A WORD FROM THE FATHERS

For the Theophany

Oration 38

St. Gregory the Theologian
FOR THE THEOPHANY
Oration 38
by
ST GREGORY
THE THEOLOGIAN
A triannual publication by Eighth Day Institute, *A Word from the Fathers* is inspired by the desert tradition of disciples asking for a word from their spiritual masters: “Father, give me a word of salvation.” Its mission is to curate living words of salvation from the Fathers and Mothers of the Church for the renewal of soul and city.

Most issues will introduce the common Tradition of the early Church by offering brief words of salvation from the undivided Church through patristic homilies, treatises, hymns, letters, poems, and biblical commentaries. Occasionally, post-schism authors will be included whom we consider worthy of the title “Father.” Intentionally catechetical, each issue will include introductory material, patristic notes, study questions, ancient prayers, and occasional annotations. Eighth Day Patrons and Pillars will automatically receive them.

**Series Editor**
Erin Doom
The fleshless one takes flesh, the Word is made dense, the invisible one is seen, the impalpable one is touched, the timeless one makes a beginning, the Son of God becomes Son of Man.

~St Gregory the Theologian
ORN IN A.D. 329 near Nazianzus in the district of Cappadocia, St. Gregory the Theologian is one of the illustrious three Cappadocians. The other two are Gregory’s dear friend St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa, the brother of St. Basil. Of the three, Gregory is quoted the most by St. Augustine. And, as Fr. Maximos Constas notes, “His thought and language were so widely disseminated that, after the Bible, he is the most frequently cited author in all of Byzantine ecclesiastical literature.”

St. Gregory the Theologian didn’t just have friends who were saints. He was born into a family of them, five of them to be exact. In addition to the Theologian, his father Gregory became bishop of Nazianus and is commemorated as a saint on January 1. His mother Nonna is commemorated on Aug. 5, his brother Caesarius on Mar. 9, and his sister Gorgonia on Feb. 23.

St. Gregory was classically educated at the best literary centers of his day: Cappadocian Caesarea, Palestinian Caesarea, Alexandria, and at Athens where he and St. Basil became dear
friends. After completing studies, his father ordained him a priest and St. Basil consecrated him a bishop of Sasima.

In A.D. 379 he moved to the Church of Constantinople where he was later elected archbishop by the Second Ecumenical Council in 381. This council condemned Macedonius, the previous archbishop who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

When Gregory arrived, the local churches were controlled by Arians. He was thus forced to serve in a house chapel dedicated to St. Anastasia the Martyr. It was there that he preached his five famous theological orations on the Trinity, for which he earned the title “Theologian” (officially recognized as such in A.D. 451 at the Council of Chalcedon.

Before his departure from Constantinople in A.D. 382, he demonstrated the divinity of the Son in a farewell speech to 150 bishops and the Emperor Theodosius the Great. He then returned to his hometown where he lived until the end of his life in 391.

Let’s now take a closer look at St. Gregory as a theologian, a poet, a panegyrist, and a wellspring of tradition.

St. Gregory: The Theologian

Gregory is one of three persons to whom the Church has bestowed the title “theologian.” He and the 10th century St. Symeon the New Theologian share this title with the evangelist John. Why was he given this title? In A.D. 378, Gregory was sent as a missionary bishop to strengthen the struggling Nicene community in Constantinople. Fifty-three years earlier in 325, the Council of Nicaea affirmed the full divinity against the Arians who argued “there was a time when the Son was not.” Less than two years after Gregory’s arrival in Constantinople he preached
CHRIST IS BORN, give glory; Christ is from the heavens, go to meet Him; Christ is on earth, be lifted up. “Sing to the Lord, all the earth” (Ps. 96.1) and, to say both together, “Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice” (Ps. 96.11), for the heavenly one is now earthly. Christ is in the flesh, exult with trembling and joy; trembling because of sin, joy because of hope. Christ comes from a Virgin; women, practice virginity, that you may become mothers of Christ. Who would not worship the “one from the beginning” (1 Jn. 1.1)? Who would not glorify “the Last” (Rev. 1.17, 2.8)?

2. Again the darkness is dissolved, again the light is established, again Egypt is punished by darkness (cf. Gen. 1.3-4, Ex. 10.21-22). Again Israel is illumined by a pillar (Ex. 13.21). Let the people sitting in the darkness of ignorance see a great light of knowledge (Is. 9.2). “The old things have passed; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5.17). The letter withdraws, the spirit advances (2 Cor. 3.6); the shadows have been surpassed (Rom. 13.12), the truth has entered after them. Melchizedek is completed, the motherless one becomes fatherless; He was motherless first, fatherless second. The laws of nature are dissolved. The world above must be filled. Christ
commands, let us not resist. “All nations, clap your hands” (Ps. 47.1), “for to us a child is born, and to us a son is given, the power is on His shoulder,” for He is lifted up along with the cross, and He is called by the name “angel of great counsel,” that of the Father (Is. 9.6). Let John proclaim, “Prepare the way of the Lord” (Mt. 3.3). I myself will proclaim the power of this day. The fleshless one takes flesh, the Word is made dense, the invisible one is seen, the impalpable one is touched, the timeless one makes a beginning, the Son of God becomes Son of Man, “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and for the ages” (Heb. 13.8). Let Jews be scandalized, let Greeks mock (1 Cor. 1.23), let heretics talk till their tongues ache. They will believe when they see Him ascend into heaven (Jn. 6.62), and if not then, at least when they see Him coming from heaven and sitting as judge (1 Thess. 4.16; Mt. 25.31).

