

Learning from the Church Fathers (15)
Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329-390 A.D.) "The Theologian"
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In magazines, journals, and newspapers, and via TV, radio and internet, we are constantly reading articles and hearing reports that religion is a relic of the past. Dogma is outdated. And if Jesus existed He was no more than a great man. Furthermore, they argue that science shows we can explain the origin of the world without God. And what is the world to think of the amazing array of denominations, the vast differences within Christianity, which are confusing even for many Christians?

How can the Church approach a person who has never darkened the door of a church, the type who does not even understand its language? Due to the secularization of public education, the de-christianization of western society, the average person can no longer understand the "language of Canaan" (the language of the Bible and the church), nor grasp the language of classic western literature.

In the light of the confusing images and messages twenty-first century Christianity offers to the world, the benefits to become acquainted with the church fathers should be clear enough. Their works greatly aid our understanding of the Gospel as well as give insight into how to resist the latest fads, heresy, and theological anarchism.

The Background of Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329-390 A.D.)

With the fourth century, great changes took place in the church. After the toleration of "Edict of Milan" (313A.D), enemies from outside were overcome, but now enemies from inside the church caused tension and unrest. Most of the disputes were concentrated on the person and work of Christ. Thankfully, Christian scholars of great intellectual prowess provided extraordinary leadership for the Church. And the number of great Christian thinkers, preachers, and writers increased enormously. Gregory of Nazianzus was one of the leading theologians and writers of his time. He was born into an aristocratic Christian family near Nazianzus, where his father was bishop. His family had been Christian for three generations on his mother's side. His mother, Nonna, formed the centre of faith in his family and encouraged him toward the ascetic life. He enjoyed an outstanding education equal to that of Basil the Great, first in Cappadocian Caesarea, then in Caesarea in Palestine, and later on in Alexandria. He studied Greek philosophy and Christian writings, especially Origen. From Alexandria he journeyed to Athens. This voyage led to a decisive spiritual event in his life. When he was involved in a shipwreck, the immediate presence of death had a profound effect on his already devout nature, and he vowed to dedicate his life to God. When he studied at the academy in Athens, he became acquainted with Julian, the later apostate and emperor, and again saw Basil, with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship from then on.

Gregory mastered the best education his civilization could offer, and believed it to be his duty to use this knowledge in the service of the Church. In one of his letters, he writes: "Perfect yourself in studies, in the works of the historians, in the books of the poets, in the smooth-flowing eloquence of orators. Be versed too in the subtle disquisitions of philosophers. Have a prudent familiarity with all these, wisely culling from that all that is useful, carefully avoiding what is injurious in each, imitating the practice of the wise bee which alights on every flower, but with infinite wisdom sucks only what is useful from each....pluck the rose but shun the thorns, the same tree bears both. These are the best principles with

regard to profane learning."

After the completion of his studies, Gregory returned to Nazianzus in Cappadocia (ca 358 A.D.), where he was ordained as a priest against his will. He assisted his father until the latter's death in 374 A.D. His friend Basil, in a jurisdictional dispute, prevailed upon Gregory to accept the bishopric at Sasima, an insignificant village in Cappadocia. Gregory called it "a frightful and detestable little village." But he never assumed his duties there.

The Monastic Life

Given Gregory's sensitive character, he was not able to cope with the difficulties of ecclesiastical politics as effectively as Basil. He longed to devote himself to an ascetic life of solitariness in the radical following of Christ. With Basil, Gregory set up a pastoral retreat at a place called Pontus, a beautiful spot by a river, surrounded on all sides by thickly forested mountains. He was called to the episcopal office because of his background and education. Since he had trouble choosing between ascetic and public life, he fled more than once into monastic retreat when community demands plagued him. He attracted no monastic following around his own person. Yet he was influential in fostering the monastic life in the Orthodox Church.

Gregory's writings became the most widely read texts after the Bible. In several of Gregory's poems, orations and letters, we first meet with elements typical of later Byzantine monasticism; the notion of the monastery as a secluded retreat for men of intellect and character to advance the higher affairs of the mind and spirit, and the idea that the seclusion proper to monasticism was an affair of the mind not of geography, so that a true monk could practice his vocation in a city as well as in a desert. He encouraged his fellow Christians to "ascend into the Mount". With this he meant to withdraw within themselves and contemplate the invisible essence of God. All that the examination of the created order allows us, he reasoned, is a demonstration of the existence of God (from motion and design). It does not tell us anything about his nature.

