



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 5 September 2007

Saint Gregory of Nyssa (2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I present to you certain aspects of the teaching of St Gregory of Nyssa, of whom we spoke last Wednesday. First of all, Gregory of Nyssa had a very lofty concept of human dignity. Man's goal, the holy Bishop said, is to liken himself to God, and he reaches this goal first of all through the love, knowledge and practice of the virtues, "*bright beams that shine from the divine nature*" (*De Beatitudinibus* 6: PG 44, 1272c), in a perpetual movement of adherence to the good like a corridor outstretched before oneself. In this regard, Gregory uses an effective image already present in Paul's *Letter to the Philippians: épekteinómenos* (3: 13), that is, "I press on" towards what is greater, towards truth and love. This vivid expression portrays a profound reality: the perfection we desire to attain is not acquired once and for all; perfection means journeying on, it is continuous readiness to move ahead because we never attain a perfect likeness to God; we are always on our way (cf. *Homilia in Canticum* 12: PG 44, 1025d). The history of every soul is that of a love which fills every time and at the same time is open to new horizons, for God continually stretches the soul's possibilities to make it capable of ever greater goods. God himself, who has sown the seeds of good in us and from whom every initiative of holiness stems, "models the block..., and polishing and cleansing our spirit, forms Christ within us" (*In Psalmos* 2, 11: PG 44, 544b).

Gregory was anxious to explain: "In fact, this likeness to the Divine is not our work at all; it is not the achievement of any faculty of man; it is the great gift of God bestowed upon our nature at the very moment of our birth" (*De Virginitate* 12, 2: SC 119, 408-410). For the soul, therefore, "it is not

a question of knowing something about God but of having God within" (*De Beatitudinibus* 6: PG 44, 1269c). Moreover, as Gregory perceptively observes, "Divinity is purity, it is liberation from the passions and the removal of every evil: if all these things are in you, God is truly in you" (*De Beatitudinibus* 6: PG 44, 1272c).

When we have God in us, when man loves God, through that reciprocity which belongs to the law of love he wants what God himself wants (cf. *Homilia in Canticum* 9: PG 44, 956ac); hence, he cooperates with God in fashioning the divine image in himself, so that "our spiritual birth is the result of a free choice, and we are in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we ourselves wish to be, and through our will forming ourselves in accordance with the model that we choose" (*Vita Moysis* 2, 3: SC 1ff., 108). To ascend to God, man must be purified: "The way that leads human nature to Heaven is none other than detachment from the evils of this world.... Becoming like God means becoming righteous, holy and good.... If, therefore, according to Ecclesiastes (5: 1), 'God is in Heaven', and if, as the Prophet says, 'You have made God your refuge' (Ps 73[72]: 28), it necessarily follows that you must be where God is found, since you are united with him. "Since he commanded you to call God 'Father' when you pray, he tells you definitely to be likened to your Heavenly Father and to lead a life worthy of God, as the Lord orders us more clearly elsewhere, saying, 'Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5: 48)" (*De Oratione Dominica* 2: PG 44, 1145ac).

In this journey of spiritual asceticism Christ is the Model and Teacher, he shows us the beautiful image of God (cf. *De Perfectione Christiana*: PG 46, 272a). Each of us, looking at him, finds ourselves "the painter of our own life", who has the will to compose the work and the virtues as his colours (*ibid.*: PG 46, 272b). So, if man is deemed worthy of Christ's Name how should he behave? This is Gregory's answer: "[He must] always examine his own thoughts, his own words and his own actions in his innermost depths to see whether they are oriented to Christ or are drifting away from him" (*ibid.*: PG 46, 284c). And this point is important because of the value it gives to the word "Christian". A Christian is someone who bears Christ's Name, who must therefore also liken his life to Christ. We Christians assume a great responsibility with Baptism.

