

**“WHAT THEN? IS THE SPIRIT GOD?
CERTAINLY!”
ST GREGORY’S TEACHING ON
THE HOLY SPIRIT AS THE BASIS OF
THE WORLD’S SALVATION**

Philip Kariatlis

Abstract: The writings of St Gregory the Theologian on the Holy Spirit stand out among early Christian Patristic literature for their cogency and spiritual depth. Whilst the Holy Spirit figures centrally in numerous works, this paper focuses on his famous *Fifth Theological Oration*, arguably the crowning work in the area of Pneumatology, where St Gregory put before his audience the full flowering and richness of the orthodox vision of the Holy Spirit. By ushering in a new way of critical reflection on the Spirit’s deity, St Gregory not only paved the way for a definitive settlement of the Trinitarian crisis which plagued fourth-century Christianity but more importantly ingeniously demonstrated how God continued to dwell in the Church making salvation (deification) in actual human lives a genuine reality.

St Gregory the Theologian has long been recognised in the Christian tradition for his consistent, erudite and focused teaching on the deity of the Holy Spirit. Far from containing speculative abstractions, his writings reveal a person profoundly steeped in the Christian mysteries. His primary concern was to engage concretely in, and respond effectively to, the controversies of his day employing the best of Greek culture and learning in order to give an eloquent witness to the truths of the Christian Gospel. More specifically, in light of the vast number of divergent views on the Holy Spirit, especially those put forward by the so-called Pneumatomachians,¹ St Gregory declared his position boldly and unequivocally that the Spirit is both ‘God’, and ‘consubstantial with the Father’,² something which, up to that point, had

PHRONEMA, VOL. 26(2), 2011, 81-102

not been explicitly stated by any other father of the Church.³ Indeed, his theology of the Holy Spirit, especially at a time when denial of its divinity was rife, initiated a new epoch – indeed of ‘seismic’ proportions – in the history of Nicene theology making him a most formative and elaborate writer of Pneumatology in the early Church. For this reason, his teaching on the Holy Spirit has had perennial significance throughout the history of the Church and, even though often eclipsed by modern scholarship, remains to this day a decisive witness to the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, by championing the divinity of the Holy Spirit in a most penetrating and comprehensive way, he was arguably also one of the first in his time to place in full view the doctrine of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit,⁴ in this way paving the way for a definitive settlement of the Trinitarian crisis which plagued fourth-century Christianity. For this reason, he was acclaimed with the title ‘the theologian’ at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD, an epithet shared only by two other saints in the Church.⁵

The key to understanding his insistence on calling the Holy Spirit ‘God’ is soteriological. Precisely because the Spirit of God, as witnessed in the Scriptures, is indispensably involved in the salvation of the world, it could not be a mere creature since only God can ‘save’. Or put another way, any subordinationist understanding of the Spirit – depriving it of its proper and equal dignity and honour with the Father and the Son – would end up truly compromising, if not totally jeopardising, the salvation of the world which, for St Gregory, was understood in terms of *theosis*.⁶ Accordingly, this paper will endeavour to examine, clarify and – to the extent that this is possible – synthesize St Gregory’s vision of the Holy Spirit, from within the parameters of what he wrote – indeed often difficult to decipher – in order to ascertain the extent to which his teaching on the Holy Spirit was informed by his vision of salvation.

Elements of St Gregory’s Pneumatology

Identity of Attributes

Right from the outset of his *Fifth Theological Oration*,⁷ St Gregory

clearly put forward his position regarding the deity of the Holy Spirit by stating that all attributes belonging to God the Father – and for that matter the Son – could equally apply to the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, if God is eternal, or in the words of St Gregory “from the beginning [ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς]”,⁸ beyond the limits of time and space, all-knowing, all-powerful, inconceivable and incomprehensible, known unknowingly to be utterly transcendent – to name only a few of God’s limitless attributes as presented by systematic theology today – so too is the Holy Spirit. More specifically, confident of the Spirit’s Godhead, he noted that if one of the inherent Scriptural characteristics of God the Father is that He is light, then the Holy Spirit could equally be predicated with such a quality:

“He was the true light that enlightens every human person coming into the world” – yes, the Father. “He was the true light that enlightens every human person coming into the world” – yes, the Son. “He was the true light that enlightens every human person coming into the world” – yes, the Comforter... He was and He was and He was. But a single reality was [ἦν, καὶ ἦν, καὶ ἦν· ἀλλ’ ἓν ἦν].⁹

By applying to the Spirit precisely the same attributes as those belonging to the Father and the Son, St Gregory openly and succinctly underscored the Spirit’s divinity. Indeed, towards the end of the Oration, he rhetorically asked: “Is there any significant function belonging to God, which the Spirit does not perform? Is there any title belonging to God, which cannot apply to him?”¹⁰ Furthermore, in wanting to respond to the accusations of tritheism levelled against him,¹¹ he spoke of the converging quality of light whose different beams tend to harmonise into one reality – beyond affirming that there was one reality [ἓν ἦν], he also wrote that there is “a single intermingling of light [μία τοῦ φωτός σύγκρασις]”¹² – in this way also demonstrating the unity within the life of the Trinity. Consequently, not only was the unity of the Trinity affirmed but also and more specifically, that this harmonious unity required the Holy Spirit’s role in order to be perfectly complete.¹³

