

The Love of Poverty (Saint Gregory the Theologian)

Date : Μαρτίου 12, 2013

This homily by Saint Gregory, "On the Love of Poverty", is read during the Night-Vigil of Meatfare Sunday, in accordance with the ancient Rubric of the Triodion of Easter.

Prologue

Saint Gregory is not only a great father and teacher of the Church, but also her most eminent theologian after the apostle and evangelist John. Born between 326 and 329 in Arianzus, near Nazianzus of Cappadocia, of well-to-do parents, he obtained a great classical and theological education. Together with his fellow student and friend Saint Basil the Great, archbishop of Caesarea of Cappadocia, and Saint Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, he belongs to the "great Cappadocians". From his father, Gregory also, bishop of Nazianzus, he was ordained presbyter and from Saint Basil bishop of Sasima. In any case, since he was a monastic nature, he dedicated the greater portion of his life to isolation and asceticism.

In 379 he was called to Constantinople, to deal with the heresy of Arianism. With the small church of the Resurrection as a centre, he catechized, taught, gave his famous homilies about the godhead of the Son, which secured him the characterization of Theologian, and he rejuvenated Orthodoxy, despite the fact that he faced the violent reaction of the Arians. Since he served Archbishop of Constantinople for a small time period (November 380-June 381), he resigned from the throne and he retired to his birthplace, where he dealt with the writing and the fighting of the heretical Apollinarists up to his repose in 390.

As an author Saint Gregory is characterized by theological depth, intense poetry, oratorical skill and deep knowledge of the Attic speech. His texts, as many as were preserved, are distinguished in epistles (246), theological and historical epics (at least 396) and homilies (43). His homilies comprise his highest creations, both from a

theological and also from a literary viewpoint, are divided in dogmatic, apologetic, festive, encomiastic-funerary and moralistic-social ones. One of the last is also the homily “Concerning love of poverty”, an anthology of which follows in a free Modern Greek rendering.

In this speech, which was given very likely in Caesarea around 370, the sacred author, with unparalleled oratorical power, diverse expressive schemes, fine linguistic colorings and vivid images, manages to captivate the reader, to inspire compassion and philanthropy in him, to convince him of the necessity of social supportiveness.

Love of poverty

It is not at all easy for one to find the highest of all the virtues and to give it the first place and reward, as precisely it is not easy for one to find in a fully blossoming and fragrant field the most beautiful and fragrant flower, as sometimes the one and sometimes the other draws his attention and causes him to cut the first. So thus, I think that good virtues are faith, hope and love. And witnesses of faith are Abraham, who was justified by his faith. Witnesses of hope are Enoch who first supported his hope in the invocation of the Lord, and all the righteous ones, who suffer hardships in the hope of salvation. Witnesses of love, finally, are the Apostle Paul, who reached the point of praying for his own perdition for the sake of his brother Israelites, and God himself, who is named love (1 Jn. 4:8).

Hospitality is good. And witnesses of this are of the righteous Lot, the Sodomite in residence but not a Sodomite in conduct, and of the sinners Rahab, the prostitute in body not prostitute in disposition, who was praised and saved by hospitality (Joshua of Nun 2:1-21).

Longsuffering is good. And witnesses of this are Christ himself, who did not want to use the legions of His angels against His torturers and not only scolded Peter, when

he drew his sword, but also the ear, which he had cut, He placed again in its place. Stephen, the disciple of Christ did the same thing later on, who was praying for those who were stoning him.

Meekness is good. And witnesses of this are Moses and David, who above all as meek were witnessed by the Scripture, as also their Teacher, the God-man (Theanthropos) Jesus, who neither argued nor cried out nor shouted in the squares nor resisted those who had captured Him.

Prayer and vigil are good. And a witness of this is the Lord, who before His passion kept vigil and prayed.

Good are purity and virginity. And witnesses of this are both Paul, who instituted them, rewarding justly both marriage and celibacy, as well as Jesus himself, who was born of a Virgin, to honor birth but to prefer virginity.

Good is humble-mindedness. And witnesses of this are many, with the main one again being the Saviour and Lord of all, who was humbled, not only taking on the form of a servant, handing over His face to shame and to the spitting and numbering Himself with the transgressors. He, who cleanses the world of sin, but also washes the feet of His disciples like a servant. Good is non possessiveness and the scorn of money. And witnesses of this are both Zacchaeus, who, as soon as Christ entered his home, distributed almost all his belongings, as well as the Lord Himself again, who, speaking to that rich youth, limited perfection in precisely this thing (Matt. 19:21).

