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## Gregory of Nazianzus' Poetical Legacy

THEODOR DAMIAN

Legacy is like an inheritance, an endowment that is distributed to specifically designated people through a testament, will or other document,<sup>1</sup> or, in some cases, even orally. Gregory of Nazianzus, in fact, wrote such a document to distribute his possessions and it appears that he is the only Church Father who left behind such a will signed by himself, and by witnesses there present, according to prescriptions of the Roman law.<sup>2</sup>

Legacy is what you leave behind whether in deliberate ways or unintentionally. It is something similar to what is implied in the beautiful Japanese proverb: "Before me, there was no pathway; after me, there will be one."

If the legacy is intended, one works purposefully and carefully in order to give shape, consistency, and durability to one's thought and work. If the legacy is unintended, one works for the sake of the work itself, based on vocation, passion, satisfaction. The quality or originality of the work or its message might then represent a legacy.

The case of Gregory of Nazianzus indicates both intended and unintended legacy.

Speaking of the intention to leave a legacy Brian E. Daley points out that Gregory, "like retired politicians today [...] turned toward establishing his legacy. In the tranquil, if Spartan circumstances of his ancestral villa, he apparently devoted most of his time and energy to being a man of letters: editing and rewriting his best sermons and speeches, corresponding with friends and people of influence in the Empire, and composing the bulk of the large collection of verse he

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<sup>1</sup> Brian E. Daley, S.J., *Gregory of Nazianzus*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184.

would leave behind, including the three long narrative poems, in epic style, recounting his own autobiography.”<sup>3</sup>

Gregory lived in a fourth century troubled by different Christian heresies. As he came from a very pious Orthodox family and was internationally and highly educated in both Christian and lay cultures, he felt responsible for addressing these heresies, and all the more so, when he became a bishop and later was elected to the highest rank in the Eastern Christian world, that of the patriarch of Constantinople. His sense of responsibility was strengthened and stimulated by the fact that he was a friend of Basil the Great, another remarkable Church leader in the fourth century, was contemporary with another important theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil’s brother, and was consoled in later years to find about the rise of St. John Chrysostom.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, as he had both to counter his opponents’ arguments and to help with the formulation of the Christian doctrine he wrote his theological treatises with care, developing clearly stated and well elaborated arguments with the specific purpose in mind not only to convince the heretics, but also to leave a clear Christian teaching for the generations to come.

Even though we are concerned here with his poetry only, it is evident from the types of poetry he wrote (doctrinal, biblical, even personal, all didactic in character) that his purpose was basically the same as in the case of his theological treatises.

In one of his poems, he tells very clearly that his writings have in view not only people of his time but the future generations as well.

We read: “Listen you all, people of today as well as people of the future.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Stelianos Papadopoulos, *Vulturul ranit: Viata Sfântului Grigorie Teologul [The Wounded Hawk: The Life of Saint Gregory the Theologian]*, Editura Bizantina, Bucuresti, 2002, pp. 311-312.

<sup>5</sup> See his poem “De Vita Sua” [“On his own life”], in *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze, Oeuvres poétiques, Poèmes personnels*, II, 1 1-11, translated by Jean Bernardi, Les Belles Lettre, Paris, 2004, p. 59.

Jean Bernardi is right to observe that in writing poetry Gregory had in view the public, in particular his students, as he had an old attraction to teaching.<sup>6</sup>

In many ways throughout his poetry Gregory tells that while in love with metric verses he was always careful as to put the words in the service of The Word, the divine Logos. No matter how much he was in love with literature, his love for the Word of God in the Holy Scripture was stronger. He writes: “But, on the other side I was possessed by the desire for the divine books and by the light of the Spirit which resides in the contemplation of the Word.”<sup>7</sup>

As Paul Gallay mentions, Gregory had no problem to confess that he made all his efforts to put the pagan culture of his time to the service of the Christian truth, and he started to do that at an early age. His purpose was to stop the arrogance of those whose science was limited to the vain and useless ability to manipulate words. He himself did not want to be caught by the tricks of their sophistry.<sup>8</sup>

However, one of the best places where Gregory gives a detailed explanation as to the purposes of his poetry is the poem entitled *On his own verses*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze, textes choisis et présentés*, par Edmond Devolder, dans la traduction de Paul Gallay, Les éditions du Soleil Levant, Namur, Belgique, 1960, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> See *On God and Man. The Theological Poetry of St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, translated and introduced by Peter Gilbert, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 2001, p. 153.

N.B. For those who understand Romanian I highly recommend the translation of this poem into Romanian by late Archbishop Valeriu Bartolomeu Anania, Metropolitan of Cluj, Alba, Crisana and Maramures (Romania), a celebrated theologian and writer. The translation is published in *Valeriu Anania: Opera literara. Poeme [Valeriu Anania: Literary works. Poems]*, preface by Petru Poanta, chronology by Stefan Iloaie, Limes Press, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, pp. 257-258.

Here he lists four specific purposes which are not incompatible (in particular the second and the third) with the didactical character mentioned above and implicitly with the idea of legacy.

According to Peter Gilbert, the first reason for Gregory's poetry writing has to do with "his tendency to talk too much,"<sup>10</sup> as Gregory himself confesses: "First, by working for others I wished so to subdue my own unmeasuredness; indeed, though I write, I don't write much when toiling on the meter."<sup>11</sup>

Even though this reason appears not to have to do much or at all with legacy, it still does if one considers that while more restraint is implied in verse than in prose, the author has in view other people for whom he actually writes, as the first words of the above citation indicate.

Also, even if poetry is for Gregory an ascetical exercise when it comes to words and expressing himself, he is aware that he puts every word at the feet and in the service of the Lord, the divine Logos as mentioned earlier and, as he himself again testifies: "I used to have one love only: the glory of the letters as combined by East and West and by Athens the glory of Greece. For them, I suffered a lot and a long time but then I made them prostrate to the ground before Christ and cede to the Word of the Great God."<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, even if the first reason indicates that Gregory, in order to contain himself from the temptation of speaking too much, expresses himself in verses, whatever he writes has in view whether more directly or more indirectly, other people, and is part of his legacy.

The second reason why Gregory wrote poetry is education and it is thus directly and visibly related to the intention to leave a legacy behind. Shortly put, he wants to instruct young people or even older but not fully mature people, to progress in the right way of life, to live morally.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> In his poem "Sur ses épreuves" ["On his own troubles"] in Jean Bernardi, *op. cit.*, p. 9. See also Peter Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Gilbert, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

Gregory explains that his verses are intended to be like a medical remedy, a sort of guide that leads the young reader to the authentic values of life in a sweet, nice form that compensates for the tough form in which the commandments are given: “Secondly, for the young, especially such as [those who] love to read, I’d give this as some kind of cheering medicine, guiding the trustful to things most worthy, sweetening by artful means the commandments’ tartness.”<sup>14</sup>

The third reason which indicates an intention to leave a legacy behind has to do with a certain type of competition between Christians, Orthodox in particular, and either non-Christians or Christian heretics, Arians and Apollinarians, more precisely.

Pagan intellectuals seem to have pretended that they have a kind of monopoly on the use of Greek language, culture, and literary styles. Because spreading a certain doctrine in Greek meter was a practice at the time, Gregory wanted to prove that Christians, and of course, he himself, could do not only the same thing but even a better job than anybody else. This is how Gregory puts it, clearly: “to see to it that strangers have no advantage over us in literature. For their sake, I speak in highly-colored language, even though beauty, for us, is in contemplation.”<sup>15</sup> As John McGuckin explained, Gregory wrote his Christian message in poetic form in order “to meet the heretics on their own ground.”<sup>16</sup>

The fourth reason as to why Gregory wrote poetry, again, like in the first case, appears not to have a special connection with the idea of legacy. This is because Gregory writes that he is doing poetry as a consolation in the time of his old age when he feels that the end is coming soon. This is how he put it: “...when stricken with disease, as a consolation: like an aged swan to speak to myself with sibilant wings, not a dirge, but a song of transition.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> *Saint Gregory of Nazianzen: Selected Poems*, translated and with an introduction by John McGuckin, SLG Press, Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres, Oxford, 1995, p. XIX.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

However, there is an indication of legacy here as well. First of all, this kind of writing teaches by example how useful is for one to meditate on his own life, to have an inner dialogue with himself in the years close to the end of life. And the intention to teach which indicates more directly the idea of legacy is expressed by Gregory right after presenting his fourth reason for writing in verse, in the same poem *On his Own Verses*: “These very words will teach you if you are willing.”<sup>18</sup>

These four reasons for writing poetry do not represent an exhaustive list. There are, for example, apologetic reasons among others. That justifies the assertion that at least part of Gregory’s poetry is “programmatically,”<sup>19</sup> which means it was written with a precise purpose in mind.

John McGuckin also indicates that Gregory of Nazianzus wrote with apologetic purposes in mind, meaning to defend the Orthodox theological positions when it came to confrontations with heretical writings, but also even to defend his own image and reputation against his detractors.<sup>20</sup>

Another reason indicating Gregory’s intention to leave a legacy behind is found in his autobiographical poem. He writes his poem on his own life in order to present to his contemporaries but also to the generations after him the right version of the events he had to go through.

This seems to be of particular importance to him as his adversaries were circulating or, in his opinion, were able to circulate all kinds of lies about him. So at least people will have his own story written by himself as a reference point. He says: “I am obliged to tell the story of my adventures, starting from an earlier time, even if I have to be too long, so that false allusions could not prevail against us. The

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Poems on Scripture*, translation and introduction by Brian Dunkle, S.J., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York, 2012, pp. 16-17.

<sup>20</sup> John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2001, pp. 371, 376.

malicious people love to have the responsibility for their malicious actions fall on their victims in order to hurt them even more by their lies.”<sup>21</sup>

In other words, as Paul Gallay shows, Gregory wants to justify himself before his enemies<sup>22</sup> and before other people including later generations, which means that the Theologian knew very well what they were saying about him and how able they would be to distort the truth about him in order to advance their own cause.

Gregory’s legacy, including the literary one, is confirmed by the fact that Michail Pselos, the renowned eleventh-century Byzantine scholar, considered taking Gregory as a model for rhetorical writing as he believed that Gregory was above Demosthenes in ideas and above Plato in the quality of prose. One more confirmation of this type of legacy comes from the learned sixteenth-century humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam who was also very impressed by Gregory’s style.<sup>23</sup>

A proof that Gregory of Nazianzus left a strong legacy behind is the fact that he is “the most cited author, after the Bible, in Byzantine ecclesiastical literature,” as Jacques Noret wrote.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, it is evident from both internal and external poetical contexts, that Gregory of Nazianzus was a very careful writer as he had in mind to leave a clear theological teaching behind and to make sure that whatever he wrote, including poetry, was in the service of the Christian faith. Consequently, as a Church leader, he had in view not only the interest of the Orthodox Christian teaching but also how his personal life and how the interpretation by others of his life might affect the Church that he loved so much and that he served with utmost dedication.

The legacy he left behind is commensurate with such kind of love and dedication.

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<sup>21</sup> In Jean Bernardi, see “Autobiographie”, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Gallay, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Brian E. Daley, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.



# **Neptic Prayer in Early Medieval Monasticism: The Byzantine Ascetic Theme of Watchfulness in the *Rule of Benedict***

DANIEL VANDERKOLK

This paper endeavors to answer – in part – the following question: what does it mean to be a hesychast? Scholars traditionally defined ‘hesychasm’ as a subcategory of Byzantine monastic life, particularly embodied by the figure Gregory Palamas.

In the 20th century, the inheritors of Byzantine Church theology – Russian and Greek intellectuals – in the context of the “in-between”<sup>1</sup> of the diaspora<sup>2</sup> began to over-emphasize the differences between “their Eastern Church” and “those Western churches”. In many ways, this reactionary, opposing self-definition has prevented fruitful cross-pollination from resulting out of the interaction of fundamentally exotic Eastern insights amidst the self-critical intellectual currents of the West.

One such example is the tremendous influx of Eastern Christian – Byzantine and Slavic – spiritual literature into the West during the past century. These works date from as far back as the late antique

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Louth, “Theology of In-between,” a talk given for the Amsterdam Centre for Eastern Orthodox Theology, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, June 27th, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Russian intellectuals fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution primarily settled in Paris. The ones of concern to this paper are Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky, and Vladimir Lossky. The main Greek intellectual of concern is John Zizioulas who began his studies in Greece, continued them in Switzerland and America, then finally ended them in the UK. Zizioulas, in many ways, carried on Florovsky's work and Lossky's work.

period and as recently as the late medieval and early modern periods<sup>3</sup>. In large part, they have fallen into Western hands as a result of mainly Catholic scholarly interactions with Russian Orthodox intellectuals during the inter-war period of the early 20th century. Unfortunately, these works have been introduced amidst an east-west dichotomy originating from authors such as Lossky. Now, at the urging of such scholars as Byzantinist John McGuckin, I believe it is time to begin carefully reappraising “Western” mysticism in the light of “Eastern” mysticism to truly see if a fundamental difference exists.

I desire to determine whether or not hesychasm has been too narrowly conceived of as a specialized Late Byzantine monastic practice when in reality it is a comprehensive activity. An activity prevalent in both the Medieval Western Church and in the Byzantine Eastern Church<sup>4</sup>. Although this paper lacks sufficient space to explore this question fully, I will focus on reading one of the most important properties of hesychasm – watchfulness – in one of the most fundamental Western, Early Medieval<sup>5</sup>, communal monastic works – the *Rule of Benedict*. A reading which, to my knowledge, has yet to be conducted.

### *Spiritual Watchfulness in Byzantium*

Watchfulness, a Byzantine Christian monastic concept, known as “Νῆψις” in Greek, denotes the cleansing of mental sins by continuous inner prayer. In recent decades Eastern Orthodox

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<sup>3</sup> Such as the Discourses of Dorotheos, the Philokalia, and the writings of Nil of Sora.

<sup>4</sup> See McGuckin, “On the Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,” in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 59: 1, Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Press, 2015. This 2014 Commencement Address given at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, published in the seminary's November, 2014 issue, questions the prevalent claim among Eastern Orthodox scholars that the Byzantine Church was more fundamentally apophatic and *mystical* than the Western Medieval Church.

<sup>5</sup> More accurately Late Antique.

theologians have promoted a refined form<sup>6</sup> of it. They argue for the concept's location in the early part of their tradition, claiming that it has continuously resurfaced throughout their ecclesiastical history, even after periods of relative disuse. Such scholars often cite the 18th-century anthology of Byzantine monastic texts titled *The Philokalia* to support their claims.

A detailed conception of watchfulness did exist in several prominent authors<sup>7</sup>, at least by the seventh century. One of them, the abbot of Sinai's Monastery of the Mother of God<sup>8</sup>, Hesychios the Priest, offered an elaborate definition of watchfulness<sup>9</sup>. The elucidation occurs in his *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, a work written for a "Theodoulos"<sup>10</sup>. In it, Hesychios offers 203 chapters – or two centuries – in the unordered style of many monastic works, such as those of Maximus the Confessor or Evagrius Pontikos. Andrew Louth posits that this style could be due to the apophatic nature of these authors' theology<sup>11</sup>. While most of the chapters concern inner prayer and the guarding of the intellect, cursory theological themes are also treated – such as the interpretation of the Old and New Testaments

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<sup>6</sup> Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, New Seeds Books, Boston, 2006; Lev Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, 1987; Frederica Matthewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer that Tunes the Heart to God*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, MA, 2009; Kallistos Ware, *Praying With the Orthodox Tradition*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1982, p. 53; Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, Penguin Books, New York, 2003, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> Of the Burning Bush.

<sup>9</sup> St. Hesychios the Priest, "On Watchfulness and Holiness," St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain, St. Makarios of Corinth, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1., Trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, Faber and Faber, London, 1979, pp. 161-185.

