

GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN - A SPIRITUAL PORTRAIT

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Abstract: St Gregory the Theologian, one of the finest exponents of the Church in the fourth century, played a decisive role in upholding the faith of the Church and preserving it from all error. Of the three Cappadocian fathers, it is St Gregory whom we know most about from his writings, especially his poem entitled *On His Own Life*. It is this work which details not only certain highlights in his life but also, and most interestingly, his difficulties and all too human grievances of which he had to face. This article seeks to present some aspects of his life in order to show that despite his reluctance to take on administrative responsibilities in the Church which he openly attests to – wanting instead to lead a more contemplative life – his astute theological insight went a long way in bringing about unity to a Church deeply divided by the crises of its time.

Distinguished among the Fathers of the early Church, as known, are the three Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa, the brother of Basil according to the flesh). It could be said that, while each of them emerged in a completely personal way as a separate luminary of the Ecumenical Church, they nonetheless created a unified and stable spiritual fundament for the Christian thought of East and West by mutually complementing each other.

Basil – to whom we had dedicated the previous Symposium of the College – had been associated with Gregory of Nazianzus through a lifelong friendship. The distinctiveness, however, of this friendship, which in terms of faithfulness even exceeded the legendary friendship in antiquity of Damon and Phintias, should not be judged on the basis

of its duration in time. The main reason for the superior quality of this friendship was of course not only the sincerity of the subjective feelings between these two people but, first and foremost, the mystery of the human person, as revealed in history through the unrepeatable event of the divine Incarnation. Therefore, the deepest and most unshakeable foundation for the friendship of both men, was the incarnate Son and Word of God Himself.

It was precisely this transcendent factor that Gregory expressed concerning all he felt – and described in a multitude of pages – regarding the friendship he enjoyed with Basil. The following two verses are very characteristic in this context:

All things were held in common and one soul united our two separate bodies.¹

The late Patristics scholar of Thessaloniki, P.K. Christou, especially underlined an even stronger image when he wrote that Gregory,

emphasised that he breathed Basil more than the air, because he lived among him, whether present or absent.²

The fact that we are dealing here not with human ‘idolisation’ on the part of Gregory, but rather with purely ‘Christocentric’ sensitivity of mutually sanctified human beings (approximately as occurred in the well-known case of Symeon the New Theologian *vis-à-vis* his spiritual father in the 11th century), is in fact substantiated by a host of ‘disagreements’, or at least moments of ‘friction’, between the two friends, the cause of which was always the non-negotiable sanctity and the inviolate freedom of the icon of God in each human being, and especially within the sphere of the Church militant.

At any rate, the noble background of Gregory’s family in Arianzos, together with his restless poetic spirit, comprised the two inherent aspects of his character which led him to become the theologian *par excellence* of Ecumenical Orthodoxy. Both mentioned aspects were manifested in practice as flight from the commotion of the world and

hesychastic introversion, through which the value of the proper *kairos* for engaging in theology was made apparent.

Corresponding to this, we must always keep in mind that Gregory and Basil (who shared the same age) had the possibility to study – as they did – in all major cosmopolitan centres of the 4th century (Athens, Alexandria, Caesaria of Cappadocia, Caesaria of Palestine etc) and to acquire the broadest possible education, not only in the teachings of Scripture and Christian Tradition, but also in so-called secular learning, especially in the areas of rhetoric, philology and philosophy, which we roughly describe today as ‘studies in humanities’.

Highly characteristic is the fact that one of the first common tasks of the friends was to produce a selection of works by Origen, under the title *Philokalia*, for which they were also able to provide a commentary by combining the method of the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools, thereby giving rise to a kind of ‘Christian humanism’. Moreover, the experiential theology of St Gregory the Wonderworker – himself an enthusiastic and grateful disciple of Origen – was still very much alive in the broader region, and it was from him that the very meaningful name of Gregory was received. The readiness to be ‘vigilant’ (as the name *Gregorios* literally conveys in the Greek) was a family trait of both friends who tended towards monastic *ascesis*. For we see that Basil’s brother (Gregory of Nyssa) also carried this name, as did Gregory’s own father, following the catechism he received from his most pious wife, Nonna.

