

### The Dialogues of Saint Gregory, surnamed the Great: Pope of Rome & the First of

St Gregory the Great, Brother Hermenegild TOSF



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The four books of Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great, "concerning the life and miracles of the Italian Fathers and the eternity of souls," were written in 593, three years after his elevation to the papacy, at the request of certain monks of his household. "My brethren who dwell familiarly with me," writes Gregory to Maximianus, Bishop of Syracuse, "would have me by all means write something in brief fashion concerning the miracles of the Fathers, which we have heard wrought in Italy. For this purpose I earnestly need the help of your charity, that you should briefly inform me of all those which come back to your memory, or which you have happened yourself to know. For I remember that you related certain things, which I have forgotten, concerning the lord abbot Nonnosus, who lived near the lord Anastasius de Pentumis. I beseech you, therefore, to put down this, and whatever others there are, in your letters, and forward them to me with speed, unless you yourself are coming to me shortly." There is no other book that gives us so vivid a picture of religious life in Italy during the sixth century: the century that witnessed the brief epoch of Gothic domination the restoration of the imperial Byzantine power and finally the invasion of the Lombards, that "barbarous and cruel nation," writes Gregory, which, "drawn as a sword out of a sheath," wrought such unutterable havoc and devastation in the peninsula that many, with Bishop Redemptus, held verily that" the end of all flesh was come." It is the century that closed the period of classical civilisation, and ushered in that dreariest epoch in the history of mankind known as the Dark Ages. Inevitably, men turned from the spectacle of a world "fraught with so many miseries and divers afflictions," to prepare in the solitude of the cloister for the end which they deemed fast approaching, if it were not already come. They naturally sought eagerly to grasp such phenomena as seemed to them miraculous, as visible signs that God had not utterly abandoned His creation, and to find proofs that the soul, at least, was immortal, and might look forward to a better life hereafter by forgiveness of injuries, and by offering herself up before death as a sacrifice to Him that had made her. It is this that gives pathos even to the apparent triviality of some of the miracles that Gregory records, and deeper significance to the note on which the work ends. Three great figures illumine the general darkness of the sixth century in Italy: Boethius, the last philosopher of the classical world; Benedict, the organiser of western monasticism; and Gregory himself, the chief agent in the building up of the medieval ideal of the papacy.

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