In short, good are vision, good is also action. Vision because it elevates us from the earthly things and leads to the holy of holies and brings back the mind to its original natural condition, and action because it welcomes Christ, serves Him and proves love with the works. Every virtue is also a path which leads to salvation, to one of the eternal and blessed places. Because, as there are many ways of life, thus there also exist many places near God, which are separated and distributed analogous with each one's action. And let one exercise the one virtue, another the other, another many

together and another all of them, if of course this is possible. So long as one proceeds and strives for the highest, following step by step Him who leads him well and guides him and places him, from within the narrow path and gate, to the vast heavenly blessedness.

And if Paul, who also follows Christ, considers love as the first and greatest commandment, as the summary of the law and of the prophets, its better portion I consider to be love for the poor and, in general, compassion and kindness to fellow humans. Because, nothing else pleases God so much and nothing else is as beloved to Him as compassion. She, together with the truth, goes before Him and she must be offered to Him before the Judgment. But also in nothing else is given as recompense by Him, who judges with righteousness and weighs with precision the compassion, as in philanthropy, philanthropy. So to all the poor and to those who for whatsoever reason suffer hardship, we ought to show compassion, according to the commandment: "Partake in the joy of whoever rejoices and in the sadness of whoever is sad" (Rom. 12:15). And we ought to offer to people, as we are also people, the expression of our kindness, when they need it, beaten by some misfortune, for example widowhood or orphanhood or being in a foreign land or harsh bosses or unjust rulers or uncompassionate tax collectors, or murderous thieves or insatiable thieves or the taking away of estates or shipwreck. All are worthy of pity. Everyone sees our hands, as we see God's hands.

So what will we do, who have been honoured with the great name "Christians" and we comprise the chosen and distinct people who ought to be occupied with good and saving works? What will we disciples of the meek and philanthropic Jesus do, who carried our sins, humbled, taking on our human nature, and he became poor, for us to become rich with divinity? What will we do having before us such a great model of compassion and kindness? Will we overlook our fellow men? Will we scorn them? Will we abandon them? Everything else, my brethren. These don't suit us, who are nurtured by Christ the good Shepherd, who brings back the wandering sheep and searches to find the lost one and supports the weak one. But they don't suit neither our human nature, which imposes kindness, since from its weakness itself it learned piety and philanthropy. Why, with all these things, don't we help our fellow men, while it is still time? Why do we live in enjoyment, whereas our brethren in misfortune? Let me never become rich, if they are deprived! Let me not have health, if I don't put balsam on their wounds! Let me never become filled, let me never get dressed, let me never be calm in a home, if I don't give them bread and clothing, as much as I can, and if I don't give them rest in my home.

Let us entrust all in Christ, to follow Him truly, carrying His cross, for us to ascend to the heavenly world lightly and comfortably, without anything pulling us downwards, and for us to gain in the place of all these Christ, lifted up thanks to our humility and enriched thanks to our poverty. Or, at least, let us share with Christ our belongings, for them to be sanctified somewhat with their correct possession and the offering of a portion of them to the poor.

Won't we recover, even if late? Won't we defeat our senselessness, so that I don't say our stinginess? Won't we think as humans? Won't we put mentally in the place of foreign misfortunes our possible misfortunes? Because, truly, none of the human things are certain, nothing is firm, nothing is independent of other factors, and nothing is based on unchangeable presuppositions. Our life turns in a circle, a circle, which brings many changes, often in one day, sometimes in one hour. It is more certain for one to entrust the wind, which moves ceaselessly, it is safer for one to entrust the line, which a seafaring ship leaves on the waters, it is more certain for one to entrust the deceptive dreams of one night, whose enjoyment lasts so little, it is more certain for one to entrust whatever the children trace on the sand, when they play than human happiness.

So they are prudent, who, not having trust in the present things, strive to secure themselves for the future. Because human prosperity is unstable and changing, they love kindness, which is not lost, to gain at least the one of the three: Either the compassion of God, who always benefactors in heaven the pious people for their earthly good works. Or boldness before God because they suffered hardship not for some evil, but for some good purpose. Or, finally, God's philanthropy, as they first showed philanthropy to the poor, benefiting smartly.

