

# SAINT GREGORY

VOL. ONE  ISSUE ONE

*Nyssa*

A PUBLICATION  
OF ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA  
ORTHODOX CHURCH  
IN COLUMBUS, OHIO

*Spring 2008*

## *Features*

St. Gregory  
of Nyssa  
Father of Fathers

---

My  
Brother's  
Keeper  
An Interview with  
Charles Robbins

---

The  
Eucharist  
Loaves  
A Baker For  
All Seasons



WELCOME TO  
THE FIRST EDITION OF  
ST. GREGORY, NYSSA.

The magazine that you are reading was motivated by the assumption that laymen can effect positive changes in the Church by assisting young men and women through a college scholarship program.

At the heart of this laymen's initiative is a trust from which scholarships will be awarded annually to Orthodox Christian men and women in the North and Central Americas. The trust will be grown from the bequests, gifts and pledges of believers from all jurisdictions of Orthodoxy in America. Scholarships from the trust will expand the pool of educated believers from whom future clergy, bishop and lay leaders will emerge.

Members of the St. Gregory of Nyssa parish in Columbus, Ohio, Diocese of the Midwest, Orthodox Church in America, wrote, edited, and produced this first issue of the magazine. For future issues, we welcome manuscripts from contributors and letters from readers.

For the first edition we focus on St. Gregory of Nyssa, known as the Father of Fathers, younger brother of St. Basil the Great. You also will read about some programs at work in our parish. We believe that by shining a light on our little community you will think of your own parish.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

**E**ssentially, Nyssa is a way to keep you in touch with the scholarship program. We hope to publish twice a year. Our next edition will appear in the fall. In future issues, we hope to deliver stories about the music of the Church, iconography, the Eucharist and stewardship, among others, written by authors who know their subjects. The magazine is free to you.

The St. Gregory of Nyssa community in Columbus hardly qualifies for cathedral status. We comprise about 120 to 130 adult souls, about 35 school children and a very vocal contingent of infants and toddlers. We are rooted in service to the parish and to the Church beyond. Our senior pastor, the Very Rev. Daniel Rentel, likes to say that, nobody ever quits the Church because he or she had to work too hard.

If you come to Columbus looking for us, you won't find any cupolas. Our church is located at Summit and Oakland streets in a storefront—albeit a beautiful, highly stylized storefront, a former Cadillac showroom. We are in the heart of the University district, reflecting the founders' desire to maintain a campus ministry near students attending The Ohio State University. We are on the outer edge of the campus, but close enough that we consult the OSU Buckeyes football schedule to decide our likelihood of becoming gridlocked before or after Great Vespers on Saturdays due to football traffic.

Ohio State isn't our only source of college students. Colleges in the city—Capital University, Columbus State, for openers—and in the area, such as Ohio Wesleyan to our north—also supply us. Parish members willingly provide transportation to the young people who want to attend services.

Another thing you should know about St. Gregory's is that we have four priests. Talk about blessings. In addition to Father Rentel are Fathers Mark Lowery, Kevin Greenwood and James Sizemore. Father Lowery is the first son of the parish to be ordained. Father Mark, as the other two, is a convert. Father Kevin was received into the faith about two years ago, as were Father Jim and his wife, Barbara. Father Daniel is a retired public school teacher, but his brother priests, Fathers Mark and Kevin, have jobs in the secular world.

Father Sizemore was ordained last year, and we speak of him with prayers stuck in our throats. He currently serves as an Army National Guard chaplain who has begun his second tour in Kuwait.

So now you know about our community and what this magazine is about. We hope you find enjoyment as you read. If we stir thoughts about assisting our scholarship trust, we will have fulfilled our mission.

If you have questions, comments and suggestions about what we have set about doing, contact me, Nadine Vallela at [nvallela@AOL.com](mailto:nvallela@AOL.com).

Finally, we are grateful to the underwriters of this first edition, Lew and Billy Rentel of Cary NC. Their willingness to finance this endeavor was a blessing.

*--Nadine Vallela, managing editor*

# SAINT GREGORY

VOL. ONE "NYSSA" ISSUE ONE

## *Nyssa*

ST. GREGORY, NYSSA

is a publication of  
St. Gregory of Nyssa  
Orthodox Church  
in Columbus, Ohio  
[www.stgregs.info](http://www.stgregs.info)

Executive Editor

Victor Rentel

Managing Editor

Nadine Vallela

Art Director

Tony Core

Business Manager

Cathy Vrugitz

Copy Editor

Carol LeMaster

Photographers

Cathy Vrugitz

Tony Core

©2008

ST. GREGORY, NYSSA  
is published two times a year by  
St. Gregory of Nyssa  
Orthodox Church.

ST. GREGORY, NYSSA  
accepts unsolicited manuscripts  
from parishioners; however,  
the editors reserve the right to  
edit and publish manuscripts  
at their discretion.

Send manuscripts to:

ST. GREGORY, NYSSA  
PUBLICATIONS  
2219 Summit Street  
Columbus, OH 43201

Email: [sgn@stgregs.info](mailto:sgn@stgregs.info)

None will be returned without  
a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Contributions may be made to:

**The Orthodox Student Scholarship Fund**  
c/o St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church  
2219 Summit Street  
Columbus, OH 43201

Your contribution is tax deductible.

Copies of ST. GREGORY, NYSSA are distributed to  
Orthodox worshippers throughout the United States.

## *Features*

I

### St. Gregory of Nyssa, Father of Fathers

8

### My Brother's Keeper An Interview With Charles Robbins

15

### The Eucharist Loaves A Baker For All Seasons

## *Departments*

### *From the Pastor*

20

### A Personal Point of View How I Got To Be Who I Am

*by Victor M. Rentel*

St. Gregory of Nyssa was a 4th Century bishop who provided a strong intellectual and spiritual foundation for early Orthodoxy.

*by Victor M. Rentel*

An interview that elects a description of a local "Saturday outreach program", but the core focus of this article is the program's coordinator, his character, and his living faith.

*by Cathy Vrugitz*

The first of a continuing series about the Eucharist, ranging from the various bakers who produce the physical Eucharist to its underlying theology.

*by Father Daniel Rentel*

An autobiographical introduction to the Rector of St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church.

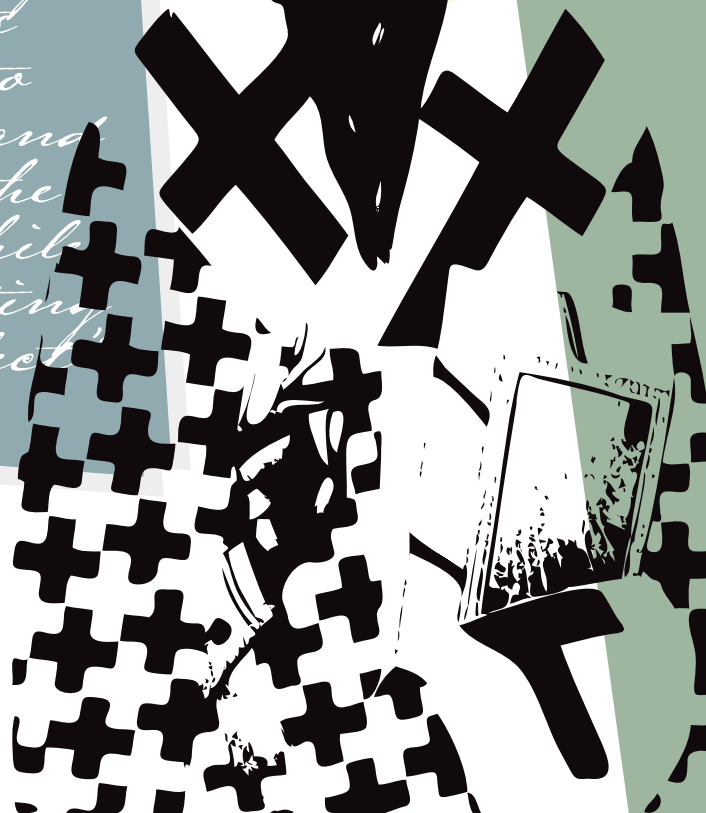
# St. Gregory of Nyssa, The Reluctant Saint

by Victor M. Kentel

**St** Gregory of Nyssa was one of an illustrious and historically prominent handful of early Church leaders and theologians who influenced early Christianity with lasting effects through the present day. Born in South Central Asia in Cappadocia, a province in modern Turkey that is located on an arid high plateau between vast mountain ranges that bracket eastern and western Turkey. Gregory was a younger brother of St. Basil the Great, the significant fourth century theologian and liturgical thinker who established an Eastern Orthodox liturgy still celebrated today. St. Gregory of Nyssa, along with Basil and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus (also called St. Gregory the Theologian) became known as the Cappadocian Fathers, acknowledged by historians and philosophers as having defined fourth century theology in the Eastern Roman Empire as St. Augustine (354-430) is said to have done in the Western Roman Empire.

