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## THE THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA

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### ABSTRACT

*This article presents the anthropological concept of Saint Gregory of Nyssa. The dilemma in which humanity finds itself when it tries to rationally discover what belongs to God and man can only be solved in the golden mystery given by divine revelation, therefore, no matter how advanced from a scientific point of view, it would human thinking, "face to face" with the divine-human indescribability, collapses into derisive reasonings and sophisms that do nothing but deceive through equivocal answers, deepening the mystery, even more, placing man and God in radically different frames.*

**Keywords:** anthropological; Christianity; Saint Gregory of Nyssa.

### INTRODUCTION

Man has a dynamic life. Of all beings, only man is fundamentally penetrated by the mystery of love which from within directs him towards a natural communion, which reveals a personal and conscious existence incorporated in an indissociable psychosomatic unity, with immeasurable psychic depth; free, master, rational, knowledgeable, etc. These are the attributes that eloquently reveal the true constitution of man. The eternal value of the human person, the uniqueness of his being achieved through the unity of contrasts that man represents as body and soul, shows that the person is not brought into the world by God in isolation, as a uniform abstract achievement, separated from nature, from being. The human person presents himself in the complex context of the bonds of love and cares manifested towards himself and other persons different from him, but who share the same common nature in which the divine presence dwells mysteriously.

The ANTHROPOLOGY OF SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA is part of a particular issue that philosophical research has sought to deepen by first-order reflection - metaphysics. If the body comes by birth from the bodies of the parents, the soul has an entirely different essence from the body through which it induces life. The soul is immortal, and immortality is somewhat of its essence.

In the space of patristic thinking, the problem of the soul is open, being a theologian. Saint Gregory of Nyssa presents very clearly the teaching about the soul assumed by the Eastern Patristics. Unlike Platonism, Gregory of Nyssa bases the immortal essence of the soul not on pre-existence or metempsychosis, but on resurrection understood as a continuous state of happiness, of knowledge, and love as spiritual progress – *epektasis*.

## 1. THE TEACHING OF THE SOUL AT SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA

In patristic thinking, the soul created by God is the reality (essence) that forms a unity together with the body. It has the property of being untouchable and uncontained materially, endowed with reason, self-awareness, and free will, immortal, immaterial, unique, and unitary, indelible, and unrepeatable. The soul through its faculties directs the human person towards spiritual living.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa (335? –394 AD) formulated the teaching about the soul about the process of apophatic knowledge. Therefore, the demonstrative approach has as its starting point what the revelation says about God to find in man what corresponds to the divine image<sup>1</sup>. The human person as the image of God is a great mystery, it is the mystery of the divine seal on the earthly human nature, which is revealed only after purification and cleansing of passions that illuminates and establishes the mind in the above, having as its target and daily virtue the virtue, to acquire salvation by appropriating the reconciliation made by Christ's sacrifice, which restores the harmony lost through sin, harmony supported by the unifying atmosphere of grace achieved in connection with God. Through the power of knowledge and the freedom to choose, man tends toward God, but he can only know Him in a special relationship, and by knowing Him, he cannot overcome Him, because this knowledge is absolute and divine. The man knows the truth through cooperation with God, through the working power of grace given by Christ, but he does not use this power only as a tool that works alone and forces it to work. He freely accomplishes everything that leads him to salvation, salvation being the very will of God who deifies, being realized in relational connection both with God and with his peers, which makes humanity be likened to the existing first given by the breath of the Spirit Saint.

