

**A WOMAN CHRISTIAN SAGE
OF THE FOURTH CENTURY:
MACRINA THE VIRGIN - PHILOSOPHER***

BY
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A
INTRODUCTION

Macrina was the elder sister of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, and she is sometimes known as «*Macrina the Younger*» to distinguish her from «*Macrina the Elder*», her paternal grandmother. She is an important figure of the early Church, a woman who had achieved the highest summit of human virtue, an ideal Christian leader and philosopher with considerable influence over her brothers, two of the great Cappadocian Fathers.

This dissertation examines her personality as it emerges mainly from Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Macrina*. Further aspects of her life are found in Gregory's dialogue, *On the Soul and Resurrection*. This study reveals interesting aspects of the life of women in the early Church and their involvement in the ascetic life, and throws light on Christian attitudes towards virginity and marriage in that period.

It is important to consider Macrina's figure in the context of her family. In the Christian world of the fourth century, the family of Gregory of Nyssa was distinguished for its leadership in civic and religious affairs in the region of the Roman Empire known as the Pontus. J. H. Newman, in an essay on the trials of St Basil, refers to this family circle as «*a sort of nursery of bishops and saints*»¹.

Gregory's grandmother was the elder Macrina, a woman of a very

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1. J. H. Newman, *Historical Sketches 2*, London 1906, p. 17.

high order of piety, who had been trained on the precepts of the celebrated bishop of Neocaesarea, Gregory Thaumaturgus, by some who had been his hearers². His father was Basil, a successful rhetorician, outstanding for his judgements and well known for the dignity of his life; the mother, Emmelia, a pious and «*extremely virtuous woman*», is praised by Gregory for her virtue and for her eagerness to have her ten children educated in Holy Scripture. Between them, five of these children established a record unmatched in the annals of Christian family history. The eldest son became an archbishop (Basil of Caesarea), and two other sons bishops (Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebastea). Three sons and one daughter chose asceticism as a way of life. And three of these children, Macrina, Basil and Gregory, are counted among the most illustrious saints of early Church³.

J. H. Newman notes the strong influence of the women in the family⁴ and in one of his letters, Basil⁵ gives credit to his mother and his grandmother, the elder Macrina, for his clear and steadfast idea of God⁶. Gregory of Nyssa especially praises his older sister Macrina as the «*common glory of our family*» and acclaimed her as «*the great Macrina*», who had achieved the highest summit of human virtue. Indeed, in *The life of Macrina*, he portrays her as the ideal Christian teacher and philosopher, seeking God with her whole heart and mind.

The Life of Macrina provides an early example of Christian biography. Most of the «*Lives*» of the early Christian biographers belong to the type of literature known as hagiography, whose primary purpose was religious—specifically, to edify its readers. *The Life of Macrina* is, according to Pierre Maraval, hagiography of the type of the

2. «St Macrina» (1), in *A Dictionary of Saintly Women*, by A. B. C. Dunbar, London 1905, vol. II, p. 1.; see also: P. J. Fedwick (ed.), *Basil of Caesarea, Christian, Humanist, Ascetic*, Toronto 1981, p. 5.

3. For the discussion of the biographical material of Gregory of Nyssa and a comparison of the enumeration of his brothers and sisters, given by different historians and biographers, see J. E. Pfister, «A Biographical note: The brothers and sisters of St. Gregory of Nyssa», in *Vigiliae Christianae* 18 (1964) pp. 108-113.

4. J. H. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

5. Although Basil mentions Emmelia and Macrina the elder, nowhere in his voluminous writings is there a reference to his elder sister. E. Katafygiotou-Topping raises the question, whether this was due to some «lingering resentment or sibling rivalry», (*The Lives of forty-eight Holy Women*, Minneapolis 1990, p. 241).

6. St Basil, «Letters», trans. A. Clarke Way, in *The Fathers of the Church Series*, vol. 28, (1955), p. 76.

philosophical biography⁷. It is written in the form of a very long letter, as Gregory says, a document which could be read everywhere and on every occasion, whenever there was a need for it.

Written shortly after Macrina's death in December 379 at the request of the monk Olympius, to whom the treatise *On Perfection* was also directed, it belongs definitely to Gregory's ascetic works, despite its literary form, as W. Jaeger has explained⁸. It is a personal portrait of his sister as an impressive exponent of the ascetic ideal, and an illuminating supplement to Gregory's more objective treatises on the ascetic life. In the other treatises, the rigours of the ascetic life are referred to only in general terms. In the *Life* Gregory gives some of the details of Macrina's disciplined existence, the single outfit of clothing, the worn sandals, the board on which she slept even in her last illness. Macrina is presented as a model of Christian perfection, to be imitated by others who have the same ambition.

Gorgonia, Gregory Nazianzen's sister, appears as a striking parallel to Macrina. The similarities between *The Life of Macrina* and the oration *On Gorgonia*, as well as between the way of life of these saintly women are worth recording. They reveal a common attitude towards wealth and poverty, life and death, pagan culture and the world of the Bible.

The Life of Macrina is also very much connected with Gregory's *On the Soul and Resurrection*. In these two works, Gregory models Macrina's portrait on two figures: Socrates of pagan antiquity, and Thecla, who according to popular legend was a disciple of the apostle Paul. As he develops the character of Macrina as equal and even surpassing Socrates, Gregory shows her as the true lover of a life of wisdom, a philosopher greater than the best that classical antiquity can offer. In his exposition of Macrina as a second Thecla, Gregory presents her as a teacher, evangelist, and leader following a pattern validated by apostolic authority.

The *Life* is an important historical source as well as for the two great Cappadocians, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. It provides in addition interesting information about ecclesiastical, liturgical and monastic

7. P. Maraval, *Sources Chretiennes* No 178, «Gregoire de Nysse, Vie de Sainte Macrine», Paris 1971, p. 26.

8. W. Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature, Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius*, Leiden 1954, p. 18.

customs of the fourth century⁹. Especially it is an important source of our knowledge of the regimen of an early community of Christian women in the East, and indeed of the first documented organized community of women virgins in the Greek world.

B

A STRIKING PARALLEL: GORGONIA THE FUNERAL ORATION OF GREGORY NAZIANZEN IN HONOUR OF HIS SISTER

The fact that a brother — a brother who himself came to be acknowledged as a saint — records the life of his saintly sister has a parallel¹⁰ in the funeral oration of Gregory Nazianzen in honour of his sister, Gorgonia¹¹. The date of the oration can not be determined exactly. It is come from it that it was after the death of Caesarius in 369 and before the death of the elder Gregory in 374. The speech was probably delivered in Iconium in Lycaonia in the presence of Gorgonia's «spiritual father», Faustinus, then bishop of that city. The oration is a noble and eloquent tribute to Gorgonia and marked with greater warmth of feeling than are Gregory's other funeral orations.

Like Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen had exemplary and influential women in his family who may well have influenced him. His mother, Nonna, was a person of strong character and great faith who led her husband, a future bishop known as Gregory the Elder, to orthodox Christianity. Nazianzen describes her as having been obedient to him in everything except religion, an area where she used all possible means to change his mind and was eventually successful. Besides dominating her husband, she determined her son Gregory's future values and life-style by dedicating

9. J. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. III, *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature*, Westminster, Maryland 1990, p. 275.

10. Danielou finds also interesting parallels between the role of Macrina in the *Life* and the bride in Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (J. Danielou, *Platonisme and theologie mystique*, Paris 1954, quoted by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, «Ascetical Works», tans. V. Woods Callahan, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 58, Washington 1967, p. xix.).

11. Greg. Naz., *PG* 35, 790-814; «Funeral Orations by St Gregory Nazianzen and St Ambrose», trans. R. J. Deferrari and others, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol 22, New York 1968. Throughout my essay I quote from the last edition.

him to God before and after his birth¹².