Fundamental to St Gregory’s teaching on the Holy Spirit is its underlying soteriological focus. This is especially seen in an excerpt immediately following his reflection on the Godhead in terms of light. In

a concise manner, he wrote: “We receive the Son’s light from the Father’s light in the light of the Spirit [ἐκ φωτός τοῦ Πατρὸς φῶς καταλαμβάνοντες τοῦ Υἱοῦ ἐν φωτὶ τῷ Πνεύματι].”¹⁴ Clearly, the whole point to this light analogy, for St Gregory, was to show that salvation – in this case, depicted in terms of a vision of the uncreated and transformative light of God – is made possible; namely, in the light of the Spirit, which in turn enables the faithful to behold the unapproachable light of Christ coming from God the Father. Simply put, it is in the Holy Spirit and through Jesus Christ that the light of God the Father permeates the church and the world thereby making salvation possible. In this way, the entire economy of salvation, which the Eastern Orthodox Church consistently claims to result from a Trinitarian action taking place from [ἐκ] God, through [διὰ τοῦ] the Son, in [ἐν] Holy Spirit is alluded to.¹⁵ More specifically, in order to highlight his main contention, namely the inextricable link between the divine uncreated reality of the Spirit and salvation – or we could say, between Pneumatology and Soteriology – St Gregory highlighted:

“If he has the same rank as I have, how can he make me God, or how can he join me with deity [εἰ τέτακται μετ’ ἐμοῦ, πῶς ἐμέ ποιεῖ θεόν, ἢ πῶς συνάπτει θεότητι].”¹⁶

For the Theologian, participation or fellowship in the life of God is only possible because the Holy Spirit, as God, makes this possible. Put another way, salvation in God would be rendered an impossibility if the Holy Spirit were a mere creature since it could not make known, reveal and testify to the divine life of God. Throughout the 31st Oration, St Gregory returned to the soteriological ramifications of his Pneumatology – namely the Spirit, as ‘true God from true God’, enabling and giving rise to the salvific experience and knowledge of the incomprehensible God. Consequently, a failure to designate the Spirit as ‘God’ would end up relegating it to the ranks of worldly creatures and therefore depriving the entire world of fellowship with God.

Consubstantiality with the Father

St Gregory focused his attention on showing that arguments previously used to confirm the divinity of the Son would equally apply to the Holy

Spirit. And so, in the same way that the Son of God was said to be ‘consubstantial with the Father’ [ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ], so too was the Spirit of the very same essence with the Father. Indeed, over the course of Oration 31, St Gregory wanted to show that such a statement did not, in any way, introduce a “strange and unscriptural God [ξένον θεόν καὶ ἄγραφον]”¹⁷ into Christian theology but could be hermeneutically derived from the Scriptures when read “with penetration so as to see inside the text to its inner meaning [ἀπόθετον κάλλος].”¹⁸ In this way, his theology of the Holy Spirit was ingeniously based upon the ‘spirit’ – not the letter – of the Scriptures in which one could find ample implicit evidence for the Spirit’s deity. Accordingly, to reject biblical truths not explicitly stated in the Scriptures would simply be a “cloak for irreligion”¹⁹, an enslavement to the letter, rather than to the ‘spirit’ and real meaning in the witness of the Scriptures. And so, after insisting on the Spirit’s deity, by attributing to it the very same qualities as those characterising the Father, he professed the Spirit’s consubstantiality with God the Father. Worthy of note is the fact that St Gregory stated incontrovertibly that the Spirit is consubstantial with the Father and more importantly was the first to declare explicitly that the Holy Spirit is God. In a series of rhetorical questions, he wrote:

“What then? Is the Spirit God? Certainly. Is he consubstantial? Yes, if he is God [Τί οὖν; Θεός τὸ Πνεῦμα; πάνυ γε. τί οὖν, ὁμοούσιον; εἴπερ Θεός].”²⁰

Whilst this may seem self evident today, in the context of fourth century theology, as correctly noted by Behr, this “was indeed a radical claim to make.”²¹ Beyond its novelty as a descriptor for the Spirit, it seems that St Gregory was not interested in extensively explaining what was meant by the term *homoousion* – this had already been done by others before him. Yet his understanding of the term *homoousios* from this excerpt can be discerned when read punctiliously since it implicitly captures what was essentially signified by the term at that time. By bringing together the terms ‘*homoousios*’ and ‘God’ St Gregory reaffirmed that the Spirit is divine with exactly the same divinity as God the Father. Consequently, he was able to conclude that it was not logically impossible for both the

divine Logos – as God's eternally begotten Son – and the Holy Spirit of God – as the breath of God – to be of the same essence with God the Father even though one was an offspring and the other not.

St Gregory's adversaries – at least from what is gathered in his Oration – had argued that since the Holy Spirit was not God's progeny – like his eternally begotten Son was – then it could not be consubstantial with God. Aware of the inadequacies of created analogies for the Godhead, since it was essentially beyond all comprehension and circumscription, he nonetheless responded by taking the Old Testament example of Adam, Eve and their son, Seth. He pointed out that in the same way that all three shared the same created human nature – namely, they were consubstantial – even though only Seth was Adam's offspring – Eve was Adam's wife – so too, in the case of the Holy Trinity, there need not be any logical hindrance in affirming the Spirit's consubstantiality with the Father even though only the Son of God was the Father's eternal offspring.²² And so, he concluded: “things with a different individual being can be of the same substance.”²³ He continued:

You have grasped the possibility of our position by means of human illustrations, so will you stop fighting desperately against the Spirit for your view that he must either be an offspring or not consubstantial and not God?²⁴

Clearly, the term *homoousios* was an expression which underscored the full and absolute deity of the Spirit – thereby highlighting that it was unlike any created reality – as well as re-emphasising the fact that all properties and attributes proper to God the Father could equally be attributed to the Spirit of God since “each of them [i.e. the persons] is in entire unity as much with himself as with the partnership, by identity of essence and power [τῷ ταῦτῷ τῆς οὐσίας καὶ τῆς δυνάμεως].”²⁵