St. Gregory of Nyssa was born about 335 AD. He spent most of his life in Cappadocia, although some historians believe he was educated in Athens by followers of Plato. Others think that he was educated by St. Basil the Great, who, it is known, was formally educated in the Greek classics. Other historians contend that Gregory of Nyssa

*"He was a gifted writer and speaker who delighted in language and its power to persuade and invoke the senses while illuminating the intellect."*



CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

was in part self-taught from his father's excellent library of Greek classics. A major theme in much of Gregory's work, the search and striving for moral and spiritual perfection, reflects partly these Platonic influences and those of an earlier theologian, Origen. A letter to Gregory from his friend Gregory Nazianzus indicates that the young Gregory was educated in rhetoric and philosophy, possibly outside of Cappadocia. If Basil was, as many historians believe, the younger brother's early teacher, he succeeded fantastically because Gregory became one of the most influential theologians of the early Eastern Church. Not only did Gregory of Nyssa's commentaries, sermons, and catechism sway his contemporaries, but also his theological work and Old Testament commentaries earned the admiration of clerical thinkers and secular philosophers to the present day.

St. Basil the Great was a skilled and powerful ecclesiastical leader who championed an "orthodox" interpretation of the early Christian religion and vigorously contested a mushrooming heresy named after its instigator Arius (c. 256 - 336). Arianism was the burning theological issue of this period. Arius held that Christ was neither divine nor human, but rather a demigod or semi-divine being with God-like attributes. In Basil and Gregory's time, the principal defender of Arianism was Eunomius of Cyzicus (c. 325 - c. 394), who argued that Arianism was essentially a logical offshoot of the concept of God. When Basil died, Gregory of Nyssa assumed leadership for defending Orthodoxy against this heresy. In doing so, he became a brilliant leader of Christian thinkers and began the most productive period of his life. How St. Gregory came to occupy this position in the history of the Church could not easily have been predicted from his earlier outlook and actions.

Gregory was captivated by the humanism of his own historical period. While still young, Gregory appears to have studied and became a teacher of rhetoric. His family, however, tried to persuade Gregory to use his talents and skills in the service of the Church. When Gregory chose a secular career, Basil objected and disputed Gregory's choice with long and impatient letters to the younger sibling. When Basil failed to convince the young Gregory of his error, Basil turned to Gregory's friends to influence him to abandon his chosen vocation. Gregory was not persuaded. Evidence suggests that he married a woman named Theosebeia with whom he lived even after he became a priest and was elevated to bishop of Nyssa. A letter from Gregory of Nazianzus offers condolences to Gregory of Nyssa on the loss of his wife. Ultimately, it seems that St. Basil prevailed and persuaded the reluctant Gregory to enter the priesthood. He became an unenthusiastic cleric and, initially, a halfhearted bishop.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

*Gregory had three brothers. Basil, the oldest, was the bishop of Caesarea and Peter, the youngest, was the bishop of Sebaste, a small town about 200 miles to the south of Caesarea. Another brother, Nectarius, was a lawyer who died very young. Gregory also had five sisters. The eldest, Macrina, was beloved and honored as a saint,*





Gregory's large family, devoutly Christian, was led by a renowned lawyer father and a saintly mother, Emmelia. Gregory had three brothers. Basil, the oldest, was the bishop of Cesarea and Peter, the youngest, was the bishop of Sebaste, a small town about 300 miles to the south of Cesarea. Another brother, Naucratus, was a lawyer who died very young. Gregory also had five sisters. The eldest, Macrina, was beloved and honored as a saint, widely recognized for her devout and holy life in her time. She was Gregory's confidant and sometimes intellectual partner wielding important spiritual influence on Gregory. In contrast to Macrina's spiritual influence on

Gregory, their brother Basil was a dominating intellectual and social force in Gregory's life and probably in Peter's life as well. In a letter to Peter, Gregory expressed his deep gratitude to their older brother whom Gregory described as "our father and our master." The letter conveyed great affection for Basil and for Peter as well. In all likelihood, Basil did play a principal role in the education and upbringing of his two younger brothers, but, as a letter from Gregory Nazianzus suggests, Gregory of Nyssa probably spent time in his early youth in pagan schools whose influence appears to have been substantial.

The impact of Greek philosophy can be observed and appreciated in Gregory of Nyssa's entire body of theology and commentary. He appears to have been deeply influenced by Plato, particularly the Republic, and by other Greek thinkers in his understanding and use of logic and in his appreciation of Hellenistic science. Basil's theology seems equally to have affected Gregory's thinking as well as the work of earlier Christian writers such as Origen and Macarius. All appear to have shaped both Gregory's philosophy and his theology. The mature Gregory, however, created an extensive body of

*Striving toward  
a never fully  
achievable virtue  
is a mystical  
journey through  
life and beyond  
introduced by St  
Gregory of Nyssa  
into Orthodoxy  
and remains a  
core belief that  
continues to  
this day.*

theology and philosophy that is entirely reflective of his own solitary genius.

Aside from Basil, Origen in particular seems to have influenced Gregory. He may have come to know and appreciate Origen's ideas perhaps through Basil's and Gregory Nazianzus' compilation of extracts from Origen's *Contra Celsum*. Their anthology, titled *Philokalia*, brings together

from various works Origen's defense of Christian scriptures against Celsus' disparaging polemic about the poverty of style and lack of elegance in early Christian texts compared with the stylish and graceful work of Greek philosophers who had addressed similar issues. Origen argued that the simplicity and 'poverty of style' of Christian Scripture made these texts accessible to ordinary people who lacked a formal education.

Origen contended that despite its lackluster style, early Christian Scripture was open to interpretation by "the multitudes" noting that, "Even an ordinary reader discovers that many passages have a deeper significance than appears on the surface, significance revealed to devoted students of the Word."<sup>i</sup> Origen contended that to those able to interpret the Word in this manner, that is, to see Jesus' transformation in the Scripture from speaking to the multitudes in the literal sense of text to His Transfiguration on the mountain, "...is the work of the highest and most sublime sense containing the oracles hidden in a mystery which God foreordained before the worlds unto the glory of his righteous ones." Gregory almost certainly was exposed to these lengthy texts and would have had access to others. This vision captures the essence of Origen's theology and is the theological thread that appears to have inspired young Gregory and influenced most of his later theology. In fact, this transcendent mystery is a core element in Gregory's own belief system.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

In theology, Gregory is responsible for the notion of the transcendent perfection of God toward which humans may strive but can never achieve. Accordingly, virtue is a limitless progression, a view unlike the conventional one of Gregory's time, but one that had survived from Plato's work into Gregory's time. In Plato's system of belief, perfection was a static state. To achieve or recover perfection required a great struggle. Gregory's concept of perfection, however, asserted that perfection was never achievable in any sense of completion. One's progress toward it was never ending or transcendent. This was Gregory's concept of *epektasis*. God's transcendent perfection cannot be achieved by mortals. Striving toward a never fully achievable virtue is a mystical journey through life and beyond introduced by St Gregory of Nyssa into Orthodoxy and remains a core belief that continues to this day.

### GREGORY, BISHOP OF NYSSA

Basil's leading role in opposing Arianism suggests why he was intent on making Gregory a bishop. Basil needed loyal bishops to support his drive to suppress Arianism. It is not clear why Gregory changed his mind and decided to enter the religious life. Most probably, Basil and Gregory Nazianzus, the treasured friend, successfully persuaded him to abandon his studies of rhetoric and to continue the religious traditions and convictions of Gregory's family. One explanation is that Gregory visited his brother's monastic community at the family estate at Pontus in the beautiful wooded hills of Ibora. At the monastery with St. Basil was Gregory's treasured friend, Gregory Nazianzus. At Pontus, Gregory of Nyssa is thought to have studied Scriptures and the theological literature of Origen. Although Gregory admired this monastic ideal, there is no evidence that he entertained it for himself. Some speculate that this time at Pontus may have been a retreat before his consecration as bishop, but no proof of this retreat exists. His extant letters do not mention such a withdrawal from the world. In fact, they suggest his opposition to both a monastic vocation and an ecclesiastical see for himself.

