

Saints Gregory and Nonna

January 1

Cappadocia; 4th century

We are blessed to know much about this illustrious Christian couple from two orations given by their son, Saint Gregory the Theologian (January 25), one of the greatest of all the Fathers of the Church. The first of these orations was given in 369, at the funeral of his sister, St. Gorgonia (February 23). Near the beginning of this homily he briefly describes their holy parents, who had instilled in their daughter strong Christian principles and virtues. Gregory and Nonna, though very elderly, were present to hear these words from their son:

“Who is there who does not know the new Abraham and Sarah of our own times? I mean Gregory and his wife Nonna — for it would not be good to omit their names, which by themselves are an encouragement to virtue. My father, like Abraham, has been justified by faith; and my mother, like Sarah, has lived with him who is faithful. He, beyond all hope, has been the father of many nations, and she has travailed spiritually in their birth. He escaped from the bondage of his father’s gods, while she is the daughter as well as the mother of the free. He went out from kindred and home for the sake of the land of promise (Gen. 12:1; Heb. 11:8), and she was the reason for his “exile” (on this point alone I dare to say that she was greater than Sarah). He set off nobly on the journey, and she eagerly accompanied him. He offered himself to the Lord, while she called her husband “lord” and regarded him as such, and was justified partly because of this. They were granted the promise and the gift, and from them was born Isaac.

This good shepherd was the result of his wife’s prayers and guidance, and it was from her that he learned the ideal of a good shepherd’s way of life. He truly fled from his idols, and afterwards put demons to flight. And never again did he have fellowship with idolaters.

With his wife he was of one honor, and of one mind, and of one soul. They were as yoked in the pursuit of virtue and of fellowship with God as they were with each other in fleshly things. Equal were they in the length of their lives and the whiteness of their hair in old age. They were also equal in prudence and brilliancy, rivaling each other, and soaring beyond all others.

They were but slightly bound by things of the flesh, having already been transferred to the spiritual realm, even before the dissolution of their bodies. They were not of the world, and yet they were of it as well, for at the same time they despised it and yet honored it. They put aside earthly wealth, yet were rich through their noble endeavors; utterly scorning things here, they purchased instead heavenly things. Now they have but a small remnant left of this life, but they look forward in piety to an abundant and blessed life for which they have labored.

I will say only one more word about them here: they have been rightly and fairly named as ornaments of both sexes — he of men, and she of women; yet not only was each one an adornment, but a veritable paradigm of virtue. From them Gorgonia derived both her existence and her illustrious reputation, for they sowed in her the seeds of

godliness. And they were the source both of her beautiful life in this world, and of her propitious departure in hope of even better things.”

Five years later, in 374, Saint Gregory’s father died, at about one hundred years of age. Again Gregory delivered an inspiring funeral oration. Here he emphasizes his father’s and his mother’s impeccable virtues, and again he speaks of the beauty and camaradery of his parents’ marital relationship:

“I do not know whether to praise more highly the grace which called him from this error, or his own choice to leave it. Nevertheless, he so thoroughly cleared away the haze which had settled upon the eyes of his mind, and he ran toward the truth with such speed, that he endured the loss of his mother and his property for a time, for the sake of his heavenly Father and the true inheritance. And he bore this dishonor more readily than others receive the greatest of honors.

Even before he was in our fold, he was ours, for his character made him ours, as it were, by adoption. Just as many of our own are not really with us, since their way of life alienates them from the common body, so too there are many “on the outside” who are really with us, since their way of life anticipates their faith, and they need only the name “Christian” to add to their good works.

One of these was my father, a foreign shoot, but inclining toward us by his way of life. He had come so near to perfection in wisdom and moderation (*sophrosyae*), that he was at the same time most fervently loved and most decorous and modest — qualities which are combined in the same person only with great difficulty. What greater and more obvious testimony is there to his righteousness than that while holding a public office second to none, he never once enriched himself by a single penny, though he saw the others casting the hands of Briareos into the public funds, becoming swollen by these evil means? For this is how I describe unrighteous wealth.

These things also provide no little evidence for his prudence, but I will give more examples in the course of my speech. It seems to me that he attained to the Faith as recompense for such conduct. How this happened — a matter too important to keep silent about — I will now set forth.

I have heard the Scripture say, “Who can find a valiant woman?” [Prov.31:7]; and that she is a gift from God; and that a good marriage is arranged by the Lord. Even non-Christians believe the same thing, since they say, “A man can win no greater prize than a good wife, nor a worse one than her opposite.”

