

Saint Basil the Great

St. Basil of Caesarea, his brother St. Gregory of Nyssa and their friend St. Gregory of Nazianzus are known as the Cappadocian Fathers. They were Bishops and had done much to defend the faith of the Church by vehemently refuting the arguments of the heretics. They were saintly fathers. They oppose to Arius, Eunomius and others who rejected the Godhead and eternity of the Holy Spirit. They explained the faith of the Church in such a way as to make it possible for the human mind with its limitation to grasp the principle of the Trinity and the mystery behind the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Basil of Caesarea also known as Saint Basil the Great was the Greek bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, of Asia Minor. He was a very influential theologian who opposed the heresies of the early church and fought against both Arianism and the followers of Apollinaris of Laodicea. He was the strongest supporter of Nicene Creed. He had very good political connections and at the same time above all, deep theological knowledge.

Saint Paul of Thebes, St. Antony, St. Pakomios and St. Makarios were the leaders of the Egyptian church tradition. St. Ephrem was the leader of the Syrian church and St. Ephiphanius was the leader of the Palastinian church tradition. But St. Basil was the first ascetic leader of the Eastern Church tradition.

Basil was born into the wealthy family of Basil the Elder and Emilia of Caesarea in Cappadocia around A. D 330. Basil the Elder was known as a scholar and eminent writer throughout Cappadocia. His mother Emilia was a house wife, full of piety and discernment. Basil was one among the ten children who was very much influenced by the perfect devotion of his grandmother Macrenea the Elder and this helped all the children grow in faith and devotion. The grandmother's influence can be seen by the dedicated lives of four of the children for God's work. Three of them became Metropolitans: Basil in Caesarea, Gregorios in Nysa and Peter in Sebaste. The eldest sister, Macrenea became a nun and started a nunnery.

Basil received his formal education in Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia, which is presently known as Turkey. There he met Gregory of Nazianzus and became a life-time close friend of him. Both Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil went to Constantinople for further studies. There they heard the lectures of Libanius. Both of them spent about six years in Athens too, where Basil met a fellow student who later became the emperor Julian the Apostate. Basil left Athens in 356 and returned to Caesarea after visiting Egypt and Syria. Here he practiced Law and taught rhetoric for a year. There came a radical change in Basil's life after his encounter with Eustathius of Sebaste, an ascetic and a well-known charismatic bishop. Basil left his legal practice and teaching career and devoted his life to God. Basil's spiritual awakening is crystal clear in his following words: "I had wasted much time on follies and spent nearly all of my youth in vain labors and devotion to teaching of a wisdom that God had made foolish. Suddenly I

awoke as out of a deep sleep. I beheld the wonderful light of the gospel truth, and I recognized that nothing of wisdom of the princes of this world.”

Basil travelled to Palestine, Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia to study ascetics and monasticism. He came back, sold his property and other belongings and gave the money to the poor. He went into solitude for a short time near Neo Caesarea of Pontus. But eventually Basil realized that solitary life was not for him, though fully respected ascetics’ piety and prayerfulness. Basil was attracted toward communal religious life and by A.D 358; he gathered around him a group of like-minded disciples and founded a monastic settlement on his family’s estate near Annesi. His brother Peter, widowed Mother Emilia, sister Macreena and several other women joined Basil and devoted themselves to pious lives of prayer and charitable works. Basil wrote about monastic communal life and these writings became central force in developing monastic traditions of the Eastern Church. Basil invited his friend Gregory of Nazianzus in the year A. D 358 and both together codified Origen’s spiritual exhortations under the title, “Philokalia”. They also tried to reform and enlarge the rules for monks. Gregory later returned to his family Nazianzus.

