

2.1 *Cappadocian Fathers*

Cappadocian Fathers: St. Gregory of Nyssa

PATRISTICS

A blessed family

St. Gregory, a remarkable figure in the history of Christianity, was the sibling of the esteemed St. Basil the Great. Their familial bond extended beyond mere bloodline, as the two brothers shared a profound intellectual and spiritual connection. In collaboration with other luminaries of the early Church, such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Gregory of Nyssa contributed to a substantial legacy of theological thought, liturgical practices, and spiritual literature that continues to shape Eastern Christianity to this day.

The significance of their collective work lies in its interpretation of Eastern Christianity's theology, liturgical structure, and the very nature of God. Through their writings and teachings, St. Gregory and his brother St. Basil played a pivotal role in establishing our understanding of the Trinity and the distinctive nature of Christ within it.

St. Gregory, in particular, expressed his deep gratitude for his elder brother's guidance and mentorship in a letter addressed to St. Peter. He referred to St. Basil as "our father and master," acknowledging the profound influence St. Basil had on both himself and their younger brother. St. Basil's wisdom, piety, and unwavering commitment to the faith left an enduring mark on St. Gregory, shaping his own theological perspectives and spiritual journey.

Together, St. Gregory and St. Basil formed an intellectual powerhouse, delving into profound theological discussions and exploring the mysteries of faith. Their collaboration resulted in a rich body of literature that addressed various aspects of Christian doctrine, including the nature of God, the role of Christ in salvation, and the significance of the sacraments. Their writings not only influenced their contemporaries but also continue to inspire and guide believers throughout history.

St. Gregory's contributions to Eastern Christianity cannot be overstated. His theological insights, liturgical innovations, and spiritual writings have left an indelible mark on the faith and practice of millions of believers. Through his collaboration with St. Basil the Great and other influential

figures of his time, St. Gregory helped shape the contours of Eastern Christianity and laid the foundation for its enduring legacy.

His Life

In 335 A.D., St. Basil was born and received a quality education. His younger brother, St. Gregory, however, had a different path in mind. St. Gregory initially pursued a career as a teacher of rhetoric, studying the art of effective public speaking and writing. However, his family, including his powerful bishop brother, St. Basil, did not approve of his choice and urged him to serve the Church. Despite their initial disagreements, St. Basil, along with St. Gregory's friends and sister, St. Macrina, eventually convinced him to become a priest. Soon after, St. Gregory was elevated to Bishop of Nyssa. Like his brother, he devoted his life to defending the Christian faith against the challenges posed by the Arians.

St. Gregory of Nyssa faced numerous hardships and conflicts throughout his life. Despite being falsely accused by heretics, he was deposed twice from his position as bishop. However, in 378 AD, justice prevailed, and he was finally restored to his see. However, the following year, his beloved brother, St. Basil the Great, passed away. The two brothers shared a deep bond, and St. Gregory was profoundly grieved by this loss. To honor his brother's memory, St. Gregory composed a moving funeral oration and dedicated himself to completing St. Basil's unfinished work, the *Hexaemeron*. This series of nine sermons, delivered during Great Lent, explored and elaborated upon the Genesis account of the world's creation in six days.

St. Gregory's trials and tribulations did not end there. The following year, he experienced another loss when his sister, St. Macrina, also passed away. To preserve her legacy, St. Gregory authored a hagiography, meticulously detailing her life and virtues.

Amidst these personal sorrows, St. Gregory remained steadfast in his commitment to defending Orthodoxy. He attended the Council of Antioch, a local synod, where he passionately advocated for the perpetual virginity of the Theotokos (Mother of God). The council's objective was to refute a heresy that denied this fundamental tenet. Additionally, the council forbade the worship of the Theotokos as God or part of the Godhead, emphasizing the distinction between divine and human nature.

Concurrently, St. Gregory continued his tireless fight against Arianism, a heresy that challenged the divinity of Christ. He played a pivotal role in the Second Ecumenical Council held in

Constantinople, where the final section concerning the Holy Spirit was added to the Nicene Creed. This addition solidified the understanding of the Trinity as consisting of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

His Works

St. Gregory's prolific theological endeavors and voluminous correspondence contribute an eloquent and intellectually distinctive body of knowledge to Orthodox theology and spirituality. His profound understanding of Christian beliefs is evident in his seminal work, the 'Catechism,' which serves as a testament to his theological acumen.