And no one can be mentioned as being more fortunate in this respect than my father. Indeed, I think that if anyone had tried to bring about the very best of marriages, from the ends of the earth and from every race of men, he could not have found a better or more harmonious one than this. For in this case, the most excellent of men and of women were so united into one, that their marriage became no less a union in virtue than of their bodies. And while they excelled all others, they could not excel each other, because in virtue they were equally matched and equally honored.

The woman who was given to Adam to help him — since it was “not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18) — instead of a partner (*synergou*)” became an enemy, and

instead of a yokefellow (homozygos) an opponent, deceiving the man by means of pleasure, and estranging him from the tree of life by the tree of knowledge.

But she who was given by God to my father became not only his partner, but what is more marvelous, even his leader, drawing him on to the highest excellence by her actions and her words. She did consider it best to allow herself to be ruled by her husband according to the law of marriage in all other respects, but in the realm of piety she was not ashamed to offer herself as his teacher. Right it is to marvel at this conduct of hers, but even more should we marvel at his willingness to submit to her.

While other women have been greatly honored and extolled for their natural and artificial beauty, my mother has acknowledged only one kind of beauty — that of the soul. She has only been concerned with preserving — or rather, restoring as much as possible — the divine image within her. Cosmetics and other devices for adornment she has renounced as only befitting the women of the theater. The one true form of noble birth which she has recognized is godliness, and the knowledge of where we have come from and where we are meant to go.

The only safe and unassailable form of wealth has been, for her, to divest herself of her goods for the sake of God and the poor, and especially for those less fortunate ones among her own kin. And she has considered that to give only what is absolutely necessary is more a reminder than a relief of their distress, but to provide more liberally brings stable honor and most perfect consolation.

Some women have excelled in thrifty management of the home, and others in the pursuit of godliness. Yet even though it is difficult to achieve both of these things, she has surpassed everyone in both of them — by her eminence in each of them, and by the fact that she alone has combined them together. Even as the prosperity of her household increased through her wise and careful oversight, according to the injunctions and laws of Solomon concerning a valiant wife (Prov. 31:10-31), and as if she had no concerns about piety, so also did she offer herself to God and apply herself to divine things, as if she were completely released from household duties. She allowed neither aspect of her life to interfere with the other, but rather made each one confirm and strengthen the other.

What time or place for prayer has ever escaped her? Each day this has been more important for her than everything else. Indeed, who has had such hope as she to receive immediately those things for which she asked in prayer? Who has paid such reverence to the hand and countenance of the priests? Or has so honored every kind of philosophical pursuit? Who has subdued the flesh more by fasting and vigilance? Or has stood like a pillar at the all-night psalmody as well as that during the day? Who has loved virginity more, yet kept upholding the marriage bond? Who has been a better ally of orphans and widows? Or has helped so much to lighten the sufferings of the mourner?

These things are perhaps small, and some might even find them contemptible, since they are not easily attainable for most people (for through envy that which is not easily reached becomes somehow not even credible). But to me these things are exceedingly praiseworthy, since they were the outcome of her faith, and the undertakings of her spiritual zeal.

Nor did she allow her ears or her tongue, which had heard and spoken divine things, to be defiled by Greek myths and theatrical songs — for she understood that nothing unholy is fitting for the holy. And what is still more amazing, even though she was exceptionally moved by the sufferings even of strangers, she never yielded to the external signs of grief so as to ever allow a sound of woe to break forth from her during the Eucharistic liturgy, or to let a tear fall from her mystically sealed eyes. She also never allowed a trace of mourning to remain on a day of festival, despite her many occasions for grieving. For a God-loving soul regards everything human in the light of divine things.

I will keep silent about certain even more ineffable things, of which God is witness, and which she has confided to her faithful handmaidens. Those things which concern me are perhaps unworthy of mention, since I have proved to be unworthy of the hope which she cherished regarding me. Still, it was a great undertaking on her part to promise me completely to God before my birth, without worrying about what the future would bring, and to offer me up immediately after I was born. Through God's goodness she has not completely failed in this prayer; her propitious sacrifice was not rejected.

Some of her virtues she displayed early in life; others she acquired gradually throughout her life. As the sun most pleasantly casts its morning rays, but becomes hotter and more brilliant at midday, so also did she. For though, from the beginning, she began to radiate no small degree of godliness, she has shone forth at the end the full light.

