

Gregory of Nyssa as a Hagiographer

The Sources and their Contexts

The younger brother of Basil the Great is primarily known for his clarifications on the Trinitarian dogma in the latter part of the 4th century, a century which had been plagued by a number of dissenting groups starting with the Arians and ending with the Pneumatomachians. He did, however, leave to posterity a number of works that deal with other themes – minor ones, of course, when compared to his complete oeuvre – but which give modern scholars a better idea of the length and breadth of this theologian's contribution.

One such minor theme is hagiography. The works on [Christian]¹ Saints by Gregory of Nyssa that have survived fall into two different genres: the majority are homilies (two of which are extended panegyrics which he himself probably re-edited at a later stage), and one is a biography written as a letter. The protagonists of these texts are a number of martyrs, two bishops and a nun. All, but for the latter, were homilies preached on the feast-days of these saints.

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¹ The specification is deemed necessary because Gregory wrote also a *Life of Moses*. This is not included in this study because Moses is a pre-Christian and therefore cannot be easily defined as a "saint" in the same way as Christians who modelled their lives on Christ can. Secondly this *Life* is in actual fact a mystical work not a biography in the proper sense as some of the works discussed in this study are.

The earliest extant homily among these happens to be one of the sermons on the forty martyrs of Sebaste.² These were a group of soldiers from the *Legio XII Fulminata* who were sentenced to death by freezing on an Armenian lake in AD 320 during a persecution ordered by Licinius who was emperor in the East while Constantine ruled the West.³ Their cult – as well as their relics – spread all over the empire by the end of the 4th century. Daniélou dates this sermon to the feast day of these forty men, 9 March, of the year 379.⁴ The setting is almost certainly their shrine, the *martyrion*, in Caesarea because Gregory speaks of Sebaste and Armenia as two neighbouring provinces, therefore the place where this sermon was delivered must have been in Cappadocia, where the cult had been introduced some years earlier presumably by Gregory's mother. The same martyrs were the object of another sermon – divided in two parts⁵ because Gregory could not complete it on the saints' feast day due to the noise made by the crowded congregation in the *martyrion* at Sebaste⁶ – delivered four years later. The first part was delivered in the *martyrion* of Sebaste itself and the final two thirds of the homily were resumed the following day in a church in Sebaste.⁷ According to Daniélou this sermon was delivered when Gregory was working on the third book against Eunomius while paying a visit to his brother Peter who was bishop of Sebaste.⁸

² *In XL Martyres II (Mart II)*, ed. O. Lendle, Gregorii Nysseni Opera vol. 10 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 159-169. The oldest homily has been recorded as the *second* homily in honour of these martyrs, probably because the 'first' one, divided in two parts, was placed in manuscripts before this one, hence one came to be known as the *first homily* and the other as the *second homily*. Studies have proven that the 'second' homily predates the 'first' by about four years. See Jean Daniélou, "La chronologie des sermons de saint Grégoire de Nysse," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 29, no.4 (1955): 346.

³ Françoise Vinel, "Sainteté anonyme, sainteté collective? Le quarante martyrs de Sébastée dans quelques textes du IV^e siècle," in *Du héros païen au saint chrétien. Actes du Colloque organisé par le Centre d'analyse des rhétoriques de l'Antiquité (C.A.R.R.A.), Strasbourg, 1-2 Décembre 1995*, Collection des études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 154 (Paris: Institut des Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 125.

⁴ Daniélou, "La chronologie des sermons de saint Grégoire de Nysse," 346.

⁵ *In XL Martyres Ia (Mart Ia)*, ed. Otto Lendle, Gregorii Nysseni Opera vol. 10 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 137-142; *In XL Martyres Ib (Mart Ib)*, ed. Otto Lendle, Gregorii Nysseni Opera vol. 10 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 145-156.

⁶ Daniélou, "La chronologie des sermons de saint Grégoire de Nysse," 362-363; Johan Leemans, "Mart Ia," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 483.

⁷ Jean Bernardi, *La prédication des Pères Cappadociens. Le prédicateur et son auditoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 306.

⁸ Daniélou, "La chronologie des sermons de saint Grégoire de Nysse," 363.

Another military martyr who got a nod from Gregory was Theodore;⁹ he seems to have been invited to Euchaïta around 381¹⁰ specifically to preach in honour of the martyr in the shrine which held his relics.¹¹ Theodore was a recruit in the Roman army who was cast into a furnace for not rejecting his Christian faith and for burning down the temple of Cybele in Amasea. The events took place in the early 4th century,¹² some seventy-five years before Gregory preached in his honour. This homily bears strong influences of the rhetorical style of the Second Sophistic since it abounds in descriptions and paraphrases, and it also follows some traditional rules of classical rhetoric like those of praising the hero's fatherland and his natural qualities. Gregory uses this homily to touch briefly upon some other motifs, such as attacks on Arians,¹³ some theological issues¹⁴ and, most notably, fierce attacks against the pagan cult that the emperor Julian tried to revive some years before.¹⁵

The latest homilies in honour of a martyr that have survived are the two sermons known as *in sanctum Stephanum*¹⁶ and these were preached on the

⁹ *De sancto Theodoro (Theod)*, ed. John P. Cavarinos, Gregorii Nysseni Opera vol. 10 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 61-71.

¹⁰ The dating of 381 for this panegyric is not accepted by everyone. Daniélou maintains that it is correct because Gregory attributes a victory over the Scythians which happened a year before to the intercession of this saint. Theodosius had a great victory over this tribe in 380, so Gregory might be referring to this war. See Daniélou, "La chronologie des sermons de saint Grégoire de Nysse," 355-356. Bernardi agrees with Daniélou. See Bernardi, *La predication des Pères Cappadociens*, 303. Leemans at first places it anytime between 379 and 381. See Johan Leemans, "A Preacher-Audience Oriented Analysis of Gregory of Nyssa's Homily on Theodore the Recruit," in *Studia Patristica: Proceedings of the 13th International Conference of Patristic Studies, Oxford, 16-21 August 1999*, vol. 37. *The Cappadocian Fathers; Other Greek Writers* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 140, but later he restricts the date between 379 and 380 without giving reasons why. See Johan Leemans, "Grégoire de Nysse et Julien l'Apostat. Polémique antipaïenne et identité chrétienne dans le Panégyrique de Théodore," *Revue d'études augustinienes et patristiques* 53 (2007): 19.

