



The Fathers Speak

ST BASIL THE GREAT
ST GREGORY NAZIANZUS
ST GREGORY OF NYSSA

Translated and Edited by Georges Barrois

THE FATHERS SPEAK

St Basil the Great
St Gregory of Nazianzus
St Gregory of Nyssa

Selected letters and life-records
translated from the Greek and introduced

by

GEORGES A. BARROIS

with a Foreword

by

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ST VLADIMIR'S SEMINARY PRESS
CRESTWOOD, NEW YORK 10707
1986

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The Fathers speak, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Saint Gregory of Nyssa.

1. Cappadocian Fathers—Correspondence.
2. Basil, Saint, Bishop of Caesarea, ca. 329-379—Correspondence.
3. Gregory, of Nazianzus, Saint—Correspondence.
4. Gregory, of Nyssa, Saint, ca. 335-ca. 394—Correspondence. I. Basil, Saint, Bishop of Caesarea, ca. 329-379. II. Gregory, of Nazianzus, Saint. III. Gregory, of Nyssa, Saint, ca. 335-ca. 394. IV. Barrois, George Augustin, 1898-
BR63.F28 1986 270.2 85-31958
ISBN 0-88141-037-3

THE FATHERS SPEAK

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ST VLADIMIR'S SEMINARY PRESS

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ISBN 0-88141-037-3

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

BY

ATHENS PRINTING COMPANY

New York, NY 10018

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Foreword

As we Christians of the twentieth century study the Fathers of the Church, their writings—often, in an unreadable English produced by clumsy translators—appear to us as foreboding, verbose, and somewhat closed within a world where theological contemplation replaces everyday reality. The Greek Fathers in particular, have this reputation among students because they wrote relatively little about themselves, about the details of their own lives and the circumstances of daily life. Only St Augustine's *Confessions* have brought that author close to people of all cultures and all epochs.

Here for the first time is an anthology of texts by Greek authors, gathered almost exclusively from the personal correspondence between St Basil the Great, his close friend Gregory "the Theologian" and his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa. These three men appear to us as real human beings, reveal the substance of their Christian vocation, uncover the program of their spiritual life, unveil the intellectual background of their use of Greek philosophy at the service of Christian theology, and explain the meaning of their ministry as monastic leaders and bishops of the Church.

Readers of this book will be able to contemplate the icons of these Fathers in a new way, and with a fuller understanding of the human reality which appears iconographically transfigured in frescoes and mosaics. For indeed it is their genuinely human response to divine love and grace which has made them into "Holy Fathers," into saints of the Church.

This selection of texts and the commentary on them are the extraordinary achievement of a truly great scholar. With his unpretentious but remarkably thorough method of re-

search, Georges Barrois crowns his career as a Biblical archaeologist, Old Testament scholar and historian of medieval Latin thought with this work of spiritual devotion and ultimate commitment. The wisdom which the Fathers sought, which they have recognized fully in Jesus, the incarnate Logos, and which they never ceased to contemplate wherever they could discover it—in Plato, in the ascetic achievements of holy works, in nature and, indeed, in the divine image present in every human being—permeates this book.

This Wisdom is indeed “manifold” (πολυποίκιλος, Eph 3:10), and no one could have recognized it in the Fathers, still young men when they wrote these letters, better than the great and wise elder, Georges Barrois.

— *John Meyendorff*

Introduction

I am not writing a book about the "Three Hierarchs," Saint Basil, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa. I prefer to let them speak for themselves in the letters which they wrote to each other or to some of their contemporaries, and which let us enter into their intimacy. My task has been to choose those pieces that can best reveal the secret of their personality.

I have made use of the following sources: For the letters of Saint Basil, the Greek text established by Yves Courtonne for the Collection Budé, tome 1, Paris 1957; tome 2 (1961); and tome 3 (1966). For the letters of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, the Greek text of Paul Gallay, Collection Budé, tome 1, Paris 1964, and tome 2 (1967). One will regret the complicated apparatus of footnotes and supplementary remarks at the end of each volume.

