

**St. Gregory the Theologian:
The First Great Hierarch of Constantinople**

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Introduction

The first great light to take center stage in the history of the Patriarchate of Constantinople was St. Gregory the Theologian, who was called on to serve as Patriarch and to the headship of the Second Ecumenical Council. Though he served as Patriarch for less than a year, he has the unique honor of holding a place in three long-standing triads remembered for their lasting contribution to the Orthodox faith. That is, he is one of the three men our Church honors with the title “Theologian”; one of Three Great Hierarchs; and one of the three Cappadocian Fathers. In his work in the defense and development of Nicene Orthodoxy he showed himself exceedingly gifted, wholly dedicated to God, and willing to risk everything for the sake of Christ, the Truth.

Yet in my own view he stands out even more prominently in his humility and honesty, as expressed in his poetry. From what I have read of his writings, he seems to me the most accessible of the early Church Fathers I have encountered. His poetry is infused not only with the Holy Spirit, but with his own fervent yet tentative humanity, his joys and frustrations, and his struggle to see Christ's light in a fallen world. Through his poetry I encounter parts of myself that I might otherwise be inclined to ignore out of shame.

Let us, then, meet St. Gregory not only as a hierarch and theologian but also as a person and poet.

Youth and Education

Gregory was born around 330 in south-west Cappadocia (modern Turkey). His father, also named Gregory, was bishop of the small town of Nazianzus. Gregory was the eldest of three children. Gregory began his higher studies around the age of 17 at the

School of Rhetoric in Cappadocian Caesarea. It was there that he first encountered Basil (the future St. Basil the Great), who was about the same age and was to become Gregory's life-long best friend. Gregory and Basil parted ways when Gregory went on to study at the Christian Schools of Rhetoric Theology in Palestinian Caesarea and Alexandria in Egypt. From these schools, both shaped by Origen, Gregory took a life-long love for Origenistic theology and monastic solitude.¹

“Determining Forces”

Fr. John McGuckin identifies five “determining forces” which marked out the course of Gregory's life, and which help us toward a better understanding of his character:²

1. The claims made on his loyalties by his father, who Gregory held in great esteem. “[Gregory] would always, in the end, comply with [his father's] requests to accompany him and support him in the administration of the family estates and the management of the local church at Nazianzus.”
2. Recurring ill-health or a delicate constitution. He was clearly nervous and detested tense situations and “would have been perfectly happy living a life of monastic seclusion, if only people had let him.” In fact, at several points of crisis in his life he disappeared quietly from the scene, seeking refuge in solitude.
3. Gregory's friendship with Basil the Great. Basil, a great administrator and influential bishop, laid claims on Gregory's loyalties, calling for his assistance in the front line of Church politics. Basil's requests overtaxed

1 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, pp. vii-viii.

2 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, pp. vii-viii.

Gregory's political abilities and the resulting emotional strain cast a shadow over their relationship in their final years.

4. The fact that, for a brief but crucial period after Basil's death, Gregory took a central place on the stage of Church history, working to reclaim Constantinople to Nicene orthodoxy. "In this period he played a leading role in the Second Ecumenical Council and saw the doctrine of the deity of the Holy Spirit, for which he had long labored, brought to canonical recognition in the Creed."
5. His own consciousness of his gifts. He was "the greatest rhetorician of his age" and a lover of learning, using his talents in the service of the Gospel, protecting and developing Nicene orthodoxy.

Gregory's Life Prior to His Prominence

Gregory moved to Athens to complete his studies, and he lodged there with Basil. In 357 (around the age of 27) Gregory moved back to his father's estate, where he assisted his father in his duties as a provincial bishop. Around this time, Basil founded a monastic community near Neo-Caesarea in Cappadocia. "Glowing descriptions of the place," writes McGuckin, "quickly enticed Gregory away from his father, and between 358-359 he joined Basil." During this time they worked on the original *Philokalia*, an anthology of spiritual texts from the writings of Origen.³

Soon after, Gregory was induced to take a step which he subsequently regretted and from which he attempted to escape: he was ordained priest. Gregory's second

3 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, pp. viii-x.

Oration is devoted to defending his unsuccessful flight. It formed a pattern for some later works, including St. John Chrysostom's *On the Priesthood*.⁴

In 372, Basil had Gregory made Bishop of Sasima, a small town in Cappadocia. The diocese was insignificant and Gregory seems to have had to taste for the work of a bishop. It seems that Gregory continued to reside at Nazianzus until the death of his father (in 374), and probably later.⁵

The Acme of Gregory's Life

The “great moment” of Gregory's life was to come at the Council of Constantinople in 381. In 379, “the Nicene Christians of Constantinople sent Gregory an urgent plea to help them consolidate their position... He was an ideal choice, a noted catholic theologian who was a bishop... but clearly unattached and therefore able to come immediately and stand in opposition to the Arian Patriarch Demophilus.”⁶ Gregory set to work in a vigorous campaign, preaching Orthodoxy in what had become the heartland of the Arian heresy. All the churches were in the hands of the Arians, so Gregory used a relative's house, consecrating it as *Anastasia* (Resurrection).⁷ There he delivered his five *Theological Orations* (which elegantly present the faith of the Church on the nature of God and the Trinity). “So eminent a theologian claimed the attention of the emperor and assembled bishops and, despite what turned out to be his political naivety, he was called on to ascend the seat of Constantinople, vacated by the Arian Demophilus in 380.”⁸ At the time, Gregory recorded that he felt like a triumphant hero, carried away in the splendor of the imperial procession that he had been called on to join (although he was

4 Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 41.

