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ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA: THE LIFE OF ST. MACRINA

Abstract: Helena Panczova, *St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of St. Macrina*.

This paper examines the content, form, and dating of Macrina's death. In the second part, the imagery of the 'philosophic' life is analysed in greater detail, including the evolving meaning of this term, the role of education in Christian life, and the significance of a woman assuming the role of teacher.

Keywords: *Gregory of Nyssa, Patristics, Macrina, Ascetics, Late Antiquity, Monasticism*

The life story of another remarkable woman, St. Macrina (327 – 380), has been preserved for us by her brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa (approx. 335 – after 394). She spent all her life in a very prosy environment, in the house of her parents. Her story, however, is far from boring. For not only did she attain the highest level of human perfection, but she was also able – by her love for God and her neighbours – to change this ordinary place into extraordinary. Her spiritual development and the changing human relationships are the main themes of this charming literary work.¹

Macrina's biography

The *Life of St. Macrina* consists of five parts. First, there is a short prologue (chapter 1), where Gregory explains the reasons for its composition. Once, when he debated with his friend, the 'addressee' of this 'letter', they struck upon the question which way of life is worthy of praise. The per-

¹ I work with the French critical edition GRÉGOIRE DE NYSSÉ: *Vie de sainte Macrine*. Introduction, texte critique, traduction, notes et index par Pierre Maraval. Sources Chrétiennes 178. Paris, 1971.

sonality of Macrina emerged as the best answer. In the end Gregory yielded to his friend's persuasion to write her remarkable life story down, so that in this way Macrina may be useful for the next generations even after her death. Then there follows Macrina's biography (chapters 2 – 14). She was the first-born child in the respectable family of Basil the Elder and Emmelia, who were settled in Neocaesarea in the province of Pontus. Officially, she was given the name of her paternal grandmother. But she had a second name, too. Her mother, shortly before giving birth, had a vision during which the name of the famous virgin St. Thecla was mentioned. Gregory, however, thinks it was aimed to presage not her name, but her future way of life.

The small girl was clever, so her parents provided for her education (at home, of course). In this work Gregory tells us that her education was exclusively Christian and that the profane literary works were excluded from her curriculum – they depict passions, so they were considered unsuitable for a girl. (But in the treatise *On the Soul and Resurrection* he gives us a different picture – I shall develop this point below.)

Macrina was not only clever, but beautiful as well, so her father had to deal with long queues of suitors. He chose one young and promising orator to become the husband of his first-born daughter and she agreed with his decision. But the wedding never took place – the young man unexpectedly died and Macrina refused to take anyone else instead of him. She argued that death is only a temporary separation and it would be dishonest not to be faithful to her fiancé during this short time of his absence. She decided never to get married and to stay in the house of her parents.

When the father died, the family moved from the city to their estate in the countryside, in Annisa near Ibora. Here Macrina spent the rest of her life. She helped her mother to look after their estates (which were situated in several provinces) and after her younger siblings. When her brothers finished their education and her sisters married (about 357), the family property was divided among them and Macrina and her mother were relieved from most of their former duties. Then she persuaded her mother to change their house into a monastery¹ and the whole of the family (in the

¹ It was not an unusual practice in that time – the same step was taken in Rome by Marcella, in Bethlehem by Paula, in Constantinople by Olympias. Cp. QUÉRÉ, F.: *La femme et les Pères de l'Église*. Paris, 1997, 74 – 75.

ancient meaning of this word, both the masters and their slaves) became one monastic community – they prayed together, worked together and served each other irrespectively of their previous social status.

Then the focus turns to Macrina's spiritual development. We learn about her brother Naucratius who lived a monastic life in solitude for five years and unexpectedly died by an accident. On hearing this news the mother fainted. On the other hand Macrina – though she, too, felt excruciating pain on the lost of her most beloved brother – used reason to raise herself above pain and helped her mother not to be overcome by grief, either. But this was not the last blow Macrina was to receive – the second one came when she lost her mother, the third one when her brother, Basil the Great, died. In all these spiritual battles she, like a noble athlete, held her ground.