Man is a synthesis of the material and the spiritual world, the only being created in the image and likeness of God. Man, through the power of the rational soul, thinks beyond the sensible, and understands that the universe is a real thought independently of the senses, as we think of the sun and the other stars. As a bearer of the divine image, he will be guided by his reason and free will. In these two traits, the divine given of the human condition is best reflected. In Saint Gregory, the face does not mean, as in Platonism, the uneven analogy of the sensible world about the intelligible world, but participation, a communion, but this without assuming a transfer of substance. There are two levels of the image in his thinking: Christ – Logos of the Father, archetypal image, and man, the face of the Logos, the level in which the image assumes the ontological distinction between created and uncreated. The biblical account presents the way man was created as follows: „*Then the Lord God took dust from the earth and made man and breathed into him the breath of life...*”. *Scripturally, human nature is constituted in a dual way, body, and soul, permeated by grace, by the breath of life so that "the earthly may rise to divinity and a single grace may guide and pervade the whole creature ... which became the image of the power of up"*<sup>2</sup>. The grace instilled in man by God makes the biological structure a living being with a life-generating soul. The "breath of life" makes man capable of dialogue, a dialogue meant to last continuously. Saint Gregory of Nyssa bases man's relationship with God on the affinity achieved between the image and the Model, on man's essential participation in the divine glory in which he enjoys the infinity and the illumination of the simplicity of the Triune Persons. Central to the biblical act of making man is the breath of life that generates the soul.

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Losski, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Traducere, studiu introductiv și note Pr. Vasile Răducă, Anastasia, Bucuresti 1998, p.144

<sup>2</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechetical Word*; VI 2, Sophia, București 1993, p. 34

Once descended into the body, the soul develops and discovers man as the image of God. Therefore, human existence is based on an act of sharing, of giving as an expression of divine love. “*Look at the harmony of the universe, the heavenly and earthly wonders, as well as the fact that the elements, although they are opposed to each other, by their nature, nevertheless all intertwine in a communion with a view to the same goal, helping each in part, with their power, to perpetuate the whole.*”<sup>3</sup> The actual act of creating man presupposes dialogue or relationship (to interact), therefore it is more of an act of sharing God's breath (grace) with man.

For Saint Gregory of Nyssa: „*the soul is a created being endowed with life and endowed with the thought which of itself infuses into the organic and sensitive body the power of life and feeling, the power of knowing so long as the Nature of the body admits these activities by its composition*”<sup>4</sup>. The soul's quality of rationality unique to man makes a connection with divinity possible. The special dignity of man is demonstrated by the fact that of all beings, only His body resurrects and goes to immortality. The soul synthetically includes the image of God that reflects on all nature and gives it the quality of mastery, of leading: „*ordained that man should come first as a spectator of so many wonders, and secondly as their master so that by using them he would realize who it is who gave them, and through the beauty and majesty of the whole view to be urged to walk in the footsteps of the unnamed and indescribable power that made them...*”<sup>5</sup>. Without arguing for preexistence and reincarnation the soul is unique and unitary in the thought of Saint Gregory of Nyssa and has three main activities or works:

- mind (nous) – reason, generator of acts of knowledge. The mind to be called the thinking soul has an ontological character and represents the main faculty corresponding to the soul. After the fall into sin, two other parts anger and lust accidentally appeared, these are not innate but have their roots in the beginnings of the soul. From anger and lust, all other passions develop. Out of anger and lust grow the passions called wounds which appear in the thinking chamber of the soul.
- anger, and impulsivity are defined as starting to harm.
- lust (concupiscence) – as the potency of all desires or will. “*Lusts are longings for what we lack, desire to live in pleasure, or pain for pleasure we cannot attain, or striving after pleasure that cannot be fulfilled*”<sup>6</sup>.

The image of God according to which man was created represents one of the fundamental problems in Christian theology. The theme of the face is full of mystery, being linked to the nature of man as an ontological given, through which the dignity, royal status, and personal value of man are reflected, as well as his role, that of a relational being fit for the special relationship with God. The word face “eikon” – defines what man is in himself in a natural, ontological way. The natural in the original state of the face reflected in itself the state of grace, grace being the medium in which the face – man – is manifested, being intrinsically human nature. The term image shows what man is from creation, and likeness shows what man is in potency, and what he must become through the realization of the image.

<sup>3</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, PSB 30, IBMBOR, București 1998., p 353

<sup>4</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed. cit., pp. 352-355

<sup>5</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *About the creation of man*, II, 1, Traducere Pr. T. Bodogae, în P.S.B. 30, Edit. IBMBOR, București 1998, p. 21

<sup>6</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed. cit., pp. 365

The image of God does not aim only at a certain spiritual or moral function of man, but looks at human nature in its psychophysical integrity, because God created the entire human nature at once, and gave it likeness as the final goal, giving it the quality of a person that encompasses nature entire human being and gives the possibility that through relationship and work it becomes transcendent, deified.