<sup>10</sup> Greek title: "Πρὸς Θεόδουλον"; Latin title: "Ad Theodulum".

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Louth, "Aquinas and Orthodoxy," Talk given for the Oxford Orthodox Christian Student Society, Danson Room, Trinity College, Oxford, October 20th, 2011.

in light of the spiritual life, discussion of the nature of various virtues, and pious reflections on liturgical practices.

In this work, Hesychios offers three main explanations of watchfulness. The first definition occurs in Chapter One. This iteration focuses on the nature, purpose, and results of the spiritual practice. According to Migne’s Greek, in this instance, Hesychios defines “watchfulness” as a mystical technique that purifies the soul of sinfully inclined<sup>12</sup> “νοημάτων”<sup>13</sup> and “λόγων”<sup>14</sup>, as well as “πονηρῶν ἔργων”. The LSJ defines “νοημάτων” as “that which is perceived”<sup>15</sup>. The noun “νοημάτων” is related to the verb “νοέω” which means “to perceive, to comprehend, to conceive”<sup>16</sup>. “λόγων,” in the genitive, according to Lampe, means “a spoken expression; a word; a statement”. “λόγος” also has the sense of “reasoning”. “πονηρῶν” is defined as “base” by the LSJ.

The Greek syntax, based on the arrangement of the adjectives and nouns, divides the precursor of a sinful behavior – or the premeditation to commit a sin – from the enacting of the sinful behavior itself. The impassioned sense observations and the impassioned reasonings – “ἐμπαθῶν νοημάτων καὶ λόγων” – are distinct from the base deeds or “πονηρῶν ἔργων”. Hesychios elaborates on this division in Chapter 112<sup>17</sup> where he attributes such significance to it as to claim that the essence of the New Testament is

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<sup>12</sup> Literally “ἐμπαθῶν νοημάτων καὶ λόγων”.

<sup>13</sup> “νοημάτων” is the neuter, plural, genitive form of “νόημα, νοήματος, τό”.

<sup>14</sup> “λόγων” is the masculine, plural, genitive form of “λόγος, λόγου, ό”.

<sup>15</sup> In the Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon.

<sup>16</sup> See David Bradshaw, “On Drawing the Mind into the Heart: Psychic Wholeness in the Greek Patristic Tradition,” Paper delivered at the *Sino-American Symposium on Philosophy and Religious Studies*, Peking University, July 2006; and “The Mind and the Heart in the Christian East and West,” in *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 26, no. 5. 2009; for philosophical treatments of the heart in Byzantine theology.

<sup>17</sup> St. Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” Nikodimos, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 181.

purification from the precursors of sin while the essence of the Old Testament is the forbidding of sinful acts or “πονηρῶν ἔργων”.

The second definition of watchfulness, given by Hesychios in Chapter 6, is a more exacting formulation of the concept. Here “Νῆψις” is laconically explained as a filtering of thoughts at the bottleneck of the heart, thus preventing the Christian from being demonically deceived.

The third main definition of watchfulness is offered by Hesychios in Chapters 13-18. These texts stand somewhat apart from the other 197 in that they function more as a whole than any other grouping does. While each text in the 203 could stand alone, these six, in particular, are meant to be considered together. Still, this passage comes to the reader autonomously, with no context different than the other chapters. The text immediately preceding this selection proffers a summary of Christ’s incarnation and earthly ministry. The text immediately proceeding this selection is an exhortation to fill one’s time with theological contemplation after a beginning in the spiritual life has been made. Chapters 13-18 read as follows:

13. I shall now tell you in plain, straightforward language what I consider to be the types of watchfulness which gradually cleanse the intellect from impassioned thoughts. In these times of spiritual warfare, I have no wish to conceal beneath words whatever in this treatise may be of use, especially to more simple people. As St. Paul puts it ‘Pay attention, my child Timothy, to what you read’.

14. One type of watchfulness consists in closely scrutinizing every mental image or provocation; for only by means of a mental image can Satan fabricate an evil thought and insinuate this into the intellect in order to lead it astray.

15. A second type of watchfulness consists in freeing the heart from all thoughts, keeping it profoundly silent and still, and in praying.

16. A third type consists in continually and humbly calling upon the Lord Jesus Christ for help.

17. A fourth type is always to have the thought of death in one’s mind.

18. These types of watchfulness, my child, act like doorkeepers and bar entry to evil thoughts. Elsewhere, if God gives me words, I shall deal more fully with a further type which, along with the others, is also effective: this is to fix one's gaze on heaven and to pay no attention to anything material.

These chapters lay down a broad definition of watchfulness that encompasses both the activity of scrutinizing mental images and the activity of ignoring all thoughts and the activity of unceasing prayer and the activity of always being mindful of death. Hesychios even considers the constant mindfulness of the next life at the expense of this one as a form of “Νῆψις”. Watchfulness sometimes takes on such broad properties as to encompass the whole Christian spiritual life.

The Greek term “Νῆψις,” which Migne translates into Latin by the term “Temperantia” is best translated as “sobriety”. The noun derives from the verb “νήφω” which means “to be sober, to drink no wine”. The verb comes from an adjective “νηφάλιος” which means: “unmixed with wine”. Often in antique literature, the noun “Νῆψις” was employed with a sense of “self-discipline” as a means to attaining some political goal<sup>18</sup>. It did not mean “keeping clean” in our modern sense of “sober”. We might even label this concept with words like “serious” or “cool-headed”.

“Temperantia” is suitably translated as “moderateness, sobriety, discreetness.” The noun comes from the verb “temperō”<sup>19</sup> which means “to observe proper measure, be moderate, restrain oneself, act temperately”. Frequently in the ancient world “temperantia” indicated a sense of “balance”<sup>20</sup>. The Latin term “temperantia” seems to more emphasize the idea of balance or moderation in the concept of watchfulness than the Greek term “Νῆψις” seems to do. However, rebuttal of evil and good thoughts – an integral component of

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<sup>18</sup> See Polybius, *Histories*, Book 16, Section 21, #4; Strabo, *Geography*, Book 7, Chapter 3, Section 11.

<sup>19</sup> Temperō, temperare, temperāvī, temperātum.

<sup>20</sup> See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Partitione Oratoria*, Chapter 22, Section 76; Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum*, Chapter 45.

watchfulness – seems to be an act of balance or moderation<sup>21</sup>. This activity is the exercise of allotting due proportion to the mental situation stimulated by the thought. “Temperantia” accurately emphasizes this property of watchfulness.

To recapitulate, Hesychios puts forward a broad definition of “Νῆψις”. It is a means of cleansing inner sins of thought and sensation. It is a means of preventing wicked deeds. It is a guard over the heart, preventing thoughts and sensations from rooting and growing into sinful behavior. Watchfulness includes several activities: the harsh criticism of every thought and imagination, the abandonment of all thoughts, unceasing prayer, and – finally – the continuous meditation upon death, judgment, and afterlife. These activities amount to the inward keeping of the Gospel – keeping the Ten Commandments with humility of spirit.

### *Byzantine Watchfulness in the West*

John Cassian, visiting the same monastic milieu as Hesychios, about four centuries before<sup>22</sup>, found a similar notion of watchfulness articulated by the ascetic fathers he met<sup>23</sup>. Cassian’s reception of these teachings particularly concerns this paper because it is primarily

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<sup>21</sup> See Hesychios, “On Watchfulness and Holiness”, pg. 165, for a discussion of “ἀντίρρησις”. “ἀντίρρησις” is even alluded to in the sub-title of the Migne, which reads “Πρὸς Θεόδουλον λόγος ψυχωφελῆς περὶ Νήψεως καὶ Ἀρετῆς κεφαλαιώδης, τὰ λεγόμενα ἀντιρρητικὰ καὶ εὐκτικά”.

<sup>22</sup> This is quite an approximation because some scholars date Hesychios as far as the Late Byzantine period.

<sup>23</sup> For studies of Cassian's interaction with the East see: Chadwick, O, *John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950, *passim*; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 3. *From Constantine the Great to Gregory the Great*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, 2011, pp. 860-862; and J. Bury, *The Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. 1., *The Christian Roman Empire and the Foundation of the Teutonic Kingdoms*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1911, p. 525.

through Cassian's writings that we would suspect the notion of watchfulness to enter Benedict's *Rule*<sup>24</sup>. In Chapter X<sup>25</sup> of Cassian's *The Second Conference of Abbot Isaac*<sup>26</sup> we find this reference to watchfulness:

Wherefore in accordance with that system, which you admirably compared to teaching children... we must give you also the form of this spiritual contemplation, on which you may always fix your gaze with the utmost steadiness, and both learn to consider it to your profit in unbroken continuance, and also manage by practice of it and by meditation to climb to a still loftier insight. This formula then shall be proposed to you of this system, which you want, and of prayer, which every monk in his progress towards continual recollection of God, is accustomed to ponder, ceaselessly revolving it in his heart, having got rid of all kinds of other thoughts; for he cannot possibly keep his hold over it unless he has freed himself from all bodily cares and anxieties. And as this was delivered to us by a few of those who were left of the oldest fathers, so it is only divulged to us by a very few and to those who are really keen. And so, for keeping up continual recollection of God this pious formula is to be ever set before you. 'O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me,'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, any conception of watchfulness espoused by Benedict of Nursia, with properties shared by Hesychios' notion, are not necessarily due to Cassian, for they could be part of the organic tradition found in Benedict's Italy. For references to the importance of Cassian's writings in the *Rule of St. Benedict* see: Benedict, *Rule*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, Vol. 6., Trans. Bruce Venarde, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2011, pp. 145, 229. For a reference to unceasing prayer within early medieval western Christianity see the life of Samthann of Clonbroney in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, Trans. Dorothy Africa, Ed. T. Head, Routledge, New York, 2001, pp. 97-110; For the same, see: Mary Earle and Sylvia Maddox. *Holy Companions: Spiritual Practices from the Celtic Saints*, Morehouse Publishing, New York, 2004, pp. 110-114.

<sup>25</sup> Titled "Of the Method of Continual Prayer".

<sup>26</sup> Titled "On Prayer".

<sup>27</sup> Cassian, "Conferences", pp. 405.

Three properties of this passage parallel those aspects of Hesychios' formulation of watchfulness considered above. First, an exhortation to pray ceaselessly. Second, a concern for attending to what thoughts enter the heart. Third, an admonition to fasten one's contemplation onto spiritual realities<sup>28</sup>. While Cassian calls it a "system"<sup>29</sup> and Hesychios calls it a "method"<sup>30</sup> they both describe the same concept – watchfulness.

Benedict of Nursia, influenced by Cassian's thought<sup>31</sup>, evinces a consistent awareness of the practice of watchfulness throughout his rule. Benedict's conception of watchfulness shares the properties of continual prayer, attention to the interaction of thoughts with the heart, and fixation upon spiritual realities of death, judgment, and so forth that Hesychios, Cassian, and many others espouse. While Benedict's espousal lacks the degree of refinement that the Late Byzantine and Modern Eastern Orthodox ascetical writers proffer – especially with respect to the use of the Jesus Prayer – nevertheless, Benedict's rendering shares a fellow mindset with them. Now we shall consider the individual manifestations of watchfulness in Benedict's *Rule* and conclude by thinking through the implications of this study.

The strongest effluence of "Νῆψις" in the *Regula Beati Benedicti* happens in the Seventh Chapter<sup>32</sup>. Benedict devotes this

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<sup>28</sup> Death, judgment, afterlife, etc.

<sup>29</sup> "Disciplinae" in Latin. See Appendix II: Cassiani, "Opera Omnia", pg. 832.

<sup>30</sup> "Methodus" in Migne's Latin. See Appendix I: Migne, Vol. 93, p. 1479.

<sup>31</sup> See Schaff, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-226; Bury, *op. cit.*, pp. 535-542; and Kardong, *passim*; for studies of Benedict and his *Rule*. See Helms, "Before the Dawn," pp. 177-191, for a comparison of the different monastic milieus with regard to their order of services. This study gives light to many social, historical, and theological differences between the Egyptian, Cassian, and Benedictine ascetic communities.

<sup>32</sup> For a study on this topic see Columba Stewart, "Manifestations of Thoughts in the Rule of Benedict," in *Studia Patristica XXV: Papers Presented to the Eleventh International Conference on Patristic Studies*, Oxford, Peeters, Louvain, 1993.

portion of his *Rule* to an elaboration of humility. This chapter crowns an unofficial opening division of the *Rule* that is more concerned with the inner practice of virtue than the remainder of the *Rule* which attends more to the external organization of the brotherhood and the interactions of its individual members. Lines 62-66 of Chapter 7 read thus:

The twelfth step of humility is that a monk always show humility to those who see him, not only in his heart but also with his body, that is, during the work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the fields, or anywhere, sitting, walking, or standing, his head should be down, his eyes fixed on the ground, judging himself guilty of his sins at all times and believing he is already being presented to the fearsome tribunal, always saying in his heart what the publican in the Gospel said, eyes fixed on the ground, ‘Lord, as a sinner I am not worthy to lift my eyes to the heavens.’ And again with the prophet, ‘I am bowed down and humbled at every moment.’<sup>33</sup>

This passage encompasses the three main properties of watchfulness shared by Hesychios, Cassian, and Benedict: the activity of unceasing prayer, the activity of attending to the movements of the heart and mind, and the activity of contemplating the spiritual realities of death and judgment and afterlife.

Other strong references to continual prayer within Benedict’s *Rule* occur in Chapter 35, lines 15-18<sup>34</sup>; as well as Chapter 18, line 1<sup>35</sup>. These two selections refer to the famous first line of Psalm 69: “O God be attentive unto helping me, O Lord make haste to help me” – a glaring residue of Cassian’s influence. Likewise, references to mindfulness of the spiritual realities of death, judgment, and afterlife occur throughout the *Rule*: Chapter Four, lines 44-49<sup>36</sup>; and Chapter Seven, lines 10-13<sup>37</sup>; among others. The references to attending to the thoughts of the heart are quite extensive.

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<sup>33</sup> Benedict, *Rule*, pp. 53-57.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

### *Benedict: A Neptic Father?*

Several early ascetic authors, including Hesychios in his 27th Chapter *On Watchfulness and Holiness*<sup>38</sup> interpret Psalm 137:7-9 as a spiritual allegory for the monastic struggle against sinful thoughts. The verses read:

Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom, in the day of Jerusalem: Who say: Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof. O daughter of Babylon, miserable: blessed shall he be who shall repay thee thy payment which thou hast paid us. Blessed be he that shall take and dash thy little ones against the rock<sup>39</sup>.

Benedict shares their exegetical sentiment, writing in the prologue to his *rule*:

It is he who, banishing from his heart's sight the wicked Devil who urges something on him, has reduced them, along with his counsel, to nothing and has seized Satan's petty plans and smashed them against Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Again, in the Fourth Chapter of his *Rule*:

When wicked thoughts come into your heart, quickly smash them against Christ and reveal them to a spiritual elder.<sup>41</sup>

Here we see most clearly the continuity of the Eastern and Western ascetical views of watchfulness which are spiritually tied to a shared allegorical reading of Psalm 137. Νῆψις clearly exists in Benedict's mindset<sup>42</sup>. With respect to this shared φρόνημα, Benedict is a *neptic* father, in line with the authors of the texts included in the *Philokalia*<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Hesychios, p. 166.

<sup>39</sup> Douay-Rheims.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

<sup>41</sup> Benedict, *Rule*, p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> φρόνημα.