Basil attended the Council of Constantinople in A. D. 360. He first joined with Eustathius and Homoiousians, a semi – Arian faction whose teaching was that the Son was of “like” substance with the Father, neither the same nor different from Him. Basil eventually abandoned Homoiousians and became a strong supporter of Nicene Creed, whose supporters professed that the members of the Trinity were of one substance, Homousios. Bishop Meletius of Antioch ordained Basil as a deacon in A. D. 362 and in A. D 365 Metropolitan Eusebius of Caesarea (not the historian Eusebius.) heard about Basil and ordained him as Presbyter of the Church there. The next few years were spent in combating the Arian heresy by both Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus as this heresy threatens to divide Cappadocia’s Christians. In public debates with accomplished Arian Theologians and rhetors. Basil and Gregory came triumphant. Later Basil took the functional administration of Caesarea. Basil’s growing popularity made Metropolitan Eusebius jealous and he asked Basil to return to his earlier solitude. Gregory persuaded Basil to return to Caesarea and Basil did so.

In the year A. D. 370 Eusebius died and Basil was chosen to succeed him and was consecrated Bishop on June 14th. 370. Basil was very generous and sympathetic and personally organized a soup kitchen and distributed food to the poor. There was a terrible famine in Caesarea, subsequent to the drought of A. D 368. People were panic for water and food. Many rich merchants hoarded their foo grains but Basil talked to them in strong and persuasive language which made them open their shops and give away their hoard. It was nothing less than a miracle. He encouraged the clergy not to be tempted by wealth and personally took care in selecting worthy candidates for the holy orders. He showed courage in criticizing the public officials who failed in their duty of doing justice. It was his custom to preach every morning and evening in his own church to large congregations. Among the church fathers there seems to be none who give more importance to social activities that Basil did. He established a chain of social service

that spread all the parts of Cappadocia. He established hospitals, rest houses and centers to give training in jobs. He also started institutions to help those suffered from famine and poverty. He built a large complex outside Caesaria, called Basiliad that included a hospital, hospice and a poor home. He started Ptocho Tropion (center to help the poor) in each small town and appointed Cor - Episcopas to supervise each of them.

The Emperor Valens who was very much adherent to Arian heresy sent his prefect Modestus to make Basil to compromise with the Arian faction. Basil's zeal for Orthodoxy gave a negative response to Modestus. In retaliation, Valens issued orders banishing Basil repeatedly, none of which succeeded. On the day of the Feast of the Theophany (Epiphany), Valens came himself to attend the Divine Liturgy. Valens was so impressed that he donated some land for building Basiliad. Basil the great died on Jan. 1st, 379 after completing his duty as a shepherd in a problem-ridden period.

Basil's work may be classified as books supporting faith, works about the Bible, those related to ascetic life and personal letters. The principal theological writings of Basil are his "On the Holy Spirit" a lucid and edifying appeal to scripture and early Christian tradition to prove the divinity of the Holy Spirit. He says as follows in his discourse on the Holy Spirit:

"We all pray facing the east. Very few remember that we are them looking towards our old kingdom of Paradise established by God in the east. Not many know why we are standing on the first day of the week. By praying standing on the resurrection day we are reminding ourselves of the grace of resurrection"

His "Refutation of the Apology of the Impious Eunomius" is against Eunomius, the chief exponent Anomoian Arianism. His series of Lenten lectures are in "Hexaemeron" ("Six Days of Creation"). In his exegesis Basil was a great admirer of Origen. His ascetic tendencies are found in the Maralia and Asketika. One liturgy that can be attributed to him is "The Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great", that is somewhat longer than the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. Saint Basil was given the title Doctor of the Church in the Western Church for his contributions to the debate initiated by the Arian controversy regarding the nature of the Trinity. The Eastern Churches celebrates his feast day on January 1st every year.

Gregory of Nyssa

St. Gregory of Nyssa is also known as Gregory the Nyssen. He was born in A.D 335 in Caesarea. Gregory was the third among the Cappadocian Fathers. He was also known as the “Star of Nyssa”. His elder brother, Basil was ceaselessly attached to work; his friend Gregory of Nazianzus was an eloquent speaker, whereas Gregory of Nyssa was the embodiment of spiritual vigor. His father Basil the Elder was a famous writer and a language teacher. His mother was Emmelia, a house wife, an embodiment of all virtues. He studied under the guidance of his father and elder brother Basil. So he sometimes called his brother “my teacher”. It seems more likely that he continued his studies in Caesarea where he read classical literature, Philosophy and perhaps Medicine. Gregory himself claimed that his only teachers were Basil, “Paul, John, and the rest of the Apostles and Prophets”.

