

The Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus

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*Discovering a New Face
of His Personality*

By

Theodor Damian

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-9067-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9067-0

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PREFACE

St. Gregory the Theologian is one of the greatest intellectuals of the ancient world. In Late Antiquity he was called the Second Demosthenes, and several of his writings go further than that great orator in the purity of his rhetorical style and the moral passion of his teachings. His life was bound up with monumental events in the development of fourth-century Christianity and he has been rightly seen as the great theologian dealing with Christology, salvation history and trinitarianism. He ended his career in the royal city of Constantinople in the reign of Theodosius I as its archbishop and president of the Second Ecumenical Council held there in 381. His resignation, in the aftermath of the stalling of the debates, was called by Cardinal Newman one of the most selfless acts in the history of the Church. But Gregory was more than just a statesman rhetorician, he was also one of the great poets of that period in Greek literature known as Second Sophistic.

In that era of late Hellenism, scholars had long been arguing over a piece of unfinished business in the conflicts that emerged between the schools of Plato and Aristotle. One of these friction points was Plato's dismissal of poetry from his ideal society, since poets (the word itself means "maker") "made up" their tales, and thus used lies, or at least fundamental falsehoods (myths of the gods that were frequently immoral and foolish), to convey their truths. Plato wanted poets banned from inhabiting his ideal society and wished them never to be cited in educating young minds. Even so, Aristotle and earlier Greek thinkers had stood up for the morally regenerative force of poetry, and found Plato's root and branch condemnation somewhat puritanical, and indeed overly dismissive of a much more ancient Greek tradition of the gods gracefully inspiring the poet (en-thousiasmos meant divine inspiration) to a higher set of perceptions and sensations than those normally attainable by humanity. Poetry could thus be seen as truly an oracular event full of sacred inspiration, and so be given a special status in the way humans apprehend truth.

Gregory, as a Christian thinker, came to that divide between Aristotle and Plato over the nature of poetry by adding his sense of inspiration of the Spirit of God coming through the most subtle refinement of the human heart and soul. This he saw beginning in an ethical conversion and culminating in a quietly reflective and ascetical attitude to life (leaving a small footprint and living compassionately) that allowed a human being to learn how to hear: that is, to use the ears of the soul to both hear and see deeper truths that passed over the heads of those who lived more superficially. He brought into the Greek literary debate a Christian sensitivity to the role that inspiration plays in the development of the spiritual intellect of humanity, and in his famed *Theological Orations* (27–31), Gregory concluded that God lifted up the prepared and intellectually refined speaker into higher visions of truth. For him, therefore, the manifestation of this in a world so often peopled by all manner of fake and misleading voices that tried to shout the loudest to be heard was the powerful but quiet voice of the poet. Gregory elevated poetry as one of the most inspired of all ways to seek the truth, and estimated that the real poet, the profound teacher of deep truths to their generation, was the one who had quietly studied, reflected and learned the trade of expressing those truths in the most elegantly persuasive manner possible. The ability to write purely and vivaciously he took as itself a proof of not only the quality of the poetry but the authenticity of the truths it expressed.

Gregory's range of poetry is restricted to his celebration of the mercy of God, and the joys of family and friendship. He did not go further. He wanted to honour Plato's original insight with a tacit agreement that Greek poets often wasted their efforts on tales of war and strife, instead of love, simplicity and hope. So all in all he stands as one of the first and most powerful Christian poets, offering a synthetic resolution of the archaic controversy.

A critical edition of all his poetry was prepared by the Polish scholars of the University of Kraków, but they were early casualties of the Nazi invasion, and were shot on the university steps. The folios of that critical edition were blown away in the debris of war, and still to this day Gregory's poetry is only available in poor editions or scattered critical parts.

Theodor Damian does us a great service in this present book by reminding us what a fine poet Gregory was. A well-known and successful

poet himself, Prof. Damian is able to enter into the heart as well as the mindset of Gregory's world. As an Orthodox priest, he too inhabits that same liturgical universe that so dominated Gregory's priestly imagination. He is thus doubly qualified as poet and theologian to stand as an interpreter of the great poet-theologian, who was known in ancient times simply as "The Theologian."

Prof. Damian's work opens up for us, the reader, a most welcome window into that ancient world; one that through the study of this great teacher, allows us to see so many instructive parallels to that of our own. As ever, the patient and focused "digging" of the poet takes us by the hand and leads us into a brighter light.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The chapters of this book were originally presentations given over the years at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at the Western Michigan University at Kalamazoo, Michigan, in the sessions organized by The Romanian Institute of Orthodox Theology and Spirituality, New York.

