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**A CHRISTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS
VOWS AS ASCENT TO CHRISTIAN PERFECTION
*IN THE LIGHT OF ST GREGORY OF NYSSA'S
"THE LIFE OF MOSES"***

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To
my beloved
Congregation of Missionaries
Sons of the Immaculate
Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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ABBREVIATIONS

a) Works of Gregory of Nyssa

- AAp *Anti-Apollinarian Writings*, trans. Robin Orton.
- CE I *Contra Eunomium I*, trans. S. G. Hall, in M. BRUGAROLAS (ed.), *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium I – An English Translation with Supporting Studies*, 61-195.
- CE II *Contra Eunomium II*, trans. S. G. Hall, in L. KARFIKOVA et al. (eds.), *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II – An English Version with Supporting Studies*, 53-201.
- CE III *Contra Eunomium III*, trans. S. G. Hall, in J. LEEMANS – M. CASSIN (eds.), *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium III – An English Translation with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, 37-233.
- CML *On the Christian Mode of Life*, in V. W. CALLAHAN (trans.), *St Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, 125-158.
- Cor *Catechetical Orations*, in P. SCHAFF (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa Dogmatic Treatises*, Series II, Volume 5, 874-961.
- HBeat *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, trans. S. G. Hall, in H. R. DROBNER – A. VICIANO (eds.), *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on The Beatitudes – An English version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, 3-90.
- HEccl *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, trans. S. G. Hall – R. Moriarty, in S. G. HALL (ed.), *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes – An English Version with Supporting Studies*, 31-144.
- HOF *Homilies on the Our Father*, trans. M. DelCogliano – A. Radde-Gallwitz, in M. CASSIN et al. (eds.), *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Our Father – An English Translation with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, 109-155.

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| HSong | <i>Homilies on the Song of Songs</i> , trans. Richard A. Norris Jr. |
| IPs | <i>On the Inscriptions of the Psalms</i> , trans. R. E. Heine. |
| LM | <i>The Life of Moses</i> , trans. A. J. Malherbe – E. Ferguson. |
| LSM | <i>The Life of Saint Macrina</i> , in V. W. CALLAHAN (trans.), <i>St Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works</i> , 161-191. |
| MMA | <i>On the Making of Man</i> , in P. SCHAFF (ed.), <i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa – Dogmatic Treatises</i> , Series II, Vol. 5, 714-797. |
| Perf | <i>On Perfection</i> , in V. W. CALLAHAN (trans.), <i>St Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works</i> , 93-122. |
| SRe | <i>On the Soul and Resurrection</i> , in V. W. CALLAHAN (trans.), <i>St Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works</i> , 195-272. |
| Virg | <i>On Virginitiy</i> , in V. W. CALLAHAN (trans.), <i>St Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works</i> , 3-75. |
| WIMCOC | <i>On What It Means to Call Oneself a Christian</i> , in V. W. CALLAHAN (trans.), <i>St Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works</i> , 79-89. |

b) Magisterial Documents

| | |
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| AA | Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity <i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i> (1965) |
| AG | Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church <i>Ad Gentes</i> (1965) |
| AL | Apostolic Exhortation <i>Amoris Laetitia</i> (2016) |
| CCC | Reference work <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> (1992) |
| CV | Apostolic Exhortation <i>Christus Vivit</i> (2019) |
| EG | Apostolic Exhortation <i>Evangelii Gaudium</i> (2013) |
| ESI | Instruction on the Ordo Virginum <i>Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago</i> (2018) |
| FT | Encyclical Letter <i>Fratelli Tutti</i> (2020) |

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| GE | Apostolic Exhortation <i>Gaudete et Exsultate</i> (2018) |
| GS | Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World <i>Gaudium et spes</i> (1965) |
| LF | Encyclical Letter <i>Lumen Fidei</i> (2013) |
| LG | Dogmatic Constitution on the Church <i>Lumen Gentium</i> (1964) |
| LS | Encyclical Letter <i>Laudato Si</i> (2015) |
| OT | Decree on Priestly Training <i>Optatum Totius</i> (1965) |
| PC | Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life <i>Perfectae Caritatis</i> (1965) |
| RD | Apostolic Exhortation <i>Redemptionis Donum</i> (1984) |
| SAO | Instruction <i>The Service of Authority and Obedience</i> (2008) |
| SF | Document <i>Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church</i> (2014) |
| SS | Encyclical Letter <i>Spe Salvi</i> (2007) |
| SV | Encyclical Letter <i>Sacra Virginitas</i> (1954) |
| VC | Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation <i>Vita Consecrata</i> (1996) |

c) Others

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| AA. VV. | Auctores Varii (various authors) |
| C. | Circa (around/about) |
| Cf. | Confer |
| E.g. | Exempli gratia (for example) |
| Ed./eds. | Edited by/editor/editors |
| Et al. | Et alia (and others) |
| Etc. | Et cetera (and other similar things) |
| I.e. | Id est (that is) |
| Ibid. | Ibidem (in the same place) |

| | |
|--------|---------------------------|
| NB | Nota bene (mark well) |
| No. | Number |
| Trans. | Translation/translated by |

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

One of the Cappadocian Fathers, St Gregory of Nyssa,¹ provides in his ascetical treatise *The Life of Moses* a route map for Christians in general, and consecrated persons in particular, to live their life of Christian perfection as a never-ending journey. The concept of “participation in Christ” is the central theme of this treatise. According to Gregory, the title “Christian” belongs to the one who participates in Christ who, being God, united himself to humanity in the Incarnation and became the perfect Image of God (the God-Man). All those who call themselves Christians by assuming the name of Christ imitate and reflect in their lives the virtues found in Christ, and participate in his divinity. In the Church, all – laity, ordained ministers and consecrated persons – are called to a life of perfection in Christ. The existence of the different states of life does not signify division within the Body of Christ; as members of the Body of Christ, all Christians are on the single path. Given this fact, the

¹ Gregory of Nyssa was born around 335 into an aristocratic Christian family in Caesarea in the province of Cappadocia, in present-day Turkey. In Acts 2:9, the Cappadocians are named as one group hearing the Gospel account from the Apostles in their own language on the day of Pentecost. 1 Pet 1:1 shows that God’s chosen people living in Cappadocia as foreigners are also included among Apostle Peter’s addressees. There was some form of organized Church in Cappadocia well before the middle of the third century, before the arrival of the ‘Apostle of Cappadocia’, Gregory the Wonderworker – Gregory Thaumaturgus – (c.213-270), who was a disciple of Origen of Alexandria. He was responsible for the conversion to the faith of Macrina the Elder, the paternal grandmother of Gregory of Nyssa. The Nyssen’s parents were Basil the Elder (+ 349) and Emmelia of Caesaria (+ 375). They had a large family of nine children. In a hagiographical work on his sister Macrina, Gregory writes, “When their property was divided nine ways in accordance with the number of the children, ... Macrina did not accept the amount that was assigned to her ...” (*LSM*, 177). But Silvas is of the opinion that Gregory’s parents had ten children, and one of them died in infancy. She includes Theosebia, whom some others consider as Gregory’s wife, as one of Gregory’s sisters (cf. A. M. SILVAS, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters – Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, 3-4). Gregory’s family was a garden of holy men and women. His parents are saints and among their nine children, the names of five are known and they are saints – St Macrina the Younger, St Basil of Caesarea, St Naucratus, St Gregory of Nyssa and St Peter of Sebaste. Gregory’s grandmother, Macrina the Elder, is revered as a saint and his grandfather was martyred for the faith during the persecution of the Roman Emperor Maximinus II (311-313). Gregory of Nyssa, his brother Basil and his friend Gregory Nazianzus (Cappadocian Fathers) are remembered as the principal theological masterminds behind the victory of Nicene orthodoxy over the various forms and degrees of Arianism at the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381. At the seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea II in 787, the Nyssen was given the title “Father of the Fathers.”

consecrated life is called “the state of perfection”² not because all those who belong to this state are perfect, but because this state provides every man and woman a sufficient condition to become perfect. What makes the consecrated life different from other states of life is its commitment both to follow and imitate Christ in a radical way through a life according to the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, and to become an impetus for others to desire the beauty of Christ and organize their lives in accordance to his thoughts, words and deeds. The sufficient condition for a radical following and imitation of Christ helps consecrated persons participate in all that the term “Christ” means.

Thus, the consecrated life is basically Christological in its radical sense: it gives witness to the chaste, poor and obedient Christ who unites humanity with divinity in himself. This state of life proclaims to the world that the Church, as the Body of Christ, is heaven on earth, and that heaven is not something that awaits a person at the other end of his or her earthly life, but a matter of his or her choice to participate in Christ, and a continuation of the present to eternity.

Purpose of the Study

The Life of Moses is to be understood against the backdrop of the development of monasticism in the Roman empire after the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312.³ In the political and religious world in which Gregory lived, the Church was incorporated into imperial life as Christianity had become the official religion of the empire. Holy orders were imbued with imperial authority and prestige. The Church lost the simplicity and humility evident in the Gospel proclamation, and the true nature of Christianity was undermined. Gregory was distraught over the imperialization of the Church, and derided the self-indulgence of ambitious men in the Church by upholding the ascetic wisdom of the desert. For him, monasticism, the first form of consecrated life, is a corrective to the system that has watered down the true

² VC 35; RD 4, 13.

³ Monasticism has never taken pride in the military movement of Emperor Constantine with a monogram of Christ surmounted on his military standard and painted on his soldiers’ shields following the so-called vision of a cross with a prophetic oracle, “In this sign you will win”, in 312. Constantine’s victory and the subsequent Christianisation of the empire led to the transformation of the martyrs’ Church into a worldly Church that revelled in luxury blackening the image of Christ. It was monasticism that saved the Church from the impending peril and upheld the truth of Christianity: cf. L. D. DAVIS, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*, 29.

ideals of Christian life; it is the remedy to be applied by Christianity for the disease of materialism. Monasticism distinguished itself from the worldly excess of wealth and glory by withdrawal from society, ascetic discipline and contemplation. Even though the Nyssen was not a monk,⁴ his notion of the discipline of the ascetic life emerged from the domestic ascetic movement.⁵ Gregory's *The Life of Moses*, written in the early 390s – in response to a letter from certain Caesarius (most probably a monk) requesting guidance in living the perfect life –, i.e., before his death in about 395, had the intention of

⁴ The Nyssen possibly refers to his marriage in his earliest work, *On Virginité*, when he says that for him the knowledge of the beauty of virginity is vain as the flowing stream is to a thirsty person when the water is out of reach: *Virg*, 12; cf. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *To Gregory of Nyssa*, (Letter 197), in B. K. STORIN (trans.), *Gregory of Nazianzus's Letter Collection*, 102-103: in the mid-to-late 380s, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote this letter to Gregory of Nyssa to console him on the death of Theosebia, his wife according to some commentators, his own sister and/or helpmate in the church of Nyssa according to others. A. M. Silvas argues that the Theosebia whom Gregory of Nazianzus mentions as the Nyssen's 'yolk-fellow' is Gregory's celibate, ascetic sister, who was trained at Annisa with Macrina and who lived in close association with him at Nyssa. While Silvas agrees with others that Gregory was married, the name of the Nyssen's wife who died not long after their marriage, according to her, is unknown: cf. A. M. SILVAS, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters*, 98-100.

⁵ His elder sister Macrina, after the death of her betrothed, embraced monasticism on the family estate at Annisa (a town of Cappadocia) by the river Iris. She founded a double monastery with her brother Peter heading the male side of the community (cf. *LSM*, 189). A double monastery is a religious house with men and women living separately. Gregory's brother Naucratus lived a life of solitude and voluntary poverty in the neighbouring forests, and he died tragically in a hunting accident (cf. *LSM*, 168-169). His elder brother Basil had received the best education available during his days. In *The Life of St Macrina*, Gregory gives credit for Basil's conversion from the worldly life of the rhetorician to the asceticism of the priesthood to his elder sister Macrina. Basil followed Eustathius of Sebaste (an ascetic) on a tour of the monastic settlements in Egypt, Palestine and Syria: cf. P. J. FEDWICK, "A Chronology of the Life and Works of Basil of Caesarea", in P. J. FEDWICK (ed.), *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic*, 6. Upon his return, he received baptism and retired to the family estate in Annisa, joining his mother and sister Macrina in the practice of asceticism. Gradually an ascetic community was formed there under the leadership of Basil, who, persuaded by his sister Macrina, founded his monastery on the opposite bank of the Iris. Basil was ordained to the presbyterate of Eusebius of Caesarea in 362 and made bishop of Caesarea in 370. The teaching of Eustathius and his followers was condemned by the Synod of Gangra in 340/1 for its ascetical excesses. These excesses included (among other things) an abhorrence of marriage and married Christians, blanket condemnations of the consumption of meat, claims that married presbyters could not perform valid sacraments, calls to abandon the family in pursuit of the ascetic life (women would leave their husbands, parents their children, children their parents), and the mixing of sex roles (for instance, women would wear men's apparel and cut off their hair). In *The Life of Moses*, we can see Gregory of Nyssa distance himself from the ascetical excesses of the teaching of Eustathius.

contributing to the religious reform which his brother Basil the Great (c.329-379) had begun.

In the monastic community established by Basil, the geographical shift from desert to city had a special significance: he showed how ascetic life could adapt to urban life. Basil developed the coenobitic monasticism in populated areas based on the notion of community as the Church and the Body of Christ, and bound this monastic community to the principle of Christian humanism. Even though monks would wear distinctive dress, voluntarily renounce wealth, and take lifelong promise to remain within the monastery, they went before the other faithful in the local church not only in faith but also in charitable acts like caring for orphans, feeding the poor, maintaining hospitals, educating children etc.⁶ In 372 Basil, who was the bishop of Caesarea (present-day Kayseri in Turkey), had Gregory appointed bishop of Nyssa (in modern central Turkey). After the death of Basil in 379, he “fell heir to the whole extent of Basil’s far-ranging activity, theological, monastic, and ecclesiastical.”⁷ With respect to monasticism, the Nyssen is in agreement with his brother Basil: the withdrawal of the monks is not permanent; they return to society to instruct and persuade the multitude; they join practical philosophy to contemplative philosophy, i.e., they participate in the humanity and divinity of Christ. Gregory’s mysticism in *The Life of Moses* is not mere an other-worldly mysticism that ignores the reality and significance of humanity’s existence in history. On the other hand, he wants to emphasise that what Christianity ought to be should be alive and evident in the monastic life.

This study aims at proposing, in the light of the Nyssen’s treatise *The Life of Moses*, how the consecrated life can be authentic and relevant in every epoch of the Church’s march through the spiritual desert of the world, without compromising the “true nature of Christianity,” – participation in the divinity and humanity of Christ or union with God and union with people. Heaven as participation in Christ in the present life itself is intimately linked to the Eastern concept of salvation as *theosis* or divinization. The Incarnation of the Son of God proves that salvation is more than moral perfection which could be taught by the prophets, the philosophers and other righteous men and women. God became man in order to actualize the full union of man with

⁶ Cf. GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *On St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea*, (no. 35, 63), trans. L. P. McCauley, in R. J. DEFERRARI (ed.), *Funeral Orations by Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose*, 58, 80-81. See also P. ROUSSEAU, *Basil of Caesarea*, 113-189.

⁷ J. DANIELOU, *From Glory to Glory*, 4.

God, *theosis*. Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses*, based on which this research study is done, is centered on the mystery of the Incarnation and the Eastern concept of *theosis* that calls each man and woman to participate in the human nature assumed and divinized by Christ in the Incarnation. Drawing on the concept of *theosis* that has a set order of purification, illumination and union (perfection), in this thesis, the consecrated life as an ascent to Christian perfection participating in Christ is also presented as following the above said order of spiritual progress through a life according to the vows. The vows are not end in themselves; consecrated persons do not seek chastity or poverty or obedience for its own sake. In other words, they do not idolize the vows, but use them as means of union with Christ.

The perennial value of monastic principles in the consecrated life is underscored in the thesis with a view to correct the misconception that monasticism is a culpable *fuga mundi* or 'flight from the world' with an indifference to the Christian mission in the world. Alienation from monastic principles will demean the consecrated life, and stamp it with "spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, and consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being."⁸ Only by being "not of this world" (Jn 17:14) can the consecrated life "be the light of the world" (Mt 5:14) and give its best "for the life of this world" (Jn 6:51). The monastic life is the original form of the consecrated life, the first to establish itself with rules and vows, the one form of religious life common to East and West.⁹ For almost ten centuries it was the only form of religious life in the Church. Religious orders and institutes of consecrated life with specific missions and different spiritualities are later developments. Only by being loyal to the monastic principles can the consecrated life safeguard the uninterrupted tradition that goes back to the earliest centuries of the Church. This thesis proposes a consecrated life that has fidelity to the past, fruitfulness in the present and fervour for the future.

Scope of the Study

Gregory of Nyssa divides his treatise *The Life of Moses* into two sections called "History" (*historia*) and "Contemplation" (*theoria*). The first part, which consists of 77 paragraphs and is indicated by the Roman numeral 'I' in the thesis (I:1-77), is a narration of the story of Moses as contained in the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The second part, which

⁸ EG 93.