¹¹ The site of the homily is confirmed because the bishop describes in great detail the shrine dedicated to the martyr where he is preaching.

¹² Leemans, "Grégoire de Nysse et Julien l'Apostat. Polémique antipaïenne et identité chrétienne dans le Panégyrique de Théodore," 15.

¹³ *Theod*, 66, 7-8. 16-21; 71, 8-9.

¹⁴ The destiny of the soul after death (62, 13-14) and the impassibility of God (66, 16-21) are two examples.

¹⁵ Leeman's article, "Grégoire de Nysse et Julien l'Apostat. Polémique antipaïenne et identité chrétienne dans le Panégyrique de Théodore," is an excellent study on this aspect.

¹⁶ *In sanctum Stephanum I (Steph I)*, ed. Otto Lendle, Gregorii Nysseni Opera vol. 10 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 75-94; *In sanctum Stephanum II (Steph II)*, ed. Otto Lendle, Gregorii Nysseni Opera vol. 10 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 97-105.

two days following Christmas of 386,¹⁷ probably at Nyssa.¹⁸ The first homily is focused around Stephen presented as a hero who fights and dies for his orthodox beliefs, giving Gregory ample room to criticise contemporary unorthodox currents represented by the Eunomians and Pneumatomachians. The second homily was preached on the day traditionally dedicated to the apostles Peter, James and John,¹⁹ and so these three saints feature in the homily as well, where Gregory curiously seeks to place the deacon Stephen on the same rank as the three great apostles closest to Christ.

The two bishops in honour of whom Gregory left very long sermons are Gregory, the first bishop Neocaesarea who lived a century earlier, and his own brother Basil, bishop of Caesarea who had died a couple of years before the eulogy in his honour was delivered.

The original version of the panegyric in honour of Gregory the Wonderworker²⁰ was probably delivered on 17 November 380.²¹ There is little doubt that the version we possess is an amplified version,²² so most certainly this is not the rendering that the people heard in 380. We do not know how the original rendition was, or its length. We can presume that the last part was added in the “revised” version made by Gregory, since after talking chronologically of the saint’s life till his death, he goes back a number of years – to the first months of the saint’s priesthood – to talk about the plague that ravaged the city. Other than this we have to mention that at various points the text shows that the original form was intended as a speech delivered to a congregation.²³ But certainly there

¹⁷ Daniélou, “La chronologie des sermons de saint Grégoire de Nysse,” 367. This scholar is certain of the date because in the second homily Gregory says that the feast of the martyrs he was commemorating (Peter, James and John) had fallen on a Sunday, and this was the only year in which the 27th of December happened to fall on a Sunday.

¹⁸ Scholars do not give details on the location, but I believe that these were held in Nyssa, since Gregory would have been bound to be in his diocese on Christmas, so presumably even the homilies in honour of Stephen were held there.

¹⁹ Daniélou, “La chronologie des sermons de saint Grégoire de Nysse,” explains that in the liturgical calendar of the Church of Cappadocia the three days following Christmas marked the commemorations of St Stephen (26 December), the apostles Saints Peter, James and John (27 December) and St Paul (28 December).

²⁰ *De vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi* (*Thaum*), ed. Gunter Heil, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* vol. 10 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 3-57.

²¹ Bernardi, *La predication des Pères Cappadociens*, 308

²² *Ibid.*, 309.

²³ The opening lines prove as much: “Our words and the people gathered here have only one aspiration. The great Gregory is thus set in front of us to reflect upon during this gathering” (3, 1-3). Unless otherwise stated, translations are made by the author of this study.

were some parts added even along the body of the text, not just at the end. At some points there are some expressions which can be taken as proof that Gregory was aware that in his homily he could not mention all that he wished since he was limited by time, and this would mean that he already had in mind a later edition of the text wherein he would add the details he was obliged to omit in the vocal version.²⁴

Even though there is only one sermon in honour of Basil preached on 1 January 381,²⁵ Gregory's brother makes a brief appearance in the earlier homily on the forty martyrs. When the latter was preached Basil had been dead only a couple of months, so Gregory pays homage to him by stating that his brother had delivered celebrated panegyrics on these same saints.²⁶ Basil is described as an "image of philosophy" and Gregory calls him "great" – we have to bear in mind that this homily on the forty martyrs was being delivered in Caesarea, the city where Basil had been bishop till a few weeks earlier and where probably another bishop had not yet been appointed.²⁷ Daniélou calls this excursus a short panegyric on Basil, which would be the sketch of the eulogy that Gregory would deliver two years later. In the eulogy Gregory makes it clear from the very beginning that he is celebrating a *feast* in honour of a ποιμὴν καὶ διδάσκαλος (110, 1):

In a remarkable way, God has established an order and progression through the annual feasts we commemorate. [...] The sequence of these yearly celebrations aligns with the apostolic order. Yet, the first event stands apart from the others, as the theophany of the Only-Begotten Son, through His birth from the Virgin, is not merely instituted as a sacred feast but as the Holy of Holies and the Feast of Feasts. Let us, therefore, enumerate those who follow this sacred order, which for us begins with the assembly of apostles and prophets. Indeed, figures such as Stephen, Peter, James, John, and Paul embody the apostolic and prophetic spirit. After them follows the pastor and teacher who belong to this same order, and it is their legacy that we commemorate in this present celebration. What, then, is this festival? Should I speak of its name, or rather of the grace that suffices to reveal the person without need for a name? You are already aware that there is a teacher and shepherd among the Apostles, and you understand the significance of such titles. I refer here to Basil, the chosen vessel, distinguished for his virtuous life and powerful preaching... (*Bas*, 109, 4-6; 10-110, 5).

²⁴ "However, the many other great miracles he performed surpass written accounts and reports. Nevertheless, I will elicit one or two attributed to him" (44, 11-14).

²⁵ *In Basilium fratrem* (*Bas*), ed. Otto Lendle, Gregorii Nysseni Opera vol. 10 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 109-134.

²⁶ *Mart II*, 160, 5-19.

²⁷ Bernardi, *La predication des Pères Cappadociens*, 304.