The papers were published in several issues of the journal *Romanian Medievalia* (see www.romanian-institute-ny.org).

THE POETRY OF GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS IN THE CHRISTIAN POETICAL CONTEXT OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

Introduction

St. Gregory of Nazianzus was a personality of first rank in the complex world of the fourth Christian century.¹ A. Benoit is certain that he was one of the greatest orators that ever existed.² So much, in fact, was Gregory part of the life of his century, his ascetic withdrawals notwithstanding, that studying his biography one will be well introduced to the life of his time and vice versa.³

On one hand, as Paul Gallay notes, the fourth century was one of fighting, between Christianity and paganism, and within Christianity between sects, heresies and orthodoxy.⁴

On the other hand, this century was characterized by a strong admiration and enthusiasm for the classic Hellenic culture, which was true for the entire Roman Empire. Subjects taught in the Greek classic educational system were in fashion now, and students would strive to learn more and better the Greek letters and philosophy, even going from school to school looking for new and better programs and professors in order to obtain this type of instruction.⁵

For all the excitement and lore of the old intellectual life and production, the pagan writers of this century in the Roman Empire were not able to generate anything comparable with the great works of the old Greek authors.

¹ M. Pellegrino, *La Poesia de S. Gregorio Nazianzeno* (Milano: Societa editrice "Vita e Pensiero," 1932), 107.

² A. Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze* (Marseille: Typographie Marius Olive, 1876), 715.

³ Pellegrino, *La Poesia de S. Gregorio Nazianzeno*, 6.

⁴ Paul Gallay, *La vie de Saint Grégoire de Nazianze* (Paris: Emmanuel Vitte, 1943), 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

It was the advent and the growth of Christianity that changed the landscape. Whatever was missing in order to achieve that comparability was given by Christianity, still a new religion to many; that is why, Paul Gallay writes, the greatest authors in this period of time were the Fathers of the Church.⁶ In other words, the profound originality of the Christian spirit found, in the cultural background of the fourth century,⁷ the most appropriate condition for it to shock in its force and potential. This was like a *kairotic* encounter. This was the time of Gregory the Theologian.

The Christian poetical context of St. Gregory's poetry in this time and part of the world is in particular and more precisely represented by the poetry of some heresiarchs who, to better spread their teaching to the public, put it in verses so that they can be easily memorized, recited and transmitted.

The most important of these heresiarchs are, chronologically and theologically speaking, the famous or infamous Arius, and then the two Apollinaris, the Elder and the Younger, especially the latter.

Moving from theology to poetry, if we want to think of the most important poets of the abovementioned tradition in the fourth century, then Apollinaris the Younger will certainly have to be named, and next to him, and more precisely above him, Gregory of Nazianzus.

It would probably be very interesting for us to compare the works of the two poets, both theologically and at the level of their *ars poetica*. Unfortunately, the works of Apollinaris, as many as they were, have been lost, and we know of his poetical elaboration only from references to them in other people's works.

In this very short chapter, I intend to make the *sitz im leben*, in rather general terms, of Gregory's poetical production; that is, to try to recreate its context by looking in particular at the goal and intention of his poetry and at the heretical teachings that he argued against, more precisely Apollinarism. This will give the reader a chance to think about poetry and theology, even though Gregory's theological responses to heresy are not the subject of this chapter.

But before starting this presentation, I will state some considerations on Gregory's poetry in general.

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Pellegrino, *La Poesia de S. Gregorio Nazianzeno*, 6.

Gregory's Poetry: General Considerations

Number: Apparently, there is no total agreement as to how much poetry Gregory wrote. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Jerome and Suidas wrote that Gregory produced thirty thousand verses, which seems not to be an exaggeration since a lot of them have been lost.⁸ Louis Montaut mentions only seventeen thousand verses,⁹ Francesco Corsaro seventeen thousand five hundred,¹⁰ Vasile Ionescu and Nicolae Stefanescu eighteen thousand (in 507 poems),¹¹ while Jean Bernardi raises the number to twenty thousand (in 185 poems plus epitaphs).¹²

It seems to me that Jerome's account the best chance to be realistic. Considering Apollinaris: if he was able to write a vast number of verses, why not Gregory as well? Gregory was extremely well educated, had a passion for poetry since his youth, and had the same reasons as Apollinaris to write poetry, if not more, as I will mention later.