⁹ Cf. P. GUERANGER, *On the Religious Life*, 14.

consist of 321 paragraphs and is indicated by the Roman numeral ‘II’ in the thesis (II:1-321), is a spiritual interpretation (allegorical interpretation) of the passage just expounded in the first part. For Gregory, history in Scripture is the words of Scripture itself or denotes the literal reading of Scripture. The modern understanding of history as a retelling of significant events that happened in the past based on research and excavations is not the concern of the Nyssen. He does not understand the Old Testament as a mere historical document that teaches us about the history of the Hebrew people. In the second part of the treatise in which a spiritual interpretation of history is provided, he holds on to the centrality of Christ and proves that “God Incarnate” is the key to understand the Old Testament. Here the story of Moses, from his birth in Egypt to his death having seen the promised land, is presented as a journey to Christian perfection. Moses represents a virtuous soul (Christian) who follows the example of Christ. Christian life is a journey from the fallen state of Adam through regaining of the image of God in Christ to the fulfilment of God’s intention in creating man in Christ himself. Gregory teaches that Moses, who hates the Egyptian life and loves virtues, is to be born in everyone. We ourselves give birth to this Moses in us through the right use of reason and free will. Christians who consciously participate in Christ, who is absolute virtue, and hate evil will make infinite progress in Christ and attain to Christian perfection.

In *The Life of Moses*, Moses’ journey to perfection, the soul’s spiritual ascent, is marked with three principal stages. These stages are three theophanies whereby Christ (God) reveals himself to Moses (the soul) – the theophany of the Burning Bush (Ex 3:1-6; LM I:20, II:19-22), the theophany of the Tabernacle not made with hands on Mt Sinai (Ex 25:40; LM I:42-55, II: 163-182) and the theophany of God’s back seen from within a hole in the rock on Mt Sinai (Ex 33:17-34:8; LM I:60, II:220). Moses’ spiritual ascent is one of progressive participation in Christ himself. In the sense of progressive participation, the three stages or theophanies correspond to purification, illumination and union (*theosis*) – the process of salvation in the Greek Orthodox spiritual tradition. In the thesis, we will focus mainly on these three stages and present them as consecrated persons’ progressive participation in Christ through the vows – chastity, poverty and obedience – and the attainment of Christian perfection. Here each theophany will correspond to a particular vow: the first theophany to chastity, the second to poverty and the third to obedience.

According to Gregory, the vocation to perfection is open to all Christians. His concept of perfection does not make room for excess of any kind, and safeguards Christian perfection as a balanced way of life which is

attainable for all. In the treatise we can trace four dimensions of Christian life – trinitarian, sacramental, virtue and ministerial – through participation in which all the faithful are able to ascend to a life of Christian perfection. Therefore, in the thesis we will also see how each vow helps consecrated persons participate in each of these dimensions in its fullest and most ideal fashion.

Originality and Relevance

The novelty of this research lies in the following:

Even though numerous studies have already been done on Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses*, no study has so far been done on the hidden presence of the evangelical counsels in this work. By substituting the traditionally acknowledged three stages of ascent with the evangelical counsels in this work, we will get a picture of a consecrated life that embodies the fundamental notion of *theosis* or divinization.

The Life of Moses and the Catholic teachings on the consecrated life, especially John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, converge on the mystery of the Incarnation. *Vita Consecrata* affirms that the consecrated life is an antidote to the denial of the saving Incarnation of Christ (VC 103). The divinization of consecrated persons through participation in Christ is a major theme of this apostolic exhortation. It introduces consecrated men and women as those who "bring anew to their own times the living presence of Jesus and who, in every age, continue to be images of Christ the Lord, fostering communion with him" (VC 9). The document specifies that even though all are called to follow Christ, "those who are called to the consecrated life have a special experience of the light which shines forth from the Incarnate Word. For the profession of the evangelical counsels makes consecrated persons a kind of sign and prophetic statement for the community of the brethren and for the world" (VC 15). The Pope reminds consecrated persons that through their configuration to Christ they can become the prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord and reflect in themselves a ray of the unapproachable light, a sign of divine beauty (VC19). Vatican Council II's decree on renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, invites the religious to live the Christian perfection for the edification of the Christian people (PC 9). Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses* is a route map for consecrated persons to reach this goal by living their vows in and with Christ.

Since the call to the consecrated life and the response to it are of a personal nature, the call for the renewal of the consecrated life is to be addressed to each person, not to a group as such. Therefore, this thesis focuses mainly on the personal perfection of each of the religious. By presenting Christian perfection through the imagery of the ascent of the soul, Gregory of Nyssa is actually emphasizing the point that “there is no male or female, but all are one in Christ” (Gal 3:28). A person who lives the life of perfection is the one who raises himself/herself above the whole world fixing his/her gaze on the truth and adding himself/herself to the kinship from on high through faith in all circumstances.¹⁰ Therefore, the path of Christian perfection proposed in the treatise is open to all, both men and women. Personal perfection contributes to the perfection of community life.

For the Western Latin Church, the Eastern Greek Church or Orthodoxy has once been “a new and unknown land.”¹¹ Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Oriente Lumen* points out that “the words of the West need the words of the East, so that God’s word may ever more clearly reveal its unfathomable riches.”¹² Pope Benedict XVI in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* notes: “Growth by individuals in the life of faith and spiritual renewal within the Catholic Church will lead to the fullness of the life of grace and *theosis*. In this way, the Church’s witness will become all the more convincing.”¹³ Very often the Eastern Church is likened to Mary of Bethany with her ‘tranquillity’ or contemplation, and the Western Church is likened to her sister Martha with her ‘restlessness’ or action (cf. Lk 10:38-42). In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory presents an ideal Christian as one who joins contemplation and action. This thesis sees the consecrated life within the common patrimony of the East and the West and aims at presenting this state of life as a principle of unity in Christianity. The truth that Martha and Mary together constitute a single family helps consecrated people fathom out the complementary nature of the Eastern and the Western Christian spiritual traditions and live the Nyssen’s admonition: “heart to contemplate, arms to work” (LM II:200).

“Christian perfection through participation in Christ” is the main theme of this thesis, and this theme is developed based on the principles Christian monasticism has embraced from its very start. Returning to the source helps

¹⁰ Cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Gregory the Wonderworker*, in M. SLUSSER (trans.), *St Gregory Thaumaturgus: Life and Works*, 45.

¹¹ T. WARE, *The Orthodox Church*, 1.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, *Oriente Lumen*, no. 28.

¹³ BENEDICT XVI, *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, no. 3.

consecrated men and women understand what their spiritual ancestors were looking for, and stay focused on the original and authentic goal of the consecrated life. Therefore, this thesis provides a road map for the renewal of the consecrated life in every age. This renewal consists in rediscovering the authentic foundations or the eternal foundations – the only foundations capable of giving it meaning and sense, from within and without – of the one consecrated life.

Structure and Arguments

This research consists of four chapters. The first chapter, *Theology and Spirituality of Christian Perfection in “The Life of Moses”*, functions as a bedrock of the following chapters in which the theme “religious vows as ascent to Christian perfection” is developed based on Gregory’s teaching on the centrality of the incarnate Christ towards whom the entire humanity is called to move, and in whom it finds its destiny. For Gregory, Christ is the centre of theology and spirituality because God’s movement towards man (theology or knowledge of God) and man’s movement towards God (spirituality) converge in Christ, the God-Man. We will see how Gregory overcomes the dichotomy between theology and spirituality in Christian life through proposing a life of participation in Christ. He ties theology to union with Christ freeing it from being a mere intellectual endeavour, and elevates spirituality to an ontological transformation in Christ freeing it from being mere piety and moralism. His theology and spirituality of Christian perfection move around the concepts of Paradise, Paradise lost, Paradise retrieved and progressive participation in God. Adam, who was created as an embodiment of humanity in the image of God with a dynamic vocation to participate in God and attain perfection, forfeited his paradisaical blessing by falling into sin. Consequently, he was endowed with a second nature or biological life symbolized by the ‘garments of skin’ (Gen 3:21) that enables him to lead the postlapsarian life. Now perfection depends on man’s ability to return to the prelapsarian state through the right use of his free will that helps him avoid what is not God. In the Incarnation, God assumed the human nature and divinized it. Since he assumed the common human nature, the salvation of humanity is objectively realised in Christ. Now, humanity is invited to participate in Christ and thereby subjectively possess salvation. Man can estrange himself from what is not God through the ‘imitation of’ and ‘participation in’ Christ because he is true God. *The Life of Moses* points out that participation in Christ is open to all Christians through the trinitarian, sacramental, virtue and ministerial dimensions of Christian life. The chapter

also provides the matrix of religious life and vows that sheds light on Gregory's monastic ideals in the treatise and their perennial relevance in a life of Christian perfection.

The second chapter, *Theophany of the Burning Bush: Chastity*, hones in on the vow of chastity of consecrated persons as a human response to Christ's initiative. For Gregory, the burning bush is a symbol of Christ, and Moses' removal of his sandals allegorically signifies Christian's getting rid of the 'garments of skin,' which was added to the original human nature after the fall, as the first level of participation in Christ who is the perfect Image of God. The 'garments of skin' refer to the human body in its fleshly and irrational condition that is subject of passions. In this chapter, we will see the first demand to those who consecrate themselves to God as the Christification (putting on Christ) of their biological being through purification of the passions and the flesh. The vow of chastity is presented as one's willingness to identify with Christ who is pure and holy by curbing the perversions of passions through turning them towards God and in service of him and neighbour. Chastity engenders a state of *apatheia* which is a precondition for contemplation. We can see that this vow does not diminish human personality, but raises it to a higher level that protects love from falling into selfish and utilitarian attitudes. Living the vow of chastity, consecrated persons make their lives a participation in trinitarian virginity and fecundity, an intensification of baptismal life that builds up the Mystical Body of Christ, an ascent in faith that transforms one's soul into a bride of Christ, and a manifestation of the equality of man and woman in the priestly nature of Christian life. Chastity is the beginning of one's ascent to the Father through the Son.

The third chapter, *Theophany of the Heavenly Tabernacle: Poverty*, develops a notion of the vow of poverty from Moses' vision of the immaterial heavenly tabernacle that encompasses the entire universe on Mt Sinai. In the treatise, Gregory presents it as Moses' contemplative ascent from the material and conceptual realities to the spiritual and invisible realities of Christ who as God surrounds the universe and orders it in harmony and unity. In the thesis, we will see the vow of poverty as an ascent from the sensory and conceptual levels of one's being to the richness of the invisible realities of God through the purification of the senses and the intellect that ultimately leads to the illumination and thereby Christification of the intellect by the Holy Spirit. Moses' ascent in poverty is his deeper participation in and knowledge of Christ himself. To his vision of the heavenly tabernacle is adjoined his mission to erect this tabernacle on earth. Thus, the ascent to the knowledge of God and the descent to communicate this knowledge are but

two sides of the same coin. In this chapter, we will see how the vow of poverty helps consecrated men and women participate in Christ's poverty, ascend to divine knowledge and partake of God's mission in the world. Poverty is freedom from idolatry, and it impels consecrated persons to be led by the Spirit and become spiritual fathers and mothers or ideal Christian leaders. It is an ascent to Jesus' prophetic ministry. Since the heavenly tabernacle erected on earth is the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, each community of consecrated persons is an extract of this Mystical Body. The world is to know what the Church is from religious communities. The poverty of the religious would manifest the synodality of the Church, and impel others to live the mystery of chrismation (confirmation) and raise their eyes to heavenly realities in hope.

The fourth chapter, *Theophany of God's Back: Obedience*, draws the mystery of the Christian concept of obedience from Moses' vision of God's back from the hole in the rock on Mt Sinai. For Gregory of Nyssa, the rock is Christ himself, and standing in the cleft of the rock, Moses is not simply to 'watch' God's back: God is asking Moses to follow him wherever he wishes to guide him (LM II:252). One who 'follows' one's guide sees only the back of the guide. Therefore, to see God's back is to follow God, whose mystery human mind cannot exhaust, in obedience to his will. In *The Life of Moses*, following God becoming a servant of God and a friend of God is Christian perfection. In the thesis, perpetually following God in obedience to his will, having attained purification from sin and the purification of the will, is presented as the perfection of consecrated life. In order to follow God consecrated persons are to be superior to everybody and everything on earth. The vow of obedience is presented not as their obedience to their superiors' will, but as their obedience to God's will. This concept of obedience overturns all worldly paradigms of authority in consecrated life. Since obedience is a higher participation in Christ through the Christification of the will, it is one of friendship or a union of love. In living their vow of obedience, consecrated men and women fall in love with Christ and make their life a total offering to God and neighbour. In this sense, it is also an entry into the mystery of the Eucharist. The fundamental decision to follow only God wherever he leads is, indeed, a participation also in the kingly ministry of Jesus Christ – the obedient King who conquered all the enemies of the soul.

Limitation and Methodology

The limitation of this study is that it approaches the consecrated life mainly in an eastern spiritual perspective that is characteristically patristic

and monastic. Regarding the primary sources, English translations of Gregory of Nyssa's original works in Greek are used.

The methodology applied in this thesis closely corresponds to a statement of Pope John XXIII in his landmark speech at the solemn inauguration of Vatican II: "... the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers, but at the same time she must also look at the present times which have introduced new conditions and new forms of life, and have opened new avenues for the Catholic apostolate."¹⁴ An attempt is made in the thesis to "return to the authoritative sources" (*ressourcement*) of the consecrated life for the purpose of rediscovering its truth and meaning in the light of *The Life of Moses* of Gregory of Nyssa, and to "bring up to date" (*aggiornamento*) this state of life, looking at the signs of the time, for the purpose of effectively communicating the ongoing vitality of its tradition in the light of the works of modern authors and magisterial documents. To this end, besides employing the deductive and inductive approaches, we will have recourse to the patristic exegetical method and the historical analysis. Since the ideas presented in *The Life of Moses* can be understood fully only with reference to Gregory's other works, they will also be adopted as the primary sources. The Nyssen did not receive any cosmopolitan education. His education was undertaken at home, in local schools, and he regards himself as a disciple of his brother Basil and his sister Macrina. But in reality, his writings reveal a sophisticated level of knowledge of classical literature, especially the works of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, the Stoics etc. He also had a solid grasp of medicine, evidenced by his familiarity with the works of Galen, a Greek physician. Even though Gregory made use of the wealth of classical literature, the final authority in his teachings was always Scripture. He rejected all pagan affirmations which he found contrary to Scripture and the Christian tradition. In order to substantiate the arguments in our study, we will make good use of our secondary sources from both Eastern and Western Christianity.

¹⁴ JOHN XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, Opening Speech to Vatican II in St Peter's, Vatican City 11 October 1962.

CHAPTER 1

Theology and Spirituality of Christian Perfection in *The Life of Moses*

1.0 Introduction

One of the outstanding features of the Eastern Church, especially of the Greek East or “Orthodoxy,”¹⁵ is her unity of theology and spirituality. “If you are a theologian, you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian,”¹⁶ says Evagrius Ponticus. For the Eastern Christians, spirituality is always ‘spiritual theology.’ Theology (*Theos* + *Logos*, knowledge of God) is a personal communion with *Theos* (the Father) through the *Logos* (the Son) in *Spiritus* (the Holy Spirit).¹⁷ The knowledge of God (theology) is experiential, given only in ‘union’ with God. Therefore, the Incarnation, the event of divine-human union which is made accessible to all, is both the starting point and end of all Eastern theological discourses. Eastern spirituality is a journey towards a “mystical union of the whole man with God” – *theosis* or Christian perfection with deification – by becoming a temple of the Holy Spirit and by participating in the divine-human life of the Incarnate Word. Gregory of Nyssa’s ascetical treatise *The Life of Moses* agrees fully with the Eastern spiritual tradition. “His spirituality is his theology, and his theology is entirely spiritual,”¹⁸ observes Thomas Merton. The theology and the spirituality of

¹⁵ The term ‘orthodoxy’ derives from the Greek words *orthe* (right or correct) and *doxa* (opinion or glory). In ancient Christianity this term connotes Christian doctrine and life in conformity with the original truth about Jesus Christ and his teachings. Later, after the Great Schism of 1054 between the Greek East and the Latin West due to their ecclesiastical differences and theological disputes, the Greek East with its ecumenical patriarchate in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul in Turkey) took the name of ‘Eastern Orthodox Church’ or simply ‘Orthodoxy.’ Today, the Eastern Orthodox Church, a communion of fifteen autocephalous Churches, five autonomous Churches, and the Orthodox diaspora in Western Europe, Australia and America, all of which recognize the Patriarch of Constantinople as a point of unity enjoying certain rights and privileges, is known as Orthodoxy: cf. W. HENN, “Orthodoxy”, in R. LATOURELLE (ed.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, 750. See also R. ROBERSON, *The Eastern Christian Churches: A Brief Survey*, 9.

¹⁶ EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, *Chapters on Prayer*, in J. E. BAMBERGER (trans.), *Evagrius Ponticus: The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, 65. Evagrius (c.345-399) was a disciple of St Gregory of Nyssa’s elder brother St Basil the Great (c.330-379) who is called the Father of the monks of the Byzantine world.

¹⁷ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 1.

¹⁸ T. MERTON, *A Course in Desert Spirituality*, ed. J. M. Sweeny, 55.

The Life of Moses are centered on Christology, i.e., on the mystery of the God-Man and human participation in this mystery. In this treatise, Gregory delineates the purpose of the Incarnation as the restoration of the human nature after the fall: “The Only Begotten God consented to be born like us so that it might bring that which had left reality back again to reality.”¹⁹ The mystery of Incarnation is presented in an ‘exchange formula’ by Gregory in *Contra Eunomium III*: “He took all that is ours, in order to give what is his in exchange.”²⁰ The Nyssen teaches that Christian perfection – divinization – through participation in Christ can be experienced here on earth, while its fulfilment awaits the believer in heaven.

