Pope Leo the Great’s Sermons on the Passion of the Lord

1. The Sermons’ nature

Pope Leo I, during two very intense and creative decades (440-461) of his life and particularly while he was responsible for the pastoral care of the church of Rome, left us as a legacy among his other writings and Homilies, a collection of nineteen wonderful Sermons. The specific group of Sermons appears in the manuscript tradition with the title "De Passione Domini".

His sermons are part of the Easter cycle which includes two more homilies about Resurrection and another two concerning the Ascension of the Lord. The examination of the events of the Passion and the characters who are involved can be perceived in the light of His Resurrection and His Ascension. In his sermons, Leo concentrates on different gospel narratives of the Passion and on the persons whom Jesus contacted during these crucial times. Furthermore, he focuses on the personalities of these people, going from the Jews to their officials, from Judas to Peter, from Simon of Cyrene to women, and from the rest of Apostles to the Virgin Mary. The basic characteristic of these particular Sermons is that

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2 The homiletic work of Pope Leo I the Great was ranked by copyists of manuscripts based on the celebratory rounds of the year. For the homiletic work of Pope Leo I, see: J. M. ARMITAGE, *The Economy of Mercy. The Liturgical Preaching of Saint Leo the Great*, Durham University, 1997.
almost in all of them there is a profound polemical rhetoric against Jews, which includes heavy characterizations toward Jewish people and their leaders, such as “sacrilegious”, “traitors” and “murderers of Christ”.

"Sermones de Passione Domini" is a collection of homilies of great importance among the other Leo’s Sermons. In particular, it is not only a separate group of sermons with an unbroken unity, but also they are totally different from the rest of his writings. The difference between the particular group of sermons and the rest of them is not their content, but the fact that the latter are more peaceful and catechetical. “Sermones de Passione Domini” do not refer to something usual and meaningless. On the contrary, there are several meanings in these Sermons, which make us doubt their unity and their spontaneity. To be more specific, in many cases these Sermons are characterized by exaggeration and contradictions. Therefore, they present both sophistication and disunity.

Leo succeeds in animating the characters of the drama and he presents them to his audience with realism, maintaining at the same time a personal and direct relationship with them. In addition, Leo speaks with the characters, he vituperates them, he defends them, he condemns them and he forgives them. Thus, the report of the Passion, the dialogue with the faithful people, and the characters of the drama are presented in a way that causes the believers to feel that everything is happening in front their eyes.

For the bishop, the preaching of the gospel is a necessity and a duty as well. He believes that there is no reason to deprive people of the manifestation of such a large mystery concerning the divine mercy. According to him, all the difficulties must be overcome for the glory of God and for the good of the believers.

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4 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LXII, 1, SC 74, 73: “Non est liberum sacerdoti, in tanto divinae misericordiae sacramento, fidelis populi auribus subtrahere sermonis officium”.
While Leo was writing his Sermons, he had no intention to present an elegant literary text, but to produce a pastoral, theological and didactic piece of work. His main goals were to educate the believers, to promote the truth of the faith and to encourage the audience to imitate the lifestyle he proposed. The Pope understands the story of the Passion of the Lord, not as something harmless and colorless, but as something dramatic and vivid. He believes that what had happened in the past can be enlivened by the story of the Passion in the present.

There is a fragmentary report of the gospel in the Sermons, which also includes explanations and clarifications. Furthermore, there is a primarily theological and dogmatic approach in the Sermons because, according to Leo, the believers have to learn details about the person who suffers as well as the reason itself. The Holy Father gives great importance both to the prophetic word of the Old Testament which propounds the Christology, and to the connection between the two Testaments.

Therefore, the aim of the particular Sermons is not the narration and the description of the Passion, but the revival through the participation of the believers in order to realize the mystery of Easter. His main aim is for all the human hearts to be penetrated by the story of the Passion of the Lord and for the audience to experience the Divine drama. In this way, the Passion of the Lord would be presented to the people in all senses as well as

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5 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LXIII, 6, SC 74, 82: “Omnia igitur quae Dei Filius ad conciliationem mundi et fecit, et docuit, non in historiam tantum praeteritam novimus, sed etiam in praesentium operum virtute sentimus”. See the work of S. TORI, Il mistero Pasquale nei Sermoni di Leone Magno. Passione, morte e risurrezione di Cristo. La dimensione soteriologica tra passibilità e impassibilità divina, Dehoniana Libri, Bologna 2012 (Diss).

