

# Peter Through the Ages

*“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:31-32).* Our Lord Jesus addressed these words to St. Peter as the time of His death drew near. Once when preaching on this text, St. Augustine interpreted the phrase “the brethren” in a broad way to include the Church itself. Augustine remarked that Peter certainly has strengthened us by his apostolate, martyrdom, and letters (Sermon 210.6). Examining Peter through the ages, we can see various ways in which the popes as the successors of St. Peter have indeed strengthened us.

## **1.) Popes have led the way in creating order in times of political strife and chaos.**

Because he saw it as his duty to settle disputes within the Church, **St. Innocent I** (401-17) demanded St. John Chrysostom be restored as the rightful archbishop of Constantinople after the imperial household had unjustly deposed him. Although Innocent worked tirelessly to promote good order within society, he was not successful in persuading Alaric and the Visigoths to spare Rome in 410. After the Visigoths sacked Rome, Innocent worked hard to rally the citizens of Rome to rebuild the city.

**St. Leo the Great** (440-61) faced two invading armies with mixed success. Leo went to Mantua to meet the Attila the Hun in 452 and persuaded him to withdraw from Italy before sacking Rome and the surrounding area. Three years later when the Vandals under King Giseric arrived, Leo met them at the gates of Rome. Even though he could not stop them from sacking the city, he did manage to get Giseric to promise that the Vandals would not massacre people or burn the city.

**St. Gregory the Great** (590-604) found the situation very menacing when he assumed the papacy. Italy was in a state of near ruin, the Lombards were constantly threatening the city of Rome, and the Eastern Roman emperor was unreliable in supplying military aid. In the face of governmental chaos, Gregory stepped forward and assumed many civil powers to provide some order and stability. He also

reorganized the extensive territorial holdings of the Holy See to serve better the needs of the hungry and suffering. He negotiated a peace agreement with the duke of Spoleto that saved Rome from Lombard attack in 592-93.

## **2.) Popes have strengthened the Church by leading the way in creating an environment that supports the spiritual life of the faithful.**

**St. Gregory VII** (1073-85) was dedicated to a thorough reform of the Church. In promoting a moral transformation of the Church, he opposed simony and clerical concubinage. His condemnation of lay investiture brought him into conflict with Henry IV of Germany. Driven into exile, Gregory was guided by an absolute and sincere commitment to the revitalization of the Church.

**St. Pius V** (1566-72) was wholeheartedly committed to implementing decrees of the Council of Trent. To this end, Pius published the *Roman Catechism* (1566), the revised *Roman breviary* (1568), and the *Roman Missal* (1570). Pius left the Church in a much stronger position than when he found it. The ramifications of his support of the Catholic Reformation were felt for centuries to come.

**Blessed Pius IX** (1846-78) issued the encyclical *Quanta cura* in 1864 in which he addressed contemporary errors concerning the relationship of Church and State, emphasizing once again the divine foundation of the Catholic Church and its complete independence from secular authority. He also convened the First Vatican Council (1869-70), which pronounced against atheism, materialism, liberalism, and pantheism, and declared the definition of papal infallibility.

## **3.) The modern world of work, commerce, politics, and bioethics challenges the faithful in how they live as witnesses to Christ in the modern world. The modern popes teach in all these areas.**

**Leo XIII** (1878-1903) issued the landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to remind us that the Church has a duty to instruct the social classes of their responsibilities to one another. Leo taught that workers should be able to form labor unions and receive decent wages, and he called upon heads of state to make sure their laws and institutions provide for public well being.

**Blessed John XXIII** (1958-63) issued two noteworthy encyclicals dealing with contemporary social issues. *In Mater et Magistra* (1961), he commented on important issues of social justice, human rights, political and economic inequalities, and the concerns of underdeveloped nations. Two years later, he issued *Pacem in Terris* where he set forth the necessary conditions for the establishment of peace on earth.

**John Paul II** (1978-2005) issued *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) to look at the moral obligations of nations to promote the complete development of each person in the world. He called upon wealthy nations to respect the rights of developing regions. John Paul also remarked that international development should foster freedom in solidarity with other peoples and nations and in a religious communion with God.

In *Centesimus Annus* (1991), John Paul examined current developments: the fall of oppressive regimes all over the world, the spiritual void that characterized contemporary atheism, materialism, free markets, profit, consumerism, ecology, abortion, capitalism, authentic democracy, and the welfare state. When his insights into work and labor, the effects of capitalism and socialism, and the long-term impact of Western consumerism upon the institutions of society — notably the family — have been taken to heart, they have provided a means of strengthening the people of God.

*(Father John Dillon, has a bachelor of sacred theology and a doctorate in philosophy (Greek and Latin) from the Catholic University of America. Father Dillon served as an editor for the “Ancient Christian Writers” series for Paulist Press and wrote articles for the Modern Catholic Encyclopedia.)*