Basil, indeed, wrote that it was necessary to overcome his brother's resistance to the idea of holy office. The episcopal office in those times was beset with many dangers. Moreover, in the fourth century, to express dislike of an episcopal appointment and to shrink from this prospect was not uncommon. A candidate's reluctance, however, usually was overcome, and the consecration took place following this show of humility. Whether it was so in Gregory's case, or whether he really did feel his own unfitness, is not known. Gregory was elected to the See of Nyssa, a village on the banks of the Halys River. According to Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil performed the episcopal consecration of his brother before Gregory of Nazianzus had taken possession of the See of Sozima. This event would place the beginning of Gregory of Nyssa's episcopate at about 371. The abrupt change in Gregory's vocation seems more the result in Basil's need for a loyal bishop rather than a sudden conversion. Whatever the circumstance of Gregory's election, Basil apparently regretted at times the removal of his brother from his influence. He complained in his letters about Gregory's hapless and inept interference in his older brother's affairs. The synod called by Gregory at Ancyra in 372 to Basil appeared to be the devastation of his own tireless efforts. In Basil's letters from 375, Gregory seemed to Basil distinctly incapable of leading a church. Similarly, Basil despaired of his brother's lack of pastoral zeal.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

*Nyssa,  
the rural  
town to  
whose  
bishopric  
Gregory  
was  
assigned  
is located  
near Mt.  
Mesogis,  
and for  
the most  
part is  
built  
upon its  
slopes.*





Having been appointed by St. Basil to the inconsequential See of Nyssa, Gregory's presumed lack of administrative talent may have been the basis for his being deposed in 376 by Emperor Valens. Valens, an Arian believer, indeed may have had other interests in unseating Gregory, who was not merely removed from office but was exiled until 378, when Valens died and Theodosius I became emperor. Theodosius favored bishops who upheld the Nicene Creed, and Gregory became heir to his brother's legacy. Basil died in 379. Despite his domineering attitude toward his

# Nyssa

younger brother, Basil's beliefs were actively supported and advanced by Gregory, even Basil's doctrines and teachings about monastic life. In retrospect, Gregory probably was a better administrator than Basil believed, as shown by Gregory's great administrative skill in the critical roles he played in restructuring ecclesiastical affairs at the Council of Antioch. A few years later, at the Councils of Constantinople in 381 and 382, Gregory performed major restructuring roles in these assemblies as well.

Nyssa, the rural town to whose bishopric Gregory was assigned, is located near Mt. Mesogis and, for the most part, is built upon its slopes. Nyssa was divided by a powerful stream that formed a gorge, traversed by a bridge joining the two parts of the town. In another part of Nyssa, an amphitheatre stood with a hidden underground passage for the rapidly flowing stream. Near the stream were two hills, below one of which was a gymnasium for

the town's young people. At the foot of the other hill was a gymnasium for older persons and a market place. To the south of Nyssa stretches a plain extending roughly 100 miles to the coastal range and Tarsus. At first Gregory was resentful of his appointment to the diocese in Nyssa and was disappointed at having to deal with people and their problems. However he apparently grew fond of this rustic village and its people, for upon returning to Nyssa from exile he wrote the following in a letter to St. Basil:<sup>ii</sup>



MT. ERCIYES FROM  
ORTA HISAR RIDGE,  
CAPPADOCIA, TURKEY

1935  
FROM THE G. ERIC AND EDITH MATSON  
PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION,  
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS,  
PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION,  
[LC-DIG-MATPC-12156]

*Nyssa, the rural town  
to whose bishopric  
Gregory was assigned  
is located near Mt.  
Mesogis, and for the  
most part is built  
upon its slopes.*

*There was a chill wind  
blowing through the clouds, bringing  
a drizzle which hit us with its  
dampness. The sky threatened such  
rain as no one had ever known,  
and to our left lay the thunder—  
unending thunder—and quick  
flashes of lightning, thunder and  
lightning in hurried succession, and  
all the mountains in front of us and  
on every side were shrouded with  
clouds...And later the rain fell but*

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

only a little. It was *not unpleasant*, just enough to moisten the air. We were close to home when the cloud bellying above is emptied, and because of the storm, our entrance [sic. to Nyssa] was very quiet, no one being aware of our coming<sup>ii</sup>

And then as we reached the covered porch [sic., of the bishop's residence] the sound of the carriage wheels along the hard dry earth heard, and the people poured out to meet us, as though they had been mechanically expelled from nowhere. I know not how or why it came about, but they were all there flocking about so closely it was not easy to descend from the carriage, for there was not a foot of clear space anywhere. So we persuaded them, though with some difficulty, to allow us to alight and let the mules pass, but the crowd surrounded us and would have crushed us with kindness, and I was near fainting. When we were well within the covered porch, we saw a river of fire pouring into the church, and this came from the choirs of virgins carrying wax candles in their hands as they marched in file through the open doors of the church kindling a blaze of splendor. Then I went into the church and rejoiced and wept with my people—for I wept and rejoiced as they did—and after I said prayers, I hastened to write this letter to Your Holiness...

[Ep. 3]

St. Gregory painted this tumultuous and joyous scene with a flair for detail and tension. He was a gifted writer and speaker who obviously delighted in language and its power to persuade and enlighten the senses and the intellect, a wholly unprecedented feature among writers of his era. In this quality he was unique among the early Church Fathers.

In another letter, this gift is even more brilliantly displayed. Most unusual for the times was St. Gregory's expression of love for nature. He has left us a delightful description of the natural beauties of the surrounding countryside of his place of exile. St. Gregory stayed at the country estate of his friend, Adelphia, a lawyer whom Gregory knew and trusted. In this letter to his brother, Gregory wrote with a keen sense of detail and with an idyllic appreciation of nature and of Asia Minor's longest and most storied river:<sup>iii</sup>

The river Halys gleams like a ribbon of gold through a deep purple robe, and scarlet sand is washed down from the bank to touch the river with redness. High up lie the oak-crowned ridges, all green and worthy of some Homer to sing their praises; and as the oaks wander down the slopes, they meet the saplings planted by men. All over the foothills are vines, some green, others ripe with grape clusters. Here at Vanota, the fruit is ripe but it is otherwise in the nearby villages...Homer never saw the apple tress with such gleaming fruit as we have here,



INTERIOR PAINTINGS  
IN GREEK CHURCH  
[CAPPADOCIA, TURKEY]

1935  
FROM THE  
G. ERIC AND EDITH MATSON  
PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION,  
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS,  
PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS  
DIVISION,  
[LC-DIG-MATPC-12164]

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



*the apples themselves almost the color of apple blossom, so white and shining. Have you ever seen ears as white as newly polished ivory? And what shall we say of the immense heaps of peaches? And what of the pathways beneath the climbing vines, and the sweet shade under the clusters of grapes, and the new wall where the roses climb and the vines trail and twist and form a kind of protecting fortress against invaders? [Ep. 15]*

**T**his passage is a word painting as vivid as any written during the Romantic period 1500 years later with its abundance of writers who captured nature in its full grandeur. It prefigures William Wordsworth's renowned poetic observations in 1793 from a spot near the legendary English ruins of Tintern Abbey:<sup>iv</sup>

**Five** *years have past;  
five summers.  
With the length  
Of five long winters! And again I hear  
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a soft inland murmur, once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
That on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.  
The day is come when I again repose  
Here, under the dark sycamore, and view  
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard tufts,  
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,  
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves  
Mid groves and copses. Once again I see  
These hedgerows, hardly hedgerows, little lines  
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,  
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees...*

(Lines Composed a Few Miles  
above Tintern Abbey, 121)

Gregory's rich chromatic texture, like Wordsworth's, gazing down toward the ruins of Tintern Abbey, appeals especially to the eye but not entirely. Competing warmth and coolness, distance and nearness, stillness and movement reach into the imagination and arouse touch, texture, taste, and movement in quick brush strokes. Gregory's prose reveals a person capable of brilliant play with words and who was wonderfully comfortable with language structures—yet innocent and alive with feeling and curiosity about the natural world and the world of the imagination created by men. This is St. Gregory of Nyssa at his most joyful and pleasurable temper. As we shall see in the next section, his scorn was equally powerful.

### ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO ORTHODOXY

After Basil's death, St. Gregory continued his brother's crusade against Arianism by refuting the Arian theologian, Eunomius, who claimed that a person could attain direct knowledge of the divinity. St. Gregory tirelessly subjected almost every claim that Eunomios had made to derision and mockery in a lengthy essay filled with malice unlike anything Gregory had ever written or would write again. Relentlessly, he challenged Eunomius as follows:<sup>v</sup>

*But how could he have suffered so, if his 'apology' cleared him of these charges? If he successfully adopted an apology to escape from these, that pathetic complaint of his is a hypocritical pretence; if on the other hand he really suffered as he says, then, plainly, he suffered because he did not clear himself by an apology; for every apology, to be such, has to secure this end, namely, to prevent the voting power from being misled by any false statements. Surely he will not now attempt to say that at the time of the trial he produced his apology, but not being*

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



able to win over the jury lost the case to the prosecution. For he said nothing at the time of the trial ‘about producing his apology;’ nor was it likely that he would, considering that he distinctly states in his book that he refused to have anything to do with those ill-affected and hostile dictates. “We own,” he says, “that we were condemned by default: there was a packed panel of evil-disposed persons where a jury ought to have sat.” He is very labored here, and has his attention diverted by his argument, I think, or he would have noticed that he has tacked on a fine solecism to his sentence.

This excerpt is characteristic of this most uncharacteristic diatribe from Gregory. Although occasionally droll, for the most part, it is a cascade of heavy mockery. Fortunately, it stands alone in this respect. With this exception, Gregory’s works were graceful, elegant, kind, and spiritually dazzling. He produced a substantial body of important theology, letters, commentaries, and what today would be considered science. He also captured the natural beauty of landscapes with a skill worthy of the finest Romantic poets. Only three of his many distinctive works will be noted briefly here: his instructions known as, *The Great Catechism*, his extraordinary vision of God set forth in, *The Life of Moses*, and his brilliantly mystical, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. They are a sweet drink from a marvelously rich and holy cup.

*The Great Catechism*<sup>vi</sup> is a set of instructions given to a group of catechists gathered around him. Gregory asks and answers questions in a simple format that encompasses an extraordinary inquiry into the nature of God, human beings, and the relationship between them. The Catechism began with an examination of faith bounded by Hellenistic thought and Judaic belief, with Christianity’s Trinity looming as a great mystery that the human mind and soul must traverse. Gregory proceeded through a series of questions about God’s intentions in creating man, the nature of evil, the reasons for God choosing to take human form, and finally to the nature of the Resurrection and to the sacraments. The clarity and power of Gregory’s explanations of human beings created in God’s image is illustrative of his extraordinary intellect:<sup>vii</sup>

*Thus, then, it was needful for man, born for the enjoyment of Divine good, to have something in his nature akin to that in which he is to participate. For this end he has been furnished with life, with thought, with skill, and with all the excellences that we attribute to God, in order that by each of them he might have his desire set upon that which is not strange to him.*

[*The Great Catechism*, Chapter 5]

This slice of text from the Catechism is typical of Gregory’s incisive simplicity and clarity. In two undemanding and graceful sentences, Gregory reveals the extraordinary significance of our humanity and its elemental relationship to God. His texts were constantly so.

Gregory then argues the case for eternal life:

*Since, then, one of the excellences connected with the Divine nature is also eternal existence, it was altogether needful that the equipment of our nature should not be without the further gift of this attribute, but should have in itself the immortal, that by its inherent faculty it might both recognize what is above it, and be possessed with a desire for the divine and eternal life.*

[*The Great Catechism*, Chapter 5]

THUS, THEN, IT WAS NEEDFUL FOR MAN, BORN FOR THE ENJOYMENT OF DIVINE GOOD, TO HAVE SOMETHING IN HIS NATURE AKIN TO THAT IN WHICH HE IS TO PARTICIPATE. FOR THIS END HE HAS BEEN FURNISHED WITH LIFE, WITH THOUGHT, WITH SKILL, AND WITH ALL THE EXCELLENCES THAT WE ATTRIBUTE TO GOD, IN ORDER THAT BY EACH OF THEM HE MIGHT HAVE HIS DESIRE SET UPON THAT WHICH IS NOT STRANGE TO HIM.

[*THE GREAT CATECHISM*,  
CHAPTER 5]

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



Here, Gregory, in one masterful sentence connects God's infinite existence with the gift of eternal life for mankind and the necessity of our striving for it. In *The Great Catechism*, Gregory set forth the basic tenets on Christianity, explained the Church's foundational theology, and confirmed the singularity and power of the sacraments.

In *The Life of Moses*,<sup>viii</sup> St. Gregory wrestles with the nature and majesty of God through a mystical exploration not only of God but of the process of knowing itself. Gregory describes Moses as trying to achieve perfect intimacy with God and as having an unquenchable desire for completely knowing God. Gregory examines this passion through Moses' three encounters with God. Moses' first encounter with God is the burning bush that Gregory interprets traditionally as light, the symbol of knowledge. When Moses asks God to allow him to see His face, God tells Moses that no man may see God's face and live. Gregory interprets this encounter to mean that God is beyond human understanding, but Moses' undiminished desire reflects a continuing search for intimacy with God.

On Mt. Sinai, Moses again encounters God, but the mountain is shrouded in dark clouds and God is indistinguishable from the cloud. St. Gregory observed that the shroud-like cloud implies that Moses' desire for a full understanding of God is unachievable. St. Gregory uses this encounter to teach that God is completely mysterious and incomprehensible to human beings. In a metaphorical sense, even Moses' successful ascent to the summit of Mt. Sinai and his patient 40-day search were insufficient to achieve a vision of God. The mystery remains.

In Moses' third encounter with God, he asks God to reveal His glory. God responds by sending Moses to a cleft in a rock where He tells Moses that He will reveal Himself there. God then places a Hand over the cleft as He walks by, permitting Moses only to see Him after He has passed. Moses is able only to see God's back. From this third encounter, Gregory argues that Moses discovers that intimacy with God is impossible. God is infinite. Becoming intimate



with God is therefore an infinite process. According to Gregory, "What Moses yearned for is satisfied by the very things which leave his desire unsatisfied." (*Life of Moses II*) His notion of moving ever closer to God, was an unfolding and mysterious process that Gregory believed continued after physical death until the soul ascends to God and to the Resurrection.

*The Life of Moses* enabled Gregory to use allegory as a means for distinguishing between literal biblical text and the spiritual interpretation of it. He defended the allegorical interpretation of Scripture because Christ used allegory to teach and because of its necessity in certain instances where otherwise Biblical text would be immoral or unintelligible. Gregory argued also that because St. Paul endorsed the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, it was appropriate and legitimate. By integrating Scripture with worldly knowledge, Gregory was able to make claims that were logically and internally consistent.

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory's commitment to rational forms of argument is arresting. Scripture for him is the starting point of an intellectual search; and, given that allegory was his most reliable tool of explanation, even Scripture was a rational pursuit within Gregory's worldview. For Gregory, the pursuit was not about reason; because God is completely mysterious and infinitely distant; the pursuit was indeed a mystical movement toward but never reaching its end. The former teacher of rhetoric never forgot his lessons.

No summary or description can render Gregory's mastery and audacity in putting into God's mouth

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



this allegory of the human soul. That the discovery of God is a flight approaching rapture, encompassing both motion and stillness, advancing without movement toward God, introduced mysticism into Eastern Church thought with such power and beauty that it remains an essential and present attribute of Orthodox belief. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory sustains this mystical stance while describing Moses' ascent in the most realistic terms, painting on the senses a tapestry of color, sight, sound, texture, sensation, and driving movement that invites the reader into a vast panorama of thought and spiritual energy, which ultimately denotes Christ. This first soaring mystical text is one of the most brilliant creations in all of Christian literature.

The third text to be illustrated here was written by Gregory at the request of Deaconess Olympias, who persuaded him to write comments about the *Song of Songs*.<sup>ix</sup> Thus, Gregory wrote, *The Commentary on the Song of Songs*, which explains the *Song of Songs* as a mystical treatment of the process of seeking union with God. For Gregory, the *Song of Songs* was Solomon's purification before entering God's sanctuary. At another level, Gregory interpreted the *Song of Songs* as our soul's craving for God's love. He appropriated the sexual images in the *Song of Songs* as a powerful analogy for the mystical love of God and a union of heavenly perfection analogous to earthly marriage. Gregory wrote, "Those who aspire to perfection must be without fear, disdain recompense and love with complete abandonment. Such is the salvation by love taught in the *Song of Songs*." For Gregory, the Shulamite woman's love was symbolically and allegorically depicted through sexual imagery as the human love of Christ in all its depth, passion, and yearning.