Let the wise person not boast of his wisdom, says the Lord, nor the mighty person for his might. Nor he rich person for his wealth" (Jer.9:23), even if they have reached the highest point of wisdom, might, or wealth. I, though, will add those things also which follow: neither the notable person for his glory nor the strong person for his health nor the handsome person for his beauty nor the young person for his youth nor, in short, no one else for whatsoever else of what is praised in this world and causes pride. But, whoever boasts, only for this let him boast, in that he knows and seeks God, he suffers together with those who are suffering and entrusts his hopes for good

things in the future. Because the present goods are passing and temporal. They constantly move and go from the one to the other, like the soccer ball. And there is nothing more certain for the person who possesses them, than that he will lose them in time or out of envy. On the contrary, the future goods are firm and permanent. They are never lost, they never go from the one to the other, they never betray the hopes of whoever trusts in them.

“Who is wise, to understand these things?” (Hos.14:10). Who will be indifferent of ephemeral things and will pay attention to the permanent things? Who will ponder that the present things will pass? Who will consider that the awaited things will remain? Who will distinguish the real from the seeming ones, to follow the former and scorn the latter? Who will distinguish earthly residence from the heavenly lifestyle, the sojourning dwelling from the habitation, the darkness from the light, the mud of the depth from the holy lands, the flesh from the spirit, God from the ruler of the world devil, the shadow of death from eternal life? Who will expiate with the present things the future things, with the corrupt wealth the incorrupt wealth, with the visible the invisible things? So blessed is he who distinguishes these things, separates with the sword of the Word the better from the worse, is elevated with his heart, as the sacred David says somewhere (Psalm 83:6), he leaves with all his strength far from this valley of pain, pursues the goods which are in heaven, is crucified for the world together with Christ, is resurrected together with Christ, ascends to the heavenly habitations together with Christ and becomes an inheritor of true life, which is never altered any more.

Let us follow the Word, let us strive for the heavenly enjoyment, let us be delivered from the earthly estate. Let us hold from the earthly things only whatever is good, let us save our souls with charities, let us give of our belongings to the poor, to become rich in eternal goods. Give something to the soul also, not to the flesh only. Give something to God also, not to the world only. Take something from the belly and give it to the spirit. Take something from the fire, which burns up the earthly things, and take it away from the flame. Grab something from the tyrant and entrust it to the Lord. Give a little to Him, who has offered you the much. Give all of them even to Him who has granted you everything. You will never surpass the generosity of God, even if you give all your belongings, even if you add to these even your own self. Because even the offering of your own self to God is equal with obtaining. No matter how many things you offer, those which remain are more. And you will not give something your own, because you have taken everything from God.

Let us not become, my beloved friends and brethren, evil stewards of the goods which were given us. Let us not strive to treasure and store up things, while others are suffering from hunger. Let us imitate the highest and chief law of God, who sends rain to the just and the unjust and dawns the sun also for everyone. He made the land spacious for all the land animals, He created springs, rivers, forests, air for the birds and waters for the animals which live in the sea, and He gave to all the beings the necessary elements for their life, without limiting them in any authority, without any written law defining them, without borders preventing them. And these elements He gave them common and richly, without distinguishing and being cut off, honoring the similarity of nature with the equality of the gift and showing the wealth of His goodness. People however once they took out from land gold, silver and the precious stones, once they made soft clothes and superfluous and once they obtained other similar things, which comprise causes of wars and revolutions and tyrannical states, were overcome by irrational haughtiness. Thus, they don't show compassion to their unfortunate fellow humans and don't want even with their excess to give the necessary things to the others. What vulgarity! What harshness! They don't think, if not anything else, that poverty and wealth, freedom and slavery and the other similar things appeared in the human race after the fall of the first created beings, like illnesses which appear together with the evil and which are its own inventions. Initially however, things did not happen thus, says the Scripture (Matt. 19:8), but He who created man in the beginning, left him free, with free will restrained only from the law of the command - and rich in the paradise of delight. This freedom and this wealth God wanted to grant -and granted- through the first man, and to the remaining human race. Freedom and wealth were only the keeping of the commandment. True poverty and slavery were its transgression. So after the transgression envies and arguments and the sly tyranny of the devil appeared, which sways everything with the gluttony of pleasure and stirs up the more daring people against the weaker ones. After the transgression, the human race was separated into various races with various names and avarice cut up the nobility of nature, after it also took the law as its helper. You however look at the original unity and equality, not the final division. Not the law which prevailed, but the law of the Creator. Help, as much as you can, nature, honor the former freedom, show respect to yourself, cover the dishonour of your race, assist in illness, help in one's need.

