor health in his later years, however, he could not continue at such a pace.

The primary testament to the care Gregory gave to pastoral duties was his considerable effort on behalf of missions. Without a doubt, the mission to England is the best remembered event of Gregory's pontificate, and it was most definitely the work he treasured most from his entire term of office. In the Moralia he could not

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[30]Homiliae in Hiezechielem I.2.26.

[31]Gregory was at work on the Dialogues at least as soon as the summer of 593 (Epistle III.50), and he claims to have written the Pastoral Care "at the very outset of my episcopate" ("in episcopatus mei exordio scripsi," Epistle V.53). See Paul Meyvaert, "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's Dialogues," pp. 345, 350.

help but add a later note of rejoicing at what he had begun in England:

> By the shining miracles of his preachers, God has brought to the faith even the extremeties of the earth. In one faith has he linked the boundaries of the East and the West. Behold! the tongue of Britain, which before could utter only barbarous sounds, has lately learned to make the Alleluia of the Hebrews resound in praise of God. Lo! the ocean, formerly so turbulent, lies calm and submissive at the feet of the saints, and its wild movements, which earthly princes could not control by the sword, are spell-bound with the fear of God by a few simple words from the mouth of priests; and he who, when an unbeliever, never dreaded troops of fighting men, now that he believes, fears the tongues of the meek. For, by the words he has heard from heaven, and by the miracles which shine around him, he receives the strength of the knowledge of God, so that he is afraid to do wrong, and yearns with his whole heart to come to the grace of eternity."[32]

But England was by no means the only place where Gregory succeeded in his missionary effort. Closer to home, he devoted considerable attention to places where pagan practices persisted, usually because the Church in that region was weak or corrupt. Those places mentioned specifically by Gregory are Campania, where he had heard that people were still worshiping trees, and the islands of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica, also bastions of pagan practice.[33] In Sardinia, in particular, the church was languishing in the hands of an aged and ineffective bishop named Januarius, whose ineptitude prompted Gregory to send numerous letters upbraiding him for gross oversight, negligence, and worse.[34] To uncover the true extent of the

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[32]Moralia 27.11.21.

[33]For example, see epistles III.59; IV.23, 25, 26, 27; V.7, 38; VIII.1, 19; IX.204. See also John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii 3.1.

[34]See especially epistles IV.26,29 and throughout Book IX.

abuses, he sent two special envoys, Cyriacus and Felix, who were to investigate the situation and report back to him. Their subsequent letter to Rome led Gregory to send the following words of rebuke to Januarius:

> We have learned from the report of our fellow-bishop Felix and the abbot Cyriacus that in the island of Sardinia priests are oppressed by lay judges and your ministers despise your authority. So far as can be seen, even though you aim only at simplicity, discipline is neglected. Wherefore I exhort you that, putting aside all excuses, you take pains to rule the Church of which you have been given charge, to keep up discipline among the clergy, and fear no one's words.[35]

Gregory goes on to catalogue a list of offenses committed by the local clergy, including Januarius's own archdeacon who was blatantly abusing his position and disregarding the bishop's authority by living with women. It was also reported that Januarius was making no effort whatsoever to see to the spiritual welfare of the peasants working on Church lands. Gregory's response was vehement: "You must be vigilant for their conversion. For, should I succeed in finding a pagan peasant belonging to any bishop whatsoever, I shall visit it severely on that bishop."[36] The report of Felix and Cyriacus further prompted Gregory to write to the nobles and landowners in Syria, exhorting them to convert their peasants:

> I have learned from the report of my brother and fellow bishop Felix and my son the servant of God Cyriacus that nearly all of you have peasants on your estates given to idolatry. And this has greatly saddened me because I know that the guilt of subjects weighs down the life of their superiors, and that, when sin in a subject is not corrected, the sentence is revisited on the master. Wherefore,

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[35]Epistle IV.26.

[36]Ibid.

> my magnificent sons, I exhort you to be zealous with all care and attention for your souls and to consider what account you will render to Almighty God for your subjects. For, they have been committed to you for this purpose: that they may serve for your advantage in earthly things, and that you, through your care for them, may provide for their souls in the things that are eternal. If, then, they pay what they owe you, why do you not pay them what you owe them? That is to say, your Greatness should diligently admonish them and restrain them from the error of idolatry, so that by their being drawn to the faith you may make Almighty God propitious to yourselves.[37]

But Gregory was not content with letters of exhortation. He ordered Januarius to appoint a bishop to a certain place on the island, called Fausiana, where a bishop's see had been in the past. Long since given over to pagan worship, this spot was to be the center for missionary activity in the region.

Gregory's problems in Sardinia were complicated further by the presence of a band of brigands called the Barbaricini, who had been expelled from North Africa by the Vandals. Through some means, the chief of this band had converted to Christianity, and when Gregory learned this fact he wrote to him, urging him to see to it that the rest of his people followed his lead. And, if for some reason he could not undertake this task himself, Gregory recommended Felix and Cyriacus, who were there for that purpose and were willing to come to his aid.[38]

The fact that Gregory chose Cyriacus, a monk and abbot, as one

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[37]Epistle IV.23.

[38]Epistle IV.27. That Felix and Cyriacus were at least in part successful is indicated by a letter Gregory wrote in 600 while sick in bed: "Many of the barbarians and provincials in Sardinia by God's grace are hastening to embrace the Christian faith with utmost devotion" (Epistle XI.12).

of his two deputies to carry out this mission in Sardinia was not unusal. An important feature of Gregory's pontificate in general was the leading role played by monks and former monks. In England, the mission consisted of some forty monks headed by Augustine, who formerly had been a monk and the prior of St. Andrew's. The establishment set up by Augustine at Canterbury was no doubt modeled after the principles of administration employed at St. Andrew's. Gregory promoted other monks and ex-monks as well to positions of authority within the administrative and episcopal structure of the Church. Indeed, as the first pope with a monastic background, Gregory brought to the office an appreciation for the varied skills of those within the monastic order.[39] He also sought to promote monasticism by encouraging those with money to donate land for the establishment of new monasteries.[40]

In his own daily routine, Gregory remained close to the monastic scheme he was so careful to promote elsewhere. Reminiscent of Constantinople, he brought together a group of monks who lived according to strict monastic obedience within the walls of the

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[39]See Richards, The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages, p. 170. See also Dudden's discussion of the relation between the monastic order and the secular clergy in Gregory the Great II p. 189 ff.

[40]See, for example, epistles I.46, II.38, III.58, etc. Gregory was active in promoting monasticism, but he was careful to limit the span of monastic duties, particularly in the realm of priestly caritative functions. See epistles IV.11, VI.39, VII.40, VIII.17. See, also, Giles Constable, "Monasteries, Rural Churches and the Cura Animarum," pp. 355-56; Thomas L. Amos, "Monks and Pastoral Care in the Early Middle Ages," pp. 169-70; F. Homes Dudden, Gregory the Great, pp. 173-200.

Lateran Palace. Indeed, it was there he was confined during the final six years of his pontificate, bedridden and debilitated by the pain his own asceticism had aggravated in his weak body. Discouraged by his own suffering and overwhelmed by the mounting problems in Rome and Italy during these final years of his life, he spent much of his time waiting for death to rescue him:

> It has now been a long time since I have been able to rise from bed. For at one time the pain of gout torments me. At another time a fire, I know not of what kind, spreads itself with pain through my whole body; and it is generally the case that at one and the same time burning pain racks me, and body and mind fail me. The other great distresses of sickness afflicting me, besides what I mentioned, I am unable to recount. This, however, I may briefly say, that the infection of a noxious humor so drinks me up that it is pain for me to live, and I anxiously look for death which alone can relieve my groans.[41]

Gregory died in March of 604 after nearly fourteen years in office.

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When considering the events of Gregory's life, particularly those from his years as pope, it is easy to detect what seem to be conflicting signals in his attitude toward the place of action and contemplation in the Christian life. His own experience shows at the very least a commitment to both, while individual passages from his writings can be found to support or discredit their compatibility.

The first step in unravelling this tangle, I believe, is to uncover just what Gregory means by action, because clearly it is action that causes him trouble, and not contemplation. Never once in

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[41]Epistle XI.20. This was written in 601, three years before his death. See also epistles XIII.26 and XIV.12, both written in 603.

his writings does he disparage true contemplation. But, on the other hand, he does disparage action--when it conflicts with contemplation. In a passage from his homilies, quoted earlier, Gregory complains about the weight of the responsibilities he must bear as pope and how he finds his time frustratingly divided between those things he would rather, and rather not, do:

> How can I think about what my brethren need, see that the city is guarded against the swords of the enemy, take precautions lest the people be destroyed by sudden attack, and yet at the same time deliver the word of exhortation fully and effectively for the salvation of souls. To speak of God we need a mind thoroughly at peace and free from care.[42]

On the one hand, there are those responsibilities he wishes he did not have to bear. By "what my brethren need," Gregory presumably means those temporal concerns that could just as easily be handled by a secular official as by a religious one. These would undoubtedly include the majority of his administrative responsibilities, which one suspects were probably the "cares" that led him to complain, at the beginning of the Dialogues, about the "noisy wrangling" of the "men of the world."[43] To these responsibilities he adds those of guarding the city and defending the people, all of which are necessary and worthy concerns, to be sure, but they are so demanding that they require his constant attention. And, attention was something he could not spare if he was to give proper weight to his other duties.

On the other hand are those responsibilities that Gregory

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[42]Homiliae in Hiezechielem I.2.26.