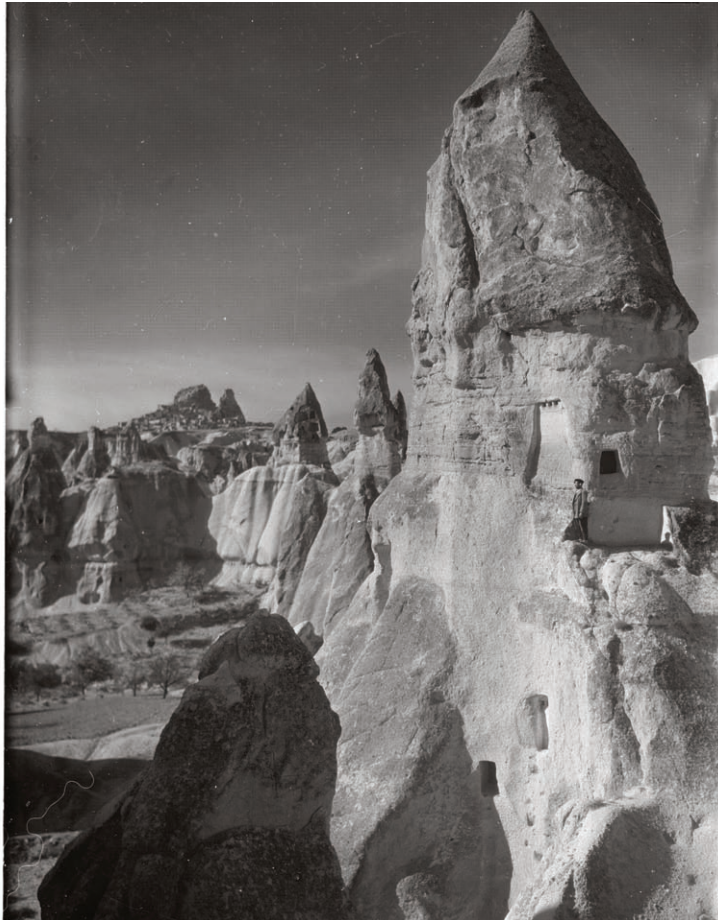
### GREGORY OF NYSSA, FATHER OF FATHERS

In *The Holy Fire*, Robert Payne summarized Gregory's stature and contributions to Orthodox Christian thought in the following graceful passage:

Of the three Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa is the one closest to us, the least proud, the most subtle, the one most committed to the magnificence of man. This strange, simple, happy, unhappy, intelligent and God-tormented man was possessed by angels. A bishop, he hated power, but hated indignity still more. He never saw himself as the little leader, vaulted high in the air, exerting a brief and illusory authority; it was enough to be a man, to wander, to praise God, to delve into the mystery. He employed all of the resources of Greek philosophy to help him in his task, but he also employed those resources that are given only to the shivering contemplatives overwhelmed with the majesty of God.<sup>x</sup>

This saint, who early in his life wanted only to teach rhetoric, came to wield a majestic influence over the Eastern Church. He is still revered as a gifted theologian of immense intellectual and spiritual significance as relevant in our own time as in his own, a great philosopher, and a humanist worthy of any historical period. His humanity and humility still touch us with grace and inspire us to strive for the perfection of the Risen Christ. Gregory's life exemplified service and ultimately obedience to a calling that initially he resisted but came to fill beyond measure. His loving parishioners and ecclesiastical subjects were the first to recognize and revere his special gifts. His peers then recognized his great oratorical and diplomatic skills and came to rely upon him for valorizing and honoring leading church figures

including an oration at the canonization of his dear friend, Gregory Nazianzus, at the Council of Antioch. Gregory's acknowledged tact and diplomatic skill made him an ideal emissary for the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople to send on a mission to resolve problems in the Arabian Church, which he accomplished without incident. At the Seventh General Council in 787, roughly four centuries after Gregory's death, the collected prelates of the Church accorded the singular honor to St. Gregory of Nyssa of being named, "Father of Fathers." St. Gregory of Nyssa, whose mystical celebration of the Trinity and consuming love for his fellow human beings, remains still, Father Gregory, the sublime catechist.

END 

ST. GREGORY  
OF NYSSA,  
WHOSE MYSTICAL  
CELEBRATION OF  
THE TRINITY AND  
CONSUMING LOVE  
FOR HIS FELLOW  
HUMAN BEINGS,  
REMAINS STILL,  
FATHER GREGORY,  
THE SUBLIME  
CATECHIST.

## CAPPADOCIA

1935

FROM THE G. ERIC AND EDITH MATSON  
PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION  
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS,  
PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION,  
[LC-DIG-MATPC-12147]

- i. *Philokalia* (15.10 CC7.60)
- ii. *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, trans. William Moore and Henry A. Wilson, *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954.)
- iii. *Ibid.*, 15.
- iv. William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abby," in *The Literature of England*, eds. G.B. Woods, H.A. Watt, & G.K. Anderson, 3rd ed. (New York: Scott Foresman and Company, 1948), 121-123.
- v. *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, 16.
- vi. NPNF1-05. *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff, (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1982), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205.toc.html>.
- vii. *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, 36.
- viii. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Classics of Western Spirituality*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).
- ix. Gregory of Nyssa, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. by Casimir McCambley, Archbishop Iakovos Library of Ecclesiastical and Historical Sources, no. 12, (Brookline: Hellenic College Press, 1987).
- x. Robert Payne, *The Holy Fire* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

# My Brother's Keeper

## An Interview With Charles Robbins

by Victor M. Rentel

*Every man is worthy*

As do many other Christian communities, the St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church in Columbus, Ohio, is knee-deep in reaching out to the poor and homeless. The church's location in the inner city has given rise to an active program involving a broad cross-section of the parish community. The program began in the first weeks after the parish was organized nearly 25 years ago. Elsewhere in Columbus larger programs for the needy are equipped with greater resources and manpower, enabling them to provide a broader range of services.

Parishioners' involvement ranges from a once-every-eight-weeks lunch to day-to-day contact and assistance to those to whom we minister. Sometimes the work is fulfilling; other times it is heart breaking.

For its first edition, the magazine *St. Gregory, Nyssa* focuses on one parish community's efforts to heed the command of our Lord Himself to serve the poor.

Charles Robbins coordinates St. Gregory's neighborhood outreach program that feeds and assists needy neighborhood residents in diverse ways.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** Describe St. Gregory's Saturday neighborhood outreach program.

**Charles:** Donna [his wife] and I started going to St. Gregory's in 1985, just a couple of years after the parish started at Ohio State on 15th Avenue. I don't ever remember people coming to church to receive food on a Sunday. But on Saturday night, two or three neighborhood individuals would come to the church to ask for cash donations.

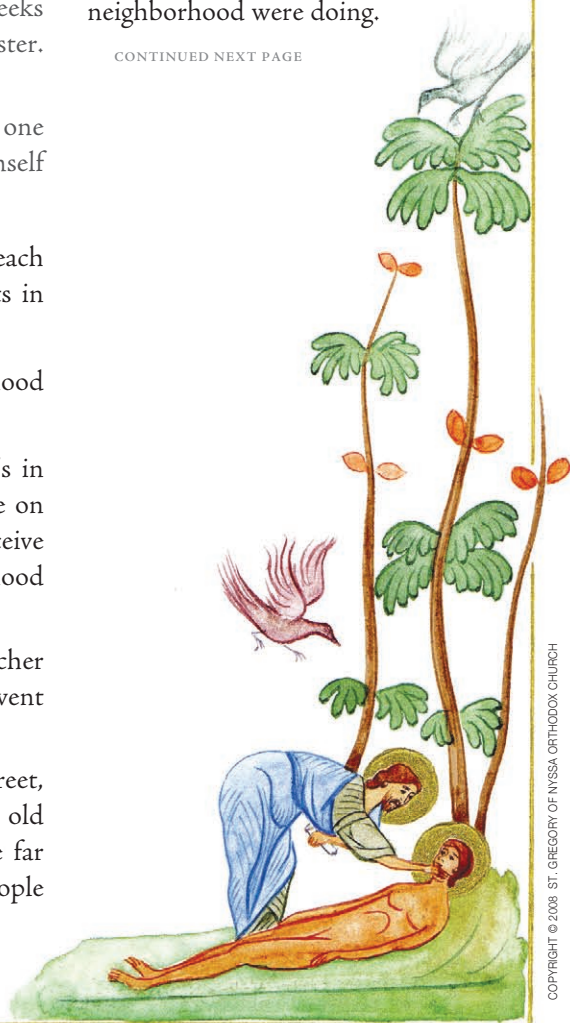
Not long after that, Father Dan got us involved in a Kroger voucher program. The vouchers were in \$5 increments and we probably went through \$100 worth of vouchers each month.