Julian the Apostate reportedly forbade Christian professors to teach Greek letters, arts and philosophy in their schools. In response, Apollinaris the Elder and the Younger began to versify entire books of the Old Testament and produce all sorts of poetry to counter the emperor's order, continuing to teach literature that was Greek in fashion but Christian in context. We are also told that Gregory of Nazianzus not only encouraged the Apollinaris in their work but he himself started to do the same.¹³

⁸ "Gregory of Nazianzus," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia>.

⁹ Louis Montaut, *Revue Critique de Quelques Questions Historiques se Rapportant à Saint Grégoire de Nazianze et à Son Siècle* (Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1878), 167.

¹⁰ Gregorio Nazianzeno, *Poesie Scelte*, Introduzione e Traduzione di Francesco Corsaro (Catania: Centro di Studi Sull' Antico Cristianesimo, Università di Catania), xi.

¹¹ Vasile Ionescu and Nicolae Stefanescu, *Antologie din literatura patristica greaca a primelor secole* [*Anthology of Greek Patristic Literature of the First Centuries*] (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1960), 141.

¹² Jean Bernardi, *St. Grégoire de Nazianze. Le Théologien et son temps* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1995), 308.

¹³ Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, 147.

In addition, Gregory and Apollinaris the Younger were competitors and adversaries in the framework of the Christological doctrine. It is supposed that Gregory wrote as much as the other to counter his heretical propaganda.

The capacity and intellectual brilliance of Gregory, his inner burning bush for poetry, his love for the ancient works in general and literature and poetry in particular, and his talent confirmed by many all become reasons to believe that he wrote much more than has survived.

Classification: If scholars do not have a unified idea concerning the amount of verses Gregory produced, they do not agree concerning the classification of the poetry either. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* online for instance divides the Theologian's poetry into autobiographical verses, epigrams and epitaphs.¹⁴ I believe that the versified epistles should have been included here as another category.

Another source divides them into Dogmatical, Moral, Personal, Epistolary, Epitaphs and Epigrams,¹⁵ while a simpler and more classical analysis indicates two categories: theological (thirty-eight dogmatic and forty moral poems) and historical (including autobiographical, lyrical and other poems).¹⁶ The name "historical" for the last category is considered confusing and ambiguous by Jean Bernardi¹⁷ because that would indicate that the poems have a purely historical nature, which is not the case.

Both Benoit and Pellegrino believe that the classification of Gregory's poetry is not a very rigorous one since poems that belong to one division can easily belong to the other;¹⁸ it depends on how one assesses the content, which is many times multi-faceted.

Time: There is disagreement among scholars with respect to the time when Gregory wrote his poetry. Some authors believe that he wrote poetry only

¹⁴ "Gregory of Nazianzus," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

¹⁵ *The Early Christian Literature Primers*, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/jackson2/11_gre.html; "Gregory Nazianzen," 7.

¹⁶ Bernardi, *St. Grégoire de Nazianze*, 308.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁸ Benoit, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze*, 725; Pellegrino, *La Poesia de S. Gregorio Nazianzeno*, 7.

in the last five years of his life,¹⁹ others that he wrote it in general at the end of his life. According to J. Planche, that proves the force of his genius.²⁰

I believe that one can argue that, on the contrary, if Gregory was a genius in poetry, he did not have to wait until the end of his life to write his beautiful poems but did so throughout it.

Genius is passion and inspiration – and effort as well – and we know how passionate for literature and how cultured, educated and outspoken he was; it is easy to imagine him writing poetry even at a very early age. That would justify Jerome's affirmation that Gregory wrote thirty thousand verses, even if we don't have them all. In fact, Benoit mentions for his part that Gregory started to write poetry in his youth, otherwise one could not explain the vast amount of literary works he produced.²¹

Gregory as Poet

Even though Bernardi writes that Gregory had two contradictory vocations – an intellectual and academic, and a Christian philosopher – (and that he sacrificed the first for the sake of the second),²² looking closely at the life of the holy man, one can easily argue that these two aspects are not contradictory at all, but on the contrary complement each other wonderfully.

First of all, everything in Gregory's life was centred on Christ. When it comes to the world, Gregory says that the one thing he clearly loved was the glory of eloquence. When he obtained it, he put it in Christ's service.²³ If one thinks of the desert and the harsh ascetical life, the theologian testifies that, there, his only richness and consolation is Christ.²⁴ Every passion he had in life – eloquence, literature, philosophy, poetry in particular – he

¹⁹ L. Montaut, *Revue Critique de Quelques Questions Historiques*, 167; Rosemary Radford Reuter, *Gregory of Nazianzus, Rhetor and Philosopher* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 50.