3. These things come later. Now is the feast of the Theophany, and so also of the Nativity; for it is called both, since two names are ascribed to one reality. For God appeared to human beings through birth. On the one hand He is and is eternally from the eternal Being, above cause and principle, for there was no principle higher than the Principle. On the other hand for us He later comes into being, that the One who has given us being might also grant us well-being; or rather that, as we fell from well-being through evil, He might bring us back again to Himself through incarnation. The name is Theophany, since He has appeared, and Nativity, since He has been born.

4. This is our festival, this is the feast we celebrate today, in which God comes to live with human beings, that we may
journey toward God, or return—for to speak thus is more exact—that laying aside the old human being we may be clothed with the new (Eph. 4.22-24), and that as in Adam we have died so we may live in Christ (1 Cor. 15.22), born with Christ and crucified with Him (Gal. 2.19), buried with Him (Rom. 6.4; Col. 2.12), and rising with Him (Eph. 2.6). For it is necessary for me to undergo the good turnaround, and as painful things came from more pleasant things, so out of painful things more pleasant things must return. “For where sin abounded, grace superabounded” (Rom. 5.20), and if the taste of forbidden fruit condemned (Gen. 2.17, 3.6-7), how much more does the Passion of Christ justify? Therefore we celebrate the feast not like a pagan festival but in a godly manner, not in a worldly way but in a manner above the world. We celebrate not our own concerns but the One who is ours, or rather what concerns our Master, things pertaining not to sickness but to healing, not to the first molding (Gen. 2.7), but to the remolding.

5. And how will this be? Let us not put wreaths on our front doors, or assemble troupes of dancers, or decorate the streets.
ST GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN

A Hymn/Prayer of Thanksgiving
Thanks be to You, King of all things, maker of all; Heaven is filled with Your glory, filled is the earth with Your wisdom. You show grace to the world, O Triad; have mercy on us, O Son of God in the Spirit, of Man in the flesh. You met and endured our mortal fate on the cross, yet passed, as God, on the third day through Hades’ gates. And rising You broke the fetters of death itself, giving this mortal race a nature beyond us: life for endless days, to praise You as deathless forever.

A Hymn/Prayer to God
God, our ever-living monarch, give us voice to sing Your glory: You, immortal Lord and Sovereign, to whom every hymn is chanted! Through You all the choirs of angels, all the ages, have their being; through You shines the sun in splendor, through You moonlight wanes and waxes and the stars reveal their glory; through You man, your noblest creature, finds the grace to know Your godhead and to live endowed with reason.

Through You all the choirs of angels, all the ages, have their being; through You man, your noblest creature, finds the grace to know Your godhead and to live endowed with reason.
creation and You place each part in order, guiding all things by Your knowledge. As You spoke, they were created! Now the Word You speak to form us is Your Son, who shares Your substance, with His Father’s glory equal—He who fits all things together so that You may rule and guide them. And the bond that embraces is Your godly Holy Spirit, who protects all things by foresight. So I name You living Triad: without source, unchanging always, all-unspeakable in nature, Mind of all-eluding wisdom, Power of heaven, all un-conquered, without cause and free from limit, Source of light, still undetected, yet surveying all in brilliance, before whom no thing lies hidden, from this earth to deepest heaven! Father, look in mercy on me; let me always bow in wonder at Your majesty and glory. Cast away my sins and failings; let my conscience stand unchallenged, free from every stain of malice. Let me glorify Your godhead, raising holy hands to heaven; let me sing to Christ in blessing, and on bended knee beseech Him to receive me as His servant when He comes again in glory. Father look in mercy on me; let me find Your grace and pardon. So to You be thanks and glory for the ageless age unending! Amen.

_An Evening Hymn/Prayer_

We bless You now, at twilight, my Christ, God’s Word, God’s brightness from light that knows no dawning, and steward of the Spirit—Your threefold radiance woven into one strand of glory! You have abolished darkness, forming, on light’s foundation, a world that light embraces, shaping unstable matter into a stable order—this beauty that delights us. Our human mind You lighten with reason and with wisdom, forming us in an image of heaven’s transcendent brilliance, that we, in light,
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Define the word “theophany” by looking up the Greek roots of the word. See also section 3.

2. How can we better integrate the Church’s cycle of feasts into our lives? And how can we celebrate them, as St. Gregory puts it, “in a godly manner,” not like the pagans? See sections 4 & 5.

3. Contemplate God as a “kind of boundless and limitless sea of being.” How would you explain this image of God to somebody, Christian or not? See section 7.

4. What is the difference between “theology” and “economy”? See section 8 and do some research!

5. According to St. Gregory, why did God create? And why is His creation praiseworthy? See sections 9-10.

6. How was the “full wealth of goodness made known”? How does St. Gregory describe the human being? And how might we translate his description to present it to a modern, secular person? See sections 11-12.

7. According to St. Gregory, why did God forbid the tree of knowledge? This is not unrelated to his explanation of the human being. See section 12.

8. List at least ten reasons why God became man, as articulated by St. Gregory in Oration 38. See sections 1, 3, 4, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18.

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In an isolating secularized culture where the Church’s voice is muffled through her many divisions, Christians need all the help they can get to strengthen their faith in God and love toward their neighbor. Eighth Day Institute, a 501(c)(3) educational non-profit, offers hope to all Christians through our adherence to the Nicene faith, our ecumenical dialogues of love and truth, and our many events and publications to strengthen faith, grow in wisdom, and foster Christian friendships of love. For more information about our work, or to support our efforts, please visit our website at www.eighthdayinstitute.org. Or contact us by phone at 316.573.8413 or email at erin@eighthdayinsitute.com.