The Life of Moses is a “mystical work”²¹ and is divided into two sections called respectively ‘History’ (*historia*) and ‘Contemplation’ (*theoria*).

¹⁹ LM II: 175. [NB Hereafter, references to *The Life of Moses* will be indicated as in-text citations in the form of ‘LM I/II + paragraph number’ in brackets. E.g., (LM I:12), (LM II:245), (LM I:35) etc.]

²⁰ CE III, (VIII:54), 200. Here the Nyssen is in line with the tradition of the Greek Church. In the Greek tradition Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130-202) seems to be the first one to present the idea of *theosis* in an exchange formula, “The Word of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, who because of his immeasurable love became what we are in order to make us what he is” (*Against Heresies*, Book V, in R. M. GRANT (trans.), *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 123). Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) echoes Irenaeus’ exchange formula, “The Word became man in order that you too may learn from a man how it is even possible for a man to become a god” (*The Exhortation to the Greeks*, trans. G. W. Butterworth, 23). This assimilation to God does not mean identification with Him. Man becomes ‘god’ only to the extent that God wills it; according to the grace he receives from God. *Theosis* expresses the newness of condition to which man had been restored through the Incarnation of the Son of God. Man is united to the true human nature of Christ that is united indivisibly to the Logos. Gregory of Nyssa’s (c.335-395) contemporary Athanasius of Alexandria (c.297-373) enunciates his exchange formula in these words, “The Word of God assumed humanity that we might become god” (*On the Incarnation*, trans. P. Lawson, (no. 54), 93). Gregory’s contemporary in the Syriac Orient, Mar Ephrem the Syrian (c.306-373) developed his theology and spirituality based on the same exchange formula, “He gave divinity to us, we gave humanity to him” (*The Hymns of Faith*, V, trans. J. T. Wickes, 87).

²¹ Eastern spiritual tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology. Mysticism is a special, deep experience of union with and knowledge of God. God is personal and can be approached directly and relationally. A Christian’s “personal experience of divine mysteries” (mysticism) is his “knowledge of God” (theology). The whole of the ascetic and mystical life is already contained in the sacrament of Baptism. Christ bestows upon the baptized the perfect grace of the Holy Spirit. The baptismal grace is manifested in each Christian in proportion to his/her progress upon the Way or fulfilment of the commandments. Meyendorff writes, “To the Western mind, mysticism is associated with forms of subjective, individual and necessarily esoteric knowledge, which, by definition, cannot be communicated to all. In early Christian and Byzantine Greek meanwhile, the term ‘mystical’ is applied to forms of perception related to the Christian ‘mystery.’ Whereas saints possess this ‘mystical’ perception in an eminent way because

The first part is a narration of the story of Moses as it is contained in the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and the second part is a spiritual interpretation of the passage just expounded. The story of Moses, from his birth in Egypt to his death having seen the promised land, is presented as the journey of the soul from its fallen state through its regaining of the image and vision of God to its divinization or as the soul's progressive participation in Christ to attain Christian perfection. In the first chapter, we will bring out from *The Life of Moses* the Christo-centric theology and spirituality of the ascent of the soul to God, and propose the soul's ascent as a model for religious perfection through a life according to the vows. Gregory is believed to have written this treatise in the last phase of his life on earth, in the early 390s. In it he is not developing a new theological or spiritual doctrine, but presents a synthesis of his teachings. Therefore, in order to have a clear vision of his ideas we need to refer to his other works.

1.1 Theology of Christian Perfection

Gregory of Nyssa lived in an age when the Church in the Roman empire entered a new stage of freedom from active persecution with the Edit of Milan in 313.²² But the heresy of Arianism²³ and its variants rocked the Church from within. The problem was how within the monotheistic system, which the Church inherited from the Jews, it was possible to maintain the unity of God while insisting on the deity of one (the Son) who was distinct from God the Father.²⁴ Even though Arianism, which denied the consubstantiality

they have attuned themselves to the gift of grace, all Christians are equally the recipients of the grace itself and are therefore called, by imitating the saints, to acquire and develop the 'mystical knowledge. Spiritual senses make God accessible to man': J. MEYENDORFF, "Preface", in A. J. MALHERBE – E. FERGUSON (trans.), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, xiii; cf. V. LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 8.

²² In 312 Constantine, Augustus (senior emperor) of the Western Roman Empire, defeated his political rival Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber in Rome following the so-called 'vision of the Cross' and became the sole master of the West. In 313 he and his co-emperor in the East, Licinius, proclaimed religious toleration throughout the Empire.

²³ A heresy condemned at Nicaea I (325 AD) and derived from an Alexandrian priest Arius (c.270-c.336), who asserted that God's Son did not always exist and consequently was not divine by nature but only the first among creatures. During the time of the Cappadocian Fathers a variant of Arianism, named *Anomeans* (Unlikers) or Neo-Arians by modern writers, emerged under the leadership of Eunomius, a man of powerful religious charisma. He asserted that God is an absolutely knowable substance and the Son is the first being created by the Father, with the Holy Spirit then being created by the Son.

²⁴ L. D. DAVIS, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787)*, 33.

(*homoousios*) of the Father and the Son, was condemned by the Council of Nicaea I in 325, Eunomius (d. 395), later bishop of Cyzicus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), caused the re-emergence of the heresy teaching that “the Son is unlike (*anomoios*) the Father”²⁵ and became a theological rival for Gregory. Eunomius’ teachings (Neo-Arianism) rendered impossible the Orthodox concept of salvation as deification, i.e., be united to God as far as possible by participating in the humanity of Christ. In Orthodox faith, the Incarnation of the Son of God was a moment in the union of God and humanity. Christ’s person was the channel through which divine powers descended to the human race and man ascended to God.²⁶ The intimate, undivided and unconfused union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ the Redeemer is a must for the realization of the concept of deification.

The Life of Moses is, as a matter of fact, one of Gregory’s refutations of the teachings of Eunomius. The first two ecumenical councils – Nicaea I in 325 and Constantinople I in 381 – were Trinitarian in nature and Gregory took an active part in the latter which asserted the triumph of Trinitarian orthodoxy. In the First Council of Constantinople (381), the Fathers proclaimed the divinity of the Holy Spirit against the *Pneumatomachians* (Spirit-fighters) apart from reiterating the teachings of the First Council of Nicaea against the Neo-Arians who limited “life in Christ” to the created order and denied deification. Denying the divinity of the Holy Spirit was tantamount to denying the possibility of deification because if the Holy Spirit is, by nature, not God, then he cannot raise the human being above the limits of the creature.²⁷ In fact, the ecumenical councils were not exhausting the mystery of God. On the other hand, they drew a fence around this mystery to prevent the people from deviating into error.²⁸ The Fathers teachings were “apophatic”²⁹ in nature. Their apophatism was a defence against the pride of human reason or against the heretics who claimed absolute knowledge of the truth. The Fathers said “what God is not” instead of affirming “what God is.”

²⁵ Ibid., 94.

²⁶ I. V. POPOV, “The Idea of Deification in the Early Eastern Church”, trans. Boris Jakim, in V. KHARLAMOV (ed.), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology Volume 2*, 53.

²⁷ I. V. POPOV, “The Idea of Deification in the Early Eastern Church”, 55.

²⁸ K. WARE, *The Orthodox Church*, 20.

²⁹ Apophatism is a central concept in Eastern theology. It is often translated as negative theology. It points out the inadequacy of all attempts to describe the absolute mystery of God. Any affirmation about God has to be qualified by a corresponding negation. God surpasses in an infinite way our categories. Knowledge of God is never purely intellectual, but calls for an ascent to God through moral and religious purification: cf. G. O’COLLINS – E. G. FARRUGIA, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 15.

They used the term *homoousios* (consubstantial)³⁰ as an apophatic (negative) term for it indicated that the Son and the Spirit are ‘not’ creatures. The mystery of what God is in himself – the Divine *Ousia* or the Trinity – is incomprehensible to the created intellect of man. Therefore, the heretics’ attempts to define the mystery through their intellectual reasoning were thwarted by the councils. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory identifies the heretics as those persons who are “stoned by their own reasonings” (LM II:161). With these facts in mind let us understand the theology of Christian perfection in Gregory’s *The Life of Moses*.

1.1.1 Doctrine of God

The theme of participation occupies the central role in Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of God in *The Life of Moses*. Nothing is more important to Gregory than to make progress in the spiritual life in order to participate more deeply in the being of God.³¹ He identifies God the Creator as real Being, Life, absolute Good, absolute Virtue and Beauty, and says that the creatures have existence, life, goodness, virtue and beauty inasmuch as they participate in them in God:

In my view the definition of truth is this: not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being. Falsehood is a kind of impression which arises in the understanding about nonbeing: as though what does not exist does, in fact, exist. But truth is the sure apprehension of real Being. So, whoever applies himself in quietness to higher philosophical matters over a long period of

³⁰ At the Council of Nicaea I, the term *homoousios* expressed the identity of essence (*ousia*) between the Father and the Son, implying a corresponding equality in dignity. In expounding the dogma of the Trinity, the Greeks start from the three persons and then proceed to the one nature or essence (*ousia*) that is incomprehensible, i.e., in the Eastern Greek tradition the Son and the Spirit are experienced first as divine agents of salvation and then are discovered to be essentially one God. Theology (knowledge of God), for them, always springs from man’s union with God who descends to man through revelations. It is said that while the Eastern theology is based on the experience of ‘God’s relationship with man’ through revelation, the Latin theology is based on speculation, i.e., man’s relationship with God, as it starts from the oneness of God and moves to the existence of three persons: cf. G. MASPERO, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa’s Ad Ablabium*, xii.

³¹ Gregory distinguishes between two classes of beings: sensible beings and intelligible beings. The sensible beings are those apprehended by the senses, and the intelligible beings are those perceived by the mind through the leading of sensible things. The intelligible beings are divided into created and uncreated. God (Trinity) belongs to the uncreated nature, while both human beings and angels, who can know God and participate in him, belong to the created intelligible nature: cf. *CE I*, (XXIII:295), 126.

time will barely apprehend what true Being is, that is, what possesses existence in its own nature, and what nonbeing is, that is, what is existence only in appearance, with no self- subsisting nature (LM II:23). ... For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participating in true Being. On the other hand, that which is always the same, neither increasing nor diminishing, immutable to all change whether to better or to worse (for it is far removed from the inferior and it has no superior), standing in need of nothing else, alone desirable, participated in by all but not lessened by their participation—this is truly real Being. And the apprehension of it is the knowledge of truth (LM II:25).

Eunomius denied the title ‘Being’ to the Son.³² But Gregory insists that he who made himself known to Moses by the name of ‘He Who Is’ (Ex 3:14) was the Only-begotten of God (LM II:20). Even though it is the Son (Christ) who reveals himself to Moses, it is the one Divine Substance (*Ousia*) common to the three Divine Persons which is indicated by the appellation of ‘He Who Is.’³³ “True Being is true Life” (LM II:235), says Gregory. In his *Contra Eunomium III*, the Only-begotten God is God and Life and Truth.³⁴ It is Christ who brings into existence whatever exists. Thus, Gregory upholds the orthodox doctrine that the Son is not a creature as Eunomius teaches, but the Son is true God and true Life; he has life not by participating but in himself. The conclusion Gregory draws from his arguments about Christ as true Being and true Life is that everything that is outside Christ is nonexistence and death. Christ promises eternal life to his followers (LM II:251). The Nyssen does not attribute natural immortality to anything created, not even to the soul. This teaching of Gregory sheds light on the fact that the Church does not teach that the soul is divine, nor that it is intrinsically immortal in the way Plato imagined, but ‘conditionally immortal’ in dependence on God’s promise of the gift of life.³⁵ The soul’s immortality is conditional; it has life, if it participates in God’s life.

³² *CE III*, (IX:31), 210. According to Eunomius, it was an angel who spoke to Moses at the burning bush. Gregory contradicts him saying that the Son is called ‘angel’ as revealing the Father and ‘Being’ (He Who Is) as having no name that would make known his essence, but transcending all designation by names: cf. *Ibid.*, (IX:41), 212.

³³ D. L. BALAS, *Man’s Participation in God’s Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 112.

³⁴ *CE III*, (VI:75), 169.

³⁵ J. H. MCGUCKIN, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*, 197.

It is in response to the request for guidance on perfection in virtuous life that Gregory writes *The Life of Moses*. In the beginning of the treatise, the Cappadocian presents God himself as absolute Good and absolute Virtue. Virtuous life depends on one's participation in God. He writes that when the perfection of visible things is marked off by certain definite boundaries, virtue has no limit at all (LM I:5) because God has no limit in his own nature.³⁶ Gregory draws his vision of perfection in virtuous life, i.e., a life of participation in God, from Phil 3:13, "... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead I press toward the goal." We can see that this text from St Paul is, indeed, the theme of the whole treatise. For the Nyssen, perfection is a continuous progress. What is good can be limited by the presence of its opposite as life is limited by death and light by darkness (LM I:5). But the infinite God (the Uncreated Nature), who "is the fount, origin and supply of very good,"³⁷ does not admit an opposite to his nature (LM I:7). God does not have good as something acquired, nor does he receive moral virtue into himself by participation in some higher moral virtue, but he is by nature what goodness is in itself.³⁸ Therefore, "those who know what is good by nature desire participation in it, and since this good has no limit, the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless" (LM I:7). In God virtue is not limited by its opposite, evil. Gregory affirms clearly that whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, and that nothing is really desirable and truly beautiful except virtue and the Nature which is the source of virtue. The essential goodness is common to all the three Divine Persons of the Trinity because "the Father has His uncreated nature in common with the Son and the Holy Spirit."³⁹ To believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is to believe in one goodness. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory says that the Good attracts to itself those who look to it (LM II:225), and comes to the conclusion that God himself is 'the Beauty' (LM II:232). In short, for the Nyssen, goodness, which includes all perfections with a special emphasis on virtue, is found in God (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) by nature, whereas the created beings possess it only by participation.

³⁶ The perfection of a table or the number ten consists in the fact that it has both a beginning and an end. But neither does God have a beginning nor an end. Since God is absolute virtue, virtue is unlimited (LM I:5); cf. Ps 119:96, "I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad."

³⁷ *CEI*, (XXII:274), 122. Gregory holds that there are terms that in some way name the divine substance (*ousia*): light, wisdom, power, life, truth, justice, goodness, incorruptibility etc. He calls these terms "goods." He also refers to some of them as virtues.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, (XXII: 276), 122.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, (XXII: 278), 122.

Gregory envisages an ontological chasm between the uncreated intelligent Being (God) and the created intelligent beings (souls and angels). The former is far removed from the inferior, has no superior, stands in need of nothing else, alone desirable, participated in by all but not lessened by their participation (LM II:25). In *The Life of Moses*, soul's participation of God is explicitly described as 'knowledge of God' (LM II:158) and the lack of participation in God leads to 'ignorance' and sin (LM II:65, 127). Anything that does not participate in God or is outside God (the true Being) is nonexistence or non-being. Evil is outside of God and consists in non-existence, i.e., in the privation of goodness. It exists only so far and so long as human beings are freely separated from the Good, and it ceases to be if they rend themselves away from evil/vice and sew themselves on to God, who truly Is. Therefore, sinful life is non-existent.⁴⁰ Man's true life consists in his participation of the real Being. Moreover, since "the goal of virtuous life is blessedness or happiness (Greek, *makariotita*; Latin, *beatitudo*)"⁴¹ and "blessedness (happiness) is something which includes every concept of goodness and from which nothing answering to good desire is missing,"⁴² communion with God (Christ), who is absolute good, is the eternal happiness (blessedness) or its anticipation for man. God alone is happy or blessed (*makarios*) as he transcends everything created, and, for Gregory, "likeness to God is the definition of human blessedness."⁴³ In other words, the happiness of human beings is achieved not by participating in contingent earthly goods, but by participating in the eternal happiness found only in God (Christ); the desire for happiness is the desire for Christ, who is absolute virtue.

In fact, Gregory's Trinitarian doctrine is nothing but the refutation of the heresy of Eunomius. By denying that the Son is true God and by pressing on the creatureliness of the Son, the doctrine of Eunomius leads either to Judaism or Hellenism – to Judaism in the sense that the Son is not to be adored

⁴⁰ D. L. BALAS, *Man's Participation in God's Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 119.

⁴¹ *IPs*, (I: I:5), 84. The word used by the ancient Greek moralists for happiness is *eudaimonia*. Christian thinkers such as Gregory of Nyssa preferred the language of the Bible and were inclined to use the biblical word *makariotita*, which denotes divine happiness, instead of the non-biblical word *eudaimonia*, which denotes earthly happiness. E.g., Mt 5:3, "Blessed (*makarioi*) are the poor in spirit, ..."; 1 Tim 6:15, "... he (Christ) who is the blessed (*makarios*) and only Sovereign ..." While the non-biblical term for happiness discards pain and sufferings, the biblical word for happiness makes acceptable pain and suffering by the heavenly hope.

⁴² *HBeat*, (Homily I), 24.