[43]Dialogues I.Prol.1.

willingly accepts. These responsibilities are those connected with his position as pastoral and spiritual leader, namely, delivering "the word of exhortation fully and effectively for the salvation of souls." These are the "cares" Gregory was willing to bear, and he believed that they were perfectly compatible with contemplation. In fact, preaching the word of God is not simply compatible with contemplation, but rather it is intimately tied to it, because ministering the word to others requires a heart prepared in solitude: "To speak of God we need a mind thoroughly at peace and free from care."[44] From his own experience, the only times of peace and freedom from care came in the monastery, when he was pursuing the contemplative life. It was from the monastery that Gregory learned how action could naturally proceed from contemplation, and it was for this reason that he never gave up trying to live the monastic life or cultivating the spiritual lessons he learned in the monastery:

> It is of utmost importance, however, that those who are zealous for good works and devote much time to performing them should also weep over their past sins, either through fear of eternal punishment or through longing for God's kingdom.[45]

To weep for one's sins is to have compunction, and compunction is at the heart of contemplation, not just for the new convert but for the experienced believer as well. The fear of eternal punishment and the longing for God's kingdom are simply the compunctions of fear and love that were experienced first at conversion.

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[44]Ibid.

[45]Dialogues III.34.4.

Those who perform good works must regularly return to contemplation because perfect contemplation is the source of good works. But good works also complement and nurture inner scrutiny. Through prayer, reading, and by "living well we are renewed afresh; because our life, while it is washed with tears, exercised in good works, drawn out by holy meditations, is without ceasing restored to its newness."[46] Thus, at the very least, Gregory's catalogue of good works includes prayer, reading, and self-denial--acts specifically tied to the inner life of the contemplative. According to Jean LeClercq, Gregory expects that all contemplatives, to a certain degree, are to participate in the active life: "In the sense of a personal askesis all men are committed to the active life, no one is at liberty to reject it. It is a 'servitude' that must be undergone in order to attain to contemplation."[47]

But the good works Gregory associates with "living well" are not simply those that apply to the ascetic life of solitude. As one who chose the cenobitic life for his own monastic pursuit, and who later became pope, he is also concerned with the wider responsibilities of those who live in the midst of other people, whether inside or outside the monastic walls. In fact, Gregory is aware that:

> there are various kinds of souls, for there are some of such leisure of mind, that, if the labors of business fall upon them, they give way at the very beginning of their work. And some are so restless that if they have a break from their work, their work becomes even harder in that they are subject to worse tumults of mind in proportion as they have more time and liberty for their thoughts. Hence,

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[46]Moralia 19.30.53.

[47]LeClercq, "The Teaching of St. Gregory," p. 23.

> it is important that the tranquil mind not open itself wide to the immoderate exercising of works nor the restless mind constrict itself in devotion to contemplation.[48]

Gregory admits that there are some who are blessed with the ability to live in solitude and who, when taken from that solitude, fail miserably. But, not everyone who believes should become a solitary because the life of leisure may lead some to unproductiveness and unfruitful thinking. For these believers, action is necessary lest they become stagnant.

Within the cenobitic community, those who held positions of authority were committed to active duties ranging from custodial and administrative to pastoral. During his time at St. Andrew's, Gregory himself, as founder of the community, was actively involved in the affairs of the monastery, at times referring to it as "my monastery."[49] In the Dialogues, he relates a story from his own experience at St. Andrew's that suggests the eagerness with which he undertook his ascetical regimen as well as his position of leadership in the monastery. Once he became very ill from his recurring stomach problems and was apparently near death. Through the care of his fellow monks and, in particular, the spiritual care of one abbot named Eleutherius he was returned both to physical and spiritual health. As Gregory relates the story:

> I quietly took the man of God with me into chapel and begged him to ask almighty God to grant me the strength to fast. He agreed. As soon as we entered the chapel, he prayed for me as I had humbly requested. After a short,

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[48]Moralia 6.37.57.

[49]For example, see epistles VIII.29 and IX.222. See Richards, Consul of God, p. 32, and Dudden, Gregory the Great, p. 187 ff.

> sincere and tearful prayer, he again left the chapel. But just as I heard him say the blessing at the conclusion of his prayer, strength returned to my weakened body, and my mind was relieved of all worry over food or sickness. In amazement I compared the way I now felt with my previous state of health. Even when I thought of my illness I did not recognize in my body any of the pains I remembered having. And when my thoughts were occupied with the care of the monastery I was entirely unaware of my infirmity.[50]

In this story, the prayers of Eleutherius restored Gregory's health so that he could return to his former place within the monastery. On the one hand, this meant that he could resume his fasting and whatever other ascetical exercises he had given up because of his illness. But he was also able to return to his former duties as the founder of the monastery. Never one to remain idle, Gregory found that "when my thoughts were occupied with the care of the monastery (dispositione monasterii) I was entirely unaware of my infirmity. Thus, Gregory wants to be healthy again not so that he can rest, but so that he can continue his former ascetical regimen and carry on with the duties of running the monastery.

Therefore, Gregory does not necessarily divide the life of action and contemplation. He is willing to accept that both can coexist in the believer's heart. As he writes in the Moralia, "the two lives, the active and the contemplative, when they are preserved in the soul, are accounted as two eyes in the face. Thus the right eye is the contemplative life, and the left the active life."[51] However, he cautions that not everyone can achieve this balanced

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[50]Dialogues III.33.7-9.

[51]Ibid.

life. It is better, he says in the words of Christ, to pluck out the right eye (contemplation) and enter into heaven with only one eye than to be cast into hell whole. Nevertheless, as the metaphor is meant to indicate, some are truly able to cultivate both the active and contemplative in their souls, and therefore, by inference, they have potentially the clearest vision.[52] The implications for the monastic life are momentous.

In the Dialogues, perhaps more than anywhere else, Gregory's merging of the active and contemplative is made most explicit and colorful through detailed accounts of monastic holy men, who are seen maintaining the principles of the contemplative life while going out into the world and performing wonders outside the monastery. Monasticism extends beyond the bounds of the cell or the monastic community to the outside world. Accordingly, his picture of good works in the Dialogues includes those appropriate to monks faced daily with the needs of their neighbor, whether that neighbor be a fellow monk, abbot, or a local villager near the monastery.

This picture of monasticism reaching out into the world offers an interesting contrast to what Peter Brown has called the "ritual of social disengagement" in the tradition of the eremitical holy man of Late Antiquity.[53] Despite the reminders of recent historians that monasticism involved an active and pastoral element even in its early days, it is still true that the desert fathers were entering into the

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[52]See Robert Gillet on Gregory's view of the "mixed life" in "Grégoire le Grand," pp. 886-88.

[53]Peter Brown, The Making of Late Antiquity, p. 87.

wilderness in order to withdraw from society. According to Brown, the desert fathers of the fourth century placed great emphasis on the sins of "human relations," particularly anger. In fact, they were less concerned with bodily sins such as fornication than with social sins of anger and the related sins of the tongue which occur in the normal course of relationships of family and business, in village or city. Reacting to the social tensions of life in Egypt in the fourth century, hermits such as Antony and Pachomius were able to demonstrate their power through a "dramatic and readily intelligible ritual of social disengagement."[54] This was a disengagement from the easily recognized social links that tied human beings "disastrously" to each other. And in place of these faulty links the hermit found reconciliation within his own soul, replacing anger with inner peace, curses with praises, idle talk with quiet. According to Brown,

> The hermit was regarded as a man who had set about finding his true self. By the fact of anachoresis he had resolved the tensions and incoherences of his relations with his fellow men. In the desert, he was expected to settle down, in conflict with the demonic, to resolve the incoherences of his own soul.[55]

In much the same way, Gregory believed that it was the duty of the monk to withdraw from the world and "resolve the incoherences of his own soul." But, rather than remain permanently disengaged from the world, the monks who could effectively reconcile the active and contemplative within themselves and within the walls of the monastery could then "re-engage" with human society in order to transform it.

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[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid, p. 89.

Thus, on the one hand, Gregory still describes the life of the monk in traditional terms of withdrawal from the world and a special relationship with God based on contemplation:

> Set apart from the ways of the world, the servants of God are strangers to its vain talk and thus avoid disturbing and soiling their minds in idle conversation. Because of this they win a hearing from God sooner than others, for by the purity and simplicity of their thoughts they resemble God to a degree, becoming of one mind with Him as far as that is possible.[56]

The monk gives up the society of the world and its accompanying burdens for companionship with God. Fostered within a life of contemplation and built upon a relationship of grace, he gains a "hearing from God," which enables him to progress in steps toward the likeness of God.

But, on the other hand, withdrawal from the world is not necessarily permanent. Benedict spent three years in the solitude of the cave at Subjaco, living in much the same manner that Antony and other holy men had lived in the desert, cultivating the virtues of contemplation. But the benefits of his labor were to be felt not just by himself. The Holy Spirit instructed him in virtue so that he would be ready to "instruct others in the practice of virtue." Then, according to Gregory, "Benedict's soul, like a field cleared of briers, soon yielded a rich harvest of virtues."[57]

For Gregory, Benedict was unusual, because he learned to live with himself without the aid of others. For most, however, the move

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[56]Dialogues III.15.13.

[57]Dialogues II.3.1. See also I.9.7.

from contemplation to earthly society involved an intermediate step through monastic society, a step that is not easy to take. The monk who is cenobitic first gains the society of the monastery so that, in addition to contemplation, he must also consider the larger community of individuals with whom he lives every day. The monastic society requires that each member be sensitive not just to his own needs but also to those of his fellow spiritual sojourners. Living with others involved both submission to those in authority as well as fellowship with like-minded people. Charity and humility become preeminent virtues within the framework of authority.[58]

The company of kindred spirits inspired joy and spiritual refreshment in the believer's heart, but the result of such refreshment was to redirect inward the individual's renewed vigor. The monastic societas was meant to teach the monk simplicity and purity of heart--the ability "to live within himself." Just as everyone must achieve a proper balance in his own life between care for his soul and care for his body so also each must balance a care for his own spiritual pursuit and that of the larger body of believers.[59]

Earthly societas, however, differs completely from the societas of the monastery. The world encourages people to live outside of themselves, being carried away by the anxieties of the world, while monks live within themselves, guarding against being swept away

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[58]On charity, humility, and the social implications of monasticism in Gregory's thinking, see, for example, Paul Meyvaert, "Gregory the Great and the Theme of Authority."