<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the only possible criticism of this claim is one of degree. Only degree might separate a Benedict from a Hesychios. Even this argument is tenuous because one might reason that Benedict here is toning down his

Having shown the underlying thread of watchfulness in Benedict's *Rule* – the quintessential Western Early Medieval monastic work – we should ask: if this predominantly Byzantine and Eastern monastic practice prevails in such a non-Byzantine and non-Eastern work as Benedict's *Rule*, are there then other historically Byzantine and Eastern categories that we should be reading Western works for? I think so. For example, "Theosis"<sup>44</sup>, the Eastern Christian conception of sanctification, which has been seen as a dividing principle between the Eastern and Western Churches since the Late Byzantine Hesychastic Controversy, is brought up in relation to a thoroughly Western mystic – Julian of Norwich – by Justin Jackson at this year's congress in a paper titled "Julian of Norwich as a Teacher of Deification" within the "Mysticism and Materiality" Session #409. The medieval studies discipline demands more work like this so that through the rubble of former east-west dichotomies a deeper understanding of the past might emerge<sup>45</sup>.

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*nepsis* for a cenobitic audience while someone like Hesychios may be emphasizing his *nepsis* for an anchoritic audience.

<sup>44</sup> See Christopher Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation: "Theosis" in Scripture and Tradition*, Mount Tabor Publishing, Dalton, PA, 2013; Michael Christensen and Jeffrey Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, Rosemont Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007; and Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> See also Tim Noble, "Ignatian and Hesychast Spirituality: Praying Together," in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 59: 1., St. Vladimir's Press, Yonkers, 2015, pp. 43-54; Columba Stewart, "Re-thinking the History of Monasticism East and West: A Modest Tour d'Horizon," in *Prayer and Thought in Monastic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Benedicta, Ward*, Eds. Santha Bhattacharji, Rowan Williams, and Dominic Mattos. Bloomsbury, London, 2014.

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## *De hominis dignitate* in St. Gregory of Nazianzus' Poetry

THEODOR DAMIAN

### *Introduction*

The human dignity is related to a fundamental set of values established in a community that makes social life possible. Respect is one of these core values and in order for it to function it has to be practiced in mutuality as the golden rule in Christian ethics requires: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6, 21).

Human dignity is an entitlement that we have by virtue of our mere existence. However, to paraphrase A. Heschel, it is not the fact that we are human beings that is important and that confers dignity; rather it is being human that is important and brings about dignity.<sup>1</sup>

Entitlement can be understood in two different ways: first, you do something meritorious and somebody gives you a title or entitles you in some way; second, you inherit a title without having done great things necessarily.

In St. Gregory of Nazianzus' poetry we find both kinds of entitlement to dignity.

In the first case, in order to achieve progress towards the Kingdom of God, which implies a dignifying lifestyle, according to Gregory, one has to work hard to reach purification through the practice of virtue, even better, through an ascetical life, and by following Christ.

In the second case, as we are God's children the title of dignity was given to us when we were created in God's image. Like the image, dignity is inherently in us, yet diminished and it is our job to work hard

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Heschel, *Who Is Man*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1965, pp. 16-17.

through a special Christian way of living in order to make it reach the original splendor.

Therefore, human dignity is a gift for no merit from our part and is open for restoration in Christ, also for no merit of ours. However, to have that restoration move from real possibility to immediate reality, that is where our effort is needed.

Dignity can be looked at from three main points of view: the psychological one, meaning how you feel about yourself; the social one, which is related to how others treat you; and the theological one, which has to do with how you feel you stand before God, *coram Deo*, and in particular and most important, how God treats you.

In his poetry, Gregory addresses each of these three aspects in different ways.

Speaking of dignity, one will have to distinguish between references to the subject related to Gregory's own person and life and references to human dignity in general.

In this chapter, I will start with examples of Gregory's personal dignity followed by his understanding of human dignity in general, and that will represent the theological dimension of the subject, and the third section will discuss man's contribution to his or her dignity according to Gregory's understanding.

### *St. Gregory's Personal Dignity*

St. Gregory of Nazianzus enjoyed very high respect from those around him, including enemies, for the brilliant intellectual skills he displayed in the daily life and, in particular, in his theological writings where he strongly defended the Nicene Orthodoxy against heretic teachings. After death, he was honored with the title "Theologian" that the Christian Church gave only to two other personalities in its entire history: to John the Evangelist and to St. Simeon, called the New Theologian.

Gregory's sense of personal dignity begins with his birth in a very pious and noble family, continues with his education in the best schools of the time, Athens in particular, and with his official position

in Constantinople where he was elected Patriarch and president of the second Ecumenical Council, and lasted until the end of his life when, old and sick, he found comfort in memories about dignifying moments in his life. His awareness of these privileges and of his gifts and skills, oratorical in particular, including the vast knowledge, theological and secular he had, of which he speaks several times in his poetry, indicate his sense of personal dignity.

This is very evident in his autobiographical poem where he describes his parents. He calls his father, Gregory the Elder, “a man of perfect honesty, whose life could be taken as a model.” “He was like a second patriarch Abraham possessing the highest virtue, far from having it just apparently, as such thing happens today,” Gregory feels the need to specify.

Speaking of his mother, Nonna, he is full of admiration as well: “My mother,” he writes, “to say it all in one word, was the worthy companion of such a man.” “Coming from a pious family she was even more pious than all other family members; physically she was a woman, but by her character, she was above men.”<sup>2</sup>

Gregory’s description of how he grew up in such a family also indicates sense of dignity: “Nourished from my earliest childhood by everything that is beautiful thanks to the excellent examples that I had at home, I started even then to take on some of the gravity of an old man, and little by little I felt that the ardor for what is best was growing in me as a cloud grows by incorporating in it other clouds.”<sup>3</sup>

The education in Athens, where he was a colleague and best friend with Basil the Great, was another phase where Gregory had a chance to conscientize his personal dignity. The two of them were in the top of every class they took and of every social circle they were in. Gregory puts it in an interesting way: “If I am allowed to talk big about

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<sup>2</sup> In the poem “Sur sa vie” [On his own life] in *Saint Grégoire de Nazianz, Poèmes et Lettres, textes choisis et présentés par Edmond Devolder, dans la traduction de Paul Gallay, Les Editions du Soleil levant, Namur, Belgique, 1960, p. 32.* All translations from French sources are mine. For future references to this source I will indicate only the translator’s name.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

myself a little bit, I would say that we didn't pass unnoticed in Greece."

For example, speaking of his and Basil's knowledge in the field of philosophy and of their place in philosophical circles he admits: "We were of the first rank among those who knew the first of all things," as he calls here philosophy.

The best circumstance where he saw how great a respect everybody had for him is the one when he decided to leave Greece together with Basil, and go back to his home country. He recounts: "I wanted to come back to my country and choose a different type of life since I had consecrated a lot of time to my studies and I was almost 30 years old. This is when I understood how much our companions loved us and what opinions they had about us. [...] Speaking for myself, I still feel tears in my eyes when I remember how troubled I was. All people surrounded me at once: strangers, friends, young people of my age, professors; and there were oaths and tears; they even turned to violence – because friendship would allow them to go even there – and retained me by live force. They protested telling me they would not let me go, no matter what, because such a glorious city as Athens could not lose me, as they were going to grant me the award for eloquence."<sup>4</sup>

"Here we were lions."<sup>5</sup> he would later say about him and Basil in Athens. As he mentions, both of them were apparently famous in all of Greece.

Also, as part of his dignity and glory in Athens, Gregory remembers how he had a demonstration of his eloquence at the request of some people there who believed that it was his duty to do so. As he did it, he was intensely applauded and enthusiastically approved.<sup>6</sup>

Another phase where Gregory's sense of dignity came into play was related to his being ordained by Basil and his father as bishop of Sasima. His vehement protests at how things happened indicate how much his dignity was hurt.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Basil who was already an archbishop and had many bishops under his direction, living in a troubled time for the Church when the Nicene Orthodox tradition competed with less Orthodox Christian factions, arranged with Gregory's father to ordain Gregory as bishop of Sasima. Two things hurt his pride and dignity in this episode: first the realization that he was part of a political manipulation or strategy, to put it in milder terms, by Basil. In other words, Basil wanted to consolidate his position of leadership against possible threats from semi-Arian and other Christian groups and for this reason, he needed more dioceses, more bishops and more faithful.

Reflecting on the situation Gregory remembers his "courageous past" with Basil and the fact that Basil considered him one of his most belligerent friends when they were in Athens.<sup>7</sup> That means he would have been useful in case of an argument that might have put at risk Basil's position.

Gregory's pride was hurt because he was used in the manipulation and his deception was as great as his love and friendship for Basil. Yet he accepted being ordained out of love and respect for his father.

The second thing that hurt his pride and dignity in this episode was related to Sasima as a place. His indignation is evident in the colorful and powerful language he uses to describe it: "There is a resting place in the middle of the grand route of Cappadocia which opens in three directions, with no water, no greenery, without anything that is convenient to a free person; a hamlet terribly odious and small. Everything was dusty, noisy [...] and the population consisted of strangers and vagabonds. This is my church of Sasima!"<sup>8</sup>

His protest and indignation are visible in another description: "It was, in fact, intolerable," he writes, "that a man that had nothing, shriveled, vaulted and poorly dressed, meted by food restrictions and

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> In the poem "Autobiographie" [Autobiography] in *Saint Grégoire de Nazianz, Œuvres poétiques, Poèmes personnels* II, 1, 1-11, Les Belles lettres, Paris, 2004, text traduit et annoté par Jean Bernardi, p. 76. For future references to this source I will indicate only the translator's name.

tears and by the fear of the future and of the evils with which others could hurt him, who is not even endowed with a presentable face, a stranger, a vagabond, an individual buried in the earth's obscurities, have the upper hand over people who were vigorous and of nice appearance."<sup>9</sup>

Another phase in Gregory's history of dignity is Constantinople. Even if he was reticent about being enthroned as bishop of the great city, he enjoyed his Anastasia church and his parishioners among other things. Later in life, he remembers how much he was admired for his sermons there. He fondly speaks of "those who once rejoiced in our preaching."<sup>10</sup>

A sense of dignity transpires from the way Gregory speaks of his discourse when he was installed as bishop in the presence of the emperor: "After that, I don't know how to go on with my discourse as I had so much to say – which writer would do it for me? – I am ashamed, in fact, to say good things about myself; [...] I will speak though with all moderation of which I am capable."<sup>11</sup>

One can see that he was aware of his qualities that gave him a legitimate sense of pride, although he did not display it with ostentation.

However, he did not bury it altogether either. We see that from another instance when he addressed the crowds at the Anastasia church in the farewell speech:

"I was not the man to bow his knee under constraint." [...] I did not swear in such conditions, (yet I did not hesitate to extoll myself in God as well, a little bit, since I have received in the bath the grace of

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>10</sup> In "Against the Deceiver in Time of Sickness," in *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Poems on Scripture*, Translation and Introduction by Brian Dunkle, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York, 2012, p. 141. For future references to this source I will indicate only the translator's name.

<sup>11</sup> Bernardi, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

the Spirit), but I gave them my word that was accredited by my character, to stay there until other bishops would come.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Gregory shows again dignity when he decides to retire from the high position he had in Constantinople: “My enthronement was not agreeable to me,” he confesses, “and now I retire on my own will. In fact, I do this because of my health as well. The only debt I have to pay is death, and this belongs to God.”<sup>13</sup>

Even old and in pain Gregory finds reason to feel dignified by thinking in his pain of Christ’s cross and suffering, but also of the glory of the resurrection that followed, as we read: “I carry a cross in my limbs, a cross on my journey, a cross in my heart. The cross is my glory” (*Repelling the Devil and Invocation of Christ*).<sup>14</sup>

In another poem (*Lament for His Soul*) he makes a reference to the type of life that he used to live, at least at times, which denotes an aristocratic sort of dignity: “Again I will leave the great glory of orations and noble blood, and lofty homes and all wealth.”<sup>15</sup> The same thing is mentioned in another poem (*Against the Deceiver in Time of Sickness*): “No longer do I stand in the joyful company of the victorious venerating the honored blood with words of praise.”<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned above, the sense of dignity is also derived from being aware of the worth of his talents and skills that he recognizes that are gifts from God. Brian Dunkle clarifies that these talents were writing and rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> In fact Gregory speaks openly about his oratorical skills (*The Parable of the Four Gospels*) and is even proud of that (*Against Anger*) when he explains how through the power of his speech he “suppressed oath taking” as a practice, and through the same skill he promised to fight the vice of anger: “We will excise, cutting it out, as much as possible, with the blade of our speech.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 101-103.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

John McGuckin also writes about Gregory's awareness of his pre-eminence in Christian oratory, philosophy, and poetry,<sup>19</sup> which is a justified basis for his personal sense of pride and dignity.

In conclusion, for this section, one can say that St. Gregory of Nazianzus had a strong sense of personal dignity not only by conscientizing along the way of his life his talents and gifts that led to success, glory and admiration from those around him, but, very important, even at the end of his life, with all pain, suffering and isolation that humbled him so much – yet humility is not inconsistent and incompatible with dignity – when he indicates that he is aware of who he was and what he did, and takes comfort in that.

As John McGuckin again writes, “the final influence that shaped his life was his own consciousness of the brilliant gifts with which he had been endowed.”<sup>20</sup>

### *The Theological Dimension of Dignity*

As Michael Welker wrote, “the personhood of the human is inseparably connected to his or her dignity. The dignity of the human is grounded in his or her being the *imago Dei*, the image of God. The image of God carries an immediate relation of every human being to God.”<sup>21</sup>

In one of his theological poems (*Meditation on the Christian Doctrine*) Gregory elaborates on his understanding of the soul and explains how its worth comes from God. It is interesting to see how

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<sup>19</sup> John McGuckin, “Gregory of Nazianzus: The Rhetorician as Poet,” in T. Hagg and J. Bortnes (Eds.), *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections*, Museum of Tusculanum Press, Copenhagen, 2005, p. 195.

<sup>20</sup> *Saint Gregory Nazianzen: Selected Poems*, Translated and with an Introduction by John McGuckin, SLG Press, Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres, Oxford, Third impression, 1995, p. VIII.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Welker, “Theological Anthropology versus Anthropological Reductionism,” in *God and Human Dignity*, ed. by R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, pp. 326-327.

Gregory begins his speech on this topic, much like a modern contemporary way of advertising a sale: “Listen now to our excellent doctrine on the soul,” he writes.

Echoing an expression of St. John Chrysostom, he tells that God created man like “terrestrial angel,” and in words and images later used by Pico della Mirandola, in his classic book *Oratio de Hominis Dignitate*, Gregory talks about how God created man as soul and flesh, at once mortal and immortal, with free will, having embedded in him the principle of the good meant to lead man to become god, thus reaching the highest possible dignity for which he was originally conceived.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of his belief in dignity in its theological aspect, Gregory is very clear: the affiliation with God brings about the highest honor and dignity. That is implied in the statement where he declares concisely: “God is my father and unto God, I have been yoked.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, if God is my father, his goods, including dignity are also mine.

But dignity is also derived from the human soul’s originating in “the breath of God”. Thus, the soul is “divine and imperishable.” Imperishable because “it would not be right for the great God’s image to disintegrate in formlessness” (*On the Soul*).<sup>24</sup>

In another attempt to define the soul Gregory writes that it is “an efflux of the unseen Godhead” and possesses a mind of a “lordly nature” which is also part of the body.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, the lordly nature of the mind ennobles the human being and gives man a lordly dignity.