Gregory lacked the administrative ability of his brother Basil or the influence of the Gregory of Nazianzus, but he was an excellent theologian who contributed significantly to the doctrine of Trinity and Nicene Creed. Gregory’s philosophical writings were influenced by Origen. Gregory liked to visit and stay in the hermitage started by his brother Basil. Persuaded by Basil, he became a Deacon. But ignoring the work of deacon he did the work of a language teacher. Gregory’s temperament is said to be quiet and meek in contrast to his brother Basil who was known to be much more outspoken.

In 371 Emperor Valens split Cappadocia into two new provinces, Cappadocia Prima and Cappadocia Secunda. This resulted in complex changes. Gregory was elected Bishop of the new see of Nyssa in 372, presumably with the support of his brother Basil who was the Metropolitan of Caesarea. Since he had no experience of skill he could not succeed in administration. He tried his best to instill in the believers the true Nicene Faith. Hence the followers of Arius deposed him. Realizing that his life was in great danger he was forced to run away from Nyssa. The synod of Nyssa which is convened in the spring of 376 deposed him. However Gregory regained his see in 378, perhaps due to amnesty promulgated by the new Emperor Gratian. In the same year Basil died and Gregory took over many of his brothers former responsibilities in Pontus.

He was present at the synod of Antioch in April 379 in which he unsuccessfully attempted to reconcile the followers of Meletius of Antioch with those of Paulinus. In 380 he travelled to Sebaste in the province of Armenia Prima to support a pro-Nicene candidate for the election for the bishopric. To his surprise he himself was elected to the seat, may be due to people’s association with him and his brother. However Gregory deeply disliked it after a stay of several months a substitute was found (probably Gregory’s brother Peter) and he returned home to Nyssa to write the books I and II of “Against Eunomius”. Gregory participated in the first council of Constantinople in 381 and perhaps gave there his famous sermon “In suam ordinationem”. He was chosen to give eulogy at the funeral of Meletius which occurred during the council. He was

often invited as a special guest and a spiritual advisor of the royal palace in Constantinople. His physical health was not good and died in the year 394.

His works are based on the strong foundation of literary elegance and spiritual vigor. They can be classified in to five groups:

1. Works interpreting the Bible
2. Spiritual and ascetic works
3. Books supporting faith
4. Letters.
5. Discourses

The most important of the Biblical interpretation are his work on the creation of man that is “in the life of Moses and his commentary on the song of songs”. “In the life of Moses” Gregory speaks of three stages of spiritual growth: initial darkness of ignorance, then, spiritual illumination and finally, a darkness of the mind in mystic contemplation of the God who cannot be comprehended. His main argument for the infinity of God which can be found in “Against Eunomius” is that God’s goodness is limitless, and as God’s goodness is essential, God is also limitless. An important consequence of Gregory’s belief in the infinity of God is his belief that God, as limitless is essentially incomprehensible to the limited minds of created beings. Gregory, following Basil define the Trinity as “one essence in three persons”, the formula adopted by the Council of Constantinople in 381. Like other Cappadocian Fathers he was a homoousian and affirms the truth of the consubstantiality of the Trinity in “Against Eunomius”.

Gregory made a profound philosophical analysis of human freedom and in this respect he unparalleled among Eastern Fathers. According to him human freedom highlights that God gave man the possibility of becoming divine when he was created. The inner meaning of the fact that man is created in God’s image is that man is given partnership in God’s freedom and goodness. Gregory’s theology was that of apophatic. He proposed that God should be defined in terms of what we know. He is not rather than what we might speculate Him to be. Gregory seems to have believed in universal salvation of all human beings. His prominent works supporting faith are Against Eunomius, Against Appollinaris and those dealing with spirit and resurrection. The discourse on Virginitas has a close bearing on ascetic life is well-known.