[59]See, for example, how spiritual conversation and friendship fortify the saints in the Dialogues: II.33, II.35, III.33.7-9.

by such anxieties lest they be "too distracted with other matters to give any attention whatever to ourselves."[60] Remaining within himself, the disciplined monk is able to go into the world, a world in which the carnal and spiritual exist side by side, and where those in the secular orders of business and military live beside monks and priests. Yet despite the mixture, the disciplined monk is able to discern the spiritual and to bring order from the chaos because he has access to spiritual power through his inner relationship with God.[61] He does not remain in the wilderness waiting for others to come to him. He learns in the wilderness, either figuratively or actually, and re-enters the world as the salt of the earth. Blessed with this spiritual vision, he has a duty to those around him--both to those with a similar vision and to those of carnal mind--to be a light in the world and to provide direction. Within the monastic setting which Gregory depicts in the Dialogues this means at the very least that the conversation of the individual, which once before had been dragged down into the mire of the world, is now raised afresh so that it blesses, rather than taints those around him.

As one whose position required that he maintain regular contact with the world, Gregory complained that too often in his own experience he found himself being dragged down to the earth rather than lifted up to heaven:

> [We] who mingle with so many worldly people frequently speak useless words and at times even very injurious ones. And the closer we keep our speech to earth, the farther we

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[60]Dialogues II.3.5.

[61]Straw, Gregory the Great. See, for example, p. 10.

> remove our voice from God. . . . To take part in the talk of worldly men without defiling our own hearts is all but impossible. If we permit ourselves to discuss their affairs with them, we grow accustomed to a manner of speech unbecoming to us, and we end clinging to it with pleasure and are no longer entirely willing to leave it.[62]

But Gregory knew that the conversation of those living the monastic life should stand in contrast to (and certainly not resemble) the conversation of those in the world. This was to be the case even if they were living outside the monastery, because monks were not to be preoccupied with worldly things but with the things of the inner life. And, clearly, Gregory saw this as a very real problem in his own life. He was trained in the monastery and then ventured into the world, but instead of keeping his spiritual balance he complained that he was being dragged down by the "noisy wrangling" and business dealings of the world. He was losing his stabilitas.[63]

When Gregory dedicated his preface for the Moralia to Leander in the early days of his pontificate, these thoughts were going through his mind. He had just brought the city of Rome through the bleakest of times, helping its people to weather the storms of plague, famine, and the aggressions of the Lombards, with more to come. From his remarks about his "frequent pains in the bowels" and fevers, it is clear that his health, which was never particularly good, was deteriorating. This gradual decline in his health meant that he simply could not keep up the pace necessary to carry out his temporal duties

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[62]Dialogues III.15.13-16.

[63]On Gregory's notion of stabilitas, see Carole Straw, Gregory the Great, pp. 75-81.

and devote the time he desired to his spiritual duties. The image of a ship tossed about on stormy seas would frequently recur in his mind during his years in office. He used it when writing to Leander, and several years later he would begin the Dialogues similarly by lamenting that he was "tossed about on the waves of a heavy sea" so that his soul was "like a helpless ship buffeted by raging winds."[64] In both instances, his profound distress carried him back to his days in the monastery. Accordingly, he wrote that, "When I recall my former way of life, it is as though I were once more looking back toward land and sighing as I beheld the shore."[65] The fact that Gregory used the same imagery again and again to describe both the past as well as the present is significant because it indicates that he was ever aware that, even though twenty years had passed, not much had changed since those days when he was debating inside himself whether or not to leave the world and enter the monastery. In fact, he knew that the pattern of his behavior was essentially the same as it had been then. The only difference was that then he anxiously ran, escaping "naked from the shipwreck of human life." But, even then it had not lasted long, because he left the monastery only a few years later. Ever since then, he continued to find himself on the sea, looking back and sighing at the shore. In effect, as Claude Dagens

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[64]Dialogues I.Prol.5. Gregory frequently uses this imagery in his letters including one, early in his papacy, to the Princess Theoctista in which he admits that, "I have fallen into fears and tremors, since, even though I have no fears for myself, I am greatly afraid for those who have been committed to me. On every side I am tossed by the waves of business, and sunk by storms" (Epistle I.5).

[65]Ibid.

points out, when Gregory was writing to Leander there were twenty years of accumulated time and frustration coloring his account.[66]

When he first became pope, Gregory wrote to several people expressing the anxiety he felt in his new position. He complained, perhaps a bit too adamantly, that he would not be up to the task of pastoral care:

> When I consider how I have been compelled to bear the burden of pastoral care, as unworthy as I am, and resisting with my whole soul, a darkness of sorrow comes over me, and my sad heart sees nothing else but the shadows which allow nothing to be seen. For to what end is a bishop chosen of the lord but to be an intercessor for the offenses of the people? With what confidence, then, can I come as an intercessor for the sins of others to him before whom I am not secure about my own?[67]

But Gregory's concern over his pastoral care went deeper than literary self-effacement. In the Dialogues he wrote that his "pastoral charge" as bishop required, of necessity, regular contact with "worldly men and their affairs."[68] The greatest problem for him was that by becoming involved with these earthly affairs he could not recover his inner peace: "After business I long to return to my heart, but being driven away by a great crowd of thoughts, I am unable to return."[69] And he believed that if he could not return to himself, he would be ineffective in his pastoral work. Thus, he confessed that by being caught up in worldly conversation, his

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[66]See Dagens, "La 'Conversion' de saint Grégoire le Grand," p. 23.

[67]Epistle I.25.

[68]Dialogues I.Prol.4.

[69]Epistle I.5.

prayers were "further and further removed from God's hearing."[70]

Gregory believed, however, that the saints overcame these problems. Benedict, for example, was threatened with the loss of his inner peace when he took charge of his first monastery. Like Gregory, he found that he was surrounded with worldly people, but in Benedict's situation the worldly people were the monks under his rule. According to Gregory,

> Their persistent daily faults would have left him almost too weary to look to his own needs, and he would perhaps have forsaken himself without finding them. For, whenever anxieties carry us out of ourselves unduly, we are no longer with ourselves even though we still remain what we are.[71]

But what distinguished Benedict from other, weaker Christians was the depth of his spiritual achievement:

> Blessed Benedict, on the contrary, can be said to have lived 'with himself' because at all times he kept such close watch over his life and actions. By searching continually into his own soul he always beheld himself in the presence of his Creator. And this kept his mind from straying off to the world outside.[72]

Benedict was not the only saint capable of such rigorous spiritual strength. In the Dialogues, Gregory records the lives of many others like him, in order to set before himself ideal examples to strive after. But, in these examples, he also found solace in his own plight. It is worth noting that Benedict endured the abuses of his monks until at last he realized that his work was having no effect on

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[70]Dialogues III.15.16.

[71]Dialogues II.3.5.

[72]Dialogues II.3.7.

their hardened hearts. Rather than waste his efforts uselessly, he left the monastery--a fact that must have lodged in Gregory's mind. He wrote to Paul, the Bishop of Sicily, early in his pontificate that, "I am now detained in the city of Rome, tied by the chains of this dignity."[73] Frustrated by the permanence of his own position, Gregory must have felt at least a trace of vicarious pleasure in Benedict's departure.

Benedict is an example of how the compatibility of action and contemplation could work out in practice. When Gregory describes him or other saints, I believe that he is thinking of his own experience and his attempts to find this compatibility. In the next chapter I will look more closely at Benedict and a few other examples from the Dialogues to see just how, according to Gregory, the saints understood their efforts to join action and contemplation.

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[73]Epistle I.3.

III.
The Dialogues: Love of Neighbor in a World of Tempest

> While we are enjoying days of grace, while our Judge holds off the sentence, and the Examiner of our sins awaits our conversion, let us soften our hardened hearts with tears and practice charity and kindness toward our neighbor.
>
> --Dialogues

Of all of Gregory's writings, the Dialogues have almost certainly attracted the most attention. In the centuries following his death, they became a favorite treasury, in both east and west, of examples for moral training, edification, and consolation. They also served as an indispensable model, alongside the Life of Antony and the Life of Martin of Tours, for the hagiographer's craft. In his Life of St. Boniface, written in the mid-eighth century, the Anglo-Saxon Willibald praises the "four books" of the Dialogues as "remarkable for their form and style" and claims that they were "being placed to this day in the libraries of our churches."[1] In the east, Gregory's popularity was sealed through the Dialogues, earning him the appellation, Gregorios Dialogos.[2]

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[1]Willibald, Vita Bonifacii, prologue.