The process of Macrina's spiritual perfection Gregory compares to the process of purification of gold:

'It is said that gold is being purified in various smelting furnaces, so that when something escapes in the first smelting, it may be separated in the second and finally in the last smelting the ore gets rid of all impure admixtures. The surest proof of pure gold is that it has come through the all smelting process, so that there are no impure particles in it. Something similar was happening with Macrina, too. Various misfortunes tested the sublimity of her mind and she, on every occasion, manifested the purity and stability of her soul.' (*Life of St. Macrina* 14)

Then there follows the central part of the work, the description of Macrina's last days (chapters 15 – 25). Not long after the death of Basil Macrina fell ill. Gregory, who was on his way to visit her, had a prophetic dream – he saw himself holding brightly shining relics of martyrs. He fully understood its meaning only later. The remaining days of Macrina's life Gregory spent in a philosophic debate with her. (Gregory's work *On the Soul and Resurrection*, known under the name *Macrinia*, too, develops the points of this debate in greater detail.)

But Macrina was losing strength quickly. Soon she was only able to pray and her attention was focused on God alone. In this place Gregory uses a very ancient symbolic image. He compares her attitude towards God to that of a bride towards her bridegroom. However reasonable Ma-

crina's life may have been, in the end it transpires that it has been her love (ἔρωσ) for God that has been motivating her all the time:

'She clearly showed the godly and pure love for the invisible bridegroom, which she has been hiding and cherishing in the depths of her soul, and she revealed her heart's desire to hurry to meet her beloved, to be with him as soon as possible, when she frees herself from the bonds of her body. Indeed, her way led directly to him who loved her, and not one of the pleasures of life could attract her attention to itself. (...) Her enthusiasm did not wane, but as the moment of her departure was nearing and she was perceiving the bridegroom's beauty better, she was more and more hastening to her beloved.' (*Life of St. Macrina* 22 – 23)

The wedding symbolism used by Gregory has its direct literary roots in the Bible – in the Old Testament we find frequent comparisons of the relationship between the Chosen People and God to the bond of marriage (e.g. Os 1 – 2, Es 16 and 23, Is 54,4-7 and 62,4-5). In the New Testament the relationship between the Church and Christ is depicted in similar way – either as marriage or as the time of engagement (cp. Mt 9,15; 25,1-13; Jn 3,29; 2 Cor 11,1-2; Eph 5,23-32; Rev 19,7-9; 21,9). In the Ancient Christian literature we find predominantly examples of women who liked to express their personal devotion in this way. From a symbolist point of view this metaphysical union of the male and the female principle may be considered to be an expression of human completeness or perfection (as we discussed in the previous article). Gregory's picture is, however, the most poetic description we find and a little below he comes to some other aspect of this imagery, as we shall shortly see.

But we should come back to the story line. When Macrina breathed her last, it fell on Gregory to organise the funeral. Its description forms the fourth part of the work (chapters 26 – 35), very closely studied by those who are interested in ancient Christian liturgy. When Macrina's body had been prepared for the funeral, dressed in soft white linen, one deaconess had an interesting remark: 'It would not be suitable for Macrina to come before the eyes of the virgins clothed as a bride' (*Life of St. Macrina* 32). So they put a dark cloak over her.

This remark reveals a very archaic attitude, which can be found in folklore of many peoples all over the world. There was an ancient belief

that life without marriage is not complete. So if a young unmarried person died, the funeral rites had many similar features with the wedding ceremony. It was thought that their life was not fulfilled and they might come back as ghosts, because they would not find peace among the shadows of the underworld. Such ritual substitute for wedding should have prevented that. This belief was still alive in Gregory's time – the deaconess warned him not to support this pagan idea.¹

Macrina may have been veiled with a dark cloak, but Gregory had to remark:

'She was shining even in this dark dress. It was the power of God, I think, that added to her body this gift, too. So it seemed – exactly as in my visionary dream – as if her beauty emanated bright light.' (*Life of St. Macrina* 32)

In the morning, after the all-night vigil over Macrina's dead body, the bier with her was taken in a procession to the chapel of the forty martyrs of Sebastea, where her parents were buried, too. There, with her mother again, she found her final resting place.

The work ends with a description of one of Macrina's many miracles (chapters 36 – 38) – a healing of a girl with her powerful prayer. In the epilogue (39) Gregory states his reasons, why he does not mention any other miracle. He knows that some weaker people tend to disbelieve those things that exceed their personal experience and he does not want to do them any harm. But even if he does not mention any other miracle, that what has been written about the life of this extraordinary woman, suffices to give us a complete picture.

The form of the work

As regards the literary genres, it must be said that Gregory uses them quite freely. The beginning of this work looks like a letter – it has a subtitle with the name of the author ('sender') and the 'addressee', but in the very

¹ This imagery, however, was too strong to be completely suppressed. In a christianized form we find it in several accounts of young women martyrs, e.g. Blandina (Eusebius: *Historia Ecclesiastica* V.I.55) and Pelagia (John Chrysostome: *Homily in St. Pelagia* 2).

beginning Gregory warns, that his writing is longer than a letter.