When we moved the church to the new building on Summit Street, we were much more into the neighborhood than we were at the old building on fraternity row. In the new neighborhood, there were far more people in financial need. All of a sudden, 10 to 15 or more people

would come to the church seeking financial assistance. It was then that Father Dan pretty much turned over the responsibility for distributing vouchers to Father Mark.

At about the same time, the church purchased another house that was to be used for the church school. At a parish council meeting, concern was expressed about security because parishioners knew nothing about the people who were coming to seek assistance. Anyone who asked for assistance was given at least a \$5 voucher—which is what other churches in the neighborhood were doing.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE





I actually went to Kroger's with neighborhood people and learned that they frequently purchased sodas and snack foods. The vouchers were easy for us to handle. They could be used only for food, not tobacco or alcohol. However, because most purchases did not exhaust the voucher's total value, voucher recipients received change. It was not an efficient use of funding.

Voucher recipients also came to the coffee hour on Sunday following liturgy to have coffee and doughnuts. One Sunday, Father Dan approached me and said, 'Charles, we're not going to serve doughnuts anymore.' I said, 'Who is not going to have doughnuts?'

Father Dan replied very loudly in my ear, 'We are not going to feed homeless people doughnuts and coffee anymore! We are going to feed them something substantial. I think you and Donna should be able to do this. We can feed them Subway sandwiches.'

That conversation took place in the summer, probably August. I said, 'we will start the first weekend in September. I can prepare a lunch for homeless people on Saturdays.'

We put up signs all during the month of September. About five or six people showed up, some of who still come to the lunch program today. Sterling, Big Jim and others were there on the very first Saturday. We served sandwiches. We also served chips, some sort of fruit, and a vegetable, such as carrots sticks, soup, and soda to drink. It went well. People were appreciative.

That lasted about two weeks. People started asking, 'When are we going to do this again?' By November, we were doing it every week. This is our fourth year. November 2006 will mark the beginning of the fifth year.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** How many people come to the Saturday lunch?

*We put up signs all during the month of September. About five or six people showed up, some of who still come to the lunch program today.*



CHARLES ROBBINS PREPARING SANDWICHES FOR THE SATURDAY LUNCH PROGRAM

**Charles:** The program started out with maybe 25 faces. But today, we serve roughly 50 people each Saturday. Counting people I don't see regularly, we probably serve 75 or 100 different people. All of these people are in town; however, I see them only every five or six months. Some may take a temporary job on the west side of town. Basically, they live on the streets where they work. When that job opportunity goes away, they return to where resources and programs are located – around Ohio State and the Faith Mission. They can get to where the services are by bus.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** How many meals are distributed

in the neighborhood?

**Charles:** Typically now for lunch, Ellen and Paul Shiptenko work with 10 church volunteers who rotate the preparation of some sort of casserole to serve to 20 or 30 people. We still do sandwiches, because if we run out of the casserole, individuals who come late still get sandwiches and a side dish. We also make sandwiches for participants to take with them for another meal. They pick up two or three sandwiches for dinner or perhaps for the next day.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

Believe it or not, if they only need one sandwich, they take only one sandwich. Some people need four because they are taking them to work or taking them to others. So, we probably send at least 50 sandwiches out the door with them.

Also, Father Kevin will do mission work. Four individuals are going to go through the steps to become



NEIGHBORHOOD VISITORS ENJOYING LUNCH AND SOME CONVERSATION.

Orthodox. If Father Kevin begins to participate in the lunch program each week, we can actually begin to visit those who are shut-ins and do more than deliver food.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** Who are the neighborhood residents? Describe a couple of typical neighborhood people.

**Charles:** Our neighborhood is like the company store. It is the type

of situation you would see in coal mining communities in Pennsylvania because all the houses in the campus area are owned by investors who live mainly in the suburbs or in outlying areas. They rent properties out to students and to families. Franklin County may provide a family with a couple hundred dollars for rent and the family may rent a floor in a house. In their situation, the family uses whatever money it gets from the County for their rent. Neighborhood people are looking for [a place] that may cost \$200 or \$300 a month. So, we are talking about individuals who don't own a car and who have only a limited amount of money for heat and rent. None of them have telephones.

Some neighborhood people work for the church part time. We make jobs available to them at the minimum wage. When the church is engaged in a building program, we may hire them for \$6 an hour. When they cut grass for somebody, they may get paid at a higher rate of \$10, \$12 or even \$15 and that may be the only money they get for that week.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** If you were to describe a few people whom you know by name, what would they be like?

**Charles:** Well, they are definitely community oriented. You would think most of the individuals were from a small town, because everybody knows everybody. They know all their neighbors' names. If an individual comes off of a painting job where he made \$80, there is an expectation that \$80 is to be shared among community members. If someone who has recently come off a job and with a paycheck were to buy a pack of cigarettes, others may ask that person for a cigarette. Or that person may be asked for \$3.

*Out on the street, neighborhood people might have a more relaxed method of talking with each other, but when they come into the church, they know it is a church.*

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



Neighborhood people don't just ask the church for money. They ask anyone who is apt to have money.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** I don't know whether it is an urban legend or a fact that many street people are mentally ill or mentally handicapped. Is that true of people who participate in the program, or is that an urban legend?

**Charles:** I would say it is more of an urban legend. For example, an individual may be impaired because he lost his house and is depressed. It also may be a person who is recovering from alcohol or drug abuse. More than likely, that person went through some sort of county rehabilitation program and was released. Even though this individual may be the responsibility of the County, in a kind of outsourcing, the County provides \$300 for rent to live in a house. Each week, these individuals pick up their money. These people are not dangerous – that is an urban legend! I don't think Father Dan would let the program operate if he thought it, or that individuals in the program would be dangerous to church members or to their children.

Also, having been in the military for 25 years, I run a tight ship. We don't tolerate swearing. We don't tolerate any kind of lowering of discipline. Out on the street, neighborhood people might have a more relaxed method of talking with each other, but when they come into the church, they know it is a church. They behave very much like children in school; they know they must wait in line to get their food. There is no pushing or shoving. There have been times over the last four years where individuals did not cope well eating in a group. We make sure they can eat their meals in peace.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** What impact has the outreach program had on participants?

**Charles:** On Saturday or Sunday, St. Gregory's has become a meeting place for them. There are people who will be at St. Gregory's on a Saturday because they know a friend is coming to meet them. The program now also is one where about 75 to 80 percent attend for fellowship—people getting to see people.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** How has their sense of life fared as a consequence of belonging to a community?

**Charles:** It's kind of like a safety net. You know, when they left home, they might still have had a parent. When things went bad, they could go back home. Now, most of them have their own families and they don't have a safety net. Most of these individuals do not attend a church and are not regular members of a church. They mostly are '10 percenters' who

go to church on Sunday. They test us. [The lunch program has only been in this location for four years.] Most of them over time probably will become Orthodox. That is just a feeling in my gut. Or they will go back into the larger community.

If you knew Big Jim or other individuals when they first came to St. Gregory's, they would show up, you would say, 'Wow, this person needs a bath.' Today, people clean up before they come to lunch. This is their bingo. This is their community thing. They expect each other to be clean. They now have higher expectations. They talk about politics and other issues. In the last year I have thought, 'This has turned into their *Cheers*.' I was telling me the other day that when E walks in the door, it's 'Phil!' or 'Jim!' It's like that during the entire lunch. From the time we open at 11:30 a.m. until 1:30 p.m., when we start to clean up, no one walks in the door without someone yelling

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



PARISHIONERS PAT BLISCHAK  
WITH "BIG JIM" MCDOLE

out his or her name. It's like they were saying, 'Hey, I only came here today to see you.'

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** What do fellow parishioners contribute to the neighborhood outreach program?

**Charles:** At the beginning, it was zero. As a designer, I learned a long time ago that if you are going to make something work, you couldn't be a burden on any type of resource.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** I was curious to know how the program has affected parishioners.

**Charles:** I had just converted to the Orthodox faith. For her to become Orthodox was a big step. Now she works as a volunteer. She took that Orthodox step and then, the leap. When the program was set up, A came back from Central America and talked about a similar program for orphans. He worked down there for a week. When he returned, A gave a slide show. I thought, 'We have those same [impoverished] people here at St. Gregory's every week. We have Central America hanging out or sleeping here on the church deck.' That's just the tip of the iceberg. I have always known that.

There probably is not a child or person from the parish who hasn't come up to me and said, 'I was shopping this week and I bought all these canned goods for the program.' I always reply, 'Thanks, this will be gone tomorrow.'

People ask, 'Should I pay a dollar and get the fancy soup?' I reply, 'Get the five cans for a dollar. We feed lots of people. Whatever you bring in, it will be gone that weekend.'

