

The Orations of the Cappadocian Fathers on Lepers: A Blueprint for Exhorting Solidarity with the Socially Alienated Today

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to understand what might effectively serve to exhort the practice of the virtue of solidarity with the socially alienated. Three orations on lepers: one by Gregory of Nazianzus, and two by Gregory of Nyssa, will be studied. The methods used to engender the virtue of solidarity with the lepers in these orations will be analyzed. Redefining classical Greek virtues in a Christian theological framework; sensitizing the listeners by appealing to emotions through the use of concrete examples; attempting to restore alienated kinship by retrieving kinship language; and encouraging a tangible encounter with lepers prove to be important elements. How the Gregorians appealed to non-Christians will also be considered. I conclude that through these three orations, the Gregorians teach us that the conviction to cultivate the virtue of solidarity is inculcated by engaging closely with those whose identity appears different from one's own.

Text

The ubiquity of news outlets and means of communication have led to people being constantly flooded with data. As a result, people hardly have any time to critically reflect, form judgments, or envisage a way of responding inspired by Christian values. Magisterial documents have insisted that due to its “liturgical nature,” the homily should not be reduced to a rendition of current affairs.¹ Nevertheless, the same documents show that the homily can and ought to engage thoughtfully with current issues in light of Scripture readings and the context of the Eucharist.²

¹ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Homiletic Directory* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 4.

² “Nor is it fitting to talk about the latest news in order to awaken people’s interest ... It is possible, however, to start with some fact or story so that God’s word can forcefully resound in its call to conversion, worship, commitment to fraternity and service, and so forth. Yet there will always be some who readily listen to a preacher’s commentaries on current affairs, while not letting themselves be challenged.” Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013) § 155, at the Holy See, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

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How can those who are charged with the duty of proclaiming the Good News communicate effectively the virtue of solidarity with the marginalized? One method of doing this would be by exhorting generosity, mercy, or compassion with the poor with the promise of heavenly reward for those who do so and God's punishment for those who do not. This kind of exhortation, however, does little more than reinforce a heteronomous morality where the subject is motivated only by a law exterior to itself. Rather, another kind of morality, known as autonomous morality, must be sought, where the subject is driven to practice solidarity out of sincere desire and personal conviction. In the latter, the agent's actions would more likely be continuous with a virtuous life as a whole rather than merely a series of good but discrete actions.

Here, I turn to the orations of two of the Cappadocian Fathers for insights into how they used the Gospel to instill an autonomous morality in their listeners regarding solidarity. The peculiar social milieu and the rich theological debates that characterized the fourth and fifth centuries, in what is present-day Turkey, served as a crucible for effective theological preaching. Several authors have reflected on the valuable contribution that the early church can offer contemporary homiletics. Orators of the era seemed to be exceptionally capable of responding "to changing cultural patterns, pastoral needs, and theological trends."³

The rhetorical force of sermons and orations delivered in the early church certainly cannot be underestimated. Suffice it to say that preaching then was more like a theatrical performance than delivering a lecture such that according to one commentator, "preachers strutted, ranted, pointed, cajoled...[e]very sermon was a dialogue, an animated conversation between preachers and audiences."⁴ My aim here, however, is not to offer a detailed analysis of the rhetoric of persuasion

³ Robert P. Waznak, *An Introduction to the Homily* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 17.

⁴ Raymond Van Dam, *Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 103. Neither do we mean by oration a speech that was necessarily delivered during a liturgical function.

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employed by the Cappadocian Fathers. Rather, I analyze how the Cappadocian Fathers sought to appeal to the moral instincts of their listeners and how their methods can be used to engender solidarity with the socially alienated today.⁵

I will proceed as follows: after briefly introducing three orations by Gregory of Nazianzus (hereafter Nazianzen) and Gregory of Nyssa (hereafter Nyssen) and their context, I will outline some of the main elements they used to effectively elicit the virtue of solidarity in their listeners, Christian and non-Christian alike. I conclude by identifying one overarching element that the Gregorians employed in the very exercise of preaching: the importance of encounter with the other. The theme of encounter is as important nowadays as it was in fourth century Cappadocia. While society is becoming more aware of its heterogeneous nature, outliers still face the threat of falling by the wayside.