²⁰ Gregorio Nazianzeno, *Poesie Scelte*, x; J. Planche, *Choix de Poésies et de Lettres de Saint Grégoire de Nazianze* (Paris: Librairie de Gide Fils, 1827), v.

²¹ Benoit, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze*, 82; 582.

²² Bernardi, *St. Grégoire de Nazianze*, 320.

²³ A. Benoit, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze*, 75.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 74–5.

When he talks about another great poet and theologian of the fourth century, Ephraem the Syrian – from the Syrian rather than Hellenistic world – Florovsky writes that St. Ephraem's talent as a poet accounts for his exceptional influence and the great popularity of his works.³⁴

If that is the case, one can argue that Gregory also enjoyed great popularity and had a very significant influence in the Christian life of his time and later. Then, he can be considered a talented poet too.

In his remarks on St. Gregory's poetry, Pellegrino goes beyond disputable definitions of aspects of these works and insists that, no matter what kind it is, no matter how one classifies it, it is poetry in the real sense of the term, and its author is a poet.³⁵

Another source states that he was "the first of the Greek Christian poets to approach, even if at some distance, the poets of antiquity ... no writer of verses ever surpassed Gregory in that elegant culture and that experience of the vicissitudes of life which are fitted to equip a poet."³⁶

Gregory had a true poetic fire. He inherited the Alexandrian and Athenian cultures but his being a Christian helped him bring into poetry new emotions of which the old poets never dreamed. Gregory created a new order of poetry: one of religious meditation and philosophic reverie.³⁷

The Goals of His Poetry

Even though it is said that Constantinople was the intended audience of Gregory's major poetry³⁸ – keeping in mind that the Apollinarians invaded Nazianzus and that their leader was in Laodicea, and that Gregory wrote a lot in order to counter this heresy, even though we may not have all his poems today – one can conclude that Nazianzus, Laodicea and maybe other places where the heresy predominated could have been part of the destination of Gregory's major poetical works.

Several goals can be considered when it comes to the poetry of the holy man of Nazianzus, and all of them help one to at least partially reconstruct

³⁴ Ibid., 168.

³⁵ M. Pellegrino, *La Poesia de S. Gregorio Nazianzeno*, 6–7.

³⁶ *The Early Christian Literature Primers*, 7.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ J. A. McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 375.

the context in which he wrote at personal, moral, theological, literary and even political levels.

The Personal Purpose

As Planche indicates, Gregory considered that in writing poetry he imposed a penance on himself, which was a normal part of the hardship that has to characterize one's ascetical life. Since he had a propensity towards writing, doing it in verse is harder than in prose,³⁹ are thus consistent with his ascetic tendencies.

One might have the impression that this is only a pretext and, since he had a real passion for poetry, Gregory would have written it anyway as a penance, hobby or need. However, one has to recognize that writing in prose on the topics that represented the content of his poetry would have been easier, and Gregory himself acknowledges that.

In fact, writing in verse in order to reduce the quantity of words is in line with the vow of silence taken by the ascetic. Less words are intended to reduce the human word to its original role of a humble auxiliary of the Word of God, Benoit observes.⁴⁰

So it could have been that Gregory wrote his poetry at the end of his life as a relaxation from the cares and troubles of life,⁴¹ more than having been a serious pursuit, as one source indicates; however, it is hard to speak for somebody else when it comes to how one writes one's own poetry. For if writing poems was for Gregory a simple way of relaxation, then one cannot easily explain why Gregory himself says that he wrote in verse in order to impose a hardship on himself, unless it was a hardship and a relaxation at the same time.

It seems to me that due to the vocation and talent that Gregory had for literature in general and poetry in particular, and due to the fire in him, his love for letters and his solid education, he wrote poetry for its own sake as well. I believe that writing poetry for the sake of poetry does not diminish the affirmation he made concerning poetry as an ascetic hardship.

³⁹ Planche, *Choix de Poésies*, vii; Gregorio Nazianzeno, *Poesie Scelte*, x.

⁴⁰ Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, 76.