6 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LXXI, 1, SC 74, 123: “Sermone proximo, dilectissimi, non incongrue vobis, quantum arbitror, participationem crucis Christi insinuavimus, ut paschale sacramentum ipsa in se habeat vita credentium, et quod festo honoratur moribus celebretur”.

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all the events which occurred in order to achieve the salvation of the world.\(^7\)

There were several times during the service in which one Sermon was not enough to cover the topic of the preaching because of the extent of the evangelical reading. Thus, the preaching was repeated at the following service every Wednesday and it was linked to the previous one or to the next one with a particular and regular type of transition. We also know that the readings of the Passion were read on every Palm Sunday and on every Great Wednesday.

The Sermons were written in the Latin language of the late imperial times within the solemnity of the imperial court, which also influenced and to a certain extent shaped the festive language of Christian worship and ritual.\(^8\) There is clarity in the Sermons and Biblical influences and dogmatic wordings as well, which had occurred at the Council of Chalcedon (451) and also exists in his 28th letter of the so-called Tome.

The writing style of Pope Leo I has many similarities to that of Tertullian, especially in terms of the lively and punchy speech. Furthermore, the eurhythmy and rhetorical figures directly refer to the rhetoric of Cicero and Quintilian.\(^9\)

There is no influence by the classical non-Christian literature on the Sermons of the Passion. On the other hand, it is obvious that the particular group of Sermons have been affected by the

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\(^7\) LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LXXI, 1, SC 74, 123: “Sermone proximo, dilectissimi, non incongrue vobis, quantum arbitror, participationem crucis Christi insinuavimus, ut paschale sacramentum ipsa in se habeat vita credentium, et quod festo honoratur moribus celebretur”.


Bible and the Latin Christian literature and particularly by the work of St. Augustine.

2. The theology of the Sermons

Jesus has a special and certainly a main role within the economy of the Passion drama. Although He seems to be the victim and the one who has been defeated, at the same time He is the one who triumphs. Moreover, He appears to suffer from peoples’ acts, but he also seems to determine the achievement of his goals. These apparent contradictions can be interpreted in the light of His divine and human nature.

Leo highlights that true Divinity and true humanity inhere within the Lord. He shared with the Father the divine nature and the human nature with his mother. As a God, he is not subjected to pain, but as a man, he suffers and he dies. Therefore, Christ’s Passion and death can redeem men because the human nature is unified with the person of the Word.

The Holy Father firmly insists that the Passion of Christ is real and true. It is Jesus who really suffers and dies and not a ghost in His place. The Divinity—the person of the Word—does not suffer and die, but it is Christ in His human nature who suffers and dies. The divine and the human nature are perfectly united in

10 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LXIX, 3, SC 74, 112: “Vera in Christo deitas et vera credatur humanitas. ipse est caro qui Verbum, et sicut unius cum Patre substantiae, ita unius cum matre naturae. Non geminatus persona, non confusus essentia; potestate impassibilis, humilitate mortalis; sed utraque sic utens, ut et virtus glorificare e posset infirmitatem, et infirmitas non valeret obscurare virtutem”; IDEM, Sermo LXII, 2, SC 74, 75; Sermo LXX, 3, SC 74, 118; Sermo LXV, 4, SC 74, 88.

11 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LLXV, 1, SC 74, 90: “Qui enim Dei Filium veram nostrae carnis negant suscepisse naturam, inimici sunt fidei christianae, et evangelicam praedicationem nimis imprudenter impugnant: ut secundum ipsos crux Christi aut simulatio fuerit phantasmatis, aut supplicium Deitatis”.
one person\textsuperscript{12}. This amalgamation is constant. Although God does not abandon his human nature during the Divine drama, He also does not obey his human passions. The God is present while humanity suffers, but He Himself does not suffer at all\textsuperscript{13}.