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<sup>22</sup> Gallay, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>23</sup> In the poem “A Comparison of Lives,” in *On God and Man: The Theological Poetry of St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, Translated and Introduced by Peter Gilbert, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2001, p. 119. For future references to this source I will indicate only the translator’s name.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Dignity does not relate only to social environments, that is, how you feel in yourself about who you are vis-à-vis other people and how others treat you; it is related first of all to how you feel you stand before God and, more than that, to how God treats you. But if dignity originates in God and you are God's son or daughter, God will treat you with dignity (*Against Anger*).<sup>26</sup>

Going to more details in his understanding of the origin of dignity, Gregory underlines its Trinitarian character. In his poem *Meditation on the Christian Doctrine*, he speaks first about the Father and the Son who both have equal dignity, and then, about the Holy Spirit who is equally God and “who makes me god down here.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, human dignity derives from the Holy Trinity and we have it in so much as we stay in communion with the Trinitarian God as we advance in a life of virtue and purification from sin; that is what makes us compatible with God or gives us the condition of “god,” meaning being in the process of deification.

The dignity that comes from the Holy Trinity is “royal” and the angels whom he calls noetic, translucent beings, have it before us;<sup>28</sup> yet man, who is a “terrestrial angel” has it as well, as man is created in the image of the Trinity.

However, Gregory does not forget to emphasize the Christological dimension of the human dignity. In a poem (*To Himself in the Form of Question and Answer*) he addresses Christ as follows: “Christ the Lord, you are my homeland, my strength, my wealth, my all.”<sup>29</sup> By being born in a Christian family, Gregory believes that his dignity comes from Christ at birth. That is why he speaks of “Christ... who once ennobled me in the womb of a holy mother” (*Against the Deceiver in Time of Sickness*),<sup>30</sup> and evidently that is the case with everyone born in a Christian household.

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<sup>26</sup> Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>27</sup> Gallay, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>29</sup> Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141.

Another way in which Gregory stresses the Christological aspect of the human dignity is by talking about Christ who restored the human being, the human life and existence, the human dignity implied. This comes into play in particular where Gregory develops his argument against the Apollinarian heresy. Apollinaris the Younger, bishop of Laodicea, taught that the mind of Christ was divine and not human. In response, Gregory formulated his famous doctrine about Christ's having assumed the entire human nature and being, specifying that what is not assumed by Christ is not saved. In his poem against Apollinaris, Gregory writes: "God came as man to honor me, so He might restore everything He took on,"<sup>31</sup> thus including human dignity.

Gregory reflects time and again on the meaning of life as he continuously examines himself in terms of what he does and how, of who he is, thus applying the Socratic principle according to which an unexamined life is not worth living.

As human dignity is intrinsically related to the meaning of life and the meaning can be found only in as much as one searches for the knowledge of God in and through Jesus Christ,<sup>32</sup> dignity, as well, will find its restoration and fulfillment in man's communion with God in Jesus Christ.

### *Man's Responsibility toward Human Dignity*

While dignity is a divine gift in man, from a theological point of view, he or she still has a major responsibility in maintaining and cultivating it. Man is responsible for what he does with what was received. If dignity is part of the image of God in man, an existential divine gift, and that was darkened by his own will, it is man's responsibility to lead a right type of life, with purity of heart and mind, on order to bring the image back to the original brightness. This is Gregory's general understanding on the issue.

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<sup>31</sup> Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

Speaking in more detail, in line with Plato's dichotomic view of man, according to which the soul is the superior main element in a human being whereas the flesh is the inferior one, Gregory attaches the dignity to the soul, "the spiritual principle that guides in us the superior part" (*Lamentation sur les malheurs de son âme* [*Lamentation on the Troubles of His Soul*]). Consequently, he confesses that he wants to live his life on earth without leaving any trace here, in order to approach the life of the immortals detached from any bond.<sup>33</sup> The affirmation here might seem unrealistic keeping in mind the fact that Gregory was aware of how much he left behind and what an important trace that represented in particular for the life of the Church. It is clear then, that when he speaks of leaving no trace on earth he refers specifically to being attached to the world and to its pleasures. The ascetic ideal and his ascetical endeavors represent an exercise of renunciation and detachment in this particular sense.

In other words, man is a theandric being in which the divine element prevails or has to prevail as the soul is "an efflux of divinity, of infinite light" (whereas the body is formed from a "murky root") as he writes in the poem *Concerning the Word*.<sup>34</sup> Compatible with such a soul is a virtuous life as he stresses in the poem *In Praise of Virginity*,<sup>35</sup> and it is up to man to live such a life in which authentic dignity resides.

In another poem, *On Human Nature*, Gregory discusses the paradoxical union between body and soul. Echoing the empiricists who, before Socrates, tried to understand the nature of things, and then Plato, who based on the totally different nature of the body from that of the soul, believed in the total separation between the two and taught the superiority of the soul over the body, Gregory of Nazianzus considered evil as being inseparable from the nature of the flesh. This is how he addresses it: "Flesh, I am telling you, you so difficult to get healed, sweet enemy, [...] ferocious beast, [...] fire that cools –

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<sup>33</sup> Gallay, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>34</sup> Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

incredible thing! But it would be even more incredible if you would finish by becoming my friend!”<sup>36</sup>

One can see that even if the human condition seems to be an unsolvable existential dilemma and a deadlock paradox, still, man has a vocation for deification and to respond concretely to this vocation is to live with the dignity one expects from a spiritual person.

Yet, to fight with such the “ferocious beast,” the “sweet enemy” and the “fire that cools” besides being a paradoxical thing, seems to be an impossible one. In this case, God’s intervention is salutary since “what is impossible with man is possible with God” (Luke 18, 27).

This topic is discussed by Gregory in several other poems as well. For example, in *Against the Flesh [Contre la chair]* he indicates clearly that even if the “I” of the person is both body and soul, dignity is attached to the soul and he talks to the flesh as being an external element of the “I”: “Flesh, respect me,” he says defending his dignity, “contain your avidity and stop exercising your rage on my soul.”<sup>37</sup>

In many places in his poetry Gregory seems to fall in nihilistic moods, yet in such moments he is a strong believer in God and Christ as his savior. This is similar to the moments on the cross where on the one hand Christ asks God the Father: “Why have You abandoned Me?” (Mark 15, 34), but in the same context, He indicates His unbroken connection with the Father as He said: “Father, In Your hands I entrust My spirit” (Luke 23, 46).

This is how Gregory has it: “If I am nothing, my Christ, why did you form me thus? If I am precious to you, why am I pressed by so many evils?” (*Desire for Death*)<sup>38</sup>

Besides the interesting fact that here Gregory has the boldness to throw the ball of our problems and our existential dilemma in Christ’s yard, he stresses the idea of human dignity when he assumes that he is precious in Christ’s eye.

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<sup>36</sup> Gallay, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-79.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>38</sup> Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

This kind of speech is resonant of Psalm 8 where, in wonder for how God cares for man, the author asks God: “Who is man that you remember him, or the son of man that You care of him?”

The fight between good and evil on the scene of man’s life is a hard one and few are those who can proclaim themselves victorious. Gregory seems to be one of them. When he felt the end of his life come, in addressing the devil (*Against the Deceiver in Time of Sickness*), he wrote with dignifying satisfaction: “I never bent the knee of my heart to you; but invincible and unconquered I will descend into the mother earth.” And this is how he will meet Christ: “To Christ, I will present the divine image that I received.”<sup>39</sup>

One understands that this image, being as it was received, was purified in a long and hard battle and that is a merit that indicates dignity, even though in his humility Gregory does not speak directly of any merit. Yet it is implied in what he says and how he says it.

Speaking of purification, Gregory makes a distinction between people who are pure or in the process of purification (meaning baptized Christians and Catechumens) and the rest (*On the Father*).<sup>40</sup>

He even writes specifically that his poem is intended only to the pure or to the ones in the process. He implies that the dignity of a pure life comes from being a Christian, from living in the light of Christ, which is man’s own choice and contribution to living a higher type of life of a higher dignity.

To be more concrete, at the question, how can one keep and cultivate the human dignity? Gregory’s response is simple: “Imitate God” (*A Comparison of Lives*) and detach yourself from earthly things. This imperative is skillfully put in terms of the *tertium non datur* theory: either, or. “You either possess the principles of all things visible,” he writes, “or else be high above all visible things.”<sup>41</sup> And since it is clear that no one can possess the principles of all things (except for God), the only option and solution is to detach from them

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>40</sup> Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 212.

and follow God. This makes the soul “harmonize with the noumena,”<sup>42</sup> he concludes more philosophically.

### *Conclusion*

St. Gregory of Nazianzus has a highly dignifying view of human dignity. Based on the understanding that dignity is part of the image of God in which man was created, as the image was not withdrawn by God or lost because of the sin, but only darkened or diminished, so the dignity, with Christ’s help, which does not exclude man’s effort and contribution, can be restored to the original condition. Gregory strongly believed that in Christ man is as great “as a very angel” (*On the Cheapness of the Outward Man*),<sup>43</sup> that in Christ he is “perfected as god” (*Concerning the World*)<sup>44</sup> and has his or her soul “mixed with divinity” which makes man be god as well (*Against the Enemy*)<sup>45</sup> and this is how he or she is supposed to journey to God’s kingdom (*On the Soul*).<sup>46</sup>

One can recognize here St. Athanasius’s teaching about the Incarnation: “God became man so that man can become god.”

This theology is dignifying because man is not saved by God in the way God would save an object, but his or her contribution is necessary, and that, in itself is dignifying, for man to know that he or she is a co-worker with God at the work for his own salvation.

Thus, in St. Gregory’s beautiful, optimistic and dignifying theology, man is worthy of deification and this process starts here in Christ and is fulfilled eschatologically in the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>45</sup> Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>46</sup> Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 66.



# **Nepsis in the *Rule of Basil*: A Corrective to Proto-Hesychast Scholarship**

DANIEL VANDERKOLK

## *Introduction*

A provocative and insightful thesis in the field of Eastern Christian asceticism was published in 2012 by Theodore Sabo, titled “Proto-Hesychasts: Origins of Mysticism in the Eastern Church”. Provocative because he argues for the acceptance of a new category of ascetics, the “Proto-Hesychasts”. Insightful because he places the fountainhead of this group of writers on Basil the Great.<sup>1</sup> Sabo claims that the primary contribution of the Proto-Hesychasts, the “mystics from Basil the Great to Symeon the New Theologian was to prepare the way for Hesychasm which represented the culmination of Eastern Orthodox mysticism”.<sup>2</sup>

Sabo’s thesis merits acclaim for drawing scholarship to a deeper historical analysis of the Late-Byzantine Hesychast Controversy. Sabo does this by focusing on the theologians who precede the controversy. This reorientation of scholarship is needed so that the universal nature of Hesychasm may be acknowledged. It must be acknowledged precisely because Hesychasm is often conceived of as a practice that emerged only in the Late-Byzantine period. Unfortunately, Sabo’s thesis reinforces this view, by labeling the preceding theologians as “Proto” Hesychasts, as if they were not full-fledged Hesychasts, in line with the Late-Byzantine monks.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Sabo, *The Proto-Hesychasts: Origins of Mysticism in the Eastern Church*, North-West University Theses, Potchefstroom, South Africa, 2012,

p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Furthermore, the secondary aspects of Late-Byzantine Hesychasm – such as mental illumination and light – are then read back in the preceding theologians. With this methodology, a certain historical development seems more obvious. However, the primary property of Hesychasm is the cleansing of the inner man through the rebutting evil thoughts by means of the constant remembrance of God. When this property is the method used to compare preceding theologians, the universal character of hesychasm is apparent. Because Sabo misconceives of Hesychasm as a particular instance of it – the Late-Byzantine version – he completely overlooks the neptic theology of St. Basil, one of the greatest reasons why St. Basil should be regarded as a Hesychast. Sabo’s approach focuses on doing a philosophical reading of Basil to such a degree that he completely overlooks one of the most important contributions Basil made to Proto-Hesychasm: Basil’s neptic theology.<sup>3</sup>

### *Problem*

Sabo enumerates several contributions Basil’s theology made to Proto-Hesychasm yet fails to acknowledge Basil’s ascetic contribution: the neptic aspect of Basil’s theology. At several points in Basil’s ascetic writings, he praises the neptic practice of constantly remembering God. In Chapter Four of his thesis, a section that treats the Cappadocians, Sabo begins by outlining the work of Basil the Great and his contribution to Proto-Hesychasm. This section proceeds Chapter Three, a topical analysis of the properties of “Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm”. Chapter Four precedes Chapter Five, a section that treats the “Proto-Hesychasm” of Macarius the Great. We see in the structure of Sabo’s thesis that he reads all history leading up to the fourteenth century from the time of Christ as a precursor to

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<sup>3</sup> “Nepsis” is the Greek word meaning “watchfulness, sobriety”. It is the ascetic activity of guarding against one’s thoughts, whether explicitly sinful or seemingly pious, in the attempt to always be mindful of God’s will.

Hesychasm.<sup>4</sup> This contradicts the Eastern Orthodox concept of Hesychasm as an integral part of the Church's life from the beginning until today.<sup>5</sup> In Chapter Four Sabo summarizes Basil's contribution to Proto-Hesychast theology thus:

Basil's Proto-Hesychasm consisted largely in (1) his work for monasticism, which became the most vital medium of Hesychasm. His (2) rejection of the elitism of Eustathius of Sebaste had a parallel in the Hesychasts' belief that all Christians could be united with the Uncreated Light and not only monks. His (3) view of the abbot's exercising authority more like a brother than a father also anticipated the Hesychastic ideal of compassion.<sup>6</sup>

This quote evidences Sabo's fundamental misunderstanding of Hesychasm, shown in two aspects. First, Sabo mentions nothing of the practice of Nepsis in Basil's *Rule*. Nepsis is the method by which Hesychasts "cleanse the inside of the cup" so that the secondary aspects of mental illumination and light may follow. Therefore, Sabo omits the most important aspect of Basil's contribution to Proto-Hesychasm. Second, Sabo's analysis of Basil's theology focuses on

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<sup>4</sup> Anita Strezova, in "Hesychasm and Art: The Appearance of New Iconographic Trends in Byzantine and Slavic Lands in the 14th and 15th Centuries" (ANU Press, Canberra, Australia, 2014) explores the idea that Hesychasm was a creation of the Late-Byzantine Hesychast Controversy.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, John Climacus, writing in the sixth century, in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Trans. Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, MA, 2001) uses the term "Hesychast" several times to refer to an ascetic struggler who practices watchfulness. See pp. 197-200. John Meyendorff, in "Is 'Hesychasm' the Right Word? Remarks on Religious Ideology in the Fourteenth Century," (*Harvard Ukrainian Studies*. Vol. 7 (1983), pp. 447-457), p. 447, reminds scholars that the word "ἡσυχία" was used from at least the fourth century onwards "to designate the contemplative monastic way of life".

<sup>6</sup> Sabo, *op. cit.*, p. 41. Sabo actually goes on to enumerate five more contributions of Basil to the Proto-Hesychast movement. None of these five contributions are significant to this research paper.

the secondary aspects of Proto-Hesychasm. This conception of Proto-Hesychasm evidences a historicizing tendency, a proclivity to view Hesychasm as a Late-Byzantine historical phenomenon, ignoring both its living character and its continuity with antiquity. This is why Sabo's analysis focuses so much on secondary aspects of Hesychasm's context in the Late-Byzantine Period. Hesychasm is, rather, a fundamental property of Eastern Orthodox Christian life, present today, and present at all times and places in the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church, to a greater or lesser extent, in a generally unbroken tradition. Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov seconds this view.<sup>7</sup> Ignatius' quote is significant as it represents the Eastern Orthodox pious popular view of Hesychasm.