The thirty-three letters of Saint Gregory of Nyssa pose a special problem: the manuscripts and the early printed editions attribute some of these letters confusedly to Gregory of Nazianzus or to Gregory of Nyssa, and even to Basil. The difficulty is compounded with the fact that the Gregorii Nysseni epistulae in the Jaeger edition of the Opera Omnia (volume 3:2), were copyrighted by E. J. Brill (Leiden, 1959), but the origin of this edition of the epistulae antecedes the volumes of the Budé collection, with a series of unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances (war, a broken leg, and a severe illness) having delayed the inclusion of the Florentine scholar Giorgio Pasquali's remarkable analysis of the manuscripts in the Jaeger edition.

I have used for my selections from the Life of Moses the text of the late Cardinal Daniélou, Sources Chrésiennes,

1

The Solitude in Pontus

We begin our pilgrimage in the wooded solitude of Annisi (Ἀννήσοι) in Pontus, cradle of Basilian monasticism, where the founder and hegumen of a community of monks and religious women, having been called—not by his choice—to the metropolitan see of Caesaraea in Cappadocia, returned home whenever a lull in the affairs of his Church procured him a too rare but most welcome occasion.

Here is Basil's own description of the solitude, to which he hoped to attract his friend Gregory of Nazianzus, his condisciple at the schools of Athens. In this he was unsuccessful. Gregory loved Basil dearly, but he did not like the place; hence, a lively exchange of sour-sweet letters between the two friends.

The description is meant to give us an idea of the place, with an overload of poetic and mythological allusions; after all, one has been to Athens, and one is eager to show it off: the island of Calypso; the Strymon, a river in Thracia, made famous by the wars of Alexander; the Echinades, islands of the Ionian Sea where Alkmaion, pursued by the Furies, attempted to find refuge. Basil relished these clichés, and Gregory found in them a ready aliment for the devastating irony of his letters to his friend, dated from the early years of the community at Annisi. It would be futile, on the sole basis of Basil's description, to attempt an objective reconstitution of the solitude and of the monastic settlement.

2

Biographical

It would be much to say that the descriptions of the "solitude" in Pontus and the saucy comments of Gregory of Nazianzus make us visualize the landscape of Annisi. We can at least imagine what it looked like: the wooded hills, the precipitous cliffs, the underlying meadows, the sinuous course of the Iris and the brooks tumbling down from the crags of the mountain, obviously a site fit for cenobites and hermits eager to flee the "world," but not the elaborate monasteries of the Athos or the forbidding stone-pillars of the Meteora; rather, an agglomeration of shanties akin to those of Saint Francis and his early disciples in the gorge of the Carceri, where they fished—or poached?—the brook trout of the Abbot of Monte Subasio. Now, who were the solitaries? Let us identify a few of them and let the letters of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus introduce them to us.

Saint Basil the Great was born in Caesaraea of Cappadocia (Kayseri), the country of his mother, around 329-330. He attended local schools and struck a lasting friendship (not exempt of piques!) with Gregory of Nazianzus, whom he accompanied to study—unhurriedly—in Athens. He was supposed to prepare himself for the profession of rhetor. On their return from Greece, he parted from his companion and took to extensive traveling through the entire Middle East (358-359), eager to acquaint himself with groups of men and women living in the observance of the precepts and the counsels of the Evangel, or retiring into the "desert" as anchorites. Back in Pontus, he founded the communal center of Christian living at Annisi on the Iris (the Yesil

3

The Quest for Wisdom

If the date of 375 assigned by the early editors of Basil's letter 223 to Eustathios of Sebastaea is correct, we have there a sample of Basil's reminiscing over his own "conversion." Returning from Athens, he had visited hermits and Christian communities throughout the Middle East, settled in the solitude of the Iris, and dedicated his whole life to the edification of the Church, whatever the cost to his personal inclinations. Now he wrote to Eustathios, whose ascetic way of life had at first impressed him so much, but whose instability and stubbornness cruelly disappointed our Saint. More on the quarrel that opposed them to each other will be found below in chapter 7, "Priests and Hierarchs: Upholders of Orthodoxy."