A Concrete and Distinctly Divine Hypostasis

Having emphasised the identity of essence and thus the essential unity and commonality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son, it follows that St Gregory would also want to affirm its hypostatic existence,

namely, its real and genuine personal existence as the third divine Person of the Holy Trinity – a concretely distinct divine entity and not a mere energy or gift of God.²⁶ Previously, the Spirit had often been thought to be an impersonal power, energy or activity of God.²⁷ And so, in answer to this dilemma, St Gregory responded by a series of syllogistic arguments showing that the Spirit acts in its own right and does not need to be activated by someone else. In this way, he affirmed the full personhood of the Spirit. He wrote:

If [the Holy Spirit were] an activity, clearly it must be activated, because he has no active power... How comes it then that he does act? He says things, he decrees.²⁸

Proof of the Spirit's full personhood, for St Gregory, were all those references in the Scriptures where the Spirit is depicted acting in its own right and not dependent upon the Father – or the Son in this case – to set its actions in motion. That St Gregory saw the Holy Spirit as a divine Person, and not a mere creature is clearly seen in the Scriptural testimony which describes the Spirit of God itself initiating actions with no need of any other person to activate these. Profoundly based on the Scriptural descriptions of the Spirit, St Gregory noted its role as initiator:

The Spirit indeed effects all these things filling the universe with his being, sustaining the universe. His being “fills the world” [Wis 1:7].... The Spirit it is who created [Ps 104:30] and creates anew through baptism [Jn 3:5] and resurrection [Ezek 37:5-14]. The Spirit it is who knows all things [1Cor 2:10], who teaches all things [Jn 14:26]...²⁹

As a distinctly divine hypostasis, the Spirit could be said to exist in its own right as opposed to simply being an inherent property of the other two divine Persons. St Gregory's affirmation of the genuine hypostatic existence of the Holy Spirit needs to be kept in mind especially today in view of certain tendencies within Christian theology which might reduce the Holy Spirit merely to an energy; namely, the love shared between the Father and his beloved Son.³⁰ In such an analogy, however, the Holy Spirit can become depersonalised, reduced to an attribute and therefore seen simply as an energy passing between God and his Son. The Spirit, however, according to St Gregory, is a genuine person, hypostatically

existent. The salvific ramifications are clear: humanity could only be made divine by an action of a Person who is divine – in this case by the Holy Spirit revealing the Father through Jesus Christ.

Procession – the Spirit's Particular Mode of Existence

St Gregory turned his attention to emphasising the particularity of the Holy Spirit. Based on the Scriptural witness found in St John's Gospel (Jn 15.26), he defined the eternal issuance of the Spirit from the Father in terms of 'procession'³¹ as distinct from the Son who was eternally 'begotten'. Indeed, in his consistent employment of the Biblical term, 'procession' [ἐκπόρευσις]³² for the distinctive hypostatic property of the Holy Spirit, he made an exceptionally important contribution to Pneumatological terminology by also highlighting its particularity as a concrete and distinctly divine hypostasis. And so, not only would the unity and communion of the divine Persons within the life of the Trinity be safeguarded but also their indivisible differentiation. In reflecting upon the procession of the Holy Spirit, St Gregory wrote:

We say there is no deficiency – God lacks nothing. It is their difference in, so to say, “manifestation” or mutual relationship, which has caused the difference in names [τό δέ τῆς ἐκφάνσεως, ἴν' οὕτως εἶπω, ἢ τῆς πρὸς ἄλληλα σχέσεως διάφορον, διάφορον αὐτῶν κατὰ τὴν κλησιν πεποίηκεν]... The very facts of not being begotten [τό μὴ γεγενῆσθαι], of being begotten [τό γεγενῆσθαι] and of proceeding [καί τό ἐκπορεύεσθαι], give them whatever names are applied to them – Father, Son and Holy Spirit respectively. The aim is to safeguard the distinctness of the three hypostases within the single nature and quality of Godhead [ἵνα τό ἀσύγχυτον σώζηται τῶν τριῶν ὑποστάσεων ἐν τῇ μιᾷ φύσει τε καί ἀξία τῆς Θεότητος]. The Son is not Father; there is one Father, yet he is whatever the Father is. The Spirit is not Son because he is from God; there is one Only-begotten.... The three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole is three in personalities [ἐν τὰ τρία τῇ Θεότητι, καί τό ἓν τρία ταῖς ιδιότησιν].³³

St Gregory insisted that the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father indicated: 1) its divinity – to the extent that the Spirit proceeds from the Father it is no mere creature, and 2) its particularity – since the Spirit is

not begotten like the eternally begotten Son of God, it is hypostatically ‘other’. For St Gregory, ‘procession’ in no way implied any deprivation on the part of the Spirit but rather expressed its distinct mode of existence or ‘manifestation [ἐκφάνσεως]’ in relation to the Father. In other words, ‘procession’ was the unique hypostatic attribute of the person of the Holy Spirit and was not therefore to be applied to the one essence of the Godhead. Having clearly distinguished the particularity and unique mode of the Spirit’s existence in terms of procession, he went no further, however, in discussing the manner by which this is so since the ‘perichoretic’ life of the Godhead – as this is termed by tradition – within itself transcends the created limits of human comprehension; it is indeed a mystery known by God alone.³⁴ In this regard, he wrote:

What then is ‘proceeding’? You explain the ingeneracy of the Father and I will give you a biological account of the Son’s begetting and the Spirit’s proceeding.... we cannot count the sand in the sea, the drops of rain or the days of this world, much less enter into the depths of God.³⁵

The purpose of the doctrine of the Spirit’s procession from the Father alone was to underscore the particularity of the Spirit’s hypostasis and its unique relation to the Father thereby affirming its deity once again. Accordingly, the Spirit’s procession from the Father remains an incomprehensible mystery beyond the created categories of time, space and causality. But, as one of the Trinity, with exactly the same divinity as the Father and the Son, the Spirit was responsible – and continues to be – for leading the entire world back to the Father through Jesus Christ.