Now in order to follow more closely the factors which contributed from the outset to the final shape of Gregory’s ‘spiritual physiognomy’, we must commence from his immediate family environment. As his parents had not acquired children, even in their advanced years, the son Gregory likened them to Abraham and Sarah, which in turn signified his view of them as destined to serve the broader course of divine Providence concerning salvation. The fervent prayers and tears of his highly devout mother Nonna had the blessed result of, on the one hand, turning his father away from

the heresy of the Hypsistarians and adopting the Orthodox faith – indeed becoming a bishop – while, on the other hand, giving birth to three children: Gregory, Gorgonia and Kaisarios (sometimes written as Caesarius).

A significant role in Gregory’s upbringing and education was played by his faithful mother Nonna, who could see very early her son’s innate inclination towards learning, as well as his quiet, and almost timid, character. Together with his brother Kaisarios, who studied medicine and rose to distinguished government positions, Gregory studied under his cousin Karterios the Presbyter and his uncle on his mother’s side, Amphilochios. Following this, he met in Alexandria two outstanding Orthodox personalities, the very dynamic Archbishop Athanasius and the great ascetic Anthony. It is said that he may also have heard lectures from Didymus the Blind.

Leaving his brother Kaisarios behind in Alexandria, he left for Athens, when a terrible storm at sea reminded him of the promise of his mother for him to be ordained, which he repeated with fear, offering himself “as a gift of earth and sea”! He arrived in Athens as a 20 year-old in approximately the year 350, and it appears that he experienced the not-too-pleasant afflictions of young students, which is why Basil tried to avoid these upon his arrival two years later. It was to be the beginning of some 10 years of co-habitation and conduct which were rich in spiritual experiences. Even though neither had yet been baptised, they knew only two roads: one to their classes and the other to Church.

The life of Gregory was thoroughly presented in the 7th century work of Gregory the Elder titled *The Life of St Gregory the Theologian*, based principally on the texts of the holy father, and it was on this life that the *Engomion* of John Geometres was based (10th century). Gregory does not name his teachers in the 1949 verses of his extensive poem *Concerning His Own Life*, yet we know from other sources that they were the most famous of his time. This is not denied by Gregory but he restricts his comments to saying that the teachers were men as renowned as the city of Athens.

We should not, however, underestimate the great life-long influence that Gregory's father, bishop Gregory of Nazianzus, had on his personality. Having died approximately at 100 years of age, he shepherded his flock – which was constantly tested by heresies and factionalism – for an entire 45 years, without always being theologically equipped to do so in each situation. Yet, on account of his strong personality and widely recognised authority, he would often make interventions with sound advice, whenever his son, a calm character and lover of solitude, preferred to escape and find peace.

Following his return from Athens, Gregory's parents beseeched him to accept ordination to the priesthood, in order to assist his now elderly father and, possibly, to succeed him. The affectionate son indeed accepted ordination, but it was not long before he regretted it and fled to Pontus where he relaxed for three months together with his friend Basil, who in turn urged him to return to his pastoral work as an imperative duty. Gregory of course understood the correctness of the advice, for which reason he not only obeyed, but also hastened to write one of his most beautiful works, in defence of his escape to Pontus. In this text, beyond describing his personal pain caused by the unpleasant aspect of pastoral responsibility, he underlines the awe and wonder he feels for the height of priestly service. It would appear that the same text intensely influenced the great Orator of the Church, John Chrysostom, in the writing of his famous orations *On the Priesthood*.

In spite of this, it should be mentioned that, while Basil maintained a stable balance between theory and practice, on account of which he exercised enormous influence on all people through his philanthropic work, Gregory always remained enchanted by the highly ascetic ideal, which he admired mainly in the life of the Prophet Elijah and John the Forerunner, with the addition perhaps of the life of Anthony the Great. During a moment of utter enthusiasm, the great mystic of theology reached the point of exaggeration when stating “for myself the greatest action is inaction”³ yet it was still impossible for him to remain unmoved by the flock of Nazianzus that was being ravaged by Arianism and other

related heresies. As a result, he gave of himself for nearly 10 years in service towards all pastoral needs of the people of God – not only in teaching.