CV just brought in winter coats collected by the church school children. Two-thirds of those winter coats were gone by the end of last week. Whatever people bring in—I really can't think of anybody who has not contributed. So, the outreach program has become a St. Gregory's family effort.

Father Dan gave out an order a long time ago. The food pantry over time has not been a burden, and it just caught on. At St. Gregory's these people are hungry every week. I think I can go around town and raise money, but this is a community. This is a St. Gregory's and a Columbus problem. And the thing that

worries me, I don't hear the mayor talking about it.

But I do see that all of the church leaders in the campus community recognize it, and they tell their church members, 'This is what we are going to do.' All campus area churches are responding with some sort of outreach. That helps, too. When I don't have the resources, I can say, 'We are not the only church.' Churches all around us are responding to these needs. A church just south of us made up 1,000 Thanksgiving baskets. We typically do 15.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** How do you think the various programs

including St. Gregory's have affected the neighborhood [of 15 city blocks]?

**Charles:** I think the Columbus government would be frightened to death if the central city churches ended their efforts to care for the needy. I talked to a police officer in one of our neighboring affluent suburbs. I asked him, 'What do the police in your community do with a homeless person?' He said, 'We put them in a car and take them into Columbus where the programs are.'

I asked a policeman from a similar suburb east of Columbus, 'What do you do with a homeless person?' These police officers do the same

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



*Father Dan gave out  
an order a long time  
ago. The food pantry  
over time has not  
been a burden, and  
it just caught on.*





thing. They take the homeless into the middle of Columbus and drop them off at a shelter.

In a way, that's good because the police take homeless people to where the resources and services are. But shouldn't the mayor of Columbus, who must provide services for the homeless, be chiding the suburbs to at least ask their citizens to provide canned goods to a Columbus food pantry? You can imagine what would happen if each organization in the suburbs set up a little food pantry.

We have individuals in St. Gregory's program who at one time were programmers, bankers and business managers. It really humbles you as a volunteer to know their histories.

Now, for the first time in our outreach program, we have graduate students who are looking for a meal. The graduate students want to set up a program where we can attack this illiteracy problem. Homeless people cannot pull themselves up by the bootstraps if they cannot fill out a job application. Overall, their IQ is average. Had they been able to see into their future earlier in their lives, boy, would they have paid attention in school.



**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** Describe contributions of the Panera Bread Corp. to the outreach program.

**Charles:** Last autumn, Paul Shiptenko saw a sign in a Panera store. He went in and filled out an application. [As a result] Panera Bread makes available what they don't sell by the end of a baking day. Many churches in the Columbus area participate in this program. Each church has a designated day

to pick up bread. Our day happens to be Friday. On some Fridays, we receive as much as \$1,000 worth of baked goods.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** Are there other corporate donors?

**Charles:** Yes, Kroger came on board in the fall. Our big corporate donors are Panera and Kroger, Panera being the largest. But the amount that we get from Kroger is sizable—bread, anything that is not suitable for their customers. So, we have a van full of Kroger donations that come in on Saturday.

Also, this year we have had more donations from parishioners. I can honestly tell you that out of our own food pantry funds, we have not had to purchase a single thing this year.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** In what ways do others donate?

**Charles:** Different people contribute in different ways. H contributes hot dogs every week. Last week, I used up all of her hot dogs. We gave the casserole makers a week off at Easter, and we had to dip into our stores. We keep a reserve. We have never failed to feed anyone. We have enough peanut butter and jelly to make sandwiches.

**St. Gregory:** What impact has the outreach program had on you, personally?

**Charles:** You know, the honest answer is that when I became Orthodox, right before I got married, I saw myself as having a mission. When I was in the Army, I did not soldier for pay. Most soldiers I know would rather build a bridge or a school, rather than shoot or hurt another person.

I don't look at this program from the perspective of how it affected me. I look at how it affected the parish.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** Has the experience changed you in any way?

**Charles:** Yes, I have learned a lot about how the inner city works. I always knew education was a

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

*I don't believe that what we are doing will eradicate these problems. I think we could dump great amounts of money and resources on these problems and it probably would not solve them. Poor people provide an opportunity for the Church*



PARISHIONERS AND NEIGHBORS DISCUSS PLANS FOR A RENOVATION PROJECT

weakness. It is not just math and English. I am a little surprised that people can drive downtown every day and not see 800 people living under the train trestle. But, I have been there. I have made food deliveries – even to an individual in a wheelchair who was living in a car.

I have been cold in the Army out in the field. But when I deliver food and I empty my car of blankets, knowing that the temperature is going to drop to 20 degrees, and that I am leaving these homeless people with three cans of food – that affects me. That may be all they will have to eat until I come back to feed them next week. The Bible says the poor will always be with us. I don't believe that what we are doing will eradicate these problems. I think we could dump great amounts of money and resources on these problems and it probably would not solve them. Poor people provide an opportunity for the Church to act as a Christian community in our neighborhood. If you have something extra, make it available to your neighbor.

Religiously, I think I am more in tune for having a chance to live my faith versus yak about it. I try to be very careful to live it.

I never carry any extra cash. There is no possible way I can come into the neighborhood and not give it out to people. They look at me as a resource, too, but they don't abuse it too much.

I guess my best attribute is that I do have a history of being able to do things. I like building things. I like building bridges. When I began to teach in college, I said to myself, 'I no longer build bridges, I build people.' I get more satisfaction building that group. In the first year, I was the only builder but now, there are many others. The people in the church are high on their sense of Christianity—in the military, we called it a mission. They are on a mission. Perhaps the most important thing that I can tell them as their battlefield commander is what I used to tell my infantry unit: 'You cannot celebrate until you get to the top of the hill.' We are not there yet, we are not on the top of the hill yet.

People who work in the lunch program can feel good from day to day—which they do—but my goal is to give community people a focus. Each year, I try to add new challenges to the program.

**St. Gregory, Nyssa:** I never see any graffiti in the vicinity of St. Gregory's.

**Charles:** Yes, and it is because of the community people. They love St. Gregory's. They want to hold it as their church. They see St. Gregory's as the hub of their wheel. They would do anything for St. Gregory's.

I have never seen parishioners hugging each other as much as they do now. Many guys are in the business world. They are hardened to the rules of business. St. Gregory's is able to soften that outlook.

If I met a veteran coming back from the Iraq war, I would say, 'Come down to my church. You will turn your hardness into a real heartfelt sense of commitment to these people and to the program.'

END





*"O God whose only begotten Son has said, Without me you can do nothing." My Lord and my God, in faith I bend the knees of my soul to bow before Thy Fatherly goodness and raise my hands to Thee. Help me, a sinner, to do the work in conformity with Thy will. Send down the Holy Spirit to guide me in the making of this prosphora that it may be worthy of the use for which it is intended."*

## The Eucharist Loaves

### A Baker For All Seasons

*by Cathy Vrugitz*



After reciting this simple prayer, Helen Volosin blesses herself and begins making the Prosphora, or church bread. In the ancient Tradition of the Orthodox Church, Holy Mystery of Communion is carried out through the mediums of wine and leavened bread. The bread is specially baked for the purpose of communion, and it is called "Prosphora" (meaning "that which is offered" in Greek.)

Helen does not take this task lightly, but takes it as seriously as she takes her Orthodox Faith. Watching her make the Prosphora is like watching someone in prayer. The whole process is filled with Helen's own special spirituality. Helen has been making church bread for over twenty-five years. To her it is an honor. Soon she will celebrate her 91st birthday and hopes that there will be many more years of bread baking for her. She learned to make it from Father Daniel Rentel and



HELEN VOLOSIN HAS BEEN MAKING PROSPHORA FOR OVER 25 YEARS

uses his recipe to this day. Helen makes the bread once a month sharing the responsibility with several other women in the church.

She knows that baking is an art; just because you followed the recipe doesn't mean the bread always comes out the way you intended. Just like singing or painting icons, it takes some practice and still there will be mistakes.

Helen begins by donning her white apron, an apron that is reserved for this purpose only. The bread is mixed and kneaded on a large wooden board, one side of which is reserved for church bread only. With hands slightly bent by age she rhythmically kneads the bread to achieve the desired texture

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE





and density. Then the bread must rest under white cloths that only touch church bread.

After resting the dough is rolled out to about a half inch thickness for the bottom circle and a little thinner for the top, smaller one. Using cutters that were made by her late husband Charlie from 3lb and 1lb coffee cans, Helen cuts the circles for the bread.

Using the Prosfophora stamp, she makes an imprint on the smaller circle. She places the smaller circle on the larger one which has been slightly moistened with water. The pieces are pierced with a toothpick to prevent any bubbles. Each one is pierced four times, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit: the whole process is a prayer.

