

St. Basil the Great – Conference One
Sept. 25, 2014

Influential monastic writers of our day such as Michael Casey have sometimes stated that reading is so integral a part of Benedictine life that any candidate who is averse to such activity would doubtfully even have a monastic vocation. We all know that St. Benedict prescribed several hours of what he called *lectio divina* each day, and even though he certainly gave pride of place to the reading of Scripture, he just as certainly didn't limit a monk's reading to that, for at the end of his Rule he names several other works that monks should read, such as Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences* and the *Lives* of the early monks.. It's noteworthy, however, that he doesn't actually name Cassian, possibly because the latter was somewhat "under a cloud" in the Latin Church for having taken what many considered a position significantly different from that of St. Augustine on the topic of grace. In fact, the only author named by Benedict in that final chapter is St. Basil, who still today remains the great legislator of monasticism for the Eastern Church. That Basil might have something important to say to us is brought out very forcefully in a very recent edition of his Rule produced by an Australian scholar, Anna Silvas. She concludes her Introduction in the following words:

We are now in a period not unlike Basil's in some respects. There is much confusion in the life of the Church, which seems not a little lost in the galloping moral and spiritual rootlessness of liberal western society.... Vast is the spiritual need of the twenty-first century, but who or what will capture this ground?... For Christians in such a situation, a way forward, a vision that affords a humble but liberating hope is needed. Basil's extensive teachings on how to take *the narrow way* of the life of Christ bear witness to a great constructive experiment in his own stressful times: the formation of austere, loving and practical Gospel communities of consecrated men and women that

show what the doctrine and mission of Christ in this world might really look like, once we have given up the attempt to ‘inculturate’ ourselves in a secularist culture and allow our hearts and minds to be pierced again by a truly transcendent hope. Perhaps contemplating Basil’s achievement and that of his family and friends in the late fourth century can provide something of a *therapeia* for our jaded spirits in this age and an invitation for the future.¹

Obviously there is no way that anyone could convey much of the richness of Basil’s accomplishment in a single talk, but I do think it would be worthwhile to treat his writings on monasticism in a number of conferences during the course of this year, though I don’t expect every single one of my more-or-less monthly conferences to be on him. Tonight I only want to give a bit of background, without saying very much about his Rule itself. Perhaps the most important point is that he came to be the great legislator he was only because of a genuine conversion from a rather worldly way of life, and that this conversion was brought about largely by the example and persuasion of some members of his own family, above all his older sister, Macrina.

Although we associate Basil mostly with the region of Cappadocia and especially with its capital, Caesarea, where he eventually became bishop, he went there for the first time only for what we might call “middle school.” He and the rest of his siblings were born much farther north, in the region of Pontus, quite near the Black Sea, and it was there that Macrina and her widowed mother Emmelia had established a community of female ascetics on the family estate at Annisa, near the spot where the Iris River joins the Lycus. Eventually this community expanded to a form of monastic life that is unusual from our perspective but was not at all unheard of in the

fourth century, namely, a community of women, men, and children all living in one large complex, with the men living in one part under the direction of Macrina's brother Peter, the women in another part with Macrina as their superior, and the children in still a third part under the direction of selected adults. They would come together regularly for common prayer, which (as with us) consisted largely of the chanting of psalms, and their work included working in the fields to grow their food and doing such domestic chores as weaving and cleaning or repairing the buildings. Their ideal was explicitly that of the early Christian community at Jerusalem as described by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, as when he writes in chapter two: "All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people" (Acts 2:44-47).