In some of its parts the *Life of St. Macrina* resembles a laudatory speech, which has made some scholars believe that it is a funeral oration. This opinion was undoubtedly supported by the fact, that another of the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, has written several funeral orations on his relatives (his father, brother Kaisarios, sister Gorgonia and his friend Basil) as well as some panegyric and hagiographical sermons (on the Maccabees, St. Cyprian of Carthage, St. Athanasius and Maximus the Philosopher).

It is obvious, however, that the work was meant to be read, not to be listened to. On the basis of its content it has been settled that it is a hagiography.

In the beginning of his story Gregory promises that he will narrate it simply and without any embellishments. This statement must not be understood literally, but as an obligatory expression of modesty of the educated rhetor. The work is not only carefully structured, but it is also rhetorically and philosophically honed to perfection. Next to Biblical quotations we hear Platonic and Stoic ideas resonating. All this, together with the rich Greek vocabulary in the hands of this extremely capable writer, makes this work a literary gem.

We may point out three superb passages – the hymnic description of the angelic life of Macrina and her companions (chapter 11), Macrina's prayer before her death (chapter 24), which is composed in the spirit of the best liturgical tradition stemming from the Bible, and the lamentation of the virgins after Macrina's death (chapter 26), which is a Christian form of ancient Greek threnody.

A testimony to the high appreciation of this work is the fact that already in the antiquity it was translated into the Georgian language.

The datation of the work

The *Life of St. Macrina* was composed shortly after her death. Gregory was induced to write it during his journey to Jerusalem (cp. chapter 1), which he undertook sometime in the course of the years 380 – 382. So the date of composition of this work may be placed somewhere in the period between the last months of the year 380 to the year 383.

The date of Macrina's death is not explicitly stated in the work, but Byzantine, Syrian and Georgian synaxaries, calendars and menologies concordly give the 19th of July as the day of the commemoration of St. Macrina.

A certain part of scholars, however, does not consider this testimony to be relevant and puts Macrina's death in the December 379 or January 380. This opinion is based on the interpretation of the data given by Gregory himself. In chapter 15 he says that nine months or a little later after Basil's death (1st January 379) he took part in the council in Antioch and from there he went to visit Macrina 'before a year passed'. If we take this expression as meaning a year according to the Julian calendar (which begins on the 1st of January and ends on the 31st of December) or as a year after Basil's death, and if we add approximately one month for the journey from Antioch to Annisa, we get the above mentioned winter date of Macrina's death.

However, between the lines Gregory himself speaks against this datation. In chapter 19 he mentions that after his first meeting with his dying sister he was sent to have rest and refresh himself in the shadow of a climbing grapevine. And the province of Pontus did not have so mild climate that in winter guests would be sent to have rest outside... So it is more probable that the described events took place in summer. (The advocates of the winter date reject this statement as a mere rhetorical styling to achieve contrasts.)

But even the chronological data given by Gregory may be interpreted in a different way – and then it agrees with the date stated in the ancient liturgical books. It is not indisputable that Gregory did use the Julian calendar. It was generally accepted in the West, but in the East, in addition to it, there were local calendars still in use, which had their beginning on a different day of the year. It is exactly this variety that makes us believe that Gregory did not use any official calendar, but he meant a year since some important event he had just mentioned. And it need not be only Basil's death, but the council in Antioch as well. According to Gregory's words it began in September/October 379 and before a year since this event had passed we have the high summer of 380, which exactly corresponds with the date preserved by the liturgy.¹

¹ Cp. Grégoire de Nysse: *Vie de sainte Macrine*, 57 – 67.

'Philosophic' life

In the preceding article we spoke about the sources where the literary genre of Christian hagiography stemmed from. One of them was the 'philosophic' biography. In the *Life of St. Macrina* the theme of philosophy appears quite often, so in the following pages we shall focus on this aspect.

We find here interesting expressions like these: thanks to 'philosophy' Macrina attained the highest level of perfection in virtue (chapter 1), the ideal she followed with her life was 'philosophy' (5), to which she has drawn her brother Basil, too (6), her brother Naucratius, living for five years as a monk, spent this time in a 'philosophic' way (9), the 'philosophic' life is non-material (11), 'philosophy' of Macrina and her companions was constantly growing (11), her brother Peter, choosing the monastic life, ascended to the noble ideal of 'philosophy' (12), constant development of Macrina and Peter is described as living in even more 'philosophic' way (13), when Peter became a priest his 'philosophy' grew greater because of increased piety (14), in monasteries in Annisa men and women lead 'philosophic' life (37). All these expressions do not agree with the classical notion of philosophy. (There is, however, one passage where Gregory uses 'philosophy' in its classical sense – that case I shall develop below. Now I would like to concentrate on this shifted meaning.)