Derived From Yet Equal to the Father

Having underlined the Holy Spirit’s deity and distinctiveness, St Gregory went on to affirm a certain *taxis* within the Trinity; more specifically, for this paper, the Spirit’s derivation – and parenthetically the Son’s too – from the Father without this in any way, however, implying any form of subordination. Namely, in affirming that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, St Gregory in no way implied that the Holy Spirit is deficient when it comes to ‘what’ the Father is. And so, in wanting to affirm both the Spirit’s derivation from, yet equality with, the Father, he wrote:

We have one God because there is a single Godhead [ἡμῖν εἷς Θεός, ὅτι μία Θεότης]. Though there are three objects of belief, they [namely the Son and the Spirit] derive from the single whole and have reference to it [καί πρὸς ἓν τὰ ἐξ αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀναφορὰν ἔχει]. One is not more, another less, than God [οὐ γὰρ τὸ μὲν μᾶλλον, τὸ δὲ ἥττον Θεός]. They are not sundered in will or divided in power. You cannot find there any of the properties inherent in things divisible. To express it succinctly, the Godhead exists undivided in beings divided [ἀμέριστος ἐν μεμερισμένοις].³⁶

In juxtaposing the realities of ‘Trinitarian *taxis*’ – expressed here in terms of the Spirit deriving ‘from the single whole’ – with the unity and communion of the three divine Persons – expressed in the referential unity of the Godhead³⁷ – St Gregory articulated his vision of the Spirit’s ontological derivation from the Father in a profoundly symmetrical and balanced way, leaving no room for any subordinationist understandings within the Trinitarian mystery. Immediately before referring to this ordering within the Trinitarian Godhead, St Gregory stressed the equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father when he noted that: 1) the Holy Spirit shares the very same Godhead as that of the Father and it is precisely in this one Godhead that there is also one God, and 2) the Holy Spirit is never separated from the Father but is always defined in reference to the Father, namely, harmoniously united to the Godhead.³⁸ Only after having therefore responded against the charges of an alleged subordinationaism and tritheism, did he turn his attention to the ontological derivation of the Holy Spirit from the Father. According to St Gregory, as the sole source of the Godhead, the Father timelessly issues forth the Holy Spirit – or as we saw, the Holy Spirit ‘proceeds’ from the Father – and in this way they remain ‘undivided’ rather than tending towards any type of division. And so, instead of the divine Persons being mutually opposed, they were, for St Gregory, seen simultaneously from the perspective of unitive diversity and diverse unification. In integrating both the unity of the Godhead – and therefore, implicitly here, the deity of the Holy Spirit – and the ontological derivation of the Spirit from the Father, he found the correct balance between the equality of all three divine Persons yet at the same time the *taxis* within the Trinitarian mystery.

Salvific Underpinnings

After having attempted to decipher some of the intricacies in St Gregory's theology of the Holy Spirit and present it in a systematic way, it remains to investigate more closely, and hence validate in a more decisive manner, the main contention of this paper, namely, that St Gregory's Pneumatology is driven by soteriological concerns. The paper already argued that a study of St Gregory's Fifth Theological Oration – or for that matter any of his pneumatological works – without constant reference to its salvific underpinnings, would be to miss the whole point of his Pneumatology and the arguments put forward for the Spirit's deity. Accordingly, we saw that it was precisely these salvific concerns which constituted the framework and basis of his Fifth Theological Oration. Only a 'Spirit' who is both 'God' and 'consubstantial with the Father' could act within the parameters of history – namely from the very beginning of the creation of the universe to the life of the age to come – in order to save God's created world. Simply put, the Holy Spirit had to be divine since it, together with the Father and the Son, continues to bring about the world's salvation. Put another way, it is the Spirit's indispensable role in salvation – together with the Son of God leading the faithful to the Father – that constituted, for St Gregory, the reason *par excellence* for the Spirit's divinity. To repudiate the deity of the Spirit would be tantamount to being deprived of access to the Father; that is, a disaffirmation of one's salvation. This indeed is the point of an excerpt found towards the end of Oration 31 where St Gregory, wanting to sum up, drew attention to the fact that all of Christ's redemptive work in the world was always accomplished together with the Spirit. But if responsible for our salvation, together with Christ, leading us to God the Father, then the Holy Spirit also had to be divine in precisely the same way as God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Section 29 of the Oration enumerates a multitudinous array of biblical references displaying the Spirit's redemptive acts – it is the Spirit, for example, according to St Gregory, who "knows all things, who teaches all things, who blows where and as strongly as he will... [who] reveals, illumines... He distributes graces"³⁹ to list a few. However, before doing

so, St Gregory set the framework in which all these salvific acts could be properly interpreted:

Look at the facts: Christ is born, the Spirit is his forerunner; Christ is baptized, the Spirit bears witness; Christ is tempted, the Spirit leads him up; Christ performs miracles, the Spirit accompanies him; Christ ascends, the Spirit fill his place [ἀνέρχεται, διαδέχεται].⁴⁰

This passage – and indeed the entire 29th section in which it is found – is usually understood in terms of providing proof-texts in order to sanction biblically St Gregory's main argument; namely, that the Spirit is divine and consubstantial with the Father.⁴¹ Whilst this is not entirely incorrect, St Gregory is doing something more profound here – what could be called a 'Spirit-filled Christology'⁴² or a 'Pneumatologically-conditioned Christology' – in order to demonstrate the deity of the Spirit. Essentially, his thesis in this case is, since salvation can only be brought about by God, we observe this archetypically accomplished in Christ *together with the Spirit*, who continues to make salvation a reality bringing it to its completion. Consequently, it is the Spirit's role in salvation, together with that of Christ revealing God the Father that is 'the more perfect proof' of the Spirit's divinity. For St Gregory, it is precisely this unity of action within the Godhead that makes salvation a real possibility and which is beautifully and succinctly synthesised in St Gregory's Fifth Theological Oration.

