Pope Gregory’s Letter-Bearers

Pope Gregory's Letter-Bearers: A Study of the Men and Women who carried letters for Pope Gregory the Great

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PREFACE

While he was serving and expanding the Catholic Church as its Pope, from September 3rd, 590, until his longed-for death on March 12th, 604, Gregory the Great had sent off over eight hundred and fifty letters to both clerical and secular contacts throughout the known world, letters that still survive, and on a hundred and fifty occasions he made use of a visitor to Rome to take his or her letter back to his or her home town.[1]

Of the letter-bearers named by the Pope, one hundred and twenty-five were male, and fifteen were female,[2] an apparently small but in fact a relatively large number, considering the dangers for any woman with or without a servant travelling to Rome, especially without a military escort, from a town overseas or from a distant town in Italy. It was also a time of warfare in Italy, with the invading Lombards, and the lucrative trade in slaves was very active, with its agents quick to capture and sell or enslave any defenceless travellers they came across, women especially. Many previously free citizens, young and elderly, would have ended up as slaves of wealthy residents in the large cities and towns and fields of the Mediterranean area, in kitchens or mines or agriculture, or on a bed. Travelling by sea was also hazardous, if a strong wind pushed the boat on to a non-Christian coast, or sank it. Almost all travellers avoided sailing across the Mediterranean during the storms of winter, partly for this reason.

The potential danger of travel can be seen in the Pope's letter 7.34, sent in July, 597, to Dominica, the wife of John, who was the prefect of Rome, a very important position. She was living in Ravenna, in northern Italy, and the Pope wanted her to join her husband in Rome, and although it was two years before she set out. He then did all he could to help her to avoid any trouble on the way. He first wrote to an important contact in Ravenna, Theodore, who had arranged peace terms on his behalf with the Lombards, asking him to provide an armed escort for Dominica as far as Perugia (letter 9.117), and then he wrote to the bishop of Ravenna, Marinianus (letter 9.118), requesting his support for the wife's return, to join the two again, for the sake of John's peace of mind. Why she had stayed so long in Ravenna remains unexplained. Her family may have lived near

Ravenna, and she was free to return once her mother, or her father, had died. Whatever the reason for her delay, the prefect's wife was certainly not travelling on her own, nor just relying on a servant.

On most occasions, especially for official communications, the Pope would have used the regular postal channels, employing horsemen and fast boats for the distribution of any imperial or papal orders, and for the transportation of money and presents and goods in general. In letter 2.20, sent to Jobinus, the praetorian prefect of Illyria, who was using troops to protect local towns and roads and bridges against the invading Slavs, the Pope told him: "The enemy's occupation of the road prevented me from delivering messages of paternal love; yet whenever the occasion arises, I don't hesitate to visit your Excellency with an exchange of letters." It seems that his letter did manage to reach the prefect. Other letter-bearers ran the risk of roads being blockaded by the Lombards' army, which was successfully invading Italy, although plenty of the papal agents managed to get through the enemy lines, as we shall see below.

As well as letter-bearers sent out by the Pope, many reports and petitions were brought before him in Rome, normally by men (twenty-one), although one was brought by a woman. There were also groups of letter-bearers, like the Sicilians in letter 12.16, the Istrians in letters 9.149, 151, 161 and 202, the inhabitants of Locri in letter 7.38, "letters brought by monks of the monastery of Castellium" in letter 8.30, and a "petition from your community" in letter 5.47. Several others were not named, like "the bearers of this letter" in letter 9.2, and "those bearing this letter" in letter 5.9. But in almost every case the Pope gave the name of the person or persons who had left or had arrived bearing a letter or letters to him or from him.

The Pope also very often invited these letter-bearers to stay with him, sometimes in his palace in Rome, while he considered their often complex cases, at times consulting other experts in Church or secular law or in history. These visits could be extended into several weeks, it seems, when tricky legal problems needed to be sorted out, and difficult letters needed to be written or dictated by him. The letter 11.11 below shows that Arethusa had stayed with the Pope "for a long time" while a legacy from a bishop was being sorted out, and he repeated "stayed in this city for a long time" soon afterwards. The Pope was also willing to discuss their problems, in some cases over several days, with most unlikely clients, as in letters 9.37, a farmer, claiming a three acres plot, 9.40, a Jewish

businessman, over a receipt and 9.43, a builder, over some unpaid work. Hardly of interest to modern popes!

It seems that the Pope wrote most of his informal letters, which were copied by his secretary, but he would have dictated the formal ones and the encyclicals, and when he was confined to bed with his gout and fever from September, 598, to May, 599, he dictated the 200 short letters that appear in book 9. But as his health improved, some longer ones appeared, probably written by him once more. Meanwhile he was busy writing, revising and rewriting his brilliant literary works, especially his *Moralia in Job* (3 vols), sent out to monasteries for the monks' comments,[3] his *Pastoral Care*, a best-seller in mediaeval England, the popular miracles in his *Dialogues*, containing his extremely popular life of Saint Benedict, and *Homilies* on the *Evangelists* and *Ezechiel*. He had started his *Moralia* while papal emissary in Constantinople, trying out interpretations with his dear friend, Leander, exiled from Seville, and with fellow monks who had crossed over with him. How he found time and energy for this biblical scholarship while he was governing his ever-growing Catholic domain, and while he was so ill with his very painful legs and stomach, is hard to explain.[4] But he still found time to produce many beautifully written letters. Cicero would have been proud of his artistry.