⁴³ *IPs*, (I: I:6), 84.

and to Hellenism in the sense that the Son is adored as a creature as if in idolatry.⁴⁴ According to Gregory, man as a creature can never cross the ontological chasm between the uncreated God and himself, and enter into God's eternity to be deified. It is in the Incarnation, in the God-Man, that the humanity crossed this ontological divide as the Incarnation is the mystery of the absolute Divine-human unity. The Incarnation made deification possible for man. Gregory's *The Life of Moses* is interspersed with allegories pointing to the Incarnation and the two natures – divine and human – of Christ.⁴⁵ By these he emphasizes the orthodox faith: the Son (the true God without origin) assumed humanity (the created nature) and deified it. But Gregory reiterates that as God is unlimited and infinite, he in his essence (*ousia*) remains invisible and incomprehensible to the created intelligence of man (LM II:163). It is, indeed, Gregory's denouncing of Eunomius' claim that man can exhaust the mystery of God.

1.1.2 Man and His Primordial Vocation

Gregory of Nyssa depicts the return journey of the soul (man) from the fallen state to its original state in Paradise through the allegorical presentation of the journey of the Israelites from the land of slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Cana. He says that human nature at its beginning was unbroken and immortal (LM II:215), and then it was divided into male and female (LM I:12). Thus, it is to the undivided and immortal human nature that man is to return. The Cappadocian develops the above said notion of man in his work *On the Making of Man* based on the creation account in Genesis 1: 27, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Here he sees a twofold sense in the creation of man's nature: in the original creation, 'man was created in the image of God,' i.e., man was created genderless as God is genderless or man was a created image of the uncreated nature, and in the second creation, 'man was created male and female,' i.e., man was created in corporeal nature, "which has no reference to the Archetype" – God, because God in his prevision foresaw man's fall and devised for his image the distinction of male

⁴⁴ *CE II*, (I:14-15), 63.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa finds six figures of the Incarnation in the story of Moses: the burning bush (LM II: 20), Moses' rod changed into a serpent (LM II: 26-27, 31-34), Moses' hand becoming leprous (LM II: 26-30), the manna (LM II: 139), the tabernacle (LM II:174), and the tablets of stone (LM II: 216).

and female so that there may happen biological reproduction in the postlapsarian state.⁴⁶

Gregory associates the first sense of creation ('God created man in his image') with God's creation of a universal humanity. He notes that in Gen 1: 26-27 – "Let us make 'mankind' (Hebrew, *adam* 'man' or 'mankind') in our image, according to our likeness; ... So God created 'humankind' (Hebrew, *ha adam* 'the man' or 'the mankind') in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" – the name 'Adam' that was given on the day man was created in God's image is general, not particular. It was not an individual, but all humanity that was created in the image of God. While the creation of the common human nature in the image of God belongs to the first sense of the creation of man, Adam and Eve as male and female belong to the second sense of the creation of man. Thus, the two accounts of creation, which appear to be mutual contradiction, were reconciled by the Nyssen. In the Hebrew Bible, the word *adam* is used in its generic (collective) sense of 'human' (man), or with the definite article as 'the human' (the man) prior to its emergence in the text as a proper name for the first male human.⁴⁷ In *On the Making of Man*, the Nyssen expounds this fact:

In saying that 'God created man' the text indicates, by the indefinite character of the term, all mankind; ... the name given to the man created is not the particular, but the general name: thus, we are led by the employment of the general name of our nature to some such view as this – that in the Divine foreknowledge and power all humanity is included in the first creation ...⁴⁸

God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and God created man, in the image of God created He him" (Gen 1:26-27). Accordingly, the Image of God, which we behold in universal humanity, had its consummation then; but Adam as yet was not; for the thing formed from the earth is called Adam, by etymological nomenclature, as those tell us who are acquainted with the Hebrew tongue – wherefore also the apostle, who was specially learned in his native tongue, the tongue of the Israelites, calls the man 'of the earth' (1 Cor 15:47).⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *MMa*, (XVI:8-14), 751-753. Gregory of Nyssa is of the opinion that if man had not sinned, he would have multiplied in angelic fashion – angels are without marriage, but they exist in countless myriads: cf. *Ibid.*, (XVII:3), 756.

⁴⁷ L. RYKEN et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 75.

⁴⁸ *MMa*, (XVI:16), 753.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, (XXII:3), 766.

The name ‘Adam’ which God called the first man is a general name indicating all mankind.⁵⁰ According to Gregory, man’s dignity consists in the first sense of creation that he/she is in the image of the nature of the Creator, and not in the materialistic approach of man as a little world, composed of the same elements with the universe.⁵¹ The original man (the original human nature), for Gregory, is the ‘soul-man’ who is the image of the incorporeal God. He believes that gender does not enter into the definition of what it means to be human. *The Life of Moses* is an ardent appeal to those who are “competing admirably in the divine race along the course of virtue, light footedly leaping and straining constantly for the prize of heavenly calling,” (LM I:1) to regain the original unbroken and immortal Divine image. “Christianity is an imitation (Greek, *mimesis*) of the divine nature,”⁵² affirms Gregory.

The Cappadocian rejects the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul. For him, the soul and the body have a single beginning.⁵³ He says, “... as man is one, the being consisting of soul and body, we are to suppose that the beginning of his existence is one, common to both parts...”⁵⁴ From this we can assume that the twofold sense of the creation of man does not mean God’s two separate acts of creation. The first sense of creation – creation of the humankind in God’s image – simply means God’s original intention in creating man, i.e., man created in the image of God should “be on the side of God”⁵⁵ participating in and imitating God’s nature. Although body is integral to human existence in God’s prevision, it is not part of the image of God; it is only the soul that is created in God’s image and hence mirrors God (LM II:47,

⁵⁰ For Gregory, as the one common Divine Nature is equally shared by the three Divine Persons, the one common human nature is equally shared by all persons. The term ‘man’ is a name of the one common nature and in the strict sense this term is not to be used in plural ‘men.’ He says, “When we address any one, we do not call him by the name of his nature, in order that no confusion may result from the community of the name, as would happen if every one of those who hear it were to think that he himself was the person addressed, because the call is made not by the proper appellation but by the common name of their nature: but we separate him from the multitude by using that name which belongs to him as his own;—that, I mean, which signifies the particular subject. Thus, there are many who have shared in the nature, but the man in them all is one; since, as has been said, the term *man* does not belong to the nature of the individual as such, but to that which is common”: GREGORY OF NYSSA, *To Ablabius that There Are Not Three Gods*, in P. SCHAFF (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa – Dogmatic Treatises Series II Volume 5*, 617.

⁵¹ *MMa*, (XVI: 1-2), 750.

⁵² *WIMCOC*, 85.

⁵³ *SRe*, 255; *MMa*, (XXVIII:8), 784.

⁵⁴ *MMa*, (XXIX: 1), 785.

⁵⁵ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 56.

318). According to Gregory, the soul (the hidden man) receives and reflects the beauty of God, and the body (the visible man) receives the beauty indirectly, from the soul. Thus, the physical beauty functions as “a mirror of the mirror.”⁵⁶ In other words, the whole nature of humanity, body and soul, is made so as to act in the divine image, i.e., the body is appropriately constructed so as to be filled with the image-bearing soul and become ‘a mirror of the mirror.’ Prior to the fall human bodies were not heavy, and life was sustained by a kind of (spiritual) food, the enjoyment of which extends to the soul alone.⁵⁷ The Nyssen is of the opinion that human body becomes heavy through association with passions. In Paradise Adam and Eve were ‘light’ like the angels.

With the corporeal nature added to the incorporeal and genderless image of God man is a body-soul. The soul or the original image of God in man is not restricted to any part of the body, but is equally in touch with the whole.⁵⁸ God endowed the soul with a corporeal nature not as a punishment because everything created by God is good. Human being as a union of an intelligent soul with a body is a ‘microcosm’ – “the point in which the spirit and matter are united.”⁵⁹ Through man that which is earthly is raised to the divine and the divine approaches the whole creation.⁶⁰ The dignity of the body can again be affirmed by the fact that the Only-begotten is united with a whole man – body and soul – in his Incarnation and this man remains united to him in his resurrected state.⁶¹ Man as the image of God implies the conviction that he is not enclosed to the universe, but is open to intimacy with God. If human beings bear the elements of the universe in themselves, this is in order to exercise their role as mediators, to lead the entire universe to God.⁶² In the second chapter, we will understand man’s mediatory role as a participation in Christ’s priestly ministry.

Gregory presents the primordial vocation of man as participation in God. The importance of his vocation depends on the fact that only he is created in God’s image through the superabundance of God’s love: “God

⁵⁶ *MMa*, (XII:9), 740.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, (XIX:1), 760; cf. Jn 7:37 – Jesus cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.”

⁵⁸ *MMa*, (XIV:1), 747.

⁵⁹ L. F. MATEO-SECO, “Body”, in L. F. MATEO-SECO – G. MASPERO (eds.), *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Seth Cherney, 117; cf. *SRe*, 221.

⁶⁰ *COr*, (VI), 893.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, (XXXV), 949.

⁶² L. F. MATEP-SECO, “Creation”, in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 187.

created man for no other reason that He is good”⁶³ and “abound in love.”⁶⁴ True love is devoid of envy, and God, who is love, does not refuse man participation in his goodness. Man was made in God’s image so that human nature is able to participate in God’s Goodness.⁶⁵ If human nature is entirely different from that of God, it would be impossible for man to participate in God, because only ‘like knows like.’ Since God is light, the human nature was also light, i.e., it had a shining nature, capable of seeing and participating in that Light which is God.⁶⁶ God’s infinity makes man’s participation in divinity an unending process.

Gregory is of the opinion that man did not possess the image and likeness of God in its totality when he was created. The image of God in man signifies only a foundation and an incitement to further participation.⁶⁷ In the beginning a certain ‘affinity’ with the Divine is mingled with the human nature such as immortality, reason, freedom etc. so that by each of them his desire may be directed “to what is akin to his nature” (LM I:12; II:258):

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.⁶⁸

Thus, man’s original condition is characterized by a certain initial share of the perfections of God and a dynamic vocation for progressive participation in God. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen enunciates that participation consists in continuous “radical change for the better” (LM II:126). Through continuous participation in God, the soul will become constantly better of itself and will never cease from its progress (LM II:242). The image of God is something that humanity continually grows further into. However, man, through participation, does not become God in his nature; he always remains

⁶³ *MMA*, (XVI:10), 752.

⁶⁴ *COr*, (V), 890.

⁶⁵ *MMA*, (XVI:10), 752.

⁶⁶ *COr*, (V), 890; cf. M. LAIRD, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, knowledge, and Divine Presence*, 182. The Nyssen understands overstepping one’s own nature and taking the place of God as pride: cf. *HEccl*, (Homily 4), 73.

⁶⁷ D. L. BALAS, *Man’s Participation in God’s Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 145.

⁶⁸ *COr*, (V), 891.

a creature. God in his essence is infinite and incomprehensible to man.⁶⁹ Gregory defines perfection not as assimilation to God, but as growth in the infinite God. But, participation in God leads to knowledge of and communion with God, and thereby to man's deification. The Nyssen uses the clause "Let us make man" against the heretics who deny the Godship of the Son, and says that the Only-begotten God made man in the image of God as there is only one Godhead for the Divine Persons.⁷⁰ Since he says that the Only-begotten God made man in the image of God, participation in God means for him also participation in the Son, Christ.

Gregory of Nyssa's anthropology is based on the idea of the original unity of the image and likeness of God in man before the fall.⁷¹ A. Ojell observes that on this Gregory is in contrast with the general interpretation of the Eastern Fathers like Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and Basil the Great, according to whom, likeness - right from the beginning - was something to be attained in a process of growing into.⁷² Instead, Gregory believes that image of God in man includes also a certain likeness of God. In the creation of man, God endowed him with purity, freedom from passion, blessedness, alienation from all evil and all those attributes of the like kind which help to form in men the likeness of God.⁷³ But man possesses these "divine attributes"⁷⁴ in the beginning as the potentiality of his nature just as in wheat, or in any other

⁶⁹ In the 14th century Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) would develop Gregory of Nyssa's concept of participation. He makes a difference between essence and energies or operations in God. The distinction between essence and uncreated energies does not imply or effect division or separation in God. The personal God who exists in essence and energies is one. Energies proceed from God - from the common 'ousia' of the Trinity - and manifest His own Being. The divinizing energy, by participation of which one is divinized, is a divine grace, but in no way the essence of God: cf. GREGORY PALAMAS, *The Triads*, trans. N. Gendle, Paulist Press, New Jersey 1983.

⁷⁰ *MMA*, (XVI: 5), 751.

⁷¹ *COr*, (V), 891.

⁷² A. OJELL, "Jesus Christ as Mediator, Archetype and Prototype in the Light of Anthropology of St. Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Context", in E. D. MOUTSOULAS (ed.), *Jesus Christ in St Gregory of Nyssa's Theology: Minutes of the Ninth International Conference on St Gregory of Nyssa*, 460.

⁷³ *MMA*, (V:1), 725.

⁷⁴ Divine attributes are God's invisible qualities which are inseparable from the being of God. Metaphysically God is self-existent, eternal, and unchanging; intellectually God is omniscient, faithful, and wise; ethically God is just, merciful, and loving; emotionally God detests evil, is long-suffering, and is compassionate; existentially God is free, authentic, and omnipotent; relationally God is transcendent in being, immanent universally in providential activity, and immanent with his people in redemptive activity: cf. G. R. LEWIS, "God, Attributes of", in W. A. ELWELL (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 492.

grain, the whole form of the plant is potentially included – the leaves, the stalk, the joints, the grain, the beard.⁷⁵ Man can unfold and manifest the divine likeness he received in the beginning through his journey towards perfection by participation of God. His vocation is that of being witness in the material world to the glory and light of God, of being someone who participates in and enjoys the divine goodness. Yet participation, being a free reception, can be also refused, and thus man can be fallen out from the participation of God. But, man's original nature (rationality and freedom) and its essential ordination to the sharing of divine perfections could not be lost, even when he chooses not to participate of God. So, to Gregory's mind, the image and likeness of God remains in man forever, it can only be obscured by sin.

1.1.3 Fall and the Garments of Skin

We have seen that, according to Gregory, man was created in the image of God with a dynamic vocation to participate in God's perfections. A creature is of itself nothing, but exists only in dependence on God who is the real Being, the Good and the Truth. Participation in God's perfections is both the foundation and the unfolding of the 'image of God' in the human being; sin is a refusal and loss of participation.⁷⁶ But for man, endowed with freedom, this participation is a conscious process. Evil entered the world due to the misuse of free-will. Gregory states that even the devil is good by nature, because he was created for no evil purpose by God, was created good, as is true of all things created by God.⁷⁷ He fell from on high because of his malice, by the misuse of his free-will, "by his very unwillingness to perceive the good."⁷⁸ In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen portrays the devil as the one who schemes against human souls with many different deceits (LM II:63). Man is to use his weapon of free-will against his antagonist (the devil), to thwart his darts of deceits: "For no one causes grief to his antagonist unless he exhibits in himself those marks which give proof of his victory over the other" (LM II:5). Gregory likens the free-will to the midwives who acted against the demands of the tyrant Pharaoh, and saved the Israelites' male children (Ex 1:17; LM II:5).

The Nyssen presents the fall of Adam as stopping his participation in God succumbing to the deception of the devil without trying to win over him.

⁷⁵ *MMa*, (XXIX:3), 785.

⁷⁶ D. L. BALAS, "Participation", in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 585.

⁷⁷ *COR*, (VI), 894.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, (VI), 895; cf. K. WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, 59.

In *The Life of Moses*, the fall of Adam is explained against the backdrop of the Hebrews' making of the idol of the golden calf at the insinuation of Aron who told them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me" (Ex 32:2). Gregory interprets that Moses adorned the ears of the Israelites with an ornament for the ears, which is the Law, but the false brother (Aron) through disobedience removed the ornament placed on their ears and made an idol with it (LM II:212). Here, while Moses represents the pre-Incarnate Christ who gave the commandment to the first parents so that they might participate in him, Aron represents the devil (the serpent) who deceived them:

At the first entrance of sin the advice to disobey the commandment removed the earrings. The serpent was regarded as a friend and neighbour by the first mortals when he advised them that it would be useful and beneficial to them if they transgressed the divine commandment, that is, if they removed from their ears the earring of the commandment (LM II:213).

The earring of the commandment was, in fact, an adornment to the first parents. But they willingly removed it and complied to the will of the deceiver. Man's rejection of the commandment of God can be interpreted as his separation from the Word, the Only-begotten, who is the power and wisdom of God (LM II:174). Evil was not willed by God, but by man. Even though Gregory calls the devil 'the father of sin' (LM II:32), Adam himself is the creator of sin through the misuse of his free-will.⁷⁹ The Cappadocian treats the devil as the explanation for the fall, but not its cause, which is identified as the misuse of God's great gift (free-will) by moving 'willingly' away from good to becoming evil by its deprivation.⁸⁰ It is one thing to be tempted, it is another thing to yield to temptation. In his seventh homily on *Ecclesiastes*, Gregory identifies the nature of evil as nonbeing for "it exists for just as long as we are outside the Good, and there is no evil subsisting by itself outside of the free will."⁸¹ Evil disappears when the created intelligent beings freely choose God.

For Gregory, in Gen 2:9 the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the tree of death) are presented in the form of an enigma by

⁷⁹ *COr*, (V), 892.

⁸⁰ R. A. GREER, *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny*, 169. According to Gregory it was Satan's envy that banished man from Paradise and in man 'envy is the passion which causes evil': cf. *LM II*: 256. The sin, the end result of an attitude of envy, was committed by man himself through his free choice, and he alone is responsible for it.