The key term Gregory employs to describe the occasion for the homily he is about to deliver is *πανηγύρεως* (*Bas*, 109, 7), meaning “festive assembly.” Thus, the reason the congregation gathered in the church at Caesarea that day was not to mourn their former bishop, but rather to continue the sequence of feasts that began on Christmas. This celebration was fittingly part of the progression, for after Christ, the martyrs, and the apostles, Basil was deemed worthy of his own commemoration. Bernardi contends that Gregory was not solely responsible for instituting this commemoration in Basil’s honour, primarily because, as the bishop of a lesser city like Nyssa, Gregory had no authority in Caesarea, where Helladios served as metropolitan bishop. Bernardi believes that the commemoration was the result of a collective decision by the Cappadocian bishops, aimed at introducing a Christian feast to replace a pagan festival.²⁸ Basil’s saintly reputation, owing to his exceptional leadership, ecclesiastical-political acumen, and remarkable pastoral initiatives, made him a fitting figure for such a celebration.

Finally, Gregory of Nyssa speaks of his elder sister Macrina, whom he characterises as “a teacher of how to live, a mother in place of our mother.”²⁹ She is first mentioned in a letter he addressed to a certain John in 380, several months after her death on 19 July 379. Gregory later composed the more well-known *Life of Macrina*,³⁰ a biography structured as a letter to an ascetic from Antioch named Olympius. According to Silvas, Gregory and Olympius likely became acquainted following Gregory’s travels after the Council of Constantinople in 381, placing the composition of the text between late 381 and early 382³¹ — within three years of Macrina’s death. Maraval categorises the *Life of Macrina* as a “philosophical biography,”³² wherein Gregory’s principal objective is to

²⁸ “Ce discours relève d’une tentative de création liturgique pour la date du 1^{er} janvier. Grégoire est-il à l’origine de cet essai? C’est peu probable, si on considère qu’il prend parole dans l’église de Césarée à la tête de laquelle se trouvait depuis 379 Helladios. [] L’initiative a dû venir du clergé de Césarée, et en particulier d’Helladios. Il est vraisemblable qu’Helladios avait pris lui-même la parole le 1^{er} janvier 380, à l’occasion du premier anniversaire de la mort de Basile et qu’il fit appel ensuite au frère de Basile, puis à son ami. Le culte rendu à la mémoire de Basile apparaît donc comme une création collective de l’épiscopat cappadocien.” Ibid., 314.

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter* 19, 6, trans. Anna M. Silvas in Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 176.

³⁰ *Vita S. Macrinae (Macr)*, ed. Virginia Woods Callahan, Gregorii Nysseni Opera 8 part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1952), 370-414.

³¹ Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008), 102.

³² Pierre Maraval, ed. and trans. *Grégoire de Nyse: Vie de Sainte Macrine*, Sources Chrétiennes 178 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 21-23.

demonstrate that his sister exemplified the Christian philosopher, living a life of exemplary virtue imbued with Christ. Gregory explicitly states his desire to highlight members of his family who were distinguished by their virtue but had been overshadowed by Basil's formidable reputation.³³ Chief among these virtuous figures is Macrina. Evidently, shortly after her death, or following Gregory's biography of her, Macrina became a widely venerated figure in Asia Minor, as attested by Gregory of Nazianzus in one of his epigrams: "The dust holds the illustrious virgin Macrina, [...] she who kept herself from the eyes of all men, is now on the tongues of all and has a glory greater than any."³⁴

Gregory's Models of Christian Living

The commemoration of saints in the early Church was regarded with profound reverence and was, in fact, an integral aspect of popular Christian devotion. Saints assumed the role that ancient heroes once held in what we might today refer to as 'popular culture,' acting as intermediaries between the divine and ordinary human beings.³⁵ The presence of a saint's relics—of one who bore witness to Christ and emulated His life—within a community signified a vital connection between the faithful and God.³⁶ This is attested even by Gregory himself in his panegyric on the *life of St Gregory the Wonderworker*:

The bodies of the martyrs were transferred to various locations, and the inhabitants celebrated their annual anniversaries with great joy, holding festivals in their honour. A clear testament to the wisdom of this great man lies in his ability to guide the people of his generation toward a new way of life. Like a skilled charioteer, he firmly yoked them to the reins of divine knowledge, ensuring that they, too, would find joy under the yoke of faith. Observing that the naive and untrained masses persisted in bodily pleasures fostered by the deception of idolatry, he sought to facilitate the most significant transition—from foolish superstitions to God. To achieve this, he allowed them to celebrate and express their joy during the festivals commemorating the martyrs, believing that, over time, they would naturally gravitate toward a more worthy and conscientious manner of life, aided by the faith, which would illuminate the path toward it (*Thaum* 53, 2-16).

³³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 8,4 in Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, 117-118.

³⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epigraph* 163, in Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, 82.

³⁵ Manlio Simonetti, *Classici e cristiani* (Milano: Medusa Edizioni, 2007), 15-17.

³⁶ Antonio Quacquarelli, "L'antropologia del martire nel panegirico del Nisseno a san Teodoro di Amasea," in *Arché e Telos. L'antropologia di Origene e di Gregorio di Nissa*, eds Ugo Bianchi and Henri Crouzel, *Studia Patristica Mediolanensia* 12 (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1981), 220.

Thus, in the perspective of the Wonderworker, as articulated by Gregory, these festive commemorations served as a valuable tool—if not an indispensable means—for redirecting the focus of people’s lives from the bodily pleasures associated with paganism toward a manner of living aligned with Christian teachings. Consequently, the primary motivation for bishops to promote the feasts of martyrs—and, eventually, other saints—was to guide the populace in “Christianizing” their pagan festivities, transforming them into celebrations characterised by moral integrity and good conduct.³⁷ Commenting about how the Wonderworker instituted the celebration of martyrs’ feast in order to transform people’s *forma mentis*, Quacquarelli says that:

Mediante le feste dei martiri cerca nuove occasioni per insegnare la fede cristiana ed elevare il livello popolare. Per Gregorio il Taumaturgo è un culto quello dei martiri che non può limitarsi solo agli anniversari, ma deve entrare profondamente nelle coscienze. Egli mira all’essenziale delle cose perché gli uomini possano fissare lo sguardo su Dio e non sulle vane superstizioni.³⁸

An intriguing aspect of early Christian veneration is that the first saints were primarily ordinary individuals—rather than influential community leaders—who chose to follow Christ unconditionally, unafraid of personal consequences. This is particularly evident in Gregory’s writings, where only two of his subjects were Christian leaders; the remainder included unranked soldiers, a deacon, and a nun, none of whom held prominent positions in society. This illustrates that Christians identified more readily with common individuals than with established figures of authority; thus, it was through these ordinary people that they perceived the potential for sainthood within themselves. Early texts, some dating back to the 2nd century, demonstrate the significant impact these individuals had on the Church. On the anniversaries of their deaths, Christian communities would commemorate them, initially by reading eyewitness accounts of their lives and deaths, and later by incorporating sermons about them into the liturgy.³⁹

Hence these texts being discussed, even the oratorical ones, were a form of hagiography.⁴⁰ Due to their Christian witness – be it through martyrdom or

³⁷ Bernardi, *La predication des Pères Cappadociens*, 311-312.