## 2. THE HUMAN BODY IN THE VISION OF SAINT GREGORY

The divine image in the conception of Saint Gregory of Nyssa is unfolded in the body-soul nature of man. Human nature ontologically reflects its divine paradigm, and a methodological similarity with the theory of Platonic ideas can be observed: *"for the face is a face only as long as it does not lack any attributes that can be attributed to the original... if one of the characteristics regarding its Being divine is that of not being able to be understood with the mind, then necessarily and in this respect the face must be similar to the Model..."*<sup>7</sup>. Thus, Saint Gregory of Nyssa bases the kinship of man with God, on the affinity realized between the image and the Model. Man's kinship with God implies, on the one hand, his divine origin, but also the essential need to receive the immeasurable beauty and love of the Creator, fully realized through the union of humanity with the divine in the person of the incarnate Son. The image of man gives him a special royal status: *"the fact that man bears in himself the image of the one who rules over all creatures, does not mean anything other than that from the beginning man's nature was destined to be queen...being thus like a living painting, which has in common with its model both the dignity and the name..."*<sup>8</sup>.

The human soul as the presence of the divine image is kept in good condition as long as it is clean and keeps alive the archetypal likeness: *"the adornment that the soul wears consists precisely in the likeness to the beauty of its Model. And just as the mirror gains its happiness by the way it reflects the face of the one who appears in it, we believe that the same relationship is also between the mind and the nature that allows itself to be led and urged, being able, in this way, to gain for itself from beauty and perfection the model"*<sup>9</sup>. The body was created by God originally with a nature strongly imprinted by grace, but after the fall became a dense, carnal concept represented by the tunics of skin. Saint Gregory notices the bivalence of the body, the otherness, on the one hand, which represents the condition of biological mortality, and mortality necessary for the eradication of evil, and on the other hand, it represents the protective clothing of the man in this condition subject to sin. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, in this sense, affirms: *"through a movement of our free will we have become partakers of evil, mixing it into our nature through the mediation of a pleasure...we have transformed ourselves in the image of evil... after the first people were expelled from heaven, the Master covered them with skin clothing. I do not believe that Moses thinks of animal skins as we have imagined, for... the skin separated from the animal to which it belonged is a dead thing, so is the ability to die, which had been wisely taken from the nature of the speechless, he afterward cast it upon men, but not forever... for the garment is a thing outside of us, an object which has a temporal use, but which has nothing to do with our nature. Death ... clothed the outer nature of this nature, not the inner..., without touching the image of God in man..."*<sup>10</sup>. Of course, the body dressed in leather clothes became dense and

<sup>7</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *About the creation of man*, XI, ed. cit., p. 33

<sup>8</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *About the creation of man*, IV, ed. cit., p. 22-23

<sup>9</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *About the creation of man*, XII, ed. cit., p. 37

<sup>10</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *About the creation of man*, XVI, ed. cit., p. 41-43

solid, carnal, but with it, the psychic functions also became carnal and corporeal. According to the Nicene, the leather garments are the fleshly mind concretized with the entry of sin into human nature, because: "the inclination to evil does not come to us from any external force, but as soon as we have chosen evil, it takes existence, producing -se when we choose it"<sup>11</sup>. Panayotis Nellas, commenting on these quotes, says: "*Therefore, if someone wants to fully understand his existence, the good elements, but also the terrifying ones that plague him, man must widen his horizons, ask himself if what he considers natural, is not quite so self-explanatory.... We thus understand why for the Holy Bishop of Nice, in this biological, irrational, material carnality, death, the honors that man finds are inevitably ephemeral..., the certainties of the flesh are killers, meaning death, and bringer of death. ..*"<sup>12</sup>.

