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Encountering God Through Others: St Gregory of Nyssa's Concept of Love and Community

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Abstract

The paper examines how Gregory of Nyssa perceived community in his soteriological system. According to the Cappadocian Father, catharsis, self-improvement, and charismas are not sufficient for encountering Christ; rather, communion and community are needed for the above-mentioned gifts to resonate and thus bring salvation. Gregory based his findings on a personal level through his encounters with and following of teachers Basil and Macrina. Through their example, the bishop of Nyssa also instructed monastic communities, teaching them the value of encountering each other as brothers and, moreover, bringing healing and life everlasting through Christ.

Keywords: St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Macrina, St. Basil the Great, Communion, Love, Soteriology, Healing

The human being is a relational creature made in the image of God. This indicates that human beings are fundamentally identified as *persons*, as emphasized in writings by authors such as the late Metropolitan John Zizioulas and Christian philosopher Christos Yannaras.[1] Furthermore, such a notion implies that the human being can truly exist only when in communion with God and others—his or her neighbor. The cross of co-existence is implemented and sought from the beginning of creation. Humans are brought into being to relate and express a *koinonia* – fellowship, communion with God, fellow human beings, and all surrounding creation. The principle of such communion is love "that never dies" (1 Cor 13:8-10). There are many Church fathers of post-antiquity who expressed the

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[1] Cf. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006); Zizioulas, *The Meaning of Being Human*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2020); Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell, (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007); Yannaras, *Relational Ontology*, trans. N. Russell, (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011).

importance of fellowship, love, and attentiveness built on the foundation of human relationship with the Uncreated Creator and one's neighbor. In this paper I hope to present how—amongst these many teachers and fathers of the Church—St Gregory of Nyssa understood the irreplaceable virtue of love expressed in the ecclesial ambience as he presents it throughout his works.

St Gregory's style and thought is frequently compared to that of ancient and post-antiquity philosophers. This is especially evident in his treatment of anthropology. Thus, one can find studies that concern St Gregory's anthropology which solely indicate his connection to that of Platonism and Neoplatonism.[2] Conclusions from such a comparison appear to emphasize that human perfection is seen solely through catharsis, movement, and communion with God. Such studies on Gregory are truly helpful and contribute to a better understanding of the Cappadocian's approach to asceticism and communion with God; however, some aspects seem to be overlooked: Is the community of the Church and human encounter within the Church important in the bishop of Nyssa's soteriological thought? How does one's encounter with others contribute to the ultimate encounter with God? Is the notion of purification and asceticism, which is attributed to St Gregory in numerous studies as chief components to his soteriology, enough for one's encounter with God, or is the surrounding community truly needed to establish communion with God?

I will endeavor to elucidate these inquiries with the aim and hope of broadening our understanding of St Gregory of Nyssa's exploration of the concepts of community and togetherness, as well as the importance of encountering each other and understanding the significance one holds for the other. Being created in the image of God, human beings are called to respect, cherish, and moreover, love one another.

The paper will engage with "ascetical" works of Gregory of Nyssa, in the hope of providing some of his conclusions which show that his soteriology is always viewed in an ecclesial-communal climate, which furthermore implies community. Purification, virtues, and even *charismas* are not sufficient if they are not shared in love with one's neighbor; only in community can they truly create an environment leading one to the Lord and His Kingdom. These themes will be explored through two contexts: 1. Gregory's experience of love through his family, especially demonstrated through his relationship with his

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2 Harold F. Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1930); Enrico Peroli, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Neoplatonic Doctrine of the Soul," *VC* 51:2 (May 1997): 117-139. Catharine P. Roth, "Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection," *VC* 46:1 (March 1992): 20-30; George Bebis, "Gregory of Nyssa's 'De Vita Moysis': A Philosophical and Theological Analysis," *GOTR* 12 (1967): 369-393

sister Macrina and his brother Basil, which will also serve as his foundation and conclusions in his works regarding community; and 2. his instructions dedicated to those living in monastic communities.

