

PARISHES OF  
**ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH**  
**AND**  
**SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW**  
**WEEKLY REFLECTION**

**Sunday 22nd June 2025: Corpus Christi**  
**The Leonine Popes: (1) Leo the Great**

After the election of our new Pope, Leo XIV, he and others said that his name choice reflects his 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessor Leo XIII. But what about the other 12 Leos? Rather than test your patience with a weekly sketch of all of them (though it could be even worse with 23 Popes John!), I have selected a total of 5 Leos for consideration of what they contributed to the Faith across the ages. My primary source is Professor Eamon Duffy's excellent book which contains a brief biography of all popes from St Peter to St John Paul II, namely: *Saints and Sinners – A history of the Popes*.

The first Leo, the only one to earn the suffix "The Great", was in office from 440-461, a time of enormous upheaval - due to the continuing collapse of the Roman Empire - and also of great tension between the Church in Rome and in the East. As regards the latter problem, there were at the time four Eastern Patriarchs, apart from the Pope. They were based in Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Ephesus. All acknowledged the papal primacy deriving from the Petrine succession, but the Eastern Patriarchs considered the agreement of all five to be the foundation of the Church's authority, rather than deferring to the single authority of the Pope. When Leo became Pope, he continually reinforced papal authority throughout the West<sup>1</sup>. His letters survive and show how he relentlessly combated heresy and dealt with schism and clerical irregularities. He obtained the Roman Emperor's formal recognition of papal jurisdiction over the entire Western church. But as Professor Duffy writes: "*Leo's extensive use of the language of intervention and of authority .. was not a matter of domination, nor of the simple exertion of power. His writings are also characterised by a language of service, and in them the Petrine ministry is seen as a vocation to vigilance....a commission to ensure that all is according to the traditions of the Apostles and the canons of the Church...*"

The Council of Ephesus of 431 A.D. affirmed Christ's divinity by declaring that Mary was the Mother of God. Following this there was a theological debate about the

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<sup>1</sup> The Western Church at this time roughly comprised what is now France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Austria Croatia, Greece and a substantial strip of western North Africa. The other Patriarchs covered the far eastern Mediterranean, most of modern Turkey and Romania and a strip of eastern North Africa centred on Alexandria

mystery of Christ's divine and human nature. One Eutyches taught that Jesus, after His incarnation, had one nature only and therefore his humanity was fundamentally distinct from ours. Leo wrote clearly refuting this, emphasising Christ's dual nature, human and divine, permanently united in Him. Leo's document settled the issue at the general Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), where all the Council Fathers declared that *"Peter had spoken through Leo"*. Nevertheless, the Eastern bishops did not accept that this was the case for all papal utterances – merely for this (and others) with which they agreed.

Leo was also instrumental in persuading the Huns not to attack Rome in 452 and the Vandals not to sack the city when they invaded it in 455, thus exhibiting his concern for matters temporal as well as spiritual. Some 96 of his sermons survive as well as hundreds of his letters. Duffy says that Leo was *"the most remarkable Pope of the early Church"*. The Catholic Encyclopaedia summarises his papacy in this way: *"Leo's pontificate, next to that of St Gregory the First, is the most significant and important in Christian antiquity. At a time when the Church was experiencing the greatest obstacles to her progress in consequence of the hastening disintegration of the Western Empire, while the Orient was profoundly agitated over dogmatic controversies, this great pope with far-seeing sagacity and powerful hand, guided the destiny of the Roman and Universal Church."*

Pope Leo the Great's feast day is celebrated on 10<sup>th</sup> November.

Stephen S.