Gregory's sister, Gorgonia, whom he describes in her funeral oration, was also of exemplary character. She led her husband and children to lives of devotion, herself practised intense prayer and asceticism, gave generously to the poor and the church, was educated in scripture and theology, and was a private adviser to men and women in her community, though she kept silence in church and in public¹³. She «won over her husband to her side and made of him a good fellow servant instead of an unreasonable master»¹⁴, eventually leading him to baptism before her death. Gorgonia was not alone in this; during the fourth century, aristocratic women in both East and West played a leading role in converting their families to Christian faith and/or to asceticism. Macrina the elder, Macrina the younger, Emmelia, Nonna and Gorgonia are all important examples of a broader phenomenon.

Gregory Nazianzen finds it necessary to begin his speech in honour of his sister with an elaborate apology. He is fully aware that he is honouring his own family by praising his sister, but the truth must be told, and the fact that he was related to this remarkable woman should not, he felt, present an obstacle: «In praising my sister, I shall be honouring my own family. Yet while she is a member of my family, I shall not on that account praise her falsely, but because what is true is for that reason praiseworthy¹⁵. In Gregory of Nyssa, by contrast, family interest is strong. He does not feel the need for an apology of this kind. He is proud of his sister and gives the impression throughout the letter that he is enjoying the opportunity to write about her and about his family. Clearly he was both interested in and intensely proud of his family. A. Meredith says that there had never been anything like it since the days of the New Testament¹⁶. Chapter 2 features his mother and his paternal grandmother Macrina; on the brothers, chapters 6 and 14 deal with Basil; Naucratis is the subject

12. *On Gorgonia*, 11.

13. *Ibid.*, 8.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, I.

16. A. Meredith, «A comparison between the *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* of Gregory of Nyssa, the *Vita Plotini* of Porphyry and the *De Vita Pythagorica* of Iamblichus», in *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. A. Spira, The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation 1984, p. 183.

other physician but God who let the accident happen, and refused to undress in front of a human physician²². At another time she was critically ill; the symptoms were alarming: high fever, rapid pulse, weariness that turned into coma, physical and mental paralysis. The physician's efforts were in vain²³. Once again Gorgonia prayed to «*the greatest of all physicians*» for recovery, imitating the woman whose haemorrhage was healed when she touched the hem of Jesus' garment. She begged him to help her, touched the altar with her head and held in her hand the host and the consecrated wine. Her health was immediately restored but she did not tell her brother about this miracle until shortly before her death²⁴.

The miracle has a parallel in *The Life of Macrina*. Macrina suffered from a breast cancer declared incurable by the physicians. Although her mother urged her to seek more medical advice, she declined, giving the same reasons as Gorgonia. Macrina considered worse than the disease laying bare part of the body to another's eyes²⁵. But one evening she entered the *παναγιστήριον* (sanctuary) and prostrated herself all night before the God of all healing. She mingled her tears with the soil on which she lay; and made a kind of salve. When her mother urged her once more to see a doctor, Macrina simply said it would be sufficient, if her mother would make the sign of the cross, *τὴν ἀγίαν σφραγίδα*, over the tumor. She did this and the tumor disappeared; only a small mark remained²⁶.

Death, too, is treated similarly in both texts. Gorgonia was happy to die. As her brother put it: «*she longed to be dissolved... and no lustful, sensuous person loves the body as much as she strove to be freed of these shackles and to rise from the mud in which we live and to give herself purely to the most beautiful being and to wholly embrace her beloved – yes, I may say her lover...*»²⁷. Macrina was happy to die as well, because she was as Gregory writes, full of that divine pure love for the invisible bridegroom, a love that nourishes her «*deep inside and hidden in her heart*». She longed, indeed, to be

22. Cf. P. Horden, *The Death of Ascetics in Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*, ed. W. J. Sheils, B. Blackwell 1985.

23. *On Gorgonia*, 15.

24. *Ibid.*, 17.

25. *The Life of Macrina*, p. 185.

26. *On Gorgonia*, 19.

27. *The Life of Macrina*, pp. 185-186.

delivered as soon as possible from the bonds of her body and hurry into her lover's embrace: «*she seemed to me to be making clear to those present the divine and pure love of the unseen Bridegroom which she had secretly nourished in the depths of her soul, and she seemed to be communicating the disposition in her heart to go to the One she was longing for...*»²⁸. Death appears as the crowning of the Bride of Christ.

Moreover, both deaths are examples of the developed form of the saint's death-bed as a holy death. The first depiction of this kind is the death of Stephen, the protomartyr (Acts 6-7), which became the model for the passions of the later martyrs. It is itself modelled on the Narrative of Christ's Passion. The basis, then, for the «*holy death*» is Lucan, both the death of Stephen in Acts and of Christ in Luke's Gospel. The death of Stephen served as a model for the depiction of the deaths of the martyrs and when the age of the martyrs ended their deaths served as the model for the holy deaths of the saints, martyrs not in blood but in the spirit.

J. T. Cummings has shown how Macrina's death is a classic example of the penitent death as a holy death²⁹. We find in both deaths some features already established by the Lucan basis, such as the assertion of the inner presence of the Spirit. Stress is laid on the «*angelic*» and «*heavenly*» life-style of both women. The reality of sufferings is stressed to highlight the transcendence. The serenity of both Macrina and Gorgonia is especially underlined by their brothers. They had no anxiety of death but a sense of familiarity with it. Their death is marked by a single-minded focus on God. All these elements prepare for the climax of their death, the prayer.

Especially in the case of Macrina, before the description of the saint's death, we are told a good deal about her periods of illness. We hear about the breast cancer, healed miraculously by her intensive prayer³⁰. Strangely enough, her last illness is barely alluded to; no doctor was consulted and no diagnosis is mentioned. However, the physical aspects of being ill and dying are given less attention than the readiness to die, the longing for death and union with Christ.

This common attitude towards death provided a kind of model

28. J. T. Cummings, «The Holy Death-Bed Saint and Penitent», in *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa*, op. cit., p. 241.

29. *The life of Macrina*, p. 179.

30. *Ibid.*

which the Christian reader could imitate when his own death was imminent, when medical science failed, as inevitably it would some day. This was the legacy of the New Testament to the patristic age on the subject of death: death, both physical and spiritual, was a result of Adam's sin, but that double death had been overcome and new life given in the death and resurrection of Christ³¹. We have several examples from the fourth century of letters of consolation, and the assertion that Christians, unlike the rest of mankind, had a solid basis for hope in the face of death was both the starting point and the concluding argument for the authors of these letters³². The longing for death and union with Christ is one of the essential messages of both *The Life of Macrina* and the oration *On Gorgonia*, and other hagiographa as well.

Both Macrina and Gorgonia are charitable. During the famine which visited Cappadocia in 368-9, Macrina miraculously fed the people³³. Gorgonia, too, was always ready to help the needy and the afflicted. Her brother stresses this quality of Gorgonia a good deal: «Who, more than she, threw open her house, with a courteous and generous welcome to those who live according to God?... Her house was a common hospice for all her needy relatives, and her goods were as common to all the needy as their own personal belongings»³⁴.

Both Macrina and Gorgonia lived so completely in the world of the Bible that they did not want to share in pagan culture³⁵. This is more obvious in *The Life of Macrina*, which is full of biblical quotations, especially the last conversation between brother and sister and Macrina's last prayer. In the whole *Life* there is not a single certain quotation from a pagan author, though there are a few possible Plato-

31. J. E. Deward, *Death and Resurrection, in Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 22, Wilmington, Delaware 1986, p. 34.

32. Cf. R. Gregg, *Consolation Philosophy: Greek and Christian Paideia in Basil and the two Gregories*, Cambridge Mass 1975, p. 156.

33. *The Life of Macrina*, p. 190.

34. *On Gorgonia*, 12.

