

Learning from the Church Fathers (14)
Basil the Great (ca-330- 379 A.D.): The "Father of Eastern Monasticism"
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In our 21st century the new gods are science, consumerism, and self preservation. The secular humanist debates are no longer whether or not Jesus Christ is unique. He is no longer considered relevant. The average man in the street figures that science has killed off religion. A good deal of what he sees on television confirms his suspicions. "Religion" is called old-fashioned and useless, the product of human beings seeking consolation in the face of suffering and violence. And some atheists lead the pack in accusing "religion" of being the greatest threat to humanity. The well-known Richard Dawkins, the Oxford zoologist, is militant on this subject. "What has theology ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? What has theology ever said that is demonstrably true and not obvious?" In his vitriolic diatribe, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Christopher Hitchens charges that religion is not just amoral but immoral. "Violent, irrational, intolerant and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience." He believes "religion" is a malignant disease and must be rooted out. Of course, Christianity receives the brunt of his attack.

Mr. Hitchens and his ilk don't know the history of the Church. If they did, they would soon discover that some of the greatest intellectuals were Christians. The Bible urges the church to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). And this is exactly what the early Church Fathers did. Those defenders of the Christian faith, and those who were writing Christian literature of the early Church, were men of knowledge with an academic background unsurpassed in the Roman empire. They could meet the world, from the point of view of learning and skill on more than level terms. It is the glory of the Christian faith that it attracted scholars of the world as well as the poor and needy of the world.

Basil the Great (ca 330-379 A.D.)

One of these great scholars was Basil the Great. He was the descendant of a rich and longtime Christian family of Basil the Elder and Emmelia in Pontus, the eldest son of ten siblings. He received his instruction in the Christian faith from his grandmother, Macrina. He was a brother to Gregory of Nyssa and a close friend of Gregory of Nazianzus from university days. He was given the best education available, studying at Caesarea, Constantinople, and Athens. While at Athens, he met Gregory of Nazianzus, who would become for him a life long friend, the third being Gregory of Nyssa. They were based in the region of Cappadocia in central modern Turkey, a region of striking mountains, where people still live in well-appointed caves carved from rock.

In 370 A.D. Basil succeeded Eusebius as bishop of Caesarea, the most important city in Cappadocia. He soon became known as the most important supporter of the Nicene Creed, a successor to Athanasius. He not only resisted the Arian emperor, Valens (364-378 A.D), face to face, but he also understood how to secure his diocese by appointing brothers and friends who shared his views. Basil, and the two Gregories, became known as the Cappadocian Fathers.

Basil was also one of the great 4th century preachers. He was renowned as an eloquent preacher of ethics. Many of his powerful and eloquent sermons had God's creation, sin and its consequences as their theme.

The Father of Eastern Monasticism

Basil's greatness and the enduring achievement rightly earned him the honorary title, "father of Eastern monasticism." He was no "spiritual lone ranger", who withdrew from the world for solitary meditation like the desert fathers. He travelled throughout Alexandria, Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia observing hermits and formulating his own monastic rule. He was foremost an ascetic and a monk, who introduced the idea of communal monasticism based on love and holiness, which replaced individual asceticism. He aimed to follow the example of the earliest biblical community (Acts 4:31-35). Not the individual, but the community is most important. Basil stressed the need for both work and prayer and insisted on the need for charity and obedience. He argued that being in a community represents the decisive, fundamental value of everything. Daily life and action centre around it, without extremes, without personal boasting, and without expecting too much from the individual, under the direction of Scripture itself. Already during his lifetime, Basil's monasticism spread rapidly in the East as well as in the West, as the Latin translation of the "Rule" and numerous manuscripts demonstrate. And the Rule of St. Basil remains the basic structure of Eastern monasticism.