In Christian literature the classical Greek word φιλοσοφία, originally 'love for wisdom' and 'wisdom' itself, acquired a special meaning – it signified the real wisdom, which is the Christian teaching as compared with the preceding periods of less developed human thought.

Religion, however, is not just theory; practice – the application of this theory in real life – is also needed. For if people find answers to some existential questions, they are not satisfied with their verbal formulation alone, but they try to answer with all their personality, with their way of life, with their deeds. That is why in our writings the term 'philosophy' means 'Christian way of life'.

What Christian way of life should look like can be gleaned from some of Jesus' words. The basis is to love God above all and one's neighbour as oneself (cp. Mt 22,36-40, Mc 12,28-34, Lc 10,25-28). It seems simple, but it is not simple at all. For to love God above all means that a person should give up 'humanity' (in the bad sense of this word), i.e. the human tendency to prefer riches, comfort, family, security, power, status, honours etc. All

these things are good as long as they are in their right place in the scale of a person's priorities, but if they ascend higher, that they belong, they enslave us. Love for God puts these created things into the right perspective and gives us freedom.

The same idea is expressed in other words in the statement: 'Seek first the God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well' (Mt 6,33, cp. Lc 12,31, Wis 7,11). In other places Jesus says more specifically how this Kingdom of Heaven may be found:

1. If people are not bound with material belongings: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5,3, cp. Lc 6,20). 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Mc 10,25, cp. Mt 19,24, Lc 18,25).

2. Not even the personal relationships should be placed above God – Jesus says: 'Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life' (Mt 19,29, cp. Mc 10,28-31, Lc 18,28-30). Some people 'who are able to receive it' even give up marriage (they 'have made themselves eunuchs') for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19,12).

3. The last advice is to give up the desire for power: 'Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all' (Mc 10,43-44, cp. Mt 20,26-27, Lc 22,24-25).

This triple advice from Jesus how to acquire inner freedom is addressed to all Christians. With special attention, however, it was put into practice in the monastic environment.

In this light the above described 'philosophy' and 'philosophic life' of Macrina and her companions can be perfectly understood. The ideal she followed with her life was Jesus' teaching – thanks to it she attained the highest level of perfection in virtue. It was a long process, constant development – that is the meaning of the phrases 'their philosophy was growing', 'they were living in more philosophic way', or that 'the philosophy grew greater'. The words about the philosophic life being non-material obviously mean giving up material possessions. And from the way of life of Naucratius, Peter and men and women in monasteries in Annisa it is clear that the author had the monastic way of life in his mind. The life-story of

Macrina's brothers Basil and Naucratius, who gave up their splendid careers, may be a model of the effort for giving up the desire for power.

The question of giving up power is closely connected with the attitude towards the education.

The power of knowledge

There are many temptations in the world and people may fall in many ways. For a gifted, capable and competent person it is pride that poses the greatest danger. That is probably why the Cappadocian Fathers made so much effort to attain its opposite, humility, which took form of giving up the power over other people. This effort may be observed in their attitude towards education and high social status it could secure (in antiquity).

As knowledge always gives power (*scientia potentia*) and it may induce a false feeling of being self-sufficient, it may be dangerous. Therefore in Christian literature we can often find refusal of (profane) education – it is also named 'the outside education' (ἡ ἔξω παιδεία).¹ So Basil, the graduate of the best schools of his era, turned away from it after his conversion. It is well described in the *Life of St. Macrina* 6:

'After a long period of time spent in schools, where he studies retorics, the great Basil returns home. (...) He came back full of conceit, because he was well aware of his great oratorical talent, he despised every class and because of his abilities he considered himself to be one grade better than the best personalities in the province. But Macrina has drawn him, too, to her ideal of philosophy, so that he gave up worldly glory, he did not value the admiration of his eloquence any longer and deserted to this way of life by the work of his own hands (...)'

