

Gregorius Noster: An Ever-Needed Confession of Winsome Models for Evangelism Today

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Background

Nothing much is known about the childhood of Gregory, one of the most distinguished Fathers in the history of the Church, except that he was born around 540 AD into a wealthy family of highly respected parents—Gordian and Sylvia who were venerated as saints—whose lineage had earlier on produced two popes within a space of forty three years.¹ Having lost his father at a tender age (an incident that did not deter him from having a quality education), his mother and his three paternal aunts embraced the ascetic life.² But saint Gregory the Great, whose episcopal rise to stardom and passion for salvation of souls through sending of missionaries would later earn him Gregory of Rome,³ *Gregorius noster*,⁴ the first monk elected pope,⁵ great pope and one of four Doctors of the West,⁶ had initially toed the footsteps of his father in a public administrative career and reached its zenith. Lack of satisfaction made him relinquish everything about his civil career in Rome and turn the family estates into a monastery. Duffy notes,

Gregory handed over his estates in southern Italy and Sicily to the Church, turned the family mansion on the Coelian Hill into a monastery and served there himself as an exemplary monk. For the rest of his life Gregory would look back with yearning on his years of monastic seclusion, study and prayer, “when I rose in contemplation above all changeable and decaying things, and thought of nothing but the things of heaven”. Gregory maintained a semi-monastic routine of study and prayer, preaching to his household the great series of devotional sermons on the Book of Job, which was destined to become one of the most influential books of the Middle Ages. . . . He was also a networker, making crucial friendships.⁷

Motivated by all these great attributes, Pope Benedict I ordained Gregory deacon in charge of work of charity. Pelagius II appointed him as papal ambassador at the imperial court in Constantinople. Being called back to Rome six years later, Pope Pelagius made Gregory his chief adviser. Gregory later succeeded Pelagius.⁸ This providential elevation became the wheel on which Gregory rode to aid the spread of the gospel in Europe and beyond.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Great Christian Thinkers: From the Early Church through the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 141.

² Mark DelCogliano, *Gregory the Great on the Song of Songs* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 6.

³ Edward L. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church: Themes and Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 37.

⁴ Duffy, *Ten Popes*, 57.

⁵ Duffy, *Ten Popes*, 50.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Great Christian Thinkers*, 141.

⁷ Duffy, *Ten Popes*, 51–52.

⁸ Duffy, *Ten Popes*, 51–52.

Means of Spreading the Gospel

The following means helped spread the gospel, and the church grew through the doggedness of the man of whom it was said, “At heart, Gregory is ever teacher and preacher, preoccupied with the direction of souls. Throughout his writings Gregory continually broaches the fundamental question, ‘what must I do to be saved?’”⁹ The same principles can kinetically inform evangelism today.

1) Training and Sending of Monks as Missionaries

Gregory the Great was committed to sending monks as missionaries. Duffy notes, “Monks from Ireland played at least as large a role in Christianizing England as anyone Gregory sent.”¹⁰ This principle has been corroborated by Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi and Justo L. Gonzalez when they remark, “He chose a number of monks from a monastery he had founded and charged them with the task of evangelizing the Angles.”¹¹ Indeed, “he sent Augustine of Canterbury and a team of forty monks to evangelize them (*‘angels’—angeli*) in 596.”¹² This article is not advocating for the use of monks as missionaries, but two things that informed the use of monks solely were like-mindedness and economy.¹³ Gregory understood the ascetic training and lifestyle of the monks. Their lifestyle took less money to sustain and do the mission work. Therefore, he leveraged the monks’ simplicity to spread the gospel, and they got the work done. If the gospel must spread fast and the church grow, leadership needs to place a premium on people who can run with vision and less cost. Of course, advocacy for people who can run with vision with lower costs does not suggest that the vision is primarily structured by financial data. Rather, it means that the vision of spreading the gospel is being grounded in reality and value. A vital part of this approach to evangelism is the involvement of like-minded people. More important to this article than the involvement of like-minded people in terms of socioeconomic and educational status is the involvement of like-minded people in terms of Christian values and shared vision. Perhaps various denominations and Christian organizations need to reexamine their catechetical process and admission requirements for theological education so that wolves are not sent into the mission field.