Before proceeding, one might ask, whom does the leper represent today? Susan Wessel observes that Nazianzen made the figure of the leper “a kind of synecdoche [i.e. a part representing a whole] for all human suffering.”⁶ Also commenting on the lepers in these texts, Susan Holman focuses on their social dimension, that is, as victims of social exile.⁷ In addition to these two notions, I propose a third: lepers as people with flawed skin. Here I understand skin in terms of what it represents in our collective imagination: the interface between the self and the external environment; that which simultaneously connects us and separates us from others; the integument

⁵ Patristic sermons, not unlike our present-day sermons, “were part of a specific performative context,” aimed at “changing the behavior of a particular audience while instructing them.” Peter Van Nuffelen, “Social Ethics and Moral Discourse in Late Antiquity” in *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics: Issues and Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Johan Leemans, Brian J. Matz and Johan Verstraeten (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 46.

⁶ Susan Wessel, “The Suffering of Christ, Humanity and the Lepers in Gregory Nazianzen,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 4 (2015): 397.

⁷ Susan R. Holman, “Healing the Social Leper in Gregory of Nyssa’s and Gregory of Nazianzus’s “περί φιλοπρωχίας,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 92, no. 3 (1999): 283-309.

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that reveals one's identity. In her book, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*, Claudia Benthien invites us to appreciate the complexity of skin and to go beyond skin color. Benthien suggests that we should consider the many other ways in which skin is continuous with identity, such as its texture. She brings to our attention how skin evokes attraction or repulsion, power and dominance, stigma and shame.⁸

With this in mind, I propose that we understand the leper, at least in this context, not as representative of some social identity, such as persons with AIDS, victims of racism, or immigrants. Rather, in order to avoid the theoretical pitfall of identity politics, I suggest that leprosy here is considered in a more personal and subjective sense. The leper can be that person who is suffering and exiled from *my* landscape because in *my* eyes, that person's "skin" is flawed. The skin perceived in some way as blemished, be it wrinkled or birth-marked, tattooed or pierced, scarred or stretch-marked, narrates a biography, no matter how imperfect.⁹ This exposure of vulnerability can elicit subtle responses of exclusion within us. Leprosy here serves as a prompt to make us aware of our emotive responses to blemished skin. This has the effect of revealing the prejudices we harbor against people with whom we rub shoulders with every day.

The Three Orations On the Love of the Poor

The Cappadocian Fathers wrote prolifically on poverty because of the great famine and drought that hit the region in the late 360s. There was, however, another phenomenon that was scourging the eastern Mediterranean at the time: the spread of leprosy. Both Nazianzen and Nyssen

⁸ See Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), passim.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of how such blemished skin is autobiographical, see for example, Jay Prosser, "Skin Memories," in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001), 52-68.

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observed that although the lepers were living on the streets, town dwellers disregarded them and treated them with contempt. It was also around this time that Basil of Caesarea took the initiative of erecting a large complex, the Basileias, that housed lepers and travelers, by providing them with shelter, nourishment, and care.¹⁰ It seems likely, therefore, that the Cappadocian Fathers hoped that through their orations, lepers, whether housed in the Basileias or not, would find a place in the people's consciousness.