In the Great Catechism Gregory suggests that while every human being will be resurrected salvation will only be according to the baptized, although he also states that others driven by their passions can be saved after being purified by fire. But at the end of the chapter XXXV Gregory declares that those who have not been purified by water through baptism will be purified by fire in the end so that “their nature may be restored pure again to God”. Furthermore

in the next chapter XXXVI Gregory says that those who are purified from evil will be admitted into the “heavenly company”.

Gregory believed that the soul is created simultaneous to the creation of the body, in opposition to Origen, who believed in per-existence of the soul. To Gregory, the human being is exceptional, being created in the image of God. In the *Song of Songs* Gregory metaphorically describes human lives as paintings created by apprentices to a master; the apprentices are the human wills, who imitate their master’s work (the life of Christ) with beautiful colors (virtues of life) and thus man strives to be a reflection of Christ. There are many similarities between Gregory’s theology and Neoplatonist philosophy. Specifically, they share the idea that the reality of God is completely inaccessible to human beings and man can only come to see God through a spiritual journey, in which knowledge is rejected and the path of meditation is followed. Gregory is revered as a saint, but he is not a Doctor of the Church. He is venerated in the East. His relics were held by Vatican, until 2000 and later they were translated to the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Gregory of Nyssa, San Diego, California.

Saint John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom was born at Antioch in AD. 349. He was the Archbishop of Constantinople, and was an important **Early Church Father**. He is very well known for his oratory and his vehement attack on political leaders. The life history of St. John Chrysostom is the history of his unflinching fight against injustice. In Greek, Chrysostomos means “Golden Mouth”. He is honored as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican Churches. Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and St. John Chrysostom are regarded as the Three Holy Hierarchs. The Coptic Churches also recognizes him as a saint. He is the Great Hierarch and Ecumenical Teacher of the East. He was born to Greco-Syrian parents. His father was Secutus and mother was Anthusa. John’s father died soon after his birth and was raised by his mother. As a result of his mother’s influential connections in the city John began his education under the great scholar Libanius. He learned Christian faith from Meletus from Antioch and received his baptism in 369. From Libanius John acquired the skills for a career in rhetoric, as well as a love of the Greek language and literature.

As John grew older he became more deeply committed to Christianity and went on to study Theology under Diodore of Tarsus. According to the Christian historian Sozomen, Libanius was supposed to have said on his death bed that John would have been his successor “if the Christians had not taken him from us.” John lived in extreme asceticism and became a hermit in about 375 A. D. He spent the next two years continually standing, scarcely sleeping and committing the Bible to memory. As a result of these strenuous practices he became ill and was forced to return to Antioch. He was ordained a deacon by Metropolitan Meletus of Antioch. That time Meletus was not in good terms with Alexandria and Rome. After the death of Meletus, John did not join Paulinus, the rival of Meletus. But after the death of Paulinus, he was ordained a Presbyter by Evagrius, the successor of Paulinus. He brought about reconciliation

between Flavian I of Antioch, Alexandria and Rome. Thus he brought these three sees into communion for the first time in nearly 70 years.

He was a person of unparalleled eloquence. The Emperor of Constantinople came to know about him. When Nectarios, the Patriarch of Constantinople died John Chrysostom was chosen as his successor. His time in Constantinople was more tumultuous than his time in Antioch. In Antioch John gained the popularity because of the eloquence of his public speaking at the Antioch's Cathedral, Golden Church, due to his insightful exposition of Bible passages and moral teachings. The most valuable of his works over the period of 12 years are his "Homilies" of various books of the Bible. He emphasized charitable giving and spoke against personal property and abuse of wealth:

"Do you wish to honor the body of Christ? Do not ignore him when he is naked. Do not pay him homage in the temple clad in silk, only then to neglect him outside where he is cold and ill-clad. He who said: "This is my body" is the same who said: "You saw me hungry and you gave me no food", and "whatever you did to the least of my brothers you did also to me" ...What good is it if the Eucharistic Table overloaded with golden chalices when your brother is dying of hunger? Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well."