The image of God in man is defined as an ontological given (fists) by Saint Gregory of Nyssa. The image presupposes what we call intellectual life (nous) and supernatural life (pneuma): the totality of these two realities constitutes human nature which is opposed by the added instinctual life. The anthropological model used by Saint Gregory imposes a fundamental role of reason (nous) in the moral framework because reason is the faculty closest to divinity. Moreover, thanks to this status conferred by reason, the entire inner life of man will be realized beneficially or not, depending on his ability to reset the soul faculties in the specific order of the beginning, which implies that all starts, and senses are subordinated to reason, the only faculty capable of discerning between what is good and what is bad.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa claims that the soul is thought-bound and manifests itself mainly through the mind, but also two other secondary forms: anger and lust<sup>13</sup>. The ordering faculty of the soul is the mind. The natural relationship between the faculties is achieved only if the mind is the one that rules over the others. The three faculties of the soul relate to each other and influence each other. Thus, according to the order of creation, lust longs for good, for virtue, while irascibility strives for this by opposing evil. Nicene's thinking shows that the soul individualizes the body it traverses, and its presence involves the intellectual part, self-awareness, and free will through which it perceives the biological body, but also the affective, sentimental experience that through grace becomes spiritual-mystical.

### 3. ON THE SOUL AND RESURRECTION

St. Gregory of Nyssa in his Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection summarizes the patristic conception of the soul through his conversation with his sister Macrina, who was near death. The soul has not only the faculty of thought and knowledge but also attraction or repulsion, desire, and passion, lust, and anger. St. Gregory of Nyssa recalls the Platonic allegory of the visitation but does not use it in his argument, preserves the three characteristics of the soul, and subordinates the theories of the philosophical schools to the Scriptures, which, based on divine revelation, represent the only guide of faith<sup>14</sup>.

St Gregory of Nyssa in the Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection uses a demonstrative speech aimed at the unity and simplicity of the nature of the soul located in the sphere of judgments of existence, but also a theoretical speech of judgments of knowledge: "*those who wish to know themselves, in their soul teaches them according to its wise guidance that it is immaterial and incorporeal, that it works and moves according to its*

<sup>11</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *About happiness*, în P.S.B. 29, Edit. IBMBOR, București 1982, p. 372

<sup>12</sup> P. Nellas, *The Deification of Man*, trad. Ioan Ică Jr., ed. a II-a, Editura Deisis, Sibiu 1999, pp. 85, 90

<sup>13</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed. cit., pp. 366-367

<sup>14</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed. cit., p.367

*nature, making itself known to them through the medium of the senses*"<sup>15</sup>. Macrina argues that the soul is immaterial and incorporeal, active, moving according to its nature, but which makes its attributes known through the mediation of the body. The soul through the mind, anger, and lust activates together with the body which has an attraction towards evil. On the contrary, the approach to God is achieved through virtues, this fact is purifying. The argument is supported by the example of the life of Moses, who reached a high spiritual level precisely in the purification of passions. Moses, unlike the people, controlled his anger and lust through reason; these are not part of the soul's nature, they are not ontological, but accidents. Their roots are in the soul, but they are not part of his nature. Lust and anger are but instruments of virtue or vice, of perfection or destruction<sup>16</sup>.

In the thought and work of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, evil is not ontological, it exists only as a state, it has no being, and it lacks good: "*apart from God, there is nothing but evil alone, which, however strange it may seem, has its existence in non-being, because the origin of evil is the lack of what exists.*"<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the Nissan speaks of the human soul stuck to the enslaved life of passions springing from lusts and instincts, this hypothesis is also found in Plato. Evil entered the world through man's free will. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, speaking about the tree of knowledge of good and evil, says: "*the tree from which we gather a mixed knowledge is part of the number of trees that are stopped. Instead, its fruit, whose defender the snake became, is a mixture of contradictions, perhaps because, according to its nature, evil is not offered to us directly and in the face. For if indeed evil did not leave such wretched traces, it would not have been adorned with the label of good, to arouse lusts in those whom it has deceived. This is how it happens that evil was presented in a veiled form, but... it was hidden, the destruction of man... it shows the face of good*"<sup>18</sup>. The fact that man was able to sin is linked to free will, but also to his dual nature, which had two movements, one ascending that belongs to the soul and another descending that belongs to the body. Thus, Adam, the first man seduced by lusts corporeal has acquired the condition that alters human nature. Evil, about human nature, caused pain and suffering that logically and ontologically ends in death, for which the body became carnal. Under the conditions of the "mixing" of good and evil, "*the power of desire no longer goes towards the natural good, the seed of anger no longer generates bravery, and the power of love takes away from spiritual things "going wild beyond measure in the pleasure of the flesh"*"<sup>19</sup>.