[2]On the diffusion and influence of the Dialogues in the Middle Ages, see Adalbert de Vogüé, introduction to Dialogues, p. 141 ff; Robert Gillet, "Grégoire le Grand," in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, 6: 878-80; and "Dialogues Spirituels," in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, 3: 837. Most recently, see Francis Clark, The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues, 2 vols. (1987), and responses to it by Paul Meyvaert, "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's Dialogues: A Response to Francis Clark" (1988), esp. pp. 338-44, 361-66; and de Vogüé, "Grégoire le Grand et

In modern times, the Dialogues have not fared so well, often bearing the scorn of ancient and medieval scholars alike who recoil at Gregory's apparent superstition, historical inaccuracy, and credulity. Edward Gibbon, for one, scoffed at the "entire nonsense of the Dialogues" and simply brushed them aside.[3] Gregory's most eloquent English biographer, F. Homes Dudden, who is otherwise admiring of Gregory's character and achievement, is nonetheless quite unforgiving of his effort in the Dialogues, criticizing Gregory for his thorough lack of "capacity either for weighing and testing evidence brought forward by others, or for drawing correct inferences from what fell within his personal observation."[4] And, most recently, Francis Clark has renewed the effort of those who admire Gregory but wish to divest the Dialogues from his corpus of writings because of the embarrassing shadow they seem to cast on their author.[5]

By contrast, most recent scholarship on Gregory has accepted his authorship of the Dialogues, for better or for worse, and set itself the task of uncovering what Gregory hoped to accomplish in them.[6]

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ses Dialogues d'après deux ouvrages récents" (1988).

[3]Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, edited by J. B. Bury, 5: 103.

[4]Dudden, Gregory the Great, p. 343. After spending over 30 pages retelling the most noteworthy stories from the Dialogues, Dudden ends with the acerbic comment: "Such are the stories vouched for by the highest ecclesiastical authority and the keenest intellect of the age."

[5]Clark, The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues. See above, note 2.

[6]See, for example, R. A. Markus, "The Sacred and the Secular from Augustine to Gregory the Great," pp. 91-96; Joan M. Petersen, The Dialogues of Gregory the Great in Their Late Antique Cultural Background; Carole Straw, Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfec-

Suspecting that they have not yet been made to yield up their full treasures, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill has suggestively referred to the Dialogues as "the joker in Gregory's pack." He asks, "What are we to make of them in the grand company of the Moralia, the Homilies, the Regula Pastoralis, and the Register?"[7]

In this chapter, I will look at the Dialogues specifically as a means toward understanding further Gregory's picture of the active/ contemplative tension. In the process, I hope to shed light on the way in which Gregory's picture contributes to what some historians have identified as the incorporation of the holy man into the institution of the Church. In many ways, Gregory's own experience of the active/ contemplative tension paralleled the dilemma the Church faced in bringing the charismatic holy man into its fold. As one who had attempted to live a life of repose within the monastery, devoting his energies to his own spiritual development and the pastoral concerns of the monastic community, Gregory found it very difficult to take up his position as the bishop of Rome, which was as much a secular position as a pastoral one. On the one hand, he wished to withdraw from the world, but he also recognized his (and the Church's) responsibility to the world. In the Dialogues Gregory shows that even one

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tion, particularly her chapter on "The Saint and the Social Meaning of Stability," pp. 66 ff.; Meyvaert, "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's Dialogues"; de Vogüé, "Grégoire le Grand et ses Dialogues d'après deux ouvrages récents"; and Cracco, "Uomini di Dio e uomini di chiesa nell'alto medioevo (per una reinterpretazione dei 'Dialogi' di Gregorio Magno" (1977).

[7]Quoted from Carole Straw, Gregory the Great, p. 67. The original source for this is "Memoirs of Fellows and Corresponding Fellows," in Speculum 61 (1986): 769.

so great as Benedict struggled to maintain his communion with God in the midst of his many responsibilities. But, most importantly, Benedict and the other saints in the Dialogues find a way to blend successfully the two elements into an uncompromising spirituality. They exist comfortably within the hierarchy of the Church without being drained of their spiritual power.

In 593, during the course of writing the Dialogues, Gregory explained the immediate reason behind his undertaking this substantial work. Writing to Maximian of Syracuse to request the specific details of a certain miracle story, he admitted that: "The brethren in whose company I live are strongly urging me to write a short work on the miracles of the Fathers which to our knowledge have been worked in Italy."[8] Prompted by those monks and clerics with whom he was close during his years in office, Gregory thus agreed to put together such a volume of miracle stories from Italy. Although it may be possible to detect instances in the Dialogues in which he had a larger audience in mind, there is little reason to doubt that he was writing primarily for a monastic and clerical audience of which his circle at the Lateran Palace was certainly a part.[9]

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[8]Epistle III.50.

[9]Meyvaert, "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's Dialogues, p. 373-81. Traditionally, it has been held that Gregory wrote the Dialogues for a popular audience, but see Adalbert de Vogué's introduction to the Sources Chrétiennes edition of the Dialogues, pp. 31-42; Meyvaert, p. 377, n. 145; and William D. McCready's recent study of miracles in Gregory's thought, Signs of Sanctity (1989), in which he summarizes the literature on this point, pp. 47-57, esp. n. 50. Gregory himself makes no mention of circulating the Dialogues. According to Paul the Deacon, Gregory sent a copy to Theodelinda, queen of the Lombards, but this is not confirmed by Gregory (Historia Langobardorum IV.5). Meyvaert suggests that Gregory may have refused

In the Dialogues, he elaborates more fully on why he believes that miracle stories would be of value to his monastic audience. In one sense, they served a purpose similar to his homilies in that they were meant to elevate the minds of his audience to a higher plain of thought. By observing the example of the saints, those who were mindful would be inspired to forget their own lowly state and meditate on the benefits of the life to come. Thus, according to Gregory:

> The lives of the saints are often more effective than mere instruction for inspiring us to love heaven as our home. Hearing about their example will generally be helpful in two ways. In the first place, as we compare ourselves with those who have gone before, we are filled with a longing for the future life; secondly, if we have too high an opinion of our own worth, it makes us humble to find that others have done better [I.Prol.9].

But miracle stories also provided a more immediate lesson for his audience on the way in which the spiritually minded should live their lives in the present. Writing through his interlocutor, Peter, Gregory compares the benefits gained from studying the scriptures with those of observing the deeds of the saints. He suggests that it is not necessarily a bad thing to interrupt the study or exegesis of the scriptures for the purpose of considering and meditating on the miracle stories of the saints "because the amount of edification to be gained from a description of miracles is just as great" [I.Prol.9]. In fact, according to Gregory, such miracle stories can even reinforce and strengthen the lessons of the scriptures often

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to publish the Dialogues partly from fear of the acclaim it would bring him.

better than straight exegesis because miracle stories provide examples of those lessons in action. As Gregory puts it, "An explanation of holy scripture teaches us how to attain virtue and persevere in it, whereas a description of miracles shows us how this acquired virtue reveals itself in those who persevere in it" [I.Prol.9].

It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that Gregory did not envision the Dialogues primarily as a work of history or biography in which he was aiming for accuracy and faithfulness to detail. Rather he saw them as a collection of miracle stories that could teach through example.[10] The examples he hoped to convey to his audience were both spiritual and practical. On the one hand, he hoped to instill a desire for the life to come, but he also hoped to portray the saints as examples of the ways in which the virtues of the holy life were to be put into practice.

But even if historical accuracy was not paramount for Gregory, the fact that he set the Dialogues in a definite time and in specific locations in Italy did provide him with an opportunity that perhaps he did not have in his other writings, particularly his homiletical works.[11] Namely, the Dialogues gave Gregory the chance to set forth his ideas about the Christian life in a real setting. More specifically, he was able to paint a richer and fuller picture of the various elements of Christian society--hermits, monks, abbots,

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[10]On the Dialogues as miracle stories, see Giorgio Cracco, "Uomini di Dio e uomini di chiesa nell'alto medioevo."

[11]Meyvaert, "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's Dialogues," pp. 377-381. Meyvaert discusses Gregory's understanding of historia and allegory in relation to the Dialogues.

priests, and bishops--all working together and exhibiting the virtues of the true Christian life within the framework of the Church and on the familiar terrain of Italy. In fact, according to Robert Markus, the Dialogues can be seen as:

> Gregory's answer to the need he perceived for a new kind of integration of the elements of Christian living, notably, an integration of the ideal of the rectores, the bearers of ecclesiastical authority, and the power of the viri Dei, the holy men of the Italian countryside.[12]

The rectores were those who held positions of authority within the Church, namely, bishops, priests, and abbots.[13] Their authority was derived from the institution of the Church and was defined by their place within the Church's hierarchy. The viri Dei, on the other hand, did not traditionally hold positions of authority within the Church.[14] In fact, they fled positions of authority for fear of becoming tied down by them.[15] As "holy men" their position in socie-

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[12]Markus, "The Sacred and the Secular from Augustine to Gregory the Great," p. 91. See, also, Carole Straw on "The Saint and the Social Meaning of Stability" in Gregory the Great, pp. 66-89.

[13]See Markus's study of the rector in Gregory's thought, "Gregory the Great's rector and his genesis."

[14]On the holy man, see Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," and other essays collected in Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity (1982). Brown's treatment of the holy man is focused mainly on the Byzantine world, but for the links between east and west see his article, included in the same volume, "Eastern and Western Christendom in Late Antiquity: A Parting of the Ways." See also Philip Rousseau, Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian (1978) and "The Spiritual Authority of the 'Monk-Bishop'" (1971). On the holy man in Gregory's thinking, see Giorgio Cracco, "Uomini di Dio e uomini di chiesa nell'alto medioevo."

[15]Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," p. 131.

ty came, paradoxically, from the reverence they were accorded for their acute ascetic withdrawal from society. Their "spectacular feats of mortification" and conquest of spiritual and natural forces demonstrated to their followers that they possessed the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. As Peter Brown writes, "To visit a holy man was to go where power was."[16]

The significance of Gregory's attempt to meld these two groups comes from the very dilemma their contrasting models of authority created for the Church. As Peter Brown and others have shown, the Church of Late Antiquity faced a growing conflict between the bishops, the foremost rectores who were at the pinnacle of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the holy men, the bearers of "charismatic" authority but who stood outside that hierarchy.[17] Clearly, holy men posed a problem for the Church because of the unwieldy nature of their power. Their power was unpredictable and volatile and thereby threatened the bishops whose power was more traditionally derived and secured. According to Brown, it was for this reason that the cult of relics became so important in the west:

> Here we are dealing with oligarchies of bishops powerful enough to overshadow any other bearers of the holy, but who were themselves locked in such bitter competition to remain equal as to deny holiness to any but the most well-tried,

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[16]Ibid, pp. 106, 121.