As this enterprise was taking root, Basil, having finished his schooling in Caesarea, had gone on to Athens and was intent on attaining a prestigious career as a rhetorician. We don't know for sure exactly what led him to leave Athens and return to Pontus, but it was quite likely the death of his younger brother, Naukratios, in a hunting accident. While staying with his grieving family, Basil began to reflect on the things that really matter in life and resolved to turn away from pursuing fame and wealth. Convinced that he ought to live as a monk, he traveled to Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia to learn firsthand how monks lived in those parts of the world, and he then returned to his native region, not, however, to join his sister's fledgling monastic community at Annisa but by going some distance away with a few like-minded persons to live a much looser kind of monastic life that in Egypt had been known by the Coptic term *sarabaite*,

the kind of life his brother Naukratios had been living before his sudden death. At the time, this word *sarabaites* did not have the strongly negative connotation that it has in Benedict's Rule, but it was nevertheless a life not carefully ordered by anything resembling a real monastic rule. By now Basil was already in demand as a kind of spiritual father and so began to formulate his teaching about monastic life in replies to actual questions put to him by various ascetics in Pontus. These were taken down by stenographers and formed the basis of what later came to be called "the short rules" or, more recently and perhaps more accurately, "the shorter responses."

In the year 362, Basil left that monastic retreat to go south to Caesarea, where he was soon ordained a priest by Bishop Eusebius of that city. Here he resumed a monastic way of life, but now one in a rather different, more ordered form. But just as a couple centuries later Benedict left Subiaco because of the envy of a neighboring cleric, Basil was apparently treated very unjustly by the bishop. He was strongly supported by his own monks, but rather than cause a schism in the church there, he left Caesarea and returned to Pontus. Like his siblings Macrina and Peter, Basil now fully embraced a cenobitic life rather than the sarabaitic one that had characterized his earlier stay in Pontus. His ideal, like that of Macrina and Peter, became that of the early Christians in Jerusalem.

If it had not been for this change, St. Benedict would never have revered Basil and his writings the way he did, nor would we cenobites have all that much to learn from him. As it is, however, the monastic writings of St. Basil have a tremendous amount to teach and inspire us. There's no time to go into them in any details this evening, for I like to keep these conferences relatively short. I would only emphasize that the very beginning of the so-called Longer Responses is just like the beginning of Benedict's Tools of Good Works, with the emphasis

squarely on love of God and love of neighbor as the foundation of every monastic life. Here is just a bit of Basil's heartfelt reflections on the love of God:

Having received a command to love God, we possess the capacity to love implanted at the moment we were first constituted by God.... For we are by nature enamoured of the beautiful, and we [naturally] show affection toward our friends and kin, and spontaneously display every goodwill toward our benefactors. Now what is more wonderful than the divine beauty, what thought more alluring than the splendour of God? ... Yet such beauty is not visible to fleshly eyes; it is comprehended only by the soul and the mind. Whenever it illumined any of the saints it left embedded in them an intolerable sting of yearning till, chafing at this present life, they said, "When shall I enter and appear before the face of God?" and again, "to depart and to be with Christ would be far better."

...Now if we naturally incline to good will and affection for our benefactors, what discourse can describe worthily the gifts of God, which are so many as to be innumerable? Let us pass over in silence the daily risings of the sun, the circuits of the moon, the changes of the seasons. But there is something we cannot pass over even if we wished, ... for [our Lord] took on our infirmities and bore our weaknesses, and was wounded for us, that by his bruises we might be healed.... What return, then, shall we make to the Lord for all that he has given to us? Yet he is so generous and tender that he does not seek any recompense but is content simply to be loved in return for all that he has given.²

It would be very wrong to think that Basil stops there, for he also has very pertinent and inspiring things to say about love of our neighbor, but that—and much more—can wait for future conferences. For now, let's simply reflect on how much in accord all this is with the sentiments of Benedict's Prologue, as when he writes: "The Lord assures us in his love, 'I do not wish the death of the sinner but that he turn back to me and live'" (RB, Prologue 38). So much of our psalmody is made up of psalms of praise, and for nothing ought we praise our God more than for the love with which he has first loved us.

1" Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 149.

2" Basil, *Asketikon*, Longer Response 2, in Silvas, pp. 162-71 passim (translation slightly amended).