With the leftover dough she makes several smaller breads that she will submit to Father with a name for prayers.

The baking bread is closely watched so the loaves do not brown, but cook. Once cooled the loaves are packed in bags and are ready to take to church.

The task completed Helen repeats her familiar prayer:



“DEAR LORD, THIS BREAD THAT WE HAVE BAKED REPRESENTS EACH ONE OF US IN THIS FAMILY AND IN OUR CONGREGATION. WE ARE OFFERING OURSELVES ON YOUR HOLY ALTAR THROUGH THIS BREAD TO BE USED BY YOU IN ANY WAY THAT YOU FEEL WILL HELP ENLARGE YOUR KINGDOM. ACCEPT OUR GIFT AND MAKE US WORTHY TO RECEIVE THE GREATER GIFT THAT YOU WILL GIVE US WHEN YOUR CONSECRATE THIS BREAD AND GIVE IT BACK TO US AS YOUR PRECIOUS BODY. AMEN”

# A Personal Point of View

## How I Got To Be Who I Am

*by Archbishop Daniel Rintel*

I see myself as an American with a Galician-Ukrainian-Slovak-Russian imprint on my person. As an Orthodox person serving the Church in America I am not untypical. My father and mother were both first generation, born here. Ancestors on both sides saw Central Europe as homeland. Specifics can't apply. Places from Lithuania through Poland and the Old Austro-Hungarian Empire would work so long as it was predominantly composed of Slavs.

My father converted to Orthodoxy prior to their marriage and after preliminary training in a pre-seminary tutorial in the Polish Roman Catholic Church. Something happened. Mutual love prevailed and they married. The wedding, which by all accounts was a three-day affair, held; I was their third-born.

I grew up used to the sounds of many foreign languages but spoke none of them. In my world, an ethnic subset, I did not meet many Protestants. There were though lots of Irish Catholics on our side of town. My Mom, I think, understood, but didn't speak Yiddish, though she could hold her own in Polish. With her Dad and siblings, Galician/Ukrainian/*po-nashestvo* (the real language of "our people") was used as the language of secret communication for adults. No spies here, just family matters that needed to be discussed, but not to be heard by children.

At 12 I was inducted into service to the Church. I was to become a cantor's (*dyak's*) assistant to be used when the parish choir was not there for worship. I was tutored by a hard taskmaster. Old Man S, the head cantor/psalmist, of SS Peter and Paul's Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of Altoona introduced regimen into my life under the guise of learning Old Church Slavonic. It took a couple of years to say the words fluently, but my comprehension was minimal at best.

At church, our family ranked high. We were a controlling influence in a parish that may be best described as governed by some inner notion of trustee-ism. We were not alone. Another family (my mentor among them) moved in and out of union with us, but sometimes with others.

Priests were respected in an odd sort of way. We had no "Great Russians," though some of the clergy who served the parish were, or so it was my impression. With those, the respect co-mingled with some suspicion. Ours were folk from somewhere in the bowels of a region governed by Franz Joseph and Polish majorities in Russian-Poland. Coming here, my kin quickly left the Greek Catholic world of the Old Country and became members

of the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of North and South America. My grandfather saw himself always as a Little Russian. The differences in language and customs were overcome by the power of Orthodoxy. Once here in America that commonality became a reality for him and lots of others. His unswerving connection to the Church influenced me. It was enough of an influence that I enrolled in learning how to read/chant/sing Church Slavonic. I had to go at least twice a week to his house. Some called Mr. S the Little

Corporal. Thank God for me that his wife harbored angelic qualities, else I would never have knocked on their back door.

We'd practice. I'd call it a "whole language" approach—pronunciation without understanding, but in time I could sing it in tones, read the Sunset Psalm, and even tell choir members correct pronunciations.

In this time frame, between the ages of 12 and/or 13, I also decided I would be a priest. This probably had a lot to do with the arrival of an English-speaking pastor. More specifically his



CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



willingness to teach –I still have a few of the Bible lessons he passed out– provided for me a base for my fledgling faith to grow. My mentor was raised in Eastern Pennsylvania, hard-coal country with lots of big churches to go to and see from highways nearby. He had a kind of gloved determination that allowed him to work with and, frankly, lead parish leaders into another, what I would call genuine Metropolia, mind-set. An awareness that there was a larger Church, with a kind of rag-tag determination to stay here and be a part of the American scene. As a model for my future, Father John M served me more than well.

I had a few Orthodox friends too. One grew up “Greek Orthodox”, a couple of others Syrian. Two of the three subsequently handed their lives over to service in the Church. We’d do the Holy Friday runs to see which parish had the best tombs. I remember how strange it seemed to me when first I saw Greeks pass under the winding sheet upon re-entry into the darkened church. In time, and with more visits and discussions, we three got used to hearing services in other languages and different chants. More importantly we came to appreciate Orthodoxy’s universality.

By the time I left town to go to seminary my basic skills were such that I could “do vespers” by myself. Between the priest’s nascent use of English and the old dyak’s insistence on manipulating the *ustav*, i.e., rubrics, I saw myself as being well-prepared for what lay ahead. That ended right quickly by what I perceive now as the Great Deflation.

Everything I chanted or read went against the accepted, even preferred, Russian-style pronunciations. I heard some snickers. When I sang somebody there my Tone 6, the look I saw on the examiner’s face left no doubt that it wasn’t the same Tone 6 used in that seminary culture. Unlearning became a necessity. What happened ultimately put another layer on my identity as an Orthodox person.

And so it went. I actually left my home seminary and went to another for a time–another layer. For me, though, the most profound influence exerted on my spiritual development came from the pervasive influence of fathers Alexander Schmemmann, Meyendorf, and Florovsky. Their thinking, I believe, either required or established the vision on which an Orthodox Church in America could rest. The appeal was universal in its scope and embrace.

Whoever I was by birth, country of origin and ancestry could fit into a community defined by Eucharist. Inside that life all things good from everywhere fit. Parish life changed palpably by frequent participation in the sublime sacrament. The Body of Christ became something more than a sublime aspiration. The effects were far reaching. The Church, while not eschewing its ethnic roots, could not restrain the appeal that comes as part of Orthodoxy’s inheritance.

Co-mingling happens. I look out now at a Sunday liturgy and realize that I have nearly all the continents represented. The neighborhood indigents have won a spot in the life of our community–some now move through the conversion process. African-Americans stand up towards the front. Around the Holy Table itself stand priests who were not born Slovak nor Ukrainian nor Russian, but Irish or Scotch, or Central Ohioan for too many generations to call someplace else the homeland. They are a blessing. They add layers to my life, already in its latter years.

If it happens in one place, rest assured the same story is told in other communities throughout this amazingly diverse population living in America. If it hasn’t happened, because we are taught to love above all things, it will. The appeal embraces yet reaches out far beyond my own particular

inheritance. In part, that’s what my life has taught me.

*Father Rentel is the senior and founding priest of St. Gregory of Nyssa Parish.*

END





“THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA (OCA) IS UNUSUAL IN THAT IT HAS NOT CREATED EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS WHOSE PURPOSE IS TO PREPARE A DEEPLY EDUCATED LAITY ON WHOM THE CHURCH CAN RELY FOR LAY LEADERSHIP. OTHER DENOMINATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE INVESTED CONSIDERABLE RESOURCES IN EDUCATING THEIR LAITY. BY AND LARGE, ORTHODOX CHURCHES HAVE NOT HAD THE RESOURCE BASE TO CREATE PAROCHIAL ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS OR A SINGLE COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY. HOWEVER, AN EDUCATED LAITY IS MORE IMPORTANT NOW THAN IT HAS BEEN AT ANY TIME IN THE HISTORY OF THE OCA, PARTICULARLY IN THE UNITED STATES, BECAUSE BOTH THE CHURCH AND THE UNITED STATES ARE UNDERGOING DRAMATIC CHANGE. WHILE THE CHURCH DOES NOT HAVE THE RESOURCES TO ESTABLISH SCHOOLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, IT CAN LAY THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCH A SYSTEM IN THE FUTURE WITH FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIPS FOR ORTHODOX STUDENTS. TO FUND SUCH SCHOLARSHIPS IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE.



ST. GREGORY, NYSSA PUBLICATIONS  
2219 SUMMIT STREET  
COLUMBUS, OH 43201

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



# SAINT GREGORY

*Nyssa*

A PUBLICATION  
OF ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA  
ORTHODOX CHURCH  
IN COLUMBUS, OHIO

*Spring 2008*