



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 29 August 2007

Saint Gregory of Nyssa (1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the last Catecheses, I spoke of two great fourth-century Doctors of the Church, Basil and Gregory Nazianzus, a Bishop in Cappadocia, in present-day Turkey. Today, we are adding a third, St Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's brother, who showed himself to be a man disposed to meditation with a great capacity for reflection and a lively intelligence open to the culture of his time. He has thus proved to be an original and profound thinker in the history of Christianity.

He was born in about 335 A.D. His Christian education was supervised with special care by his brother Basil - whom he called "father and teacher" (*Ep.* 13, 4: *SC* 363, 198) - and by his sister Macrina. He completed his studies, appreciating in particular philosophy and rhetoric.

Initially, he devoted himself to teaching and was married. Later, like his brother and sister, he too dedicated himself entirely to the ascetic life.

He was subsequently elected Bishop of Nyssa and showed himself to be a zealous Pastor, thereby earning the community's esteem.

When he was accused of embezzlement by heretical adversaries, he was obliged for a brief period to abandon his episcopal see but later returned to it triumphant (cf. *Ep.* 6: *SC* 363, 164-170) and continued to be involved in the fight to defend the true faith.

Especially after Basil's death, by more or less gathering his spiritual legacy, Gregory cooperated in the triumph of orthodoxy. He took part in various Synods; he attempted to settle disputes between Churches; he had an active part in the reorganization of the Church and, as a "pillar of orthodoxy", played a leading role at the Council of Constantinople in 381, which defined the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

Various difficult official tasks were entrusted to him by the Emperor Theodosius, he delivered important homilies and funeral discourses, and he devoted himself to writing various theological works. In addition, in 394, he took part in another Synod, held in Constantinople. The date of his death is unknown.

Gregory expressed clearly the purpose of his studies, the supreme goal to which all his work as a theologian was directed: not to engage his life in vain things but to find the light that would enable him to discern what is truly worthwhile (cf. *In Ecclesiasten hom. 1: SC 416, 106-146*).

He found this supreme good in Christianity, thanks to which "the imitation of the divine nature" is possible (*De Professione Christiana: PG 46, 244c*).

With his acute intelligence and vast philosophical and theological knowledge, he defended the Christian faith against heretics who denied the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (such as Eunomius and the Macedonians) or compromised the perfect humanity of Christ (such as Apollinaris).

He commented on Sacred Scripture, reflecting on the creation of man. This was one of his central topics: creation. He saw in the creature the reflection of the Creator and found here the way that leads to God.

But he also wrote an important book on the life of Moses, whom he presents as a man journeying towards God: this climb to Mount Sinai became for him an image of our ascent in human life towards true life, towards the encounter with God.

He also interpreted the Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father", as well as the Beatitudes. In his "Great Catechetical Discourse (*Oratio Catechetica Magna*) he developed theology's fundamental directions, not for an academic theology closed in on itself but in order to offer catechists a reference system to keep before them in their instructions, almost as a framework for a pedagogical interpretation of the faith.

Furthermore, Gregory is distinguished for his spiritual doctrine. None of his theology was academic reflection; rather, it was an expression of the spiritual life, of a life of faith lived. As a great "father of mysticism", he pointed out in various treatises - such as his *De Professione Christiana* and *De Perfectione Christiana* - the path Christians must take if they are to reach true

life, perfection.

He exalted consecrated virginity (*De Virginitate*) and proposed the life of his sister Macrina, who was always a guide and example for him (cf. *Vita Macrinae*), as an outstanding model of it.

Gregory gave various discourses and homilies and wrote numerous letters. In commenting on man's creation, he highlighted the fact that God, "the best artist, forges our nature so as to make it suitable for the exercise of royalty. Through the superiority given by the soul and through the very make-up of the body, he arranges things in such a way that man is truly fit for regal power" (*De Hominis Opificio* 4: PG 44, 136b).

Yet, we see that man, caught in the net of sin, often abuses creation and does not exercise true kingship. For this reason, in fact, that is, to act with true responsibility for creatures, he must be penetrated by God and live in his light.

Indeed, man is a reflection of that original beauty which is God: "Everything God created was very good", the holy Bishop wrote. And he added: "The story of creation (cf. Gn 1: 31) witnesses to it. Man was also listed among those very good things, adorned with a beauty far superior to all of the good things. What else, in fact, could be good, on par with one who was similar to pure and incorruptible beauty?... The reflection and image of eternal life, he was truly good; no, he was very good, with the radiant sign of life on his face" (*Homilia in Canticum* 12: PG 44, 1020c).

Man was honoured by God and placed above every other creature: "The sky was not made in God's image, not the moon, not the sun, not the beauty of the stars, no other things which appear in creation. Only you (*human soul*) were made to be the image of nature that surpasses every intellect, likeness of incorruptible beauty, mark of true divinity, vessel of blessed life, image of true light, that when you look upon it you become what he is, because through the reflected ray coming from your purity you imitate he who shines within you. Nothing that exists can measure up to your greatness" (*Homilia in Canticum* 2: PG 44, 805d).

Let us meditate on this praise of the human being. Let us also see how man was degraded by sin. And let us try to return to that original greatness: only if God is present, does man attain his true greatness.

Man therefore recognizes in himself the reflection of the divine light: by purifying his heart he is once more, as he was in the beginning, a clear image of God, exemplary Beauty (cf. *Oratio Catechetica* 6: SC 453, 174).

Thus, by purifying himself, man can see God, as do the pure of heart (cf. Mt 5: 8): "If, with a diligent and attentive standard of living, you wash away the bad things that have deposited upon your heart, the divine beauty will shine in you.... Contemplating yourself, you will see within you he

who is the desire of your heart, and you will be blessed" (*De Beatitudinibus* 6: PG 44, 1272ab). We should therefore wash away the ugliness stored within our hearts and rediscover God's light within us.

Man's goal is therefore the contemplation of God. In him alone can he find his fulfilment.

To somehow anticipate this goal in this life, he must work ceaselessly toward a spiritual life, a life in dialogue with God. In other words - and this is the most important lesson that St Gregory of Nyssa has bequeathed to us - total human fulfilment consists in holiness, in a life lived in the encounter with God, which thus becomes luminous also to others and to the world.

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including participants in the Summer University programme sponsored by the European Union of Jewish Students, as well as pilgrims from Sweden and from Indonesia. Upon all of you, I invoke God's abundant Blessings of peace and joy.

My thoughts now turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the heroic example of St John the Baptist, whose martyrdom we are celebrating today, spur you, dear *young people*, to plan your future in full fidelity to the Gospel. May it help you, dear *sick people*, to face suffering with courage, finding serenity and comfort in the Crucified Christ. May it lead you, dear *newly-weds*, to deep love for God and each other, and to experience every day the comforting joy that flows from the reciprocal gift of self.

APPEAL

In these days, some geographical areas have been devastated by grave disasters: I am thinking of the flooding in certain Eastern countries as well as the disastrous fires in Greece, in Italy and in other European nations.

In the face of such dramatic emergencies, which have taken a heavy toll of victims and caused immense material damage, it is impossible not to be concerned about the irresponsible behaviour of some, who threaten people's safety and destroy the environmental patrimony, a precious good of all humanity.

I join those who justly stigmatize these criminal acts and I invite everyone to pray for the victims of these tragedies.

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