⁸¹ *HEccl*, (Homily 7), 122.

God. In truth, only the tree of life exists by its very nature because it is impossible to have two trees at the middle of the garden. The other tree, the tree of death or the killer-tree, comes to its place in the privation of life, i.e., when man opts out of true life, when he chooses not to participate in the tree of life:

Life is the very centre of God's plantation. Death on the contrary is, in and of itself, rootless and unplanted, since it has no place of its own. It is in consequence of the absence of life that death gets planted, when living beings lack participation in the nobler condition.⁸²

According to Gregory, "the killer-tree was called capable of the knowledge of good and evil, because, like the evil nature of poisons that are prepared with honey, it appears to be good in so far as it affects the senses with sweetness, but in so far as it destroys him who touches it, it is the worst of all evil."⁸³ A person becomes a victim of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, when he thinks that the good lies in that which gratifies the senses and stops participating in the tree of life through contemplation. This is man's leap into death.⁸⁴ The fall of Adam took place when he chose not to treat the tree of life as the centre of his life, and saw material goods at its place. Man in Paradise was a spiritual creature, and he could look upon God with a pure and simple mind. In *The Life of Moses*, this contemplation of God is presented as the goal of human existence. Adam sinned by failing to maintain his single-minded contemplation of God, and by turning his mind from the Creator to creatures. This desertion of the supreme good and adherence to the less good is the evil suggested by the devil. Adam thought that the "true good"⁸⁵ consisted in the pleasure of the senses. This, then, is the origin of sin, the choosing of that which in itself is not an evil (for the sensible creation is also

⁸² *HSong*, (Homily 12), 369.

⁸³ *MMA*, (XX:4), 763.

⁸⁴ In *MMA* (XX:4) Gregory says, "... the serpent points out the evil fruit of sin, not showing the evil manifestly in its own nature - for man would not have been deceived by manifest evil - She (Eve) took of the fruit thereof and did eat, and that eating became the mother of death to men."

⁸⁵ For Gregory, the true good is that which possesses what is good both of itself according to its own nature, and likewise for everyone and at all times. He writes, "What is the characteristic mark of true goodness? It is not only to have a usefulness in relation to something, or at certain moments, or to appear now helpful, now useless, or to be good for one person but not such to another. Rather, it possesses what is good both of itself according to its own nature, and likewise for everyone and at all times. This is, at least in my judgment, the characteristic mark of the good, one without error or deceit": GREGORY OF NYSSA, *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep*, trans. R. A. Greer, in R. A. GREER, *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny*, 95.

from God) in preference to a greater good.⁸⁶ In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory presents the deception of the devil in these words: “Envy (the devil) walled us off from the tree of life, divested us of holy garments, and in shame led us away clothed with fig leaves” (LM II:256).

In the treatise, he likens man’s participation in God to climbing the ladder which the Patriarch Jacob saw in a vision as recorded in Gen 28:12 (LM II:227). For him, stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil (LM I:6). While the race of virtue is an ascent, the race of evil is a descent. Having been lost touch with the commandment – the tree of life, the Only-begotten who is the Ladder to climb up to God, – man fell down to an earthly life. The Cappadocian goes on to depict this condition of man’s fall in *The Life of Moses* through the story of the Israelites who labour under a tyrant Pharaoh in Egypt.

Sin, as it is a stopping of participation in God, brought a twofold death to man: death of the soul and that of the body. This death of the soul is separation from the true life – God – and, therefore, a spiritual death.⁸⁷ The soul perished before the body because of its disobedience. But the life of the soul is different from that of the body. The spiritual death of the soul due to sin does not mean the discontinuation of the soul. In the postlapsarian state, while the life of the body is mortal and subject to death, that of the soul is not subject to death.⁸⁸ Moreover, the natural spiritual faculties of the soul are not lost due to the fall, i.e., man’s inner capacity to participate in God remains with him. Through emphasising the mortality of the body and the immortality of the soul, Gregory drives his point home stating that man ought not to give away himself to the life of the senses, which compared with the true life is unreal and insubstantial.⁸⁹ Sensual pleasures have only an appearance of beauty, goodness and life, and a life dedicated only for participation in them is communion with death: the spiritual death of the soul, and the physical death in which body and soul are separated.

⁸⁶ E. V. McCLEAR, *The Fall of Man and Original Sin in the Theology of Gregory of Nyssa*, 186.

⁸⁷ In *CE III* (VI: 77-79) Gregory says, “Physically the activity and movement of the bodily senses is called ‘life’, and conversely their failure and dissolution are called ‘death’. Where the intelligible nature is concerned however, intimate affinity with the divine is true life, and loss of the divine is entitled ‘death’. ... Just as in the case of body the extinguishing of natural functions is called death, so too in the case of intelligible being, failure to move towards the good is death and cessation of life. ... The death which affects the intelligible nature is separation from God ...”

⁸⁸ *HEccl.*, (Homily 1), 36.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, (Homily 1), 37.

Gregory uses the Genesis story of the “garments of skin”⁹⁰ (Gen 3:21), with which Adam and Eve were clothed after the fall, to explain the postlapsarian condition of man. Symbolically the garments signify the animal nature (‘biological life’) with which man was clothed when he became associated with passionate impulses. What distinguishes man from animals is his ‘spiritual life’ which bestows the life of communion with God. After the fall, God stripped man of his primordial happiness (i.e., immortality, the frankness of communication with God, dominion over the passions) and clothed him in animality and mortality with the skin of a ‘dead’ animal. Garments of skin do not indicate the beginning of man’s bodily existence because, as we have already seen, man’s body and soul came into existence together. The garments denote the beginning of man’s biological existence, different from his prelapsarian spiritual existence. The garments include the passions, sexuality, and especially mortality, which are added to the human nature made in the image of God. According to the Nyssen, since the garments of skin were not part of the original nature of man, they must be gotten rid of in order to ascend toward the original condition of man. In *The Life of Moses*, he takes “the sandals” of Moses at the sight of the burning bush for “the garments of skin,” and interprets Moses’ removal of sandals from his feet as the purification of the soul (LM II:22). For him, man’s return journey to God necessitates first of all his freedom from a mere biological life.

The Nyssen teaches that since Adam bears the one common human nature, the consequences of the fall is transmitted to his descendants: human nature has sinned in Adam. In the first creation of man, the image of God was bestowed collectively upon all human nature (humankind/*adam*). Adam’s human nature is our human nature, his gifts are our gifts and his ejection from Paradise is our ejection from our real home.⁹¹ He writes, “Envy (the devil) banished *us* from Paradise, having become a serpent to oppose Eve” (LM II:256).⁹² The Cappadocian taught that all men, whether guilty of personal

⁹⁰ The theme of the ‘garments of skin’ has a long tradition among the Greek. Philo of Alexandria understood the garments of skin as the creation of the human body, and so did the Gnostics, Encratites and Messalians. According to their interpretation salvation would lie in liberation from it.

⁹¹ E. V. McCLEAR, *The Fall of Man and Original Sin in the Theology of Gregory of Nyssa*, 192.

⁹² The devil belongs to the sphere of the angelic powers and was created good, as is true of all things created by God. This angel who was created before man (LM II:209), when he saw that man was formed of earth in the image and likeness of God, was envious of him: it seemed intolerable to him that one who comes from the earth could be made in the image of God. Gregory anthropomorphizes the devil’s envy by presenting it as a serpent that speaks and tempts the first parents. The Nyssen does not ascribe image of God to angels even though they are divine and incorporeal probably because the ‘image’ (icon) also

offences or not, have inherited an alienation from God together with the nature which they inherited from Adam. Thus, his teachings are in line with the doctrine of the original sin in the Catholic Church. With the loss of supernatural life, man lost his immortality, happiness, beauty, luminosity and “equality with angels.”⁹³ Pain and suffering became his lot.

Before the fall, human nature was simple. It was not being oppressed by inner contradictions. But after the fall a civil war between an angel and a demon takes place within man (LM II:45).⁹⁴ Thus, “man is set before competitors as the prize of their contest, and he makes the one with whom he sides the victor over the other” (LM II:14). The contest between the angel and the demon over man can also be understood as the contest between reason and passion within man. With the fall, man lost the domination of reason over his sensible part, and since the soul is associated with passions, there began a struggle between the rational and the irrational parts.⁹⁵ Human body which

signifies visibility. Angels cannot be visible images of God. In the Incarnation Christ became the true Image of God.

⁹³ *MMA*, (XVII:4), 756.

⁹⁴ According to Gregory of Nyssa, man was created with complete freedom from passion and all evil. In the prelapsarian state Adam did not have a gnostic will – a will that constantly wavers between good and evil. Life before sin was angelic, and the ‘natural will’ of man was directed towards the Good as a dynamic attraction, but not in a way that curbs his freedom. The tendency of the natural will to keep a direct course to what is good can be likened to a child’s natural attraction towards its mother. Man did not possess a plenitude of virtue in the beginning, but was perfectly capable of acquiring virtue and grow in divine perfections through participation in God by the application of his will. Satan presented evil under the guise of good and man willingly chose evil disobeying God. In the words of the Nyssen, Adam would not have been deceived by manifest evil in its own nature. Adam chose material good that gives him sensual pleasure abandoning spiritual good that gives him life. Thus, in the postlapsarian state Adam was placed between good and evil so that he may freely choose good and hate evil. In the eighth homily on the beatitudes the Nyssen writes, “Human life lies on the border between good and evil, and just as the one who slips down from the good and sublime hope falls into the pit, so the one who quits sin and becomes a stranger to corruption shares in justice and incorruption”: *HBeat*, (Homily VIII), 86.

⁹⁵ Gregory speaks of three parts (faculties) of the soul as in Plato – the rational, the appetitive and the spirited. The appetitive part of the soul refers to the bodily passions or sensuous desire; the spirited part refers to the ardent, spirited will. According to Plato, the three parts of the soul are in a constant state of antagonism. The appetitive part rises up against the intellect attempting to seize the control of the soul from its hands, while the intellect resists these attacks and struggles to subjugate the appetitive part with the help of the spirited part. For Gregory man’s ethical character is judged from the outcome of this battle within the soul. The spirited and appetitive faculties were joined to the soul after the fall, and so they do not belong to its essence (a rational and irrational division within the soul. According to M. Ludlow, for Gregory, the soul appears not to have three parts as in Plato, but rather three powers as in Aristotle: cf. M. LUDLOW, “Christian Formation and the Body–Soul

was light became physically heavy. Man exchanged the divine life for the irrational and material, and neglected the truth that God alone is really life and all other realities only participate in life, but are not identified with it.

Gregory does not despise the garments of skin because “after our nature fell into sin God did not withhold his providence” (LM II:45). They are given as blessings and means of salvation. The garments have a pedagogical purpose in the present fallen state. The body, through its experience of evil (suffering), will cause man to use his freedom to opt for an ascent toward Paradise and thus, to lead back the soul to God,⁹⁶ and the knowledge of the visible world that is acquired through the garments of skin might become a guide to the soul for knowledge of things unseen.⁹⁷ Secondly, these garments of skin are linked to man’s free-will and his growth in virtue. The garments of skin offer material pleasures and place man before the choice between virtue and vice. He can either follow or reject these pleasures; his ascent in virtue depends on the free choices he constantly makes.

It is to be kept in mind that, for Gregory, the garments of skin do not indicate that the body cannot be redeemed. In order to explain this, he uses the image of the pottery vessel: God acts like a potter who breaks a vessel to which lead (a poisonous metal) had been mixed and remakes it, this time without lead. The body is broken up in death to be remade anew by ‘the maker of human body’ in the resurrection in its original beauty without any admixture of the contrary matter, i.e., wickedness.⁹⁸ The resurrection of the dead is nothing but the complete restoration of the original state.⁹⁹ God makes man mortal, since he looks to man’s resurrection. God clothed man mercifully in “dead skins” so that he might die, experience the limitedness of evil, and convert.¹⁰⁰ Gregory specifies that death is a dissolution, not an annihilation. Neither soul nor body returns to nothing. After physical death the soul remains tied to the dissolved elements of the body. Since the garments of skin, like clothes, do not form part of the essence of human nature, resurrected bodies are bodies freed from the garments of skin – “the heavy and fleshy garment of life” (LM II:191) –, and with it from all the consequences of this

Relationship in Gregory of Nyssa”, in A. MARMODORO – N. B. MCLYNN (eds.), *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies*, 162.

⁹⁶ D. L. BALAS, *Man’s Participation in God’s Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 96.

⁹⁷ *HEccl.* (Homily 1), 37.

⁹⁸ *COr* (VIII), 900.

⁹⁹ *HEccl.* (Homily 1), 45.

¹⁰⁰ L. F. MATEO-SECO, “Tunics of Hide”, in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 770.

second skin added to human nature. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen presents Jesus as the true potter who remoulds human nature in its original beauty as the purpose of his Incarnation is to bring man who had left reality to back again to reality (LM II:175).

1.1.4 Human Freedom

Freedom is one of the major themes in *The Life of Moses* which treats the soul's ascent, breaking all the shackles of enslavement to the 'deceiver,' to the One who is Absolute Freedom. For Gregory, freedom is part of man's being the image of God, which remains even after the fall and is never lost: God who made man for the participation of His own peculiar good, and incorporated in him the instincts for all that was excellent, will never deprive him of that most excellent and precious of all goods – being his own master, and having a free will.¹⁰¹ Since freedom has to do with being God's image, it is good and naturally oriented toward the Good. The soul was created to be royal from the first because it is the image of that Nature which rules over all.¹⁰² The temptation in Paradise was an occasion for the soul to grow in freedom, from the partial freedom in the created condition to the ideal freedom in God – the Absolute Self-determination. But man abused his freedom, and it led to his slavery to passions because "each man makes his own plagues when through his own free will he inclines toward these painful experiences" (LM II:86). According to Gregory, every evil of life has no power over man's life, unless a person brings it on himself. Each person has the power to live well or badly: "we are our own parents and we give birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be" (LM II:3). In Gregory's anthropology, what is responsible for evil is not the body but the spiritual power of the will.¹⁰³ For the Nyssen, man is a rational being (the soul) and the body, as an instrument, must be made suitable for the use of reason.

Freedom enables man to choose between good and evil. If it were not so, man would not have any responsibility for his sins. Gregory interprets God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Ex 9:12) in the sense that God would not break into the Pharaoh's freedom, into his free-will walled against God and inclined to evil (LM II:73-88). As Pharaoh closed the door of his soul against God, and God from his part did not break it open, his heart was hardened. In

¹⁰¹ *COr*, (V), 892.

¹⁰² *MMa*, (IV:1), 724.

¹⁰³ A. MEREDITH, *The Cappadocians*, 58.

The Life of Moses, the Cappadocian teaches this truth in line with St Paul's words in Rom 1:26, 28, "... God gave them up to degrading passions ... since they did not see it fit to acknowledge God..." (LM II:75). Since no evil can come into existence apart from our free choice (LM II:88), Pharaoh himself is the real cause of his misfortune; Pharaoh's free will through its inclination to evil did not receive the Word which softens the heart. In order to articulate that God is not the cause of the painful sufferings of those who abuse their free will, the Nyssen likens God to a physician who induces a glutton by his medicines to vomit, and remains not accused of the cause of the sickness of vomiting because the physician merely brought to light that man's dissipated life (LM II:87). It is not God who punishes the evil doers, but they themselves; their sufferings have their origin and cause in they themselves. As empowered moral agents, human beings are able to control the evil inclinations, and are responsible for their actions and their consequences. From the Scriptural testimony that the Israelites were unaffected by the plagues unlike the Egyptians, Gregory reaches the conclusion that in the same place the difference of free choices distinguishes one group from the other (LM II:88) – the Israelites sided with virtue while the Egyptians chose to be on the side of vice. The free choice of virtue or of evil is set before everyone equally (LM I:12) and man shows by his/her free will to whom he/she belongs to. Through this teaching, Gregory is actually leading the Christians to find the medicinal and pedagogical value of sufferings which God allows to them.

The Nyssen rejects, however, the notion that the free choice is a strictly autonomous human power.¹⁰⁴ Man can rightly use his freedom only with the help of God. Divine assistance is present with human beings from the time of their birth and is manifested and made known when they apply themselves for higher goods (LM II:44). In other words, God is present in the soul before the soul is present to him.¹⁰⁵ From the time of the fall, each individual is placed between an angel appointed in God's providence to help him and a demon who contrives to corrupt his nature (LM II:45). Divine assistance or demonic suggestions do not eliminate man's free choice. While stating that, for Gregory, however, divine assistance does increase or decrease depending on how human beings interact with it. Man is called to exercise his freedom within a participatory framework, siding with the divine assistance or grace that is present with him from the moment of his birth.¹⁰⁶ Only through

¹⁰⁴ H. BOERSMA, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 240.

¹⁰⁵ J. DANIELOU, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, trans. W. Roberts, 205.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *GS* 16. The document states, "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience, when necessary, speaks to his

participation with divine assistance, can man do good. Intimacy with evil would mean estrangement from the assistance of the Good (LM II:299),¹⁰⁷ and since the Holy Spirit guides towards the Good only those who are worthy (LM II:121),¹⁰⁸ it is impossible for the evil doers to ascend to God.

