

CONCERNING THE FAITH

INTRODUCTION

This brief treatise addressed to the Tribune Simplikios contains nothing especially revealing with regard to the thought of Gregory of Nyssa (+c.395). It deals with one of the most fundamental tenets of Christian faith, namely, the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, two Persons of the Blessed Trinity who are equal in their divine nature with the Father. As Gregory says towards the end of this treatise, "It [the Holy Spirit] has one uncreated nature [*aktiston phusin*] shared by both Father and Son" (J.67.5). Gregory recognizes the importance this Spirit plays in our sanctification in his concluding paragraph which draws a parallel between two uses of *pneuma*, "spirit" and "wind" when quoting from Amos 4.13:

He who forms the thunder and creates the wind [*pneuma*]...The prophet [Amos] speaks of another spirit [*pneuma*] which is created in the 'strength of thunder' and does not refer to the Holy Spirit [*Pneuma*]. (J.67.9-13)

This verse is used to introduce a favorite theme not only of Gregory but of virtually every Church Father, namely, our divinization or assumption of those heavenly qualities in our human nature. Due to the brevity of **Concerning the Faith**, it may be helpful to illumine its intention (namely, our sanctification by all three Persons of the Trinity) with an excerpt followed by one from Gregory's **Commentary on the Song of Songs**:

Therefore faith in the Gospel is firm and unmoved as those persons who pass by faith from flesh to spirit. As the Lord says, "whoever is born from flesh is flesh, and whoever is born from Spirit is spirit" [Jn 3.6] (J.67.14-18)

...for the nature of the parent is recognized in the child. Since what is born of the Spirit is spirit, the offspring is a dove. Indeed, the mother is the Dove which descended from heaven at the Jordan River, as John testifies [Jn 1.32]...And the fact that they [the daughters of Jerusalem] praise the dove shows their zeal to attain what they praise until all become one. (J.468-9)

Because the Holy Spirit is the bond between Father and Son, it thereby shares the qualities of the other two Persons. This unique character takes the best of both, as it were, and offers it to us "that he might renew the path to human salvation which had been corrupted" (J.63.8-14). Since the Spirit embodies the fullness of that oneness proper to the Blessed Trinity, it is only natural that this same Person impart the same oneness to us

who are endowed with a mortal human nature thereby restoring us to God's image and likeness.

The bishop of Nyssa presents the classic distinction between the created [*gennetos*] and uncreated [*agennetos*] natures, that is, the distinction between divinity and createdness. He uses the familiar example of Adam and Abel whose births differed in that the former was created directly by God while the latter came into existence through conventional human birth. Gregory then proceeds to apply this example to the divine generation of the Son, Jesus Christ, from his Father:

Because the divine teachings posit no difference between not being begotten and being begotten, and just as Adam and Abel are one human nature, so the Father and the Son have one divine nature. (J.65.20-4)

After introducing his readers right from the beginning to the command found in Ps 80.10 and Ex 20.3 which prohibits the worship of alien gods, Gregory then succinctly takes up the difficult problem posed by Prov 8.22 ("The Lord has created me") which in his own words, "offers a strong argument to prove that the Creator and Maker of all things is created" (J.63.23-4). This "strong argument" for the created nature of the Son, Jesus Christ, refers to those "heretics who say [that]...if the Only-begotten does not share this true nature, God is alien and not our God" (J.62.1-3). The heretics to whom Gregory refers are the Arians who denied the divinity of Christ, saying that although divine in some way, he was essentially a created being. Thus Prov 8.22 became a favorite weapon in their arsenal to refute the Orthodox Christian teaching on Christ's divinity. It is precisely to refute this false yet widely held belief that Gregory refers to the tradition distinction between created and uncreated natures already referred to above, namely, *gennetos* and *agennetos*. One could say that the short treatise **Concerning the Faith** revolves around this central issue and is a summary presented to a military tribune by the name of Simplikios.

One particular offshoot of Arianism which the bishop of Nyssa had to confront was represented by a contemporary, Eunomius, whose basic position was that God is knowable because he is simple unity. Although both men share belief in God's basic simplicity, the latter uses the term *agennesia*, "unbegottenness," the essential divine quality which affirms God's uniqueness, whereas Gregory uses the same term against any hierarchy of being within the Godhead. In the words of Frances Young which echo those of J.64.16-18, ("those who apply the notions of less and greater to the Son and Father should pay heed to Paul when he says that the immeasurable cannot be measured," 2Cor 10.13), "To speak of 'large' and 'small,' or 'before' and 'after' introduces compositeness into the single unity of the undivided divine substance...there cannot be degrees of Being

or priorities of Being"¹.