³⁸ Quacquarelli, “L’antropologia del martire nel panegirico del Nisseno a san Teodoro di Amasea,” 220-221.

³⁹ Elena Zocca, “Santo e santità,” in *Nuovo dizionario patristico e di antichità cristiane*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (Bologna: Marietti, 2010), 3:4703.

⁴⁰ René Aigrain, *L’hagiographie*, *Subsidia hagiographica* 80 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes 2000), 122.

otherwise –, these saintly models were looked upon as very powerful intercessors, as if they had some kind of influence on God.⁴¹ Local saints, in particular, were invoked for protection against all kinds of evil, especially against invasions by foreign tribes.⁴² The purpose of hagiographical texts – be they homilies preached on the occasion of the saints' feast, or written texts narrating their lives – was that of portraying the person as a model worthy of imitation by other Christians. The subject, therefore, was not just the individual *per se*, but the individual as a person of God,⁴³ and this is what Gregory seeks to show in these texts.

Preachers, however, do not stop there. In the first part of this paper, it has been stated that in the two homilies on St Stephen Gregory launches attacks against Eunomians and Pneumatomachians, two heretical movements that developed three hundred years after Stephen died. Leemans gives a short but detailed description of how feasts would have been celebrated, and even shows how these occasions proved to be appropriate for preachers to address issues that were not strictly related to the saints:

Les panégyriques de martyrs étaient prononcés au jour anniversaire de leur mort, qui était, chaque année, le temps fort de leur culte. Ce jour-là, la communauté chrétienne locale, avec les amis et les proches, affluait vers le sanctuaire du martyr. Pareille fête d'un martyr ou *panéguris* commençait le plus souvent la veille au soir, par une veillée qui se poursuivait toute la nuit, tandis que la célébration eucharistique en constituait le point d'orgue liturgique. Un des éléments fixes de la liturgie de ce jour était aussi le transport des reliques en procession, qui rassemblait une foule de gens. Au cours de la liturgie célébrée en l'honneur du martyr, on prononçait évidemment aussi une homélie. Celle-ci était le plus souvent un éloge du martyr, bien que le prédicateur eût la liberté – lorsqu'il le jugeait nécessaire – d'aborder des sujets tout autres.⁴⁴

Gregory of Nyssa lived and worked immediately after the end of the era of persecutions, a time when other holy men and women, who did not shed their blood but who still lived exemplary lives, started to be celebrated and invoked as

⁴¹ Johan Leemans, "Introduction," of *Let Us Die that We May Live*, eds Johan Leemans, Wendy Mayer, Pauline Allen, Boudewijn Dehandschutter (London: Routledge, 2003), 11.

⁴² Examples of this are found in the homily in honour of the recruit Theodore. Gregory starts off by thanking the saint on behalf of the people of Euchaïta for having protected the city from the incursions of the Scythians; towards the end of the homily, he asks the saint to continue his protection and avoid any incursions in the future.

⁴³ Leemans, "Introduction," of *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 22.

⁴⁴ Leemans, "Grégoire de Nysse et Julien l'Apostat," 16.

well.⁴⁵ The ‘new heroes’ – such as holy monks, strong-willed bishops and pious virgins – who started to be venerated in the 4th century along with the martyrs after Christianity gained imperial favour, were a necessity more than anything else: the faithful needed other spiritual models to imitate since their faith was no longer that of a persecuted minority. Proving that Gregory moved with his times, two (or three)⁴⁶ of these new models appear in his hagiographical texts as well. The increasing number of saints was a sign of the ever-growing faith which till a few decades before was considered as a *religio illicita*, as Leemans shows clearly in his introduction to a collection of translations of homilies preached on saints’ feast days:

The cult of the saints contributed greatly to this process of Christianising place and time. During the first centuries this cult was celebrated more or less in hiding, venerated with celebrations situated on or in the neighbourhood of their graves in graveyards at the outskirts of the cities. When Christianity grew, and certainly from the moment it enjoyed imperial support, the cult of the martyrs was celebrated more openly and with greater splendour, reflected in that the martyrs’ sanctuaries grew from modest chapels into splendidly adorned basilicas. These became visible signs of the Christian occupation of that particular part of territory. From the fourth century onwards not only martyrs were venerated but also important and pious bishops, monks and biblical saints, thus multiplying the number of sanctuaries. It also led to an increase in feast days since the memory of a saint was especially celebrated on his or her *dies natalis*: the day of the saint’s death. These feast days came to supplement the regular feast days, and certainly in big cities with many churches and sanctuaries the number of saints venerated could be considerable.⁴⁷

Gregory’s Style of Presenting His Models and Contextualising Them in the Late 4th Century

Leemans suggests that Gregory followed the rules of classical rhetoric, especially those of the Second Sophistic, in these hagiographic texts;⁴⁸ he extols the qualities and virtues of the saint in question and invites his audience to follow his or her example. The structure of the discourse typically comprises four key components. First, a prologue is presented, which emphasises the importance of

⁴⁵ The first among these was Anthony the Abbot; eventually others like Basil of Caesarea, Macrina and Martin of Tours followed.

⁴⁶ It is uncertain whether Gregory the Wonderworker, who died around 270, received martyrdom or not.

⁴⁷ Leemans, “Introduction,” of *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

discussing the saint in question and includes the preacher's humble admission of his inadequacy to do so justice. This is followed by the corpus, where the social and familial context of the saints, along with their innate qualities, upbringing, education, and life and death, are celebrated. In this section, Gregory introduces a distinctive Christian perspective, choosing to highlight the dignity and perfection⁴⁹ of the saints rather than their earthly status and honours. The discourse also features comparisons⁵⁰ between the saints and other notable figures, often drawn from the Bible, to underscore their significance. Finally, the text concludes with an epilogue that serves as an exhortation for the congregation to emulate the example set by the saints. Instances where Gregory addresses current situations, such as heresies, are usually found in the second and third parts.