The Life of Moses is a route map of the soul's journey to true freedom. Moses offered freedom to the Hebrews who were languishing under the yoke of the tyrant, and strengthened their desire for it (LM II:56). Gregory observes that Moses' journey towards the life of freedom culminates in being called a servant of God (LM II:314). Thus, true freedom is to become a servant of God: "...to be called servant of God, ... is the same as saying that he is better than all others. For one would not serve God unless he had become superior to everyone in the world" (LM II:314). According to the Nyssen, a life of true freedom is a life of true obedience to God. To become superior to everyone in the world means to be freed from all passions and covetousness. A soul overpowered by passions and covetousness is no more a servant of God, but of all others. *The Life of Moses* presents this truth from the example of Aron, who became the "Israelites' servant" when he acted according to "their will" and made the idol (golden calf), rejecting the true God (LM II:210).¹⁰⁹ Gregory notes that a servant is always driven on to more by his master (LM II:129). The servant of passion is driven on to more pleasures and the servant of covetousness is driven on to more possessions. But the servant of God is driven on to more participation in the Good. Thus, for Gregory, freedom means progressive participation in God by obedience in a state of detachment. In freedom, the soul would progress from "glory to glory," i.e., a progressive participation in God and deification. For the Nyssen, as we have already mentioned, perfection is not an immutable state, but a radical change for the

heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged." We can apprehend the written law in man's heart, the voice of conscience, as the divine assistance at work in man from the beginning of his life.

¹⁰⁷ For Gregory the assistance which God gives to our nature is provided to those who correctly live the life of virtue (LM II: 44).

¹⁰⁸ Evil has no participation with the good.

¹⁰⁹ Ephrem the Syrian presents this fact of exchanging God's Lordship for people's lordship, yielding to passions and covetousness, in an attracting manner in his *Hymns on Paradise* (7:13). "A man's neighbour has become his god: every moment he seeks to please him; if he does wrong, he feels shame before him, if he does him an injury, he is afraid; or if he does him some good, then he has spoiled that good by his thirst for praise. Such a man has become an abject slave in all these ways. The Good One gave us freedom, but we have reduced this to slavery. May we exchange, for Your lordship, this overlord we have made for ourselves!": EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. S. Brock, 130.

better (LM II:126), i.e., “the perpetual growth in good”¹¹⁰ for the Good is infinite and thereby inexhaustible. Since he identifies the Good with Christ, for him, freedom is one’s progressive participation in Christ, conforming one’s will to that of Christ – God’s obedient Son. The treatise projects Moses as a role model for Christians to attain perfection for he is allegorized as the soul that has “left behind the Egyptian pleasures” (LM II:132) and is “straining ahead for what is still to come” (LM II:225) as St Paul says (Phil 3:13).

When Moses is presented as a model for Christian perfection, Gregory points out that Moses is actually following the example of Christ. This is because, according to Gregory, “becoming a true Christian means the perfecting of oneself through an imitation of Christ.”¹¹¹ In *The Life of Moses*, the true captain of a mature Christian is Christ (God) himself when he fights with his opponents (enemies of the soul) by himself (LM II:148). In order to depict Moses’ liberation from all passions and covetousness, Gregory uses the episode of Aron and Miriam, who became envious of Moses, talked against him and hence were punished by God (Num 12:1-16). He compares their attempt to make Moses distraught with the devil’s attempt to agitate and sever the first parents from God, and notes that the darts of the devil’s envy which banished man from Paradise could not harm Moses, because he was well fortified with “the armour of virtue” (LM II:256-263), i.e., Jesus Christ himself (Rom 13:14). Not only did Moses not move to defend himself against those who caused him sorrow, but even besought God for mercy on their behalf. Here it is clear that Moses is imitating Jesus who nailed all passions to death on the Cross and prayed for his enemies, while being provoked by them. Likewise, Moses’ ‘following God’ and progressive participation in him (Ex 33:23) is, for Gregory, his ‘following or imitation of’ and ‘participation in’ Christ – the Word made flesh–, who asked his disciples to follow him (LM II:251-252).

1.1.5 Redemption in Christ

Hans Boersma writes that Christology is the front and centre in *The Life of Moses*.¹¹² In this treatise, Gregory draws our attention to the manifestation

¹¹⁰ J. DANIELOU, *From Glory to Glory*, 52. “Gregory’s notion of perfection implies a positive idea of the process of change which is a most important contribution to the Christian theology of man. For the Platonist, change is a defect; and the intelligible world is superior to the world of the senses insofar as it is immutable”, observes Danielou, 47.

¹¹¹ *WIMCOC*, 80.

¹¹² H. BOERSMA, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 242.

of Christ in the account of exodus. The burning bush brings forth the mystery of the Incarnation and the virgin birth (LM II:20-21). The miracles of the transformation of Moses' right hand and the changing of his rod into a snake likewise refer to the Incarnation (LM II:27-34). Moses' outstretched hands in order to destroy the frogs refer to the Cross (LM II:78). The wood that sweetened the waters of Marah is the Cross that sweetens the virtuous life which seems difficult and disagreeable (LM II:132). The miracle of the manna coming from heaven also teaches about the virgin birth (LM II:139). Moses' holding up his hands in the battle against Amalek is again a picture of the Cross (LM II:149). The heavenly archetype of the tabernacle (Ex 25:40) is the pre-existent Christ, while the tabernacle fashioned on earth is the Incarnate Christ (LM II:174). In its earthly form, this tabernacle, with each of its holy objects, speaks also of his manifestation on earth in the form of the Church (LM II:184).¹¹³ Moses who chisels out new tables of the Law, after breaking the first ones to pieces is a prefiguration of Christ who will become "the stonecutter of his own flesh" in the Incarnation (LM II:216). Christ is also the rock on which the Lord instructs Moses to stand during the third and final theophany (LM II:243-244). The bunch of grapes suspended from the wood, which the spies bring from the promised land, prefigures the blood of Christ's passion that Christians drink in the Eucharist (LM II:268). Finally, the brazen serpent, which rendered the real serpents powerless, also is a figure of the Cross (LM II:273). For Gregory, it is only participation in Christ that makes one a perfect Christian. A Christian is called to get rid of the garments of skin and put on Christ as the garment of salvation.

In his work *On Perfection*, Gregory specifies that the Incarnation of the Only-begotten was an act of his love for man as in the creation of man. God who created man in his image became himself an image of God:

...because of His love for man, became Himself an 'image of the invisible God' so that he took on the form which He assumed among you ... Therefore, if we also are to become an 'image of the invisible God,' it is fitting that the form of our life be struck according to the 'example' of the life set before us.¹¹⁴

The Cappadocian repeats after St Paul that "Christ is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). In his Godhead, Christ is man's 'archetype' in whose image man was created and, in his humanity, he is the 'prototype' whose image man

¹¹³ Gregory notes that in many places the Church is called Christ by St Paul: 1Cor 12:12, 27; Eph 1:23, 5:23.

¹¹⁴ *Perf*, 110.

can copy.¹¹⁵ The perfection of human life consists in the ‘participation in’ and ‘imitation of’ the incarnate Christ, the Prototype, in whom the perfect image of the Archetype is achieved. According to Gregory, the human nature that Christ assumed in the Incarnation is the ‘only one common human nature’ that belongs to the first man to the last.¹¹⁶ Basil the Great, Gregory’s brother, had already described the birth of Christ as the ‘birthday of mankind.’¹¹⁷ With the Incarnation, Christ united all mankind with the Divinity, i.e., in his personal unity (hypostatic union) the human and divine are united. Hence, Christ the Redeemer does not offer salvation merely to each one. On the other hand, he effects it, and he is himself the salvation of the whole. Consequently, all those who are united to Christ are united to God.

In Christ, a man receives the healed human nature: sin was totally abolished in Christ who ‘knew no sin’ (2 Cor 5:21), and along with sin was abolished in him the death which flows from it.¹¹⁸ A general restoration of human salvation has taken place in the resurrected humanity of Christ. Yet this general restoration has to be actualized in us by our individual participation in it through the sacraments (Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist) and moral imitation.¹¹⁹ This union with Christ is a divine work, proper to the Holy Spirit, since it concludes in the ‘divinization’ (*theosis*) of the human being. Thus, we can say that in the Incarnation Christ makes an

¹¹⁵ An archetype is a perfect and unchanging form that existing things or people can approach but never duplicate. Prototype is a term used in theology to designate the original design or model from which copies are made; cf. *HSong*, (Homily 13), 401. Gregory of Nyssa says, “Christ is in one respect creature and in another respect uncreated. We say that he is uncreated in that he is eternal and prior to the ages and the Maker of everything that is, but created in that he was conformed to our lowly body in the economy he carried out for our sakes.”

¹¹⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 2), 69; cf. D. GRUMETT, *De Lubac: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 99.

¹¹⁷ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *Homily on the Holy Birth of Christ*, trans. M. DelCogliano, in M. DELCOGLIANO (ed.), *Christ: Through the Nestorian Controversy*, 364.

¹¹⁸ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Sermon on 1 Corinthians 15:28*, in M. WILES – M. SANTER (eds.), *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, 258. See also GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, trans. S. J. Hall, in A. SPIRA – C. KLOCK (eds.), *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa*, 41-43. In death, the humanity of Christ underwent a separation of body and soul. But these body and soul, which were pure, were not separated from his Divinity. The Divinity reunited the soul to the body again on the third day and man was given life. Therefore, human beings can continue to live without returning to non-existence by becoming one body with the humanity of Christ. Christ’s defeat of sin and death through his resurrection affects the rest of humanity as they begin to imitate Christ in rejecting sin/evil.

¹¹⁹ D. L. BALAS, *Man’s Participation in God’s Perfection According to St Gregory of Nyssa*, 97.

ontological change in humanity and invites all to participate in it.¹²⁰ In Christ, man can overcome his/her fallen human nature (garments of skin/animal nature) and become fully human. But it is the Holy Spirit who guides towards the Good those who are worthy (LM II:121). This aspect brings to the fore the spiritual differentiation among individually unique human persons. Even though there is only one human nature and Christ has assumed this nature, human life is lived not collectively but personally, with individual lives created in the image of God.¹²¹ Spiritual life derives from the Holy Spirit and signifies life in the Spirit. Depending on the reception of the Spirit, spiritual life varies from person to person.

Man's vocation is to participate in Christ. Fallen man finds the restorer of his broken nature in God-Incarnate (LM II:217) whose humanity reveals the perfect man as he partakes of all God's goodness being undividedly united to the Divine Logos. The resurrected body of Christ is weightless, and restores the original nature of the human body. Again, Gregory specifies that the genderless image, which God originally devised for man is the image of Christ¹²² because "in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28) as the Apostle Paul says. In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female because the Logos/Only-begotten is the personal subject of the God-Man. This personal subject is consubstantial with the genderless invisible God. Moreover, even though Christ appears in gender, his humanity is permeated by divinity (divine virtues), and reveals the genderless image of God. The genders find their unity in Christ, i.e., Christ incorporates both genders into himself. To become genderless does not mean to be without body, but to participate fully in the resurrected/glorified body of Christ. When Gregory glorifies the genderless existence, he is actually denoting a transposition from a life concerned with the body to one that is devoted to the soul.¹²³ In a genderless state, human beings will deal with each other in accordance with the image of God, not in accordance with gender distinction. We shall see more on this theme in the next chapter. According to Gregory, Incarnation is

¹²⁰ Cf. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *On the Incarnation*, (no. 16), 44. Athanasius writes, "There were two things which the saviour did for us by becoming man. He banished death from us and made us anew."

¹²¹ D. GRUMETT, *De Lubac: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 99.

¹²² *MMA*, (XVI:7), 751.

¹²³ H. BOERSMA, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 111. The body is important for Gregory. He maintains that the earthly body and the risen body are identical. He believes that the soul is never actually separated from the elements of the body, even during the period between death and the resurrection. The risen body will be the same, but the two states of the body different, the risen body being the last of a series of transformations which the body of man goes through from infancy to resurrection; cf. *SRe*, 213-229.

the purpose of creation,¹²⁴ and God perceived beforehand also the Incarnation, together with the fall of man.

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory presents also ‘Paradise’ in a Christological sense. For him, Paradise is not a geographical space but a sacred space: Christ is the place where the soul experiences paradisaical blessings. God is present everywhere and “not being separated by choice from God is the same as living in heaven.”¹²⁵ In the treatise, Moses’ entrance into the hole in the rock (Ex 33:22) on Mount Sinai is allegorically presented as the soul’s entrance into Christ in whom the soul would enjoy the pleasures of Paradise (LM II:247). Moreover, Moses’ vision of the heavenly Tabernacle, which is to be erected on earth and symbolizes both the Incarnation and the Church, is connected with the revelation of the mysteries of Paradise (LM II:178). Sebastian Brock, a British scholar in Syriac language and literature, observes that Gregory of Nyssa’s presentation of Paradise in a sacred space (outside ordinary space to which our world belongs) is in conformity with Ephrem the Syrian’s vision of Paradise. Since Gregory locates Paradise outside geographical space, his views are left unaffected by modern advance in scientific knowledge, and the primordial Paradise serves also as the eschatological Paradise.¹²⁶ The Nyssen does not present even Mount Sinai as a real place. One is to discover Sinai within – a landmark in the geography of the soul. Thus, we can understand that man’s initial life in Paradise, for Gregory, was his life with an invitation to participate more and more in Christ. He identifies the ‘tree of life’ with Christ himself who is the real Life.¹²⁷ Adam was deprived of the tree of life – Christ – because of his disobedience or failure to participation in God’s perfections.

We are invited to understand the twofold sense of God’s creation of man as a single act of creation in which he foresaw man’s participation in Christ in a twofold sense – vertical and horizontal. In the vertical sense, man

¹²⁴ Cf. *HomSong*, (Homily 13), 405-407. Gregory says, “The creation of the cosmos signifies the foundation of the Church (the Body of Christ), in which ... both a new heaven is created ... and a new earth is established ..., and another humanity, renewed by the birth from above “after the image of its Creator” is fashioned ...”; cf. IRENEUS OF LYONS, *Against Heresies*, III: 22.3. St Ireneus of Lyons (c.130-202) speaks of God the Father, who is above time, looking to Christ Incarnate as the model when first creating humankind. Gregory might have followed his line of thought. In the prelapsarian state man and woman could exist as images of Christ in Paradise.

¹²⁵ *WIMCOC*, 88. Gregory uses the nouns heaven and Paradise interchangeably. In the strict sense, heaven is the final stage of the spiritual ascent, i.e., infinite progress in God.

¹²⁶ S. BROCK, “Introduction”, in S. BROCK (trans.), *Saint Ephrem: Hymns on Paradise*, 55.

¹²⁷ *HSong*, (Homily 1), 21; cf. *MMa*. (XIX:4).

is to make an ascent to divine perfections participating in the divine goodness of Christ. Without participation, human persons do not own the perfections that they are able to possess. A human person is good only as far as he is participating the divine goodness. Man, having been created in the image of the infinite God, is called by his own nature to transcend the limited boundaries of creation and to become infinite in Christ. In the horizontal sense, man has to participate in the common human nature of Christ, and work for the salvation of his brothers and sisters. The humanity assumed by Christ is a universal one, including all mankind, like the humanity of the first man, Adam. Thus, salvation of man would mean the salvation of all mankind. It is an invitation to participate in Christ's salvific mission. All human beings have one and the same nature. So, when one sins it tarnishes the whole human nature. The salvation of man is not accomplished until the last human being is saved in Christ. These aspects of man's vocation (vertical and horizontal movements) are tacitly portrayed in *The Life of Moses*: Moses who encounters God at the burning bush becomes the liberator of the people who are in slavery, and he who ascends Mount Sinai also descends to serve the people and do the will of God. It shows that the greater our spiritual progress is, the greater our desire to follow Christ in love of neighbor and in working for the common good will be.¹²⁸ In the treatise, Moses is a contemplative in action.

Salvation in Gregory is not merely man's return to Paradise. We have already seen that, according to Gregory, in the beginning man was not created in the perfect image of God, but with initial participation in God and a dynamic vocation to participate more and more in freedom to attain perfection. This aspect of man's vocation has particular importance when we present the religious vows in the following chapters as progressive participation in Christ to attain Christian perfection. Christ is the perfect image of God. Therefore, man's perfection consists in his 'putting on Christ' (LM II:262) and attaining his true personhood by becoming an image of the Image. This identification of man with Christ is known as Christification.¹²⁹ In the thesis we will see that, for Gregory, a Christian is the one who journeys

¹²⁸ A. G. KEIDEL, "Contemplation and Following Christ in Gregory of Nyssa", in E. D. MOUTSOULAS (ed.), *Jesus Christ in St Gregory of Nyssa's Theology: Minutes of the Ninth International Conference on St Gregory of Nyssa*, 853.

¹²⁹ V. KHARLAMOV, "Emergence of the Deification Theme in the Apostolic Fathers", in S. FINLAN – V. KHARLAMOV (eds.), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology Volume 1*, 65. The term 'Christification' was first used by Panayiotis Nellas in his book *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*. Though less common than 'theosis' or its synonyms, divinization and deification, the term 'Christification' is a reminder that for Christians 'theosis' must always be understood Christologically.

‘into Christ’, not just ‘to Christ.’ This journey “into Christ” is an ontological participation in him to become another Christ. Therefore, Christification not only involves ‘external imitation’ of Christ in the sense of moral or ethical change in life and action; it also means ‘ontological’ transformation of the person¹³⁰ in the Incarnate Son. We can understand Gregory’s concept of imitative participation in Christ through which a person becomes similar to Christ in all aspects of his or her human nature as Christification.