⁴¹ "Gregory of Nazianzus," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

It is clear from his writing that the Theologian wrote poetry in order to praise God in a special way. “I am God’s organ,” he says. “I write praises to Him, yet not like the pagan poets but with a Christian heart.”⁴²

Poetry was written as a way of personal consolation when the author was in physical pain – as he often was, according to his own testimony – but also when he was taken by sadness at the thought of soon leaving the earthly life, when he looked at himself like an “old swan” and wrote verses on his past as a way to dignify the exit from the life’s scene.⁴³

Finally, Planche says that Gregory wrote poetry in order to destroy calumnies published against him by his adversaries; in other words, to defend his reputation.⁴⁴

The Moral Purpose

As G. Florovsky, McGuckin, and several other scholars writing on Gregory the Theologian show, the ascetic of Nazianzus wrote poetry with moral purposes in mind; he wrote to teach moral principles to people, youths in particular, and hence many poems have a didactic character.⁴⁵

Through his poems, he wanted to produce spiritual delight in the soul and mind of those young people and, in fact, all those who took delight in art and literature, but who also needed spiritual guidance. Poetry would be a way to make the moral teachings of the Christian Church more readily acceptable.⁴⁶

Bernardi believes that, through his poems, Gregory also wanted to teach the youth the classic literary forms of poetical expression, while of course teaching them the new Christian values, and he does not exclude the possibility that some of Gregory’s poems may have been used as collective

⁴² Gregory Nazianzus, “De se ipso,” in Migne, *P. G.* vol. 37, 69–72; in Ionescu and Stefanescu, *Antologie din literatura patristica greaca a primelor secole*, 170.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴⁴ Planche, *Choix de Poésies*, 7.

⁴⁵ G. Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, 69; McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, 376.

⁴⁶ Ionescu and Stefanescu, *Antologie din literatura patristica greaca a primelor secole*, 167.

Apollinarian propagandistic poetry with his own poems, fighting his adversaries with their own weapons.⁵¹

Literary Purposes

As Planche explains, in writing poetry, Gregory also wanted to show that poetry and music are not the exclusive prerogative of the pagans, but Christians can excel in them too.⁵² Thus, many poems were written by the theologian with the clear intention to supersede the work of pagan writers.

Moreover, we are told that he even wanted to create a literary movement or school of Christian root and inspiration,⁵³ a goal that he may have achieved without actually seeing its development.

Political Purposes

Louis Montaut thinks that Gregory wrote poetry in order to offer a solution to the law of Julian the Apostate, the emperor who forbade Christians to teach the classic Greek works in their schools.⁵⁴

The Apollinarian Heresy

Before moving to a short presentation of the false teaching of Apollinaris, I consider it necessary to mention here a few other Christian authors who wrote poetry in Greek in the fourth century and who are integral to the poetical context of St. Gregory's poetical works.

Arius was the major Christian heresiarch of the fourth century who defended his theological positions in verse. His best known poem is *Thalia*.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, 616; Montaut, *Revue Critique de Quelques Questions Historiques*, 169; Gregorio Nazianzeno, *Poesie Scelte*, x.

⁵² Planche, *Choix de Poésies*, viii.

⁵³ Ionescu and Stefanescu, *Antologie din literatura patristica greaca a primelor secole*, 167.

⁵⁴ Montaut, *Revue Critique de Quelques Questions Historiques*, 169.

⁵⁵ "Arius," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Ephraem's poetry was divided into *memre* – orations, homilies which might explain why his verses are so many – and *madrase* – hymns containing instructions written for choral singing, and even to be accompanied by harps.⁶³

In his about one thousand works⁶⁴ Ephraem basically intended to give moral instruction, to glorify God and the Theotokos, and to fight heresy. He wrote against the Gnostics, Marcion and Manes specifically, the Arians and Julian the Apostate,⁶⁵ and Bardesanes (Bar-Daisan) and his son Harmonius.⁶⁶

Bardesanes was the first Syrian poet and a heretic teacher; he used to spread his teachings in metrical forms in order to have better success with the public.⁶⁷

As Gregory of Nazianzus did with his verses against the Apollinarians, so Ephraem, in order to fight the heretic with their own weapons, put his theological doctrines in verse.