The precise location of Gregory's education remains uncertain – he refers to his siblings, Macrina and Basil, as his sole teachers – yet it is evident that he received comprehensive training in the principles of classical oratory. This influence is clearly reflected in the stylistic characteristics of his texts, where he employs metaphors to enrich his language and enhance the vividness of his expression. For example, in the *first homily on the Forty Martyrs* Gregory compares the noise made by the congregation to the sea;⁵¹ the faith of the martyrs against the forces of evil is compared to the armour used by soldiers in their military campaigns.⁵² The use of hyperbole is evident, generally in describing the persistence of the saint in the hour of trial, wherein super-human boldness is shown in the saint's words such as Theodore's speech before he is killed,⁵³ or even the countless miracles presented in the life of Gregory the Wonderworker. Sometimes comparisons are used to help the addressees understand better the message Gregory wished to

⁴⁹ This can be seen at the beginning of the homily on St Gregory Thaumaturgus.

⁵⁰ Among these homilies maybe the most notable comparison is that made by Gregory between his brother Basil and Moses. An excellent study has been made on this theme by Marguerite Harl in the 5th international colloquium on St Gregory of Nyssa: Marguerite Harl, "Moïse figure de l'évêque dans l'éloge de Basile de Grégoire de Nysse (381)," in *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa. Proceedings of the Fifth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Mainz, 6-10 September 1982)*, ed. Andreas Spira (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristics Foundation, 1984), 71-119.

⁵¹ *Mart Ia*, 142, 11-13; *Mart Ib*, 145, 16-21.

⁵² *Mart Ib*, 149, 11-17.

⁵³ "Because of my faith in him and my confession of it, let he who is wounding me cut me; let he who is whipping me lacerate me; let he who is burning me bring the flame close; let he who is taking offence at these words of mine cut out my tongue, for each part of the body owes to its Creator an act of endurance" (*Theod*, 66, 8-12; trans. Johan Leemans as "A Homily on Theodore the Recruit," in *Let Us Die that We may Live*, 87).

pass, like when he compares the group of forty young soldiers to forty gems on a crown or a necklace⁵⁴ and when their imprisonment is compared to the training of athletes in a gymnasium.⁵⁵ Being an excellent orator Gregory makes also use of detailed descriptions (ἐκφράσεις) in order to involve mentally and emotionally his audience into the events he is presenting.⁵⁶

In addition to recounting the testimonies of the saints, Gregory's hagiographical texts provide insights into various issues, thereby conferring historiographical value not only concerning the lives of martyrs who lived several decades or centuries earlier but also, and perhaps more significantly, regarding many aspects of the ecclesiastical situation in the late 4th century.⁵⁷ This integration of broader themes occurs both implicitly and explicitly; at times, Gregory merely references contemporary theological issues, while at other moments, he engages in extensive digressions. The primary purpose of addressing these additional subjects is to convey a message to his audience: when the texts are homilies, Gregory utilises them as vehicles to address specific concerns within the congregation; when they take the form of other literary works, such as the *Life of Macrina*, the intended audience is the readers. In any case, Gregory recognized the popularity of saints, making it unsurprising that these texts extend beyond strictly hagiographic content.

Thus, these texts do not merely recount historical facts regarding the lives of the saints; rather, they present these figures as representatives of the 4th century. In this context, the saints from both the distant and recent past, as well as from various geographical locations, are portrayed as responding to the situations present in Gregory's environment through their words and actions. These models serve as sources of inspiration for the audience, encouraging them to persist in their pursuit of perfection, even when faced with challenges. According to Leemans, scriptural or historical figures who embodied this ideal played a crucial

⁵⁴ *Mart Ib*, 148, 13-15.

⁵⁵ *Mart Ib*, 152, 5-9.

⁵⁶ The description of the changes suffered by the bodies of the forty martyrs as they freeze is remarkable: "Their youthful bodies became black, their beauty withered away and the colour of their flesh faded. Their fingers fell off, mutilated by the frost little by little and all their limbs and sense-organs were pounded to pieces by the bitter cold. For after a time their flesh became livid and swollen, it became rent all around the limbs until it fell off the bones and they could experience in reality the decay of a corpse" (*Mart Ib*, 154, 1-6; tans. Johan Leemans as "First Homily on the Martyrs of Sebaste (Ia and Ib)" in *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 105).

⁵⁷ Aigrain, *L'hagiographie*, 121.

role, as Christian writers depicted them as exemplars of Christian virtue.⁵⁸ Saints emerge as symbols of Christianity's superiority over Judaism (as seen in the figure of Stephen), paganism (represented by Gregory the Wonderworker, the Forty Martyrs, and Theodore), heresies (exemplified by Basil), and a worldly lifestyle (as illustrated by Macrina). Consequently, it is common for these texts, particularly the homilies, to conclude with an exhortation for the audience to emulate the virtuous qualities of the saints.

The Characteristics of the Saints

In accordance with traditional hagiography, Gregory enumerates specific characteristics possessed by his saints both in life and in death. Notably, despite the diverse backgrounds of the saints he extols – a deacon, soldiers, bishops, and a nun – certain common traits emerge among them. The most prominent of these is the public profession of faith, whether expressed overtly or subtly. This is unsurprising, given that sainthood is inherently linked to membership in the Church and adherence to orthodoxy. For instance, Stephen is depicted – consistent with the account of his martyrdom in the Acts of the Apostles – publicly affirming his faith prior to his stoning.⁵⁹ Similarly, Theodore frequently confesses his faith during his trial and martyrdom,⁶⁰ and the forty soldiers of Sebaste are likewise commemorated in this light in both of the sermons honouring them.⁶¹ Even non-martyr figures provide testimony to the truth they uphold: Macrina lives as an authentic witness to her beliefs, speaking of heavenly matters on her deathbed with her brother,⁶² while Basil ardently defends the truth against the rampant heresies of his time, even at the cost of his exile.⁶³ Gregory the Wonderworker articulates his profession of faith at the outset of his episcopal ministry,⁶⁴ maintaining it as a guiding principle throughout his life.