5 Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 41.

6 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, pp. xi-xii.

7 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, p. xii.

8 Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 41.

also the target of popular scorn and ridicule from the waning majority of Arians), and that his body “was feeble and sore broken with sickness.”⁹ “A little later, on the death of Meletius of Antioch, the president of the council, in May 381, Gregory was chosen to be his successor.”¹⁰ Thus we see how this power-averse yet courageous and conscientious saint came to play a central role (in human terms) in the triumph of Nicene orthodoxy at the Second Council.

However, Gregory's time as Patriarch of Constantinople and president of the Council was to be very brief:

[After Meletius' death] the long-standing dispute over the rightful succession to the see of Antioch (the Meletian Schism) broke out with renewed vigor among the party that had come from that Church. The tentative agreement that had already been reached (that the two rival parties at Antioch should recognize on another's Patriarch: first Meletius, then after his death, Paulinus if he still survived) completely broke down in pandemonious dispute. These old wounds had been reopened at the worst possible moment, and Gregory as the new president was supposed to reconcile the differences. In the event he failed. He wrote about the problem shortly afterwards: “If I must speak the truth, I feel disposed to shun every Conference of Bishops; because I have never yet seen as Synod that came to a happy end. They do not solve problems; they increase them! There is always rivalry there and ambitions which soon gain mastery over all reason. I am not exaggerating. If a man tries to act as a mediator he is more likely to draw fire on himself than he is to reconcile the parties. Accordingly I have retired to private life and consider tranquility the only secure way of living.”

The final straw for Gregory was that into this chaos there then arrived the Alexandrian delegation under the new Apollinarian Patriarch Timothy. The Egyptians had arrived late because of the recent death of Peter II, and missed the early canonical sessions. The delegation laid formal protest to the appointment of Gregory as Patriarch on the grounds that the business had been transacted before their arrival, and because Gregory was officially the Bishop of Sasima and his transfer at that date was uncanonical. Gregory had had enough of it all and... to the astonishment of all he announced his resignation to the Synod in June 381 [barely a month after the Council had confirmed his election as Patriarch], and after a

9 McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, pp. 327-328.

10 Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, pp. 41-42.

farewell oration he left them all to get along without him. Nektarios (381-397) was elected in his place.¹¹

Gregory sought the emperor Theodosius's permission to “yield before envy”, and the emperor's warm and understanding reaction showed that he was pleased with Gregory's service and sad to seem him forced to retire, but supportive of his decision. Among his fellow bishops there were a wide range of reactions.¹²

Points of Doctrine

The first group of heretics which St. Gregory had to combat was that of the Arians. At this point in history there were the extreme Arians, who held the Son to be a creature, and the Homoians, who taught that the Son was of like nature to the Father. “Against this Christology, St. Gregory consistently taught that the Son the Nicene position that the Son was consubstantial (*homoousios*)--equal in nature and glory to the Father and thus fully and entirely God, uncreated and glorious... Gregory distinguishes the Father as unoriginate and the Son as having his origin timelessly from the unoriginate source.”¹³

The second movement which Gregory fought was Apollinarianism. This heresy taught that the Divine Wisdom itself assumed the place of the human mind and soul in Christ. Gregory held to the tradition he received from his mentor Origin that Christ had a human soul. Gregory took a position consonant with Athanasius, but developed it more fully: he insisted on the full and authentic range of Christ's humanity; he expressed the Orthodox position in a more clear and persuasive way than his predecessors in saying that “Christ is one, out of two. Two natures unite in him to the one. There are not two sons.”

11 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, pp. *xiv-xv*.

12 McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, pp. 360-361.

13 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, pp. *xv-xvi*.