Both Basil and Naucratius gave up the post of a rhetor, a high social status secured for them by their high education. Naucratius died shortly after, so we cannot follow his development, but we know about Basil that later he modified his attitude towards education – it is not bad in itself, it may be used for good ends, for the support of the Christian community,

¹ Cp. Špidlík, T.: *Spiritualita křesťanského východu IV. Mnišství*. Velehrad – Roma, 2004, 223 – 227.

for the defence of the faith and the fight against heresies.¹ The same attitude may be observed in the case of Gregory, who never despised profane education, the ‘riches of Egypt’, as he calls it in the *Life of Moses*.

Macrina's education

This double attitude towards education we must bear in mind if we want to assess the case of Macrina correctly.

In the chapter 3 of the *Life of St. Macrina* it is said that Macrina was not given any kind of education in profane literature, because she was considered to be a threat for morality. This attitude is in accordance not only with the above mentioned Christian circumspect attitude towards the ‘outside’ education, but also with the general view of the pagan antiquity which did not consider higher education to be suitable for women.

On the other hand, during the discourse Macrina had with Gregory in the few remaining days before her death – described in the chapter 17 of the *Life* and especially in the separate work *On the Soul and Resurrection* – she speaks philosophy in its ancient meaning of the word, she knows the thoughts of Plato, Stoics, Epicureans, she is capable of reasoned arguments. All this requires not only natural intelligence, but also some kind of formal education in these matters. Undoubtedly, Macrina did not get the complete rhetoric education like her brothers did and she only studied at home, but if she was able to discuss the high matters of philosophy, she must have been educated in them.²

However, the opponents of Macrina's profane education warn against overvaluing the testimony of the dialogue *On the Soul and Resurrection*. It is also named ‘Christian *Phaedo*’ and like Plato's Socrates, Gregory's Macrina is modelled not according to historical reality, but to suit author's

¹ A parallel development may be observed in the West in the case of St. Jerome – in his early years of manhood this highly educated man refused classical education, but after some more years he accepted it again, cp. *Epistolae* 22 (*Ad Eustochium*) and 70 (*Ad Magnum*).

² Higher education for women was certainly not common, but it was not impossible either. We know, for example, that in his catechetical school Origen taught not only men, but women as well – the name of one of them, Herais, has been preserved (Eusebius: *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.4).

philosophical intent. The question what Macrina's education was in reality remains open.

Woman in the role of a Teacher

Whatever the education of real Macrina may have been, it is a fact that in these two works she is depicted not only as educated, but even more – she appears in the role of a teacher of wisdom. This fact is significant, too.

All three of the Cappadocian Fathers – Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus – were coming from families where women played a crucial role in passing the Christianity to the next generation. In their writings they openly express their respect and gratefulness towards their female relatives – Gregory of Nazianzus mentioned his mother Nonna and sister Gorgonia, Basil and his brother Gregory their mother Emmelia, grandmother Macrina and, of course, their sister named after her.

However, the respect for women in the family circle is one thing and the respect for women on a greater social scale is something very different. In the time of Ancient Christianity the first steps in this direction were made. In the previous article we mentioned several saint women who appeared in an unusual (in the language of that period 'manly') role of a teacher – Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger, Marcella, Paula, Synclitica, and, of course, St. Macrina.

The literary character of Macrina was undoubtedly modelled after a philosophic-literary pattern. In Plato's dialogue *Symposium* the wise Diotima teaches Plato on the matters of love. In the 4th century Christian literature this image of a woman as a Teacher reappeared. In the work of Methodius of Olympus, which is named *Symposium*, too, the well known Thecla appears as the acknowledged leader of a group of virgins who are dedicated to the devout life and pursue it with learning and wit. Thecla is the teacher who gains her leadership over the others not by her piety only, but through her learning which is acclaimed by the others, her ability to interpret Scripture, and her refutations pagan philosophy.¹

¹ Cp. Clark, E. A.: The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'. In: *Church History* 67, 1998 (1-2), 1 – 31, especially 24. Wilson-Kastner, P. – Kastner, G. R. – Millin, A. – Rader, R. – Reedy, J.: *A Lost Tradition. Women Writers of the Early Church*. Lanham – New York – London, 1981, p. XIV, XVII – XVIII.

This is exactly the role which Macrina has – as it is sketched out in the *Life of St. Macrina* and as it is fully developed in the dialogue *On the Soul and Resurrection*. She is the teacher of wisdom and she instructs her brother the bishop in the same way as Diotima illuminated Plato. When we read (in the chapter 2) about Macrina's mother's vision about the name of St. Thecla, we should understand not the 'itinerant' Thecla of the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, but the 'philosophic' debater Thecla of *Symposium*.

