



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 22 August 2007*

Saint Gregory Nazianzus (2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the course of portraying the great Fathers and Doctors of the Church whom I seek to present in these Catecheses, [I spoke last time of St Gregory Nazianzus](#), a fourth-century Bishop, and today I would like to fill out this portrait of a great teacher. Today, we shall try to understand some of his teachings.

Reflecting on the mission God had entrusted to him, St Gregory Nazianzus concluded: "I was created to ascend even to God with my actions" (*Orationes* 14, 6 *De Pauperum Amore*: PG 35, 865).

In fact, he placed his talents as a writer and orator at the service of God and of the Church. He wrote numerous discourses, various homilies and panegyrics, a great many letters and poetic works (almost 18,000 verses!): a truly prodigious output.

He realized that this was the mission that God had entrusted to him: "As a servant of the Word, I adhere to the ministry of the Word; may I never agree to neglect this good. I appreciate this vocation and am thankful for it; I derive more joy from it than from all other things put together" (*Orationes* 6, 5: SC 405, 134; cf. also *Orationes* 4, 10).

Nazianzus was a mild man and always sought in his life to bring peace to the Church of his time,

torn apart by discord and heresy. He strove with Gospel daring to overcome his own timidity in order to proclaim the truth of the faith.

He felt deeply the yearning to draw close to God, to be united with him. He expressed it in one of his poems in which he writes: "Among the great billows of the sea of life, here and there whipped up by wild winds... one thing alone is dear to me, my only treasure, comfort and oblivion in my struggle, the light of the Blessed Trinity" (*Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 15: PG 37, 1250ff.). Thus, Gregory made the light of the Trinity shine forth, defending the faith proclaimed at the Council of Nicea: one God in three persons, equal and distinct - Father, Son and Holy Spirit -, "a triple light gathered into one splendour" (*Hymn for Vespers, Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 32: PG 37, 512).

Therefore, Gregory says further, in line with St Paul (I Cor 8: 6): "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom is all; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom is all; and one Holy Spirit, in whom is all" (*Orationes* 39, 12: SC 358, 172).

Gregory gave great prominence to Christ's full humanity: to redeem man in the totality of his body, soul and spirit, Christ assumed all the elements of human nature, otherwise man would not have been saved.

Disputing the heresy of Apollinaris, who held that Jesus Christ had not assumed a rational mind, Gregory tackled the problem in the light of the mystery of salvation: "What has not been assumed has not been healed" (*Ep.* 101, 32: SC 208, 50), and if Christ had not been "endowed with a rational mind, how could he have been a man?" (*Ep.* 101, 34: SC 208, 50). It was precisely our mind and our reason that needed and needs the relationship, the encounter with God in Christ.

Having become a man, Christ gave us the possibility of becoming, in turn, like him. Nazianzus exhorted people: "Let us seek to be like Christ, because Christ also became like us: to become gods through him since he himself, through us, became a man. He took the worst upon himself to make us a gift of the best" (*Orationes* 1, 5: SC 247, 78).

Mary, who gave Christ his human nature, is the true Mother of God (*Theotokos*: cf. *Ep.* 101, 16: SC 208, 42), and with a view to her most exalted mission was "purified in advance" (*Orationes* 38, 13: SC 358, 132, almost as a distant prelude to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception). Mary is proposed to Christians, and especially to virgins, as a model and their help to call upon in times of need (cf. *Orationes*, 24, 11: SC 282, 60-64).

Gregory reminds us that as human persons, we must show solidarity to one another. He writes: "'We are all one in the Lord' (cf. Rom 12: 5), rich and poor, slaves and free, healthy and sick alike; and one is the head from which all derive: Jesus Christ. And as with the members of one body, each is concerned with the other, and all with all".

He then concludes, referring to the sick and to people in difficulty: "This is the one salvation for our flesh and our soul: showing them charity" (*Orationes* 14, 8 *De Pauperum Amore: PG* 35, 868ab).

Gregory emphasizes that man must imitate God's goodness and love. He therefore recommends: "If you are healthy and rich, alleviate the need of whoever is sick and poor; if you have not fallen, go to the aid of whoever has fallen and lives in suffering; if you are glad, comfort whoever is sad; if you are fortunate, help whoever is smitten with misfortune. Give God proof of your gratitude for you are one who can benefit and not one who needs to be benefited.... Be rich not only in possessions but also in piety; not only in gold but in virtue, or rather, in virtue alone. Outdo your neighbour's reputation by showing yourself to be kinder than all; make yourself God for the unfortunate, imitating God's mercy" (*Orationes* 14, 26 *De Pauperum Amore: PG* 35, 892bc).

Gregory teaches us first and foremost the importance and necessity of prayer. He says: "It is necessary to remember God more often than one breathes" (*Orationes* 27, 4: *PG* 250, 78), because prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with our thirst. God is thirsting for us to thirst for him (cf. *Orationes* 40, 27: *SC* 358, 260).

In prayer, we must turn our hearts to God, to consign ourselves to him as an offering to be purified and transformed. In prayer we see all things in the light of Christ, we let our masks fall and immerse ourselves in the truth and in listening to God, feeding the fire of love.

In a poem which is at the same time a meditation on the purpose of life and an implicit invocation to God, Gregory writes: "You have a task, my soul, a great task if you so desire. Scrutinize yourself seriously, your being, your destiny; where you come from and where you must rest; seek to know whether it is life that you are living or if it is something more. You have a task, my soul, so purify your life: Please consider God and his mysteries, investigate what existed before this universe and what it is for you, where you come from and what your destiny will be. This is your task, my soul; therefore, purify your life" (*Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 78: *PG* 37, 1425-1426).

The holy Bishop continuously asked Christ for help, to be raised and set on his way: "I have been let down, O my Christ, by my excessive presumption: from the heights, I have fallen very low. But lift me now again so that I may see that I have deceived myself; if again I trust too much in myself, I shall fall immediately and the fall will be fatal" (*Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 67: *PG* 37, 1408).

So it was that Gregory felt the need to draw close to God in order to overcome his own weariness. He experienced the impetus of the soul, the vivacity of a sensitive spirit and the instability of transient happiness.

For him, in the drama of a life burdened by the knowledge of his own weakness and wretchedness, the experience of God's love always gained the upper hand.

You have a task, soul, St Gregory also says to us, the task of finding the true light, of finding the true nobility of your life. And your life is encountering God, who thirsts for our thirst.

To special groups

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially the groups from England, Ireland, Hungary, Sweden, Japan, Australia and the United States of America. Upon all of you, I invoke Almighty God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, as usual, a cordial greeting to the *young people*, to the *sick* and to the *newly-weds*. Let us raise our eyes to Heaven to contemplate the splendour of the Holy Mother of God, whom today the liturgy invites us to invoke as our Queen.

Dear *young people*, place yourselves and all your projects under the motherly protection of the One who gave the Saviour to the world.

Dear *sick people*, as you wait to recover your health, pray to her every day to obtain the strength to face patiently the trial of suffering.

Dear *newly-weds*, develop a sincere devotion to her, so that she may be near you in your daily life.

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