But Christ, Gregory says, is also present in the poor, which is why they must never be offended: "Do not despise them, those who lie idle, as if for this reason they were worth nothing. Consider who they are and you will discover wherein lies their dignity: they represent the Person of the Saviour. And this is how it is: for in his goodness the Lord gives them his own Person so that through it, those who are hard of heart and enemies of the poor may be moved to compassion" (*De Pauperibus Amandis*: PG 46, 460bc). Gregory, as we said, speaks of rising: rising to God in prayer through purity of heart, but also rising to God through love of neighbour. Love is the ladder that leads to God. Consequently, Gregory of Nyssa strongly recommends to all his listeners: "Be generous with these brothers and sisters, victims of misfortune. Give to the hungry from what you deprive your own stomach" (*ibid.*: PG 46, 457c).

Gregory recalls with great clarity that we all depend on God and therefore exclaims: "Do not think that everything belongs to you! There must also be a share for the poor, God's friends. In fact, the truth is that everything comes from God, the universal Father, and that we are brothers and sisters and belong to the same lineage" (*ibid.*: PG, 465b). The Christian should then examine himself, Gregory insists further: "But what use is it to fast and abstain from eating meat if with your wickedness all you do is to gnaw at your brother? What do you gain in God's eyes from not eating your own food if later, acting unfairly, you snatch from their hands the food of the poor?".

Let us end our catechesis on the three great Cappadocian Fathers by recalling that important aspect of Gregory of Nyssa's spiritual doctrine which is prayer. To progress on the journey to perfection and to welcome God within him, to bear the Spirit of God within him, the love of God, man must turn to God trustingly in prayer: "Through prayer we succeed in being with God. But anyone who is with God is far from the enemy. Prayer is a support and protection of charity, a brake on anger, an appeasement and the control of pride. Prayer is the custody of virginity, the protection of fidelity in marriage, the hope for those who are watching, an abundant harvest for farmers, certainty for sailors" (*De Oratione Dominica* 1: PG 44, 1124ab). The Christian always prays by drawing inspiration from the Lord's Prayer: "So if we want to pray for the Kingdom of God to come, we must ask him for this with the power of the Word: that I may be distanced from corruption, delivered from death, freed from the chains of error; that death may never reign over me, that the tyranny of evil may never have power over us, that the adversary may never dominate me nor make me his prisoner through sin but that your Kingdom may come to me so that the passions by which I am now ruled and governed may be distanced, or better still, blotted out" (*ibid.*, 3: PG 44, 1156d-1157a).

Having ended his earthly life, the Christian will thus be able to turn to God serenely. In speaking of this, St Gregory remembered the death of his sister Macrina and wrote that she was praying this prayer to God while she lay dying: "You who on earth have the power to take away sins, 'forgive me, so that I may find refreshment' (cf. Ps 38: 14), and so that I may be found without blemish in your sight at the time when I am emptied from my body (cf. Col 2: 11), so that my spirit, holy and immaculate (cf. Eph 5: 27), may be accepted into your hands 'like incense before you'" (Ps 141: [140]: 2) (*Vita Macrinae* 24: SC 178, 224). This teaching of St Gregory is always relevant: not only speaking of God, but carrying God within oneself. Let us do this by commitment to prayer and living in a spirit of love for all our brethren.

APPEAL

I now address a greeting in English to the participants in the International Symposium on the care of the Arctic environment.

Tomorrow, on the west coast of Greenland, His Holiness Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch of

Constantinople, will open a symposium entitled: "The Arctic: Mirror of Life". I wish to greet all the participants - various religious leaders, scientists, journalists and other interested parties - and to assure them of my support for their endeavours.

Care of water resources and attention to climate change are matters of grave importance for the entire human family. Encouraged by the growing recognition of the need to preserve the environment, I invite all of you to join me in praying and working for greater respect for the wonders of God's creation!

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To special groups

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear *young people*, in resuming your usual daily activities after the holidays, intensify the rhythm of your intimate dialogue with God and work to spread his light and peace around you. Dear *sick people*, may you find support and comfort in the Lord Jesus, who continues his work of redemption in every person's life. And you, dear *newly-weds*, strive with divine help to make your love ever more true, permanent and supportive.

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