35. Parallel to Egeria, who is also not a woman learned in the secular classics, but she is well-read in the Scriptures and demonstrates a thorough grasp of them. Egeria's journal makes constant reference to events in the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament. Her ability to distinguish between what she has read and what is non-Biblical also points to a woman of ecclesiastical culture and literacy, firmly established in a Christian culture, and eager to let her biblical faith come alive.

nic echoes and patterns³⁶. On the other hand, though both lives are described in philosophical language³⁷, the language in which Gorgonia's brother describes her end³⁸ is more Platonist and Origenist than is the language of Gregory about Macrina, which as A. Meredith says, «seems deliberately to modify the traditional pattern in favour of a more characteristically Christian approach»³⁹.

Gregory knew Plato and other pagan authors well, but here he seems to exclude any kind of non-Christian traditions. Even a highly educated man such as he refused to quote from the classical authors, even though he could easily have done so, and limited himself to his personal experience, his recollections of a *θεία γυνή* (holy woman), who happened to be his sister, and to the biblical passages which directed her life and gave meaning to it. His restraint in the life of his sister reflects the way she felt; he only quoted from the Bible in his sister's *Life* because the Bible was her world. It cannot be simply a «post-Julianic coyness»⁴⁰ that led him to this reticence.

Commenting on Gorgonia's exploits of prayer and asceticism, Gregory Nazianzen makes the following rhetorical exclamation: «O nature of woman overcoming that of man in the common struggle for salvation, and demonstrating that the distinction between male and female is one of body, not of soul!»⁴¹. In a parallel text, Gregory of Nyssa says he does not know if it is fitting to call his sister a woman, naming her for female nature when she came to be above nature⁴². This kind of language, which points to the idea of women being, becoming male or surpassing maleness, has a long history in Greek philosophy and in orthodox and heterodox Christian sources. Basil of Caesarea also employs such concepts on occasion; in his *Homily on the Martyr Joulitta*, he makes this point in a particularly striking way. Expressing wonder at the most manly struggle of this blessed woman, he adds: «if indeed it is fitting to call woman one who overshadowed

36. A. Meredith quotes some of them: *The Life of Macrina*, 11 (= *Phaedrus* 246c), *The Life of Macrina*, 18 (= *Phaedo* 67d), *The Life of Macrina*, 22 (*Symposium* 219ff), *op. cit.*, p. 194.

37. *On Gorgonia*, 15, *The Life of Macrina*, 11.

38. *On Gorgonia*, 23.

39. A. Meredith, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

41. *On Gorgonia*, 14.

42. *The Life of Macrina*, ch. 8.

by the great nature of her soul the weakness of female nature»⁴³. Nazianzen says that his mother Nonna displayed «in female form the assertiveness of a man»⁴⁴.

This gender language is not meant literally but represents aspects of the human condition that every person shares. Maleness in this context is actually a stage in the growth of human perfection as such, as are likeness to the angels and *theosis*. It is equivalent to virtue, philosophy of dispassion, which women can achieve and which many men fail to reach⁴⁵. Nazianzen applies this kind of language to married women as well (Nonna, Gorgonia). This shows that «he envisages the possibility of fully human achievements and moral stature for women within the more socially constrained context of marriage as well as in the freer society of the ascetical movement»⁴⁶. The parallel between Macrina and Gorgonia in this case has a greater meaning than this. If women like them surpass men in this regard, they can achieve greater excellence as human beings, and this shows that the difference between men and women is not one of moral or spiritual character. The distinction is a bodily one. Moreover Nazianzen states in Or.7.23, that the bodily distinction, too, is ultimately temporary because it will not exist in the resurrection body.

The only apparent difference between *The Life of Macrina* and the oration *On Gorgonia* does not seem to influence the two women's life decisively. Gorgonia was married⁴⁷, and displayed all the domestic virtues⁴⁸, while Macrina, sought in marriage the life of virginity. However, both women followed an ascetical ideal and lived a life not separated from the Spirit. Gregory Nazianzen says of Gorgonia: «...in the two universal divisions of life, I mean the married and the unmarried states, of which one is more sublime and divine but more difficult and perilous, while the other is lower but safer, she avoided the disadvantages of both and chose and united the sublimity of the one with the security of the other... Though she was linked in carnal union, she was not on that account separated from the Spirit, nor because she

43. P.G. 31, 237A-C.

44. V.E.F. Harrison, «Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology», in *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 41, October 1990, p. 446.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, p. 447.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *On Gorgonia*, 8.

had her husband as her head did she ignore her first Head»⁴⁹.

Gorgonia's marriage helped her to avoid the danger of pride and thus to attain a more perfect degree of moderation⁵⁰. Her brother contrasts her with Eve, calling his sister a bride of Christ and asserting that she, unlike the first mother, overcame the serpent and death. Significantly, this suggests that according to Gregory spiritual marriage is possible for Christians in all states of life, not only for celibate ascetics⁵¹. Gregory of Nyssa's view, as it appears from the chapters 3-9 of his *On Virginité*, is not different. He explains how the needs of the body and the soul are ultimately compatible and thus provides a non-dualistic understanding of the goal of asceticism, grounding asceticism in overcoming illusions about the body rather than in a spirited struggle against the body. He points to a freedom from passion which does not require the renunciation of marriage and worldly activity for its foundation⁵².

These lives of Gorgonia and Macrina, the first married, the second a virgin, suggest that neither of these two states binds completely to or separates from God or the world. In the view of their brothers, two of the greatest fathers of the fourth century, a life of piety and contemplation can be achieved through both the «two universal divisions of life», marriage and virginity.

C

MACRINA AS A SECOND THECLA: A COMPARISON WITH THE *ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA* AND THE *SYMPOSIUM* OF METHIDIUS OF OLYMPUS

In fourth century Cappadocia, as was true throughout the Greek speaking Christian world, the name and legend of Thecla were well

49. *Ibid.*, 9.

50. Gregory of Nyssa points out that lack of appreciation of the bodily and political realities which support them is one basis for the sin of pride among celibates. Those who despise marriage forget that they were both from marriage, forget the tree of which they are the fruit. (*On Virginité* 7.2.24-29).

51. *On Gorgonia*, 14.

52. Gregory thus provides the remedy for the problem which the Eustathians had raised for Christian theology in Asia Minor: giving marriage a secondary and doubtful status in the life of Christians.

known⁵³. According to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla was a young virgin engaged to Thamyras in Iconium. As soon as she heard Paul preaching about the virginal life, she wanted to be «counted worthy herself to stand in Paul's presence and hear the word of Christ»⁵⁴. One of the major motifs is of Thecla as a follower of Paul. She follows Paul to the prison at the peril of her own safety, and is condemned to death, while Paul is only scourged and banished. From that point on, Thecla is the disciple growing up to take the place of the master. After the pagans unsuccessfully try to martyr her, Paul praises her but will not yet baptize her. Thecla, travelling with Paul, is again arrested and condemned to martyrdom, prays over the beasts to tame them, and baptizes herself in a pit of water where the seals are kept. Finally Thecla is freed «lest the city also perish with her», as the Roman governor exclaims in amazement. She confesses her faith before the governor, evangelizes the household of her patron Tryphaena, kinswoman of Caesar, and eventually finds Paul at Myrna. There she tells him of her baptism, and he commissions her to do the same work he is doing: «Go and teach the word of God». She returns to Iconium where she preaches to her mother, and journeys on to Seleucia. There she dies «after enlightening many with the word of God»⁵⁵.

Gregory of Nyssa was familiar with the story and almost certainly with the Greek text of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, as well as with oral hagiography. Like Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa referred on many occasions to Thecla and her virtues⁵⁶. Almost in the beginning of *The Life of Macrina* Gregory introduces the theme of Macrina as a second Thecla. Macrina was only the official name of his sister, the one her acquaintances used. However she had been given another,

53. For an extensive treatment of the legend of Thecla and some of the many references to Thecla in the writings of the Greek Fathers, see «Thecla», in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, ed. W. Smith and H. Ware, London 1887, 4:882.