Orthodoxy is further reinforced through a vibrant relationship with God, which manifests in various ways. This relationship may take the form of a life

⁵⁸ Johan Leemans, "Reading Acts 6-7 in the Early Church: Gregory of Nyssa's First and Second Homilies on Stephen the Protomartyr," in *Studia Patristica. Papers Presented at the Fifteenth International Conference on Patristics Held in Oxford 2007*, vol. 47 *Cappadocian Writers. The Second Half of the fourth Century (Greek writers)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 11.

⁵⁹ *Steph* I 86, 4-88,2.

⁶⁰ *Theod* 66, 5-15.

⁶¹ *Mart Ib* 148, 6-7.

⁶² *Macr* 389, 19-391, 4.

⁶³ *Bas* 121, 20-22.

⁶⁴ *Thaum* 17, 18-19, 5.

dedicated to prayer and service, particularly among the non-martyr saints, who praise God continually, especially during times of trial. This is evident across all examples: the martyrs endure torture while worshiping God; Macrina displays her faith during periods of ill health; Basil champions the truth amid heretical struggles; and Gregory the Wonderworker remains steadfast during persecution. Prayer also propels individuals toward service to those in need: Naucrati⁶⁵ leads a life marked by prayer, work, and service; Stephen assists the poor; and both Basil and Macrina demonstrate generosity, even toward Jews, during times of drought. Another indicator of orthodoxy, albeit one that may be considered unseemly by contemporary standards, is the fervent destruction of pagan shrines and temples. This is vividly illustrated in the homily on Theodore, who is labelled a “persecutor of idols” for having burned the temple of Cybele,⁶⁶ as well as in the life of Gregory the Wonderworker, who prioritises the destruction of all temples in Neocaesarea following his elevation to bishop.⁶⁷

A life in union with God, sustained by persistent prayer, necessarily fosters a journey toward ever-greater perfection, a quality that manifests to varying degrees among the saints. The forty soldiers of Sebaste are described as having been endowed with grace and achieving perfection through their deaths, having steadfastly trusted in God. Stephen’s perfection is characterised by his imitation of the Lord in his commitment to the truth; the apostles Peter, James, and John are perfected by their faith and understanding of the truth. Theodore, a devout man and true servant of the Crucified, actively spreads his faith in various ways. Basil is commended for loving God with all his heart, resulting in a life marked by poverty and purity. However, it is Macrina who takes centre stage in discussions of this particular quality: her unceasing prayer allows her to transcend natural limits and attain the highest summit of human virtue in her longing for union with God, all while attending to the needs of those around her, particularly her mother, who was devastated by the loss of her husband and son.⁶⁸

The wisdom of these saints is also highly commended. In his theological treatises, Gregory, like many of his contemporaries, associates wisdom with the Holy Spirit; thus, all his wise figures achieve this status by allowing the Spirit to work within them. The forty soldiers are portrayed as friends of Christ, characterised by their truthfulness and justice, and steadfastly adhering to their

⁶⁵ Another of Gregory’s siblings who died in an accident while living in solitude. He is mentioned in the *Macr* 379, 9-380, 16.

⁶⁶ *Theod* 67, 11-24.

⁶⁷ *Thaum* 55, 15-27.

⁶⁸ *Macr* 380, 17-381, 14.

faith. Stephen is described as being rich in wisdom and grace, a testament to his role as a proclaimer of truth, filled with the Holy Spirit. Basil and Macrina are notably esteemed for their wisdom, albeit presented in somewhat different manners. Basil is lauded for his ability to extract the best from pagan philosophy, thereby embodying the true essence of philosophy as it ought to be. This alignment with wisdom renders him pleasing to God and a chosen vessel. Gregory asserts that his brother is deserving of honour for purifying life through both his teachings and personal example. Conversely, Macrina, who does not hold the title of theologian like Basil, is celebrated for her wisdom in entirely distinct terms: she was well-versed in Scripture, demonstrated wisdom from a young age, and consistently managed to control her passions through reason, even amid family tragedies. She led a philosophical and ascetic life, characterised by a detachment from passions, striving to emulate the angelic existence as closely as possible. In essence, she was filled with the Holy Spirit, a point that Gregory emphasises repeatedly throughout his writings.

Authentic Christian living has historically been regarded as a struggle, not only during periods of persecution, and Gregory was acutely aware of this reality, having personally experienced insubordination and exile. Consequently, it is not surprising that he commends the courage exhibited by the examples he presents. The martyrs, in particular, are celebrated for their steadfast witness during the tortures they endured, which ultimately led to their glorification. Among the titles he attributes to them, the most notable include courageous soldiers and athletes of Christ, champions of the faith adorned with the armour of God. The forty soldiers, whose martyrdom is described in vivid detail, are particularly praised for viewing the cares of life as transitory, willingly offering their bodies to torment; thus, their inner strength is enhanced while their bodies endure suffering patiently. They are fortified by the love of God, demonstrating remarkable bravery rooted in their confidence in the Spirit's power. Stephen, for his part, willingly sacrifices his life, becoming a pure offering in honour of God. Basil and Macrina are also characterised as a soldier and an athlete, respectively. Macrina derives joy from her suffering and engages in daily acts of mortification, enduring trials with and for Christ. Basil's courage in participating in doctrinal debates serves as a cautionary example for other bishops. Although he was not a martyr, he faced exile and experienced daily suffering through his corporeal discipline and fasting, aligning himself with the martyrs in spirit. Both martyrs and confessors resist temptation throughout their lives and exhibit fearlessness in the face of death.

Gregory at times speaks about the physical appearance of these models. Most are of a beautiful countenance in life: the forty soldiers are said to have been adorned with beauty in life and chaste;⁶⁹ Macrina is said to have possessed unsurpassed physical beauty.⁷⁰ More attention, however, seems to be given to the transformation of their bodies at the moment of death and after. In the short interlude on Peter, Gregory says that he radiated with holiness when crucified; Stephen is described as taking the appearance of angel while he was being stoned,⁷¹ while Macrina is said to have a god-like face in death.⁷² The relics of Theodore and of the forty soldiers are described as treasures that bring sanctification and blessing. Even though their bodies are dead, they are still alive, because through the miracles they perform they show that the dead bodies are still active, a true sign of the immortality granted to God's loved ones.