Basil's Writings

Basil has left behind an extensive wealth of writings, which is worth knowing as a whole. These works are consistently focussed on doctrine, practical ecclesiastical life, and reflect his own life and work. Basil was not an anti-intellectual. He did not reject the thinking of the learned pagan philosophers. Although he considered classical learning profane and took a critical point of view toward it, he made good use of his knowledge of the old writers and of the classical world. His books, homilies (especially on the Psalms), a commentary on Isa. 1-6, and letters have been of lasting value to the church, revealing the heart, not just of a great scholar, but also of a loving Christian. He wrote about the Christian life clearly and passionately. He did not accept second extra-Biblical sources of revelation as authoritative. For him Scripture was the supreme criterion of doctrine. Writing about his controversy with the heretics, he said, "let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the Word of God, in favour of that side will be cast the vote for truth."

In Basil's time, the Gospel had progressed significantly and made its influence felt throughout the Empire. However, the latter was divided over the disputes following the acceptance of the Council of Nicea of (325 A.D.). Basil defended the orthodox teaching of the *Nicene Creed* against Arianism. In 360 A.D., he appeared at a council that condemned the Arian theologian, Eunomius, who argued that the Son is a creature, but begotten "before all time". Shortly afterwards he published *Contra Eunomium*, which attacked the Arian heresy, which at that time was being pushed on the church by the Emperor Valens. This work marked a major advance in Nicene anti-Arian thinking. It was composed of three books. Each book dealt with one person of the Trinity. The work gave exact meanings to terms for the Trinity and prepared the way for the Council of Constantinople (381/2 A.D), which formally saw the end of Arianism, and stands as a memorial to his teaching.

Basil is particularly remembered for his writing on the Trinity, especially the distinctive role of the Holy Spirit. Among his writing is his book, *On the Holy Spirit*, a robust defence of Trinitarianism in the light of the Arian controversy. The book's thirty chapters together revolve around the main theme, namely, that the Holy Spirit is worthy of the same honour as the Father and the Son. For evidence he appealed to the witness of Scripture, the baptismal formula, and the Holy Spirit's part in the creation

and in the plan of redemption. The oneness of nature with the Father and the Son therefore entitles the Holy Spirit to the same titles and honours as accorded to them.

Prayer and Work

Today, Mr. Hitchens and the like-minded call Christianity "a malignant disease" which must be rooted out. What if the Roman emperors had succeeded in rooting out Christianity? The world would not have seen moral and social progress. Human selfishness and greed rooted in sin would have gone from bad to worse. In vain, humanity would have searched for peace and justice as there is none apart from Christ who is the Prince of Peace. But what happened? The Christian record is far from perfect. But it is foolish to deny that followers of our Lord have done a great deal for the world. The Church became the leader in the Roman Empire in the alleviation of poverty and distress, in providing hospitals and orphanages and charity of all kinds. And so it offered to people a hope and belief that the individual was still unique, created in the image of God. The church protected, fed, and gave a home to wanderers and refugees.

The first ecumenical council of Nicea, (325 A.D.), directed bishops to establish hospices and hospitals. Although their most important function was to nurse and heal the sick, they also provided shelter for the poor and lodging for Christian pilgrims. They were prompted by the early apostolic admonition by Christ's command that Christians be hospitable to strangers and travellers (1 Pet. 4:9). And Basil took note. He established the principle of social concern for monastic communities. He devoted himself to a radical Christian, ascetic lifestyle. The welfare of the "lowly person," was his primary concern and areas of engagement throughout his life. He set a Christ-like example by giving away his own wealth, and used the proceeds to the support of the poor. He also organized and administered great works of charity – hospitals, schools, and hostels. He founded the first hospital in Caesarea in about A.D. 369. It was one of a "large number of buildings with houses for physicians and nurses, workshops, and industrial schools." It even had rehabilitation units which gave those with no occupational skills opportunity to learn a trade while recuperating.

Basil was a great ethical thinker and a man of moral integrity, and highly respected by the 16th century Reformers. He used his great learning, his wealth, his organizational talents, and social concern in the service of his Lord. Basil's message for the church today can be summed up in the words of the apostle Peter: "Let us love one another earnestly from the heart...having purified our souls by our obedience to the truth...through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:22-23).

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