In his 'Life of Moses,' St. Gregory presents a mystical portrayal of God that is both audacious and humble, offering insights that remain unparalleled in Christian thought. His letters are characterized by their elegance, grace, and beauty, foreshadowing a writing and thinking style that would not emerge until the Romantic era of Western literature, over a millennium later.

St. Gregory possessed a rare gift for language, wielding it with skill and precision to persuade, engage the senses, and illuminate the intellect. This attribute set him apart from his contemporaries and even among the early Church Fathers. He reveled in the power of words, recognizing their capacity to transform hearts and minds.

St. Gregory's theological contributions extend beyond his written works. As a gifted speaker, he captivated audiences with his eloquence and passion. His sermons and homilies were renowned for their clarity, depth, and spiritual insight. He possessed a unique ability to communicate complex theological concepts in a manner that was both accessible and inspiring.

St. Gregory's legacy continues to influence Orthodox theology and spirituality to this day. His writings have been translated into numerous languages and continue to be studied and revered by scholars and laypeople alike. His insights into the nature of God, the human condition, and the path to salvation offer a timeless source of wisdom and guidance for believers seeking a deeper understanding of their faith.

Triadology

St. Gregory of Nyssa is principally remembered for two substantial contributions to the field of theology. Foremost among these is his doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which further developed the

theological understandings of his contemporary, St. Basil the Great, and their mutual friend, St. Gregory the Theologian.

Following the lead of St. Basil, St. Gregory proposed a thought-provoking analogy to comprehend the three "Persons" of the Trinity. He suggested that we can envision them along the lines of three members belonging to the same class. Similar to how Peter, Paul, and Timothy can be considered three distinct individuals, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can be understood as three distinct entities.

But why, then, do we not acknowledge them as three separate Gods? St. Gregory addresses this question by pointing out a crucial distinction. Typically, we can differentiate between members of the same class based on observable physical characteristics such as shape, size, and color. Even if they appear identical, they occupy different positions in space. However, these criteria are inapplicable to incorporeal beings like God.

Even lesser spiritual beings possess varying degrees of goodness that allow us to distinguish between them, but this distinction is also irrelevant in the case of God. Therefore, the only way to discern the three "Persons" of the Trinity from one another is through their mutual relationships.

In St. Gregory's words, "it is impossible to think of one member of the Trinity without thinking of the others too." He likens them to a chain of three inseparable links, each pulling the others along. This profound analogy encapsulates the interconnectedness and interdependence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the Trinity.

Infinite, without beginning

St. Gregory's second significant contribution was his spiritual theology, in which he argued for the infinity of God. He countered the prevailing view of the time, influenced by Origen, which posited that God was limited. In Platonic philosophy, limitation was seen as essential for clarity and knowability. However, St. Gregory contended that if God were limited, it would imply the existence of something greater than God, which would contradict the concept of an all-encompassing and supreme being.

Drawing inspiration from neoplatonic philosophers like Plotinus, St. Gregory asserted that God is without boundaries, unbounded by any external force or concept. He argued that God's infinity defied human comprehension, as any attempt to grasp the entirety of God's essence would be futile. He is the first Christian to defend it, apart from some hints in the work of St. Irenaeus.

In contrast to Origen's notion of a spiritual journey characterized by increasing illumination and knowledge of God through Scripture, St. Gregory maintained that God's infinity rendered him incomprehensible to the human mind. He emphasized that the mystical experience was not about acquiring more information about God but about coming to terms with the unfathomable nature of the divine.

St. Gregory's spiritual theology had a profound impact on Christian thought and influenced subsequent theologians. His emphasis on the infinity and incomprehensibility of God challenged traditional conceptions of the divine and encouraged a deeper contemplation of the mystery of God's being.

Stages of Spiritual Progression

In his spiritual journey, St. Gregory identifies three distinct stages of spiritual progression. The first stage is characterized by an initial darkness or ignorance, where the individual is not yet aware of the spiritual realm. This stage is followed by spiritual illumination, where the individual experiences a sense of connection to the divine and receives insights into the nature of reality. However, the journey does not end there. St. Gregory emphasizes that there is a final stage, a darkness of the mind in contemplation of the God who cannot be comprehended. This is known as apophatic theology, which holds that God is beyond human understanding and cannot be fully grasped by human concepts or language.

