

St. Pope John I



St. John I, Pope and Martyr (Feast day - May 18) A native of Tuscany in Italy, John was elected Pope while he was still an archdeacon upon the death of Pope Hormisdas in 523. At that time, the ruler of Italy was Theodoric the Goth who subscribed to the Arian brand of Christianity, but had tolerated and even favored his Catholic subjects during the early part of his reign. However, about the time of St. John's accession to the Papacy, Theodoric's policy underwent a drastic change as a result of two events: the treasonable (in the sovereign's view) correspondence between ranking members of the Roman Senate and Constantinople and the severe edict against heretics enacted by the emperor Justin I, who was the first Catholic on the Byzantine throne in fifty years. Spurred on by the appeals of Eastern Arians, Theodoric threatened to wage war against Justin but ultimately decided to negotiate with him through a delegation of five Bishops and four senators. At its head he named Pope John - much against the latter's wishes. Little is known for certain about the nature of the message which the Pope bore and the manner in which he carried out his mission. What is known is that he succeeded in persuading the Emperor to mitigate his treatment of the Arians and thus avoid reprisals against the Catholics in Italy. The Pope's visit also brought about the reconciliation of the Western and Eastern Churches which had been plagued by a schism since 482 when Zeno's Henoticon had been published. However, Theodoric had been becoming more suspicious with each passing day. While waiting for the delegation to return, he ordered the execution of the philosopher Boethius and his father-in-law Symmachus on a charge of treason; and as he got word of the friendly relations between the Pope and the emperor, he concluded that they were plotting against him. Hence, on the delegation's return to the capitol city of Ravenna, Pope John was imprisoned by order of Theodoric and died a short time later as a result of the treatment he experienced there.