[17]"The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," pp. 139-52; "Eastern and Western Christendom in Late Antiquity," pp. 178-95; and The Cult of the Saints (1981), in which Brown discusses the role of relics and dead saints in the managing of the holy. See also Rousseau, "The Spiritual Authority of the 'Monk-Bishop'," esp. pp. 397 ff., which traces the concept of authority as it evolved from the spiritual authority of the charismatic holy man to the more institutionalized clerical authority of the "monk-bishop."

that is, the most safely-dead figure.[18]

Ultimately, the success of the bishops and the episcopal-oriented authority structure was crucial to the development of the Church in the West.

In the Dialogues, however, Gregory can be seen as promoting the mutual acceptance of rectores and holy men by attributing to those in positions of authority the virtues of holy men and likewise by portraying holy men in positions of authority.[19] He is trying to break down the barriers between the two.

Thus, on the one hand, Gregory presents a host of bishops in the Dialogues who have the power usually associated with holy men.[20] This power derives directly from the special relationship they have with God and serves as the basis for their esteem by the people. The fact that they hold positions of authority in the Church is incidental to the fact that they have and demonstrate their spiritual

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[18]Brown, "Eastern and Western Christendom in Late Antiquity: A Parting of the Ways," pp. 186-7.

[19]In general, see the treatment of this subject by Adalbert de Vogüé in his introduction to the Dialogues, esp. pp. 95-103; by Cracco in "Uomini di Dio e uomini di chiesa nell'alto medioevo"; and by Straw in Gregory the Great, p. 71 ff.

[20]I count in the Dialogues 81 people as the primary subjects of stories told by Gregory. Of these, I count 21 bishops and popes (including Maximian, who was abbot of St. Andrew's and later bishop of Syracuse, and Herculanus, a monk and then bishop of Perugia). The first 13 saints in Book III are either bishops or popes. In addition, there are 27 simple monks or hermits, 10 abbots, and 2 priors. The remaining subjects are priests, deacons, and sacristans (11) and kings, officials, and laypeople (10).

power.[21] Such is the case with a certain Marcellinus, a bishop and a "man of venerable life" whose power was so great that it saved his city from the devastation of fire [I.6.1-2]. Afflicted with gout, the bishop found it nearly impossible to walk without the help of his friends who would carry him wherever he needed to go. One day, a fire broke out in the city and spread rapidly, threatening to destroy all of the local neighborhoods. But Marcellinus was brought to the scene, carried by his friends, at the very time when the townspeople despaired of ever being able to halt the fire's advance. Immediately the bishop commanded those carrying him to set him down in the path of the fire. They did as he requested, placing him in front of the advancing flames where the force of the heat was strongest. According to Gregory, "the flames doubled back over themselves as if thereby to indicate that they could not pass over the bishop" [I.6.2]. Thereafter, the fire gradually died away and caused no further destruction. Gregory's response is one of awe: "Consider, Peter, what great sanctity was required for a sick man to sit there and subdue the flames by prayer" [I.6.2]. Marcellinus, by his holy life and marvellous deeds, demonstrates that he possesses spiritual power and that this power undergirds his ecclesiastical authority.

On the other hand, there are those holy men in the Dialogues who acquire their virtue as monks or hermits before ever holding positions of authority in the Church. In many cases they are brought into the Church as abbots or bishops as with Herculanus, who had

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[21]Cracco, "Uomini di Dio e uomini di chiesa nell'alto medioevo," pp. 199.

lived as a monk during the time of Totila, the Gothic king. Gregory describes Herculanus as a "most holy man" (vir sanctissimus) who lived is life as a monk in a monastery before being taken from the monastery to be made bishop [I.13.1]. Benedict, also, was trained by the Holy Spirit in the wilderness according to the best tradition of the eastern desert hermits, but emerged from the wilderness to become an abbot of a local monastery.

The Dialogues should not be seen as Gregory's attempt to legitimate holy men by portraying them in positions of authority in the Church. As Giorgio Cracco points out, the fact that most of the saints in the Dialogues are in positions of authority is not the point Gregory is trying to make. Gregory is ultimately concerned to show that these figures who have authority are possessed of real spiritual power. And it is this power that legitimates their authority.[22] This can be seen clearly in the case of the hermit Isaac [III.14.1-10]. Isaac, who came to Italy from Syria, arrived one day in Spoleto and entered a church to pray. He implored the sacristans of the church to let him remain there throughout the night. They agreed, but when Isaac stayed there for days in prayer, one of them was "filled with a spirit of pride" and rebuked the man of God [III.14.3]. The sacristan's anger finally moved him to strike Isaac, at which point an evil spirit seized him in the midst of his wicked act and cast him down at Isaac's feet, shouting "Isaac is casting me out, Isaac is casting me out."

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[22]Cracco, "Uomini di Dio e uomini di chiesa nell'alto medioevo," pp. 193-199.

According to Gregory, "Isaac was a complete stranger at Spoleto, but the evil spirit, by loudly acknowledging Isaac's power to expel him, made his name known to all." Although Isaac was from another land, the fact that the spirit acknowledged him, demonstrated that Isaac's power was not limited by any artificial borders or jurisdictions, even ecclesiastical ones. Furthermore, Gregory makes it clear that the miracle occurred inside the church. He writes that, after Isaac had cast out the spirit, "the whole city soon heard what had happened in the church" [III.14.4]. Not only did the man of God display his power, he did so in the church, the local focus of ecclesiastical authority. Gregory does not mention specifically how the priests or bishop reacted to Isaac, but clearly everyone in the region accepted him from henceforth so that "men and women of high and low station came in great numbers" to see him. The ultimate point of the story seems to be that Isaac, as a holy man, derives his authority comes from the power of the Holy Spirit that indwells him. The saints of the Dialogues demonstrate daily that their authority is genuine through the example their lives give of inner spiritual light. Caught up in the battle of good and evil, the saints are able to triumph only through spiritual virtue and the power of Christ.[23]

But, just as Gregory should not be seen as attempting to legitimate holy men, likewise the fact that the saints in the Dialogues derive their power from above should not be seen as Gregory subverting the authority of the Church. The virtues that Gregory

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[23]Cracco, "Uomini di Dio e Uomini di Chiesa nell'alto Medioevo," pp. 193-200.

particularly emphasizes in these saints--self-denial, charity, and humility--are those that both fortify the individual Christian, but they also serve to strengthen the hierarchy of the Church. Humility, in particular, cultivated through contemplation of God, is easily translated into submission to authority, which is essential in the monastery as well as in the wider Church.[24] In each of the instances mentioned above, the Church was absorbing the power of the saints into itself so that it could carry on the collective mission of the community of saints on earth. The relationship between the saint and the Church, therefore, is mutually reinforcing.

It is possible, however, to gain additional insight into the integration of the ideal of the holy man and rector in the Dialogues by recalling Gregory's understanding of the active and contemplative lives. As one who had followed as best he could the principles of the monastic life that stood behind the tradition of the holy man, Gregory knew firsthand the problems posed by undertaking a position of authority in the Church. Throughout his years as pope, Gregory would remain close to the cause of monasticism, promoting it wherever possible and trying himself to remain close to his earlier monastic vows by gathering around him this group of monks who, with him, continued to live a life of monastic austerity. For Gregory and his monastic group at the Lateran Palace, the dilemma of incorporating the holy man was not so much the problems of authority it created for the Church but the problem it presented to the holy man who had to

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[24]Paul Meyvaert, "Gregory the Great and the Theme of Authority," pp. 8-12.

strive to maintain his communion with God (the source of his special "charisma") while performing his duties in the Church. To control a holy man was to rein in his powers and thus artificially limit what was not defined by earthly men or institutions. Although Gregory never would have compared himself personally with the saints, he nevertheless identified with the kind of life they were trying to lead; that is, a life of asceticism and close communion with God. His own experience gave him special insight into the problems that the holy man would face.

In the Dialogues Gregory describes in practical terms the way that holy men maintain communion with God while living an active life of service in the Church. He knows that this is not an easy matter because as those who cultivate ascetic and contemplative ways undertake pastoral responsibilities within the Church they are, by necessity, engaging in the world. When Benedict becomes an abbot, he does not simply minister to those within his community but to those in the surrounding countryside as well. On Monte Cassino there was a temple dedicated to Apollo where the neighboring peoples still offered sacrifices as their ancestors had done. When Benedict and his entourage arrived, they took it upon themselves to win over these people. They began by destroying the temple idol, overturning the altar, cutting down the trees in the nearby sacred groves, and converting the temple into a chapel dedicated to St. Martin. Gradually, according to Gregory, Benedict's "zealous preaching" converted

the people.[25]

But, as Gregory makes clear, such contact with the world does not come without a price. The primary source of difficulty for the holy man is the devil and the forces of spiritual forces of darkness that support him. Rare is the occasion in the Dialogues when the devil allows a saint to go unchallenged in his attempt to engage in the world. The devil may not be able to compromise the saint one-on-one, but once that saint leaves the confines of his cell, where his communion with God is almost impossible to disrupt, and enters the world, the devil has many more tools at his disposal to frustrate the saint's efforts.