Now, the importance of this claim lies in the fact that more often than not in contemporary Christian theology, the work of Christ and the Spirit are thought of in terms of independently successive plans in God's salvific action within the world.⁴³ Whilst it is true that the pneumatological foundation of salvation is obviously acknowledged today, nonetheless, the reciprocity between the Son and Spirit in the work of salvation is often overlooked. For St Gregory, however, God's salvific actions in the world as witnessed in the Scriptures betray a real mutuality between the Son and Spirit: as stated by St Gregory, when Christ became incarnate, joining in his person divinity with humanity, and in this way making salvation a real possibility, it was the Holy Spirit by whom this

took place. It was the Spirit who was with Christ throughout his entire ministry and it is the Spirit who continues to make this communion with Christ a reality throughout the ages. It is the Holy Spirit who continues to further the work of Christ – cf. e.g. ἀναδέχεται – in this way giving the faithful access to God the Father. Indeed, as underlined by St Gregory all of Christ’s actions were accompanied by the Spirit. For St Gregory, Christ and the Spirit were always seen together in God’s *ad extra* operations from the very moment of creation. Whilst it is true that in its linear historical development, it was Christ who came first and only after He had ascended into the heavens was the Holy Spirit sent, nonetheless, salvation, as depicted by St Gregory, was fundamentally deeper than this – the work of Christ and the Spirit together leading the faithful back to their heavenly Father. And so, for St Gregory, proof of the Spirit’s deity was the reciprocating roles of both Christ and the Spirit in the work of salvation.

Having affirmed the reciprocity between Christ and the Holy Spirit, St Gregory underlined his vision of salvation in terms of *theosis* and the Spirit’s constitutive role in making this a reality for the entire world. This is seen in the following direct statement which affirms that the basis of St Gregory’s Pneumatology was the Spirit’s constitutive role in salvation understood as *theosis* and initiated through the rite of baptism.⁴⁴ According to St Gregory, precisely because the Spirit is divine can it offer the faithful within the life of the Church through baptism the possibility of becoming ‘gods’ by grace:

Were the Spirit not to be worshipped, how could he deify me through baptism? If he is to be worshipped, why not adored? And if to be adored, how can he fail to be God? One links with the other, a truly golden chain of salvation. From the Spirit comes our rebirth [ἀναγέννησις], from rebirth comes a new creating [ἀναπλάσις], from new creating a recognition [ἐπίγνωσις] of the worth of him who effected it.⁴⁵

The foundational basis of his entire teaching of the salvific role of the Holy Spirit is summed up in this passage: namely the Spirit is worshipped and adored because together with God the Father and his Son it deifies

the faithful bringing forth their rebirth, recreation and recognition of God. Clearly, that which informed St Gregory's teaching on the Holy Spirit was its deifying work in the Christian life. Now, the reason that mention is made of baptism is that it was this rite which initiates the lifelong transformative process of every Christian to become god-like.⁴⁶ In reflecting upon the Spirit's deifying work in baptism, he wrote that: "[the Spirit] makes us his temple, he deifies, he makes us complete and he initiates us in such a way that he both precedes baptism and is wanted after it."⁴⁷ In denying the divinity of the Spirit, it could not be possible, according to St Gregory, to receive the deifying gifts and grace of baptism. As correctly summed up by Beeley, "the ground of Gregory's praise of the Spirit and his confession that the Spirit is God lies in his own experience of the Spirit's making him God, so that the Spirit's work in the Christian life is the source of the doctrine of the Spirit."⁴⁸

Concluding Remarks

An attempt was made throughout the paper to explore the teaching of St Gregory the Theologian on the Holy Spirit especially as this related to the salvation of the world. In so doing, we were invariably able to ascertain that his ground breaking Pneumatology, far from being preoccupied with any speculative or presumptive abstractions, remained within a soteriological and existential context. Specifically, at the heart of our study of St Gregory's Pneumatological vision, whose writings demonstrated for the very first time in the history of Christian thought that the Spirit is both 'God' and consubstantial with the Father, we were able to reflect upon five key aspects of his teaching which unambiguously indicated the Spirit's divinity: 1. the identity of attributes so that all divine characteristics depicting the Father are equally applicable to the Holy Spirit; 2. the Spirit's consubstantiality with God the Father, namely the incomprehensible and inexplicable essence of the Father was equally shared by the Spirit; 3. the affirmation that the Spirit is a concrete and distinctly divine hypostasis and not any impersonal power or energy; 4. the Spirit's unique mode of divine existence in terms of procession indicating its particularity within the Godhead and finally, 5. an examination of

St Gregory's understanding of the Spirit's derivation from the Father without this in any way destroying its equality. A consideration of these five dimensions in his teaching on the Holy Spirit showed the extent to which they were inextricably linked with salvation. In reflecting further we were able to highlight more closely the salvific underpinnings of his Fifth Theological Oration and proposed that the divinity of the Holy Spirit was seen in its intimate cooperation with Christ, what we called a 'Spirit-filled Christology'; indeed, a remarkable contribution in the face of so much confusion to this day on the synthetic relationship between Christology and Pneumatology. It is only appropriate that St Gregory has the last word:

Soul, why delay? Sing the praise of the Spirit! [...] Let us bow in awe before the mighty Spirit, who is God in heaven, who to me is God, by whom I came to know God, and who in this world makes me God.⁴⁹

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Revd Doru Costache – a friend and colleague – and to the referees for taking the time to review the paper and offer important comments for its improvement.