Here, I focus on three particular orations by Nazianzen and Nyssen who, while discussing the poor, focus their attention on the figure of the leper.¹¹ Nazianzen's oration, "On the Love of the Poor (De pauperibus amandis)," or more simply, "Oration 14," was probably delivered to gain support for the construction of the Basileias. Nyssen's two (likely Lenten) sermons also carry the title "On the Love of the Poor 1" and "On the Love of the Poor 2" but their Latin titles are rendered as *De beneficentia* (On Good Works) and *In illud: Quatenus uni ex his fecistis mihi fecistis* (On the Saying: Whoever has Done It to One of These has Done It to Me).¹²

¹⁰ See among others, Jean Bernardi, *La Prédication des Pères Cappadociens: Le Prédicateur et Son Auditoire* (Marseille: Sopic, 1968), 104-108.

¹¹ Nazianzen introduces the lepers as "those wasted with the sacred disease that devours their flesh and bones and marrow clear through." Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 14: On the Love of the Poor," in *Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 6:43. Hereafter, for uniformity, in the footnotes it will be referred to simply as "Oration 14." Nyssen actually first mentions lepers in only the latter third of his "De beneficentia," ("a myriad of Lazaruses sit at the gate, some dragging themselves along painfully, some with their eyes gauged out, others with amputated feet, some quite literally creep, mutilated in all their members") and the first quarter of his "Quatenus uni" ("many constrained by need, and whose bodies are utterly spent from suffering sickness... I think above all of the victims of a terrible illness... whose frightful malady has changed them into beasts"). Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 468:189 and 475-476:200-201 respectively. Note that when referring to Nazianzen's *Oration 14*, I will first cite the paragraph number followed by the page number in Vinson's translation. For Nyssen's work, since there are no chapter divisions, I will first cite the paragraph breaks Holman proposes in her translation followed by the page number in her work.

¹² Jean Daniélou, "Chronologie des Sermons de Grégoire de Nysse," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 29:4 (1955): 360, 364.

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I argue that by discussing specifically the poor lepers, the two orators provide a lens through which prevalent attitudes against excluded populations can be identified and then offer a Christian response. I now turn to the ways of responding to these attitudes of exclusion.

Classical Greek Virtues Redefined in a Christian Theological Framework

Moral imagination in the early eastern Mediterranean church was strongly influenced by conceptions of virtue. Peter Van Nuffelen reminds us that, whereas in our society, discourse on social justice is commonplace, in the ancient world, the main concern was the achievement of happiness.¹³ Moreover, the Cappadocian Fathers were greatly influenced by Platonic and Stoic philosophy. This provided the foundation for their conception of virtue after they reworked it to fit their Christian theological framework.¹⁴

The Platonists denigrated the body, perceiving it as the prison of the soul. Since virtues pertain to the World of Ideas, they believed that knowledge of the virtues by the intellect is sufficient for their mastery. The Peripatetic school, on the other hand, developed a hylomorphic conception of reality and believed that the body and soul form an inseparable unity. According to this school of thought, the virtues can only be realized in their practice. It was only later, with Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, that the virtues started being reinterpreted in Christian moral theology using Peripatetic metaphysics. More akin to the Platonic than the Peripatetic conception of virtues, the Stoic school conceived of virtue as a perfection, possible but rare, and

¹³ Van Nuffelen, "Social Ethics and Moral Discourse in Late Antiquity," 45.

¹⁴ On this see I. P. Sheldon-Williams, "The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition from the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 425-456. See also David Bradshaw, "Plato in the Cappadocian Fathers," in *Plato in the Third Sophistic*, ed. Ryan C. Fowler (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 193-210, and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 141.

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argued that intermediate degrees are not possible.¹⁵ The Cappadocian Fathers were original in this regard, since they forged a synthesis of the Platonic and Stoic conceptions of virtue with Christian scriptures and doctrine. For Platonists, virtue was merely excellence (*arete*), while for Stoics, it was the strength of the soul (*tonos*). For the Cappadocian Fathers, however, virtue is the way of righteousness which is opposed to the way of sin.¹⁶

With this distinction in mind, we can understand the reason for Nazianzen's method of beginning his oration with a catalog of virtues and exemplars, since contemporary Greek literature also begins this way.¹⁷ Nazianzen substitutes the Greek heroes, however, with exemplars from the Bible:

*Faith, hope, love, are a fine thing, these three; Abram bears witness to faith, because he was justified for his faith; Enoch to hope, because he first hoped to call upon the name of the Lord, and also all just men who suffered because of their hope; the divine Apostle, to love because he had the courage to call down a curse even upon himself for the sake of Israel.*¹⁸

The list reaches its climax in the virtue that surpasses them all: "Now if, following Paul and Christ himself, we must regard charity as the first and greatest of commandments since it is the very sum of the Law and Prophets, its most vital part I find is love of the poor along with compassion and sympathy for our fellow men [and women]."¹⁹ Likewise, virtues that were highly regarded in the classical Greek culture, such as philanthropy, generosity, due respect, and honor, are also redefined in Christian terms. For instance, until then, philanthropy toward the poor or those who are of

¹⁵ See for example, Lawrence C. Becker, "Stoic Virtue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy E. Snow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1-27. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/978019935195.013.6.

¹⁶ Thomas Špidlik, *Grégoire de Nazianze: Introduction à l'Etude de sa Doctrine Spirituelle* (Rome: Pontificiae Universitatis Gregoriana, 1971), 57-75.

¹⁷ Martha Vinson, "Introduction," in *Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), xix.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 14," 2:39. Emphases in original.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, 5:42.

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inferior status was inconceivable.²⁰ Nazianzen, however, makes his case for philanthropy for the poor by invoking the philanthropy of God towards humankind.²¹

In a parallel fashion, the virtue par excellence for Nyssen is beneficence, the undertaking of good works, as attested by the following example: “Mercy and good deeds are works God loves; they divinize those who practice them and impress [or stamp] them into the likeness of goodness, that they may become the image of the Primordial Being, pure who surpasses all intelligence.”²² By cross-fertilizing popular thought with Christian teachings, the Gregorys broaden the moral imagination of their listeners beyond what was hitherto conceivable.

Using Concrete Examples and Appealing to Emotions to Sensitize Listeners

From the Gregorys’ orations, it is evident that the tragedy of lepers lying on the streets failed to elicit any response of compassion from the townspeople. It was as though the lepers were invisible to them, or that the townsfolk were desensitized to the lepers’ sight and plight. This might sound surprising at first blush, but recent feminist scholarship about emotions shed light on the dynamics at work here. Susan Wessel surveys the hagiographic accounts of the saints of the early church who worked with the sick, especially with lepers, and juxtaposes them with the findings of contemporary theoreticians of disgust. She concludes that feelings of disgust can jeopardize our “sense of our belonging to a common humanity.”²³ This might explain why lepers fell in the “blind spot” of the town-dwellers. Nazianzen describes the tragic state of affairs as such: “there is the fact

²⁰ See John McGuckin, “St. Gregory of Nazianzus on the Love of the Poor (*Oration 14*),” in *The Ecumenical Legacy of the Cappadocians*, ed. Nicu Dumitrascu (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 143.

²¹ For more on philanthropy in the work of Gregory of Nazianzus, see Vicki Petrakis, “*Philanthropia* as a Social Reality of *Askesis and Theosis* in Gregory the Theologian’s *Oration: On the Love of the Poor*,” in *Philanthropy and Social Compassion in Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, ed. M. J. Pereira (New York: Theotokos Press, 2010), 90-105.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, “*De beneficentia*,” 465-466:197.

²³ Susan Wessel, *Passion and Compassion in Early Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 75.