Miraculous activity is yet another sign of sainthood, and all the models presented by Gregory, even his siblings who had been dead for only a couple of years, are surrounded by miracles in their lives and death. In the case of the life of Gregory the Wonderworker miracles abound: he is constantly healing people, raising people from death (and causing the death of some as well) and exorcizing temples. The martyrs, too, were granted divine visions in their moments of trial, and do not hold back the power they were given through their glorification because they still perform miracles in aid of their devotees. Basil is curiously described as a miracle himself: in one of the homilies on the forty martyrs he is defined as a visible miracle of divine providence; his birth was revealed before to his father in a vision while in his adulthood a divine light with no material source illuminated his room when he prayed at night. Macrina, too, was the vessel of miraculous works, namely the unending provision of food to the people who streamed to her retreat during the time of famine, the healing of her breast tumour,⁷³ and when she healed the infected eye of a child.

A final note on the characteristics shared by most of Gregory's models is their sense of communion in life and in death. Basil is admired for having revered the saints in his life; Macrina is praised for having founded a monastic community; while the forty soldiers are lauded for having endured their martyrdom together, being compared to a necklace which finds its value and its beauty as long as each stone stays linked to the others. This fraternity and communality are pursued

⁶⁹ *Mart Ib* 147, 23.

⁷⁰ *Macr* 374, 10-15.

⁷¹ *Steph I* 87, 10-13.

⁷² *Macr* 408, 21-409, 2.

⁷³ *Macr* 404, 20-406, 9.

even in heaven: Basil is now equal to the apostles and the martyrs, Theodore now rests in union with the other saints, as are the forty soldiers.

Gregory on the Cult of His Saints and Other Faiths

These texts offer some further interesting information on the shrines that honour these holy persons, built to hold the remains of these heroes of the faith, but which, of course, for any Christian, represented much more than just buildings. They were in fact a tangible guarantee of the real presence of the saint among the people, as well as a place where earth met heaven.⁷⁴ In the homily in honour of St Theodore Gregory gives a very detailed description of the magnificent *martyrium* of this saint found in Euchaïta. From this same homily we learn what the shrine looked like, what decorations it had and also that inside the church there were many paintings depicting episodes from the earthly and eternal life of the saint.⁷⁵ In his account Gregory gives enough information to modern readers to understand that this shrine was not only a place of prayer, but also a centre where acts of charity were carried out:

To us he left the instructive memory of his contest, he who brings people together, who teaches the Church, who chases the demons, leads the peaceful angels, looks out for our interests in the presence of God. He turned this place into a hospital for the most diverse diseases, a harbour for those suffering from the storms of life, a well-filled warehouse for the needy, a convenient resting place for those who are travelling, a never-ending feast for those who are celebrating (*Theod.* 69, 24-70, 1; trans Leemans, 90).

Hence, the sanctifying presence of the martyr's remains propelled the people who assembled there to do acts of kindness to the poor and the sick who sought help in such places.

Gregory provides insights into the observance of the cult of saints, not only in the towns where he preached but throughout Cappadocia more broadly. Two specific practices, one of which likely has its roots in pagan traditions, include the custom of incubation in shrines and the practice of *inhumatio ad sanctos*.⁷⁶ The first practice, which can be traced back to the cults of Isis and Asclepius, involved the faithful sleeping in the sanctuary to receive healing through dreams

⁷⁴ Leemans, "Introduction," of *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 9.

⁷⁵ The decorations did not just have an aesthetic value, but used to be made in order to help the people who entered the *martyria* to get a glimpse of the glory of the martyr, and thus helping in the faithful's personal edification.

⁷⁶ Leemans, "Introduction," of *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 12-13.

or visions. In the second homily on the Forty Martyrs, Gregory references this practice twice: the first instance involves a limping soldier who is healed while sleeping at the shrine of the Forty Martyrs in Ibora,⁷⁷ the second refers to Gregory himself, who experienced a vision while sleeping outside the shrine established by his mother in Caesarea.⁷⁸ The second practice, *inhumatio ad sanctos*, pertains to individuals requesting burial near the remains of saints to protect their own remains from defilement and to attain resurrection alongside them. In the second homily honouring the Forty Martyrs, Gregory notes that his parents were buried close to the shrine commissioned by his mother for their relics.⁷⁹

However, there are numerous aspects of the cult of saints that Gregory's homilies do not address. Among these are two significant elements found in other contemporary texts. Firstly, some individuals exhibited inappropriate behaviour during social festivals, a topic discussed in the homilies of other preachers⁸⁰ but notably absent from Gregory's writings, with the exception of his remark about the excessive noise that prevented him from delivering his homily on the Forty Martyrs. Secondly, there are the devotional rites performed by the faithful in relation to the relics of the saints.⁸¹ While Gregory commends the shrines built to house the relics of saints, regarded as invaluable treasures, he appears more inclined to encourage people to emulate the saints rather than to engage in quasi-magical practices surrounding the relics. Nevertheless, he emphasises the importance of venerating the relics, particularly in the context of his sister's death, whom he clearly cherished more than other family members. The night before reaching Macrina's deathbed, Gregory dreams of holding radiant relics of martyrs, which he later interprets as symbols of his dying sister.⁸² Additionally, while attending to Macrina's corpse, he discovers a ring she wore that contains a relic of the Holy Cross, which he keeps as a cherished memento of her.⁸³

The cult of the saints frequently served as a tool in the polemic against other religions, particularly paganism and Judaism; Gregory's texts are no exception

⁷⁷ *Mart II*, 166-167.

⁷⁸ *Mart II*, 167, 11-168, 5.

⁷⁹ *Mart II*, 166, 9-12. Macrina, Gregory's elder sister, was also buried here (*Macr*, 408, 12-15).

⁸⁰ Basil, in his homily against drunkards makes reference to two drunken women, indecently dressed, who went inside the *martyrium* of a saint to dance (PG 31, 445). John Chrysostom, in his homily on martyrs exhorts his audience to avoid their usual custom of celebrating the feast with heavy drinking, playing dice and visiting brothels (PG 50, 661-666).

⁸¹ Chrysostom encourages the people to take home some oil touched to the martyrs' relics in order to obtain physical and spiritual healing when spreading it over the body (PG 50, 664; 673).

⁸² *Macr*, 387, 13-19.