According to Florovsky, “it is Ephraem's talent as a poet that accounts for his exceptional influence and the broad and immediate popularity of his verses.”⁶⁸

Apollinaris the Elder was a Christian grammarian living in the fourth century, first at Berytus in Phoenicia, then in Laodicea in Syria. When in 362 Julian the Apostate forbade Christian professors to teach the Greek letters in their schools, he and his son Apollinaris the Young started to replace the Greek literature with Christian, and composed great works in verse and prose of Christian root and inspiration. Socrates in his *Ecclesiastic History* mentions that Apollinaris the Elder put the Old Testament Pentateuch in Greek hexameters, converted the first two books of Kings into an epic poem, and wrote tragedies, comedies and odes imitating the Greek authors.

Sozomen does not mention Apollinaris the Elder's works in his history but indicates those of his son. None of those works survive.⁶⁹

⁶³ Ibid.; Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, 169.

⁶⁴ *The Saint Pachomius Library* (<http://www.voskrese.info/spl/XefremSyria.html>).

⁶⁵ Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, 169.

⁶⁶ “St. Ephraem (Poetical Writings),” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

⁶⁷ Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, 168.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ “Apollinaris (the Elder),” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Apollinaris the Younger, born in Laodicea in 310, was, according to Charles Raven, “perhaps the most remarkable, as he is certainly the last, of the great Hellenic Students and thinkers who devoted their lives ... to the pursuit of truth.”⁷⁰ With an incontestable, profound and solid education, he was a brilliant rhetor who, just like Origen earlier, “combined in himself all that is best in the culture of his time,”⁷¹ according to one testimony.

In 360 he was elected Bishop of Laodicea. Florovsky mentions that he wrote “countless” works, most of which have been lost,⁷² and he certainly worked with his father on the creation of a Christian literature imitating the Greek models after Julian the Apostate’s edict. Sozomen states that Apollinaris’s writings were of great elegance and at least equal to the originals on which they were modelled.⁷³ His poetical works along with those of his father enjoyed extreme popularity in their time. They were sung and recited, we are told, by people at work, meals, festivals and many other events great and small.⁷⁴

Apollinaris was a Nicene theologian, admirer and friend of Athanasius. For his friendship with the great Alexandrian bishop, in particular for having received him when Athanasius was travelling through Laodicea, Apollinaris was excommunicated by the Arian Bishop of Laodicea, George.⁷⁵

Before 362, according to Florovsky, apparently in order to counter the teaching of Diodore of Tarsus, leader of the Antiochene School, Apollinaris developed his own Christological views yet tried to stay faithful to Athanasius’s Christology, according to whom in Incarnation the Divine Logos took upon himself our flesh (μία φύσις τοῦ λογοῦ Θεοῦ σεσαρκωμένη).⁷⁶

Florovsky explains that Apollinaris did not distinguish between *nature* and *hypostasis*; consequently, he saw in Christ one person with one nature and one hypostasis. In order for Christ to have been able to save us, He must

⁷⁰ Charles E. Raven, *Apollinarianism: An Essay in the Christology of the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 127.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷² Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, 16.

⁷³ Raven, *Apollinarianism*, 137.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷⁶ Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, 16–17; Raven, *Apollinarianism*, 170.

have had a Divine Intellect, not a human one that is bound to weakness and cannot overcome sins. Hence in Jesus Christ the Word of God had taken an animated body. The intellect was that of the Divine Logos itself. Consequently, the Word became flesh, but not fully human. It results that the two entities, divine and human, only coexisted in Christ's person.⁷⁷

According to Florovsky, Apollinaris was a trichotomist. Jesus Christ had a flesh and soul that were human and a spirit or *nous* – the Divine Logos. The abovementioned author believes that, based on the Apollinarian theology, Jesus Christ's humanity is similar to ours but not consubstantial with it,⁷⁸ even though it is also said that Apollinaris made a "lasting contribution to the Orthodox theology in declaring that Christ was co-substantial with the Father as regarding His divinity and co-substantial with us as regarding his humanity."⁷⁹

For their Christology, the Apollinarists were called "sarkolaters," or those who adored the flesh,⁸⁰ because they refused to recognize the human spirit in Christ.

Paul Gallay considers that Gregory had to get involved in the Apollinarian controversy. On his way to Constantinople, he tells us, he worried about it. In addition he had to write a professional refutation of the heresy at the request of Cledonius, the priest he installed at Nazianzus, since this city dear to the poet was invaded by disciples of Apollinaris.⁸¹ Yet his response, like his entire Christology, is in Florovsky's evaluation, in as much as it relates to this heresy, not elaborated like a theological system. It is rather a confession of faith expressed in clear and precise language that anticipates the later Christological formulae relating to the two natures and one person of Christ.⁸²

⁷⁷ Ibid., 16–17.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁷⁹ "Apollinaris of Laodicea," in *Academic/Wikipedia* (<https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/1372756>).