In the Dialogues, this warfare between good and evil is the background against which Gregory showcases the saints. He presents an elaborate picture of a world in which evil has insidiously entwined itself into the daily workings of men and women everywhere and where the maneuvers of Satan are so effective and so subtle that even the well-intentioned cannot always discern them. But against this background, he carefully depicts the saints triumphantly joining that battle. The saints are not easily deceived by evil because they are fighting on the side of God who, in the end, will assure the victory. The measure of their success is how close they stay to God so that they can hear his instructions and faithfully carry them out. Thus contemplation is at the heart of the saints's training because it is through contemplation that they can approach God. The inner

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[25]Dialogues II.8.10-11. See also II.8.1 and II.19.1.

light that results from the contemplation of God guides them through the darkness of the world. When they have learned to listen to God and live within themselves, they are able to step out into the world and allow the light to shine beyond themselves to those in darkness. Their light is needed to uncover the "hidden designs of providence" [II.16.3]. But they never leave behind contemplation because God is the source of their light, and they cannot find their way without that light.

In Book II of the Dialogues, Gregory describes how this scenario could be played out by concentrating on the life of one extraordinary saint, Benedict. Through an extended account of Benedict's life, Gregory is able to comment at some length on the general principles that could be extracted from Benedict's experience of living the active and contemplative life in a fallen world. Thus, Gregory's account of the saint begins with his rejection of the world and withdrawal into solitude and ends with his re-entry into the world, not to become part of it but to minister to those in it through miracles and teaching. Throughout it all, he remains faithful to the principles he learned in solitude even though he is living no longer in the wilderness.

Benedict, like Gregory, was born of distinguished parents and had a promising career ahead of him had he chosen it. But just as he began his education, he fled from the world and his worldly studies and entered the wilderness where he could give himself fully to "laboring for God." According to Gregory, "he stepped back from the threshold of the world in which he had just set foot lest he become

defiled by its learning and later plunge headfirst into the terrible abyss" [II.Prol.1]. For three years, he resisted the world through a life of solitude and contemplation. The devil used every means in his power to trip up Benedict during this time so that the aspiring servant of God might give up his pursuit of virtue, but to no avail. Benedict endured every temptation until God decided that his servant was ready to step forth from the wilderness:

> At length the time came when almighty God wished to grant him rest from his toil and to present Benedict's life as an example to others so that, just as a light shines more brightly when it is set on a lampstand, everyone in God's house might see more clearly [II.1.6].

Thus, as Gregory describes it, Benedict fled from the world to the solitude of the wilderness but emerged again from the wilderness when God had judged that he was ready to be an example to others.

But what did it mean for the saint to be ready? First of all, it meant that he could withstand the assaults of the devil. During his last days in the wilderness, Benedict had to endure one last temptation as the devil tried once more to topple the saint. He appeared to Benedict in the form of a blackbird, fluttering in front of his face. Startled, Benedict made the sign of the cross, causing the bird to fly away, but he was immediately seized with an extremely piercing sexual temptation. So strong was the temptation that he was nearly overcome by it and even at the point of abandoning the wilderness. Fortunately, however, he "came to himself" and flung himself into a patch of briars and thorns:

> There he rolled and tossed until his whole body was in pain and covered with blood. Yet, once he had conquered pleasure through suffering, his torn and bleeding skin served to drain the poison of temptation from his body. Before

> long, the pain that was burning his whole body had put out the fires of evil in his heart. It was by exchanging these two fires that he gained the victory over sin. So complete was his triumph that from then on, as he later told his disciples, he never experienced another temptation of this kind [II.2.2].

Having survived this final assault, Benedict emerged victorious from the trial of the wilderness. The devil had reached into the very root of his sinful human nature and exposed that which was most likely to make him stumble. When Benedict prevailed, he thereby proved that the devil had no hold on him. Therefore, according to Gregory, "now that he was free from these temptations, he was ready to instruct others in the practice of virtue" [II.2.3].

Gregory compares the proven Benedict to the Levites of Hebrew scriptures who could not guard the sacred vessels until they were fifty years of age. The sacred vessels are the souls of the faithful, and the Levites are God's servants. Benedict, like the Levites, was only ready to minister to others when he had conquered his own temptations. But Gregory makes it clear that Benedict was not simply resisting by himself. He had escaped the devil's temptation not through his own strength but by "God's grace" [II.2.2]. He was ready to teach others not just because he had conquered temptation but because he had done so through the grace of God.

The fact that Benedict was able to appropriate this grace was the result of his close relationship with God which he had cultivated in the wilderness. Gregory places great emphasis on this special relationship between the saint and God in the Dialogues because it is crucial to the saint not just in the wilderness or in solitude but

also in the world. In fact, it is perhaps more crucial in the world because in the world there are so many more ways to be distracted and drawn away from God, as Gregory himself knew: "We who mingle with so many worldly people frequently speak useless words and at times even injurious ones. And the closer we keep our speech to earth the farther we remove our voice from God" [III.15.14]. The saints, however, are not frequently drawn away from God in this way. Gregory characterizes the close relationship between the saint and God as a union, in which the saint becomes "one with God."[26] This does not mean that the saints actually become united with God in substance. It is a spiritual union in which they are together with God so that they can speak with him and he with them, but the saints are never able to overcome their humanity. Thus, Gregory admits, "All those who devotedly follow the Lord are with God through their devotion, but in so far as they are still weighed down by corruptible flesh, they are not with God" [II.16.7].

Like the rest of humanity, even the saints are still human and therefore cannot know every thought of God. God's ways are still "inscrutable" to the earthbound mind, and the saints can only know those things God wishes to reveal to them. Nevertheless, because they labor night and day to be near God, they are rewarded for their efforts and made privy to his judgments. Through contemplation they

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[26]"Sancti viri, in quantum cum Domino unum sunt, sensum Domini non ignorant" [II.16.5]. "Illi ergo nos necesse est sponte subdi, cui et adversa omnia subiciuntur invita, ut tanto nostris hostibus potentiores simus, quanto cum auctore omnium unum efficimur per humilitatem" [III.21.4]. On union with God in Gregory's thinking, see Giorgio Cracco, "Ascesa e ruolo dei Viri Dei," p. 285.

can open a line of communication with God which allows them to be with him so that when he speaks they are there to listen:

> Since even holy men cannot fully grasp the secret designs of God, they call his judgments inscrutable. But because they are together with God's spirit and keep their hearts joined with him by dwelling continually on the words of holy Scripture and on such private revelations as they may receive, they understand his judgments and pronounce them. In other words, the judgments which God conceals they cannot know, but those God speaks they know [II.16.7].

Gregory describes the holy man who lives in this way as living both "within" himself and also "above" himself. He is within himself in that his mind and spirit are turned inward in contemplation rather than outward on earthly concerns. He is above himself in that his spirit ascends heavenward to be with God. Benedict learned to do this in the isolation of the wilderness:

> Now, the saintly Benedict really lived "within himself" out in that lonely wilderness in that he bound himself up with his own thoughts. Yet each time the rapture of contemplation drew him heavenward, he must have left the uncertainty of self beneath him [II.3.9].

It is perhaps difficult to imagine how transforming such an experience of contemplation could be to one such as Benedict. Gregory surely knew the "rapture of contemplation" from his own experience, but what he wishes to show with Benedict and other saints in the Dialogues is how thoroughly colored their picture of the world could become because of this contemplation. Not drawn into the world and dragged down by it the way Gregory believed himself to be, Benedict was able to allow his contemplation of God to overtake him and transform him so that he saw the world in a totally new light. In a startling passage, Gregory describes what a soul such as Benedict's

would see in the course of this upward ascent:

> Keep this well in mind, Peter. All creation is bound to appear small to a soul that sees the creator. Once it beholds a little of his light, it finds all creatures small indeed. The light of holy contemplation enlarges and expands the mind in God until it stands above the world. In fact, the soul that sees him rises even above itself, and as it is drawn upward in his light all its inner powers unfold. Then, when it looks down from above, it sees how small everything is that was beyond its grasp before [II.35.6].

When the saint lives within himself contemplating God, his soul is raised above the world. In fact, Gregory says, the soul that sees God is raised even above itself, so that it transcends its own limited power. As the soul thus possessed looks back on the world, all of creation seems small. This does not mean that the created world loses significance, but rather that the saint can now put it all in its proper perspective. Paul the Apostle provides the foremost example of a saint soaring to God in this fashion. Gregory cites 2 Corinthians in which Paul claims to have been caught up into the "third heaven" before God allowed Satan to buffet him with a thorn in the flesh to keep him from exalting in himself. As Gregory interprets the passage, Paul is saying that even when he was lifted high in contemplation he was thinking of the needs of those in the world. In other words, Paul is able to be above himself in contemplation while still active in the world:

> While he was mingling in contemplation with hosts of angels, he did not think it beneath him to consider the needs of the flesh and make provision for it [III.17.11].

In the most basic terms, this means for Gregory that the saints are able to enter the world and not have to sever their union with God.

Their contemplation is so transforming that they are not truly walking in the world but above it. The life they live in the flesh is really "beyond the flesh" [III.17.12]. Therefore Benedict, like Paul, can go confidently into the world knowing that God will protect him because he is near him through contemplation. He sees the world as it really is, and he is not deceived by its lures. He is able to minister to the world while remaining above it. In turn, God rewards the endurance and faithfulness of his servant by drawing even nearer to him:

> Set apart from the ways of the world, the servants of God are strangers to its vain talk and thus avoid disturbing and soiling their minds in idle conversation. Because of this they win a hearing from God sooner than others, for by the purity and simplicity of their thoughts they resemble God to a degree, becoming of one mind with him as far as that is possible [III.15.13].