So it was that he who had established her in his house had at home no little spur to godliness — for his wife, due to her origin and her descent, was a lover of God and Christ, and her patrimony was virtue. For unlike him, she had not been cut from a wild olive tree and grafted into a good one.

In their early years together, she could not bear to be unequally yoked with him, due to the super-abundance of her faith. While she was the strongest and most courageous of women, this alone she was not able to bear — being only half-united to God, due to the estrangement of him who was a part of herself, and the failure to add to the bodily connection a complete union of spirit.

So she fell before God night and day, beseeching Him for the salvation of her “head” with much fasting and many tears. And she diligently devoted herself to her husband, influencing him in many ways, through reproaches, admonitions, attentions, and estrangements. But most of all, she won him by her own character, and especially her fervor for godliness, such as is able to bend and soften the soul so that it yields willingly to the pressure of virtue. The drop of water constantly striking the rock surely will hollow it, and eventually achieves its desire. And this is what happened, as we know.

These prayers and hopes of hers arose not from the fervor of her youthfulness, but of her faith. For indeed, no one was as confident of things present as she was of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1), since from her own experience she knew the munificence of God. For the salvation of my father, two things worked together — the gradual healing of his reason, and a vision in dreams which God often bestows upon a soul worthy to be saved.

And what was the vision? This is to me the most precious part of the story. He saw himself singing a certain verse from the psalms of the holy David — something he

had never done before, though his wife often had asked and supplicated for such a thing. The verse was, “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord’” (122:1). Though the psalm was strange to him, yet the desire it expressed arose within him.

When she heard about this from him, believing that her prayers had been answered, she seized the moment, and immediately replied that the vision would bring the greatest pleasure if it were accompanied by its fulfillment. With her joy making clear the greatness of the blessing, she urged his salvation forward, lest anything intervene to hinder the call and dissipate the object of her longing.

It happened that at this very time many bishops were hastening to Nicea to oppose the madness of Arius — since the wickedness of dividing the Godhead had just arisen. So my father gave himself to God and to these heralds of Truth, confessing his desire and seeking from them the common salvation. One of these bishops happened to be the famous Leontius, who at that time was ruling over our own city.

Here it would be a great injustice against grace if I passed by in silence the wonder which was then bestowed upon him by grace. And the witnesses of the miracle were not a few! The teachers of doctrinal and liturgical exactitude made a spiritual mistake; the ceremony became a prophecy of the future, for the prayer for the ordination of a priest was mixed with that of admission into the catechumenate! O involuntary initiation! For on bended knees he received the words making him a catechumen, in such a way that many of those present, of both lofty and of humble intellect, prophesied the future, being convinced by no obscure signs of what was to be.

After a short time, this marvel was followed by another, the account of which I will commend to the hearing of the faithful (for nothing that is good can be entrusted to profane minds). He was approaching that regeneration through water and the Spirit by which we confess to God the formation and perfection of our inner man according to Christ, and the transformation and refashioning from what is earthly to what is of the Spirit. He was approaching with warm desire and radiant hope, to be cleansed in the laver as much as possible — indeed, to be purified in soul and body to a much greater degree than those who were to receive the tablets from Moses. For their purification involved only their clothing, and a slight restriction of their eating, and a short period of continence. But for him, all of his past life had been a preparation for this enlightenment, so that his own purity sealed the baptismal gift — perfection being entrusted to purity, and the blessing being subject to no risk in one so confident to receive the grace.

And as he was coming up out of the water, there flashed around him a light and a glory worthy of the disposition with which he approached the gift of faith. This was seen by some of those attending the service, who at first kept quiet about it, each one thinking that he alone had seen it, but who then talked about it with one another. But to the one administering the baptism and chrismation, it was so clearly evident that he was not able to hold back the mystery, but publicly cried out that he was anointing with the Spirit his own successor (as bishop).”

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And indeed, several years later, Saint Gregory the Elder did become Bishop of Nazianzus.

Saint Nonna followed her husband into the Heavenly Kingdom shortly thereafter. The Church remembers her on August 5, and her husband on January 1.

Their other child, a son named Caesarius, was court physician to the Emperor; he also has been canonized by the Church (March 9 in the Russian Church, and February 10 in the Greek Church). Thus, both the parents and all the children of this family are canonized Saints.

Taken from the book, “Marriage as a Path to Holiness” by Drs. David and Mary Ford