1.2 Spirituality of Christian Perfection

Gregory of Nyssa focuses his theology, as noted above, on Jesus Christ; he is true God, the Creator and Redeemer of mankind. The Nyssen’s spirituality dwells on how this knowledge of God and one’s salvation can be realized in Christ himself. The perfection of Christian life depends on the divinizing participation in Christ. The Greek Fathers used the term *theosis*¹³¹ (divinization/deification) in order to express the great height to which God in his goodness wishes to raise human beings.¹³² The Incarnation is God’s descent to human nature, and thus having two natures – divine and human – and one person – the Divine Logos.¹³³ Divinization, on the other hand, is man’s ascent participating in Christ, and thus having two natures – human and divine – and one person – man. Man does not lose his personhood in divinization. Moreover, man’s union with God in *theosis* is not a hypostatic union, equal to the union of Christ’s humanity and divinity in one hypostasis (one person) of the Son. Through union with man in the Incarnation, the second Person of the Trinity became true God and true man. But through union with God in *theosis*, man becomes only a divinized person, not a true

¹³⁰ M. S. MEDLEY, “Participation in God: The Appropriation of Theosis by Contemporary Baptist Theologians”, in V. KHARLAMOV (ed.), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology Volume 2*, 214. For Gregory, Christ is the new garment that the believer puts on when removing the old garments of skin.

¹³¹ The term ‘theosis’ (the state of being a god) was coined by the great fourth century Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nazianzus: cf. N. RUSSELL, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 214. It is to be noted that Gregory of Nyssa usually speaks of ‘participation in God’ instead of ‘theosis’ or divinization because he wants to keep clear of anything that could obscure the fundamental division between creatures and the Triune God.

¹³² S. THOMAS, *Deification in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, 7.

¹³³ The union between full divinity and humanity in the one divine person of Jesus Christ is called “hypostatic union.”

God.¹³⁴ *Theosis* is Christification, for Gregory of Nyssa. Through putting on the humanity of Christ, man becomes a partaker of divine attributes, not of divine essence. Just as the truth of the material creation and its potentialities are revealed and realized in man, so too the truth of created man and his potentialities are revealed and realized in the uncreated God,¹³⁵ i.e., in his union with God.

Theosis means that ‘in Christ’ we can live at the same level of existence as the divine Trinity, to some extent even in this life, and, without possibility of falling away, in the next.¹³⁶ At this new level of existence, to which we are taken up in Christ, we can relate to God as friends and experience the conquest of death, passion and sin. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory proclaims Christian perfection as friendship with God (LM II:320). The Son of God took up human nature, defeated death in it and divinized it. If we participate in Christ, identifying ourselves with him and living in faith and obedience to his commandments, we come to share in Christ’s divinized human nature. According to Gregory, it is by participating in Christ that a person is given the title “Christian,” and Christians are drawn into a share in the lofty ideas which the name “Christ” implies.¹³⁷ A Christian, uniting himself/herself to Christ, is also united to divinity.

In *The Life of Moses*, participation in Christ is extended to Church life as well because the Church is part of the mystery of the Incarnation and is identified with Christ (LM II:184). “We should not separate ourselves from the nourishment of the Church’s milk, which would be her laws and customs” (LM II:12), says Gregory. Sacramental life – Baptism, Chrismation (Confirmation) and Eucharist – is essential means of participation in divine perfections. However, for the Nyssen, divinization through participation is not one’s personal achievement; it is the Holy Spirit who guides those who are worthy towards this end.

The Life of Moses is also known as *Concerning Perfection in Virtue* because, in it, Gregory sets forth Christian perfection as consisting in a virtuous life that progresses towards perfection. For the Nyssen, to lead a

¹³⁴ Man’s union with God is not a union of essence, as with the three persons of the Trinity, nor a hypostatic union – the union between a divine person and a created nature in Christ – without separation and without division. *Theosis* is man’s union with God in the divine energies (not with divine essence). It does not abolish the gulf between the divine and human natures, but simply bridges it.

¹³⁵ P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 30.

¹³⁶ S. THOMAS, “Deification”, in J. A. MCGUCKIN (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 183.

¹³⁷ WIMCOC, 84.

virtuous life is to put on Christ, to imitate him. Orthodoxy understands Christian virtues as those powers and possessions of the mind and the heart which all men should have if they are truly human, fulfilling themselves as the image and likeness of God.¹³⁸ All these virtues are characteristics of Christ as he is true God and true Man. He is the light that enlightens every man (cf. Jn 1:9). Whatever is found in man to be good, beautiful and true, is found there because of God and is from God/Christ by participation. This concept is of special importance for us in the thesis as the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience are also virtues found and participable in Jesus Christ, “in whom every virtue comes to perfection” (VC 18).

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory insists that Moses – “a virtuous soul who follows the example of Christ” – is to be born in everyone, and that we ourselves give birth to this Moses in us through the right use of reason and free-will (LM II:1-3). One who leads a virtuous life participates in God/Christ who is absolute virtue. Since God is infinite, virtue is also infinite and virtuous life has no limit. It is a life of infinite progress or ascent in God. In the treatise, Gregory says that continuous development of life to what is better is the soul’s way to perfection (LM II:306). The goal of the virtuous life, the life of perfection, is to become a “servant of God” (LM II:314) and a “friend of God” (LM II:319) as Moses has become. Moses’ journey, from the theophany of the burning bush to his vision of God on Mount Sinai, is presented by the Nyssen as a spiritual ascent. However, this spiritual ascent is not a running away from the people. For Gregory, humankind is deified not only by a participation in divine life which is experienced, felt, and lived but also by service to others. In the treatise, Moses is presented as an exemplary Christian who participates actively in the threefold kenotic ministry of Jesus – Priest, Prophet and King. Moses is a mediator, teacher and leader.

1.2.1 Spiritual Ascent in Gregory’s Biblical Exegesis

One of Gregory of Nyssa’s goals when he writes the treatise *The Life of Moses* is to make the Jewish scripture relevant to the educated Greeks who are familiar with Platonic philosophy, without compromising the Christian faith. The Greeks became familiar with the Jews and their land only during the reign and conquests of Alexander the Great (336-323 BC), in the Hellenistic period.¹³⁹ The Greeks considered sociability an indispensable

¹³⁸ T. HOPKO, *The Orthodox Faith Volume 4: Spirituality*, 40.

¹³⁹ Cf. B. ISSAC, *Empire and Ideology in the Greco-Roman World*, 286. The Hellenistic period (the period of the spreading of the Greek culture) that began with the conquests of

feature of a civilized people. They accused the Jews of cutting themselves off from the rest of humanity because the Jews kept themselves away from ‘pagan customs.’ Aristotle in his *Politics* writes, “The man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the city, and must therefore be either a beast or a god.”¹⁴⁰ In the eyes of the civilized Greeks, the Jews were uncivilized barbaric. They were considered to be misanthropic or xenophobic, and those who lived the perverse laws imposed by Moses.¹⁴¹ From 313 A.D., as Christianity got freedom in the Roman Empire, the Greek Fathers, including Gregory of Nyssa, wanted to present the scriptures, which they shared with the Jews, to the Greeks in a Greek philosophical style so that they may be understood. They wrote for the intellectual and their intention was pastoral.

For the Greeks, philosophy was a Platonist endeavour, and also a way of life – a life founded on ideas about the human soul (human nature).¹⁴² Platonism and Neoplatonism present the ascent of the soul from the sensible world to the intelligible world above. In them, life is spiritual in nature and is to be set off from everything bodily; virtue is an incomparably greater good than any bodily pleasures. The study and knowledge of true being (including the knowledge of human souls as the spiritual allies of the true being) became the ultimate and proper task of philosophy.¹⁴³ The philosophical thrust of the Greeks led them, “starting with Theagenes of Rhegium”¹⁴⁴ in the 6th century BC, to provide an allegorical exegesis to Homer (8th century BC):

Alexander the Great continued under the Romans, encompassed the Byzantine Period (324-1453 AD) and ended with the Islamic conquest. Judaism in the Greek-speaking world, including those Jews who spoke Greek and adopted a Greek way of life, is called Hellenistic Judaism. Christianity had to confront, from its very beginning, the Greek culture.

¹⁴⁰ ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, (1253a), trans. Earnest Barker, 11.

¹⁴¹ B. ISSAC, *Empire and Ideology in the Greco-Roman World*, 288.

¹⁴² J. M. COOPER, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*, 307.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁴⁴ PORPHYRY, *Homeric Questions*, in J. A. MACPHAIL (trans.), *Porphyry's Homeric Questions on the Iliad: Text, Translation, Commentary*, 241. Theagenes of Rhegium is credited with being the founder of the allegorical interpretation. Through his allegories he defended the mythology of Homer from rationalist attacks. According to Porphyry (a Neoplatonist philosopher, c.243-c.305 AD) Theagenes is the first to write on Homer. He reports that Theagenes interpreted the Homeric battle between the gods as the opposition among physical elements or psychological conflict. The battle of Apollo, Helios, and Hephaestus against Poseidon and Scamander stands for the opposition between fire and water; the fight between Athena and Ares is the conflict between wisdom and stupidity.

All the enigmas, contradictions and the immoral, anthropomorphical character of the statements of Homer about the gods are, according to this interpretation, not the result of the author's carelessness; instead, they represent a conscious encoding of his thoughts. It is thus the task of the interpreter to unveil the hidden. All that Homer has explicated narratively within the sensual realm, refers by itself to the rational realm.¹⁴⁵

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory presents the Christian truths against the backdrop of this philosophical culture. He does not, in anyway, downplay philosophy, but makes it a "handmaid of theology"¹⁴⁶:

...those participating through virtue in the free life also equip themselves with the wealth of pagan learning by which foreigners to the faith beautify themselves. ... receive such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the Church, since these things will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason (LM II:115).

¹⁴⁵ C. KANNENGIESSER, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, 217. The cosmopolitan Greek city of Alexandria in Egypt was, for centuries, a centre of culture and learning. First Jews, and then Christians, there harnessed Hellenistic rhetoric and philosophy in the service of their religious belief systems. Three figures in particular stand out: Philo, Clement, and Origen. All three adapted for biblical use the allegorical approach developed to make sense of Homeric myths. They found 'spiritual' meanings hidden behind the literal details of the biblical text. Origen was brought up in Alexandria, and began his teaching career there, but left around 231 after coming into conflict with the city's bishop. He spent his last two decades based in Palestinian Caesarea, as 'the leading intellectual of the age.' One of his pupils there was a Gregory, later named 'Thaumaturgus' (the wonderworker), who went on to become a bishop in his native Pontus, and whose sayings were passed down to Gregory of Nyssa by his grandmother, Macrina the elder. Hence the influence of Origen on Cappadocian Christianity generally, and on Gregory of Nyssa in particular: cf. A. CONWAY-JONES, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in Its Jewish and Christian Contexts*, 35-44.

¹⁴⁶ Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215), in his work *The Stromata*, Book V, presents philosophy as the handmaid of theology. "...philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring 'the Hellenic mind,' as the law, the Hebrews, 'to Christ.' Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ." Abraham's preference for Sarah to Hagar is presented in the form of Abraham's soliloquy, "I embrace secular culture as youthful, and a handmaid; but thy knowledge I honour and reverence as true wife": CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Stromata*, in P. SCHAFF (ed.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 2 Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus and Clement of Alexandria*, 496-498.

But, according to the Nyssen, the Christian's espousal of pagan philosophy or secular education should not give birth to belief or opinion contrary to Christian doctrine: the circumcision of Moses' son (Ex 4:24-26) whom his foreign wife, who stands for secular education, bore exemplifies the fact that the fruit of Christian doctrine's mingling with secular education should be purged of those elements that are not in agreement with Christian faith (LM II:38-39). Scripture gives birth to the truth, while pagan philosophy is "always in labour but never gives birth" (LM II:11).¹⁴⁷ Greek philosophy spoke of the ascent of the soul from the sensible world to intelligible world. The Nyssen, in his Biblical exegesis, tries to discover a meaning higher than that of the surface sense (the body of Scripture), and, with pastoral prudence, lead the philosophic minds upward in the direction of something more divine and incorporeal, without compromising the Christian faith. According to him, if what is said in Scripture were such that it could be comprehended by the power of human thoughts, it would in no way differ from Greek wisdom.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, Scripture manifests its trustworthiness precisely by being above knowledge.

The first part of *The Life of Moses* (Greek, *Historia* "History") is a literal narration of the story of Moses, and the second part (Greek, *Theoria* "Contemplation") is a spiritual interpretation that gives an insight into meaning beyond the range of the literal. The Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture gives the reader power to search the depths of God in Scripture (LM II:173). The spiritual interpretation is allegorical in style.¹⁴⁹ Gregory does not refuse the literal sense as long as it is useful as a guidance to virtue. He is of the opinion that an allegorical meaning becomes necessary when the literal meaning is unnecessary, superfluous, or out of place; when something morally wrong is enjoined in the biblical text; or when anything unworthy of God is suggested; as well as when it is impossible to reduplicate the exact

¹⁴⁷ The Nyssen probably sees a distinction between the revealed truths and the truths of reason. He does not believe that a rational philosophy by itself can yield true knowledge. Reason, in its speculative thrust, is free to go wherever it wants.

¹⁴⁸ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Gregory the Wonderworker*, 47. Gregory says that Greek philosophers are of the opinion that what they are able to comprehend is the same as "what is" (the true Being). But the comprehension of the transcendent (Divine) nature is inaccessible to human reasonings.

¹⁴⁹ The Greek word *allegoria* (from *allos* "other" + *agoria* "speaking") means to say one thing in order to signify another. Allegorical interpretation is a hermeneutical approach that consists in discovering in a text another meaning apart from the literal sense and also beyond the original intentions of the author.

historical circumstances.¹⁵⁰ For instance, Gregory interprets the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians as the complete destruction of the first beginning of evil (LM II:92). Wherever he finds a mention of Christ in the Old Testament like the burning bush, rock, manna etc., he uses allegory to interpret it.

Gregory focusses also on the ‘anagogical’ sense of Scripture, i.e., “uplifting (*anagogy*) from the literal to the spiritual sense.”¹⁵¹ According to him an ascetically attuned reading of Scripture ‘leads upward,’ drawing the reader towards God. *Anagogy* serves for the contemplation of celestial (eschatological) things to come as it is focused on the final stage of the spiritual journey. This approach to Scripture is in accordance with his central theme of the treatise: “straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil 3:13), “ascent to lofty perceptions” (LM II:156), “ascent to God” (LM II:239), “straining to higher life” (LM II:305), “development of life to what is better” (LM II:306). For Gregory, life is anagogical in nature and so is Scripture. *Anagogy* is human beings increasing participation in divine virtue and thus their own ascent into the life of God.¹⁵² The anagogical nature of Scripture is pointed out in the treatise in these words: “Scripture leads our understanding upward to the higher levels of virtue” (LM II:152). The Nyssen is of the opinion that while the literal sense may appear as unattractive as the back side of the feathers of a dancing peacock, the spiritual sense is as attractive as the front side of the feathers of this peacock.¹⁵³ In Greek patristic tradition Origen of Alexandria (c.186-255) had already identified Scripture with the Incarnation of the Divine Logos.¹⁵⁴ The ascent from the literal sense to the spiritual sense of Scripture, for the Nyssen, is in agreement with Christology – an ascent from the humanity of Christ to his divinity.

Theoria includes, besides allegorical and anagogical senses, the moral sense of Scripture. It is impossible for one to imitate the literal events in Moses’ life to grow in virtue. Therefore, one must substitute the literal events with a moral teaching. Gregory unequivocally states that “being in Chaldea does not make one virtuous or vice, nor by living in Egypt or Babylonia one becomes evil. God can be found not only in Judea and Zion. What one has to do is to avoid Egyptian, Chaldean and Babylonian types of life where one

¹⁵⁰ A. J. MALHERBE – E. FERGUSON, “Introduction”, in A. J. MALHERBE – E. FERGUSON (trans.), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, 7-8.

¹⁵¹ C. KANNENGIESSER, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 256.

¹⁵² Cf. H. BOERSMA, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 3.

¹⁵³ *CE III*, (1:26), 47.

¹⁵⁴ ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA, *Philocalia*, (XV:19), trans. G. Lewis, 76.

lives. So, we have to grasp the spiritual meaning of those places and pursue virtue” (LM I:14). Gregory draws our attention to the fact that the meaning of Scripture is not limited to historical or literal events but also has to do with the higher or heavenly realities. In this sense we can say that *The Life of Moses* is a biblical commentary. The journey of the Hebrews from Egypt to Mount Sinai is a type of the journey of the Christian soul to God. As we have already noted, the historical narrative of Moses’ story functions as a map for Christians. Whether it is a nation or a single soul, it is the same God who leads them by the same ways.¹⁵⁵ Gregory’s treatise is relevant to all Christians in every nation at all times.