Many western - Protestant and Catholic - scholars misunderstand the historical dimension of Hesychasm. For the Eastern Orthodox, Hesychasm essentially is the constant remembrance of God's presence by means of the ceaseless repetition of a short prayer. This practice is the surest method of inner spiritual purification. It existed as a practice from the time of Christ onwards, as evidenced by both New Testament and Apostolic writings.<sup>8</sup> Sabo's choice of Basil as the fountainhead of

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<sup>7</sup> Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus* (Trans. Father Lazarus, New Seeds, Boston, 2005) pp. 4-5, writes: "From the Gospels, the Acts and the Apostolic Epistles we see the unbounded faith of the holy apostles in the name of the Lord Jesus and their unbounded reverence for this name. By the name of the Lord Jesus they performed the most striking miracles. There is no instance from which we can learn how they prayed in the name of the Lord. But that is certainly how they prayed. How could they do otherwise when that prayer was given and commanded them by the Lord Himself, and when the order was confirmed by a twofold repetition of it? If Scripture is silent about it, it is silent only because this prayer was in general use and was so well known that it needed no special mention in Scripture. Even in the monuments of the first ages of Christianity that have come down to us, prayer in the name of the Lord is not treated separately but is only mentioned in connection with other matters."

<sup>8</sup> Brianchaninov gives copious examples, including instances from the Old Testament. The *Didache* is another example. Greco-Roman Stoic and Cynic philosophers also maintained an idea of always having in mind the first

Proto-Hesychasm is arbitrary precisely for this reason: he could have started earlier.

### *The Universal Nature of Hesychasm*

Why do so many scholars fail to see the universal nature of Hesychasm, especially when practices such as the Jesus Prayer are today widely distributed across denominations, geographical location, and stations of life?<sup>9</sup> Two reasons jump out to me.

First, many Eastern Orthodox are ignorant of the depth of Hesychasm. They often are given a particular expression of it and fail to distinguish essence from accident. Because Hesychasm is a lived tradition, handed down from master to disciple, the practice is often only recorded for posterity as the number of living examples decreases. It is fair to assume, then, that in the Early Christian period the practice was nearly ubiquitous and thus rarely recorded in writing – for there was no need. The Sign of the Cross gesture is a practice in the same category. In the Late Antique period, we see the zeal of the Early Christian period wane and a need to record Hesychastic practices

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principles of philosophy. See Epictetus, *Discourses* (Trans. George Long, William Benton, Chicago, 1952) pp. 242-243: “When you have remitted your attention for a short time, do not imagine this, that you will recover it when you chose; but let this thought be present to you, that in consequence of the fault committed to-day your affairs must be in a worse condition for all that follows...To what things then out I to attend? First to those general (principles) and to have them in readiness, and without them not to sleep, not to rise, not to drink, not to eat, not to converse with men”.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, many lay people now practice it all over the world. It is also practiced in Anglican, Catholic, and even Evangelical circles. See *Merton and Hesychasm (The Prayer of the Heart & the Eastern Church)*. Eds. Henry Gray and Jonathan Montaldo. Fons Vitae, Louisville, KY 2003); and Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm* (Christopher Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer: Contesting Contemplation*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2010).

emerges. This is why authors such as Hesychius of Sinai lament the decreasing prevalence of the practice of the Jesus Prayer in his time.<sup>10</sup> What happened in the Late-Byzantine Hesychast Controversy was a long existing, ancient practice was articulated to a degree as never before. Furthermore, this was done in a manner with a very particular character, heavily representative of the manifestation of Hesychasm in St. Gregory Palamas' time. However, even today Hesychasm is receiving a new and fuller articulation, different even from Palamas'. In many ways, we have better means than ever before to see the universal and deep character of Hesychasm, a character many Eastern Orthodox of previous generations were unable to articulate. This ignorance has also caused Hesychasm to be cast in an anti-Western character as part of a political agenda in the past two-hundred years.<sup>11</sup> This ahistorical approach is probably the origin of the idea that Hesychasm began, in its fullest, in the Late-Byzantine period, neglecting the millennium and more of previous Church History. And this leads to the second reason so many western scholars misunderstand the universal and deep character of Hesychasm.

No one, among scholars of Eastern or Western Christianity, has pointed out the neptic-Hesychastic character of western Christianity,

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<sup>10</sup> Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain, *The Philokalia*, (Trans G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, Faber and Faber, London, 1979), Vol. 1, p. 162: "Watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if sedulously practised over a long period, completely frees us with God's help from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words and evil actions... It is, in the true sense, purity of heart, a state blessed by Christ... and one which... because of our negligence – is now extremely rare among monks."

<sup>11</sup> See Nel Grillaert, "What's in God's Name: Literary Forerunners and Philosophical Allies of the Imjaslavie Debate," in *Studies in East European Thought*. Vol. 64 no. ¾, Nov. 2012, pp. 163-181; and Kristina Stöckl, "Review: Political Hesychasm? Vladimir Petrunin's Neo-Byzantine Interpretation of the Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church," in *Studies in East European Thought*. Vol. 62, March 2010, pp. 125-133.

especially as contained in the Pre-schism of 1054 monastic writings.<sup>12</sup> No doubt this has yet to occur because so few have intimate knowledge of both Eastern and Western Christianity in the medieval period. This lacuna has led scholars of Eastern Christian topics – such as Hesychasm – to overlook the common heritage of East and West. Protestant and Catholic scholars of Eastern Orthodoxy are especially prone to this. The opposite is also true. Eastern Orthodox scholars of Protestantism and Catholicism often do not find common ground in areas such as Hesychasm because they are so clouded by their political motives.<sup>13</sup>

If scholarship fails to see the universal character of Hesychasm, as evidenced by its presence in writings not traditionally thought of as hesychast, it will perpetuate the mistaken notions that lead them also to claim that monks bearing the name “Hesychius” were not Hesychasts simply because they lived before Gregory Palamas despite the fact that their name belies their manner of living.

While I commend Sabo’s general treatment of the development of light mysticism and his attention to oft-neglected authors, I think he misunderstands what it means to be a hesychast. A hesychast is anyone who keeps quiet in his or her heart, always examining the movements of his or her soul against the remembrance of God. Basil, Hesychios of Sinai, John Climacus, and Symeon the New Theologian were all Hesychasts, in my opinion. I think Sabo’s Proto-Hesychast theory precisely falls off track because he fails to see the importance of the remembrance of God in authors such as Basil. Furthermore, I commend future Proto-Hesychast scholarship to examine the development of this practice in documents such as the “Didache,” the “Epistles of Ignatius,” the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Greco-Roman philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius. Sabo treats

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<sup>12</sup> I attempted to address this in my paper “Neptic Prayer in Early Medieval Monasticism: The Byzantine Ascetic Theme of Watchfulness in the Rule of Benedict”, see above, pp. 15-26.

<sup>13</sup> See Daniel Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought: The Political Hesychasm of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2011.

Basil's *Asketikon* in detail yet completely overlooks Basil's explicit articulations of Hesychast methodology.

This paper seeks to fill this lacuna in Proto-Hesychast studies thus far, the neglect of detailed treatment of Basil's neptic theology. This paper will perform a neptic reading of Basil's *Small Asketikon*, and then consider the implications this reading has on Hesychasm scholarship.

### *Nῆψις in the Rule of Basil*

Basil the Great is rightly remembered for his authorship of a monastic rule, often referred to as his *Asketikon*. The phrase *Basil's Asketikon* really refers to two works: the *Small Asketikon* and *Greater Asketikon*.<sup>14</sup> The *Small Asketikon* was written in 366 A.D. The *Great Asketikon*, an expansion of the *Small Asketikon*, was written in 376. The *Great Asketikon* eventually becomes known as the *Rule of Basil*, the *Regula Basilii*. The *Small Asketikon* and the *Great Asketikon* can be thought of as different recensions, a shorter recension and a longer recension.

The *Rule of Basil* is a record of a series of questions posed by Basil's monastic brethren along with Basil's responses. The *Rule of Basil* does not lay down exacting descriptions of the inner and outer order of the monastery to the degree of other monastic rules. Rather, the *Rule of Basil* lays down the basic principles of monastic life, while occasionally treating the minute external ordering of a monastic community.

The *Rule of Basil* gives deep expression to Basil's ascetic theology. A fundamental component of his ascetic theology is the concept of watchfulness, "Nῆψις" in Greek. Watchfulness is understood in Christian monastic tradition as the method by which one cleanses the soul of sinfulness. This happens through defeating passionate impulses in prayer. Basil sees watchfulness as the anchor

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<sup>14</sup> See Anna Silvas, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great* (Trans. Anna M. Silvas, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005) pp. 8-9.

of monastic virtue, the pre-requisite to progress in the monastic life. Three primary locations in the *Rule of Basil* evidence the great significance watchfulness has for Basil's ascetic theology.

First, "Question 128" reveals Basil's great concern for the practice of watchfulness with respect to food and eating. "Question 128" treats the sinfulness of one's inner disposition towards his or her appetite for food. The context of the question is telling. The preceding question, "Question 127," concerns monks being anxious over the necessities of life and how this informs their work practices. The proceeding question, "Question 129," concerns a monk's wardrobe, and whether or not it is permissible for a Basilian monk to possess a separate night tunic. We see, already, from context, that even amidst the treatment of seemingly external and routine monastic activities – providing for their monastery through labor, nourishing their bodies, and clothing themselves – Basil is concerned with the inner disposition of a monk's choice to agree with a thought, a property of watchfulness.

"Question 128" reads:

Q: If someone thinks in his heart about *eating*, then condemns and reproves himself, is he to be judged for thinking about such things (cf. Matt 6:25)?

R: If the thought arose before the due time when we are naturally urged by the necessity of hunger to seek food, it is manifestly an indication of a wandering mind [*vagae mentis*] and of a soul attached to present things and listless and indolent towards the will of God. Even so, he has God's mercy at hand. For inasmuch as he has condemned and reproved himself for this, the sting of the offence is drawn – if he only keeps himself from another lapse of his thoughts [*cetero cogitationum lapsus*], mindful of the Lord who said [*memor dominici sermonis*]: *Behold you are made whole; do not sin again, lest something worse befall you* (John 5:14). But if it occurred at the proper time in which we are urged naturally by the appetite of food, but the mind, in its devotion to better things spurns and disdains the lesser

then it is not the thought of eating [recordatio ciborum] that deserves blame, but its disregard that deserves praise.<sup>15</sup>

It is significant that Basil begins this sub-section by tying external behavior to one's internal disposition and motives. This entire section concerns the morality of *thinking*. The agents or major actors in this "Question 128" are the will, mind, appetite, thoughts, memory, and heart. This is the same terminology, albeit in a less-refined form, which the Hesychasts employ. Basil, as later Hesychasts do, defines the psychological movements occurring in the soul during the time of temptation. Furthermore, it is remembrance of God, *mindfulness*, that is the antidote that St. Basil recommends as a remedy. In later Hesychastic theology, generally speaking, this last part of remembrance is replaced with the Jesus Prayer.

The entire framework of this question revolves around a schematic found in all neptic writers. First, an impulse – hunger – touches the soul. This impulse could be internal or external, in this case, it is internal. Second, the monk is now confronted with a choice. Either the monk deflects the impulse through remembering God, or the monk gives into the impulse. In this case, if the appetitive arousal to hunger is untimely, that is – if it does not occur at the regular daily time – then it is reckoned by Basil to be a sin. To recapitulate, in his response to "Question 128," Basil employs the fundamental schematic of watchfulness – that is articulated more fully in later ascetic writers – in a treatment of how to manage gluttonous thoughts. Now we shall turn to how Basil employs a neptic schematic to something as innocuous as laughter.

At the end of Basil's response to "Question 8," he articulates the importance of watchfulness with respect to laughter and pleasure. This important articulation of neptic practice occurs within the context of a description of the foundation of monastic activity. The questions leading up to "Question 8" represent a movement from the essential character trait necessary for those who *pursue* monasticism – love for

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<sup>15</sup> Anna Silvas, *The Rule of St. Basil in Latin and English* (Trans. Anna M. Silvas, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2013), p. 219.

God – to the fundamental quality necessary for those who *live* in a monastery – self-discipline of the mind.<sup>16</sup> “Question 8,” then, turning toward the topic of living in a monastery, turning away from the process of entering a monastery, explains the nature of monastic life – self-discipline of the mind – showing it to be the foundation of monastic behavior and life at a monastery.

“Question 8” reads “Is it necessary that one who would give himself to the life of piety and religion also practice *self-control* (cf. Gal 5:22)?”.<sup>17</sup> Basil responds by first citing II Cor. 6 as a positive definition of the benefits of self-control. Second, Basil negatively defines the benefits of self-control by enumerating the evils of self-indulgence, the opposite of self-control. Third, Basil elaborates on how a monk should practice the external aspects of self-control by – for example – not eating too much or too little food. Fourth, in the passage we shall consider, Basil finally discusses the internal properties of self-control, using the example of laughter. Basil’s response reads:

Yes, and self-control also curbs immoderate laughter, just as a mark of intemperance is the kind of laughter that is accompanied by disorderly and unruly gestures. Since the cheerfulness of the mind [laetitia mentis] need only be indicated by smiling, it is unseemly to lift up a cackling laughter in a loud din, which is certainly wont to

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<sup>16</sup> “Question 1” inquires into whether there is an order to the acquisition of the virtues. “Question 2” treats the topic of how a monk is supposed to love God, the most important virtue. “Question 3” concerns whether or not a pious Christian, intentionally living away from impious unbelievers, should either live alone in seclusion or in community with other pious Christians. After establishing the primacy of community life, “Question 4” describes how one should part with his or her material goods before entering community life. “Question 5” elaborates an aspect of “Question 4”. “Question 6” turns to the perspective of those who manage a monastery, advising them on how to accept or reject postulants to their community life. “Question 7” elaborates on this same dilemma, by advising a community on how and at what age it should accept a postulant’s decision to receive the tonsure.

<sup>17</sup> Silvas, *The Rule of St. Basil*, p. 93.

happen, even involuntarily, through intemperance of mind [incontinentiam mentis]. Such laughter usually softens and undermines gravity and constancy of mind [Quae res gravitatem et constantiam animi emollire ac resolvere solet], whence Solomon says: *Of laughter I have said it is madness* (Eccl 2:2) and, *as the crackle of thorns under the cooking pot so is the laughter of fools* (Eccl. 7:6), and again, *The fool raises his voice in laughter, but the wise man will scarcely smile discreetly* (Sir 21:20). The Lord, too, showed that he had in himself passions of the flesh, that is, those which tend to evidence of virtue, such as weariness and tears and grief. But never is he found to have used laughter, so far as the gospel narrative touches on it. We find there instead that those who laugh shall lament even more when he says: *Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall weep* (Luke 6:25).<sup>18</sup>

What is important is that the end of this treatise on self-discipline – that begins by talking about external moderation – culminates with a treatment of the inner, spiritual moderation of one’s thoughts. Basil begins by showing how a monk’s external behavior – facial gestures and bodily gestures – are manifestations of the mind’s disposition. Likewise, the mind is influenced by the bodily gestures one chooses to make. Here he is laying down the topography of the soul. Second, Basil shows that the impulse to laugh uncontrollably, for a Basilian monk, is a tempting impulse similar to a sinful thought. Third, Basil points to the remembrance of scripture – passages from

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<sup>18</sup> Silvas, *The Rule of St. Basil*, p. 97. The text continues: “The ambiguity of 'laughter' ought not at all deceive us, for it is often the custom of Scripture to call gladness of soul and a certain more cheerful emotion 'laughter' as in: *Sarah said, God has made laughter for me* (Gen 21:6) and again: *Blessed those who weep now for they shall laugh* (cf. Luke 6:21), and in Job it is said: *the truthful mouth shall be filled with laughter* (Job 8:21). All these are terms used for the joy of the soul. Therefore one who is superior to every passion and does nothing through the goads of pleasure, but with self-control and sobriety strives against all that can do harm, this is called perfectly self-controlled – and such a one is thereby without a doubt a stranger to every kind of sin. For pleasure is the rat-trap of all evil and through it we are all beguiled into sin. Therefore, anyone who is not undermined or waylaid by it, cuts out from himself every vile germ of sin.”

Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and the Gospels – as the remedy for this temptation. He, once again, has mimicked the neptic paradigm. Now we shall turn to Basil’s most explicit reference to neptic spirituality, where he strongly emphasizes the role of the heart in this practice, in the response to “Question 2”.

“Question 2” elicits the longest response from Basil. It follows upon “Question 1,” in which Basil’s brethren ask him if there is an order to the commandments.<sup>19</sup> Basil affirms that yes – citing Matt. 22:36-39 – there is a specific order to the commandments as evidenced by Jesus’ own teaching. In “Question 2” the brethren ask Basil *how* they are to fulfill the first commandment, to love God with all their heart and soul and strength [*Diliges dominum deum tuum ex toto corde tuo et ex tota anima tua*]<sup>20</sup>. Basil begins his response by explaining that this commandment encompasses all of the virtues. He then places temperance of the mind as the cornerstone of monastic virtue:

It needs to be considered before all else that no-one can succeed in keeping any commandment at all, neither the one that charges us concerning love for God, nor the one concerning love for one’s neighbor, if the mind is wandering off among varied and scattered occupations, for it is impossible that those who are constantly fluctuating between one thing and another should attain any craft or the discipline of any skill.<sup>21</sup>

We ought, therefore, to guard our heart with all watchfulness lest it happen that base desires and sullied thoughts cast out and displace

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<sup>19</sup> Silvas, *The Rule of St. Basil*, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Silvas, *The Rule of St. Basil*, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Here we see that the idea of Nepsis is fundamental to Basil’s conception of the ascetic life – his exposition of watchfulness occurs in his second answer – in establishing a fundamental principle for the remainder of the ascetic treatise. He also sees watchfulness as essential for *loving* God. Watchfulness is also prominent in the *Didache* document and the *Rule of Benedict*. The Hesychastic method of prayer, nepsis, is often seen as a specialized form of Late-Byzantine asceticism when in reality the practice of watchfulness is an integral part of any – especially early – Christian spiritual practice.

from our minds the desire for God. On the contrary, by the diligent recollection and memory of God, let us so deeply fix his form and figure as it were in our soul like a seal, that no disquietudes may cause it to be lost. For in this way desire for the divine love comes upon us when the memory of him constantly illumines our mind and dispositions, and we are aroused and stirred to the work of the commandments of God, and conversely, by these works of love the love of God is safeguarded in us and increased.

And the Lord wants to show this, I think, when on one occasion he says: *If you love me, keep my commandments* (John 14:15), while elsewhere he says: *If you do what I tell you, you abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love* (John 15:10). From this he teaches us that the goal of our work ought to hinge on his will, as though he had a kind of mirror to which we continually look back and, by keeping the eye of our heart upon it, direct our work.

Just as the crafts of this life set before the mind a certain goal and work through the ministry of the hand in accordance with this goal engendered in the mind, so also in our work only one purpose remains for us and one goal is fixed: that we should please God. Let us, therefore, direct the work of the commandments toward this goal. For it is impossible otherwise to give definite form to our work unless we hold him continually in memory who enjoined the work, so that, by keeping his will and fulfilling it exactly through the labor and diligence of our work, we shall always be joined to God while we are ever mindful of him.

Mindfulness of God as the sure rudder that steadies the mind through the storm of the passions is the cornerstone of Basil's ascetic theology. It is not surprising that the Eastern Greek monastic tradition that developed from the fourth to ninth centuries, particularly under the influence of the *Rule of Basil*, further elaborated this ascetic theology to the point of the Jesus Prayer becoming the central practice of monastic life.

It seems to me that authors such as Sabo have a preconceived notion that Hesychasm is a Late-Byzantine phenomenon, tied to Gregory Palamas, and then read all authors prior to Palamas as pointing towards him. Rather, Palamas was forced to articulate a tradition and handed-down practice that was centuries old, probably

ancient, due to the attacks facing this practice from authors such as Barlaam. Being mindful of the presence of Hesychast theology in authors such as Basil we may more easily see the universal nature of Hesychasm. It seems to me that there is probably an inverse relationship between how popular an activity is and how much a monk such as Palamas needs to write about it. We have to rely on writings when we do not have many living persons who embody a practice from which to learn the practice. We have to record our living knowledge of a tradition into writing when that tradition is in danger of being lost.

### *Conclusion*

Sabo's thesis argues that a succession of authors known as the "Proto-Hesychasts" lead to a culmination of Eastern Orthodox theology in Hesychasm. Sabo's method is looking at the secondary aspects of Late-Byzantine Hesychasm, then reading these traits into the preceding authors to lesser or greater degrees, and thereby developing a historical progression which culminates in the Late-Byzantine Hesychast Controversy. Sabo takes a particular historical manifestation of Hesychasm and then reads preceding history as leading to it. He claims to do this from "an Eastern Orthodox" point of view, however, the "Eastern Orthodox" point of view differs from Sabo's in two key areas. The Eastern Orthodox emphasize nepsis, watchfulness, as the primary property of Hesychasm that leads to the secondary traits of mental illumination and light. Sabo ignores nepsis and only focuses on the secondary traits, reading Hesychasm as a philosophical concept. The Eastern Orthodox see Hesychasm as the universal practice of nepsis in the Church, present in all times and places in Her history to a greater or lesser degree. Sabo reverses this, seeing Hesychasm only in one of its particular manifestations. In order to begin correcting Sabo's thesis, this paper focused on how his argument misreads St. Basil, ignoring his neptic theology in the hope that scholars may begin to see the other figures along with Basil whom Sabo deems to be "Proto-Hesychasts" as in fact full-fledged Hesychasts.

Proto-Hesychast studies should look further back to the practice of controlling thoughts in Greco-Roman philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius, who often talk about keeping in one's mind the principles of right living. I also think that we have to keep in mind that from the time of Constantine to Justinian and iconoclasm a great change occurs in Church History – the early diversity of the pre-Constantinian Church begins to be forced out as uniformity prevails. I think this is also evident in the practice of *nepsis*. The Jesus Prayer formula becomes *the* central formula for practicing *nepsis*, as opposed to the verse from Psalm 69 (according to Cassian) and other short formulas mentioned in the *Desert Fathers*.

### Appendix I. Another Reference to Nepsis in the Rule of Basil

Another significant reference to *nepsis* in the *Rule of Basil* exists only in the Syriac recensions.

The Syriac question:

ܠܡܢ ܩܘܠܘܢ. ܡܢ ܗܘܐ ܒܫܐ ܘܡܢ ܠܘܒܐ ܘܡܢ ܠܘܒܐ ܘܡܢ ܠܘܒܐ [Amrin: mana hwazla wamana hwa rana bsha anna]: Q<sup>22</sup>

The English translation:

Q: The brothers say: What is guile and what is a wicked mind? (cf. Rom 1:28-29; Mark 7:21-22)

R: Basil says: Wickedness of mind is a hatred concealed in the secret places of the heart, whereas guile is wickedness veiled under a show of the good, which inflicts pain by a device that is undetected. And just as a trap has on it a sign of food in a device of death, so guile wears an outward face of friendship, so to accomplish its will by a wickedness concealed in common courtesy. For those whose malice is plain, the many are on their guard against meeting them. But that a man should speak with a double heart, and *speaks peace with his neighbor, while he devises evil in his heart* (Ps 27:3), this is a great impiety learned from the craft of the Evil One, so that its remission is difficult, perhaps even with penitence.

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<sup>22</sup> Silvas, *The Rule of St. Basil*, p. 301.

## Appendix II. On Diathesis in the Rule of Basil

The noun “διάθεσις” comes from the verb “διατίθημι,” meaning “to arrange, distribute”. “διάθεσις” in Ancient Greek means “placing in order, arrangement; disposition or composition in a work of art; bodily state, condition; condition of the mind, disposition towards persons; generally one’s state or condition”.<sup>23</sup>

In the thought of Maximus the Confessor “διάθεσις” is the subjective factor in one’s relation to the Word of God. Maximus writes: “We find that Holy Scripture portrays God in relation to the underlying condition (διάθεσις) of those under his providence. For this reason, even though he is none of these things, Scripture calls God a lion, bear, leopard, panther, human, cow, sheep, sun, stars, fire, wind, and scores of other things, each of which has a certain force specific to the dispositions of the audiences of the texts”.<sup>24</sup>

Augustine Holmes, in *A Life Pleasing to God*, Chapter Nine, titled “The Heart of Basilian Spirituality: *Diathesis* and the Undistracted Memory of God” discusses the importance of “διάθεσις” in the *Rule of Basil*. Describing the purpose of a monk fleeing from the world, he writes: “The purpose of retirement from the world is an undistracted disposition (diathesis) which is orientated towards a clear goal (skopos), to live a life pleasing to God, the life of the commandments.”<sup>25</sup> Holmes continues by discussing how by remembering Christ’s suffering, among other things about God, we bring God’s presence into our life and change our disposition (diathesis): “When Basil speaks of continual and pure memory one is reminded of the command to ‘pray without ceasing’ (1 Thess. 5:17, Eph. 6:18) which has always exercised such an appeal to Christian

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<sup>23</sup> LSJ. In Lampe it means “ordering, arrangement, disposition, attitude, affection”.

<sup>24</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestione ad Thalassium* (Trans. Laga-Steel, Vinel, Larchet, 1980) p. 203.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God: The Spirituality of the Rules of St. Basil*, Cistercian Studies Series, No. 189, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 2000, p. 113.

ascetics. In Shorter Rule 157 the memory of God's blessings is put in parallel with contemplation, and in letter 2 Basil explicitly links memory of God and prayer".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

## **“He who pays attention to them is illumined”: Peter of Damaskos, Repetition, and *Lectio Divina***

NATHAN JOHN HAYDON

Despite the fact that Peter of Damaskos’ extant texts, “A Treasury of Divine Knowledge” and “The Twenty-Four Discourses,” inhabit a considerable portion of the *Philokalia*, second only to Maximos the Confessor, and that at least a hundred manuscripts of his works exist, the spiritual and theological legacy of Peter as an authentic Byzantine monastic is diminished. This is due to the murky nature of ascribing a legitimate identity to whomever composed those texts;<sup>1</sup> and, perhaps as a greater detriment to the theological and spiritual thought of Peter, previous scholarship only offers an unhesitating and uncritical examination of these works as derivative of the Evagriian-Maximian tradition.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Peter’s texts have been dismissed as not conveying any reasonable value through its assumed lack in originality.

Despite this dismissal, current scholarship has set out to give prominence to Peter of Damaskos and to cast new light on the individual and his texts, and there is still much more to consider from his philokalic works. In light of that, this essay will attempt to place Peter of Damaskos into a discourse of spiritual theology and

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<sup>1</sup> The scholarship of Greg Peters is particularly impressive navigating this, in the article “Recovering a Lost Spiritual Theologian: Peter of Damaskos and the *Philokalia*,” in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 49, 2005, pp. 437-459, and *Peter of Damaskos: Byzantine Monk and Spiritual Theologian*, The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> This is a critique from Greg Peters; however, there is pushback against this criticism. See Andrew Louth’s review of *Peter of Damaskos: Byzantine Monk and Spiritual Theologian* in *Catholic Historical Review* 98.3, 2012, pp. 543-544.

asceticism by focusing on Peter's texts regarding the act of reading the scriptures. Issues that will be considered are the correspondence to the western concept of *lectio divina*, and how this might contribute to forming a foundation for his approach to Byzantine spirituality regarding the scriptures and the process of theosis.

As a pillar of the western monastic spiritual tradition, *lectio divina* is the process by which reading scripture becomes praying scripture, where our reading crosses the boundary from conceptualization to contemplation. This gift of contemplation is not readily accessible, but is still critical for the act of sacred reading, and is attainable through an ascetic process. Regarding this, Gregory the Great says that

The creatures are lifted from earth when holy men are suspended in contemplation. The more a saint progresses in him... Divine eloquence grows with the reader, for one understands more deeply as one's intention searches more deeply within it... What happens is that you feel the words of holy Scripture to be heavenly, if you yourself, enkindled through the grace of contemplation, are lifted up to heavenly things. When the reader's intellectual soul is pierced by supernatural love, the wonderful and ineffable power of the sacred text is truly acknowledged.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding contemplation, Thomas Bushlack notes that "sacred reading initiates a process of transformation of the whole person. It is a contemplative process that is manifested both interiorly and exteriorly. Transformation takes root interiorly by informing the 'head' and what one believes, desires, and wills, and it also moves outward to inform the 'body' and how one acts in daily life."<sup>4</sup> Bushlack offers a more precise explanation of *lectio* when he outlines that this prayerful, contemplative reading is intended to help one "cultivate a deeper relationship with Christ through reading, prayer,

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<sup>3</sup> Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*, Cistercian Publications/Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2011, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Bushlack, "Lectio, *Intentio*, and the 'Twofold Tropological Sense': Lectio Divina as a Guide to the Cultivation of Practical Wisdom," in *ABR* 67.1, 2016, p. 29.

meditation upon the text, and ultimately resting quietly in the divine presence that has been mediated through God's word."<sup>5</sup> Embedded within this description of sacred reading is a process of ascendancy – a fourfold sequence that is recognized for the practice of sacred reading. And while prayerful reading and recitation of the scriptures has always been integral to monastic spirituality, a twelfth-century text entitled *The Ladder of Monks*, written by the Carthusian monk Guigo II, is considered to be the first text to show a methodology for *lectio divina* as a fourfold process, comparing the movement upward as a reference to Jacob's Ladder from Genesis.<sup>6</sup> According to the *Ladder of Monks*, our spiritual ascendancy through the sacred reading of scripture happens through the steps of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation: "[r]eading is the careful study of Scripture. Meditation is applying reason to gain knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer is devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is the mind, in some way, lifted up to God and held above itself to taste the joys of everlasting sweetness,"<sup>7</sup> or to put it another way: *lectio* is the first reading of a scriptural text; *meditatio* is repetition and reflection on the text; *oratio* is prayerful consideration of what was read; and *contemplatio* is resting in the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> Considering all this, the purpose of *lectio* is clearly not intended for just satisfying intellectual curiosity, but for you to be transformed by God's word, and that interacting with the scriptures is seen to lead to interacting with God himself in Christ. It is important to draw this distinction and to realize that the written word mediates

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> While *The Ladder of Monks* might denote an explicit fourfold process, monastics have discussed aspects of the process well before Guigo II. For an example of this, see Jacob Riyeff, "Lectio Divina and Cynewulf's Epilogues: The Poet in Community," in *American Benedictine Review* 65.3, 2014, pp. 271-290.

<sup>7</sup> John Green, "The Golden Epistle and the *Ladder of Monks*: *Lectio Divina* in the Context of Twelfth Century Carthusian Spirituality," in *The Australasian Catholic Record* 87.2, 2010, p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> Robertson, *Lectio Divina*, xvii.

the spiritual experience we engage in. In short, the holy Scriptures are meant to cause us to commune with God, and through communing, we become transfigured by being in His presence.

Moreover, I mention all this particularly because Guigo II and Peter of Damaskos are figures from the twelfth-century. Duncan Robertson mentions that

In religious writing at the turn of the twelfth century, we note an increasing theoretical consciousness expressed in introductory statements and in instructions to real or ideal readers. Saint Anselm warns the reader his *Prayers and Meditations* should be read not hurriedly or in turmoil but quietly and thoughtfully, a little at a time; the reader should not even strive to read all of the book, “but only as much as, by God’s help, she finds useful in stirring up her spirit to pray.”<sup>9</sup>

I do not wish to claim that there were exchanges of these works between the east and west, or that a monk on Athos was reading Anselm, but what deserves examination is how the twelfth-century became a defining moment for theoretical application of sacred reading in the west, and the correlation being espoused by Peter in the east. I suggest that this western patristic milieu in which sacred reading developed serves as an analogue to the Byzantine approach of Peter of Damaskos.

