

St. Basil of Caesarea

I Brief Biography

Born to an aristocratic family c. 300, d. 379, fervently Christian for a couple of generations.

Studied under his father, a teacher of rhetoric, until 14, went to Caesarea to study, finally to Athens, became close friends with Gregory of Nazianzus.

Basil's brother, Gregory, says he returned from his studies in Rhetoric in Athens conceited and full of himself. He underwent a conversion through the influence of his elder sister, Macrina, and his younger brother, Naucratus.

Traveled to Egypt, Palestine, Syria on a tour of ascetic settlements, but eventually made a home in a very rustic and isolated place for a number of years.

362, ordained a presbyter. He eventually formed a complex communal monastic pattern within the city of Caesarea. Around this time, he also became active in the theological controversies connected to the Trinity, but returned to his seclusion.

365, he leaves his monastic seclusion and becomes a parish priest.

370, ordained bishop.

Death, 379.

II Features of Basil's life and work

The battle for the full doctrine of the Trinity

Eunomius: Unless the term 'unbegotten' applies to God as he really is, it is merely the result of human conception or invention. Yet, 'unbegotten,' was not found in Scripture.

Scripture and baptism demonstrate the propriety of the name Father for God. A Father may be unbegotten, in that it does not point to one derived from another, but also implies a Son. It is in the name of the Father, not the Unbegotten, that the Lord commands us to baptize.

"The divinity is common, but fatherhood and sonship are properties; and from the combination of both elements, of the common and the particular, we will have in us the comprehension of the truth." (Eun. 2.28)

"In delivering the formula of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, our Lord did not connect the gift with number. He did not say "into First, Second, and Third," nor yet "into one, two, and three, but He gave us the knowledge of the faith which leads to salvation, by means of holy names. So that what saves us is our faith. ... Count, if you must; but you must not by counting do damage to the faith. Either let the ineffable be honoured by silence; or let holy things be counted consistently with true religion.

"There is one God and Father, one Only-begotten, and one Holy Spirit. We proclaim each of the hypostases singly; and, when count we must, we do not let an ignorant arithmetic carry us away to the idea of a plurality of Gods. *On The Holy Spirit* 18.44

The battle for the full divinity of the Holy Spirit

He is 'of God' not as all things are, but as 'proceeding', not by generation, as the Son, but as the Breath of his mouth. (On the Spirit, 18, 46)

He is also the 'Spirit of Christ', because He is intimately related to Him by nature, and because it is only the Spirit who can adequately glorify Christ. (ibid.)

His dignity derives from his origin and his activity from the One who sent Him.

The Spirit is glorified with the Father and Son by his communion with them;
Christ's testimony that blasphemy against Him will not be forgiven.

Scripture indicates the dignity of the Spirit also by titles shared with the Father and Son:
holy; good; Spirit of Truth; Spirit of Wisdom; structure of the Creed; baptismal formula.

The proper key for Trinitarian theology is worship.

Life and Liturgy

"Who has taught us in writing to sign with the sign of the cross those who have trusted in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? What writing has taught us to turn to the East at the prayer? Which of the saints has left us in writing the words of the invocation at the displaying of the bread of the Eucharist and the cup of blessing?... Moreover we bless the water of baptism and the oil of the chrism, and besides this the catechumen who is being baptized. On what written authority do we do this? Is not our authority silent and mystical tradition? Whence comes the custom of baptizing thrice?"

He introduced antiphonal singing of the psalms.

Composed at least the core of what in the Eastern church is celebrated as the Liturgy of St. Basil.

Charity and care for the poor

Gregory of Nyssa: He "ungrudgingly spent upon the poor his patrimony even before he was a priest, and ...and afterward did not hoard even what remained to him." (*Against Eunomius* 1.10)

The *Basilidad* was a place of care for the poor, the sick, who received free medical care, food and shelter, originally funded through Basil's own resources.

Bringing order to the Ascetic Movement

Authority is necessary but fruitful only when love is the driving force of life together.

The Longer and Shorter Rules became the basis for monastic life throughout the Eastern church.

III Basil and Our Times

Praying as we believe and believing as we are baptized

Scripture, liturgy, and doctrine are inextricably woven together. We need: worship that is doctrinally sound; theology impelling to worship; love of God and love of neighbor joined.

Saving gospel and social conscience

Against the phenomenon of an ever-rising standard of basic need in *I Will Tear Down My Barns*.

"Give but a little, and you will gain much: undo the primal sin by sharing your food. Just as Adam transmitted sin by eating wrongfully, so we wipe away the treacherous food when we remedy the need and hunger of our brothers and sisters."

The charismatic and institutional belong together: Basil offers us a model of integration through his active promotion of and discipline of the ascetic movement.