What is the result of Incarnation for the human nature? It is the elevation of human nature to divine levels, without becoming a God. As far as the Divinity is concerned, it is a lowering of the Deity to human nature, without causing any deterioration to its divine nature\textsuperscript{14}. Hence, we must confess that Jesus is both a real God and a real human at the same time. He is both the Son of God and the Son of Virgin Mary, He is temporal and the creator of time who is sinless and does not suffer from the consequences\textsuperscript{15}.

The salvation of man is performed through the Passion. The Incarnation can be justified by the aforementioned because the Incarnation of Christ led to the redemption of man and also to his liberation from the domination of sin\textsuperscript{16}.

The Passion was necessary, because He who was supposed to unchain the people from the power of sin and from the power of devil should be sinless, in order to freely accept the consequences of sin.

\textsuperscript{12} LEO THE GREAT, Sermon LXIX, 3, SC 74, 112; Sermon LXII, 2, SC 74, 75; Sermon LXX, 3, SC 74, 118; Sermon LXV, 4, SC 74, 88.

\textsuperscript{13} LEO THE GREAT, Sermon LXVIII, 1, SC 74, 116: “Manente enim in sua proprietate utraque substantia, nec Deus dereliquit sui corporis passionem, nec Deum fecit caro passibilem; quia Divinitas quae erat in dolente non erat in dolore. Unde secundum Verbi hominis que personam, idem est qui factus est inter omnia, et per quem facta sunt omnia. Idem est qui impiorum minibus comprehenditur, et qui nullo fine concluditur. Idem est qui clavis transfigitur et qui nullo vulnere sauciatur. Idem postremo est qui mortem subiit, et sempiternus esse non desiit, ut utrumque signis non dubiiis manifestetur quod vera sit in Christo humilitas, et vera maestas...” See also the study of B. GREEN, The soteriology of Leo the Great, Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford University Press 2008.

\textsuperscript{14} LEO THE GREAT, Sermon LXIV, 4, SC 74, 88.

\textsuperscript{15} LEO THE GREAT, Sermon LXII, 2, SC 74, 74.

\textsuperscript{16} LEO THE GREAT, Sermon LVI, 3, SC 74, 44: “...quia natura, quae in nobis rea semper fuerat atque captiva, in ilio innocens patiebatur et libera...”; IDEM, Sermon LIXIII, 4, SC 74, 80.
The restoration of the primitive justice could happen only through the redemptive death of Jesus. The single way to ensure the victory over death and sin, it would be only through Him. His unique death would give to all the people the strength to release themselves from the necessity of death.\(^{17}\)

Therefore, death changes to life. The death of the Fair, who was killed by the hands of the unrighteous people, is the honor, the ransom for the redemption of the human race, because they had to reconcile with Justice.\(^{18}\) Thus, the death of Christ changed to triumph.

In Leo’s Sermons, there is the theory of the devil’s power over human beings, which also exists in the preaching of St. Augustine and in the previous patristic tradition as well. The particular theory concerning the relationship between the devil and man, and consequently the relationship between the devil and Jesus Christ, is very old and famous within the history of theology. According to this theory, Satan has the right of capturing the man. St. Leo refers to this theory in many of his Sermons. It is supposed that the particular right of the devil on humans comes either from a pact of slavery between them or from the man’s sale to the devil, which was willingly made by man himself and in which he was committed to obey.

The victory of Christ over the devil was necessary in order to repeal this law and to break the chains of slavery. In this perspective, Leo includes the virgin birth and the redemptive mission of Christ, without referencing the story of the original sin. Human nature wins, and both the sin and the devil release man. Until the advent of Christ, man was subject to Satan, suffering the consequences of his credulity and enduring his domination. It must be pointed out that there were always people who were faithful to God and who, despite the venom with which the devil

\(^{17}\) LEO THE GREAT, *Sermo LXIII*, 4, SC 74, 80: “.. nemo posset laqueis mortalitatis absolvì, nisi ille, in quo solo innocens erat natura omnium, sineret se interfici manibus impiorum”.