Gregory's Encounter with Basil and Macrina

Gregory of Nyssa came from a noble and devout family. His brother St Basil the Great, his grandmother and his sister who shared the name Macrina, and his younger brother Peter all contributed to his upbringing. In such a milieu, St Gregory had many luminaries he could look up to. St Basil, in combination with Gregory's theological brilliance, had immense impact on the ever-emerging development within the Church—ranging from his emphasis on fellowship within cities to organizing monastic communities—which led to major breakthroughs in the structure and organization of the Church. St Gregory was ordained bishop by his brother, and throughout his writings the bishop of Nyssa referred to Basil as his teacher (*didaskalos*), transcending their biological relationship of brotherhood to become that of father and son.[3] In the concluding remarks of the *Funeral Oration* given two years following Basil's repose in 379, Gregory depicts the importance of imitating (μίμησις) and walking in the footsteps imprinted by the great bishop Basil, so much so, writes Gregory, "that remembering his life improves our mode of living."[4] He emphasizes that all are welcome to imitate and not simply adorn the teacher's life. What are the qualities that Gregory wants us to imitate? After comparing Basil to many scriptural characters— Abraham, Elijah, Moses, and Paul—he emphasizes the following: 1. Basil's holiness as exemplified through virtue and correct faith; 2. his contribution to the Church; and finally, 3. his existence in God. Basil, writes Gregory, is the vessel that brought the Church out of crisis:

> When people had fallen under the sway of such changes, a short time later God reveals the great Basil in the same way as Elijah with regard to Ahab; the priesthood had already collapsed but was taken up again as a light which illumined the faith through indwelling grace. Just as a torch shines at night for those wandering lost on the sea, so does the entire Church turn to the right way and becomes united with her leaders.[5]

For Gregory, the chief figure amongst these leaders is undoubtedly Basil, who not only proclaims the truth but also shows the truth by being helpful to and considerate of his flock. Hence, Gregory recollects Basil's love for his community in the following way:

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3 Cf. *De hominis opificio*, PG 44:125B; *In Hexaemeron*, PG 44:64 A-B.

4 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Basilium Fratrem*, GNO 10/1, 133.10: "τὸ διὰ τῆς μνήμης ἐκείνου τὸν βίον ἡμῖν γενέσθαι τῆς συνθείας βελτίονα."

5 *Ibid*., 115-116, (trans. Richard McCambly, 16).

> When the famine was severe in the city in which [Basil] happened to be present and the entire region was afflicted, he sold his possessions and exchanged money for food which was scarce. Having prepared a great amount of food and set a table, [Basil] took into consideration the people who came from everywhere during the time of famine; this included the young people of the city and the Jews who equally shared his generosity.[6]

The bishop of Nyssa indicates that for Basil, and for himself too, Christian love is open to all creation and all people; love, therefore, has no boundaries. In the oration dedicated to his brother's life, Gregory proposes that love is the greatest good. By means of 1 Cor.13, while comparing Basil to Paul, he highlights that "love is superior to prophecy and knowledge, firmer than faith, more durable than hope and always constant without which all our striving towards good would be meaningless."[7] Love is above all other good virtues and encompasses, or rather births, everything else that directs us to God and His Kingdom. Gregory said that Basil exemplified such love, and he commended Basil's example to those who hear it.

Great as he was, St Basil the Great was not the only *didaskalos* of Gregory. As we find in other texts, Gregory also honored, the eldest of his siblings, Macrina, with this title.[8] In one of the most touching of Gregory's writings, *On the Life of St Macrina*, he depicts a dialogue between himself and Macrina at her deathbed.[9] Gregory's portrayal in this *vita* indicates his encounter with one who has given herself wholeheartedly to Christ. St Macrina is regarded not only as Gregory's teacher, but Basil's as well. Moreover, the goal of the script is also to inspire readers of this manuscript to imitate the one called the "bride of Christ," as Gregory depicts his older sister.[10] From this text, I would like to point to Macrina's love for others. First, her household becomes a monastic commune, which included slaves who were regarded as equal to the rest of the household.[11] Second, he indicates throughout the text that she took care of others, including her elderly mother Emily and her students who wept as she breathed her last breath. Macrina is

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6 *Ibid*., 124.15-20, (trans. McCambly, 20).

