Saint Leo the Great’s Legacy

Homily · November 10, 2026

Pope Saint Leo the Great is truly named Great for a reason. He came into the papacy at a time when the world was pretty much coming apart at the seams.

He served as pope from 440 to 461. The Western Roman Empire was already crumbling during his papacy, and its fall is traditionally dated to 476. One of the first great things Leo did was to shore up the theology of the Church at a time when heresies were spreading.

Leo is famous for his Tome, a letter that explains something important about who Jesus is. It was read at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Leo taught that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures, human and divine.

After the letter was read, the bishops famously responded together, “Peter has spoken through Leo.” They recognized in Leo’s words the faith handed down from Saint Peter. So all the way back in 451, thanks in large part to Pope Leo the Great, the Church clearly affirmed that Jesus is one person, fully human and fully divine.

Then the next year, in 452, Leo had to confront Attila the Hun, who was advancing through Italy. Leo went out to meet him, and Attila turned back before reaching Rome.

In 455, Genseric, the king of the Vandals, threatened Rome. Leo again had to act as a diplomat. He pleaded for the lives of the people of Rome. The Vandals still plundered the city, but Leo secured a promise that the people would be spared and the city would be spared from fire.

Leo also wrote many letters and homilies. One of the things you see in them is how he strengthened the understanding of the pope's role as successor to Saint Peter. The pope is the Bishop of Rome, and Leo showed how much that office was needed as the Church entered a time of great spiritual and political turmoil.

He was the first pope to bear the name Leo. Thirteen more popes have borne that name, including our current Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV. Leo was the first pope to be called "the Great," and you can see why in both his diplomacy and his teaching. He is also honored as a Doctor of the Church, as is Pope Saint Gregory the Great.

If you believe that the Holy Spirit gives us the leaders we need when we need them, I think Pope Leo is a beautiful example. The Holy Spirit guided the Church in the year 440 to choose Leo as her shepherd at a time when he was desperately needed. And he did a great job.

We don't call him Great for nothing.

So let us pray today for our shepherd, Pope Leo XIV, who bears his name. Through the intercession of Pope Saint Leo the Great, may our Holy Father shepherd the universal Church with fidelity, clarity, and courage.