54. E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, and trans. R. McL. Wilson, Philadelphia 1965, p. 335, hereinafter cited as *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 364.

56. Apart from the references in *The Life of Macrina*, Gregory of Nyssa speaks elsewhere of her as Paul's virgin disciple (*Hom. xiv in Cantt*). Gregory Nazianzen also speaks of her as a virgin who had escaped the «tyranny» of her betrothed husband and her mother (*Orat. xxiv*). Also in his *Or. in Julianum*, i and in his *Hymns, Praecepta ad Virg.* 190, In *Exhort. ad Virgg.* 87, he connects her escape with Paul's suffering hunger.

(Thecla), secretly in connection with a vision which occurred before she was born: «When the time came in which she (her mother) was to be freed from her pain by giving birth to the child, she fell asleep and seemed to be holding in her hands the child still in her womb, and a person of greater than human shape and form appeared to be addressing the infant by the name of Thecla... This, then, was her secret name. It seems to me that the one who appeared was not so much indicating how the child should be named, but foretelling the life of the child and intimating that she would choose a life similar to that of her namesake»⁵⁷.

Certain aspects of the life of Thecla are essential for Gregory's image of Macrina, as in this apocryphal work he found a vivid second-century romantic image of a woman who is presented as a disciple of Paul and who is eventually given by him the same commission to preach which he received. She is presented therein as an evangelist, a confessor who faced martyrdom, and a model and teacher in the virginal life.

Thecla is portrayed as finding virginity to be the most perfect evangelical life-style, and the way in which one lives out the Gospel most securely. Virginity is the way for the Christian to become a «temple of God», to be pleasing to him, and to be rewarded by him in the «day of his Son». Thecla rejected her own fiancé and was first sent to execution; and in Alexandria she also rejected a suitor, who became the cause of her trial in the arena. Thus, Thecla's adherence to virginity was a cause of her near martyrdom, and was almost identical with her Christian life.

The tinge of Encratism is undeniably traceable in the Acts. In her first ordeal at Iconium, Thecla is presented as condemned not because she had embraced the Gospel, but because she repudiated her contract of marriage. This is even more true of her second ordeal at Antioch, in which she was cast to the wild beasts not as a punishment for her Christian profession, but for the «sacrilege» involved in the indignity offered by her to the Syriarch, whose crown she plucked off while struggling to defend her chastity against his violence, as a virtuous heathen maiden might have done. Paul is presented as considering celibacy so fully synonymous with chastity that in his eyes marriage cannot be pure unless man and wife live on the terms of

57. *The Life of Macrina*, p. 164.

practical celibacy. In the address which is supposed to be spoken by him in the house of Onesiphorus, he begins with a string of beatitudes moulded after those of the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, all of them in some degree turned from their proper bent: «*Blessed are they that keep the flesh pure, for they shall be made a temple of God*», «*Blessed art they that have wives as though they had none, for they shall inherit God*»⁵⁸.

Macrina's experience differs from Thecla's. Macrina does not reject her fiancé. When he died prematurely before their marriage, Macrina regarded herself as still his wife in the eyes of God, and affirming that marriage was an act that could no more be repeated than birth or death, that her husband was still living, and that resurrection would reunite them, she refused to listen to any further proposals of marriage. However, virginity is no less important in the Macrina's life. Macrina is the model of the virgin life throughout *The Life of Macrina*⁵⁹. She is introduced to us as the «*virgin*», persuading her mother and her brother Basil to take up the virginal-philosophical life, and joining together others on the family estate to lead the virginal life in a community characterized by a common life and shared goods. Her virginal life in this community was «*for her mother a guide to the immaterial and philosophical life*», and the power of her example was such that the whole community rose towards the heights of this sort of life⁶⁰.

Moreover, Macrina was the teacher who guided others to the «*angelic life*», instructing them as if «*inspired by the Holy Spirit*», but also with «*clarity and logic... with verbal facility*»⁶¹. As a second Thecla, Macrina was an exemplary teacher of the Word, respected by men and women, and by lay people and clergy alike. Of course she does not exercise any sacramental function, but no one questions that she must be accepted as an authoritative guide in the philosophic life. Even Gregory, a bishop, portrays himself as an admirer of, and learner from, this woman who was the «*common boast of our family*»⁶². In his last conversations with her in the *Vita*, Gregory appears as the one

58. *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, p. 356.

59. P. Wilson-Kastner, «Macrina: Virgin and Teacher» in *Andrews Univ. Seminary Studies* 17, 1979, p. 109.

60. *The Life of Macrina*, pp. 166-168.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

who is in need of comfort and instruction, and these he receives from Macrina. Macrina is explicitly a teacher of the Word and an expert in expounding Scripture. Macrina's teaching has Scripture as its basis and is oriented towards the nurturing of others in the evangelical life.

Gregory was also familiar with the *Symposium* (*The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*) of Methodius of Olympus⁶³ (d.c. 311), written sometime in the second half of the third century, a dialogue of considerable power and grace in praise of virginal life, which is the only complete work of this writer which has come down to us⁶⁴. The work reveals Methodius as an ardent admirer of Plato, from whom he probably derived his preference for the dialogue form of composition; in the present case he has not only imitated him in several particular passages, but has taken from him the whole idea of his work, thus entering into direct and somewhat audacious rivalry with him.

As in Plato's *Symposium* the praises of Love are celebrated, so here are proclaimed the glories of Virginité. The imitation of the form of Plato's work is even kept up in not presenting the dialogue directly, but as reported by one who had been present at it. Eubulius receives from a virgin Gregorion an account of a banquet in the gardens of Arete, not under Plato's plane-tree, but under an agnus-cactus, in which ten virgin guests, at their hostess's command, pronounce ten successive discourses in praise of chastity. At the end of the banquet the victor Thecla leads off a hymn, to which the rest, standing round as a chorus, respond. The dialogue concludes with a discussion between Eubulius and Gregorion as to which is to be preferred, the chastity which knows no sexual desire, or that which feels the stings of lust and triumphs over them.

The banquet is also the only other literary work to treat the figure of Thecla which Gregory of Nyssa would have known. It is further

63. Methodius, was bishop simultaneously of Olympus and Patara, in Lycia. Very few biographical details are known. He was afterwards removed, according to Jerome, to the episcopal see of Tyre in Phoenicia, and at the end of the latest of the great persecutions, he suffered martyrdom at Chalkis in Greece. Methodius is known chiefly as the antagonist of Origen, though he was himself influenced in no small degree by the method of Origen, as may be seen by his tendency to allegorical interpretations of Holy Scripture.

64. Greek text, in G. N. Bonwetsch, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, Leipzig 1917, 27:1-141; Eng. trans., in «The writings of Methodius» in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, vol. XIV, pp. 1-119, hereafter cited as *Symposium*.

notable as the only work (not definitely based on the *Acts*) in which Thecla is treated of directly and not by way of mere passing allusion. Of the ten virgins introduced into it as contending in the presence of Arete, as to which shall pronounce the most eloquent panegyric on virginity, Thecla, whose oration is the longest and most elaborate, is declared victress, and winds up the festivity with a triumphal hymn. In inviting Thecla to speak, Arete designates her a disciple of Paul and in her hymn she directly speaks of her escape from the fire and the wild beasts, and her willing abandonment of her country, mother, and family. Similar allusions occur repeatedly in the writings of later ecclesiastical writers⁶⁵.

One can note several points which are relevant to Gregory's portrait of Macrina. Thecla is presented to us as a learned maiden, proficient not only in Christian doctrine but in philosophy (*φιλοσοφία ἐγκύκλιος καὶ παιδεία*)⁶⁶. She is the intellectual leader of the virgins⁶⁷. She is the teacher who gains her leadership over the others not only by her piety but through her learning, which is acclaimed by the others, her ability to interpret Scripture, and her refutations of pagan philosophy⁶⁸. In her teaching, she illustrates characteristics which Gregory insists upon in his portrait of Macrina. Just as with the Macrina of the *Life*, Thecla has as her basis Scripture, she is a master of Scripture, not just acquainted with it in a pious way. She also knows enough about pagan philosophy to refute it in order that Christian truth may shine forth.

