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**BRONWEN NEIL**

**LEO THE GREAT'S PASCHAL HOMILIES :  
A BRIEF HISTORY OF SALVATION**

Leo the Great (440-461) is usually considered one of the more pedestrian homilists of Late Antiquity, a sort of « Cinderella » among the Fathers. The sheer volume of his surviving homiletic corpus – which includes 97 genuine sermons and one of dubious authenticity (*hom.* 98) – is probably partly to blame for the impression that he was an earlier practitioner of recycling, making use of certain homilies on more than one liturgical occasion. In this he was not alone, either in his own day or in our own. Leo used the opportunity of the Easter feast to run through the rudiments of salvation history, both for the newly baptised and for those who were reluctant to frequent the basilica too often. In this way, he inculcated the newly-Christianised people of Rome with the basics of their new faith and made it a truly civic religion, safeguarding the city and its residents from demonic attacks.

Leo delivered 21 surviving homilies on the Passion of Christ, which are among the most copied of his sermons, and are preserved in the most ancient manuscripts<sup>1</sup>. These include four delivered on Palm Sunday, and four from the following Wednesday<sup>2</sup>. Some of these are more correctly called « Resurrection » homilies, being delivered on at the Easter Vigil

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1. Leo Mag., *Hom.* 52-72, ed. A. Chavasse, *Sancti Leonis Magni Romani Pontificis tractatus septem et nonaginta*, 2 vols., CCL 138 and 138A, Turnhout, 1973, CCL 138A, pp. 304-448. The earliest manuscripts are the Reichenau *Karlsruhe Badische Landesbibliothek*, *cod. augiensis pergam.* 227, 254 f°, *saec.* IX; the Roman homiliary *Vaticana Latina* 3835, 329 f°, *inc. saec.* VIII; and *Lambeth Palace, cod.* 338, f° 97-174', *saec.* XII, of unknown origin. These manuscripts are described by A. Chavasse, CCL 138, pp. xiv-xxiv.

2. Palm Sunday *homs.* 52, 54, 56, and 58a, are presented in pairs with those delivered on the following Wednesday, *homs.* 53, 55, 57, and 59a. On the numbering see the next note.

or on Easter Sunday (*homs.* 62, 69, 70, 71, and 72)<sup>3</sup>. The close link between Leo's letters and his homilies on particular themes, e.g. against Eutychianism and Nestorianism, has been demonstrated in previous studies of Leo's most famous letter, the *Tome to Flavian*<sup>4</sup>.

In the following chapter, I trace the main Christological themes of Leo's Passion and Resurrection homilies, looking for other traces of these themes in his sermons on other liturgical occasions, such as Palm Sunday, and in Leo's letter corpus. This study will lead to the conclusion that the broad strokes of his earliest Easter sermons continued to be those that shaped his later message. Four themes have been identified for discussion here: eschatological hope; the union of the divinity with humble humanity in Christ's humanness; the value of the apostle Peter as an exemplar of betrayal and forgiveness; and the importance of unity within the universal church. Before we go any further, however, we should address the question of Leo's audience, and the liturgical developments of the century in which his homilies were penned.

#### A NEW CHRISTIAN CALENDAR FOR ROME

Little is known of the three-day celebration of Pascha in Rome in Leo's day. Antoine Chavasse observed that most of Leo's Easter homilies are called in the manuscripts « Passion homilies », and it is only very late that the term « Resurrection » appears as a rubric for those preached both on Holy Friday (*hom.* 66 on 10 April 453; *hom.* 70 on 2 April 443, and *hom.* 72 on 21 April 444) and on the Easter Vigil (*hom.* 71 on Saturday 3-4 April 443; *hom.* 69 on Saturday 4 April 454)<sup>5</sup>. The Vigil on Holy Saturday preceded a dawn Eucharist on the following day<sup>6</sup>. On the morning of Holy Saturday, the catechumens recited the Creed before being baptized, and it is probably to this occasion that the 98<sup>th</sup> homily,

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3. Sermon numbers are taken from A. Chavasse's edition, where they are grouped chronologically and by liturgical occasion, rather than that of R. DOLLE, *Léon le Grand: Sermons* 1-4, SC 22bis, 49bis, 74bis, and 200, Paris, 1961-2003, which also groups the homilies by liturgical occasion but in a quite different order.

4. Most recently B. GREEN, *The Soteriology of Leo the Great*, Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford, 2008, pp. 188-247; J. M. ARMITAGE, *A Twofold Solidarity: Leo the Great's Theology of Redemption*, Early Christian Studies 9, Strathfield, NSW, 2005.

5. See the introduction to these homilies by A. Chavasse, CCL 138 A, p. 304.

6. E. CAVALCANTI, E. MONTANARI, *Leone Magno, Sermoni IV: I sermoni sul mistero pasquale*, Biblioteca Patristica 38, Bologna, 2001, p. 457.