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that most people cannot stand to be near them, or even look at them, but avoid them, nauseated by them, and regard them as abominations, so to speak. It is this that preys on them even more than their ailment: they sense that they are actually hated for their misfortune.”²⁴ Nazianzen’s observation tallies with that of Martha C. Nussbaum, who is among the philosophers considered by Wessel, and who in a more recent work contends that humans naturally have difficulty feeling compassion for those whose bodies appear foreign to their own.²⁵

After making the town-dwellers aware of their tendency to exclude the lepers, the Gregorys then attempt to return the lepers to their listeners’ field of vision. By crafting homilies with vivid descriptions of the lepers, they confront their listeners with fear and disgust so that these emotions may be transformed into pity and compassion.²⁶ This is significant because unlike the Peripatetic account of virtue ethics, the Platonic and Stoic accounts offer a negative outlook on emotions, or *pathos*. Platonists believed that emotions distract the rational part of the tripartite soul from perfecting its own virtue.²⁷ Stoics, in turn, used the term *apatheia* to describe not the state of being without emotion but that of having the “appropriate sort of emotion.”²⁸ For them, emotions were to be eliminated when they compromised progress towards virtue.²⁹ The Gregorys break with this tradition by engaging the emotions of their listeners with the hope of eliciting a virtuous response. Hence, for instance, Nazianzen continues his reflection on the lepers thus: “I cannot bear to think

²⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 14,” 9:45.

²⁵ For example, Nussbaum states, “The disgusting bodily weakness of others, the shameful condition of mere animal humanity, is seen as foreign: as the way women’s bodies so often are, or the way African American bodies often have been. One may even become quite incapable of empathetic participation in the plight of these people: for one may see them as so brutish that they could not possibly have insides like one’s own, and they are thus to be seen only as objects, the way humans frequently view animals.” Martha C. Nussbaum, “Compassion: Human and Animal,” in *Species Matters: Humane Advocacy and Cultural Theory*, ed. Marianne DeKoven and Michael Lundblad (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 159-160.

²⁶ See Wessel, *Passion and Compassion in Early Christianity*, 40-41 and 53-54.

²⁷ On this, see for example, Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 192-195.

²⁸ Becker, “Stoic Virtue,” 14.

²⁹ Becker, 15.

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of their suffering [that they sense that they are hated for their misfortune] without weeping; I am overcome by the mention of it; and I hope that you will feel as I do, and through tears, dry their tears.”³⁰ On his part, Nyssen poses a series of questions to his listeners to achieve the same end: “Why aren’t you moved by any of the diseases you perceive happening to other people?... To outsiders they only awaken disgust... Can you distinguish their gloomy dances? Do you listen to their plaintive songs? How they arrive to make a parade of their infirmities and give the crowds a spectacle of their crippled bodies?”³¹

It is, therefore, clear that the Gregorians departed from the Stoics and Platonists insofar as they appealed directly to the *pathos* of their listeners in order to widen their moral imaginations. The Gregorians realized that if they could sensitize the townsfolk to the suffering of their neighbors, then they would trigger pity and, hopefully, give rise to practical action.³²

Using Kinship Language to Restore Alienated Kinship

Both Gregorians call attention to the tragedy that many lepers are rejected by even their closest family members for fear of contracting the disease. The lepers are denied their share of material resources, including their household, and immaterial resources, such as affection. We sense a touch of irony when Nyssen says that these lepers are “robbed of the traits that would permit them to be identified” because, despite its disfiguring effects, it is unlikely that leprosy would actually result in anyone not being identifiable, especially to one’s beloved.³³ Nyssen’s point, therefore, is not a question of identification through external features but of the inability or reluctance to acknowledge the lepers as pertaining to the common kinship of humankind. Nazianzen makes a similar point in particularly poignant language when he says,

³⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 14,” 9:45.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, “Quatenus uni,” 479:202.

³² See Wessel, *Passion and Compassion in Early Christianity*, 2-3 and 40-41.

³³ Gregory of Nyssa, “Quatenus uni,” 480:202.