Notes

[1] For the first ever translation of all of the Pope's letters into English, see *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, with introduction and notes, by John R. C. Martyn, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 2004 (*The Letters of Gregory*); see also his two more recent works, *Pope Gregory and the Brides of Christ*, 2009 (*Brides of Christ*), and *From Queens to Slaves*: *Pope Gregory's Special Concern for Women* (*From Queens to Slaves*), 2011, both published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne.

[2] Excluding the three ladies from North Africa, in letter 12.2, who did not travel to Rome to inform the Pope about their good works, although a report on their activities did reach him.

[3] For the Pope's reliance on monks in various monasteries to provide him with feed-back on his most impressive work, his *Moralia in Job*, see letter 5.53, sent to his dear friend from Spain, Leander.

[4] For his most poignant *cri de coeur*, as he was confined to bed with most painful gout and gut-wrenching stomach pains, and was praying for death, see letter 11.20 below, sent in February, 601, to Marianus, bishop of Arabia. He must have wished he could be in that warm country, while very cold, wintry winds whipped through Rome. Almost all of the letters from book 9 are short, when he dictated them, too sick to write them himself, for his scribe to copy. This led to many more letters

being dictated from his bed, to fill in the painful hours, explaining the 243 letters in book nine, mostly very short. The only long ones come near the end, when he was feeling better. The most letters otherwise are the eighty-two letters in book one and sixty-five in books three and six. The average number of letters (excluding nine's) is forty-six.

CHAPTER ONE

FEMALE LETTER-BEARERS

For a smaller but in some ways more interesting group, the female letter-bearers will be considered first. They were mostly very determined women, is seems, and their determination paid off, with a normally very helpful reaction from the Pope, who seemed to be on their side in virtually every dispute. As a young politician, Gregory had served as a *praetor* in the Roman senate, in charge of all legal matters, and with a tutor he had studied the main works on law and rhetoric in Greek and Latin, and this training was of great help when he sorted out complex legal matters for his female, and male, visitors. Similarly, having served as a *quaestor* in the Senate, young Gregory would have acquired a sound grounding in financial matters, including accounting and complex wills and donations, very useful for similar financial problems facing him as Pope.

(a) Letter 1.63, dated July, 591:

The first letter was taken from the Pope's office in her baggage by Theodora,[1] the widow of Petronius, a man who had held an important position as a Church secretary. She was determined to regain their family home, which, she had claimed, had been wrongly occupied by another influential man, who was once a defender, Constantius.[2] The Pope's authority would have soon provided her with what she needed to remove the person who had stolen her house, albeit one of the retired defenders.

(b) Letter 1.69, dated August, 591:

Cyriacus and his wife, Joanna, who had recently converted from Judaism to Christianity, were bearing this letter from the Pope to be given to the Pope's agent in Sicily, sub-deacon Peter. The couple were not to be oppressed unjustly by anyone, the Pope stressed, especially Joanna, who was being slandered over her recent conversion. Peter was to look into their case and preserve their judgement, thereby ending the slander. This was one of many letters taken to the Pope's very close friend Peter, who

could be trusted to sort out such legal problems, normally using his papal authority.

(c) Letter 3.43, dated June, 593:

In this letter some property of a Stephania had been forcibly seized by the previous bishop of Reggio, Lucius, who had used his agents to do so, but the Pope ordered the new bishop, Boniface, to restore this property to Stephania without any loss or any delay. He would have to satisfy the woman's complaint beneficially, to avoid acting contrary to the Church's policy.

Stephania must have been quite delighted to leave Rome bearing a letter expressing the Pope's strong support. It seems that properties were very much at risk for women, especially widows, who lacked a protector.

(d) Letter 3.58, dated August, 593:

In this letter, taken to Fortunatus, the bishop of Naples, the Pope informed him that an abbess, Gratiosa, had presented him with a petition, backed by her nuns, that was contained in its appendix to his letter. She had told him that a rich patrician lady, Rustica, had built them a convent in Naples in her own home, adding an oratory, with the use of a third part of her will, enough to help in equipping the convent also. She wanted masses to be celebrated in the oratory by local priests. This request was fully supported by the Pope, provided no one sought his own advantage. Any benefit should be for the nuns. The Pope was on their side, protecting their interests against the local bishop's.

(e) Letter 7.1, dated October, 596:

This letter was also taken to Bishop Fortunatus. In it the Pope sorted out the problem of a woman's status, an unnamed woman who had come to Rome with her mother, seeking to be reunited with her husband as soon as possible. Gregory took the trouble to obtain legal proof of her free status, and he ordered the bishop not to allow her clerical husband to use a false charge of slavery against her, as an excuse for his rejection of her claim as his legal wife. This would have taken some time for his inquiry into her status, and for the composition of a carefully judged letter persuading her bishop to renew their marriage. The Pope was always determined to keep

a married couple together, even if one of them wanted to join a convent or a monastery.