NOTES:

¹ McGuckin warned against any oversimplification when referring to the term 'Pneumatomachian' as if its followers were one homogeneous group holding to precisely the same beliefs. He highlighted the importance of bearing in mind that this designation included divergent groups. For this reason, he wrote that the term as such is "not very useful (except as an apologetic term) precisely because of its historical imprecision. Some of those who fought against the Homoousion pneumatology were certainly of Arian persuasion, since the Arians had resisted the concept of the co-equal divinity of the Son, and were by no means willing to admit the idea in terms of a third hypostasis. But many of them were not of the Arian party. The *homoousion* of the Spirit was a concept that put heavy stress on the relatively recent alliance with the Nicene Homoiousians, and to that extent must have worried several theologians at the council of 381, not least

the Antiochenes who sponsored it. Such pro-Nicene Pneumatomachians thought that the problems of the previous generation of the Church had largely been caused by the unfortunate word *homoousion* and did not see why now it should be extended to the Spirit.” Anthony McGuckin, *St Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 301.

² It must be remembered that there were fathers before St Gregory who had referred to the Spirit as consubstantial with the Father. Cf. St Athanasius, *Ad Serap.* 1.27: “τό πνεῦμα... καί τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐνός ὄντος ἴδιον καί ὁμοούσιον” PG 26, 593C. Undeniably, however, Gregory explicitly referred to the Holy Spirit as ‘God’. On the Pneumatology of St Athanasius, see George C. Berthold, ‘The Procession of the Spirit in Athanasius’, *Studia Patristica* 41 (Leuven, Paris, Dudley: Peeters, 2006), 125-131.

³ Writing to Cledonius in 382AD, St Gregory referred to the Nicene Creed as the standard of true faith but was also quick to add that the fathers of the Council in Nicaea had ‘left out’ an important confession on the Holy Spirit and that it was now important to declare openly “the Holy Spirit too as God.” *The Second Letter to Cledonius the Presbyter*, Letter 102. 1, trans. Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 167.

⁴ On this, Harkianakis concluded: “the terminology [St Gregory] developed allowed him to express previously latent and insufficiently addressed elements of the Trinity more clearly, and thus ward of any objections... while Basil defended the Homoousion of the Son with the aid of the terms ‘Fatherhood’ and ‘Sonship’, he failed to find any equivalent for the Holy Spirit’s presence....” Stylianos Harkianakis, ‘Die Trinitätslehre Gregors Von Nazianz’, *Κληρονομία*, 1.1(1969): 91.

⁵ Those being St John the Evangelist and St Symeon the New Theologian (b. 949AD).

⁶ For St Gregory’s understanding of *theosis*, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 213-225.

⁷ Whilst the Holy Spirit figures centrally in numerous works, this paper focuses on his famous Fifth Theological Oration, otherwise known as Oration 31, arguably the crowning work in the area of Pneumatology, where St Gregory put before his audience the full flowering and richness of the orthodox vision of the Holy Spirit. For a brief yet insightful study regarding the development of St Gregory’s Pneumatology, see Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 156-164.

⁸ *Oration* 31.4. trans. Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary

Press, 2002), 119. All quotations from this Oration, unless otherwise stated, are taken from this translation.

⁹ St Gregory the Theologian, Oration 31.3. PG 36, 136B. Cf. also the following from St Gregory: “If one existed from the beginning, so did all three” *Oration* 31.4. PG 36, 137A.

¹⁰ *Oration* 31.29. PG 36, 163B.

¹¹ On St Gregory versus the Eunomians, see John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, part 2, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Press, 2004), 334-342.

¹² *Oration* 31.14. PG 36, 149A.

¹³ For St Gregory, there can be no perfect Trinity without the Holy Spirit since only an incomplete God would result. Cf. for example, *Oration* 31:4: “If you cast one down, I make bold to tell you not to exalt the other two. What use is incomplete deity? Or rather what is deity if it is incomplete? Something is missing if it does not have holiness, and how could it have holiness without having the Holy Spirit?”

¹⁴ *Oration* 31.3. PG 36, 136C.

¹⁵ Reflecting on the fact that all of God’s *ad extra* salvific actions are Trinitarian, Meyendorff wrote: “all major acts of God are Trinitarian acts, and the particular role of the Spirit is to make the “first contact”, which is then followed – as existentially, but not chronologically – by a revelation of the Son and, through Him of the Father. The personal being of the Spirit remains hidden, even if He is active at every great step of divine activity: creation, redemption, ultimate fulfillment. His function is not to reveal himself, but to reveal the Son “through whom all things were made” and who is also personally known in his humanity as Jesus Christ.” John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 168. Cf. also St Basil’s earlier reflection on the meaning of the three prepositions in *On the Holy Spirit* 4.6.

¹⁶ *Oration* 31.4. Elsewhere, St Gregory was even more direct: “If the Holy Spirit is not God, let him first be deified, and then let him deify me his equal!” *Oration* 34.12. PG 36, 252C. Costache noted that the Cappadocian fathers in general were in the same tradition as St Athanasius applying the same soteriological arguments. Cf. Doru Costache, ‘Christian Worldview: Understandings from St Basil the Great’, *Phronema* 25(2010): 31-33.