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What would be more loyal than a father? What more devoted than a mother? ... A father spontaneously grieves over his own son, ... yet he drives him away in spite of himself. His mother relives the pain of giving birth and her heart is wrenched; and with piteous cries keeps calling out his name and lays him out and makes lament over him as though he were dead. "Hapless child of a heart-broken mother!" she sobs. "The disease has taken its bitter toll of us both. My poor child! My child I do not recognize."³⁴

Nyssen makes the further point that estrangement has led to a situation where people more readily share their affection and living quarters with animals than with fellow humans stricken with the disease:

You see these people, whose frightful malady has changed them into beasts.... These people who yesterday stood upright and looked at the sky are here, today, bending to the earth, walking on four feet, practically changed into animals.... But we assert that this condition is worse than that of animals. With men [and women] all happens as if they change nature, losing the traits of their species to be transformed into monsters.³⁵

Nyssen goes on to remind his audience that many people, by virtue of their occupation, interact and live closely with animals. Why is it then, he asks, that humans find it so hard to do so with fellow human beings simply because of their disease?

Are we not willing to shelter pigs and dogs under our roof? The hunters are often not separated, even at night, from their dogs. Look at the love that the peasant has for his calf. Even better, the traveler washes his donkey's hoofs with his own hands, brushes his back, carries out his dung, and cleans the stable. And will we disparage our own kin and race as baser than the animals? Let these things not be — no, my brothers! Resolve that this inhumanity will not triumph.³⁶

Evidently, Nyssen's concern is not people's fear of contagion but the apparent disdain for the lepers. Both Gregorys, therefore, lament the breakdown of kinship relations that has resulted from the disease, either due to fear of contagion, because the illness has rendered them unrecognizable, or simply out of disgust.

³⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 14," 11:46.

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, "Quatenus uni," 476:201.

³⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, 481:203.

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The situation described by the Gregorys is not very different from that experienced in contemporary society. Anthropologist Rayna Rapp calls “alienated kinship” the failure to recognize kinship ties with anyone who would otherwise be considered as kinspersons to oneself.³⁷ This kind of alienation happens, for example, when parents refuse their own children born with disabilities; when the elderly end up victims of neglect; and when family members suffer dispersion because of migration. In a vein similar to that of the Gregorys, Rapp advocates for the retrieval of kinship in two ways: first, by the use of the “rhetorical power of kinship language” in order to include others, especially those who are excluded from the “universal family of [humankind];” second, through the use of “imagined communities of extended kinship.”³⁸ Similarly, the Gregorys respond to this situation by reminding their listeners that we are all sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father and hence brothers and sisters to one another. No one should be excluded from the common family of humankind. Additionally, the Basileias meant to make up for kin when actual kin relations were lacking. This kinship substitution, whether within the Basileias or without, is sometimes called “fictive kinship” because the concerned individuals live in relationships similar to those of kin.³⁹

Encouraging a Tangible Encounter with the Lepers

What is particularly striking is that the three sermons encourage their listeners to make physical contact with lepers. The Gregorys insist that through this encounter the lepers would be

³⁷ See Rayna Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 275-280.

³⁸ See Rapp, *Testing Women*, 292-3.

³⁹ For example, “All belongs to God, our common father. And we are all brothers [and sisters] of the same race.” Gregory of Nyssa, “De beneficentia,” 465:197; and “You see a man [or a woman] and in him [or her] you have no respect for a brother [or a sister]? ... But you, who share the nature of the same brokenness, you flee your own race. No, my brothers [and sisters], let not this odious judgment flatter you!” Gregory of Nyssa, “Quatenus uni,” 476:201.

