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Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen: Two Bodies One Spirit

St. Gregory of Nazianzen
Early Church Father and Doctor of the Church



On January 2, the Roman Catholic Church honors the memory of two friends from an area of what is now Turkey that was called Cappadocia. These men began their friendship while away at school and later became bishops who were the backbone of Catholic Orthodoxy during a period of doctrinal struggle and confusion. Gregory presided over the 2nd ecumenical council, held at Constantinople, whose great achievement was the completion of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed that the Catholic Church recites each Sunday and the definition of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. These Cappadocian Fathers, both Doctors of the Church, proved to be some of the greatest and most influential teachers of all time, honored by both East and West, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. This selection, an excerpt from a sermon by Saint Gregory Nazianzus (Oratio 43, in laudem Basilii Magni, 15. 16-17, 19-21; PG 36, 514-423) is used in the Roman Office of Readings for January 2, the feast of Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen.

Basil and I were both in Athens. We had come, like streams of a river, from the same source in our native land, had separated from each other in pursuit of learning, and were now united again as if by plan, for God so arranged it.

I was not alone at that time in my regard for my friend, the great Basil. I knew his irreproachable conduct, and the maturity and wisdom of his conversation. I sought to persuade others, to whom he was less well known, to have the same regard for him. Many fell immediately under his spell, for they had already heard of him by reputation and hearsay.

What was the outcome? Almost alone of those who had come to Athens to study he was exempted from the customary ceremonies of initiation for he was held in higher honor than his status as a first-year student seemed to warrant.

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Such was the prelude to our friendship, the kindling of that flame that was to bind us together. In this way we began to feel affection for each other. When, in the course of time, we acknowledged our friendship and recognized that our ambition was a life of true wisdom, we became everything to each other: we shared the same lodging, the same table, the same desires the same goal. Our love for each other grew daily warmer and deeper.

The same hope inspired us: the pursuit of learning. This is an ambition especially subject to envy. Yet between us there was no envy. On the contrary, we made capital out of our rivalry. Our rivalry consisted, not in seeking the first place for oneself but in yielding it to the other, for we each looked on the other's success as his own.

We seemed to be two bodies with a single spirit. Though we cannot believe those who claim that everything is contained in everything, yet you must believe that in our case each of us was in the other and with the other.

Our single object and ambition was virtue, and a life of hope in the blessings that are to come; we wanted to withdraw from this world before we departed from it. With this end in view we ordered our lives and all our actions. We followed the guidance of God's law and spurred each other on to virtue. If it is not too boastful to say, we found in each other a standard and rule for discerning right from wrong.

Different men have different names, which they owe to their parents or to themselves, that is, to their own pursuits and achievements. But our great pursuit, the great name we wanted, was to be Christians, to be called Christians.

Basil was born of a Christian family at Caesarea in Cappadocia in 330 AD. Conspicuous for his learning and virtue, for a time he led the life of a hermit but in 370 was made bishop of Caesarea. He fought against the Arians and wrote many admirable works, especially his monastic rule which many Eastern monks still follow. Saint Basil died on January 1, 379. Gregory Nazianzen (also called Nazianzus) was also born in 330. Traveling as a youth in the pursuit of learning, he first joined his friend Basil as a hermit and was later ordained priest and bishop. In the year 381 he was elected bishop of Constantinople; however, because of factions dividing the Church, he returned to Nazianzen where he died on January 25, 389 or 390. He was called theologus because of his outstanding teaching and eloquence.

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