(f) Letter 7.20, dated May, 597:

This letter was taken to Fortunatus, bishop of Campania, and to Anthelm, the defender of the papal patrimony, also of Campania. The letter-bearer was Catellus. He had told the Pope that his sister, who had been engaged to a man called Stephen, had become a nun in a convent in Naples, and Stephen had unjustly retained her house and some of her property. But legal decrees had ordained that any woman who was engaged should not be penalized through any loss, if she was determined to become a nun.[3]

The Pope ordered both Fortunatus and Anthelm to investigate the woman's case, and to establish the truth, and if Stephen was unjustly retaining her house and properties, they should warn him to restore them without delay. If he refused, they were to give the Pope a precise account of the truth, and he would find other means to make Stephen give them back, if necessary.

Besides his concern over the apparently unjust theft, the Pope would have ensured that the properties went to the convent in Naples, for as long as she continued to serve as one of its nuns.[4]

(g) Letter 7.41, dated August, 597:

In this letter, the Pope's deacon, Cyprian, acting on his behalf in Sicily, was told that Paula, bearer of the letter to him, was being treated in a very hostile manner by an ex-Jew, Theodore. He was harming her unfairly, the Pope told him, and yet the people of the church of Messina supported him against her charge. The Pope ordered Cyprian to investigate the case, and if Theodore was guilty of mistreating Paula, he must be punished with a strict penalty, to provide an example for those parishioners who were supporting him. Paula must have made a very strong impression on the Pope to find him so much on her side.

(h) Letter 9.36, dated October, 598:

This letter was to be carried to sub-deacon Anselm, by another Theodora, the widow of the one-time defender, Sabinus. She had sent her servant to the Pope, complaining that she had been deceived by her son and his wife's father, Aligernus, being forced to leave all of her goods to her son,

who now despised her and kept all of her property, leaving her with nothing on which she could live, and not even letting her own slave look after her. The Pope ordered Anselm to find out the truth, while giving her legal assistance and helping her with the Church's protection. He ended: "If you cannot arrange for peace and comfort for this woman, report it to us at once and I shall tell you what to do." The Pope was determined to help the impoverished widow, even if it involved him in further action.

(i) Letter 9.39, dated October, 598:

Another woman, Januaria, was suffering from the loss of her property in Palermo, and was bearing a letter from the Pope to the defender of Palermo, Fantinus. The Pope explained the lady's unjustifiable troubles at the hands of three men, Ingenuus, Anastasius and Boniface, who were trying to expel her from a property that she had held for many years, as she had told the Pope 'in person.' She had demanded Church protection, and the Pope told Fantinus to warn the three men not to do anything to her by force, but to take their case to court for trial, and if the men should refuse to do so, he must protect the woman against them. Again the Pope preferred a legal solution, but suggested to his defender that otherwise the woman would have to be protected and not be victimised.[5]

(j) Letter 9.48, dated October-November, 598:

In this letter a widow, also called Stephania, travelling with her young son, Callixenus, told the Pope that they were suffering from extreme poverty, following the death of her husband, Peter. She tearfully requested the return of their house in Catana that her mother-in-law, Mammonia, had donated to the Church, although Stephania claimed that it belonged to her son, Callixenus. Although the Pope's agent, the deacon Cyprian, had refused her request, and it would have been a loss to the Catholic Church, he ordered his representative, Romanus, to return the property to Stephania at once, extracting damages from Mammonia, thus providing merciful assistance for an impoverished orphan. As Stephania left to sail back to Sicily, she must have been delighted with the letter that she was carrying for Romanus to read.

(k) Letter 9.87, dated January, 599:

A nun, Adeodata, was bearing this letter, written on her behalf by the Pope. It requested the bishop of Luni, Venantius, to protect the newly converted nun against her mother, Fidentia, and it noted that the nun's petition was appended to the letter. Her mother might have taken her to court, to regain her daughter's assistance in looking after her, it seems, but the Pope told the bishop to let her continue to wear the habit, assisting her in a case before the judge, if necessary. Unfortunately the Pope only retained a few replies to his letters, and the result of this interesting letter is unknown.

(l) Letter 9.208, dated July, 599:

In another short letter to Fortunatus, bishop of Naples, the Pope told him that an abbess, Agnella, had mentioned to him that some soldiers were staying as guests and dining in her convent, and he was amazed at the bishop's lack of concern. They were to be removed from the convent most urgently, none of them receiving their daily allowance there any more, to protect the nuns from Satan. The Pope was always worried by threats to nuns, from monks or priests or even worse, from soldiers. In letter 14.10, a soldier had raped a nun several times in Naples, but had been let off, and the Pope ordered the Duke of Naples, as tactfully as he could, to punish him immediately, calling the Duke 'a lover of justice.' The Pope certainly flattered him, and the guilty soldier would almost certainly have been executed.[6]

(m) Letter 11.11, dated October 600:

The Pope wrote this letter to the clergy of Milan, about Arethusa, a lady who had stayed with him in Rome 'for a long time,' asking the clerics to sort out a legacy left to her, to her husband and to their children. He had sent a letter asking the local bishop, Constantius, to settle this affair, but he had died soon afterwards (letter 11.6). He now asked the clergy to help the family over their case, which had been put off for such a long time, while she was staying in Rome, once a new bishop had been appointed in Milan. Once he had taken over, Arethusa must not be worn out any longer. Her prolonged stay in the Pope's quarters is interesting. Such legal problems over wills were often sorted out by the Pope to help those who felt that they have been cheated.