It must be pointed out that Methodius avoids absolutely the exaggerated thesis often maintained by the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. There is no trace of Encratism in him: virginity is exalted as the best life of all, and the one most closely united to Christ, but marriage is not a corruption; we must praise and prefer purity, but not regard the procreation of children with disgust. Repeating the words of St Paul,

65. Apart from Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa other writers who mention Thecla are: John Chrysostom, Isidore of Pelusium, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Epiphanius, Basil of Seleucia, Ambrose, Sulpicius Severus, Jerome, Augustine, Joannes Moschus, John Damascene and Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem. For all these references, see «Thecla», in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, op. cit., pp. 886-887.

66. This account is confirmed by Basil of Seleucia, who characterizes her as φιλόλογος καὶ φιλόμουσος (*De vita Th.* ii 24).

67. *Symposium*, discourse VIII, ch. XI.

68. *A Lost Tradition, Women Writers of the Early Church*, P. Wilson-Kastner and others, London 1981, p. XIV.

Methodius says: «He that gives his virgin in marriage does well, and he that does not give her does better». He adds: «*In setting forth that which is better and sweeter, the Word has not forbidden the rest, but he has laid down as a law the assigning to each one of what is proper and useful to him*»⁶⁹. Thus the attitude towards virginity is much more orthodox than that in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The idea that marriage and pleasure are bad and that virginity is good is put forward by one of the characters and is refuted by another, who asserts that marriage is good but virginity is better because it frees one for the Kingdom of God⁷⁰. The virginity which Thecla espouses in the *Symposium* is freer of encratic taint than that of the Acts; it gives one freedom and one's human completion. In this respect it «*enhances the women's personhood*»⁷¹. The virgin may even defend the goodness of marriage without feeling the worth of her own state threatened⁷².

The equation of virginity with salvation, as well as the Christocentric emphasis of Methodius, also finds expression in Gregory of Nyssa's treatises *On Virginity*, *On the Making of Man* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Gregory explains⁷³ that God created man according to His image and likeness, but instead of giving him the body suited to the divine image he gave him the body of the brute, creating him «male and female», with the order to «grow and multiply» like animals. In his mercy, God wanted to prevent man from the irremissible fall of angels. For that purpose he provided our race with a mode of life and thought which was indeed inferior to that of the angels, but this makes a return possible. After our death we shall be given, not this corruptible body, but the body of the Resurrection, i.e., our genuine body, suited to our creation according to the image and likeness of God. The body of resurrection has nothing to do with the characteristics designated by male and female. Gregory of Nyssa, therefore, can call it the «body of our virginity». Those upon earth who live in holy virginity actually live according to the genuine patterns of creation, and anticipate our future heavenly condition when we shall put on the plenitude of our human nature. For this reason it

69. This explanation of Origen's, taken from his commentaries on the Psalms (Migne, *P.G.*, Vol. XII, 1093) is transcribed by Methodius in the *On Resurrection*, i, 20-24.

70. *Symposium*, II.

71. *A Lost Tradition*, op. cit., p. XIV.

72. For the defence of marriage, see *Symposium*, discourse II of Theophilla.

73. *On the Making of Man*, 15-18, *P.G.* 44, 176-196.

is absolutely right to elect a life of holy virginity. Those who choose marriage obey an inferior, although divine, dispensation.

Moreover, Gregory associates virginity with the incorruptibility of God, the impassible begetting of the Son, the pure Virgin birth of the Incarnate Word, the purity of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of God. This enables him to describe virginity as salvific: «...*virginity... while it remains in Heaven with the Father of spirits, and moves in the dance of the celestial powers... nevertheless stretches out hands for man's salvation... while it is the channel which draws down the Deity to share man's estate, it keeps wings for man's desires to rise to heavenly things, and is a bond of union between the Divine and human, by its mediation bringing into harmony these existences so widely divided*»⁷⁴.

Virginity, then, is in the first instance a way of speaking of God's saving grace. And the human response is to embrace the virgin life and so seek God's presence. That task is to begin with a moral one, and the transformation of lust to love, passion to virtue. Moreover, like Methodius, Gregory of Nyssa regards the completion of the process as a rendering of the body incorruptible. In other words, virginity finds its completion in the resurrection of the body after this life.

Gregory's emphasis however, is upon the contemplative dimension of the process. He speaks of lifting our longings «to that height, which sense can never reach»: «*The beauty noticed there will be but as the hand to lead us to the love of the supernal Beauty whose glory the heavens and the firmament declare, and whose secret the whole creation sings*»⁷⁵.

Virginity becomes a metaphor for the ideal Christian life. Like Methodius, Nyssa never cuts the ties with virginity in a moral or physical sense; but he does recognize that the ideal it symbolizes can to a degree be realized in marriage: «*But our view of marriage is this; that while the pursuit of heavenly things should be a man's first care, yet if he can use the advantage of marriage with sobriety and moderation, he need not despise this way of serving...*»⁷⁶.

Unquestionably, Gregory does model the life of his sister Macrina on the Thecla figure, even more so on the portrait in the *Symposium*

74. *On Virginity*, ch. 2.

75. *Ibid.*, 11.

76. *Ibid.*, 8.

of Methodius of Olympus than that in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Therefore, he is able to present his sister in a very strong characterization as a virgin teacher, philosopher, and leader, within a context familiar to his readers.

D

MACRINA AS A CHRISTIAN SOCRATES: *ON THE SOUL AND RESURRECTION (MACRINIA)*

Gregory of Nyssa completes the portrait of Macrina as the embodiment of ascetism and gives us further insights into her personality in another of his works, the dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection*⁷⁷ (it has often been given the title *Macrinia*), which is a dogmatic treatise⁷⁸. The dialogue is between Gregory and his sister, during her last hours. It is reminiscent of Plato's *Phaedo*⁷⁹ in which Socrates and his friends spend the last day of his life discussing the pertinent subject of the possibility of the soul's immortality. The fact that the role of protagonist is given to a saintly woman also recalls the Platonic device in the *Symposium* where Socrates attributes his splendid insights into the nature of love to the instruction of the wise Diotima.

V. Woods Callahan⁸⁰ remarks that Macrina's solicitude for her brother's state of mind in the dialogue creates a situation not unlike that in the first book of *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius. One is reminded also of another conversation between two saints, St Augustine and his mother, recorded in the *Confessions*, as taking place shortly before St Monica's death at Ostia⁸¹. However, this work is most similar to a dialogue written in the second century by Methodius of Olympus, entitled *On the Resurrection*, in which a certain

77. J. P. Migne, *P.G.*, vol. 46, cols. 11-60; «Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Ascetical Works», trans. V. Woods Callahan, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 58, Washington 1907, pp. 193-272. In my essay I quote from the last edition.

78. Cf. H. Chernis, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 65, who notes that «Macrina is represented as the ideal champion of orthodox dogma».

79. *Plato's Phaedo*, trans. R. Hackforth, Indianapolis 1955; *Plato*, trans. H. N. Fowler, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1:200-403, hereinafter cited as *Plato*, from the last edition.

80. «Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Ascetical Works», in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 58, p. 195.

81. St Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10.

Aglaophon offers objection to the doctrine of the resurrection which Methodius himself resolves⁸².