2) Intentional Networking and Friendship

Pope Gregory the Great was a proficient networker. He intentionally established working networks and crucial friendships with people so as to win them for Christ.¹⁴ He did so perfectly with people of different ranks especially royal families. If the church today would strive kinetically in evangelism, the different denominations and mission agencies should embrace networking with one another and cultivate friendship that is geared toward the salvation of souls. The deeper the relationship, the easier it is to witness and impact the lives of those around us.

⁹ Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (London: University of California Press, 1988), 200.

¹⁰ Duffy, *Ten Popes*, 56.

¹¹ Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, Justo L. Gonzalez, *To All Nations from All Nations: A History of the Christian Missionary Movement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 85.

¹² Smither, 37. *Emphasis mine*. The original name was Angles. They were English slave boys for sale in Rome.

¹³ Mark DelCogliano, *Gregory the Great*, 19; Arthur G. McPhee, *The Road to Delhi: J. Waskom Pickett and Missions in the Twilight of the Raj and Dawn of Nationhood* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2012), 296.

¹⁴ McPhee, *Road to Delhi*, 52.

The best way to accomplish this task is to make friends. We must consciously build redemptive relationships. Towns remarks, “Friendships are not found, they are established and developed through the investment of time and effort.”¹⁵ The Bible is keen on this: “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24); “A friend loves at all times” (Prov. 17:17); “I have called you friends” (John 15:15). Gregory recognized the power of networking and friendship. Christians must work diligently to recover intentional networking and friendship for the purpose of evangelism.

3) Disciplining the Married Women

Disciplining the married women was another major method used by Gregory the Great. He associated with and disciplined the Catholic wives of pagan or heretical rulers.¹⁶ Notable among the women was Queen Theodelinda who served as a mediator between the Lombards and the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁷ Most of these women eventually became instrumental to the conversion of their husbands. Going back in history, it is well established that the commitment to reach and disciple women was fundamental in the ministry of Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul. These women contributed significantly to the spread of the gospel through presence, participation, and financial resources. I will argue that as mentioned in all four Gospels, these women were not manipulated and coerced to support Jesus’s ministry. Rather, they responded to God’s compassion that met them where they were. For instance, Mary Magdalene followed Jesus after she was delivered from seven demons (Mark 16:9–10). Nyambura J. Njoroge has observed the historical events that changed the landscape of Christianity in Africa through women who spread the gospel and served as theological educators and administrators.¹⁸ This method is virile for spreading the gospel and making the church grow. When it is implemented, many household churches could emerge from it.

Means of Growing the Church

1) Multifaceted Social Activities and Donation

Gregorius Noster was a very active protagonist of multifaceted social activities. He made use of the money in the confines of the Holy See and Italy, notably in Sicily to feed the famine-stricken people of central Italy, paid for the liberty of Roman citizens held captive by the Lombards, and helped the needy and poor priests, monks, and nuns.¹⁹ These combined with his heart-searching preaching grew the church. In addition, as pointed out previously, Gregory the Great had an unquenchable longing for God and wanting people to know him. He did give up his personal estates and family mansions on Coelian Hill to the church as Saint Andrew’s monastery and for other sacerdotal functions. Today, social actions, selfless giving of personal resources, and losing the bond of servitude will serve as part of the major principles for evangelism. Therefore, the

¹⁵ Elmer Towns, *Winning the Winnable: Friendship Evangelism* (Lynchburg, VA: Church Growth Institute, 1987), 12.

¹⁶ Towns, *Winning the Winnable*, 54.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Great Christian Thinkers*, 143.

¹⁸ Nyambura J. Njoroge, “A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians,” in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 403.

¹⁹ Duffy, *Ten Popes*, 53–54; Pope Benedict XVI, *Great Christian Thinkers*, 143.

church should strive always to see that where it exists, its presence is physically felt by the people, especially the needy.