(n) Letter 11.30, dated February, 601:

This letter was taken by Agathosa to Hadrian, a notary in charge of Palermo. She had complained to the no doubt embarrassed Pope that her husband had long since become a monk in the monastery of Urbicus, which was quite contrary to her wishes. As this would no doubt cause a guilty feeling and odium for the abbot, the Pope told Hadrian to sort it out, in case he had become a monk with her support, or she had promised to become a nun. If so, he should compel her to do so. Otherwise, unless she had been charged with adultery, then even if he had been tonsured, he should be made to be returned to her, without any excuse.

One wonders, however, what chance they would have had, once they were reunited, of staying together, and if they did so, of regaining the all or even some of their wealth that had been contributed to the monastery.

(o) Letter 13.4, dated September, 602:

An abbess, Desideria, was the bearer of this letter, probably dictated, asking Januarius, bishop of Cagliari, in Sardinia, to act on her behalf in a lawsuit. The abbot John was unjustly retaining the fortunes left to Desideria by her parents and to her brother, and a judgement was needed, once Januarius, assisted by two local bishops, Innocent and Libertinus, had carefully examined the evidence. If doubt should arise over a point of law, a wise man with the fear of God before his eyes should tell Januarius what was legitimate, so as to avoid any blame over his decision. Again, the final decision over Desideria's case is not known, but the need for three bishops, and a legal expert, is quite surprising.

(p) Letter 12.2, dated September, 601:

Some really good news had reached the Pope that had made him feel positively joyful, concerning the achievements of three aristocratic ladies in North Africa, Sabinella, Columba and Galla,[7] who had been helping those who were in need most compassionately, and who would receive Heavenly gifts in return for their goodness, the Pope assured them in his letter to them. There are as many as seven biblical quotations included in the Pope's one page letter, suggesting that all three of them were very pious ladies.

For most of the letter, the Pope reassured them with Holy Writ that on Judgement day they would repaid for what they had spent, and assured them that if they always remained generous, they would achieve what was written: "Hide alms-giving in the bosom of the poor, and they will pray for you", and "they that sow in tears shall reap in joy," for "he that sows to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption, but he that sows to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting."

The Pope then quoted from Matthew, with the words of the Lord: "For I was hungry, and you gave me meat, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, naked, and clothed me," and he concluded with "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it uno me." He ended his biblical reassurance of the three ladies with a final quotation: "While doing good, do not give up, so that you may lay up treasures for yourselves where neither rust nor moth destroys, and where thieves do not break through nor do they steal."[8] The treasures in Heaven were often used by the Pope to encourage greater generosity on Earth.

The Pope then told the ladies that his personal secretary, who was a very important representative in North Africa, Hilary, and had delivered the Pope's letter to the ladies, was also bearing keys for them from the body of Saint Peter, in each of which there was a relic from his chains, for each of the ladies to wear.

This was in fact a report taken to the Pope, and the three ladies did not visit him in Rome, but as it is the only report from a lady or ladies, it seemed best to include it with the letters brought over to Rome by the other ladies. The name of the person who took the report to Rome is not given by the Pope, but it could well have been one of staff of Dominic, the archbishop of Carthage or of Columbus, the bishop of Nicibivus, in Numidia, both of them regularly exchanging letters with Gregory, the first receiving nine, the second as many as thirteen.

The Pope ended this section by telling the ladies to hang this relic around their necks, as a means of absolution, and then he prayed God to protect them, inspiring their hearts to do good deeds, so that God might pour his grace on them and finally lead all three of them to eternal joys.[9]

These eighteen ladies bearing letters are an interesting group. Three of them were powerful abbesses (Gratiosa, Desideria, and Agnella), two of

them were nuns (Adeodata and the unnamed sister of Catellus), four were widows, also of special concern to the Pope (Theodora, Stephania, Arethusa and another Theodora, her letter taken by her servant), and three were the aristocratic ladies in Africa, with truly Christian consciences. Then there was an unnamed woman who was seeking to be reunited with her husband, accompanied by her mother, and another woman, Paula, who appeared to have (or to expect) some standing in her local church community, and Agathosa, who was determined to be united again with her husband, a monk.

Finally another woman, who was also called Stephania, was assisted by the Pope in regaining her property, as was Januaria, and Joanna also, a wife who had converted from Judaism. For an extremely busy administrator, who was often crippled by gout,[10] Pope Gregory spent a lot of his time and showed surprising concern for a wide range of women who needed his assistance, some staying with him in Rome, and he told some that he was always ready to follow up any of his orders that were not implemented.