For example, to recall what Gregory the Great said, the eloquence he mentions is not necessarily suggestive of epideictic, rhetorical ornamentation in discourse, but rather of a sort of fluency in perceiving the Holy Spirit. The hidden meaning of scripture, the deep meanings reserved for those who are Christian, reveals itself to those who are more attenuated and sensitive to their brilliance as they enkindle grace for the reader. This sort of perception is similar to what Peter of Damaskos asserts for those who practice the reading of scripture:

He does not know all the mysteries hidden by God in each verse of Scripture, but only as much as the purity of his intellect is able to comprehend through God’s grace. This is clear from the fact that we

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

often understand a certain passage in the course of our contemplation, grasping one or two of the senses in which it was written; then after a while, our intellect may increase in purity and be allowed to perceive other meanings, superior to the first.<sup>10</sup>

The underlying assumption is that because the scriptures are formed within the context of revelation of God's people, the depth of meaning is unfathomable; however, there is the possibility that as people continually engage the scriptures with the intent of seeking a purer intellect, then the exegetical result of contemplation is commensurate with the mode of reading we are in. Because of this, Peters would suggest, "Peter sees real meaning in texts, claiming, in fact, that the deepest meaning of a text is most evident to the one who is spiritual."<sup>11</sup> However, this is not to say that Peter of Damaskos jettisons critical application to ideas from contemplation; the one who is spiritual is not an authority unto themselves. He argues that understanding the meaning of scripture is "not about the mere act of listening to a passage of Scripture or to some other person; for this does not by itself involve purity of intellect or divine revelation. I am speaking about the person who possesses knowledge but distrusts himself until he finds another passage from Scripture or from one of the saints that confirms his... knowledge of the scriptural passage."<sup>12</sup> This hermeneutic of reading scripture in light of scripture corresponds to a component for accurately perceiving divine revelation: discrimination. Peter of Damaskos argues that "discrimination reveals the nature of things, their use, quantity, variety, as well as the divine purpose and meaning in each word or passage of Holy Scripture."<sup>13</sup> From here, we can discern a holistic approach for the ascetic practice of sacred reading from Peter of Damaskos. The ascetic practice he writes of is predicated on holding an overarching humility that the scriptures will guide you when you will be spiritually obedient to what

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<sup>10</sup> G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, Eds., *The Philokalia*, vol. 3, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, p. 264.

<sup>11</sup> Peters, *Peter of Damaskos*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>13</sup> Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, *Philokalia*, p.152.

they say. In fact, Peter argues that “God reveals himself, as St. John Klimakos states, to simplicity and humility, and not to those who engage in laborious study and superfluous learning.”<sup>14</sup> The apparent anti-intellectualism present in this is not dismissive of serious study, but an admonition against the soul-killing condition of pride, where the humility present in God’s incarnation and condescension is an exemplum for the disciple, rooted in the seat of wisdom to understand revelation.

With this sort of theoretical apparatus in mind for his approach to the reading of scripture, I would like to suggest the ways in which his ideas regarding sacred reading can possibly be consonant with other twelfth-century ideas of *lectio divina* and moving up the ladder of purity. First, there is the obvious presumption that Peter begins with the act of literally reading the scriptures, engaging in the first movement of *lectio*. He asserts in a section of his *logoi*, entitled “Spiritual Reading” by the editors of the English edition of the *Philokalia*, that the “purpose of spiritual reading is to keep the intellect from distraction and restlessness, for this is the first step towards salvation.”<sup>15</sup> The sheer act of reading scripture is intent, at the lowest level, to serve an apotropaic function against the intellect, being our capacity to perceive the holy, from becoming sluggish and idle, and is held in tension of being in “serious study” of scripture, but not necessarily academic. Because of reading being rooted in humility, this first reading of scripture carries potential for greater ascendancy.

The next movement up the ladder is *meditatio*, or the intentional repetition of scripture, and this act of repetition is meant to convey a deeper understanding of the text. Peter introduces this idea of understanding through the act of the scriptures repeating themselves. Initially, there appears to be an underlying anxiety about the fact that the scriptures engage in repetition when he says that “divine Scripture often repeats the same words, yet this is not to be regarded as verbosity.”<sup>16</sup> This presumes criticism possibly existed that the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

scriptures rhetorically gave needless reduplication of what it said. This antagonism against rhetorical repetition in the text is not disregarded by Peter, but clearly celebrated: “[o]n the contrary, by means of this frequent repetition it unexpectedly and compassionately draws even those who are slow in grasping things to an awareness and understanding of what is being said; it ensures that a particular saying does not escape notice because of its fleetingness and brevity.”<sup>17</sup> The rhetorical insight regarding brevity is critical, but another point is made here: that the repetition found in the scriptures is cooperative with the act of repetition in reading it. The way to understand the moments that are repeated in scripture is to repeatedly read the scriptures themselves, and to slowly consider them, not hurriedly, but savoring the potential for higher meaning to be revealed as God sees fit for your context, and in this we can see how *meditatio* is “applying reason to gain knowledge of hidden truth” through an interior repetition of the text.

Next is *oratio*, the act of praying through the scriptures. In a very literal way, this occurs as a monastic is dependent upon the spirituality of the Psalter to govern their liturgical prayer. Concretely, Peter mentions in a section on “The Seven Forms of Bodily Discipline” that “the fourth form of discipline consists in a recital of psalms – that is to say, in prayer expressed in a bodily way through psalms and prostrations,”<sup>18</sup> and again in a section titled “Obedience and Stillness,” that “[o]ne man should have a psalm on his lips, another a verse of a hymn; all those who have not yet been found worthy of entering the realm of contemplation and spiritual knowledge, the fathers tell us, should attend with the intellect to psalms and troparia. In this way, each will be engaged in some kind of meditation.”<sup>19</sup> While this harkens back to the act of meditation, the more important aspect to consider is how this movement of praying the scriptures through the Psalms is intentionally stated as before the highest level of understanding, being contemplation. The idea of the intellect

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

progressing into deeper understanding is intentional and appears to correspond with the theory of the *Ladder of Monks*, and his praxis develops *oratio* in such a way as to be somatically comprehensive; the body is engaged as well as the intellect, so in a very real way theosis occurs interiorly and exteriorly.

Following this, we arrive at *contemplatio*. Peter of Damaskos interestingly asserts that “[w]henever a person even slightly illumined reads the Scriptures or sings psalms he finds in them matter for contemplation and theology, one text supporting another. But he whose intellect is still unenlightened thinks that the Holy Scriptures are contradictory.”<sup>20</sup> For Peter, the ascendancy up the ladder of *lectio divina* brings one into to see the scriptures comprehensively and coherently, just as him or herself becomes comprehensively illuminated through the previous manners of spiritual reading. Your noetic perception finally rests in the grace of the Holy Spirit where the intellect can directly perceive the mysteries of God as revealed in the scriptures. Additionally, this is all predicated on an implicit understanding that the repetition found in the scriptures mimics the repetition needed to reach this state of contemplation. The behavior of reading scripture accompanied by prostrations is suggestive of the development of virtue, where through repetitive, ascetic discipline, the mind and body work in tandem for the reifying and strengthening of the intellect’s capability to pierce through the darkness of understanding and into the restful contemplation of understanding of being in God’s marvelous light.

Peter of Damaskos, quoting from the psalms and the gospel of John says respectively, “‘Sing the psalms with understanding’, (Ps. 47:7); and the Lord says, ‘Search the Scriptures’ (John 5:39). He who pays attention to them is illumined, while he who pays no attention is filled with darkness.”<sup>21</sup> In an age where purity is seen as being held in bondage to a prurient self-hatred, Peter of Damaskos brings us back to seeing that purity of the intellect through the practice of sacred reading leads to true freedom in God. While his philokalic texts are admittedly

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 263-264.

a bit discursive, Peter still engages a holistic concept of a high view of the reading of scripture that can lead the serious practitioner into salvation, or theosis: the kenotic emptying of the self becomes formed through the ascetic discipline of sacred reading, which leads to perceiving God for the one who is illuminated. As Gregory the Great suggested before, and as Peter of Damaskos attested to following him, the enkindling of the soul through the anchor of reading the scriptures leads to ascendancy of the soul and the knowledge of God, and fluency in his wisdom becomes possible through the mimetic repetition of the scriptures by reading them, praying them, and paying attention to them, so that the whole person is transformed more clearly and brightly into the image of God.



## OTHER RESEARCH



## Paul Sterian's 'War' with His Own Aestheticism

CAMELIA SURUIANU

The most representative of all his poetry volumes for the spirit of the *Rugul Aprins (The Burning Pyre)* group is, in our opinion, *Războiul nevăzut al lui Paisie cel Mare (The Unseen War of Saint Paisie the Great)*, which is one of a kind in Romanian literature through its versification of the XXXI cantos of a saint's life.

*The Foreword* to the volume published in 1944 sets the place of this writing in the world of literature, but also mentions its sources: "This work has been written with the belief that no source of inspiration is richer than the treasury of the Christian Church. [...] *Războiul nevăzut al lui Paisie cel Mare (The Unseen War of Saint Paisie the Great)* is part of a list of poems, plays, and novels inspired from this endless treasury. A few examples: *Cei șapte coconi din Efes (The Seven Gentlemen of Ephesus)*, *Varlaam și Ioasaf (Barlaam and Ioasaf)*, *Alexie omul lui Dumnezeu (Alexis, A Man of God)*, *Doctorii fără de arginți (Doctors without Silver)*. Not only does this work use the Saints' Lives, but also some texts signed by the holy Fathers. Augustine, *John Chrysostome*, Clement of Alexandria and others reveal the subtleties of the Christian thinking in many of these verses. Also, The Sinners' Redemption has been closely followed in the paragraphs referring to the torments of hell."<sup>1</sup>

If Vasile Voiculescu and Alexandru Mironescu transposed the mystical hesychast spirit into their poetry, Paul Sterian attempted to rhyme the Christian teachings which theorize this way of life. To make such a writing attractive to readers, he resorts to accounting for the life

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Sterian, „Lămurire,” Foreword to *Războiul nevăzut. Viața de îndumnezeire a sfântului părintelui nostru Paisie cel Mare (The Unseen War - The Godly Life of Our Holy Father Paisie the Great)*, Casa Școalelor Publishing, București, 1944, p. 315.

of saint that is very famous in the Romanian space by creating a story. He does not limit himself to the saint's biography, but also incorporates aspects from the lives of the holy fathers into the narrative, so that he acquires a collection of the most important spiritual experiences, as found in the hagiographic writings. One could say that Paul Sterian does what a fairy tale writer would do by borrowing various motifs and putting them together according to his personal vision. However, what he is actually doing is putting the epic narratives together, making them succeed on the basis of the three fundamental stages which the Orthodox mystique put forward for the soul's unification with the divinity: atonement, illumination, and consummation.

Although a narrative thread is present, it is impossible to render due to the multitude of the events, which give the text ambiguity at times. We can identify, however, a few of the spiritual experiences described by the hesychast fathers. For example, as an apprentice of Ava Pamvo, pious Paisie had three daily tasks intended to provide the cleansing of his body: the canon of absolute silence, with the eyes cast down, for three years (to give him inner strength); spinning the hemp with both his hands until the hands acquired equal handiness (to subdue his body); and the behest to consider all God's creations perfect. Eventually, the apprentice succeeds in seeing all in the primordial light, before man's falling into sin. Having acquired these basic skills, pious Paisie is given the blessing to live by himself in the desert of Egypt. Having become an anchorite, he meets the temptations of the place, which is a compulsory aspect for acquiring completeness. After he succeeds in this new trial, pious Paisie becomes a confessor himself, leading the path to his apprentices. A great number of monks, eremites, and believers start reaching out to him for advice or blessing.

As a crowning of his harsh life, depleted of any worldly goods, Paisie's body is given the gift of making miracles. Learning about the pious man's well-doings, the emperor himself comes to pray to his relics, and the empress, barefooted, takes off her jewelry near the saint's tabernacle, an ultimate gesture of humility. The last canto of the vast poem is a true lament of the author on his inability to express the entire treasure of his senses into words, as long as he uses dead

letters to convey life: “in vain the quill is struggling / to draw the spotless face / and the dead verse to close eternity / to close the real life in narrow letters.”<sup>22</sup>

Preserving the past into words functions as a *pharmakon*, in the sense ascribed to it by Plato in *Phaedrus* dialogue (in reference to writing), is a cure for forgetfulness and, at the same time, a poison of life, because is not the *living* of the life what is preserved, but the *shadow* of what was once lived. Aside from the shortcomings of the word, the poet blames the fact that he has written about a very sensitive aspect of his being which, as he confesses, he has not really experienced beyond the surface, for his failure. Nonetheless, in the end, anguish is done away with by the thought that the documentation he has undertaken with regard to the saint’s life alone is elevating him to a superior spiritual level.

*Războiul nevăzut al lui Paisie cel Mare (The Unseen War of Saint Paisie the Great)* does not make Paul Sterian look like a facile poet. Aside from the contents, he pays great attention to the aesthetic quality of the text, both so as to prove his poetic craftsmanship and to make it as attractive as possible for the pious readers or to make the others to take the path of pioussness.

Virgil Ierunca considers the poem “his most important writing, a synthesis of his prayers, worships and religious inroads. [...] All aesthetic stages have been overcome. Aside from a few echoes from Ion Barbu’s poetry, Paisie’s war is also a war of the poet with his own aestheticism. Arabesques and volutes are missing, any trace of the picturesque is equally absent, the sentence is blunt (there is no literature in the desert), a vocalic monachism floats over words and signs. But the wilderness is “as rich as the heavens” for the poet. We are presented with a new richness, the meaning is emphasized, alongside with the spirit, a staging of the miracle and of the poetic wonderment. The desert is, in this case, a reference of voluntary occultation of the poetic, which gives in to a certain Transfiguration of the word. The poet is just a historian of a life of a saint and nothing

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

more.”<sup>3</sup> The exegete’s conclusion is that it is about “a historian deeply involved in his subject who, while accounting for the facts, is also giving his confession. We also note these aspects of indirect confession and direct biography, in a lyrical and encomiastic project. The saint’s life is the poet’s nostalgia. The poetical neo-pathetism of Paul Sterian is a suite of images of accomplishment. Thus, Paisie defeats everything: “the haze of temptation” and “the boiling mists” of the hell, but also the worldliness of the powerful men on Earth. He contemplates, from a Dantesque perspective, the torments of the defeated men of the Scriptures (Judas, Pilates, Ana, and Caiaphas) because “in turn, the miracle unwinds its dowry” [...] Death itself – in the poet’s eyes – is a wonderful dowry of.”<sup>4</sup>

Inquired by Alexandru Mironescu “whether the unfortunate events in his life and in the life of the country had prevented him to affirm his talents,” Paul Sterian answered that they had indeed. Unfortunately, as a seventeenth-century Romanian historian once wrote, the poor man, being under the forces of his times, could not valorise God’s gift the way he’d wished to. Sterian also used to say, according to Ileana Mironescu, that, despite the evil that had set in the time of the II World War, there was something good for him: “God had helped him to write and to publish, in April 1944, his masterpiece oeuvre, *Războiul nevăzut al lui Paisie cel Mare (The Unseen War of Saint Paisie the Great)*.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Virgil Ierunca, “Un estet ortodox: Paul Sterian (An Orthodox Aesthete: Paul Sterian),” in *Subiect și predicat (Subject and Predicate)*, Humanitas Publishing, Bucharest, 1993, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Ileana Mironescu, „Paul Sterian, Creatorul creștin polyvalent (A Polyvalent Christian Creator),” in *Tabor*, nr. 4, April 2014, p. 67.