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healed of their physical suffering while those who are physically well will be spiritually healed.⁴⁰ For the Cappadocian Fathers, physical contact with lepers manifests what happened in the Incarnation. They were convinced that while the townspeople would attend to the needs of the lepers, offering them alms, nourishment, and clothing, the lepers, in turn, would heal the townspeople by liberating them from the leprosy of greed and other vices.⁴¹ Nyssen's call to show solidarity in concrete and tangible ways is significant because he downplays the risk of contagion by reminding his listeners of the many holy people who have done so since their youth without contracting the disease.⁴² For example, Nazianzen encourages his listeners not to flee from the lepers but rather to "extend a helping hand; offer food...bandage wounds...keep them company."⁴³ Nyssen too has similar words when he says in "De beneficentia," "Embrace the wretched as gold: take into your arms the afflicted as you would your own health, as you would care for your wife, your children, your domestics and all your house."⁴⁴ Again, in "Quatenus uni," he observes poignantly, "You imagine therefore that you escape involuntary ills by fleeting sickness. These words are made up of excuses by which you conceal your scorn for divine wishes."⁴⁵ For the Gregorys, solidarity cannot be exercised if not in tangible and practical ways, just as God expressed solidarity with humankind through the Incarnation of his Son.

The four elements mentioned above, that is, redefining classical Greek virtues in a Christian theological framework; sensitizing the listeners by appealing to emotions through the use of concrete examples; attempting to restore alienated kinship by retrieving kinship language;

⁴⁰ See Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 144.

⁴¹ Holman, "Healing the Social Leper in Gregory of Nyssa's and Gregory of Nazianzus's "περί φιλοπρωχίας," 285 and 298.

⁴² See also, Lorenzo Dattrino, "Aspetti della Predicazione Quaresimale di Gregorio Nisseno," *Studi di Antichità Cristiana* 40 (1988): 197-198.

⁴³ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 14," 27:60.

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, "De beneficentia," 459:195.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, "Quatenus uni," 487:205.

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and encouraging a tangible encounter with lepers all require some kind of Christian disposition since they all invoke elements from Christian theology. Nevertheless, there are two additional ways of exhorting solidarity which the Gregorians employed to appeal to non-Christians. To these I shall now turn.

Soliciting Solidarity from Non-Christians

It must be recalled that in 313, Emperor Constantine promulgated the Edict of Milan, turning Christianity into a religion which was tolerated in the Empire. When Julian took power as emperor some thirty years later, however, he returned to the Hellenistic cult, leading to a temporary suppression of Christianity.⁴⁶ Despite this relatively hostile environment, the Gregorians succeeded in broadening their call for solidarity, implicitly at least, to all the citizens of the empire. This was done by engaging humanist ideas and by acting as exemplars.

Although the starting point for their exhortations was always rooted in Christian anthropology, the Gregorians offered parallel humanist arguments in order to appeal to non-Christians.⁴⁷ By humanist ideas, I mean a form of reasoning which is based entirely on human nature without recourse to any divine being. For instance, both orators claim that actively expressing mercy and compassion is constitutive of true human nature. To fail to do so, they insist, is to go against one's nature. Moreover, both Gregorians believe that since we all share in the same human nature, rich and poor, strong and healthy, when compassion and mercy is expressed, this common nature is recognized and affirmed. Thus, for example, regarding the human weakness that binds all humankind together, Nyssen states,

But to you, you who share the nature of this brokenness, you flee your own race. No, my brothers, let not this odious judgment flatter you! Remember who you are and on whom

⁴⁶ For more on this see Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus: The Early Church Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 31-33.

⁴⁷ See McGuckin, "St Gregory of Nazianzus: On the Love of the Poor," 148.

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you contemplate: a human person like yourself, whose basic nature is no different from your own.... For you yourself belong to the common nature of all. Treat all therefore as one common reality.⁴⁸

For Nazianzen, human weakness gives rise to compassion and is, therefore, the defining element of all human beings: “Nor do [attitudes of neglect towards the lepers] become of our human nature, which, learning piety and kindness from our common weakness, has given compassion the force of law.”⁴⁹

Finally, since all men and women share in this common nature, it would be incoherent that some merit private possessions (material or immaterial) while others do not.⁵⁰ By emphasizing the common nature of humankind and the problem of private possessions, Nyssen provides a philosophical basis to the evangelical command to retribute to the poor what is theirs.⁵¹ The emphasis on the ontological reality of human nature is important because to base common nature on other realities (such as species or society) would be too fragile a concept, potentially leading to egoism, strife, and imposition.⁵² Therefore, by devising arguments that appealed to the common nature of humankind, the Gregorians supported their theological propositions so that they are equally intelligible to non-Christians.