His straight forward understanding of the Scriptures in contrast to the Alexandrian allegorical interpretation meant that the themes of his talks were practical, explaining the Bible's applications to everyday life. Chrysostom's straight forward preaching helped him to get a very popular support. Once it happened that during the weeks of Lent in 387 A. D he preached more than 20 homilies in which he entreated the people to see the error of their ways. This made lasting impressions on the general population of the city and many pagans converted to Christianity. During his time as Archbishop of Constantinople he sternly refused to host lavish social gatherings. This made him popular with the common people, but unpopular with the wealthy citizens and the clergy. He told the visiting regional preachers to return to their churches they were meant to be serving without any payout. His time in Constantinople was more problematic than the one in Antioch. Theophilus, the Patriarch of Alexandria wanted to bring Constantinople under his control and opposed John's appointment to Constantinople. Theophilus had disciplined four Egyptian Monks known as "The Tall Brothers" over their support of Origen's teachings. They fled to John and were welcomed by him. Theophilus therefore accused John of being too partial to the teachings of Origen. He made another enemy in Aelia Eudoxia, wife of Emperor Arcadius, who assumed that John's denunciations of extravagance in feminine dress were aimed at her. Theophilus, Eudoxia and other enemies of John held a Synod in 403 A. D and charges were made against John in which John's connection to Origen was used against him. It resulted in his disposition and banishment and was called back Arcadius. The people became very displeased over his departure and threatened to burn the royal palace. There was an earthquake the night of his arrest. Eudoxia took this as a sign of God's anger which prompted her to ask Arcadius for John's reinstatement. The peace was short

lived. A silver statue of Edoxia was erected in Augustaion near his cathedral. John denounced the dedication ceremonies as pagan and spoke against the Empress in very harsh terms. Once again John was banished to Caucasus in Abkhazia. John Chrysostom wrote an appeal for help to Pope Innocent I, Venerius, the bishop of Milan and Chromatius, the bishop of Aquileia. Pope Innocent I protested John's banishment from Constantinople, but no avail. He was further exiled from Caucasus to Pityus. He never reached his destination and died during his journey in 407 A.D.

John was venerated as a saint soon after his death. Saint Proclus Patriarch of Constantinople preached a homily praising his predecessor in the Church of Hagia Sophia, which is a very remarkable one. He said: "O John, your life was filled with sorrow, but your death was glorious. Your grave is blessed and reward is great, by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ O graced one, having conquered the bounds of time and place! Love has conquered space, unforgetting memory has annihilated the limits, and place does not hinder the miracles of the saint." The Eastern Orthodox Church commemorates him as a "Great Ecumenical Teacher" with Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian. The homilies of Chrysostom display much characteristic of the Antiochian School, but he also uses a great deal of the allegorical interpretations of the Alexandrian School. Apart from his homilies a number of John's treatises have had a very lasting influence. John's one of the early treatises "Against Those Who Oppose the Monastic Life", was directed to parents. John's work may be divided into four groups: They are

- Works interpreting the Bible;
- 2. Discourses;
- 3. Moral and Ascetic Essays
- 4. Letters.

The greatest contribution of St. Chrysostom is his practical applications of the uncompromising Christian Spirit against injustice and immorality. John's liturgical legacy has inspired many musical compositions. John's influence on church teachings is interwoven throughout the current Catechism of the Catholic Church. One of the recurring features of John's homilies is his emphasis on care for the needy. He calls upon the rich to lay aside materialism in favor of helping the poor, quite often using all of his rhetorical skills to shame the wealthy people:

"Do you pay such honor to your excrements as to receive them in to a silver chamber-pot when another man made in the image of God is perishing in the cold?"

Saint John Chrysostom wrote hundreds of exegetical homilies on both the New Testament and the Old Testament. These include sixty seven homilies on Genesis, fifty nine on Psalms, ninety on the Gospel of Mathew, eighty eight on the Gospel of John and fifty five on the Acts of the Apostles

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