With the repose of his father in 374, and realising that the episcopal see of Nazianzus remained vacant, it appears that he feared a possible repeat of what had occurred to him two years earlier, namely his ordination by compulsion as Bishop of Sasima, after which he left for Seleucia and remained for some years in the Monastery of St Thekla. While looking after his fragile health there and resting, he wrote his Orations, Poems and Letters. It is primarily from these Letters that we learn first hand about the degree to which ecclesiastical matters of the day had taken a toll on him. A case in point was the rivalry between Anthimos of Tyana and Basil of Caesaria, in which his friend Basil had unintentionally entangled him - even if for reasons that were in the best interests of the Church – through his forced ordination as Bishop of Sasima.

Highly indicative are Gregory's lamenting sentiments expressed to one of his faithful students, Eudoxios:

You ask how things are going with us. Very badly! I no longer have Basil, I no longer have Kaisarios – neither my spiritual brother, nor my bodily one. My mother and my father have abandoned me. My bodily state is wretched, old age shows on my head, cares weave together, practical concerns press on me, my friends are faithless, the Church is without a shepherd. Goodness has vanished, evil is out in the open; we are sailing in the dark, and there is no light anywhere. Christ is asleep! Why must we suffer? There is one end to my miseries: death! But even what lies beyond it is terrifying to me, if present circumstances are an indication!⁴

One would have the impression, based on the enormous pessimism and pervasive lyricism of the above excerpt, that Gregory was providing his own 'swan song'. Yet, all that was to follow in Constantinople (where he was called to put an end to the 40-year reign of Arianism), proved the indefatigable dynamism of his faith, as the centre of his theological struggles was ultimately transferred there, but also his great triumphs.

Basil of Caesaria (as the leading figure among all Orthodox of the East) had placed much hope that Demophilos, the bishop of the capital, would deal moderately with the Orthodox. In the end, however, he sided with the heresy of Arianism. The Palace and the army had already tended towards heresy. For this reason, many bishops of Asia Minor, led by Basil and Meletios of Antioch, could look to none other than Gregory. This is why he showed no strong opposition, in contrast to other occasions, but followed instead with inner conviction. The fact that he subsequently claimed, “And so I arrived, not of my own will but summoned, by forceful men, to defend the Word”⁵ should not surprise us, since those who were frightened of his reputation slanderously spread the rumour that Gregory was chasing the throne of Constantinople out of raw ambition.

The fact that Theodosius, a friend of the Orthodox, became Emperor in 379 could only have alarmed the heretics in Constantinople, whereupon they prepared the worst possible reception for Gregory – even to the point of stoning him! He however, in spite of his external appearance and exhausted expression giving the impression of an untidy villager, did not lose spirit. At any rate, he took courage from the fact that the most vital and fundamental dogma of Christianity, that of the Holy Trinity, was finally going to be given its proper priority. Without it, there would be no meaning, neither for the present life, nor for the next. Panagiotis Christou therefore commented justly on this topic when stating epigrammatically: “He often felt the need to leave the city, but was afraid that the Trinity would also leave with him.”⁶

Despite the barbarity of his ‘welcome’, Gregory wasted no time in enthusiastically assuming the task of preaching, initially in the small Church of Anastasia (named thus because, within it, the divine Word was once again resurrected). He also stated concerning the Arians, who were in charge of the largest and greatest number of churches, these stunning words:

They have the houses [of prayer], we have the resident; they have audacity, we have faith; they have gold and silver, we have the word purified.⁷

Not much time had passed before Theodosius, having arrived from Thessaloniki where he proclaimed the Orthodox faith, granted to Gregory, among others, the cathedral of Constantinople, from where the heretical Demophilos simultaneously departed. While, in accordance with the wish of the Emperor, Gregory could have been immediately declared Archbishop of Constantinople, he did not accept this, mainly because he awaited the decision of a local council on the matter, which occurred in 381. He in fact accepted the position, even with grave reservations, by the synod that was later recognised as being ecumenical. Moreover, he succeeded the late Patriarch Meletios of Antioch in the presidency of that synod. However, the many intrigues and open enmity shown towards him, soon obliged Gregory to deliver from the pulpit his famous Farewell Oration, addressed to all in a most moving way, and recalling how he found a small flock which he was now handing over in a flourishing state. The only reward that he requested of everyone was to be allowed to return to his beloved life of silence, which he in fact did acquire once again on the very property where he was born. There he died in 390, aged 62.