In general, the main lines of movement and structure in the dialogue *On the Soul and Resurrection* and Plato's *Phaedo* are the same. Gregory, in a first-person narrative, tells of coming to Macrina to mourn together over the death of Basil. She herself on her deathbed helps him overcome his grief as they talk about the soul and the resurrection. Macrina refutes his fear of death by showing that the soul is one and cannot be destroyed⁸³. This leads to a discussion on the resurrection, which is the true answer to the problem of the soul's fate after death. Gregory questions her about the individual resurrection and the final resurrection⁸⁴. Macrina responds by refuting Gregory's arguments against the resurrection and describes what can be known of the final restoration, (*ἀποκατάστασις*)⁸⁵. On this note of the ultimate healing of the cosmos the dialogue ends.

In the *Phaedo*, in a similar way, Phaedo exposes his intention to recount to Echecrates the last day of Socrates. In this account, Socrates explores the fate of the soul after death and expounds a myth after death. He adduces several proofs to dispel the fear that the soul will vanish after death⁸⁶. He refutes some serious attacks brought forward by Simmias and Cebes (in a parallel action to the questioning by Gregory in the dialogue) on his own views about the soul and he demonstrates to everyone's satisfaction that the soul must be indestructible⁸⁷. Then follows the myth of the soul's fate after death and Socrates prepares himself for death, for which he regards his whole life to have been a preparation.

Both works begin with the imminent death of the teacher, and cover the same topics: virtue, the life of philosophy, and the fate of the soul after death. Both works end, as well, with a final healing of the disordered human state. Socrates dies, asking that a cock be sacrificed to Asklepios so that his debt be paid; but Macrina does not die at the end of her dialogue. In her doctrine, the *ἀποκατάστασις* is

82. «The Writings of Methodius», in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, vol. XIV, pp. 139-173.

83. *On the Soul and Resurrection*, p. 225ff.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 257ff.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 264ff.

86. *Plato*, p. 243ff.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 290ff.

healing; therefore it is found at the end, as the conclusion of the discourse. Moreover, both dialogues have a similar focus. They are not simply about death and life after death. They are concerned with the leading of the virtuous life, in which death is a «boundary situation» which forces one to ask why one lives as one does⁸⁸. Death is not important in and of itself, nor is «life after death» an abstract concern. In both texts the question is raised about the way in which one lives as this relates to what one can hope for after death. The perception of the relationship and what is to be hoped for is quite different for the two, but the concern is the same.

Of course, some major differences are found between the two works. Socrates asserts the immortality of a disembodied soul, whereas Macrina bases her faith on the resurrection of the body and the restoration of the cosmos to harmony with God.

There are also some significant differences in structure. The first relates to the immediacy of narration. In the *Phaedo*, Phaedo recounts the death of Socrates to Echechrates, who has been seeking an eyewitness account. The narrator is himself peripheral to the events. The whole episode takes on the timeless atmosphere of a tale told within another story. Such a telling was much appropriate for a philosopher who denied the meaning of history and the propriety of human emotion, and who was seeking to escape this body and life in the world. Gregory, on the other hand, is himself both narrator and participant in *On the Soul and Resurrection*. He expresses his own grief, admiration and consolation. He himself goes through the process of seeking the truth with Macrina, and he takes the reader on the same journey. One can notice in this literary style an affirmation of a central theological truth for Gregory and Macrina. The whole cosmos is in search of reunion with God. None of us is an isolated sage, as in the Socratic idea; but we are now and always will be all on a common journey together to a common goal. That is why for Gregory timelessness is inappropriate as a narrative technique, because the life and death of Macrina are part of the temporal progress of the world towards God.

Moreover, both *Phaedo* and *On the Soul and Resurrection* have similar endings, dealing with the healing of the soul. But they do not both also end with the death of the central character. Socrates had to die at the end of the *Phaedo*, for the final reward of virtue, the

88. P. Wilson-Kastner, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

necessary final liberation of the philosopher, is death. Philosophy is the study of «nothing but dying and being dead»⁸⁹. Thus it is not only historical but also literary and philosophical necessity that demand that Socrates die at the end of his dialogue. Only death will give him the freedom to seek the reward he hopes for behind the myths he recounts⁹⁰.

But Macrina does not expound this sort of understanding of death or of human nature. The human being is a microcosm⁹¹, a spiritual being in a body. Both components are necessary, the soul linking human beings to God, and the body to visible creation. The soul itself works and acts through the body⁹². The soul is and always will be united to the body; death is, in our present economy of salvation, a necessary stage between this present life and our restoration in the resurrection⁹³. The moment of death is not a farewell to the body, but an entrance into a new state of relationship to it. Therefore, it was unnecessary to show Macrina's death. Pagan philosophers saw the flesh as a detriment, and viewed the ideal human state as being that of a disembodied spirit; true philosophy, on the other hand, knew that the body is part of the human person which will always interrelate with the soul. Macrina's death as the climax of the dialogue would have lessened the impact of the very doctrine she was propounding — the resurrection of the body.

All the characteristics of Macrina which Gregory has chosen to portray in the dialogue point to her as the exemplar of the Christian sage, the true philosopher: «...having raised herself to the highest peak of human virtue through philosophy...»⁹⁴. She is the virgin-philosopher par excellence⁹⁵. Having freely chosen the philosophical life, she is therefore enabled to know the higher truth through her living of it. Aware of the subtleties of truth, she is capable of leading others along the way. Master of «other philosophies», she is the teacher of

89. *Plato*, p. 222.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 370-376.

91. For the conception of man as microcosmos, see the excellent works of L. Thunber, *Microcosm and Mediator, The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, Copenhagen 1965, and, *Man and the Cosmos, The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor*, New York 1985.

92. *On the Soul and Resurrection*, p. 212.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

94. *The Life of Macrina*, p. 103.

95. P. Wilson-Kastner, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

the true philosophy of Scripture, who is irrefutable because of her logic and her life.

In his first paragraph, Gregory establishes the notion of Macrina's skill as a teacher. He relates that after Basil had died, he journeyed to his sister, seeking «for one who could share as an equal my sorrow, with many tears together»: «But when we saw each other, the sight of the teacher awakened all my sorrow, because she also was lying in a state of decline, near to death. Like a skillful driver of horses, she allowed me to give way to the force of my grief; and afterwards she tried to check me with words, and to curb the disorder of my soul»⁹⁶.

Gregory had come to Macrina as an equal, a sister who would share his grief. Instead, he found in her one who exercised the traditional role of a teacher to a pupil. It was she who gave way to his emotions; it was she who must lift him up and console him. The introduction not only establishes her as a teacher, but as a skilled and psychologically insightful one⁹⁷. In contrast to Socrates, who had Xanthippe ejected when she lamented his coming death, and who rebuked his disciples whenever they mourned his imminent execution⁹⁸, Macrina accepts Gregory's grief and allows him to express it. Only after he had had some time to grieve does she help to see the issues involved. She then can move to help him identify the problem of his belief in the soul and resurrection.

This difference between Socrates and Macrina towards the grieving ones is not so much in attitudes towards the passion of grief, which both would agree is detrimental, but in their exercise of compassion. In Socrates' view, compassion is not a virtue; From Macrina's Christian perspective it is. Macrina is not simply a midwife of the soul, but a follower of Jesus who wept when his friend Lazarus had died.

In further contrast to Socrates, who referred quite specifically to his death several times in the course of the *Phaedo*⁹⁹, Macrina only once and indirectly refers to hers¹⁰⁰. Probably the difference has to do with the character of the Christian sage in contrast to the pagan philosopher. The former does not have his or her own soul as a focus of

96. *On the Soul and Resurrection*, p. 198.

97. P. Wilson-Kastner, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

98. *Plato*, pp. 208-210, 400.

99. *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 240, 294.

100. *On the Soul and Resurrection*, p. 233.

concern, but is preoccupied with the praise of God and the union of all in God. Thus the Christian sage is not constantly absorbed with his or her own death, but with the testimony of God's grace and love to us.

There is also a methodological contrast between Socrates and Macrina. During his discussion of life after death Socrates often refers to stories and myths which he regards as probable and worthy of belief because they affirm the immortality of the soul. Macrina, on the other hand, explicitly excludes myths and stories to assert the truth of the resurrection. Sometimes she simply deabsolutizes myths — e.g., cosmology. She refutes pagan philosophy, and calls the Platonic myths of the soul's fate after death and the transmigration of souls «*incoherent doctrine*»¹⁰¹.