⁸⁰ Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, 605.

⁸¹ P. Gallay, *La vie de Saint Grégoire de Nazianze*, 217.

⁸² Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, 86.

Conclusions

Gregory of Nazianzus, with his solid and vast knowledge in dialectic, philosophy, theology and scriptures, with his incomparable eloquence, and his talent as a writer, exercised a great influence on his contemporaries and generations after him. These qualities made him win all the disputes where he had to defend Christian Orthodoxy, as Benoit notes.⁸³

Gregory was a poet of first rank who surpassed all other poets writing in Greek in the first Christian centuries. He is also rival to the greatest writers of the pagan antiquity. These classic writers were great and inimitable indeed. However, they addressed people's imagination and spirit with their literary production. Gregory's works, in no inferior position vis-à-vis the first ones, first address not only the mind and spirit but the heart of the reader as well.⁸⁴

Villemain considers Gregory of Nazianzus "the poet of Eastern Christendom" per excellence, as he believes that poetry is the chief accomplishment of the saint.⁸⁵

It is worth noting that fifty years after Gregory's death his writings became normative and the Roman Church issued a declaration that his poetry was to be admitted entirely in the Church as works of greatest authority.⁸⁶ For his import of great and exalted ideas from the theological science into poetry he was even likened to Dante and it was suggested that he be considered on just ground the father of modern poetry.⁸⁷

In summary, according to Benoit, Gregory's providential mission in the Church was: to fight successfully against the great heretics of his century; to work towards the reform of the clergy's morality; to bring Constantinople to the Orthodox faith; and to create a form of Christian poetry and use it in order to serve, defend, ornate and beautify the Christian truth.⁸⁸

⁸³ Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, 402; Pellegrino, *La Poesia de S. Gregorio Nazianzeno*, 5.

⁸⁴ Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, 737; 741.

⁸⁵ "Gregory of Nazianzus," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*

⁸⁶ Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, 595.

⁸⁷ *The Early Christian Literature Primers*, 7.

⁸⁸ Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, 743.

SYNESIUS OF CYRENE AND HIS SIMILARITY TO GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS'S LIFE AND WORK

Biographical Information

Synesius of Cyrene was a philosopher, poet and writer, bishop and politician, and in all a bright personality of his time considered a model by many, which means that people not only looked up to him for guidance and instruction and tried to follow his style in life and work, but also that his image remained after his death as a symbol and light for the generations that came after him.

Synesius was born in Libya in the second half of the fourth century to a wealthy and prominent family,¹ in a time when Rome was in decline and Byzantium was growing. More precisely, he lived between 370–412 or 413 AD.

Christian Lacombrade writes that Synesius was of Greek origin, belonging to generations of Greek colonists who had founded the city of Cyrene in Libya in the seventh century BC and who made an advanced citadel of the Hellenistic culture out of it.²

Being raised in a rich family, Synesius benefitted from a solid education and excelled in several fields of study. He studied letters and sciences in lay schools in such great intellectual centres as Alexandria and Athens, being very fond of the major Greek writers and philosophers. Due to his application to sciences and his stages in Alexandria, he came to admire, know and be a close friend of Hypathia, a celebrity of the time, whom he called “mother,” “sister” and “master.” His attraction to the Greek letters

¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. I, *The First Five Centuries* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1937), 195.

² Synesius of Cyrene, *Hymnes*, texte établi et traduit par Christian Lacombrade (Paris: Ed. Les Belles Lettres, 2003), v–vii. Future references to this work will be given as *Hymnes*.

and philosophy influenced him to adhere to Neoplatonism, which was an in-vogue philosophical movement.³

In terms of his scientific preoccupations, Synesius had a passion for astronomy. He collaborated with Hypathia, created a kind of planisphere that he called an "astrolabe," and also ordered a hydroscope for his scientific observations and experiments. Otherwise, he spent his life praying, reading and hunting.⁴

He was also a politician and as such had a high-profile public life; between 399 and 402 Synesius was appointed ambassador of his country to Constantinople, where his sister was married. Three years seems not to be much time. Indeed, he would have liked to stay there longer, but an earthquake that happened in 402 forced him to leave.⁵