The women must have been very relieved to have his letter in their baggage, or on their desk, in nearly every case designed to protect them, or their possessions, from verbal or physical abuse by men and even priests, the letter often demanding a legal resolution to their case. The legal complications were soon unravelled by the Pope, especially relating to wills, as were the financial complications that often arose. As mentioned above, the Pope showed that as the senate's *quaestor* while young, he had studied many financial affairs, with the expertise needed for judging interest rates and for large-scale book-keeping that was needed later on for the problems he had to solve as Pope.

This book is restricted to letter-bearers, but there were many other visitors to the Pope's quarters, who were at least given an audience, although they are not included here. For example, the Pope had to deal with some very strong-minded women, one of them a litigious and formidable lady in Sardinia, Pomponiana, whom he invited to have talks with him in Rome, accompanied by another powerful and aristocratic lady, Theodosia, who had become a nun, plus a brilliant scholar, Isidore, and the Pope had also summoned Bishop Januarius, and the defender of Sardinia, Sabinus, with the papal notary, John.

For how many days these six very interesting people, who had come down from Sardinia, would have stayed in the Pope's quarters, while discussing their problems with him, is uncertain, but it improved his relationship with the two ladies. The Pope makes no more reference to their discussions in later letters, unfortunately. One could wish that the Pope's scribe had made a recording of their no doubt very animated conversations![11]

The Pope was not the only man who did all that he could to help the women in trouble, as can be seen in the letters above. For example, a young brother, Catellus, clearly spent a lot of time and money to help his sister, possibly called Catella, in letter 7.20, first appealing to the august Pope in Rome, and then knocking on the doors of the mansions that were owned by the Bishop of Campania, Fortunatus, and by the powerful defender, Anthelm. Fortunately it appears that his determination turned out successfully.

In letter 1.69 above, Joanna was helped by her husband, firstly with her conversion from Judaism to Christianity, which would have demanded legal and financial expertise to avoid later arguments that often arose over status, and secondly with his determination to end the slander that had still been used against her, by getting the Pope's support. Once again it seemed likely to work out just as the couple would have wanted.

The papal notary, Hadrian, sorted out Agathosa's problems, and the clergy in Milan finally helped Arethusa over her long-delayed legacy. Finally, sub-deacon Peter seemed very ready to help any lady in trouble, even while he also was extremely busy representing the Pope in Sicily, to judge from their very long letters sent to each other.

Notes

[1] Some of these ladies have appeared in my work *From Queens to Slaves*, and the entries here have been kept short, but they deserve an appearance here because of their special rôles as letter-bearers, rather than as abbesses or founders of convents. Even so, half a dozen appear for the first time.

[2] For the importance of the 'defenders,' an organization set up by the Pope to provide him with representatives well trained in law and theology, throughout the Church's domains, especially when his ill-health prevented him from travelling far outside Rome, see *Brides of Christ*, pp xv-xvii. They were a very important factor in his extremely successful administration. See also my 'Six Notes on Gregory the Great' in *Medievalia et Humanistica*, ns 29, 2003, pp 1-7, explaing their selection and training in a School for Defenders.

[3] See *Codex Justinianus* 1.3.54 (56).
[4] Although the nun in this letter is without a name and her fate is unknown, yet perhaps she should have appeared in my *From Queens to Slaves*.
[5] See my *From Queens to Slaves*, pp 151-152.
[6] For the text, see my *From Queens to Slaves*, page 119. The Pope's letter was very carefully written to persuade the Duke to take immediate action.
[7] These three ladies, apparently very wealthy and mature, could have been included in my recent work on *From Queens to Slaves*. In this book, the letter mentions Hilary as the letter-bearer, but the ladies are better attached to the other women who had brought letters to the Pope or had taken them back with them on their journey home.
[8] The passages quoted came from 2 Timothy 1.12, Sirah 29.15, Psalm 126 (125).5, Galatians 6.8, Matthew 25.35-6 and 40, and Matthew 7.20, all quoted from the Pope's memory, with some small changes to suit the context.
[9] For Saint Peter's relics and chains, see the Introduction to my *Letters of Pope Gregory*, p.74. Elsewhere recipients of the keys were people of great influence and power, like the royalty, the patriarchs, the archbishops and a few special bishops, which again tells us something about these three very special ladies. The Pope's final suggestion that they should wear the relics around their necks is also of interest. Superstition was obviously widespread at that time, although the Pope did appear to be joking in letter 4.30, where he commented that "a priest stands by with a file, and for some, something is cut from the chains so quickly that there is no delay, but for others, the file is drawn over the chains [of Peter] for a long time, but with no result." The miracles in his *Dialogues* have worried some modern scholars, but Gregory only collected the Italian ones when he was under pressure from his fellow monks, and close friends, who wanted the extra status from the accounts of Italian miracles, and it gave him a good chance to include his life of Saint Benedict, with all of his miracles. He never meant to publish it, but it was soon being copied and in the late mediaeval times it was to become his most popular work.
[10] For the final attack by gout and fevers, see letter 11.30 below.
[11] See letters 3.36 and 11.13, and pages 44-49 in *Brides of Christ*. A secretary might well have recorded their discussions and arguments, although a modern tape-recorder would have made it much easier for the Pope to do so.