Let the healthy person console the sick person, the rich person, the poor person, the upright person the fallen person, the joyous person the sad one, the happy one the unfortunate one. Give something to God as a pleasant gift, for that you are one of those who can benefactor and not one of those who has need to be benefactored, for that you are not awaiting help from the hands of others, but of your own hands others

are awaiting help. Become rich not only in estate, but also in piety, not only in gold, but also in virtue, or rather only in virtue. Become more honourable than the neighbour by showing more kindness. Become a god for the unfortunate person by imitating God's compassion. Give something, even slight, to him who has need. Because even the slightest thing is not unimportant for the person who is deprived of everything, but neither also for God, since it is analogous with your capabilities. Instead of a great offering, give your eagerness. And if you don't have anything, shed tears. Kindness with one's whole soul is a great medicine for him who is in misfortune. True compassion comforts very much in one's misfortune. Man doesn't have less value, than the animal, who, if he is lost or falls in a pit, the law commands you to lift it up and to gather it up (Deut. 22:1-4). How much compassion, consequently, ought we to show to our fellow man, when furthermore even with the irrational animals we ought to be kind? "The Scripture says "Whoever gives charity to a poor person lends to God" (Prov. 19:17). Who won't accept such a debtor, who, aside from the loan, will also give interest, when the time comes? And elsewhere again he says: "With the charities and with honesty sins are cleansed" (Prov.15:27a).

So let us cleanse ourselves with charity, let us wash with the good herb the filth and our stains, let us become white, others like cotton and others like snow, each one analogous with his compassion. "Blessed", he says, "whoever shows mercy to others, because God will show them His mercy" (Matt. 5:7). Mercy is underlined in the beatitudes. And elsewhere: "Blessed is he who has compassion on the poor and the deprived person" (Psalm 40:2). And: "A good person is he who has compassion on others and lends to them" (Psalm 111:5). And: "The righteous person always gives charity and lends" (Psalm 36:26). Let us grab the beatitude, let us understand it, let us respond to its calling, let us become good people. Neither let night interrupt your charity. "Don't say, "Leave now and come again tomorrow for me to give you help" (Prov. 3:28), because from today to tomorrow something may happen, which will put to naught the benefaction. Philanthropy is the only thing which doesn't take a delay. "Distribute your bread to those who are hungry and put in your home the poor, who don't have a roof" (Is. 58:7). And do these things with eagerness "Whoever gives charity", says the apostle, "let us do it with pleasure and sweetness" (Rom. 12:8). With eagerness, your good is considered as double. The charity which happens with distress or by force is ungraceful and tasteless. We should celebrate and not mourn, when we do kindnesses. Maybe you think that philanthropy is not necessary, but voluntary? Maybe you think that it does not comprise a law, but a counsel and urging? I would very much like it if it were thus. And thus I thought of it. But whatever the Scripture says about those who, on the day of Judgment, the Just Judge will place on His left, as a habitation, and He condemns them, scares me (Matt. 25:31-46). They are not condemned because they stole or robbed or were lewd or did

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whatsoever else of whatever God forbids, but because they didn't show care for Christ through the unfortunate man.

So while it is time let us visit Christ, let us take care of Him, let us feed Him, let us dress Him, let us gather Him in, let us honor Him. Not only with a meal, like some, not only with myrrh, like Maria, not only with the tomb, like Joseph of Arimathea, not only with burial, like the Christ-loving Nicodemus, not only with gold, incense and myrrh, like the Magi earlier on. But because the Lord of all wants mercy and not sacrifice and because compassion is better than the sacrifice of myriads of well fed lambs, let us offer Him through those who have need, through those who are today in a harsh position, so that they welcome us in the heavenly kingdom, when we leave from this world and go near our Lord, Christ, to whom is due glory unto the ages. Amen.

Translated by Fr. Nicholas Palis from the Greek Book "Voice of the Fathers"
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