7 *Ibid*., 118.5, (trans. McCambly, 17).

8 Cf. *De anima et resurrectione*, GNO, 3/3, 1 : " ἀδελφὴ καὶ διδάσκαλος."

9 Cf. *Life of St. Macrina* in *Ascetical Writings*, trans. Virginia W. Callahan (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1967), 163-191.

10 *Ibid*, 179.

11 Gregory is the first Father who spoke against slavery, indicating its illogical standing: because all human beings are created in the image of God, it is precisely because of bearing God's image that a human being cannot be owned. I find that he was taught this by Macrina's example; see his remarks in his work *In Ecclesiasten*, GNO 5, 336.

also said to have healed the sick with her prayers: all these examples portray the importance of love for neighbors, as commended by the Lord Jesus Christ.[12] Finally, her virtues crowned with love serve as an inspiration for how all human beings should live and to what they should aspire.

Gregory's reflection on the lives of his sister and brother allows one to conclude that he is not merely, as one would assume, a "mystic philosopher," but rather that he is a Christian inspired by his encounters with these people of God who taught him what the Church represents: community, amongst whose members love is centered and headed by Christ. To love God is to participate with others, to think of the entire creation as a gift bestowed by God. Moreover, only by being "wounded with love" (Cant. 5:8)[13] as Gregory depicts in his commentary on *Song of Songs* can one truly find his or her existential definition. However, for one to be "wounded by love," purification, virtues, and life through the mystagogy of the Church is needed. Gregory showed respect for his brother, not only by following in his footsteps as an ascetic and bishop, but also by striving to finish texts that were left undone by Basil due to his early passing. The ascetic writings, dedicated to abbots and monastic communities, were composed to enrich their life. I now move to some of these writings focusing on the importance of love and community.

Encounter with Ascetic Communities – Asceticism in Communion and Love

St Gregory of Nyssa is recognized as an assertive advocate for monasticism.[14] He models his conclusions on the foundation built by his *teachers*, who also lived and exemplified the importance of virginity and asceticism as that which preludes, but also reflects, eschatological existence. Gregory was an active spokesman to those who were interested in a life within monastic institutions initially organized by his brother Basil the Great. Hence, Gregory's first monumental work, *On Virginity*, was written in response to Basil's request and was dedicated to a monastic commune in Cappadocia. In the present paper, however, among the many aspects that are explored in Gregory's works dedicated to asceticism and soteriology, I would like to focus on two: the

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12 Concluding his *Life of St. Macrina*, Gregory depicts his sister as a healer, substantiating his previous statement in which he describes his sister as one who "never turned away anyone who asked for something." cf. St Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of St. Macrina* in *Ascetical Writings*, trans. Callahan, 178, 188-190.

13 See Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on *Song of Songs*, especially *Oratio* XIII, cf. *In Canticum canticorum*, GNO, VI, 371-399.

14 Gregory's works such as *De virginitate*, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae*, *De professione Christiana ad Harmonium*, etc. are a testimony to this statement. See Gregory's collection of ascetic writings in English trans. in Gregory of Nyssa, *Ascetical Works*, trans. Callahan.

importance of community (Church and Christian encounters amongst each other), and love, which is the foundation of every virtue and which will survive in the *eschata*.