As mentioned, Gregory's body of work consists of Orations, Poems and Letters. All of these were written not as products of academic study, that is to say, as systematic texts deriving from an ascetic's exhaustive thoughts on matters of common benefit. Rather, they were a personally evaluated response to the adventures of a continually unsatisfied life. Very characteristic in this regard are the following verses of his autobiographical poem, in which he describes tears as the highest 'offering' for the Church in general:

But what shall I give the churches? My tears. For God has led me to this point, after letting my life roll through many vicissitudes.⁸

Of all his works, Gregory himself attributed greater significance to the Dogmatic Orations, which are six in number. Of these, the first appears in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* as Oration 20, and was delivered in 379, as a preparation for the audience to appreciate the subsequent five Theological Orations which, comprising a unified whole, are presented in Migne as Orations 27-31, and were delivered in the year 380.

It is clear that it was predominantly the five Theological Orations which earned Gregory the characteristic title of Theologian, given that they develop both the presuppositions of true theology, as well as the content of engaging in theology under those presuppositions. Just as St John the Evangelist stated categorically that “no one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (Jn 1:18), Gregory similarly hastens to point out from the outset that God is completely incomprehensible in terms of His essence, while being guided by the Scriptures concerning the three Persons or *Hypostases* of the one divinity.

The necessary prerequisite to approach God is humility and moral purification. Hence the axiom put forward in his Oration 27: “It is not for everybody to philosophise about God, not for everybody.”⁹ He then puts forward the viewpoint that the visible world furnishes us with the notion of God’s existence, while at the same time admitting that his essence cannot be determined or defined, as neither the prophets nor the apostles were able to know this fully. Firstly, the ambivalent passages of the Old and New Testament ‘concerning the Son’ are analysed, followed by a commentary ‘on the Holy Spirit’ whereby Gregory acknowledges as correct the observation of the heretics that the Spirit is not expressly called ‘God’ in any portion of Scripture. However this, he adds, is due to the progressive character of revelation.

Yet, despite Gregory’s efforts to adopt a philosophical vocabulary, even in his theological orations, in order to use logical arguments to convince the followers of intellectualism among the heretics (Eunomians, Sabellians and Apollinarians), it must be confessed in the final analysis that the major feature of his writings is that they are doxological, and this is manifest not only in his poems and letters, but throughout his orations, including the Funeral Oration - a genre which he appears to be the first to have introduced. It is at any rate not by chance that his Sepulchral Epigrams constitute the 8th book of the Palatine Anthology. Even more indicative is the fact that, on major feast days of the Lord, Orthodox hymnography utilises verses from Gregory’s writings word for word, as

for example in the Canon of Christmas (PG 38), compiled by Kosmas the Melodist: “Christ is Born – glorify Him! Christ from the heavens – meet Him! Christ on earth – exalt Him!”

Following all the above, it could be said that the deeply poetic nature of Gregory, in conjunction with his broad education both in sacred texts as well as in ‘secular’ literature, have justly earned him the designation of ‘Theologian’. If we take into account furthermore the tragic manner in which he departed the Church’s primary See within the Empire, then the unrivalled holiness of the wise man is also triumphantly recognised, no less than his theology.



NOTES:

- ¹ *Concerning His Own Life*, PG 37:1045.
- ² Panagiotis K. Christou, *Greek Patrology* [in Greek], vol. 4 (Thessalonika: Kyromanos, 1989), 109.
- ³ *Epistle* 49.
- ⁴ *Letter* 80. Translation taken from Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London: Routledge: 2006), 181.
- ⁵ *Concerning His Own Life*, 607.
- ⁶ P. Christou, *Patrology*, 114.
- ⁷ Cited in P. Christou, *Patrology*, 114.
- ⁸ *Concerning His Own Life*, 143-145.
- ⁹ *Oration* 27.3.

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