¹⁷ *Oration* 31.1. PG 36, 133B. Much of the Oration is dedicated to demonstrating the Biblical basis/ proofs in favour of the deity of the Holy Spirit in order to

refute those who had alleged that he had introduced a strange and unscriptural God since the Scriptures were silent when it came to the deity of the Holy Spirit. Reflecting on the charge brought against him regarding the silence of the Scriptures as this related to the Spirit's deity, St Gregory responded in terms of the history of covenants. He proposed a unique understanding of history and in so doing was able to explain why in fact the Scriptures did not explicitly declare the Spirit's divinity. He spoke of a certain order in the unfolding of God's divine economy according to "gradual states proportionate to [people's] capacities". Indeed, this unfolding of God's salvific plan for the world was so transformative that it involved, in the words of St Gregory, three "shakings of the earth" (*Oration* 31.26). On this, he wrote: "the old covenant made clear proclamation of the Father, a less definite one of the Son. The new covenant made the Son manifest and gave us a glimpse of the Spirit's godhead. At the present time, the Spirit resides amongst us, giving us a clearer manifestation of himself than before it was dangerous for the Son to be preached openly when the Godhead of the Father was still unacknowledged. It was dangerous, too, for the Holy Spirit to be made (and here I use a rather rash expression) an extra burden, when the Son had not been received" (*Oration* 31.26). According to St Gregory, the Spirit's deity was not openly preached from the beginning because humanity would not have been mature enough to receive this message. Rather, each stage prepared God's people by making them more receptive for the next covenant. In this way each covenant brought about an increasing proximity of the faithful to God through a gradual maturation process. Clearly, St Gregory's narrative of the covenants is meant to indicate the increasing awareness and illumination on the part of the faithful regarding the Trinitarian existence of God. In other words, St Gregory, in this case, was not advocating a theory of the 'development of doctrine' put forward in the nineteenth century, which alleged the introduction of new doctrines after the incarnation. Indeed, to read this as an affirmation, on the part of St Gregory, of a progressive divine self-revelation theory is to have missed the point of his argument because when God acts in the world, He always does so together with his Son and Spirit even though the faithful needed to wait for the fullness of time to experience this reality.

¹⁸ *Oration* 31.21. PG 36, 156C.

¹⁹ *Oration* 31.3. PG 36, 136B.

²⁰ *Oration* 31.10. PG 36, 144A.

²¹ John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2: The Nicene Faith, part 2 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 363. He continued: "Not only does Gregory categorically call the Spirit "God", which most, even of the Nicenes, had been hesitant to do, but he continues this with the assertion that the Spirit is therefore consubstantial, just as is the Son." *ibid.*

- ²² For a discussion on the antecedents of the Adam-Eve-Seth analogy in depicting the mystery of the Holy Trinity, see Alexander Golitzin, ‘Adam, Eve and Seth: Pneumatological Reflections on an Unusual Image in Gregory of Nazianzus’s “Fifth Theological Oration”’, *Anglican Theological Review* 83.3(2001): 537-546. On this analogy, Orphanos wrote: “Therefore, Gregory, illustrating the relations of the Holy Trinity, uses the analogy of the mode of being of Adam, Eve and Seth. Adam is a type of the ‘unbegotten’, Seth is of the ‘begotten’ and Eve is of that which ‘proceeds’.” Markos Orphanos, *The Procession of the Holy Spirit According to Certain Greek Fathers* (Athens, 1979), 29. In reference to Trinitarian analogies, however, St Gregory is very clear on the shortcomings of analogies. He concluded: “In the end, I resolved that it was best to say “goodbye” to images and shadows, deceptive and utterly inadequate as they are to express the reality” (Oration 31.33).
- ²³ Oration 31.11. PG 36, 145A.
- ²⁴ Oration 31.11. PG 36, 145B.
- ²⁵ Oration 31.16. PG 36, 152B.
- ²⁶ It was in reaction to the Sabellian relativisation of the genuine existence of ‘persons’ that St Gregory the Theologian wanted to emphasize the concrete and distinct mode of existence of the Holy Spirit. The same trend prompted St Basil to attempt a consolidation of the concept of personhood in his theological elaborations of hypostasis. Cf. Philip Kariatlis, ‘St Basil’s Contribution to the Trinitarian Doctrine: A Synthesis of Greek Paideia and the Scriptural Worldview’, *Phronema* 25(2010): 57-83.
- ²⁷ Cf. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, ‘The Holy Spirit as Agent, not Activity: Origen’s Argument with Modalism and its Afterlife in Didymus, Eunomius, and Gregory of Nazianzus’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 65(2011): 227-248.
- ²⁸ Oration 31.6. PG 36, 140A. More specifically, in order to make his point, St Gregory employed the Aristotelian categories of ‘substance’ and ‘accident’; the former denoting a reality existing in and of itself, whilst the latter signifies that which can only exist in a certain object, namely, the perceptible properties of a substance which play no part in modifying the said substance.
- ²⁹ Oration 31.29.
- ³⁰ Those tendencies today which see the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and Son are to some extent reiterations of St Augustine’s teaching. Cf., for example, *De Trinitate* 6,7: “The Holy Spirit has his existence in the same unity of substance and equality of Father and Son.... it is plain that the two Persons [i.e. the Father and the Son] are joined together by a bond other than themselves... One who loves him who is derived from himself, one who loves

him from whom he himself is derived, and their mutual love.” Cited in Henry Bettenson, *The Later Christian Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 229. For a perceptive introduction into the Trinitarian theology of St Augustine especially with reference to the Holy Spirit as the *vinculum Trinitatis*, see, Declan Marmion and Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 83-92. In reflecting upon this analogy of the Trinity, Ware wrote: “The disadvantage of St Augustine’s analogy of love is that it likens the Trinity to two persons, not to three; for while love and beloved are both persons, the mutual love passing between them is not a third person additional to the other two. In this way the analogy is in danger of depersonalising the Holy Spirit, although this was certainly not St Augustine’s intention.” Kallistos Ware, ‘The Trinity: Heart of Our Life’ in *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 133.