When he talks of his years spent in Constantinople, the great, cosmopolitan city, capital of the later Byzantine Empire, he calls them "exile in Thracia." This is a metaphor, of course, since on the one hand he was fit for such type of public life and function, and on the other he even had family in Constantinople. But at the same time, it is a valuable piece of information indicating that Constantinople was basically on Thracian territory and, as a culture, built on the foundations of the Thracian civilization. Synesius even talks about his pious endeavours there, where he apparently worshipped pagan gods and was a pilgrim to places of pagan mysteries.⁶

One year later in 403 he married, and his marriage was blessed by the Patriarch of Alexandria, Theophilus. In just a few years, a major turning point would take place in his life. He was such a prominent figure that in 410 the population of the city of Ptolemais elected him as their bishop and Patriarch Theophilus accepted the call, even though Synesius at the time was not even baptized into the Christian Church. This was not unusual in that epoch. Of course, he had to receive the baptism as he accepted the call for episcopacy, yet, strong personality that he was, he told the Patriarch that he would accept the consecration under two conditions: first, he would keep his wife; second, he would keep his personal convictions regarding the

³ *Hymnes*, x–xv; Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*.

⁴ *Hymnes*, xix; xxxvi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xxv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13, 6.

Neoplatonic philosophy and teaching, even though in public he would profess only the Christian doctrine.

The Patriarch agreed and Synesius became a bishop.⁷

Literary Works

Together with science and philosophy, literature was a major passion in the life of Synesius. According to his own confession, he wrote all types of poetry and prose in use at his time. In fact, philosophy and poetry were considered inseparable, in particular in the Neoplatonic circles, as it had been for the old Greek philosophers.⁸

Among others, Heraclitus of Ephesus and Parmenides of Elea used to produce their philosophical works in verse. This practice was taken over by Christian theologians, one of whom was a great contemporary of Synesius, Gregory of Nazianzus, also a poet, philosopher and bishop.

Although Lacombrade believes that the ascetic life was not what characterized Synesius's existence,⁹ because in his hymns he often asks for physical and spiritual comfort, he was not a stranger to the contemplative life either. Actually it is in his retreat and solitude that he wrote his first verses,¹⁰ and where, in general, he felt inspired to write, just like his counterpart, Gregory of Nazianzus.

Synesius's literary works *Cynegetics*, which enjoyed great success in Alexandria, and *Dion*, a collection of pieces on his biography, diatribes, apologies and introspection, indicate a talent where the grace of the sophist and the fervour of the philosopher were combined, but also a person whose life was characterized by harmony, in particular the one between theory and praxis,¹¹ theory actually being related to contemplation, and less to theoretical thinking as understood today.

⁷ Ibid., vi; x; xxxvii.

⁸ Ibid., xii.

⁹ Ibid., 90.

¹⁰ Ibid., xxii.

¹¹ Ibid., xiii; xxxi.

Poetry, Philosophy, Science and Theology

In Synesius's life and understanding, poetry and philosophy were close to each other, just as science and philosophy were strictly connected. Philosophy and poetry had as their main purpose rapprochement to God's mystery, and the advance towards the proximity of the divine, whereas science, or physics more specifically, was more organically connected to metaphysics,¹² which constituted its *raison d'être*. In this system, the four fields of science, philosophy, metaphysics or theology and poetry validated each other's inquiry in as much as they all intended to deal with the human's intuitions of the Absolute, and tried to lead towards it.

According to Etienne Gilson, in that time theology was considered a transcendent science and philosophy as part of theology. While philosophy kept its own method and rational character, by working together with theology it did not lose anything, and was instead fulfilled.¹³

Being in love with Hellenism, where his works were solidly rooted, Synesius was a Platonizing Christian.¹⁴ What he retained in particular from the Platonic philosophy was the idea of the total opposition between good and evil, and of the eternal return of all things to the original source.¹⁵ He found these beliefs to be so much in consonance with Christian theology that when he was ordained bishop not only did he not want to renounce them, but he was convinced that the Church ministry would help him reach fulfilment in philosophy. In fact, Plato was considered by many Christian theologians to be "avant la letter," and the attachment of several Christian theologians to him, such as Synesius in this case, then Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil the Great, indicate how much Christian theology and philosophy were considered compatible with each other.

Yet science and theology were not considered as being in opposition either. As mentioned, for Synesius, physics was organically connected to

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ Etienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1993), xvi; xx.

¹⁴ E. Norden, "Agnostos Theos," in *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to Close of the Middle Ages*, edited by F. J. E. Raby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997 [1953]), 31.

¹⁵ *Hymnes*, xxix.