*Războiul nevăzut al lui Paisie cel Mare*  
(*The Unseen War of Saint Paisie the Great*)

As a whole, this ample work “reflects the writer’s belonging to the Christian-Orthodox literature and, at the same time, an artistic level which makes it comparable, without exaggeration, to Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in *Războiul nevăzut al lui Paisie cel Mare (The Unseen War of Saint Paisie the Great)* the poet strives to organically connect Christianity with the artistic expression “which is a specific feature of our Orthodox culture.”<sup>7</sup> Given his preoccupations, Alexandru Mironescu “saw in Paul Sterian an heir to our elder scholars, Atanasie Crimca, Dosoftei or Antim Ivireanu. [...] Especially considering that no source of inspiration is richer for our writers than the treasury of the Christian Church.”<sup>8</sup>

The poem is written following the patterns of the hagiographic texts, a simple epic. In the first part, Paul Sterian accounts for a few episodes of pious Paisie’s life. After much struggle, the anchorite defeats all the devil’s temptations. Thinking of his much ado, Ada ends up believing that askesis was the virtue which helped him to most the reach completeness. The news that “a great Father” was toiling in the desert of Egypt spreads in the entire area and many believers start paying him visits. Pious Paisie would gladly welcome them, advise and give them blessings, and after that, the believers would peacefully return to their homes.

In order to emphasize the spiritual gifts of the Father, Paul Sterian provides a few examples. One day, a very rich Egyptian came to his cell. He had been going through great misfortunes for some time. After having listened to him, Ava gave him his blessings and advised him as God enlightened him. Shortly after this episode, the Egyptian returned to the cell to tell Ava that his troubles had been solved as if by miracle and to offer him a large amount of money. Gently, the pious man refused the gift and advised him to give it to the poor.

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<sup>6</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>7</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>8</sup> *Idem.*

As the devil notices that the number of the believers who were reaching out to him was increasing, he seeks to instil vainglory into his mind, but pious Paisie resists to temptation: “but the saint, from all this complaint / which resounds from the trumpets / feels only that this pain doesn’t hurt”.<sup>9</sup>

Each canto begins with a teaching which presents a life lesson. From the examples given by Ava to his believers, they could understand the reasons for their trouble – lack of prayer, lack of fasting, lack of good deeds – these were only meant to make people avert from the right path and to fall to temptation, which, in turn, would burden their souls.

Their problems are solved with the Father’s advice and prayer. For example, *Canto XXI* accounts for the story of a priest who lost his path after the devil’s temptation. Even though Ava is aware of this fact, he does not interfere but leaves the priest to become aware of the seriousness of his situation by himself. The priest does not passively accept his state, but prays to God night after night and, after a while, his behavior changes. Following an inner analysis, he is able to understand the devilry. And this is the moment when the confessor intervenes and brings him back gently to the right path. Although Ava Paisie had ordered his apprentices not to share his deeds and miracles, they would rarely refrain from doing so, and everybody knew that he was “a great saint”.

As already mentioned, the poem also features a series of moral stories. *Canto XXIII*, for example, presents a story inspired from *The Pateric*. A priest coming from Jerusalem, thirsty after having walked a long way, leans to drink from the bath once used by Jesus Christ. Breaking the custom, as it was forbidden for the believers to drink water from that place, he loses his holy charisma. Although he greatly repents “deep in his heart,” is not forgiven. This morality has a didactic function. Even though in social life priests may be considered a

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Sterian, *Războiul nevăzut. Viața de îndumnezeire a sfântului părintelui nostru Paisie cel Mare (The Unseen War - The Godly Life of Our Holy Father Paisie the Great)*, Casa Școalelor Publishing, București, 1944, p. 34.

distinguished category, the idea conveyed is that man may be subject to sin in any hypostasis, and that a moment of absence of mind may, at any time, bring forth a great temptation. (It is said that the sins against the Holy Ghost are unforgivable.) Thus, in Ava Paisie's view, the monk, whatever his situation may be, should remain modest, his humility being "his victorious weapon": "A good deed is that which is done / in secrecy and which remains unfound."<sup>10</sup>

Paul Sterian also underlines the role of the incessant inner prayer. In his opinion, it is a great inner toil which results after cleansing the body. Once the monks have overcome the human senses, "their prayer, which rises above their minds" descends "into the secret chamber of the heart" to meet the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In those moments of symbiosis with the charisma of the Holy Spirit, the anchorite is said to have his appearance changed, completely transfigured. "And the eyes that are praying lovingly / are but two embers fuming of incense / and thurifying sun-blindness up to heavens."<sup>11</sup>

The consubstantiality man (Paisie) – God (Jesus Christ) emphasizes the smallness of the creation in relation to the Creator. "Oh, Jesus, my soul is mourning / and with Thee, with Thee alone / it fears it can be no more. / Ten lives with Thee if I had / my prayer still wouldn't be too just / I fear I'll lose Thee if I lose my state / allow me just to be thy servant's slave, my Lord."<sup>12</sup>

Although the Father had interiorised the soul's prayer, the fight against the evil spirits and against himself had not ended, humility being his only shelter. The cleansing of the body requires great sacrifices. Here there are some of the pieces of advice he used to give his apprentices: "And keep your body tight and strong / be careful not to drop the bowl / and fight yourself, brother, fight for long!"<sup>13</sup>

Ava Paisie also tells them that the nights of wake are much more important than proselytizing among the believers, the prayer being

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 106.

primordial in their becoming: from a simple man, the monk rises to the status of the angels through his life.

Although many of the words in the text are intertextual references to the words and teachings of the saint, the artistic language is just the writer's work. Paul Sterian, who had previously written an ample Byzantine poem named *Acatistul Sfintei Paraschiva (Akatist to Saint Paraskeva)*, was familiar with the ecclesiastic style, the archaic lexical forms specific to hagiographic writings. "Just as a sap, through our blood is flowing / the godly Christian language / which speaks for all eternity. / We all are the Church / and our mouth is like a holy gate / a stoop, an entrance for the spirit / the lips receive the holy communion/ they give the truth away into the world / our soul is spreading out through our lips, as well."<sup>14</sup>

*Canto XIII* brings forth some dogmatic aspects related to the Holy Trinity: The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: "and his angel praises what he endures / to the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit / [...] Unchanged is in one Being / In one true God, three voices / of Hope, of Love, of Faith."<sup>15</sup> Introducing the Holy Trinity with the help of the Holy Apostle Paul's 13<sup>th</sup> Epistle to Corinthians is proof that the writer was acquainted with the Orthodox Church canon, which is different from the Western Christianity doctrine. "Duality is limp and atheistic/ and Trinity is the whole, never deceiving," Saint Paisie tells his apprentices during a sermon.

Aside from him being a great prayer ("and then, for months and months, without a gaze, / he spins three threads, each one towards the others / in his hands, a reel of love"), he also devoutly helps his peers, refusing to accept their gifts or any material goods. As many other eremites, the saint would knit baskets and mats for a living, sending his apprentices to sell them in town fairs. "Paisie takes up the tow / and quickly twists and turns the reed / the worker makes three baskets / and three handles to them."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

Father Paisie also used to fast. Having the belief that a monk must fully overcome human nature in order to reach completeness, he asks the Lord for “divine nourishment”. To his great surprise, Jesus Christ tells him that it is of utter importance to maintain a balance between the needs of the body and those of the soul, and to give his human nature everything, but measuredly.

Paul Sterian also presents his character in his moments of spiritual elevation. The carefully chosen similes underline the solemnity of the moment of prayer: “Paisie in prayer gathers prayers / he shrouds like a silkworm / he ties his white hairs of the girder / and shuts the world behind a narrow door / and sings like a caged blackbird.”<sup>17</sup> This particularly subtle description refers to the most enlightening moment in the life of an anchorite, the mystery of solitary praying.

One of the best achieved tableaus in the entire poem is the description of the inferno. Relying on his vast religious knowledge, Paul Sterian splits the hellish space according to the seriousness of the sins committed. The damned are punished for the seven deadly sins. “In howling waterfalls the dead are falling / into the lake which boils and boils / and then into the river without shallows / smashed bodies like a stinking draff / are flowing viscously into the bed of darkness / while the devils dig their shovels, take them out / rafters on rafts of knitted ankles / hurry the logs, the naked bodies / which try to crowd too quickly to the shores. / and then, the rafters, towards seven channels / lead in the stinking river full of bodies / onto the thrones of the capital sins / Onto the Lust pedestal flow, congested / eyes with snail horns, breasts twisted like screw bolts. / And greedy jaws, all torn apart lie on the pedestal of Gluttony. / And on Pride’s throne lies a bloated nostril / And on the Envy’s throne, tongues torn in pieces.”<sup>18</sup> Among the dead who are in hell, the poet names Judas, Ana, and Caiaphas, whom he accuses of devilry.

With this imagery, the poet wants to draw the reader’s attention to the common human being (an antagonist to those who live under

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

the auspices of the sacred), who, most often than not, refuses to become aware of the certainty of a life in the service of the soul. “For death is deathless life/ and Life’s a road of pain and fear/ man trampling death by death”. The last line, borrowed from the Paschal troparion, vouches for the fact that, after Christ’s crucifixion, the original sin was redeemed and man received the chance for redemption.

Paul Sterian includes the death of the “dobrotoliubov” in this tableau. This is a direct reference to Nikolai Dobrotoliubov, philosopher and politician, founder of the “real thinking,” a concept which brings to the fore the “Oblomovism,” i.e. the stagnation spirit, analyzed for the first time by Ivan Goncharov. In the novel *Oblomov*<sup>19</sup>, a masterpiece of Russian literature, he constructs an eponym character endowed with genuine intellectual skills, which, thanks to his carefree life, chooses to consume himself in a total love, accepting to enter a lamentable passivity of the being. It is obvious that the novel is a criticism targeted at the aristocracy of the time, which led a careless life, without any constructive preoccupations. The status of this social class provided them with all facets of a life of leisure and luxury, a downfall for many innocent souls. The fact that Oblomov refuses to work, considering the work boring, combined with his erotic fulfillment, makes only his sentimental nature develop, whereas his spirit is completely brought to a standstill.

In our case, Paul Sterian stresses the fact that life is God’s given gift to man, and the way we live it is the gift we give to the Lord. Thus, the man who, along his life, never sought to evolve, both spiritually and intellectually, is doomed to hell, as stagnation of any kind is considered a sin. A man who chooses to live like Oblomov, although he does no harm to anybody, just madly loves a woman, squanders the gift from God and is, in Sterian’s opinion, a soul doomed to go to the dark side.

Next, he analyzes all great religions and their representative figures (Osiris, Brahma, Buddha, Confucius, Mohamed), without commenting on them in any way. In Paul Sterian’s opinion, religion is

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<sup>19</sup> Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov*, ALLFA Publishing, București, 2014.

closely related to the nation, to tradition, to ancestors, and to the motherland. Although there may be great differences between the religious doctrines, nothing can prevent a man to evolve at the intellectual level, to become a better human being, to obey the commandments, in short, to become spiritual.

To return to the poem which constitutes the focal point of the present analysis, we should also mention the artistry employed by Paul Sterian in the account of the moment of Saint Paisie's ascending to God: "The End is near, the Beginning also / it always happens in the final hour / the flesh leaves the bony chamber / the soul arises as the suns are rising."<sup>20</sup>

A significant number of believers attend his funerals. The poem tells us that Paisie humbly presented himself to heavens, and was praised by the angels in the Empire of God: "the mourning people lead him to the grave / and merry cherubims take him to heavens / Paisie is now a green plant / which fastens the hands of the root into the land / and with the other hand embraces / the springs of light and life / immortal, as if after Resurrection / the pilgrim feels reborn / ascension, ascension is to heaven."<sup>21</sup>

In what prosody is concerned, the entire poem is made of artfully crafted tercets: "Ye bless, my Lord, the tercet verse / to humbly praise the man in the desert / to see his godly face. To write on vellum / with the quill soaked in the holy chrisim / thin, strong calligraphy / as clean as Paisie's life / an angelic cry to the skies / when the sky among lightning bolts arises."<sup>22</sup>

The poetic text abides by the ecclesiastic formalism. Paul Sterian divides this Byzantine rite poem into XXXI cantos, divided in turn into 12 sequences, each made of three tercets.

In his work, *Istoria literaturii române de azi pe mâine (A History of Romanian Literature from Hand to Mouth)*, Marian Popa comments on the lexis of the text, which he considers utterly unusual. In his opinion, this aspect is "determined by the difficult prosody,

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 121.

which also claims word formation, associative and syntactic resourcefulness. Otherwise, what makes the poem attractive is precisely the reader's effort, which is not waiting for a new image, but for something surprising at the level of word, syntax, or rhythm."<sup>23</sup>

A dedication addressed to Alexandru Mironescu reveals that the writer also used Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* as a source of inspiration: "I wanted to compete with Dante / going over the thresholds of the world / to reach the honey gathered in the comb / with elegant tercets, as he had done."<sup>24</sup>

Paul Sterian's is also appreciated by the famous critic Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu: "*Războiul nevăzut al lui Paisie cel Mare (The Unseen War of Saint Paisie the Great)*, a very interesting poem, chants the stages of the anchorite experience, with archaic turns of the phrase locked in perfect tercets."<sup>25</sup> Crohmălniceanu is the first exegete to have noticed the influence of the religious study *Mântuirea păcătoșilor (The Sinners' Redemption)* in the construction of the terrifying tableaux.

Dan C. Mihăilescu also praises the archaic language used in the poem and the already mentioned aesthetic aspects: "if in *Poemele arabe (Arab Poems)*, probably the author's most representative volume (despite its artificiality) everything overflows with saps, fragrance, glamour, vegetal with double symbolism (mystical and sexual) and hedonism – *Războiul nevăzut (The Unseen War)*, with its epic contorted with visions, temptations, doubts, voluptuousness,

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<sup>23</sup> Marian Popa, "Paul Sterian," in *Istoria literaturii române de azi pe mâine, 23 august 1944- 22 decembrie 1989 (A History of Romanian Literature from Hand to Mouth, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1944- December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1989)*, vol. I, Semne Publishing, București, 2009, p.1044.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>25</sup> Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, "Paul Sterian," in *Istoria literaturii române între cele două războaie mondiale (The History of Romanian Literature between the Two World Wars)*, vol. II, Minerva, București, 1974, p.327.

displays a weak theoretical framework but, at the same time, a remarkable prosodic vigour.”<sup>26</sup>

Closing an arc over time, as a conclusion to everything already said, let us quote a fragment from an article signed by Marin Diaconu in 1993: “A poet, a prose writer, an essayist, an economist and a sociologist, Paul Sterian is one of the few men of culture in our country who could harmoniously combine seriousness with humour, spirit and soul, sense and faith, the Occidentalism and Orientalism immanent to the Romanians’ nature.” In the year 2001, in another article, he adds a few observations: “the gateway to the divine absolute through Christian-Orthodox poetry was his first and defining path, which directed him from his youth until he was over 80 years old and was still working on an ample.”<sup>27</sup> It is also in this article where he warns us that “Paul Sterian is still known only at a superficial level.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dan C. Mihăilescu, “Paul Sterian,” in *Dicționarul scriitorilor români (Dictionary of Romanian Writers)*, ed. cit., p. 384.

<sup>27</sup> Marin Diaconu, “Paul Sterian – o personalitate plurivalentă (Paul Sterian – A Polyvalent Personality),” in *Jurnalul literar*, nr. 45-48, 1993, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Marin Diaconu, “Paul Sterian – publicist (Paul Sterian, the journalist),” in *Viața Românească*, nr. 7-8, July-August, 2001, p. 3.



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