

## Basil and Gregory - Friends to the End

I'd like to introduce you to two good friends who grew up to be Doctors of the Church - St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. Both were raised in wealthy Greek households in the 4th century in what today is eastern Turkey. Basil went on to become Bishop of Caesarea and Gregory became Bishop of Constantinople. Both heroically opposed the heresies of the early Church, despite strong opposition. Arianism, which denied the divinity of Christ, was the most entrenched heresy, although the teachings of Apollinaris, who taught that Christ's divinity could not coexist with a rational human soul, was also persuasive.

St. Basil, in his desire to guide Apollinaris, traded many letters with him, two of which have survived to this day. Their main debate was over the Greek term, *homoousian*, which is used to describe Jesus as "same in being" or "consubstantial" with God the Father. Basil and Gregory were uncompromising on this point because it represents one of the most important theological concepts in our understanding of the Trinity. In addition to their work as theologians, both were known for their care of the poor and underprivileged. Basil actively worked to reform thieves and prostitutes as well as championing the cause of the complete equality of the two sexes.

Basil was one of ten children. His maternal grandfather was a Christian martyr in the days before Emperor Constantine I. His pious maternal grandmother raised Basil and four of his siblings. Including Basil, all five became saints - one sister and four brothers!

St. Gregory of Nazianzus, who became known as the Trinitarian theologian, grew up in a strong Christian home, although it was not always so. It was his mother's prayers and example that persuaded Gregory's father to convert to Christianity. His father then went on to become Bishop of Nazianzus and encouraged young Gregory in the ways of faith and education.

After beginning his education in his home with his uncle, Gregory continued his studies in Caesarea, Alexandria, and Athens. He excelled in advanced rhetoric, which is the art of persuasive speaking or writing, and philosophy. In 361, his formal studies complete, he returned home with a desire to seek a solitary life. His father, as bishop, had other plans. He pressured Gregory to be ordained a priest and care for the local Christians. After only a few days at home, Gregory left and sought out his school friend, Basil. Together they lived together as monks for one year. Learning of the rift between Gregory and his father, Basil convinced Gregory to return home to Nazianzus. Gregory did, and his great learning and persuasive speech helped influence people to reject the heresies that were circulating about the divinity and humanity of Christ. The two saints even joined forces in a series of public debates against the Arians, in which they emerged triumphant.

After serving as a priest in Nazianzus, Gregory reluctantly was ordained a bishop in a smaller, border city of the diocese. He was hesitant to accept the call because he felt that his father and his friend, Basil, had overly influenced the decision. Consequently, he did not put all his efforts into the work of his diocese, and eventually returned home to Nazianzus when his father started to decline. It was only after his father and mother's deaths in 374 that Basil was able to follow God as a hermit. He sold most of his property, except for a small patch of land where he settled, and gave away all his money to the poor. His

retirement was short-lived, however. Basil, on his deathbed, promoted the name of Gregory as the correct choice to become Bishop of Constantinople and confront the followers of Arias on their home ground.

In his defense of the Holy Spirit, Gregory wrote: "Look at these facts: Christ is born, the Holy Spirit is his forerunner. Christ is baptized, the Spirit bears witness to this...Christ works miracles, the Spirit accompanies them. Christ ascends, the Spirit takes his place. What great things are there in the idea of God which are not in the Holy Spirit's power? What titles appertaining to God... do not also apply to Him?" Gregory's sermons were so successful, that an Arian mob broke into his church during the Easter Vigil in 379 and wounded Gregory and killed a bishop. Gregory survived and was soon enthroned as bishop of Constantinople.

To conclude, Gregory and Basil focused on the fact that Jesus did not cease to be God when he became a human person, nor did he lose any of his divine attributes when he took on human nature. They asserted that Christ was fully human, including a fully human soul. They insisted that the Holy Spirit is truly Spirit, coming forth from the Father, but not in the same manner as the Son. Gregory was the first to use the idea of procession regarding the Holy Spirit to describe the relationship of the Spirit and the Godhead.

These two saints offered their gifts to God without compromise, but perhaps it is the difficulties they endured that teach us greatest lesson. The peace that Christ offers is not a peace without problems, pain, or opposition. Holiness, as attested by the lives of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus, is only achieved by way of the cross.

New Year Blessings,  
Kevin MacDonald, C.Ss.R.