⁸³ *Macr* 404, 17-19.

to this trend. Within these writings, the accounts of individuals who were executed for their Christian faith by pagan military officials constitute a clear denunciation of paganism, portraying it as a barbaric religion that lacks respect for both human dignity and the pursuit of truth. In the late-4th century context, this can also be interpreted as a subtle political agenda aimed at those, especially clergy, who supported rulers that did not uphold the Nicene Creed. This is particularly relevant considering that until 378, just a year before the first of these texts was produced, the Eastern Emperor was Valens, an Arian, and prior to him was Julian, a pagan. Thus, the glorification of young soldiers who sacrificed their lives for their commitment to the true faith can be seen as inherently intertwined with a condemnation of paganism and unorthodox beliefs, as well as a call for those in positions of power to resist any directives from their superiors that might compromise their faith.⁸⁴ Additionally, the reference to the feast honouring Mars, the god of war,⁸⁵ celebrated shortly before the feast of the Forty Martyrs in the second homily, indicates that pagan practices were still prevalent in those regions. The panegyric in honour of Gregory the Wonderworker repeatedly emphasises the superiority of the true faith over paganism, notably in the episode where Gregory exorcises a pagan temple and subsequently commands the demon to re-enter that same temple.⁸⁶

An interesting detail proposed by Leemans concerns the way Gregory refers to the tyrants who kill the martyrs. There is only one occasion when an evil ruler is called by name,⁸⁷ but Leemans believes this to be a scribal interpolation.⁸⁸ In all other occasions they are referred to as tyrants or enemies, compared to Herod and Pilate and to Satan himself.⁸⁹ According to this scholar the reason is not only to keep the spotlight on the martyr as a man of God without giving any

⁸⁴ Bernardi, *La predication des Pères Cappadociens*, 307; Leemans, "Introduction," of *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 25.

⁸⁵ For a detailed study of the cult of Mars in the area refer to Johan Leemans, "The Cult of Mars in Late Antique Caesarea," in *Studia Patristica. Proceedings of the 14th International Conference of Patristic Studies, Oxford, 2003*, vol. 39 *Historica, Biblica, Ascetica et Hagiographica* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006¹), 71-76.

⁸⁶ *Thaum*, 20, 19-23, 9.

⁸⁷ In the homily in praise of Theodore there is a sentence which states: οἱ γὰρ ἀμφὶ Μαξιμιανὸν τότε τῆς βασιλείας ἡγούντο (*Theod*, 66, 2-3). This is the only indicator to a historical dating of Theodore's martyrdom.

⁸⁸ Johan Leemans, "At That Time the Group Around Maximian was Enjoying Imperial Power': An Interpolation in Gregory of Nyssa's Homily in Praise of Theodore," *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 57 (2006²): 158-163.

⁸⁹ *Theod*, 68, 16-18.

unnecessary details, but also to make a *damnatio memoriae* of these evil persons.⁹⁰ It is another way of saying that only the good will be remembered while the evil will be forgotten; this is the same destiny in store for the waning paganism *vis à vis* the ever-increasing Christianity. Leemans believes that in this context these texts may also have had an apologetic or polemic end.⁹¹

As in other texts by Gregory, here too, the Jews are subject to severe criticism, this time being presenting as scheming liars in the *life of St Gregory the Wonderworker*,⁹² and as murderous blasphemers in the *two homilies in honour of St Stephen*.⁹³ In these they are equated to heretics (Pneumatomachians and Eunomians) and to the devil himself. It was very convenient for preachers and authors to present the saint as a model of steadfast fidelity to the true faith, thus encouraging addressees to put aside any deviant theological opinion or any interest in other religions.

Conclusion: The Saints and their Devotees

Gregory unequivocally asserts that sainthood is an attainable option for all individuals. The saints serve as primary intercessors for their disciples and devotees on their journey toward this same goal. On numerous occasions, Gregory encourages his audience to emulate the saints and lead virtuous lives. In his homily honouring Theodore, he remarks that the devotion exhibited by the faithful – who constructed a splendid martyrion in Theodore's honour – is a testament to God's benevolence toward him. This implication suggests that those who live similarly will ultimately share in God's favour.⁹⁴

Another significant theme that emerges from Gregory's texts is the accessibility of every vocation within the Church, extending beyond members of the higher social classes. The martyrs he references were predominantly soldiers, representing common people, and his sister Macrina is depicted as an ordinary woman. Additionally, there is an intriguing account of Gregory the Wonderworker selecting the bishop of Comana, wherein he overlooks all the high-born and educated candidates in favour of a coal-cutter, who, despite his

⁹⁰ Leemans, "Introduction," of *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 32; (2006²) 160.

⁹¹ Leemans, "Grégoire de Nysse et Julien l'Apostat. Polémique antipaienne et identité chrétienne dans le Panégyrique de Théodore," 15.

⁹² *Thaum*, 41, 19-43, 17.

⁹³ *Steph* I, 80, 14-81, 9; 84, 3-87, 6; 89, 17-21; *Steph* II, 97, 9-16; 100, 9-11.

⁹⁴ This same theme is present even in the three funeral orations we have by the Nyssen, wherein he says that the deceased (Meletius, Flacilla and Pulcheria) will enjoy God's mercy since they lived as good Christians.

humble occupation, was a wise man who embraced that lifestyle as a form of asceticism. Through these narratives, Gregory illustrates that while social class may confer certain advantages in worldly pursuits, it is not a prerequisite for attaining sainthood.

As articulated in the homily honouring Theodore, the saints embody faith in the promise of future rewards. The “immortality” they experience through the veneration they receive from the faithful, alongside the miraculous events associated with their relics, serve as evidence of this promise. Although deceased, the saints are attuned to the needs of those who seek their intercession, offering peace and protection to their communities from external threats. While their relics rest in urns, the saints remain vibrant, acting as guardians and companions to those still navigating earthly existence. The recently departed, such as Basil and Macrina, are portrayed as exemplars of Christian living, sources of sanctification for others, and models who lead through their example; the communities they founded further attest to this legacy.

In conclusion, it is evident that while Gregory’s descriptions of his saints incorporate elements of wonder – particularly in his references to miracles – these models consistently retain their humanity. This is particularly evident in the sufferings endured by the martyrs and the struggles with heresy and health faced by his siblings. These examples underscore Gregory’s firm belief that sainthood is not the exclusive domain of an elite group; rather, it is a possibility available to all individuals, irrespective of status, gender, or condition. As Gregory articulates in the eulogy to his brother, recalling the lives of the saints enriches our own way of living.

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