Gregory's Writings

Gregory was a poet, a superb writer, concise, and brilliant. He was skilled in presenting solutions to the complex theological issues of his time, clearly and persuasively. Thanks to his literary skill he had an effect on the educated society of his period which technical works could never have done. He is remembered for his collection of dogmatic extracts from the works of Origen, which he entitled the *Philokalia*. But his *Oration*s constitute the most significant of his writings. Of these, the five *Theological Oration*s preached at Constantinople in 380, are the best known. In them, Gregory defended the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. *Oration 2* is a treatise on the priesthood which influenced John Chrysostom's *On the Priesthood* and Gregory I's *Pastoral Rule*. Of his many letters, two are important treatises against Apollinaris of Laodicea.

The Theologian

Gregory never wrote a work of controversial theology; yet he is considered to be the theologian of the Trinity *par excellence*. In 380, he observed that concerning the rank of the Spirit and His relation to God, there was a great diversity of opinion among theologians, some professing not to know what to think of the matter. He was instrumental in developing satisfactory theological solutions to the Arian

disputes, which the Council of Constantinople accepted together with the Nicene Creed. His eloquent sermons in the Church of the Resurrection, Constantinople, and his defence of the Nicene Creed gave him the title "The Theologian." While maintaining against the Arians the essential unity of the three divine persons, and therefore their equality, Gregory provided the terminology to express the real distinctions between Father, Son, and Spirit. He stated, "This, then, is my position...to worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, three persons, one godhead, undivided in honour and glory and substance and kingdom." And he noted that as long as the unity and distinctness of the three were kept in balance, the proclamation and worship of the Church would be in agreement with the teaching of Scripture.

Bishop Apollinaris of Laodicea (ca.30-390 A.D.) denied that Christ had a human soul. He argued that the Word did not assume a "changeable" human mind in the incarnation, which would have led to the Word being trapped in human sin. Rather, it assumed "an immutable and heavenly divine mind." As a result, Christ cannot be said to be totally human. Apollinaris seceded from the church after he was rightly condemned at a succession of Synods held in Rome in 374-80 A.D. The council of Constantinople in 381 A.D., which Gregory even chaired for a while, confirmed his condemnation. In his reply to Apollinaris, Gregory stressed that Jesus Christ is both perfect God and a perfect human person. Even though human nature had fallen, through the impact of sin, it remains capable of being redeemed; it follows, therefore, that the whole of that human nature must be assumed. Gregory argued that if Christ did not possess a human mind, humanity is not redeemed.

For Gregory, the doctrine of the virgin birth is essential for our salvation. He said, "If anyone does not believe that holy Mary is Theotokos, [often translated as "Mother of God"] they will be cut off from the deity." For Gregory, the use of this title is a necessary consequence of the Incarnation. To deny this title is to deny the reality of the Incarnation. For Gregory, salvation is essential deification ["God became human that we might become divine"]. Consequently, in Christ there must be two complete natures inseparably united in one person. Gregory also taught that Satan is not entitled to a ransom. It is given to God, not because He demanded or needed a price, but because through the Incarnation, man could be purified and made holy.

Gregory's Legacy

From 379-381 A.D., he served the Nicene minority as bishop in Constantinople. During the Council of Constantinople, Gregory was elected bishop of Constantinople, but he resigned the See when his election was disputed. Church politics began to plague the church then already. His opponents pointed out that it was contrary to church law for a bishop to move from one diocese to another. Gregory, of course, was still supposedly the bishop of Sasima. So he was deposed, and he retreated to Nazianzus. Gregory's most prolific literary activity was during the last years of his life. He wrote half of the forty-four still surviving sermons, most of the 249 letters, and the bulk of his poetry. Gregory's theological works are found in Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Slavonic, and Arabic versions. His remains were in St. Peter's in Rome from June 11, 1580, until Pope John Paul II returned them, along with the remains of John Chrysostom, to Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople on November 27, 2004.

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