The substance of Christian existence is found in the Liturgy, the body of Christ. Within the body of the Church, human beings, whether monastic or not, are called to participate in the Head of that same Church. Thus, within the Church, human beings not only encounter the Alpha and Omega—Christ—but also those who are created in His image, the brothers and sisters gathered in the same Church. Gregory's guidance indicates that all who belong to the body of Christ are in need of self-denial to overcome their individualistic inclinations. Hence, he writes in his work *On the Christian Mode of Life*:

One must deny his own soul. Denying one's own soul is not seeking one's own will, but rather making one's will the established word of God and using this as a good pilot which guides the common fulfillment of brotherhood harmoniously to the shore of the will of God.[15]

Such harmony between the brotherhood Gregory is alluding to can only be reached if there is harmony within each ascetic. The human person requires Christ, who is therapy and medicine to all creation, and thus a "life of angels" is established in the life within the existing world.[16] Moreover, this notion is proposed to all Christians, as Gregory writes: "Let each (virgin-monk) persuade himself that he is not only inferior to the brother at his side, but to all human beings."[17] Through humility and other corresponding virtues, the human being is elevated—and elevates his/her surroundings. Of course, this is not by his/her own power but, rather, by the Holy Spirit and the mystical body of the Church. The Church is composed of the body and the Head, and Christians are the body; however, simply being a Christian is not sufficient because action is needed, as Gregory explains in his work *On Perfection*:

> Learning that Christ is the "head of the Church," let this be considered before all else, that every head is of the same nature and the same essence as the body subordinate to it, and there is a unity of the individual parts with the whole, accomplishing by their common respiration a complete sympathy of all the parts. Therefore, if any part is divorced from the body, it is also altogether alienated from the head.... In order for the body, therefore, to remain whole in its nature, it is fitting for the

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15 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Christian Mode of Life*, 145 (trans. Callahan).

16 Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 51 (trans. Callahan).

17 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Christian Mode of Life,* 147 (trans. Callahan).

> separate parts to be in communion with the head.... And if we know that the head is incorruptible, then, the members also must be incorruptible.[18]

Incorruptibility requires action from the members of the Body, which is the Church. Gregory indicates that it is through love, virtues, and a life of *mimesis*—imitation of Christ, and thus μετουσία—of sharing in, or participating in God, that incorruption is attained.[19] In other words, in the experience of communion and participation in Christ Himself, within the Church, but also with other persons of the Body, incorruption is made a reality as a gift. Through Christ and His Church a recapitulation of all creation takes place. Participation implies love, *agape*, which opens the human being to God and others.

Agape, therefore, is the source and fulfillment of every good, including all that is defined as ἀρετή—virtues. The bishop of Nyssa is clear in the way he sets love on the highest pedestal, higher than any other virtue or charisma. Thus, he emphasizes:

> Even if someone receives the other gifts which the Spirit furnishes (I mean the tongues of angels and prophecy and knowledge and the grace of healing), but has never been entirely cleansed of the troubling passions within him through the charity of the Spirit, and has not received the final remedy of salvation in his soul, he is still in danger of failing if he does not keep charity (ἀγάπην) steadfast and firm among his virtues.[20]

Love towards God and human beings is that which substantiates existence, recreating human possibility. Through the power of love, all virtues will follow, as Gregory depicts, saying, "When the love of God is present among you, the other virtues will necessarily follow along with it: love of one's brother, gentleness, honesty, sufficiency, earnestness in prayer, and simplicity in virtue."[21] Consequently, love is something to be shared; it cannot exist confined in the solitary self where it becomes alter-love, which is a plunge into individualistic existence from its true potential, i.e. in becoming a person. To become a person, imaged in God, love for God and neighbor is essential. An openness of heart and mind and an openness of arms is what Gregory of Nyssa proposes to his readers. Thus, a person becomes "inflamed towards a love of the good and enkindling the soul with desire, as it is said: 'He

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18 Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, 111-112 (trans. Callahan).

19 Cf. David L. Balás. Methousia Theou: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to St. Gregory of Nyssa. Studia Anselmiana 55. (Rome: Herder and Herder, 1966).