With respect to Prov 8.22 which to heretical eyes intimates that the Son, Jesus Christ, was created and not fully God, refer to a passage from **Against Eunomius** where Gregory of Nyssa explains this verse in the larger context with regard to the definition of a proverb which to him has an indirect significance. With this in mind, the verse under question cannot be interpreted literally:

Accordingly the words "created me" do not proceed from the Divine and immortal nature, but from that which was commingled with it in the Incarnation from our created nature.²

Another aspect which ties into this role played by Prov 8.22 may be seen in the concept of *diastema*, "interval of time," as first used by the Stoics in a philosophical sense. Gregory incorporated it into the Christian struggle against Arianism which claimed that a time existed when Jesus Christ as Son of the Father did not exist. Such a view admitted an interval...a *diastema*...between the two divine Persons with the result that Eunomius claimed that the Father was older than the Son. It was in his struggle with Eunomius to safeguard Christ's divinity that Gregory of Nyssa became the only theologian to make thorough use of its opposite meaning, *adiastatos*, literally, "unextended" or "having no interval." Numerous instances of this term are found in his lengthy treatise, **Against Eunomius**. On one hand, *adiastatos* means that no temporal gap exists between the three divine Persons while on the other hand, *diastema* is distinctive of the ontological difference between God and creation. To cite the difference between the uncreated and created realms as these two terms signify, consider the following passage from Gregory's **Concerning Those Who Have Died**:

What is the divinity which the soul resembles? It is not the body, lacks form, likeness, quality, figure, depth, place, time and anything else which resembles material creation; rather, once all these attributes are stripped away, the soul reveals its nature which is spiritual, immaterial, invisible, incorporeal and unchangeable. If we contemplate the stamp of the archetype, the soul necessarily conforms itself according to that image. The soul is recognized by its characteristics, that is, as being immaterial, without form, spiritual and incorporeal. (J.41.25)

¹¹ **From Nicaea to Chalcedon**, (London, 1983), p.111.

²² **The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers**, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1972), p.140. For a commentary on how this text applies within the context of **Concerning the Faith**, cf. **Gregoire de Nyse et L'Hermeneutique Biblique** by Mariette Canevet (Paris, 1983), pp.268-73.

Such resemblance to divine transcendence, "the stamp of the archetype," is at the core of Gregory's teaching on our being made in the image and likeness of God. Terms which relate to this such as "spiritual, immaterial, invisible, incorporeal and unchangeable" quoted just above are the same characteristics of the Holy Spirit by whose power and birth "believers have become spirit." (J.67.19-20).

The critical text of **Concerning the Faith** may be found in **Gregorii Nysseni Opera**, vol. iii, part i; edited by Fridericus Mueller, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1958. The edition by J.P. Migne may be found in **Patrologia Graeca** edited by J.P. Migne, Paris, vol. 45, 1858, cols. 136-145.

THE TEXT

*To the Tribune Simplikios:
Concerning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*

[**M.136 & J.61**] God has summoned us through the prophet neither to consider any new God nor to worship a strange God [Ps 80.10]. Furthermore, it is clear that anything considered new is not eternal, while on the other hand it is claimed that anything eternal is not new. Thus whoever does not believe that the Only-Begotten [Son] God is eternally from the Father does not deny him to be something new. God is not something new, for Scripture says, "You will not have a new God" [Ps 80.10]. The person who claims that a time existed when there was no Son denies his divinity. Again [Scripture] charges us with regard to the worship of an strange god, "You shall not worship an alien god" [Ex 20.3]. We believe that an alien god has nothing to with our God. [**M.137**] What, then, is our own God? It is clear that God is true. What is alien? Namely, that which is antagonistic to the [**J.62**] true God's nature. If, as the heretics say, our God is the true God and if the Only-Begotten [Son] does not share this true nature, God is alien and

not our God. But the Gospel says that sheep fail to obey a stranger [Jn 10.4]. The person who declares that he [Christ, the Only-Begotten] is created conceives that his nature alien from the true God. Then what do they propose when saying that he is created? Do they worship a created god or not? If they do not worship [such a god], they follow the Jews who deny adoration of Christ; if they owe obeisance, they are idolaters, for they worship something adverse to the true God. But it is equally impious not to worship the Son and to adore a strange god. We must say that the true Son is of the true Father in order that we may venerate him and not be condemned as worshipping an alien god.

Some say that the following verse from Proverbs, "The Lord has created me" [Prov 8.22], offers a strong argument to prove that the Creator and Maker of all things is created, a statement which behooves us to say that the Only-Begotten [Son of] God accomplished much on our behalf: the Word became flesh, God became man and he who is incorporeal assumed a body. Furthermore, he was made sin, a curse, a stone, an axe, bread, sheep, way, door, rock and many such things without assuming their nature, [J.63] became them for our sake. In the same way when the Word became flesh and God became man, the Creator became created for us, for flesh is created. Therefore the prophet says, "Thus says the Lord who formed me from the womb to be his servant" [Is 49.5]. Through Solomon he also said, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his ways" [Prov 8.22], for as the Apostle [Paul] claims, all creation serves him [Rom 8.21 & 22; Judith 16.14]. Thus he who was formed in a virgin's womb is, according to the prophet, a slave, not Lord. This is the one who is man according to the flesh in whom God is revealed and who was created in the beginning of his ways. It is not God but man in whom God was manifested that he might renew the path to human salvation which had been corrupted. Since we know [M.140] two things concerning Christ, one divine and the other human (divine in nature while man according to his dispensation), it follows that we attest to the eternity of his divinity and assign createdness to human nature. The prophet says that he was formed a slave in the womb, and according to Solomon he was manifested through this slave-like creation in the flesh.