Gregory paved the way to a clearer definition of “person” and “nature” (previously not clear in Greek theology) and toward the final resolution of this issue that would come with the Council of Chalcedon in 451.¹⁴

The third heretical movement affecting Gregory's doctrine has come to be known as Pneumatomachianism since it denies the personal identity (hypostatic reality) and the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

In the matter of setting out a conceptual framework for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, the Church owes an inestimable debt to the Cappadocians, not least among them Gregory of Nazianzus. He taught the hypostatic reality and divine essence of the Holy Spirit with vigor and confidence and summed up this position in the demand for full worship and equal honor to be given to the Spirit. This doctrinal summary is the essential theological statement added to the Creed in the Council of Constantinople. Even though Basil accepted the same doctrine in substance, Gregory was much clearer on this point than Basil... It was the Spirit who gave life, the Son who mediated that life to God the ultimate goal of all being... The Spirit life-giver and sanctifier leads on the soul to Christ... [This] theology of the Trinity is not a static and moribund theological abstraction, it is the very energy and substance of all his spiritual life.¹⁵

St. Gregory's Retirement and Poetry

“At the end of his life, after resigning his position as Archbishop of Constantinople in the midst of the Second Ecumenical Council and returning to his native Cappadocia, St Gregory... retired to a secluded life at home in an obscure, muddy village, and wrote poetry.” He had written some poetry previously, but the vast majority of his poetry dates from this final period of his life, 381-390. He wrote prolifically: we about 19,000 lines of poetry come down to us.¹⁶ (This is the equivalent of about 25 or 50 15-page research papers, depending on line length.)

14 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, pp. xvi-xviii.

15 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, pp. xviii-xix.

16 St. Gregory, *On God and Man*, introduction by Peter Gilbert, p. 1.

Gregory's poetic style is difficult to translate, writes Fr. John McGuckin, because his Greek is “often cast in Homeric style and is particularly difficult, often deliberately obscure, suggestive and ironic.”¹⁷ Even more noteworthy, as Peter Gilbert points out, is the character and depth of Gregory's poems:

For there are things in these poems that some readers may find unsettling. Indeed, one might dispute the contention that light is a defining characteristic of Gregory's poems. Certain passages in this volume [of Gregory's poetry] may appear distinctly bleak. Gregory seems, in some of these poems, to be struggling with what, in modern terms, might be diagnosed as a state of clinical depression: he speaks of going about under a black cloud,... a loss of a sense of God's presence,... self-doubt and doubts as to the value of life. Gregory in fact tells us that one of his chief reasons for writing poetry is that it [helps to ease his physical and mental suffering].¹⁸

Yet, Gilbert points out, it would be foolish to fall into the trap of dismissing the poems, or their dark passages, as a symptom of mental illness. Rather, the poems are characterized by a very realistic portrayal of human life along with a theological interpretation. Gregory is sharing insights that would be no less true if at some later point he were “feeling better.”¹⁹

I am struck however, by the feeling that my own clumsiness with words is compounding Gilbert's difficulty in expressing the depth of Gregory's poetry, a depth that defies description. Let me instead offer Gregory's poem “On the Precariousness of Human Nature” (1.2.12)

Dear world, though not so very dear, why like a rolling wheel
do you bear down on me, who trudge wheezing
like a tiny ant distressed at his sore burden?
But you who are so huge, on the other hand, bear so much.
I know in fact, that you are from God, proclaiming Him. But likewise,
formed

17 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, p. v.

18 St. Gregory, *On God and Man*, introduction by Peter Gilbert, pp. 1-3.

19 St. Gregory, *On God and Man*, introduction by Peter Gilbert, pp. 1-3.

by Christ's own hand, you were woven of things
both heavenly and earthly. The body was fashioned down here,
while soul, again, is a breath of the great Mind.
Nevertheless, like all the others, I am driven to and fro
by my miseries, miseries from an enemy.
And like a seagoing dolphin upon land, in the thin air I die.
World, my time is done; bring the people on yet unwounded.²⁰

How true Gregory's words ring in my ears—true to the experience and suffering
of a hero in my own life, used up and dying—half longing for the end to come quickly
and half holding on for the sake of the people in her life who are still struggling.

From my brief acquaintance with St. Gregory so far, I could not agree more
wholeheartedly with the sentiments of Fr. John McGuckin in his poem, “St. Gregory
Nazianzen:”

Of all the ancients
You I think I could live with,
(some of the time)
comfortable in you
like an old coat
sagged and fraying at the back,
(its pockets drooping with important nothings
like string, and manuscripts of poems)
perfect for watching you off your guard,
rambling round your country garden,
planting roses, not turnips,
contrary to the manual
for a sensible monk;
master of the maybe;
anxious they might take you up all wrong;
shaking your fist at an Emperor,
(once he had turned the corner
out of sight);
every foray into speech
a coasted regret.

Your heart was like a spider's silk
swinging wildly at the slightest breeze,
too tender for this tumbling world
of mountebanks, and quacks and gobs,

20 St. Gregory, *On God and Man*, p. 130.

but turned to hear the distant voices
of the singing stars
and marvel at the mercy of it all.²¹

After a debilitating illness, Gregory died around 390, leaving all his property to
the Church at Nazianzus for the benefit of the poor.²²

21 McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. xvii.

22 St. Gregory, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Fr. John McGuckin, p. xv.

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