The Gregorians also encouraged solidarity among non-Christians by acting as exemplars themselves. Most scholars agree that the solidarity shown by Christians toward the poor in Cappadocia during this time led even to improved social services provided by the Empire.⁵³ Hence,

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “Quatenus uni,” 476:201.

⁴⁹ Gregory of Nazianzen, “Oration 14,” 15:49-50.

⁵⁰ For example, Nyssen states, “Remember who they are on whom we meditate: on human beings, in no way distinct from common nature.” Gregory of Nyssa, “Quatenus uni,” 480:203.

⁵¹ B. Salmona, “Le Due Orazioni *De Pauperibus Amandis* nell’Opera di Gregorio Nisseno,” *Augustinianum* 17, no. 1 (1977): 203.

⁵² Salmona, 204.

⁵³ See Vinson, “Introduction,” xv; and Julian, “Letter to Arsacius, 22,” in *The Works of Emperor Julian*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright (London: William Heinemann, 1953), 66-73. The authenticity of this letter has been questioned by recent scholarship. For more on this see Peter Van Nuffelen, “Deux Fausses Lettres de Julien

the altruism of Christians in Cappadocia spread among even non-Christians, if not through the conviction that the poor are endowed with the image of God, at least out of rivalry for what the Christians were doing with respect to the poor. John McGuckin, therefore, insists that non-Christians were educated by the orators and encouraged to change their views on poverty and suffering, from one of shame to an impetus for social change.⁵⁴ The fact that even non-Christians were moved to care for the marginalized proves that while the Gregorys preached using words, upon listening and acting on their words, listeners also preached to non-Christians through their example.

Soliciting Solidarity with the Socially Alienated Today

An overarching principle spans throughout these various calls for solidarity. While exhortation of the virtue of solidarity is important, nothing cultivates it as much as practice. In other words, solidarity with poor lepers implies that one does not keep oneself at a distance or avoid personal involvement with them. Rather, by definition, there must be some kind of active engagement with those who suffer exclusion because of what their flawed skin represents in our personal or cultural imagination. It is only through personal engagement with these lepers that cultural change begins.

What elements, therefore, might a blueprint for exhorting solidarity with lepers today include? First, following Nazianzen's and Nyssen's "Christianization" of classical Greek virtues, a thorough understanding and Christianization of the secular virtues and values is important. Second, just as the Gregorys appealed to the emotions of their listeners through vivid descriptions

l'Apostat (*La Lettre aux Juifs*, Ep. 51 [Wright], et *La Lettre à Arsacius* Ep. 84 [Bidez])," *Vigiliae Christianae* 55, no. 2 (2002): 131-150. Nonetheless, most scholars agree that the joint efforts of the Cappadocian Fathers to relieve poverty in their region at least led to "clerical administrators of the Church strategizing in consultation with imperial officers about social welfare projects." See also McGuckin, "St Gregory of Nazianzus: On the Love of the Poor," 142.

⁵⁴ See McGuckin, "St Gregory of Nazianzus: On the Love of the Poor," 153.

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of the suffering of lepers, narratives can be used to make listeners conscious of the suffering of those around them. Third, as we have seen, retrieval of fictive kinship language can serve to highlight the common element among people. Fourth, and perhaps the most challenging, is the actual practice of the encounter, as the Gregorys themselves argued. When these four elements are practiced, they find resonance equally with Christians and non-Christians alike, especially when Christian values are expressed in humanist thought and when Christians act as faithful exemplars.

If these three orations are employed as a blueprint for solidarity with whomever the leper might be today, one feature appears most striking: it is by engaging closely with those foreign to one's "skin" that the conviction to cultivate the virtue of solidarity is engendered.

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