2) Metamorphosis of Pagan Temples to Christian Churches

Gregory made a pragmatic shift from suppression of traditional religious beliefs and coercion of the Anglo-Saxons to genuine transition of beliefs and conversion of souls. Instead of destroying the temples of the idols of potential converts, he advised Augustine and other missionaries to purify them for use and convert them to places of worship of the true God. Idolatrous items in the pagan temples were removed and replaced with Christian relics, temples were purified with holy water, and new altars were erected.²⁰ As the new converts became rooted in the Christian faith, they embraced the new form of their old buildings. According to Bevans and Schroeder, this paradigm shift enabled the Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic peoples to declare their faith in Christ Jesus boldly.²¹ It is sad that while Gregory converted the pagan temples of his days to Christian churches, the opposite is the case in some places today, especially in North America and Europe. Many local churches are in decline and several have closed down. This alarming rate of decline and closure was observed by W. Jay Moon when he noted, “This year alone, about 4,000 churches will likely close.”²² and the buildings are being converted to mosques and other social event centers. What can we learn from Gregory’s flexible and transformative approach to evangelism? This trend could be reversed. The church needs to move beyond a gigantic, expensive, permanent place of worship and take over coffee shops, public event centers, abandoned shrines especially in European, North American, and African countries in order to make the church grow and become more visible to the community.

3) Multiethnic Dimensional Outreach

In the days of Gregory, the church grew by making the gospel go beyond the Holy See and England as far as northeastern Europe: Germany and Holland.²³ DelCogliano notes that Gregory reached out to places such as Antioch, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Alexandria, Dalmatia, North Africa, Britain, and Spain.²⁴ Unfortunately, most African churches in diaspora are mainly reaching their national immigrant communities. The same can be said about many traditional Western churches. This racial barrier and division need to collapse. Today, the church must consciously make concerted effort to get the gospel across to people of different cultures, races, languages, and colors without any inhibition. The gospel is not in enmity to any of the foregoing ethnic identities.

4) Making the Bible a Gift for Every Occasion

²⁰ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 124.

²¹ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 124.

²² W. Jay Moon, “Alternative Financial Models for Churches and Church Plants: When Tithes and Offerings Are Not Enough.” *Great Commission Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (2020): 20.

²³ Duffy, *Ten Popes*, 57.

²⁴ DelCogliano, *Gregory the Great*, 18.

The gospel also spread through an initiative of giving out the Scriptures as gifts to pious princes and other people.²⁵ The Bible remains the best gift. It was written over 1,500 years ago by more than forty authors who were inspired by God. It was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Its first translation was in 1382 AD by John Wycliffe, and the first printed Bible appeared in 1454 AD by Johannes Gutenberg. Since then, an estimation of six to seven billion Bibles have been printed and distributed, making it the best-selling printed book in the world. Calculated attempt by individuals, families, local churches, and denominations to make the Bible a special gift to celebrities and the unreached people will definitely bring about the spread of the gospel. For instance, in many cultures, the celebrations of birthdays, wedding anniversaries, child christenings, funeral and memorial services, consecration anniversaries, coronation anniversaries, and so forth are all too common. Usually, the celebrants give expensive souvenirs to guests. Some of these guests are non-Christians and seekers. What if Christians intentionally make the Bible or study devotional one of the souvenirs? Christians who receive a copy of the Bible on such occasions will pass it on to non-Christian or unchurched neighbors.

5) Loving the Predators (Lombards)

Another means by which the gospel spread in the days of Pope Gregory that could inform evangelism today is loving the fierce or those who are kept at bay for their nefarious character. I presume this method could be difficult in some contexts, but the church has been called to love. While the Byzantine Emperor saw the Lombards as animals that must be terminated, Gregory saw them as candidates for salvation. Just as Gregory's love for the Lombards brought about salvation, peace, and reconciliation, today's church will conquer evil, spread the gospel, and see the church grow through the instrumentality of love.

Conclusion

The title of this article: "Gregorius Noster": An Ever-Needed Confession of Winsome Models for Evangelism Today" begins with the Latin phrase "Our Gregory". Gregory, though, was of Rome. The possessive confession Gregorius Noster was a household name in England because he believed that Jesus came for those far and near. The gospel spread and the church grew. Much more can happen in today's church. Advocates of evangelism—bishops, pastors, church workers, theologians, evangelists, missiologists, and so forth—need to be sensitive to trust issues. Like Pope Gregory the Great, they can enter a new culture without eradicating the local cultural traditions. They can domesticate tactics grounded in flexible ideologies that prioritize like-mindedness, trust, conversion, Bible gifts, and love. The Holy Spirit will convict the converts.

²⁵ Duffy, *Ten Popes*, 18.