BASIL TO EUSTATHIOS OF SEBASTAEA, LETTER 223 (375)

I have spent many a year in the pursuit of nothingness [τῆ ματαιότητι] and I have consumed almost all my youth in the vain attempt to acquire the teachings of a wisdom which is folly in God's eyes. And then, one day, as waking up from a deep slumber, I looked toward the wonderful light of the truth of the Gospel, and I saw the uselessness of the wisdom of the "rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass

4

Monastic Ideal

Basil, writing to Gregory of Nazianzus from the solitude in Pontus (letters 2 and 22), sets forth the principles of spiritual life in a religious community. We have here a first sketch of what is known as "the Rules," which were to shape the life of his followers, and which left an indelible imprint on Benedictine life in the Latin West. The Christian living must aim at realizing the ideal of ἡσυχία (quietude) and at overcoming the dispersion of secular life; Basil's ἡσυχία corresponds in Western monasticism to the Benedictine "Pax," peace.

Christian charity should inspire the entire life of the brethren, a heavenly life, yet earthly as well; hence, Basil's insistence on the necessity of elementary kindness and of unaffected good manners, for which the brethren may have had some use, since a number of them seem to have been rather boorish, if we judge from Basil's remarks.

ST BASIL TO GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, LETTER 2
(358-359?)

... One should aspire at keeping the mind in quietude [ἡσυχία]. The eye that wanders continually around, now sideways, now up and down, is unable to see distinctly what

5

Priests and Hierarchs: Their Calling

It is a common maxim that one does not, or ought not to, choose a priestly career as one chooses to become a lawyer, a pharmacist, or an architect. One is chosen. "No man takes this honor upon himself, but he that is called of God" (Heb 5:4). The words of instruction of the Apostle to Titus are equally valid: "If any man aspires to the office of a bishop, he desires a noble task" (1 Tm 3:1). The life of the Three Hierarchs is a running commentary on those seemingly contradictory principles, diversely illustrated in the correspondence of Basil and the two Gregorys.

The very circumstances of the life of Basil, not his own choice, demanded that the hegumen of the community on the Iris be able to dispense the divine mysteries to the solitaries. The letter in which he announced his ordination to his friend Gregory has not been preserved, but we possess Gregory's answer to it, letter 8. Basil had not sought the charge of the priesthood, and Gregory of Nazianzus showed a similar reluctance against being ordained, perhaps even more pronounced.

6

Priests and Hierarchs: Shepherds of the Sheep

The Three Hierarchs had to administer their Churches in the most trying circumstances. Orthodoxy was a minority in the midst of a medley of heterodox and heretics, who were often favored by local officials. On the political side, the Church aimed at establishing a modus vivendi with the civil power, which was generally inclined to lean upon the majority. Whether they liked it or not, the bishops had to acknowledge the pluralism of the society and realized that true faith was not something they could ram down the throat of reluctant people.

The Cappadocian hierarchy had to face some important changes in the government of the province: In 371, Emperor Valens reorganized the administration of the province by dividing it into two eparchies: Cappadocia Prima, the eastern part of the province with the capital Caesaraea (Kayseri); and Cappadocia Secunda, the southwestern part, with the capital Tyana, itself an insignificant little town, but strategically located on the road to Archelaïs (Aksaray), Ancyra (Ankara), Nicaea (Iznik), and Constantinople. There were precedents: Diocletian, emperor from 284 to 305, had divided Armenia into Greater and Lesser Armenia, the latter being contiguous with the eastern parts of Pontus. Basil, consecrated archbishop of Caesaraea in 370, had as his opposite number in the imperial service the “archôn” of the eparchy, with whom he maintained correct relations. The towns of Nyssa and Nazianzus were now under the jurisdic-

7

Priests and Hierarchs: Upholders of Orthodoxy

Saint Athanasius and the Church fathers who were gathered at Nicaea (325) had laid down the foundations of the catholic dogma, which the major treatises written by the Three Hierarchs brought to completion in its structural integrity. But it is not these major treatises that are the object of the present chapter. They have been analyzed, scrutinized, and commented upon by successive generations of patristic scholars and theologians. We would rather scan the correspondence and personal testimony of our Hierarchs, as they invented and tested a theological language suitable for expressing in human terms the ineffable mystery of the Triune God.