St. Gregory draws upon the story of Moses as an allegory for this spiritual journey. Moses' first encounter with God occurs at the burning bush, a theophany of light and illumination. This represents the initial stage of spiritual awakening, where the individual experiences a glimpse of the divine. However, Moses' journey continues, and he later encounters God in the cloud, where he realizes that God cannot be seen by the eyes. This symbolizes the second stage, where the individual comes to understand that God cannot be limited to physical or sensory perception.

Finally, Moses ascends Mount Sinai and enters the "divine darkness." Here, he realizes that God cannot be known by the mind either. This is the third and final stage of spiritual progression, where the individual transcends rational thought and logic to experience a direct and ineffable connection with the divine. St. Gregory emphasizes that it is only through not-knowing and not-seeing that God can, paradoxically, be known and seen. This concept of unknowing as a path to knowledge

became highly influential in both Western and Eastern spirituality, thanks in part to the mystical writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

St. Gregory's ideas on spiritual progression and apophatic theology have had a profound impact on the development of mystical and contemplative traditions. He is widely regarded as a major figure in the history of these disciplines, offering insights into the nature of spiritual experience and the limitations of human understanding when it comes to comprehending the divine.

Epektasis, Constant Progress

Related to this is St. Gregory's idea of epektasis or constant progress. Platonic philosophy, which significantly influenced early Christian thought, held that stability represented perfection, while change signified deterioration. In contrast to this view, St. Gregory envisioned the ideal of human perfection as an ongoing journey of spiritual growth and moral excellence. He rejected the notion that perfection meant reaching a static, unchanging state. Instead, he emphasized the importance of continuous progress in virtue and godliness.

In St. Gregory's theological framework, God himself exists as the epitome of unchanging perfection. God has always been and will always remain perfect, without any need for improvement or transformation. However, humanity, in contrast, has a different trajectory. After the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, humans were left in a state of imperfection and separation from God. The goal for humanity, according to St. Gregory, is not to return to an unchanging state of perfection but to embark on a continuous journey of becoming more and more perfect, striving to become more united to God.

Another significant aspect of St. Gregory's teachings relates to the question of universal salvation. While some early Christian theologians, such as Origen, speculated about the possibility of the salvation of all humans, St. Gregory took a more cautious approach. He acknowledged that it is impossible to know definitively whether or not all humans will be saved. However, he offered a hopeful alternative to theologies like that of St. Augustine, which suggested that at least some individuals were predestined to eternal condemnation. St. Gregory taught that faithful Christians should hold onto the hope and pray for the salvation of all, even after death. He believed that God's love and mercy extended beyond the boundaries of earthly life, offering the possibility of redemption and transformation even beyond the grave.

St. Gregory of Nyssa on Virtues

The virtuous life begins with free will. It is a choice that flows from the deepest part of our being, a choice for goodness and truth. This choice causes distress to tyrants, for it undermines their power and authority. Virtue is not something that can be imposed from the outside; it must come from within. “When we lay bare the hidden meaning of history, scripture is seen to teach that the birth which distresses the tyrant is the beginning of the virtuous life. I am speaking of the kind of birth in which free will serves as the midwife, delivering the child amid great pain. For no one causes grief to his antagonist unless he exhibits in himself those marks which give proof of his victory over the other.”
(from *The Life of Moses*)

Unlike other pleasures, virtue is timeless and constantly fresh. It does not fade with time or become stale. This is because virtue is not based on external circumstances, but on our inner being. It is a quality of character that we carry with us wherever we go. “A greedy appetite for food is terminated by satiety and the pleasure of drinking ends when our thirst is quenched. And so it is with the other things... But the possession of virtue, once it is solidly achieved, cannot be measured by time nor limited by satiety. Rather, to those who are its disciples it always appears as something ever new and fresh.”

The soul follows Moses (commandments) and the cloud (spiritual meaning) to advance in virtue. This journey is not always easy. There are times when we must cross the Sea (purification), defeating enemies (temptations), tasting bitter life (suffering), and enjoying gospel springs and living water (grace and mercy). But if we persevere, we will eventually reach our destination: the contemplation of transcendent Being.

