

After the Fall: Leo's *Sermo* 84

Michele Renee Salzman
University of California, Riverside

One of the most intriguing instances of the Christian appropriation of pagan rituals is attested by *Sermo* 84 of the fifth-century Pope Leo. In this undated sermon, Leo is concerned that so few attended the “religious devotion in commemoration of the day of our chastisement and release” (*Sermo* 84.1). The occasion for the commemoration is described as the “rescue of the city from captivity,” which, Leo states, is owed more to the “veneration of the saints” (*cura sanctorum*) than the “circus games” (*ludus Circensium*) (*Sermo* 84.1). The historical circumstances that occasioned this commemoration and the date of Leo's *Sermo*, as well as Leo's interpretation of the meaning of the fall of Rome, are still disputed.

In this paper I will argue that Leo's *Sermo* 84 should be associated with the thanksgiving services offered in Rome after the defeat of the Goths in 410 CE. It is possible that these were first held immediately after Alaric's departure from Rome, as P. Courcelle has suggested [*Histoire littéraire des grands invasions germaniques* (Paris, 1964 3rd ed.) 184 n. 2]. But it is likely that the thanksgiving services were joined to the last recorded triumphal procession of an emperor in Rome; in 416 CE, Honorius celebrated an imperial triumph over the former usurper and tool of the Visigoths, Priscus Attalus. Christian thanksgiving services had been first added to imperial victory celebrations in the west some twenty years earlier; in 394 CE Theodosius ordered special thanksgiving masses in conjunction with his victories over Eugenius [Ambrose, *Ep.*, 61 (*PL* 16.1237-8)]. As M. McCormick observed, the addition of such services is one public sign of the Christianization of imperial victory and imperial cult in the late fourth century [*Eternal Victory. Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge, 1986) 45]. If Honorius' victory is the origin of the thanksgiving services described by Leo's *Sermo*, it would also explain their annual nature and why the services continued into Leo's papacy in the mid-fifth century.

The concern expressed by Leo for the annual celebration of these thanksgiving services suggests not only that the Church was supporting the Christianization of imperial victory celebrations, but that the bishop of Rome was aggressively asserting his role in lieu of the emperor in the fifth-century city. Leo's political intent and his justification for the survival of Rome in this *Sermo* should, however, be understood within the context of fifth-century Christian discourse about the fall of Rome; after 410 CE, as Augustine's *City of God* underscores, Christians had to justify the city's fate in the face of critics who preferred, still, circuses to saints as the best means to offset public concerns about Rome's security.