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WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 29th June 2025: St. Peter & St. Paul
The Leonine Popes: (2) Leo IX

This is the second article in the series on some of the Leonine Popes who have preceded our new Leo XIV¹. After Pope St Leo the Great (440-461), a number of successors took the name, one of whom, Leo IV (847-855) surrounded the Vatican with the great Leonine Wall, 40 feet high and 12 feet thick with 44 towers defending against another potential Muslim invasion - the first invasion, in 846, had attacked Rome and desecrated and stripped the graves of SS Peter & Paul.

Nevertheless, this second article is about Leo IX who was Pope for the short period between 1049 and 1054. He followed a very unfortunate period for the papacy. Theoretically the Popes were the world's spiritual leaders, their supremacy symbolised by their exclusive right to appoint the Holy Roman Emperor. In practice the Popes were subject to the power of the Roman aristocracy or to the German rulers. There were 25 Popes between 955 and 1057; 13 were appointed by the Roman aristocracy and 12 by the German Emperors. In the late 1040s the situation improved. Henry III, the young and very pious German king, decided to reform the papacy. He appointed Popes who were committed to the Church's renewal. All were Germans and all deliberately chose names of great popes of the early Church. The third, longest-serving and greatest of these was Leo IX.

Leo IX was an Alsatian Count and Bishop named Bruno. He accepted papal office on condition that his appointment be ratified by the Roman clergy and people. He also walked all the way from Alsace to Rome in pilgrimage prior to his installation in 1049. He had what we might now describe as a "full in-tray". First, he had to put an end to a (yet further) attempt by the previously deposed Pope, Benedict IX, to seize the office. [Benedict IX is described by the Catholic Encyclopaedia as "*a disgrace to the Chair of Peter.*"]; secondly, the papal finances were in chaos and Leo entrusted these to the extremely efficient Hildebrand (later Pope St Gregory VII) to sort out.

¹ Articles based primarily on Professor Eamon Duffy's Book: "*Saints & Sinners: A History of the Popes*" and the Catholic Encyclopaedia

Leo IX then embarked on reforms which would shape the papacy for the next century. He condemned two great evils of the day, namely simony (selling Church privileges) and clerical lack of chastity. He travelled throughout Europe holding synods and clearing up corruption and other wrongdoing in the Church. At Rheims he demanded that every bishop and abbot declare whether they had paid for their office; most were shamed into silence. Bishops who confessed (about 25%) were pardoned and restored. One bishop fled and was excommunicated. Another, who had succeeded his father in office, was reduced to the priesthood. As Professor Duffy says: *“In one week Leo had asserted papal authority as it had never been asserted before.... The whole system of payments for promotion within the Church had been earth-shakenly challenged. And Rheims was only the beginning”*

Leo IX was determined to maintain papal freedom and to rid papal territory of political interference. But he had to contend with a new force, the Normans, who had taken control of Sicily (from the Muslims) and parts of southern Italy (from the Byzantine Empire). They began to move north towards Rome. Leo, a Roman imperial army commander in his youth, received many pleas for help from the people of Southern Italy. He eventually decided to lead his own army against the Normans, expecting that there would be help from the German Emperor and the Byzantine armies in the south. No such help was forthcoming. The Normans defeated Leo in June 1053 and he was kept under arrest for 9 months. He died in Rome in March 1054. His sortie into the Byzantine south was a factor in the great schism (1054) with the Orthodox Church; the tensions had been bubbling for centuries, but had recently exacerbated with the advent of Michael Cærularius as Patriarch of Constantinople

There is much more that could be said about Leo IX's papacy. For example, he forbade marriage between William (afterwards called the Conqueror) and Matilda of Flanders and [it is believed] King Macbeth visited him in Rome.

Leo IX was canonised in 1082 by Hildebrand, Pope St Gregory VII.

Stephen S.