The gradual elaboration of the dogma had as its complement the refutation of heretical theories, old and new, unremittingly reborn like the heads of some monstrous Hydra. Thus, in the wake of Arianism which had made deep inroads into the two halves of Christendom, heretical movements threatened the peace, as they were being exploited by political schemers eager to capture the favor of the basileus and his representatives. It is worth noting that Basil remained personally untouchable, so great was his popularity as archbishop of Caesaraea. A distinctive feature is that Basil thought it necessary to explain theological matters to non-theologians as well; he adapted his instruction to the capacity of his correspondents: pious women,

8

Priests and Hierarchs: The Arian Persecution

In the preceding chapter, we tried to follow our hierarchs' refutation of heretical doctrines and their exposition of catholic dogma, as reflected in their correspondence. We will follow them now in the struggle against heretics and their allies in government circles. The Churches of the Middle East had been most severely affected under the reign of Emperor Valens (364-378). Valens was personally hostile to Nicene orthodoxy, and his provincial administrators followed suit. Heterodox and heretics were in the majority. The province had been divided into two eparchies, in itself a mere administrative move, but soon exploited by intrigants. Demosthenes, the imperial vicar sent to supervise the situation in Cappadocia, proved himself to be a rabid pro-Arian. Among other vexatious measures, he ordered the arrest and deportation of Gregory of Nyssa. Basil's protest in letter 225 shows forth his attitude in face of the established powers, the emperor and his agents. There is here a diplomatic approach toward regaining the imperial circles for the orthodox cause. No matter what the circumstances were, Basil saw in the basileus the representative of God on earth and the "friend of the Logos," in charge of maintaining the right order in Christendom. But at the same time, Basil never omitted to remind the imperial officials of the canonical prerogatives of the episcopate and the duty of bishops to exclude from their communion those who were deemed unworthy. We open the series with the following letter of Basil to Demosthenes.

9

Hierarchs' Frustrations

Hierarchs are not continually "defining the word of truth" or leading the fight against heretics, but they cannot avoid being continually besieged by petitioners and claimants who expect the bishop to solve their personal problems, whether about serious matters or trifles, at times ludicrous. To these unwelcome distractions from the hierarchs' main task add the case of insubordinate clergy who take it upon themselves to act in their administration without much regard for canonical procedure: the canons are for specialists, and the bishop lives far away and is not always accessible!

Several letters from Basil deal with abuses committed, more or less innocently, by "village bishops," the "chorepiscopi" (χωρεπίσκοποι). These were church leaders invested with quasi-episcopal authority, under the jurisdiction of the bishop and the metropolitan of the ecclesiastical province. They were commonly addressed as episcopi, without restrictive qualification. It appears from Basil's letters 53 and 54 that some of these chorepiscopi indulged in practices smacking of simony and ordained some unworthy candidates, in violation of regular canonical procedure.

10

Glimpses of Daily Life

The order in which we present our hierarchs' short notes, a considerable number of intimate messages well fit to inform us of their daily activities, is immaterial. We will arrange them in broad categories and will briefly comment on each piece, if need be.

Postal Service

Poorer still than ours! The imperial service, when available, could not be blindly trusted to respect the confidentiality of personal communications. Our hierarchs entrusted their letters to private messengers, often some deacon or a cleric in lesser orders, who would advise the addressee on what the author had deemed prudent not to put in writing, and would bring the answer back as soon as possible.

BASIL TO HIS FRIEND GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, LETTER 19
(written before Basil's consecration to the episcopacy)

A letter addressed to me came lately from you. It was from you all right, judging from the handwriting, as well as from the proper object of the message; the words were few,

11

Ailments and Deaths

One may have noticed in the preceding chapters the number of letters and notes in which Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus excuse themselves of not being able to visit their correspondents, often high government officials, on account of ill health. Doctors helped little or, among common prescriptions, recommended seasons at the thermal waters of Xanxaris (possibly Kara punar, the "black springs").

BASIL TO EUSEBIUS, BISHOP OF SAMOSATA, LETTER 27
(368)

When, through God's grace and with the help of your prayers, I seemed to recover somewhat from illness and to gather up my strength, winter came to confine us at home forcing us to stay put. Although the season happened to be much milder than usual, it was enough, at least for me, to hinder me not only to travel by my own means, but even to peep out of my room. . . .

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ST VLADIMIR'S SEMINARY PRESS

ISBN 0-88141-037-3

Cover Icon: St Basil the Great, St Gregory the Theologian, and St Gregory of Nyssa. Miniature, 9th c.