The contemplation of transcendent Being is the ultimate goal of the virtuous life. It is a state of perfect happiness and fulfillment. In this state, we are united with God and experience the fullness of His love. “The soul has followed Moses and the cloud, both of these serving as guides for those who would advance in virtue; Moses here represents the commandments of the Law; and the cloud that leads the way, its spiritual meaning. The soul has been purified by crossing the Sea; it has removed itself from and destroyed the enemy army. It has tasted of the waters of Marah, that is, of life deprived of all sinful pleasure; and this at first had seemed bitter and unpleasant to the taste but offered a sensation of sweetness to those who accepted the wood. Next it enjoyed the beauty of the palm trees of the gospel and the springs; it filled itself with the living water, that is, the rock. It took within itself the bread of heaven. It overwhelmed the foreign host—a victory due to the extended arms of the

Lawgiver, which thus foreshadowed the mystery of the Cross. Only then can the soul go on to the contemplation of transcendent Being.”

His Writings

St. Gregory, a prominent figure in the early Church, left behind a significant body of works that encompass various genres and address a wide range of theological, philosophical, and practical topics. Among his writings are dogmatic treatises against Eunomius, in which he refuted the heretical teachings of Eunomius of Cyzicus, who denied the full divinity of Christ. These treatises demonstrate St. Gregory's unwavering commitment to upholding orthodox Christian doctrine.

In addition to his dogmatic works, St. Gregory also produced ascetic and moral treatises on virginity and other topics related to spiritual growth and ethical conduct. These treatises provide valuable insights into his understanding of the Christian life and his emphasis on moral purity and the pursuit of virtue.

St. Gregory's philosophical works explore profound questions about the nature of humanity and the soul. His treatise "On the Making of Man" delves into the creation and purpose of humankind, while his work "On the Soul" examines the intricate relationship between the soul and the body. These philosophical inquiries reflect St. Gregory's deep intellectual curiosity and his desire to understand the mysteries of human existence.

Among his apologetic works, "The Great Catechism" stands out as a comprehensive exposition of Christian doctrine intended for catechumens preparing for baptism. In this work, St. Gregory systematically presents the fundamental beliefs and practices of Christianity, providing a clear and accessible guide for those seeking to deepen their faith.

St. Gregory's oratorical skills are evident in his funeral oration, which eloquently expresses his grief and profound respect for the deceased. This oration showcases his ability to craft moving and emotionally resonant language that resonates with his audience.

Lastly, St. Gregory's numerous letters encompass a wide range of topics and addressees, making up his most extensive body of writing. These letters offer a glimpse into his personal life, relationships, and pastoral concerns. They reveal his dedication to guiding and supporting his flock, his wisdom in resolving conflicts, and his compassionate response to the needs of others.

Through his diverse works, St. Gregory left a lasting legacy as a prolific writer, theologian, philosopher, and pastor. His writings continue to inspire and guide believers, providing insights into

the mysteries of faith, the pursuit of holiness, and the search for deeper understanding of human nature and the divine.

Category	Works
Dogmatic Treatises	against Eunomius, Triadology
Ascetic and Moral Treatises	On virginity, on infants' early deaths, and on pilgrimages
Philosophical Works	On the making of man, on the soul and the resurrection, and 'The Life of Moses'
Apologetic Works	'The Great Catechism'
Oratorical Works	'Funeral Oration on Meletius,' as well as regarding the baptism of Christ
Letters	To Eusebius, to the city of Sebasteia, to Ablabius, to Cynegius, regarding a testimonial, to Stagirus, to a friend, to a student of the classics, an invitation, to Libanius, a second letter to Libanius, on his work against Eunomius, to the Church at Nicomedia, to the Bishop of Melitene, to Adelphius the lawyer, to Amphilochius, to Eustathia, Ambrosia, and Basilissa, lastly, to Flavian



Review Questions

1. Who is St. Gregory's brother? (A: St. Basil the Great)
2. What is St. Gregory's first main contribution? (A: His doctrine on the Holy Trinity.)
3. What is St. Gregory's second main contribution? (A: He argued for the infinity of God.)

4. Name one of St. Gregory's great works. (A: The Life of Moses.)
5. True or false? St. Gregory believed humanity's goal is to become more and more perfect, like God, and that someday it could be achievable. (A: False)
6. True or false? St. Gregory was happy to be a cleric. (A: False)
7. True or false? St. Gregory had a good education. (A: True)
8. What are St. Gregory's three stages of spiritual progression? (A: initial darkness or ignorance, spiritual illumination, and a darkness of the mind in contemplation of the God who cannot be comprehended.)
9. True or false? In St. Gregory's theology, God himself has always been perfect and has never changed. (A: True)
10. Name three people he wrote letters to. (Sample A: Libanius, Flavian, and Stagarius.)