In the place where Socrates presents his final great myth of the soul in the underworld, Macrina places her exposition of Scriptural passages discussing the ἀποκατάστασις. While Socrates ends with myth and probable expectation, Macrina ends with Scripture and certain truth.

Socrates is shown as attacking the Sophists and transcending the notions of his inadequate philosophical predecessors¹⁰². Macrina is presented as possessing all the philosophical insight necessary to reject these «outside» philosophers and demonstrate what the Christian wisdom is¹⁰³. Her mode of operation is not to try to discredit those other philosophies by mere pious affirmation. Rather, she demonstrates an acute mind with enough grasp of the pagan arguments to refute them or correct them.

She does not claim an extensive knowledge of the written sources; she has only «heard» them. But because she is intelligent and knows the truth, she is able to present aptly the «*certain philosophy*» of the Scriptures in opposition to pagan arguments. Her assertions are reasonable, Gregory insists, and she rejoices in refuting clearly and precisely the diverse positions of «*foreign philosophy*»¹⁰⁴. Rather than proclaiming Scripture as an arbitrary authority, she shows how it must be interpreted reasonably and why it can overcome all the objections

101. P. Wilson-Kastner, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

102. Plato, pp. 330-342.

103. *On the Soul and Resurrection*, p. 220.

104. Plato, p. 245ff.

of the adversary¹⁰⁵. From this perspective, Macrina does not represent a triumph of Christian asceticism over philosophy, but the triumph of true philosophy over false.

The use of the word «*philosophy*» to designate Christianity is common in the writings of the fourth century, and may perhaps be traced back to Origen's synthesis of the Gospel and philosophy. It is employed in a twofold sense, of the Christian religion generally and of asceticism in particular. Gregory Nazianzen, describing the asceticism of his brother Caesarius, says: «*As philosophy is the greatest, so it is the most difficult, of professions, which can be taken in hand by but a few, and only by those who have been called forth by the divine magnanimity*»¹⁰⁶.

Throughout the life of Macrina the concern to depict the philosophical life and the ideal of philosophy is clear. Gregory describes his sister in chapter I as «*having risen through philosophy to her virtuous heights*» and in chapter 6 she is said to have encouraged her brother Basil to embrace the philosophic ideal and in similar language the text dealing with the life of her brother Naucratius is described at the opening of chapter 9.

A. Meredith points out a formal similarity in this point between *The Life of Macrina* and the *Vita Plotini* of Porphyry and the *De Vita Pythagorica* of TAMBlichus¹⁰⁷. But behind this similarity there is an important difference which helps to distinguish the pagan and the Christian lives: «*For Plotinus and for his biographer the philosophic life means the life of contemplation leading to the final union with the One... By philosophy is clearly meant metaphysical truth*»¹⁰⁸. This is the case also for the *De Vita Pythagorica* where philosophy is defined as the «*enthusiastic search for knowledge of the first and of the intelligible, the first being, the knowledge of numbers which are the basic principle of all things, human, divine and pure*»¹⁰⁹.

However, *The Life of Macrina* presents in the dress of philosophy a distinctly different picture. Both here and in other works of Gregory the religious life is presented under the rubric of the philosophic life. What interests him in *The Life of Macrina* and what he is

105. P. Wilson-Kastner, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

106. Gregory Nazianzen, *Or. VII*, 9.

107. A. Meredith, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid.*

seeking to recommend is perfection of the life rather than the pursuit of truth. «*It is clear how far Gregory has departed from Platonism in all its forms*»¹¹⁰. By the philosophic life he means primarily, the life of moral virtue. This is the concern of Macrina herself in chapter 12 in the concern she shows for her brother Peter. The overwhelming impression of the whole life is that it is a life of virtue. The life of philosophy is regularly stated to be the same as the life of virtue and it is as a protreptic to such a life that Gregory undertakes the narration¹¹¹.

In terms of Gregory's theology, Macrina is a human being who has made progress in the virginal-philosophical life. She is judged as an individual human being recreated by Christ; she is one who has gained mastery of spirituality. Therefore, she can teach and lead others on that same quest. Gregory's portrait of Macrina is a strong and sensitive statement, with no exact parallel in patristic literature. It is an historically plausible portrait, a Christian philosopher equal, and even superior to, Socrates.

E

MACRINA'S CONTRIBUTION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORGANIZED NORM OF MONASTIC LIFE IN THE GREEK WORLD

One interesting aspect of Macrina's personality was her development skills and ability as spiritual director of the first documented organized community of women virgins in the Greek world. Macrina's involvement in the monastic life is described in *The Life of Macrina*. About 355 A.D. Basil returned from Athens elated with his university successes and full of hopes of a grand career as an advocate and rhetorician, looking down with contempt from his intellectual eminence on men of rank and official station. Macrina reduced the young man's self-conceit and infused into him the disregard of all earthly wealth and distinctions, and the enthusiastic love for an ascetic life of perfect poverty, which ruled in her own breast. «*Macrina took him over and lured him so quickly to the goal of philosophy that he withdrew from the worldly show and began to look down upon acclaim through oratory and went over to this life full of labours for*

110. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

one's own hand to perform, providing for himself, through his complete poverty, a mode of living that would, without impediment, lead to virtue»¹¹².

Macrina retired to the family estate on the banks of Iris, near the village of Annesi¹¹³, where she subsequently established the religious community of which she was the head. The premature death of her brother Naucratus, the most dearly loved of all her brothers, on a hunting expedition in 357, strengthened her resolution to separate altogether from this world and its pursuits, and under the influence of the same sorrow, she persuaded her mother also, who was nearly broken-hearted at her loss, to embrace the ascetic life¹¹⁴: «When there was no longer any necessity for them to continue their rather worldly way of life, Macrina persuaded her mother to give up her customary mode of living and her more ostentatious existence and the services of her maids, to which she had long been accustomed, and to put herself on a level with the many by entering into a common life with her maids, making them her sisters and equals rather than her slaves and underlings»¹¹⁵.

The nucleus of the sisterhood was formed by their female servants and slaves. Devout women, some of high rank, soon gathered round them, while the birth and high connections of Macrina and her mother attracted the daughters of the most aristocratic families in Pontus and Cappadocia to the community. Among its members were a widow of high rank and wealth, named Vestiana¹¹⁶, and a virgin named Lampadia, who is described as the chief of the band. She became the head of the «choir of virgins», and must have been Macrina's right hand in the administration of the community. When Macrina died in 379 Gregory was grateful for Lampadia's assistance in preparation of the body for burial; for, as he observed, «*she knew exactly the ordinance for funeral ceremonies*»¹¹⁷.

112. *The Life of Macrina*, pp. 167-168.

113. Cf. W. M. Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, London 1890, p. 238.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

115. Melania the younger did exactly the same: «She also arranged to work during the day with her slaves who had become ascetics with her» (*The Lausiack History of Palladius*, ed. C. Butler, Cambridge 1898; repr. Hildesheim 1967, p. 23).

116. Vestiana was wife of Agilo who was magister peditum, see *The Prosopography of the Late Roman Empire*, vol. 1, Cambridge 1971, A. Jones, J. Martindale and J. Morris.

117. *The Life of Macrina*, p. 183.