20 Gregory of Nyssa, *De instituto Christiano*, GNO 8/1, 60.10. (trans. Callahan, 141).

21 *Ibid*., 149 (trans. Callahan).

who eats of me will hunger still, he who drinks of me will thirst for more.' And elsewhere: 'You put gladness into my heart.' And the Lord has said: 'The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'"[22] Hence, the Kingdom and that which equates to it, i.e. love, is lived and foretasted within the ecclesial atmosphere, where, as God's creation, human beings evermore thirst and hunger for the coming Kingdom shared amongst the faithful. St Gregory's ascetical writings allude to the Church and community. It is within the ecclesial experience of love that one entirely looks upon "the resurrection and future blessings" and thus accepts every insult and scourging, persecution and suffering as a blessing in the grace of the Holy Spirit, "taking away the perception of the present *pathos* (παθήματα) because of the hope of the future things to come (τῶν μελλόντων ἐλπίδι)."[23] Hence, all pain and suffering is healed in the eschatological reorientation, in the Spirit, that brings the Kingdom, elevating the human nature to that which is expected in the Kingdom.[24]

Conclusion

The importance of encountering others in love brings forth therapeutic circumstances; however, only in the encounter with Christ and the Holy Spirit can human co-existence have true value. Christ is the Therapist and therapy, the One who brings his followers to everlasting existence in His own existence. Empowered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, the community becomes the body of Christ, enduring the difficulties of the death-bound world, looking towards the future truth of existence. Christ frees human creation from these constraints and opens one's world to the anticipated New Creation, New Jerusalem, in the *eschata*. This is what inspires the human being to exist as an image of God, imitating Christ in His words and deeds, partaking in Him, and thus becoming in His likeness. To aspire to such an existence, St Gregory invites his readers to go through the fire of asceticism, for asceticism is not reserved for one's inner self, but is open to all, freeing one's body and soul from the love for vices and, instead, focusing one's love on that which is eternal. For Gregory of Nyssa, there is a strong emphasis on synergy between the Christian person and God, the created and Uncreated. No human power, worldly medicine, or therapy is sufficient to

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22 The term "within you," as detected by Metropolitan John Zizioulas, is a poor translation, i.e., it is common to understand 'within you' as within one's heart. However, as Metropolitan Zizioulas testifies it should be rendered as "in the midst of you" rather than "within you." Cf. John Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future: Towards an Eschatological Ontology* (Los Angeles: St. Sebastian Press, 2023), 18, f. 36.

23 De Insitituto Christiano, GNO 8/1, 86-87.

24 In *De oration Dominica*, the Holy Spirit is identified with the Kingdom (τὸ δὲ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον βασιλεία ἐστιν). The communion with the Holy Spirit elevates the human being towards the Kingdom of God. In other words, where the Holy Spirit is present the Kingdom of God emerges. Cf. *De oration Dominica* 3, GNO VII/2, 40.

free one from the limitations of death and sorrow; only in Christ is this possible. Hence, human free will and choices are authentic only if they align with that which is commanded by Christ. Loving God and neighbor—being the greatest commandments—truly opens human beings to a new reality in which one can encounter the God-man Christ. We thus encounter others in a new perspective, as those who are created in His image, loving the other in and through Christ, giving the other hope for the coming Kingdom. Only as the Body of Christ, as the Church, can this hope exist. The Church is the hope of the coming Kingdom, one that heals and brings all those within to a new mode of existence.

The abovementioned conclusions that sprout from Gregory's works serve as a testimony of his encounter with his teachers, Macrina and Basil. It was within the environment created by his sister and brother that Gregory became a witness to Christ and instructor of life in Him. This is an environment that taught him, and teaches his readers, that no person—because he or she is an image of God—can be a slave nor be enslaved; that love is the pinnacle and that which images and prevails in the coming Kingdom; that community is important—so much so that as human beings, all are accountable for each other and to Christ, who brings the Kingdom and love amongst His creation and who calls the faithful to encounter Him now and in His coming Kingdom.

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