A specific problem is the relationship between soul and body, especially with the body identified by the skin tunics. "Saint Gregory expresses through the category of leather tunics the entire psycho-somatic garment of man after the fall."<sup>20</sup> Leather clothes have a dual and necessary character, specific to man. Nicene uses a metaphor of grafting, whereby the good variety is placed upon the wild variety to take from it the vegetative power of the wild. In the same way, leather clothes stand to give man the strength to resist in a world that has gone wild and requires wild skills for survival. There are two types of passions: natural-good, and unnatural-counter-natural. This state of human nature in the condition of leather clothes will end when man, following the Christ Archetype, will put on the "high priest's tunic", that is, the state of resurrection, of deification. The Platonic conception of

<sup>15</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed. cit, p.354

<sup>16</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed. cit, pp. 362-363, 365-366

<sup>17</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed. cit, p 381

<sup>18</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *About the creation of man*, XX, ed.cit, p. 58

<sup>19</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed.cit, p. 394

<sup>20</sup> Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit*, ed.cit., p 188

preexistence and metempsychosis pales in comparison to the resurrection state. At the resurrection, the body will not have the physical qualities of worldly life, being spiritualized or spiritual (1 Corinthians 15, 42-44)<sup>21</sup>. The resurrected body will be like the resurrected body of Christ, a transfigured body (Luke 24, 42-43). He will have a new life appropriated through the boundless path as the blissful state of contemplation of divine goodness and virtues. Resurrection means a perfected state. *"Thus I will say that in the resurrection there would not be any bodily difference between the virtuous and the wicked so that you might think that some have a perfect body, and others give it imperfectly, but as in this life the body of an imprisoned man is the same with that of a free man, but the difference between them in terms of the pleasure or pain they feel is great, so I think the difference between the good and the bad must be counted in the age to come"*<sup>22</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

A defining approach in the Christian space is the thought and work of Saint Gregory of Nyssa. Nicene theology is an expression of what man must and can acquire by being like God. The soul is identified as the central part of man that belongs ontologically to the divine image. The soul together with the body forms man as a person, as a knowing, rational-spiritual being.

Man is a theological, rational, free, eloquent being, he has the tension towards deification planted in his face, which attracts him unconditionally, and frees him from all the weight of sin. The whole world of the first man is an icon, a reflection of God's love. Through man, the world and creation present themselves as a cosmic liturgy and service, a game of love and communion.

In the thought and work of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the soul is unitary and has as its main faculty the mind or reason, to which anger-impulsivity and lust (will) are subordinated. Through reason man is linked to knowledge and love, this fact is possible precisely because the Truth, the One, is founded in the being, and the Being itself is the Truth. In the Platonic conception, Good in the ultimate sense has an impersonal existence, while for Saint Gregory of Nyssa it is identified with God – the Holy Trinity. For St. Gregory, knowledge of the reality to which only the divine being belongs, of what constitutes the true ontology, and not the imagined one, is possible. For non-Christian mystical currents or philosophical epistemology, this fact is impossible. The virtuous soul touches the divine darkness, that luminous darkness – the darkness. Being in the proximity of divinity, the soul reaches the most paradoxical situation possible: it is in front of spring from which, as it drinks, it becomes more and more thirsty. This blissful state perceived as the ecstasy of knowledge and love is defined by Saint Gregory of Nyssa by *epektasis*.

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<sup>21</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed.cit., pp. 404-406

<sup>22</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue about the Soul and Resurrection*, ed.cit., p. 407

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