

Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome. By George E. Demacopoulos. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. 2015. viii + 236 pp. \$28. ISBN 978 0 268 02621 9.

The study of Gregory the Great, historically driven by French and German scholarship, is currently thriving in publications in English. Boosted by Carole Straw's penetrating 1988 book *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, Gregory has since featured as a key subject of several monographs (those by Robert Markus and Conrad Leyser leading the way), a companion in Brill's ever-expanding Companions to the Christian Traditions series (published in 2013), and fine new English translations of his letters and exegetical writings. Demacopoulos' book, a slim study of about 150 pages, wades into this vibrant stream with a single purpose in mind: to show how Gregory's ascetical theology coloured just about every aspect of his thought, writings and career, giving distinctive shape to his legacy as an ascetic as well as a pastor and pope.

Those three roles of ascetic, pastor and pope flagged in the book's subtitle indeed form the backbone of Demacopoulos' study. In the introduction, Demacopoulos contends that this tripartite approach will amount to 'a more integrated assessment of Gregory's thought and life than currently exists' (p. 11), by showing how Gregory's ascetic commitments orient both his pastoral activities as well as his administrative and diplomatic achievements. Part One of the book, 'Gregory as Ascetic Theologian', comprises four chapters that lay out Demacopoulos' understanding of Gregory's ascetical theology and its impact on certain aspects of his thought.

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as doi: [10.1111/emed.12254](https://doi.org/10.1111/emed.12254)

Demacopoulos concedes that the purpose of these chapters isn't really to demonstrate that Gregory's outlook is ascetic – this point being somewhat obvious and already too well established – but rather 'to show the important implications that individual subthemes within his particular vision of ascetic behavior have for other aspects of this theological thought and instruction' (p. 14). Thus Demacopoulos sets out to show that, for Gregory, while commitment to an ascetic life was expected at some level from everyone who believed in God, the true ascetic was 'the one who cared so little about himself that he would willingly suspend his own enjoyment of the contemplative life to be of service to others' (p. 19). This idea of an asceticism directed toward the service to others is the essential point established in Part One. Demacopoulos shows in turn how it colours Gregory's hermeneutics, his treatment of virtue and vice, and his understanding of humility (Chapter 1), before moving on to characterize its contributions to his soteriology (Chapter 2), his ecclesiology (Chapter 3) and finally the mystical aspects of his thought (Chapter 4).

Part Two, 'Gregory as Pastoral Theologian' seeks to extend this thesis, like Part One also through four chapters, but now with an eye toward demonstrating how various aspects of Gregory's role as pastoral theologian and spiritual director can be understood as by-products of his particular ascetic vision, with its heavy sense of an obligation to serve others. Demacopoulos argues here that pastoral care and spiritual direction would not have been separate categories in Gregory's mind since 'he understood the spiritual director to be the person most prepared to offer pastoral care to those in need, and he understood that task to exist within the framework of

spiritual direction' (pp. 53–43). Those who reach the summit of contemplative perfection by embracing a life of renunciation, achieving moral reform through ascetic means, are, paradoxically, the very ones most fit to return to worldly life to embrace positions of spiritual leadership and authority. To illustrate this point, the chapters of this section discuss Gregory's deep commitment to the master–disciple paradigm (Chapter 5), his ideas on the selection and recruitment of leaders (Chapter 6), the many tasks such leaders were to perform (Chapter 7), as well as the multitudinous impediments they may face (Chapter 8).

Part Three then shifts to the practical and diplomatic aspects of Gregory's own career as a spiritual leader. This section, 'Gregory as "First Man" of Rome', has six chapters and is the longest section of the book. The segue is natural as these chapters aim to show how Gregory's own administrative and diplomatic policies as papal *nuncio* to the imperial court in Constantinople and then as bishop of the see of Rome were nothing other than the direct result of his theological and pastoral commitments. Demacopoulos here considers a range of topics, such as Gregory's view of Rome and his strategy for dealing with the Lombard threat (Chapter 10), how his theological programme was implemented and but also the source of factionalism (Chapter 11), the spread of the Roman church's influence in regions such as northern Italy, Sicily, and the Balkans (Chapter 12), further beyond into the Roman world in Gaul and Kent (Chapter 13), and finally the various ways the figure of St Peter shaped Gregory's understanding of papal authority and was deployed and appropriated by him in his administration as well as in his writings.

Demacopoulos does a fine job analysing and incorporating the full range of Gregory's writings into his book, which sets passages from the *Dialogues* alongside excerpts from the *Moralia*, or invites us to read parts of the *Pastoral Care* in view of sentiments found in Gregory's letters. Some of this primary material and commentary on it, and indeed other remarks that strike me as integral to the discussion throughout the book's chapters, must be sought however in endnotes at the back of the book, which this reader felt to be somewhat taxing. Given that some of these chapters are quite short – Chapter 8 is barely two pages long – some of this material would have been better dealt with in expanded form in the chapters themselves. Readers may also wonder whether Demacopoulos' claim to have produced a more 'holistic view' (p. 10) of links between Gregory's asceticism and his pragmatism is really that successful (I find Markus and Leyser as good if not better on this theme), and whether his critique of other scholars (I do not find Straw's portrait of Gregory to be reductively Augustinian) rings true or not. The book nevertheless adds to a growing body of solid scholarship in English on Gregory, a trend that one hopes will only continue in years to come.

University of Michigan – Dearborn

SCOTT DEGREGORIO