As the saint prepares to enter the world, the Church becomes crucial. As the body of Christ on earth, it acts as a buffer between the saint and world. Gregory says that Benedict was supposed to shine to everyone in "God's house" and to minister to the "souls of the faithful." His first step out of solitude was not into the barren world but rather into the supportive framework of the Church in the world. The Church no doubt existed in the world of hostile forces, but it was serving as the mediator between God and the world, nurturing those within it and ministering to those outside of it. After leaving the wilderness, Benedict took his place within the Church, nurturing and ministering as teacher and prophet. Gregory says that he was infused with the "spirit of prophecy" so that he communicated to others what God revealed to him in contemplation

[II.21.3]. Thereafter, many people followed his example by forsaking the world, and they sought out his guidance by placing themselves under the saint's spiritual direction [II.2.3].

As Benedict stepped forth from the wilderness and took his place within the Church, he became a microcosm of the Church as a whole. The Church existed in the world but was not of it. It rejected the principles of the world yet actively ministered to it as the mouthpiece of God and the mediator between heaven and earth. So also, Benedict was no longer part of the world even though he lived and moved in it. Because he had conquered his worldly human nature in solitude, he no longer looked for strength within himself but beyond himself to God through contemplation. Through contemplation he established communion with God by which he was nourished and strengthened. Consequently, he became a source of nourishment and strength to others since God could effectively speak and work through him. By his miracles, but above all through his teaching, many people who already believed and were in the Church converted to a higher form of life by joining monasteries. And as he continued his work, he gradually spread his net wider so that people outside of the Church witnessed his miracles and heard his preaching. As they converted to the faith, they were brought under the protection of the Church, thereby enlarging the place of the Church within the world.[27] By his work, therefore, Benedict was contributing to the Church's

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[27]Dialogues II.19.1: "Not far from the monastery was a village largely inhabited by people the saintly Benedict had converted from the worship of idols and instructed in the true faith." See also II.3,8.

leavening of society--infiltrating and transforming it rather than becoming part of it.

Therefore, according to Gregory, the greatest acts of the saints are those that contribute to this leavening of society. Miracles, though important, must be understood in the proper light. In general, when he recounts a miracle story, he is less concerned with the miracle itself, and sometimes even the recipient of that miracle, than with the changed outlook that the miracle creates in those who witness it or hear about it. Even a miracle so great as raising a body from the dead is overshadowed by those miracles that change people's spiritual vision. According to Gregory, when Lazarus was raised from the dead little else was heard of him thereafter, but when Paul experienced a resurrection of the spirit, he subsequently became the greatest teacher of the Church.

> To be raised to life from bodily death is, therefore, not of the highest importance, unless, perhaps, when this resurrection of the body is accompanied by a resurrection of the soul; for then the external miracle produces internal conversion in the one so revived [III.17.13].

Therefore, the most important miracles are the invisible ones that take place within the heart. Paul was the most illustrious example of a soul raised from the dead, and in the Dialogues he becomes for Gregory the exemplary preacher (egregius praedicator) who devotes himself to bringing life to other lost souls. The saint understands and comprehends the supreme value of such work because he looks down on the earth, seeing both the visible and invisible worlds laid out before him, and is not deceived into underestimating the importance of the invisible. Visible miracles may be more awe-inspiring on the

surface, but they cannot compare to the greatness of the regeneration of a heart in darkness. Thus, according to Gregory:

> If we consider the invisible, then it becomes evident that to convert a sinner by preaching the word of God to him and aiding him with our prayers is a greater miracle than raising to life the physically dead. For in the latter case the flesh is brought back to life, only to die again; in the former, the soul is brought to life for all eternity [III.17.7].

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Despite all the good a saint such as Benedict could accomplish beyond the confines of his wilderness cave, the step into the world is still not an easy one. Although Gregory believes that the saints can remain "within themselves" through contemplation even while ministering to others, he nevertheless knows that they must protect themselves. The saint has to harness all the power from his relationship with God in order to avoid the host of obstacles that the devil will thrust in his way. If he is to work actively for God in the world, he must be careful not to stumble because, by ministering to others, he becomes vulnerable in that he is turning his attention outward beyond himself. The saint must retain the virtue he has gained in the quiet of contemplation.

To see how Gregory envisioned this delicate balance between the inner and outer working in practice, it is instructive to look at an experience from Benedict's life in which the balance almost gave way. The problems Benedict encountered in his first attempt to teach others typify the dangers holy men in general faced in leaving the safety of solitude and entering the world, even the protected environment of the monastery. As mentioned in the previous chapter,

Benedict became abbot of a community of monks soon after he left the wilderness. The previous abbot had died, and the monks asked Benedict to take his place. But soon thereafter Benedict found that the monks were wicked beyond reform:

> Their waywardness clashed with the standards he upheld, and in their resentment they started to reproach themselves for choosing him as abbot. It only made them the more sullen to find him curbing every fault and evil habit. They could not see why they should have to force their settled minds into new ways of thinking [II.3.3].

Finding himself unable to effect any change in these hardened hearts, Benedict told the monks to go find themselves another abbot to their own liking, while he himself returned again to the wilderness. According to Gregory, "If he had tried to force them to remain under his rule, he might have forfeited his own fervor and peace of soul and even turned his eyes from the light of contemplation" [II.3.5].

Benedict's experience demonstrates the delicate nature of the saint's relationship with God. Despite his honorable motives and noble efforts, he was nevertheless in danger of losing his peace of soul because of the actions of others who were beyond his control. "Their persistent daily faults would have left him almost too weary to look to his own needs, and he would perhaps have forsaken himself without finding them" [II.3.5]. Therefore, as this example would suggest, there are instances when the saint may not be able both to live within himself and to minister to others. In this case, Benedict was attempting to minister to those who were not willing to receive the message of God. His efforts, therefore, were in vain, and by staying there he risked losing his own spiritual poise. Not

even God could soften the hearts of these monks. The lesson, therefore, that Gregory draws from this instance is that the saint must be in a situation blessed by God where his work can produce results. If not, he must move on. Gregory does not say whether or not Benedict should have known better in the first place, but he does commend him for knowing when his works were producing no results and for moving on where he "could do some good" [II.3.11]. If Benedict ever found himself again in a situation in which he was similarly frustrated, Gregory does not record it.

When a saint, therefore, is successfully ministering to others, his efforts produce results and his direct line to God remains open, indicating that God is with him in the situation. In effect, what happens is that the recipient of his good works becomes drawn into the lifeline between the saint and God. The saint and the person to whom he is ministering become engaged together in the web of God's providential working so that all involved receive the benefit of God's grace through the efforts of the saint. Instead of resisting, the one who is ministered to willfully receives what God is giving through the saint. In the case of the wicked monks, they too would have been drawn into this web through Benedict if their hearts had not been hardened. Benedict's efforts would have produced results and his own contemplation of God would have flourished. But, because they resisted and were beyond the point of repentance, his work failed and he felt his own "fervor and peace of soul" evaporating. He therefore had to return to the wilderness to regain his spiritual balance.

As the story of Benedict suggests, the saint's relationship with God was more fragile in the world than in the wilderness because, in effect, there were more things to go wrong. In the wilderness, Benedict's struggle for virtue was fought between himself and the devil, with no outside intervention (other than God). If the devil could not defeat the man of God one on one, he could not resort to others to help him. But outside of the wilderness, even if he could not hope to bring the saint down, the devil could at least try to sabotage his work by manipulating those who were less strong or virtuous than he.

Thus, in another story Gregory shows how the devil tried to break the link between God and the holy man by deceiving others, who were not directly involved, into doing his work for him. He describes the case of a certain Florentius, who lived the monastic life together with his companion Eutychius in Nursia. Eutychius, who was "very active in converting souls to God by his holy exhortations," was called to preside over a community of neighboring monks, leaving Florentius by himself. Florentius, who was not as active as Eutychius but "lived a simple life dedicated to prayer," became disconsolate in his solitude and prayed to God for help. Answering the saint's prayer, God sent to Florentius a bear to serve him. By the bear's unusual gentleness, he knew that it had been sent by God, so he instructed it to keep watch over a small flock of nearby sheep. According to Gregory, "This animal, by nature a devourer of sheep, curbed its native appetite and pastured them instead." News of this marvel spread throughout the region, bringing glory to the holy man

and to God.

This miracle was the result of the close communion between Florentius and God. In his loneliness, he prayed to God, and his prayers were answered. In this case the answer to prayer involved God's summoning of an animal who by nature was ferocious and harmful to humans and other animals. But because of the saint's union with God, the bear was drawn into that union so that it obeyed the saint even though this meant acting against its own nature.

The conclusion of the story, however, exemplifies again how fragile this web of providence could be. Seeing that the bear was drawn into the divine relationship between God and the holy man and that the miracle was bringing glory to God, the devil was incensed. He sought to break up the relationship by drawing others into his own web of malicious designs. According to Gregory, "in his envy, the ancient enemy invariably drags evil men to their shame through the very deeds that make good men shine with glory" [III.15.5]. He stirred up envy in the hearts of the monks in Eutychius's monastery, convincing them that Florentius's fame was overshadowing that of their own beloved abbot. Consequently, they banded together and killed the bear. Immediately the web was broken. The death of the bear was such a traumatic event for the saint that he lost himself and fell from his communion with God. He cursed the monks, and they died not long thereafter. A time of great remorse and repentance followed for Florentius because of the "terrible fulfillment of his imprecations," but his compunction eventually brought him back to himself and back to God. Gregory adds, soberly, "It may be that

almighty God brought this about in order to prevent Florentius from ever again presuming to hurl the weapons of malediction in a state of anger" [III.15.8].