CHAPTER TWO

MALE LETTER-BEARERS IN BOOKS 1-2

(a) Letter 1.14, dated December, 590:

The first of the male letter-bearers was Stephen, who took this letter 1.14 to the bishop of Naples, Demetrius. Stephen had broken with the Catholic Church, due to doubts over some articles of faith, but once he had spent some time in Rome, with the Pope's help he had managed to regain his faith and had taken communion again, and the Pope was now sending him back to Naples. Others there whom he had said were backsliding like him should be helped by the bishop to return to the Catholic faith, at once, the Pope insisted, avoiding negligence.

(b) Letter 1.16, dated January, 591:

The letter-bearer for this letter was not named, but would have been one of the sub-deacons who helped the Pope in Rome, and he had been sent on a very important mission to Aquileia, in Northern Italy, where the archbishop, Severus, had broken from the official Church of Rome. He was to persuade the bishop, to whom the letter was sent, to come to the tomb of Saint Peter in Rome, bringing his followers, for a special synod, so as to remove their doubts. In fact the synod never took place in Rome, but the schismatics went to the Emperor, for him to decide their fates, but with the Lombard threat, he was reluctant to alienate the Christians in Northern Italy, leaving things as they were, which did not please the Pope.[1]

(c) Letter 1.34, dated March, 591:

A Jew, called Joseph, took this letter to Peter, the bishop of Terracina, and it also is a very significant one. The Pope had clearly had a long talk with him, finding out that the local bishop had expelled the Jews from the castle area in Terracina, allowing them to worship in another part of the town, but had now expelled them from that place also. He suggested clemency

and kindness, which might encourage some of the Jews to hear him preaching, rather than treating them with such immoderate harshness. The Pope continued this very sensible approach to the Jews in letter 1.45, many of them residing in Marseilles, and because some of them had been forced to be baptized, they were therefore very likely to return to their former 'superstition,' he warned the bishop.'[2]

(d) Letter 1.37, dated March, 591:

The Pope started this letter to his sub-deacon Anthelm, with: "As you were leaving [from Rome], I ordered you to take care of the poor, and to send me a letter in reply if any of them are in need." Anthelm was then asked to provide large amounts of gold and wheat for the Pope's female relatives, who were certainly not poor, suggesting that Anthelm, who controlled the nearby patrimony of Campania, had access to plenty of gold coins and plenty of wheat, no doubt collected from the wealthier churches on behalf of the Pope.

(e) Letter 1.53, dated July, 591:

In this letter the Pope reminded the same Anthelm that he had warned him, face to face, to protect Church interests and to look after the needs of the poor, in Campania. He now tells him that the bearer of this letter, Gaudiosus, had complained of violent attacks by agents of the local Church, and according to his documents, his wife, Sirica, had been left by a now dead but once wealthy Aetia, to a woman called Morena, as a gift, but she had manumitted Sirica in a letter. The Pope thought it improper for their sons to be reduced to slavery, and suggested that Anthelm should read the documents also, and stop the Church from causing Gaudiosus and his family any more trouble.

(f) Letter 1.38a, dated March 16th, 591:

This letter is also a very significant one, which went with the Pope's most trustworthy friend, the sub-deacon Peter, as he set out on March 16th, 591, to sort out the corrupt Church of Sicily and the parlous state of its once very fruitful domains. No doubt the letter was consulted and quoted regularly by Peter as he successfully tackled a wide range of problems as requested by the Pope. The two of them were very close, and in his very popular work on Italian miracles, his *Dialogues*, Pope Gregory used sub-deacon Peter as his interlocutor. For Peter's authority, see letter 1.1 below.

(g) Letter 1.1, dated September, 590:

In this encyclical to all the bishops in Sicily, the Pope had told them that he considered it very necessary that he should entrust their affairs to just one person, as his authority would be represented through the man entrusted with it, since he could not be there in person. He had committed his duties in the province of Sicily to Peter, a sub-deacon of Rome. He told them that they ought to work with Peter to settle all that concerned the province's interests and its churches, whether to lighten the burden of the poor and oppressed, or to admonish those whose faults had been proved. He ended with a demand for an annual Episcopal synod, in either Syracuse or Catana.

(h) Letter 1.67, dated August, 591:

This is one of many letters sent to the Pope's very close friend, who was sorting out all those problems in Sicily, the extremely capable sub-deacon Peter. It was carried by an abbot, John. The abbot was an expert in Law, and the letter requested Peter to have a talk with Faustus, the legal secretary to the ex-praetor Romanus, to commend the business of a monastery to him, while providing a salary for the abbot, so that he could live in peace, and so that the monks could have more freedom to work for the Lord. John appears again in letters 3.3 and 7.36; his abbey was in Syracuse.

