



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 8 August 2007*

Saint Gregory Nazianzus (1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday, I talked about St Basil, a Father of the Church and a great teacher of the faith.

Today, I would like to speak of his friend, Gregory Nazianzus; like Basil, he too was a native of Cappadocia. As a distinguished theologian, orator and champion of the Christian faith in the fourth century, he was famous for his eloquence, and as a poet, he also had a refined and sensitive soul.

Gregory was born into a noble family in about 330 A.D. and his mother consecrated him to God at birth. After his education at home, he attended the most famous schools of his time: he first went to Caesarea in Cappadocia, where he made friends with Basil, the future Bishop of that city, and went on to stay in other capitals of the ancient world, such as Alexandria, Egypt and in particular Athens, where once again he met Basil (cf. *Orationes* 43: 14-24; *SC* 384: 146-180).

Remembering this friendship, Gregory was later to write: "Then not only did I feel full of veneration for my great Basil because of the seriousness of his morals and the maturity and wisdom of his speeches, but he induced others who did not yet know him to be like him.... The same eagerness for knowledge motivated us.... This was our competition: not who was first but who allowed the other to be first. It seemed as if we had one soul in two bodies" (*Orationes* 43: 16, 20; *SC* 384: 154-156, 164).

These words more or less paint the self-portrait of this noble soul. Yet, one can also imagine how this man, who was powerfully cast beyond earthly values, must have suffered deeply for the things of this world.

On his return home, Gregory received Baptism and developed an inclination for monastic life: solitude as well as philosophical and spiritual meditation fascinated him.

He himself wrote: "Nothing seems to me greater than this: to silence one's senses, to emerge from the flesh of the world, to withdraw into oneself, no longer to be concerned with human things other than what is strictly necessary; to converse with oneself and with God, to lead a life that transcends the visible; to bear in one's soul divine images, ever pure, not mingled with earthly or erroneous forms; truly to be a perfect mirror of God and of divine things, and to become so more and more, taking light from light...; to enjoy, in the present hope, the future good, and to converse with angels; to have already left the earth even while continuing to dwell on it, borne aloft by the spirit" (*Orationes* 2: 7; *SC* 247: 96).

As he confides in his autobiography (cf. *Carmina [historica]* 2: 1, 11, *De Vita Sua* 340-349; *PG* 37: 1053), he received priestly ordination with a certain reluctance for he knew that he would later have to be a Bishop, to look after others and their affairs, hence, could no longer be absorbed in pure meditation.

However, he subsequently accepted this vocation and took on the pastoral ministry in full obedience, accepting, as often happened to him in his life, to be carried by Providence where he did not wish to go (cf. *Jn* 21: 18).

In 371, his friend Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, against Gregory's own wishes, desired to ordain him Bishop of Sasima, a strategically important locality in Cappadocia. Because of various problems, however, he never took possession of it and instead stayed on in the city of Nazianzus.

In about 379, Gregory was called to Constantinople, the capital, to head the small Catholic community faithful to the Council of Nicea and to belief in the Trinity. The majority adhered instead to Arianism, which was "politically correct" and viewed by emperors as politically useful.

Thus, he found himself in a condition of minority, surrounded by hostility. He delivered five *Theological Orations* (*Orationes* 27-31; *SC* 250: 70-343) in the little Church of the Anastasis precisely in order to defend the Trinitarian faith and to make it intelligible.

These discourses became famous because of the soundness of his doctrine and his ability to reason, which truly made clear that this was the divine logic. And the splendour of their form also makes them fascinating today.

It was because of these orations that Gregory acquired the nickname: "The Theologian".

This is what he is called in the Orthodox Church: the "Theologian". And this is because to his way of thinking theology was not merely human reflection or even less, only a fruit of complicated speculation, but rather sprang from a life of prayer and holiness, from a persevering dialogue with God. And in this very way he causes the reality of God, the mystery of the Trinity, to appear to our reason.

In the silence of contemplation, interspersed with wonder at the marvels of the mystery revealed, his soul was engrossed in beauty and divine glory.

While Gregory was taking part in the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, he was elected Bishop of Constantinople and presided over the Council; but he was challenged straightaway by strong opposition, to the point that the situation became untenable. These hostilities must have been unbearable to such a sensitive soul.

What Gregory had previously lamented with heartfelt words was repeated: "We have divided Christ, we who so loved God and Christ! We have lied to one another because of the Truth, we have harboured sentiments of hatred because of Love, we are separated from one another" (*Orationes* 6: 3; *SC* 405: 128).

Thus, in a tense atmosphere, the time came for him to resign.

In the packed cathedral, Gregory delivered a farewell discourse of great effectiveness and dignity (cf. *Orationes* 42; *SC* 384: 48-114). He ended his heartrending speech with these words: "Farewell, great city, beloved by Christ.... My children, I beg you, jealously guard the deposit [of faith] that has been entrusted to you (cf. I Tm 6: 20), remember my suffering (cf. Col 4: 18). May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all" (cf. *Orationes* 42: 27; *SC* 384: 112-114).

Gregory returned to Nazianzus and for about two years devoted himself to the pastoral care of this Christian community. He then withdrew definitively to solitude in nearby Arianzo, his birthplace, and dedicated himself to studies and the ascetic life.

It was in this period that he wrote the majority of his poetic works and especially his autobiography: the *De Vita Sua*, a reinterpretation in verse of his own human and spiritual journey, an exemplary journey of a suffering Christian, of a man of profound interiority in a world full of conflicts.

He is a man who makes us aware of God's primacy, hence, also speaks to us, to this world of ours: without God, man loses his grandeur; without God, there is no true humanism.

Consequently, let us too listen to this voice and seek to know God's Face.

In one of his poems he wrote, addressing himself to God: "May you be benevolent, You, the hereafter of all things" (*Carmina [dogmatica]* 1: 1, 29; *PG* 37: 508).

And in 390, God welcomed into his arms this faithful servant who had defended him in his writings with keen intelligence and had praised him in his poetry with such great love.

To special groups

I greet all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including groups from Ireland, Israel, the Far East and North America. I extend a special welcome to the pilgrims who have travelled here from Da Nang in Vietnam. May the peace and joy of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you and may God bless you all!

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Today is the Memorial of St Dominic Guzman, a tireless preacher of the Gospel, and tomorrow will be the Feast of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, Co-Patroness of Europe.

May these two Saints help you, dear *young people*, to trust in Christ always. May their example sustain you, dear *sick people*, so that you participate with faith in the saving power of his Cross. I encourage you, dear *newly-weds*, to be a luminous image of God through your reciprocal fidelity. I impart my Blessing to you all.

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