

Saints Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus

SAINT OF THE DAY

02_01_2021



Saints in heaven, friends on earth, both were proclaimed doctors of the Church in 1568 by Saint Pius V: because they shared their lives in Christ, the Church remembers on the same day Saint Basil the Great (c. 329-379) and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-390), who belong to the group of «Cappadocian Fathers», also including Basil's own brother, Saint Gregory of Nyssa. In addition to sharing the same geographic origin, the Cappadocian Fathers distinguished themselves by the ability to communicate their faith to Greek-speaking intellectuals, to whom they demonstrated the perfect compatibility of

Christianity with true philosophy.

SAINT BASIL THE GREAT. His was a family of saints, effectively a small domestic church. His grandfather [Basil the Elder] died a martyr under the persecutions of Diocletian, and became the first saint known to us in Basil's genealogical tree; the Church also venerates his parents, grandmother Macrina the Elder, his sister Macrina the Younger, his brothers the bishops Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebaste. His grandmother Macrina the Elder proved fundamental in Basil's education to the Christian virtues: "In my life I will never forget the vigorous promptings that the speeches and examples of this most pious woman gave to my still tender heart", he wrote. After studying in his native Caesarea in Cappadocia, where his father (a wealthy rhetorician and lawyer) was his first teacher, Basil completed his education in Constantinople and then in Athens, where he was a pupil of the pagan philosopher Himerius, together with Gregory of Nazianzus, with whom he struck a lifelong friendship.

Back home, Basil followed his sister's advice to lead an ascetic life, so he visited a number of anchorites in Egypt, Palestine and Syria, to learn their way of life. This experience produced the drafting of two Rules, one extended and one short, to guide the life of the monks who lived in the monastery he founded. The monks took from him the name of Basilians. Because of his teaching, which wisely regulated the cycles of prayer and work, Basil was called "the legislator of Eastern monasticism" and his influence affected the West too, as Saint Benedict (480-547) would recommend, among other readings, the biography and the "Rule of our holy Father Basil". Basil's contribution to the structure of Eastern liturgy was also remarkable, and is still preserved today in the corpus known as the *Divine Liturgy of Basil the Great*, partly written by him and partly inspired to his works.

Consecrated bishop in his birthplace Caesarea, where he founded a charity citadel (commonly called "Basiliad") with a leper colony, a hospice and a hospital, he had to fight the Arian heretics, who denied the divinity of Christ and enjoyed the support of Emperor Valens (who divided Cappadocia into two dioceses to curb Basil's influence), as well as the Macedonians, who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Regarding the latter heresy, Basil wrote a fine theological treatise on the Holy Spirit, arguing its consubstantiality with the Son and the Father; two years after his death, consubstantiality of the three persons of the Trinity would be solemnly defined by the Council of Constantinople with the integration of the Nicene Symbol, our Creed, a real barrier against the heresies that denied the One and Triune God.

Patron of: Cappadocia, Russia; Basilian monks, hospital managers, reformers

SAINT GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS. The eminence of his theological arguments earned him the title of "Theologian", previously attributed to the sole Saint John the Evangelist. Together with Saint Gregory of Nyssa, he was among the main participants in the Council of Constantinople (started in May 381), which he presided over after the death of Saint Meletius of Antioch – to resign about a month later due to a difficult mediation between the Macedonian heretics (which Saint Athanasius and Saint Basil the Great had formerly tried to bring back to Catholic orthodoxy) and the bishops who, like himself, were faithful to the Nicene Symbol proclaiming the consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son.

Like his friend Basil, Gregory too had been raised in a devout household. In fact, his parents, Gregory the Elder and Nonna of Nazianzus, his brother Cesarius and his sister Gorgonia are regarded as saints. And like Basil, Gregory engaged in the fight against the various Trinitarian heresies. His was a very sound theological background (formed first in Caesarea, Cappadocia, then in Caesarea Maritima, Alexandria and Athens), nourished by constant prayer listening to God, which made him shine in both preaching and writing. Attracted to the monastic life, he lived for some time in the hermitage founded by Basil in Pontus, but then he had to devote himself to the government of the diocese in Nazianzus and later in Constantinople, where he pronounced the famous *Theological Discourses* on the Trinity. At this stage he had Saint Jerome as a disciple and helped him improve his Greek.

By Gregory of Nazianzus we also have numerous liturgical sermons, an epistolary with 245 letters and various eulogies, including the one he pronounced on the death of Saint Basil: "The sole business of both of us was virtue, and living for the hopes to come, having retired from this world, before our actual departure hence. [...] Each of us bears a name derived from his origin [***Basil is also said to be "of Caesarea", editor's note***], roots, actions or customs; to us, the greatest merit and highest title have consisted in being Christians and bearing this name with honor".

Patron of: Christian poets