(i) Letter 1.75, dated August, 591:

This encyclical was taken to all of the bishops of Numidia, in North Africa, by the Pope's personal secretary, Hilary. In it the Pope allowed earlier customs to remain unchanged, like using its bishops to elect its primate, unless they were contrary to the Catholic faith. He ended his encyclical letter by advising them to resist heretics and enemies of the Catholic Church, with united hearts, helping their neighbours and persuading all they could persuade to accept the true faith with the message of God's love.

(j) Letter 2.21, dated March, 592:

This letter was sent by the Pope to another extremely close friend, Maximian, whom he had just appointed as the powerful bishop of Syracuse, in charge of all the bishops in Sicily. Gregory used his

secretary, Felix, as his letter-bearer, who had told him about a priest in Sicily who should be consecrated as a bishop. If Maximian agreed with Felix that the priest was worthy of that rank, the priest must be sent to Rome for the Pope to consecrate him and to provide him with a vacant see.

(k) Letter 2.34, dated July, 592:

This letter was taken to John, bishop of Ravenna, by a Gothic letter-bearer, Wiland, who begged the bishop for recognition in a law suit. The Pope had asked John to ensure that the Deacon Gavinian, against whom Wiland had said he had a case, was summoned to his court. He asked John to examine the case with great care to establish the truth, forcing both parties to observe and carry out whatever justice might recommend, defining the result with the sentence he decided to impose. The Pope did not plead Wiland's case, as he often did, no doubt discussed in Rome, but he relied on John's interpretation of justice to decide between him and the deacon; the bishop's decision is not known, and we know nothing about Wiland or the deacon.

(l) Letter 2.39, dated July 23rd, 592:

This letter was again taken to his friend Bishop Columbus in Africa, by two Church officials, Constantius and Mustelus, who had presented a petition to the Pope, suggesting, as the deacons of the church of Pudentia, in Numidia, had asserted, that Maximian, bishop of that church, had been corrupted by a bribe from the Donatists, allowing a bishop to be elected with a new license, and the Catholic faith had prohibited this licence from continuing, even if it was allowed in earlier times.

The Pope then told Columbus that his private secretary, Hilary, would reach him soon, to represent him at a universal Council of all the African bishops, being arranged, when this issue should be examined with a very careful inquiry. For the African domain, see letters 1.73 and 74 sent to Gennadius, a general, and 1.75 to all the bishops in the province, and 1.82 to Hilary, who was the papal notary of Africa.

Notes

[1] Severus was the archbishop of the metropolitan see of Venice and Istria, which moved to Grado when the Lombards had moved south. The schism over the Three Chapters dispute continued there, despite the Pope's attempt to win them over, until the time of Pope Sergius I, 687-701. Severus was active from 587 until his death in 607. See my *The Letters of Gregory the Great* vol1, pp 86-87, for an account of the all too persistent 'Three Chapters' heresy.

[2] The Roman historian, Tacitus used the same loaded word (*superstitio*) to describe the Jewish faith in his historical work *Historiae* 14.44.

CHAPTER THREE

MALE LETTER-BEARERS IN BOOKS 3-4

(a) Letter 3.5, dated October, 592:

This letter was again sent to sub-deacon Peter, now in charge of the papal domains in Campania, and in it the Pope claimed that a violent Deusdedit, the son-in-law of Felix of Orticello, had threatened the bearer of the letter, a widow, it appears, although he was retaining her property illegally, and was showing no pity for her, but strengthening his spitefulness. She was suffering under prejudgement, and Peter was told to console the widow and to protect her.

The Pope ended his letter: "Otherwise you may either be found to neglect in some way those things entrusted to you, but not through any injustice, or else the payments for widows and other poor people may be interrupted, because of the long distance of this journey, while they find no help there." It seems that the Pope might be compelled to provide payments for widows and the poor in Rome, if they were forced out of Campania by unjust men like Deusdedit. He avoided suggesting that Peter was unjust.

(b) Letter 3.16, dated December, 592:

This letter was for the bishop of Barcae, Peter, and was carried by the priest Valerian, who had been sent with the letter (and some gold) to Barcae by the Pope, so as to ransom prisoners-of-war facing slavery there. Barcae was in Mauretania, one of the major centres for the slave-trade. The Pope stressed the priest's long overseas journey there, hoping for a deal to be made. If the bishop helped him, he would then be greatly rewarded before God, in return for his cooperation. The success of Valerian is not known, but plenty of prisoners-of-war were exchanged for the gold provided by the Pope, thanks to some very generous donations made by the royal family in Constantinople.

(c) Letter 3.27, dated April, 593:

This letter was taken by a distinguished gentleman, Boniface, to the abbot of Palermo, Martinianus, and to Benenatus, a notary and administrator of the district of Palermo, accusing certain citizens of Palermo of offending God, and deserving punishment, in particular for their mistreatment of the Pope's letter-bearer, Boniface. He had complained to Pope Gregory that he had been deprived of the sacred Mass for no reason, and had suffered other injustices, all due to the local bishop, Victor. The Pope argued in his letter that nobody should be condemned without a trial, and told the two of them to carry out a very careful investigation into what was said, and if Boniface needed to be charged for some criminal act, he would have to purge his sins back in his monastery, to prepare for the eternal Judge. But if their inquiry produced what were only falsehoods, they should notify him at once in Rome.

