
ST. LEO THE GREAT (D
461) – POPE WHO
RESCUED THE
DOCTRINE OF THE
INCARNATION



How do you think of Jesus? As the Lord of lords in glory? Or as a human baby soon to be born in Bethlehem? November brings the glorious climax of the church year with the Sunday of Christ the King on 22rd November – only to begin a new ‘year’ a week later, with Advent.

So, the ways in which the Church speaks of Jesus this month could not be more dramatically different.

How can Jesus be both God and Man? Trying to get your head around the Incarnation is not easy, and so this is a good month to remember Leo the Great. In the 5th century, he ‘rescued’ the doctrine of the Incarnation at a time when the Church was really struggling with the onslaught of various attacks.

Leo, a deacon of Tuscan descent, became Pope at a time when Rome was reeling under repeated assault by the barbarians. As well as trying to patch up the material and spiritual damage they had done, Leo faced an even

more deadly attack: the Church was being torn apart on the inside. There were various heresies raging, each trying to claim that their view of the person of Christ was the only right one.

Between the barbarians on the outside and the distortions of Manichaeism, Priscillianism, and Pelagianism on the inside, Leo was not in for an easy time. Yet this man of indomitable energy and devotion to duty pressed on. Leo was pope for 20 tumultuous years, but undoubtedly the most important contribution that he made was at a famous church council. It was the Council of Chalcedon, in 451 – often regarded as a highlight in Christian history. Leo presented a dogmatic letter (or

Tome) to the Council. He wrote with remarkable clarity of thought and understanding. Jesus Christ, said Leo, is one Person, the Divine Word. In Jesus the two natures, the divine and the human, are permanently united without confusion or mixture.

When the Council read this document, it was exclaimed: 'Peter has spoken by Leo.' Leo's understanding was seen to encompass all the Bible teaching on the subject of who Jesus was. It became thenceforth part of the official teaching of the Christian Church.