Therefore, the devil's manipulation was effective in more ways than one. Not only was he able to kill the bear, he also was able to bring down Florentius, demonstrating again the fragile nature of the saint's relationship with God when it is extended to include others within its compass. When the saint is ministering to others in the world, he must be careful because he must consider others besides himself. If one of the links in the relationship is broken, he can become vulnerable, and he may come tumbling down from the great heights he has attained.

There are times, therefore, when the saints will come down from the heights of contemplation. According to Gregory, the "spirit of prophecy does not enlighten the prophets constantly" [II.21.3]. In some cases this may mean simply returning to a normal state of mind as with the Apostle Peter, who was lifted above himself to the level of the angels when God released him from Herod's prison but soon thereafter "came to himself" after he was free. According to Gregory, "he merely returned from the heights of contemplation to his ordinary state of mind" [II.3.9]. But, just as it was possible to be carried above oneself in contemplation, it was also possible to descend below oneself through sin. In this case, the prodigal son provided the example. Through sin, he "sank below himself," but then by "breaking with his sinful past" he "came to himself." In the case of Florentius, his situation was not so severe that he needed to

break with a sinful past, or in other words, be converted as with the prodigal son. Yet, nevertheless, he had brought about the deaths of the monks, and Gregory makes it clear that this blocked his communion with God. He therefore repented and wept bitterly for the evil he had caused, and by so repenting, he was turning back to God in much the same pattern as the prodigal son, who was converted from the error of his ways and returned to fellowship with his father.

According to Gregory, sometimes God withdraws himself from the saints specifically to remind them of their humanity. By doing so, he is disciplining them in humility so that they do not become puffed up in their lofty contemplation:

> By granting these men the spirit of prophecy he raises their minds high above the world, and by withdrawing it again he safeguards their humility. When the spirit of prophecy is with them they learn what they are by God's mercy. When the spirit leaves them they discover what they are of themselves [II.21.4].

In this statement, Gregory describes the great paradox of the saint's life. When he recognizes his own limitations and lives "within himself," he is able to do great works. In fact, by living within himself he can actually live "above himself." But if he forgets that God is the one who lifted him up, then God may withdraw his spirit from him to teach him once again what he is of himself. Humility and weakness become the basis for strength and power.

And when the saint is living above himself, looking down upon the world as Gregory describes it, humility is the virtue that stirs him to minister to those in the world. Humility means forgetting oneself and turning toward others in charity. Again, Paul the

Apostle, the greatest preacher, provides the example:

> Why should I be annoyed if you stoop to help a weak brother? Does not Paul say, 'I have become all things to all people so that I might save all people'? In doing so out of charity, you deserve greater respect, because you are thereby imitating the practice of an exemplary preacher [IV.4.10].

Rather than setting the saint high upon a pedestal, the experience of contemplation reduces the saint to what he is of his own self. By contemplating God, he comes to realize how little he is by himself without the power of God. Stripped of all pretense, he has no illusions of himself as being any more noble than the next person. He therefore can minister to everyone without looking down upon them. With humility of heart to ground the saint and the power of God to lift him up, he is sufficiently armed to proceed into the world confident that God will protect him. He also is a part of the Church and exists within it while living in accordance with the principles that enable him to have communion with God.

The resulting picture is that of saints bringing light to a darkened world, whose landscape is growing brighter. Gregory ends the Dialogues with an exhortation to his readers to follow the example of the saints while there is still time. The time that grows short, however, is not the time until the end of the age but, appropriately enough, the time that each person has in the world. The judge holds off his sentence so that each one might repent and show charity toward others.

> While we are enjoying days of grace, while our Judge holds off the sentence, and the Examiner of our sins awaits our conversion, let us soften our hardened hearts with tears and practice charity and kindness toward our neighbor. Then we can be sure that, if we offered ourselves during

life as victims of God, we will not need to have the saving Victim offered for us after death [IV.62.3].

Conclusion

In the first three books of the Dialogues, Gregory tells dozens of stories about saints doing battle in an arena of contrary spiritual forces without ever explaining in explicit terms the nature of the conflict. At the beginning of Book IV, however, he pauses for a moment to consider the arena in which the battle takes place. He is concerned that the invisible world may too often be obscured in people's minds in the face of the more immediate visible reality, and so he stops to describe how the invisible can be seen to exist side by side with the visible.

Building upon Plato's familiar image, he compares the human plight to an expectant mother cast into a dungeon where she gives birth to a son. Like Adam, the mother can remember what life was like before her exile, but, of course, her son has no such memory. As the boy ages, she describes to him the sun, the moon, and the stars, the mountains and the fields, but he can only listen and take by faith what she tells him.

> So it is with humans born into the darkness of this earthly exile. They hear about lofty and invisible things, but hesitate to believe in them, because they know only the lowly, visible things of earth into which they were born [IV.1.3].

In order to remedy this situation, Christ, who is the creator of both the visible and invisible worlds, came into the world and delivered the Holy Spirit into the hearts of people. Through Christ, God

testified to the world that this invisible reality did indeed exist, and through his Spirit he placed a perpetual testimony in the hearts of humankind so that they might believe what they could not know through experience: "All of us, therefore, who have received the Spirit as the pledge of our inheritance are no longer in doubt about the existence of invisible beings" [IV.1.4].

This confidence in the existence of the invisible is central to the world Gregory describes in the Dialogues. It is also central to his understanding of the active and contemplative lives. If Gregory is indeed concerned that some may doubt the existence of the invisible, then it is the saints who can dispel those doubts. Carole Straw describes Gregory's saint as "an ambassador between worlds," signifying the importance of his two-way relationship between God, the source of wisdom and power, and the people of the world, who are living in the shadow of the Fall.[1] In the saint, the world is confronted with the invisible spiritual reality that lay beneath everyday life. Through contemplation the saint maintains communion with God, thereby receiving power from above to go forth into the world actively preaching and doing miracles in the name of God. Like Benedict, he cannot keep his candle hidden beneath a bushel but must let his light shine to those around them. The logic is really quite clear, and one can almost see a fluid motion from God, the creator, to the holy man, God's chosen vessel and intermediary, to the multitude of humanity, floundering in darkness. God leaves his saints in

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[1]Carole Straw, Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection (1988), p. 71.

the world for this very purpose:

> It is not our belief that all the elect are taken out of this world, leaving only the perverse to continue on, for sinners would never turn to sorrow and repentance if there were no good examples to motivate them [III.37.22].

But, if the saint is indeed "an ambassador between worlds," then his unique position creates a problem. Not only is the saint joining two worlds, he is also caught between two worlds--between the spiritual and secular, the inner and outer, the contemplative and active. He must be in the world but not of it. He must minister to people who do not see as clearly as he does without losing sight himself of what he is trying to make them see. The challenge, then, is to maintain uninterrupted communion with God and still minister successfully to the world. In the Dialogues, Gregory shows how this can be done.

To Gregory, those who are in regular communion with God are those best prepared and best qualified to speak on behalf of God; therefore, contemplation must be compatible with action. The saints in the Dialogues, therefore, are able to achieve a delicate balance between action and contemplation. By going inside themselves, they are able to reach sustained periods of spiritual ecstacy, during which they are raised above the earth so that they can see the entire panoply of the visible and invisible worlds beneath them. They are like Paul the Apostle, who was raised up to the third heaven but, according to Gregory, "did not think it beneath him to consider the needs of the flesh." They are prepared to go into the world to do God's work. The greatest work is to preach the gospel to those who

are staggering through this shadowy world. These include both those within the Church, for whom the gospel means direction and guidance, and those outside the Church who are in complete darkness, and for whom the word of life from the saint means salvation. Missions, therefore, are an extension of the work of preaching.

These saints, especially Benedict, embody the qualities Gregory most admired and, frankly, those he most wanted to see in himself. In his own experience he struggled to avoid the pitfalls of the world that the saints were able to hurdle. They were strangers to the vain talk of the world.

> But we who mingle with so many worldly people frequently speak useless words and at times even very injurious ones. And the closer we keep our speech to earth, the farther we remove our voice from God. We are drawn downward by mingling in continual conversation with men of the world [III.15.13].

Gregory's own experience was such that both the monastery and service in the Church drew upon him to a point that he was unwilling to relinquish either. To the very end, he tried to live a hybrid form of life, combining the active and contemplative, even after his poor health had confined him to bed. He may have complained bitterly about the onerousness of his duties and the lack of time he had to be alone in quiet devotion, but he was firmly committed to both, and he gave himself as fully as possible to both. Gregory was not opposed to the active life. He was opposed to the active life when it hindered contemplation. As pope, the majority of temporal duties bothered him because he felt that they dragged him down into the world and impeded his ability to live within himself. His extensive

work as preacher, writer, and spiritual leader, however, did not bother him because it was compatible with the principles of contemplation. It grew out of contemplation. The real source of his frustration, therefore, was his inability, as he saw it, to get the balance right.

A regular theme that recurs in Gregory's thinking on action and contemplation and the ability to balance the two is conversion. It is the beginning of spiritual life and it is the result of the saint's greatest work, namely the salvation of others. But, conversion is also a signpost throughout the life of saint and ordinary believer alike. Because even the saint is not perfect, he cannot always maintain the lofty heights he has reached. Through the sin of pride or through the machinations of the evil one the saint may stumble and lose his inner balance, but in such cases conversion is the doorway through which he must pass to regain that delicate balance. But the same principle applied as well to ordinary believers, as Gregory would have seen himself. In his own experience, he frequently recalled with great care the sequence of events from his conversion not just out of sentiment or nostalgia but because it was the pattern he always returned to when he felt himself losing his spiritual balance. Through the "steps of conversion" he could be restored to his former state. And this was the case for the saints in the Dialogues, who, when restored, were able once again to minister to others.

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