³¹ Elsewhere, St Gregory described the way the Holy Spirit is issued from the Father in terms of ἐκπεμψις and πρόοδος. Cf. *Oration* 25.15: “ἴδιον δὲ Πατρὸς μὲν ἢ ἀγεννησία, Υἱοῦ δὲ ἢ γέννησις, Πνεύματος δὲ ἢ ἔκπεμψις.” PG35. 1221B.

³² It must be noted that the Johannine Gospel uses the verbal form ἐκπορεύεται as did St Gregory the Theologian.

³³ *Oration* 31.9. PG 36, 141C – 144A. Even though at first glance the Greek term ἰδιότησιν would be translated as ‘characteristics’, in the context of what St Gregory is writing, I agree with the translator’s choice of the word ‘personalities’.

³⁴ For St Gregory’s understanding of ‘perichoresis’, see J.P. Egan, “Primal Cause and Trinitarian Perichoresis in Gregory Nazianzen’s *Oration* 31.14”, *Studia Patristica* 27 (Louvain: Peeters, 1993), 21-28.

³⁵ *Oration* 31. 8. PG 36, 141.

³⁶ *Oration* 31.14. PG36. 148D – 149A.

³⁷ In his Pentecost oration he wrote: “the Holy Spirit always was and is and will be, without beginning, without end, but is always ranked and numbered with the Father and the Son [Τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἦν μὲν αἰ, καὶ ἔστι καὶ ἔσται, οὔτε ἀρξάμενον, οὔτε παυσόμενον, ἀλλ’ αἰεὶ Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ συντεταγμένον, καὶ συναριθμούμενον]” *Oration* 41. 9, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 151. PG 36. 441AB.

³⁸ Reflecting upon this excerpt under discussion McGuckin correctly noted: “This passage ought not to be read as inferring a single common abstract “Godhead” to which class three members belong; for this is what Gregory attacks in the following section of the *Oration* (ch. 15). For Gregory, the Godhead is that of the Father.” A. McGuckin, *St Gregory of Nazianzus*, 306.

³⁹ Oration 31.29. Beeley offers some insightful remarks on this section of the Oration. Cf. C. Beeley, *St Gregory of Nazianzus*, 180-185.

⁴⁰ Oration 31.29. PG 36, 165B.

⁴¹ Cf. J. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 368-9.

⁴² What has been called a ‘Spirit-filled Christology’ in no way is to be interpreted in any adoptionist way. It simply illustrates a concern in St Gregory and other Christian fathers to affirm the intimate connection between Christ and the Spirit.

⁴³ It falls beyond the scope of this paper to engage specifically with this matter. This has been addressed by Zizioulas at length especially in his discussions on the Pneumatological dimension of the Church where he argues for the need for a proper synthesis between Christology and Pneumatology where the work of the Son and Spirit are not seen as successive phases of God’s economy. In this study, after warning of the dangers of separating the work of Christ and the Spirit in the world, he concludes that “theology [today] has failed to assimilate the synthesis between Christology and Pneumatology with which the early church tried to solve its problems.” John Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, ed. Gregory Edwards (Sebastian Press, 2010), 77. See also, Boris Bobrinsky, “The Indwelling of the Spirit in Christ: Pneumatic Christology in the Cappadocian Fathers”, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 28.1(1984): 49-65.

⁴⁴ In emphasising the importance of baptism, St Gregory would in no way espouse any absolutist view that would preclude salvation from the unbaptised. On this, he specifically wrote: “It is true that there is but one Lord, one faith, and one baptism... But can we equally say that there is one road to salvation... and that those who turn away from it are strictly in error, rejected by God and excluded from heavenly hope? Nothing would be more dangerous than to give such advice or to believe it on its own account!” Oration 32.33, cited in Donald Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study of Gregory of Nazianus* (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979), 140.

⁴⁵ Oration 31.28. PG 36, 165A.

⁴⁶ Cf. Oration 31.29.

⁴⁷ Oration 31.29. Elsewhere, St Gregory commented extensively on the saving effects of the rite of baptism: “[Baptism is] a help for our weakness, a putting off of the flesh, a following of the Spirit, communion with the Logos, an amendment of the creature, the wiping away of sin, the possession of light, the overcoming of darkness, a vehicle which leads towards God, a traveling with Christ, a support for one’s faith, perfection of the mind, a key to the kingdom of heaven, an exchange for life, removal of one’s chains, and the transformation of every human person’s synthetic nature” Oration 40.4. PG 36, 361B.

⁴⁸ C. Beeley, *St Gregory of Nazianzus*, 175.

⁴⁹ *Poem on the Holy Spirit* 1.1.3.1-4. PG 37, 408.

Philip Kariatlis is Academic Secretary and Lecturer in Theology at St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College. He received his Doctor of Theology degree from the Sydney College of Divinity having examined the notion of *koinonia* in Orthodox ecclesiology as both gift and goal. His research interest lies in Church doctrine, specifically its existential and salvific character. He translated the doctoral dissertation of Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis) *The Infallibility of the Church in Orthodox Theology* (2008) and has written in several peer reviewed journals within Australia and abroad.