The Pope ended with an effective antithesis: "If blameless, we want Boniface to sustain no more trouble from anyone, since, while it is just that a worthy punishment should proceed against those who sin, even so it is unjust that someone should be subjected to certain afflictions unreasonably." Presumably the monk Boniface was happy with the letter he took to show his two judges, certain of his innocence, as suggested by the Pope.

(d) Letter 3.29, dated April, 593:

This letter to the priests, deacons and clergy of the church of Milan, was taken to them by the sub-deacon John, who was in charge of the administration of the papal patrimony in Liguria. He had the authority to represent the Pope at the consecration of a new bishop for Milan, a man whom the Pope had long known and had been a popular deacon in the church of Milan, and who had the support of all the local clergy, called Constantius. He was one of the clerics who had crossed over with Gregory to Constantinople, when he was just a deacon, serving as an emissary for Pope Tiberius II back in Rome, and he would have joined fellow monks for their worship, and for sessions on Gregory's suggestions for his original *Moralia in Job*.

Most of this letter covers two very important issues for the Pope, firstly the requirements for a successful bishop, based on his very positive opinion of the character of Constantius, and this interest produced a best-

seller, his book on *Pastoral Care*, vital reading for any would-be bishop. The final paragraph depicts the sinfulness of Man and the total destruction of the World, linked with the Lombards' violent swords, and ending with the final judgement of God. But he then again concludes his letter, as in letter 3.27 above, with a succinct rhetorical antithesis: "For just as we exact our own rights from others, even so we preserve their rights for individuals." The finale suggests that Gregory's eschatology may have been a rhetorical trope.[1]

(e) Letter 3.41, dated June, 593:

This letter was taken to Felix, the bishop of Siponto, by a notary of Rome, Pantaleo, requesting the bishop to describe in detail all of the Church properties known to exist, each one individually. Working with Pantaleo and with Boniface, also a notary of the Church of Rome, the three men should compile an inventory containing all the vessels of the churches, as well as their silver 'usuals',[2] and whatever else there may be.

He then asked the bishop not to find any excuse to delay this inquiry, but to be quick in implementing his commands. Then he should sign the inventory himself and send it over to the Pope through the notary, Pantaleo.

In the next letter, also sent to Bishop Felix at the same time, the Pope attacked him for bringing up a depraved grandson, who had seduced the daughter of Bishop Felix's deacon.[3]

(f) Letter 3.47, dated July, 593:

This letter ends with the Pope sending back a deacon to Columbus, the bishop of Numidia in North Africa, who had sent him to Rome: "I have received with love Victorinus, deacon of your Fraternity, and bearer of this letter, whom I am sure imitates you, and I have released him to return to you all the more quickly. I have also sent over through him, for your blessing, the keys of Saint Peter, containing a fragment of his chains."[4]

He then added: "Concerning the unity and peacefulness of the Council that you are arranging to bring together, with God's authority, let your love bring joy to our mind by telling us all about it in great detail."

The Pope was very keen to have a Council or Synod arranged in Gaul, which badly needed one, and he repeatedly asked for one in almost all of his letters to contacts in Gaul, but he was unable to influence the local Gallic bishops or the powerful queen Brunhilde to hold one, despite many attempts, although a Synod was held not long after his death, which included some of the topics that the Pope wanted to be discussed, but not the all too common sin of simony.

(g) Letter 4.13, dated October, 593:

This letter was carried by a bishop, Adeodatus, for the attention of Crementius, the primate of Byzacena, an imperial province in Africa. The bishop had told the Pope that he had been expelled from his See improperly, although the text of a petition to the primate might explain it. Because of an illness, he had been absent from his church for about two months, leaving bishop Quintianus to look after his interests, but he had consecrated another priest in place of Adeodatus. The Pope told Crementius to inquire into the case, and if illness had kept him away, he should be restored to the See without hesitation. He was to show concern about the priest consecrated in his place. Provided he was free of simony, he should be consecrated for some other church that was vacant. The Pope was strongly opposed to the use of money for high office, for a bishop or an abbess.

(h) Letter 4.14, dated October, 593:

Another Felix appears as a letter-bearer. He was a deacon who had broken with the Istrian Church, but had not been a heretic. In Rome he had received the Lord's body in communion, correcting his sinfulness, but he still strayed from the holy mysteries of the Church, as the Pope explained to Maximian. He then asks him to appoint Felix as a deacon in his church in Syracuse, supported by a pension to be paid from papal funds. So that there would be no excuse for him to neglect the poor, the Pope added, jokingly.

(i) Letter 4.36, dated July, 594:

This letter was taken to the same Maximian, The letter-bearer, Euplus, had informed the Pope that the last bishop of Agrigento, Eusanius, was in fact his father, and a great deal of his mother's property had remained at his last resting place. The bishop had left no will, and his son wanted to obtain his