\(^{18}\) LEO THE GREAT, *Sermo LXII*, 3, SC 74, 75: “Fudit sanguinem iustum, qui reconciliando mundo et pretium esset et poculum”.

had infected humanity, resisted his persecution. Even this is due to the redemption of Jesus Christ\textsuperscript{19}.

In the Eastern theological tradition, two new trends emerged concerning the ransom and its recipient\textsuperscript{20}. According to the first trend\textsuperscript{21}, the ransom is considered to be a sacrifice. Furthermore, the recipient is either God the Father or no one is mentioned at all because the redemption is perceived as the man’s release from the sin and his reconnection with God. As far as the other trend\textsuperscript{22} is concerned, the recipient of the ransom is considered to be the devil, because there is a personification of the Evil within its existence. The Eastern fathers perceived the offered ransom as the love of the God towards men. They also considered the Passion of Christ to be the emergence of resurrection and the deification of the human being\textsuperscript{23}.

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\textsuperscript{19} LEO THE GREAT, \textit{Sermo LII}, 1, SC 74, 23: “Omnis prorsus antiquitas colementium Deum verum, omnis numerus apud saecula priora sanctorum, in hac fide vixit et placuit; et neque patriarchis, neque prophetis, neque cu quam omnino sanctorum, nisi in redemptione Domini nostri Jesu Christi salus et justificatio fuit: quae sicut expectabatur multis prophetarum oracoli signisque promissa, ita est etiam ipso munere atque oper e praesentata”.
\textsuperscript{20} Mt 20:28; cf Mk 10:45; 1Cor 6:20; Heb 2:14-15; Ti 2:14; 1Pt 1:18.
While Saint Leo is narrating the story of the Passion and the death of Jesus, he constantly emphasizes the freedom of Jesus. He also stresses the fact that Jesus was voluntarily submitted to the hardness of his persecutors in order to let them complete their crime. Jesus also willingly accepted the will of the Father, to an extent that His Father’s will fully coincided with His own will. Through His Passion, Christ has achieved both the exemption from sins and the administration of justice.

The Passion of Christ actually includes the whole mystery of the peoples’ salvation due to the fact that Jesus, while he was on the cross, begged for his Father’s mercy for His own murderers. He even excused them, because according to Him they did not know what they were doing. The mystery of the Passion cannot be conceived by the human mind and, in particular, what really surpasses the human intellect is the fact that God and human flesh, the creator and the creature, the weakness and the strength, the humiliation and the glory, refer to the same person.

The Cross gives strength instead of weakness, glory instead of shame, life instead of death. Through his cry while He was on the cross, Jesus aimed to give a great lesson to the humanity. To be more specific, he tried to show us how deficient the human nature is without the divine. The crucified Christ cried out with a loud voice to his Father, not because he was abandoned and not saved by him, but because He wanted to declare that in order to become the savior of the World, He must die. Therefore, Christ willingly offered his life in order to achieve our salvation. After all, how would have he achieved our salvation if He had resisted His

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24 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LXVIII, 2, SC 74, 107: “Unde tradi Dominum passioni, tam fuit paternae quam ipsius voluntatis: ut eum non solum Pater relinqueret, sed etiam ipse quadam ratione desereret, non trepieda discensione, sed voluntaria cessione. Continuit enim se ab impiis Crucifixi potestas, et ut dispositione uteretur occulta, uti noluit virtute manifesta”.
25 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LV, 1, SC 74, 35.
26 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LXII, 1, SC 74, 73.
27 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LIX, 7, SC 74, 60-61.
28 LEO THE GREAT, Sermo LXVII, 7, SC 74, 105.
persecutors\textsuperscript{29}? Therefore, a unique victim, a lamb was offered to God in order to achieve the world’s salvation, just as it was predicted throughout the centuries. This sacrifice implemented the very old promise of freedom. The New Testament was confirmed and handed down through the blood of Christ to the heirs of the eternal kingdom. Obviously, there was a transition from the Law to the Gospel, from the Synagogue to the Church and from the many sacrifices to the one victim\textsuperscript{30}.

\textsuperscript{29} LEO THE GREAT, \textit{Sermo LXVII}, 7, SC 74, 105.