Macrina took with her to her retreat her youngest brother Peter, who was «*all in all to his mother and sister, labouring with them towards the attainment of the angelical life*»¹¹⁸. The effect of his living of the cenobitic life under Macrina's direction must certainly be inferred to have shaped Basil's understanding of the monastic life and his own written rule. In 357-358 Basil had travelled to Egypt and Syria to visit the desert communities and houses of Pachomius and he retired home, resolved to initiate the Pachomian mode of life in his own country. Eustathius of Sebaste was already working on the same lines¹¹⁹, and the unorganised ascetic life in the world, to which Gregory of Nazianzen refers in his works, had paved the way for monasticism proper. Basil called his friend Gregory Nazianzen to fulfill a promise made in student days at Athens and join him in the ascetic life. This Gregory eventually did, though he was unable at first to pay more than a brief visit. Basil chose for his experiment a spot of much natural beauty on the banks of the Iris. At Annesi, on the opposite side of the river, his mother Emmelia and sister Macrina were living on the family estate¹²⁰. Basil put himself at the head of the community of men likeminded with himself, while Macrina was the spiritual mother of the monastery on her side of the river. Basil took Pachomius' *coenobium* at Tabennisi for his model, with certain modifications suggested by his own original and practical mind. However, J. Gribomont insists that Basil did not initiate a cenobitic movement or write a monastic rule after the fashion of Pachomius, but that he traced out an ascetical way of Christian life that had its immediate

118. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

119. Basil had been greatly attracted by the enthusiastic type of Christian commitment preached by Bishop Eustathius of Sebaste and practised by ascetical communities in the neighbourhood. But he soon discovered that considerable dissension was involved in the encratic movement. A Council at Gangres as early as 340 or 341 had condemned movements that prescribed too literal an interpretation of the Gospel injunctions, and the consequent desertion of husbands or wives, children, aged parents or relatives, the self-emancipation of slaves, and the refusal to honour civil obligations by Christians who had decided to «leave all things and follow Christ». In particular, elements of the heresy to be known as Messalianism were apparently involved in the Eustathian ascetical experiment. Its practitioners tended to repudiate work of all types in favour of an ascetical indulgence in continual recollection and prayer.

120. For a wonderful description of this place, see Gregory Nazianzen's «Epistles 4, 5 and 6», in *P.G.* 37, 24C-32B and Basil's «Epistle IA, 2», in *P.G.* 32, 276C-277C.

roots in the New Testament teaching¹²¹.

In *The Life of Macrina* we find a double monastery, the men presided over by Peter, the women by Macrina. This seems to have been a natural development of the earlier ascetic family life to which Macrina had drawn her mother after the death of Naucratius. It is not clear to what extent it conformed to the regulations for double monasteries prescribed by Basil in his *Rules*. It is neither clear whether Basil's monastery on the far side of the Iris still existed when Gregory visited Macrina. It may be surmised that when Basil became bishop of Caesarea and Peter reached adulthood, the brethren were transferred to the opposite bank and came under the joint rule of Macrina and Peter¹²². Anyway, *The Life of Macrina* throws a light on the arrangements of a double monastery in primitive times, and supplements the account given in the Pachomian and Basilian *Rules*¹²³.

Gregory details much about the life of this small community at Annesi, emphasizing the common life: «*The arrangement of their life, the high level of their philosophy, the lofty regimen of their activities night and day was such that it transcends description. Just as by death souls are freed from the body and released from the cares of this life, so their life was separated from these things, divorced from all mortal vanity and attuned to an imitation of the existence of the angels. Among them was seen no anger, no envy, no hatred, no arrogance, or any such thing; neither was there in them longing for foolish things like honour and fame and vanity, nor a contempt for others; all such qualities had been put aside*»¹²⁴.

Gregory also emphasizes the absolute equality of rich and poor, their work, constant prayer, and obedience to the head of the monastery, Macrina, who never puts herself above them: «*Continence was their luxury and not being known their fame; their wealth consisted in their poverty and the shaking off of all worldly abundance like dust*

121. «His aim was to encourage not only the most earnest communities of zealous faithful but all Christians in their endeavor to achieve a simple, ascetical life based directly on the Gospel» (F. X. Murphy, «Moral and Ascetical Doctrine in St. Basil», in *Studia Patristica* 14, Berlin 1976, p. 320).

122. 11 Cf. E. E. Morison, *St. Basil and his Rule*, Oxford 1912, and W. K. Lowether Clarke, *St. Basil the Great: a Study in Monasticism*, Cambridge 1913.

123. *A Lost Tradition, Women Writers of the Early Church*, P. Wilson-Kastner and others, London 1981, p. XVII.

124. *The Life of Macrina*, pp. 170-171.

from the body. They were not occupied with the concerns of this life; that is, they were not preoccupied. Rather, their one concern was the Divine; there was constant prayer and an unceasing singing of hymns distributed throughout the entire day and night, so that this was for them both their work and their rest from work»¹²⁵.

Directed by Macrina, the convent became a spiritual and philanthropic centre. She never turned away anyone who asked for something, no matter what their needs. Seeking her spiritual guidance and protection, women from the surrounding provinces consulted her. Many of them joined the community. The mother and teacher of this flourishing sisterhood, Macrina gave to it her entire inheritance and dedicated to it all her talents and energies¹²⁶. Macrina's personal involvement in philanthropy provided a model for Peter and Basil as well. Gregory recalled that once during a terrible famine, Peter furnished so much nourishment through his foresight that the large numbers going to and from made the hermitage seem like a city¹²⁷. Later, when Basil became archbishop of Caesarea (370), he founded philanthropic institutions large and numerous enough to form a city.

If it had not been for Macrina, monasticism in the East would have had different beginnings¹²⁸. Her influence on her brother Basil was decisive. She instilled in him the need for quietness and humility, along with a strength of purpose necessary in those difficult years. She was both passionate and discerning. She loved her family deeply, with the same fire as her love of God. This love embraced the family of her monastic community, and engendered in Basil and others a desire to imitate her, in answer to their own personal call.

Gregory makes it clear his sister conformed to everything that he advocated in the other ascetical treatises as a means of reaching the goal of the ascetic life¹²⁹. The reader of the biography witnesses her practice of the virtues, her fortitude in adversity, her Christian attitude in the face of death, her immutable faith and unending good

125. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

126. E. Catafygiotou-Topping, *The Lives of forty-eight Holy Women*, Minneapolis 1990, p. 242.

127. *Ibid.*

128. J. Lang, *Ministers of grace*, Middleteon, Slough 1989, p. 96.

129. W. Jaeger believed that *The Life of Macrina* was deliberately written by Gregory as a «perfect contrast to the abstract and austere character of Basil's *Great Rules*, in which he appears as lawgiver», *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature*, Leiden 1954, p. 18.

deeds, and he recognizes, therefore, that the life outlined by Basil and Gregory can be lived, since it has already been exemplified in one remarkable human being.

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CONCLUSION

Macrina the Younger is an important figure of the early Church. This dissertation examined some aspects of her personality, starting with a comparison with Gorgonia, Gregory Nazianzen's sister, and revealing striking parallels between the life-style of these saintly women and common attitudes towards wealth and poverty, life and death, pagan culture and the world of the Bible.

Macrina is presented by her brother, in two works, *The Life of Macrina* and the dialogue *On the Soul and Resurrection*, as the ideal Christian teacher and philosopher. Macrina in both is the virgin-philosopher, thus showing in her person how the Christian and pagan search for wisdom is fulfilled in the virginal-philosophical life. In the figure of this virgin-sage we find the unifying theme which pulls together the Thecla and Socrates motifs. Thecla is the virgin teacher par excellence; Socrates' search for wisdom is fulfilled in the virginal-philosophical life as embodied in the idealized figure of Macrina.

Finally, this study examined Macrina's contribution in the development of the organized form of monastic life in the Greek world and the information we have for an early community of Christian women in the East. It is true that Macrina's name has been overshadowed by those of her brothers, but they themselves fully appreciated her worth, and their debt to her. Gregory of Nyssa praised her as the «*common glory of our family*» and acclaimed her as the «*great Macrina*», who had achieved the highest summit of human virtue. His portrait of Macrina is a strong and sensitive statement, with no exact parallel in patristic literature. It declares that «*in Christ there is neither male no female, but that in him all are one*».