When they [i.e., heretics] say, "if he existed, he was not begotten," and "if he was begotten, he did not exist," they seem to claim that it is unnecessary to attribute the properties of fleshly birth to the divine nature. Bodies which did not exist were born; however, God brings into existence what did not exist, and he [Christ] does not come into being from what did not exist. For this reason Paul calls him the seal of glory [Heb 1.3] that we might learn that just as a lamp [J.64] emits light which is one with its source (for both a lamp and its light give off brightness), so the Apostle invites us to understand that the Son comes from the Father and the Father does not exist without the Son. Glory does not endure without reflection in the same way that a lamp has radiance. This example clearly shows that [Christ's] testimony to his glory (for if there is no glory, neither would there be radiance); anyone who says that his splendor never existed reveals

that neither is there glory when splendor is absent because glory without splendor is impossible. It is thereby impossible to say that if splendor existed, it [glory] did not, and if it did exist, [glory] did not exist: such words are absurd when applied to the Son who is the [Father's] splendor.

Those who apply the notions of less and greater to the Son and Father should pay heed to Paul when he says that the immeasurable cannot be measured [2Cor 10.13], for the Apostle says that the Son is the stamp of his substance [Heb 1.3]. It is clear that the Father's substance and his stamp are one because the stamp can not be inferior to this substance. The great John teaches a similar doctrine when he proclaims that "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" [Jn 1.1]. He said that [Christ] was in the beginning, not after the beginning, thereby showing that the beginning [**J.65**] never lacked the Word [*alogos*]. The words he presented, namely, the Word was with God, signified [**M.141**] that the Son lacked nothing with regard to the Father because the Word is considered as belonging to the undivided God. If the Word lacked something in his own greatness so that he could not be with God who is complete, we are compelled to consider the Word's transcendence as not fully the word of God [*alogos*]. But the majesty of the Word is revered along with all the greatness of God, and the divine teachings allow no room to such notions as greater or less.

Those who assert that the begotten and unbegotten natures are dissimilar do not teach nonsense when considering the example of Abel and Adam. According to the natural generation of men, Adam was not begotten while Abel was begotten from Adam. But he who was begotten [*gennetos*] was not unbegotten [*agennetos*], and he who was begotten was born. Nothing prohibits Adam to be a man by not being born. The birth of Abel was according to human nature, but he was man because his birth differed [from Adam's]. Because the divine teachings posit no difference between not being begotten and being begotten, and just as Adam and Abel are one human nature, so the Father and the Son have one divine nature.

Those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit also say that the Lord is created, and the church equally believes that the Son [**J.66**] and Holy Spirit are uncreated. Therefore all creation is good through participation in the transcendent [God], while the Holy Spirit lacks no goodness (for as Scripture testifies, it is good by nature). Because creation is guided by the Spirit, the Spirit grants direction; creation is led [**M.144**] while the Spirit leads; creation is consoled while the Spirit consoles; creation is subservient while the Spirit is free; creation learns wisdom while the Spirit bestows the grace of wisdom; creation receives gifts while the Spirit bestows them according to its own power [1Cor 12.11]. All these things the Spirit effects as one and the same, distributing them to each as it wills. One can find many illustrations in Scripture every type of lofty and divinely fitting name which apply to the Father and Son: incorruptibility, blessedness, goodness,

wisdom, power, justice and sanctity. Every honorable name thus speaks of the Holy Spirit as well as the Father and Son; only the persons are fully distinct from each other. By this I mean neither should we consider the Father to be the Holy Spirit nor the Son: Scripture applies other names to the Father and Son which also pertain to the Holy Spirit. For this reason we understand that the Holy Spirit transcends creation. Therefore the Father and Son are similarly regarded along with the Holy Spirit. The Father **[J.67]** and Son transcend creation as Scripture testifies with regard to the Holy Spirit. Therefore a sound teaching must be presented to any person who maintains that the Holy Spirit is a creature: it has one uncreated nature shared by both Father and Son.

Since some persons consider the Holy Spirit to be a creature, we offer the prophet's voice which says, "I am he who strengthens the thunder and creates the wind and announces his anointed [i.e., Christ] to men" [Amos 4.13]. The prophet speaks of another spirit which is created in the "strength of thunder" and does not refer to the Holy Spirit. The mystic word calls the Gospel "thunder." Therefore faith in the Gospel is firm and unmoved as those persons who pass by faith from flesh to spirit. As the Lord says, "Whoever is born from flesh is flesh, and whoever is born from the Spirit is spirit" [Jn 3.6]. Thus it is God who confirms **[M.145]** believers in faith through the thunderous Gospel as spirit who by birth from the Spirit have become spirit through such thunder. This person proclaims Christ, for as the Apostle says, "No one can call Jesus Christ 'Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" 1Cor 12.3].