1.2.2 Man’s Ascent as the Soul’s Ascent

Jean Danielou observes that for Gregory the natural man is man as he was created in God’s concrete plan – that is, man in God’s image with all those gifts which are supernatural.¹⁵⁶ Both the body and the soul are part of the human nature from the beginning. When we dealt with the creation of man, we saw that in Gregory’s view, man created as male and female, though first in the order of time, is only second in the order of intention (first in the order of God’s intention being ‘the genderless image of God’, i.e., the soul). Therefore, according to the Cappadocian, gender and sex are not essential to what it means to be human. In the beginning God created man with the body and the soul, and man was leading a life similar to that of the ‘resurrected life’ in Paradise. The garments of skin and, with it, mortality and corruptibility are foreign to true human nature. God added the garments of skin to human nature so that man, using his own free-will, might turn towards the good. He did not wish man to withdraw from sin unwillingly and be forced by necessity towards the good, for this would have destroyed man’s freedom and the image of God within him.¹⁵⁷ Thus, in the context of man’s spiritual progress the opposition between “biological life or bodily life” (garments of skin) and “life of the soul” receives a more ascetical meaning: it becomes the opposition between “the life according to the flesh,” dragged down by earthly preoccupations, and “the spiritual life” oriented toward God.¹⁵⁸ “Once the soul is released from its earthly attachment, it becomes light and swift for its

¹⁵⁵ J. DANIELOU, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, 226.

¹⁵⁶ J. DANIELOU, *From Glory to Glory*, 11.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵⁸ D. L. BALAS, *Man’s Participation in God’s Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 97.

movement upward, soaring from below up to the heights” (LM II:224), says Gregory. For the Nyssen, those who bring glory to the Church must be wise, superior to sense perception that is bound to a life according body, and lead a life according to the soul that takes them to those realities which lie beyond the reach of senses.¹⁵⁹ When he speaks of the tripartite division of the soul – rational, appetitive and spirited –, he looks at the soul from three viewpoints: there is indeed only one soul, but it has three aspects, three ways of being.¹⁶⁰ Rationality is part of being God’s image; by using it man is able to control the appetitive and spirited or irascible tendencies, which belong to the garments of skin, and make the ascent possible.

In fact, through presenting man’s salvation as the soul’s ascent to perfection, the Nyssen invites Christians to have a life modelled on Christ, in whom there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28), and whose resurrection inaugurated eschatological life here on earth itself. The imitation of Christ’s death in Baptism must be followed by imitation of Christ in a transformed life,¹⁶¹ and the bodily senses must be transposed into spiritual senses to ascend from the sensible to the spiritual realities. This ascent does not imply a spatial transposition as it is not a literal imitation of Moses, but a spiritual endeavour “to catch the halo around the holy man.”¹⁶² God is present everywhere. The body (humanity) of Christ is the new place for those liberated from fleshly life. Christ’s humanity offers an “infinite ascent in his divinity” (*epektasis*) and the soul is “transformed into divine” (divinized) more and more. In the soul there is no differentiation of male or female, and so is in Christ. Therefore, every soul can participate in Christ. It shows that the way to practice spiritual life and attain Christian perfection is same for both man and woman. Gregory stands up for gender equality.

Another reason for Gregory’s stress on the ascent of the soul is his notion of the ‘knowledge of God’ (theology). According to him, divine knowledge is possible only through an ascent from the visible to the invisible. In theophanies (manifestations) God descends towards creatures. But he is beyond all his manifestations: “while communicating knowledge about

¹⁵⁹ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 15), 479. Gregory writes, “Sight does not serve as their criterion of beauty, taste does not provide their assessment of goodness, their judgment of virtue does not depend on smell or touch or any other organ of perception; on the contrary, all sense perception is done to death, and it is through the agency of the soul alone that they touch the good things and yearn for them as they are manifested in an intelligible form.”

¹⁶⁰ Cf. T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 6, 18.

¹⁶¹ H. BOERSMA, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 185.

¹⁶² M. MOTIA, *Imitations of Infinity: Gregory of Nyssa and the Transformation of Mimesis*, 85.

himself, God in his essence transcends all knowledge and escapes the grasp of mind.”¹⁶³ Gregory says, “One who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and, lifting up his own mind to the invisible and incomprehensible, believe that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach” (LM I:46). The lifting up of the mind to the invisible appertains to the ascent of the soul. We will deal with it in detail in the third chapter.

1.2.3 Divinization as Progressive Participation in Christ

According to St John, “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1: 17). In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory presents Moses, through whom the law was mediated (LM II:45), as a “type”¹⁶⁴ of Christ who is the true Mediator because he unites that which is human with God in himself. All those who are united to him are united to God. Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) sees Gregory’s doctrine of Incarnation as the “philosophy of love” which deals with God’s own incarnational descent into the world to meet his human creature who vainly struggles to cross the abyss that separates the created from the uncreated realm.¹⁶⁵ He upholds the Eastern concept of the unity of theology and spirituality stressing on Gregory’s own Christocentrism saying that “Christ makes it less than ever possible even slightly to divide theology and spirituality.”¹⁶⁶ Jesus Christ’s knowledge of God is based on his personal union with the divine, and this knowledge is translated into his actions. All are called to acquire a personal union with the divine in Jesus Christ and thereby become the meeting point of theology and spirituality, i.e., divinized persons.

¹⁶³ J. MEYENDORF, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 38.

¹⁶⁴ A type is a prophetic symbolism, i.e., it points to the future. A biblical person or thing can foreshadow new truth.

¹⁶⁵ H. V. BALTHASAR, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. M. Sebanc, 133-179; cf. A. NICHOLAS, *Divine Fruitfulness*, 39.

¹⁶⁶ H. V. BALTHASAR, *Convergences: To the Source of Christian Mystery*, trans. E. A. Nelson, 12. Balthasar opines that it is impossible to say which of the two was first present in the biblical view: theology or spirituality. His opinion is based on the argument that the original situation, which holds unchanged from the beginnings of Israel’s history to the latest writings in the New Testament, is that twofold engagement, God’s with mankind and mankind’s with God, which is called “covenant” (cf. *Ibid.*, 11). In Jesus Christ both members of the covenant – God and man – are represented by the same person.

The concept of “participation in Christ” is the central theme in *The Life of Moses*. The Incarnation is the real divine-human communion which is made accessible to all. Man through the free renunciation of “the dead and earthly covering of skin that was placed around his true nature at the time of his disobedience” (LM II:22) is united to the true human nature of Christ that is united indivisibly to the Logos. It is to be noted that Gregory does not reduce participation in Christ and divinization to moralism. Moralism reduces Christianity to the dimensions of an ethical framework, or to equate faith with obeying a law.¹⁶⁷ For the Nyssen, salvation does not depend merely on one’s good works and obedience because it is the Holy Spirit who leads one to participation in Christ. He favours the notion of divine and human collaboration (*synergeia*).

Moses’ journey to perfection, the spiritual ascent, is marked with three principal stages. These stages are indeed three theophanies whereby God reveals himself to Moses: the theophany of the burning bush (Ex 3:1-6; LM I:20, II:19-22), the theophany in the darkness on Mount Sinai of the tabernacle not made with hands (Ex 25:40; LM I:42-55, II:163-182) and the theophany of God’s back seen from within a hole in the rock (Ex 33:17-34:8; LM I:60, II:220). In *The Life of Moses*, these three theophanies have Christological significance. According to Gregory, following God is following Christ, and it is Christ himself who appears in theophanies. Moses’ (the soul’s) ascent is one of progressive participation in Christ. In this thesis, we will focus mainly on these three stages and understand them as consecrated persons’ progressive participation in Christ through a life according to the vows – chastity, poverty and obedience. We will see how each of these theophanies corresponds to a particular vow: the first theophany to chastity, the second to poverty and the third to obedience. Now let us see how Gregory presents these theophanies in his treatise.

1.2.3.1 Theophany of the Burning Bush

To arrive at the first theophany, God tells Moses to remove the sandals from his feet. Gregory of Nyssa comments on the significance of removing the “lifeless sandals” (LM I:20) from the feet:

Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be

¹⁶⁷ T. ROWLAND, *Ratzinger’s Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, 66.

removed from the feet of the soul. When we do this, the knowledge of the truth will result and manifest itself. The full knowledge of being comes about by purifying our opinion concerning nonbeing (LM II:22).

These sandals stand for the ‘garments of skin’ God provided for Adam and Eve after the fall. It was not part of their original nature (image of God), but something that was added to it. In other words, the sandals refer to the human body in its fleshly and irrational condition (subject to the passions) and thus in its mortal character. Therefore, the removal of the ‘sandals’ is one’s first identification with Christ who is pure and holy. Gregory says, “That light teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light” (LM II:22). Once Moses has removed the sandals, God reveals the truth, “I Am Who Am” (Ex 3:14). From this Moses learns that objects of sense perception do not really subsist and that only God, the real Being, possesses existence in its own nature (LM II:23). Therefore, to have life is to participate in the real Being. For the Nyssen, ‘faith’ is a sure understanding of that which truly is.

Gregory sees the burning bush as a symbol of Christ. In his Incarnation, the “divinity” (‘fire’) shines through his “virgin body” (‘bush’). For Gregory, it is by looking at the “thorny flesh of Christ,”¹⁶⁸ through which divinity shines forth, that we gain true knowledge of God; to grow in virtue means to rely ever more on Christ. He identifies virginity with the divine characteristics of blamelessness, holiness, purity and incorruptibility.¹⁶⁹ Human beings are able to participate in these divine characteristics in Christ. It is participation in Christ that not only constitutes the journey of ascent but that also makes it possible in the first place.

God’s self-revelation empowers Moses to free the Hebrews from the Egyptians: after he was empowered by the theophany which he had seen, he was commanded to release his countrymen from Egyptian bondage. Thus, we see that Moses’ acts of virtue are not derived from his own human abilities, but from the ‘strength implanted by God’. Gregory explicitly recognizes that this particular theophany, which empowers Moses to do his work, is comparable to God’s self-revelation in Christ. According to him, the grace

¹⁶⁸ The burning bush is a thorny bush (LM II: 20). Gregory identifies the sinful human nature as thorny. Thorn may represent the consequences of the fall: “Thorns and thistles it (the ground) shall bring forth for you” (Gen 3:18). Cf. *Perf*, 117. The Nyssen states that Christ assumed a sinful human nature and through suffering transformed the thorn into a crown of glory.

¹⁶⁹ *Virg*, 9.

extended to Moses is open to everyone who encounters Christ and imitates Moses:

In the same way that Moses on that occasion attained to this knowledge, so now does everyone who, like him, divests himself of the earthly covering and looks to the light shining from the bramble bush, that is, to the Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh and which is (as the Gospel says) the true light and the truth itself. A person like this becomes able to help others to salvation, to destroy the tyranny which holds power wickedly, and to deliver to freedom everyone held in evil servitude (LM II:26).

In the second chapter, we will reflect in detail on how the theophany of the burning bush and Moses' removal of the sandals from the feet are related to the vow of chastity.

1.2.3.2 Theophany of the Tabernacle not Made with Hands

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory equals 'the removal of the sandals from the feet' both to freedom from the Egyptian life (from the slavery of sin) and to crossing the Red Sea killing the enemies behind (symbol of Baptism). Now the Israelites who are freed from slavery are led by the cloud. According to Gregory, this cloud is the Holy Spirit who guides toward the Good those who are worthy (LM II:121). The second theophany is Moses' ascent in the Spirit. It was "hope in the Divine help" (LM II:117) that strengthened Moses and the people to travel through the desert and it was the "cloud that provided light" (LM II:124), the source of hope for them. In the wilderness of Sinai, Moses, who ascends Mount Sinai and goes up to God (Ex 19:3), is separated from all other people, things and animals. In this poverty, he is led to the contemplation of the divine mysteries. The Nyssen notes that the darkness on Mount Sinai, into which Moses enters, is, in fact, his entrance on to the mountain "wrapped in a dark cloud" (LM I:43). In the darkness, Moses slips into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge which Gregory identifies as the "tabernacle not made with hands" or the "heavenly tabernacle" according to the pattern of which Moses was asked to build a tabernacle on earth (Ex 25:40). For Gregory, the heavenly tabernacle is Christ himself, the pre-incarnate Christ: "This tabernacle would be Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God, who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us" (LM II:174). Here the erection of "tabernacle among us" signifies both the Incarnation of the pre-existent Word and the Church, the Body of

Christ. Participation in Christ is also participation in the whole Body of Christ, the Church.

According to Gregory, the second theophany entails a revelation that is no longer accessible to rational knowledge. In the second stage, Moses, who began his ascent from the light of the burning bush, enters into the “darkness,” which symbolizes both the limit of human capacities to know God – the unknowability of God – and the presence of God (the Holy Spirit), and receives another revelation. For the Nyssen, it is Moses’ higher participation in Christ and in the knowledge of Christ (theology). When Moses left sensory knowledge and knowledge by reason (intellectual knowledge), he acquired a new knowledge. It is not thanks to the light of the intellect, but that of the Spirit, that Moses acquires this knowledge. Therefore, the darkness of the Spirit is luminous. God reveals to the spiritual sages, who leaves behind the world as Moses did, a value which transcends every other reality.¹⁷⁰ This second theophany will be the subject matter of the third chapter in which we understand the vow of poverty in the light of the second stage of Moses’ spiritual ascent.

1.2.3.3 Theophany of God’s Back Seen from within the Hole in the Rock

In the second theophany, Moses reached a stage that lies beyond conceptual knowledge. His ascent does not stop there. The third theophany is more magnificent than the previous theophanies and lifts Moses to the height he desires to attain after the previous ascents (LM II:241). Moses requires that God appear to him. God directs Moses to “a place with Himself” where there is “a rock” with a hole in it (LM II:220). When Moses is sheltered in the hole in the rock, God allows him to see his back. Since God is incorporeal, Gregory gives a spiritual interpretation to Moses’ vision of God’s back: “Vision of God’s back is the true sight of God because one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire” (LM II:233). According to Gregory, the true vision of God consists in never to be satisfied in the desire to see him (LM II:239). He equals seeing God’s back to following him:

Moses, who eagerly seeks to behold God, is now taught how he can behold Him: to follow God wherever he might lead is to behold God. His passing by signifies his guiding the one who follows, for someone who does not know the way cannot complete his journey safely in any other way than by following behind his guide. He who leads, then, by his guidance shows the

¹⁷⁰ T. SPIDLIK, *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East Volume 2*, 217.

way to the one following. He who follows will not turn aside from the right way if he always keeps the back of his leader in view (LM II:252).

This following is the perpetual ascent (*epektasis*).

Gregory makes it clear that it is precisely when Moses is sheltered in the rock that he is able to see God. Christ is the rock. It is by standing firmly on Christ that we are able to achieve the perfection, i.e., to become a friend and a servant of God (LM II:317, 319). For the Nyssens, it is both a standing still and a moving or following. The firmer and more immovable a Christian remains in the Good (Christ), the more he/she progresses in the course of virtue (LM II:243). According to the Cappadocian, Christians are called to establish themselves firmly in Christ, the rock, in order to progress fully towards perfection in virtue. Therefore, the third theophany too is a participation in Christ. Gregory makes it clear that God's desire for man is that he should be a follower because "when the Lord who spoke to Moses came to fulfil his own law, he asked his disciples to follow him" (LM II:251). Those who follow Christ are being transformed in their nature. Moses went up as a mere man but descended carrying God with him, glory shining on his countenance. He became the most blessed in following God, became a servant and a friend of God. In the final chapter of this thesis, we will dwell on the third theophany of "God's back seen from within the hole in the rock" as an invitation to the vow of obedience with which consecrated persons can attain the perfection that was granted to Moses in the last stage of his spiritual ascent.

1.2.4 Different Dimensions of Divinization

In the treatise *The Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa is not proposing any abstract philosophical wisdom that, in his own words, "is always in labour but never gives birth" (LM II:11). On the other hand, he offers us practical guidelines that we can translate into our life and thereby place ourselves in God's life. According to him, human vocation is to become an image of the Image (Christ). Therefore, the Church introduces Christians to all those dimensions of Christian life that help them conform to Christ and in him divinized. It is our scope to see that consecrated men's and women's ascent through a life according to the vows is an embodiment of these basic dimensions of Christian life: Trinitarian, sacramental, virtue, and ministerial. Each vow makes them capable of living a particular aspect of each of these dimensions in its entirety and manifesting in the world the fact that Christian

perfection is not a utopia. In this chapter, we have a glimpse of the four dimensions of Christian life that can be traced in *The Life of Moses*, and in the following chapters we will see how each of the vows participates in these dimensions.

1.2.4.1 Trinitarian Dimension

Thomas Spidlik, a Catholic theologian expert on the Christian East, writes that on the royal highway of human divinization two movements converge, one downward: the Father creates man through the Son and sanctifies him in the Holy Spirit; the other upward: man gives glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.¹⁷¹ These two movements we can trace in *The Life of Moses*. Gregory starts with the Trinity – the real Being, absolute Good and absolute Virtue – and says that the truth about man derives from the Trinity. Then, he insists that man is to make a return journey to God to become what he truly is to be. Moses' ascent through the three stages (theophanies) is a portrayal of this Trinitarian journey. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that this divinizing return journey is the common vocation of mankind: “God’s will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature” (CCC 51).

Vocation to the consecrated life in a special way constitutes the twofold Trinitarian movement. Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* epitomizes this Trinitarian dimension as it starts with stating that the consecrated life is a gift of God the Father to the Church through the Holy Spirit in Christ (VC 1). According to the exhortation, this gift expects a response of love towards the Trinity from the consecrated persons: “love for Christ, which leads to closeness with him; love for the Holy Spirit, who opens our hearts to his inspiration; love for the Father, the first origin and the supreme goal of the consecrated life” (VC 21). The consecrated life gives testimony to the Church and to the world at large that the most important thing is to serve God freely, through Christ’s grace which is communicated to believers through the gift of the Spirit (VC 25). Consecrated men and women can fulfil this mission through living the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience as a journey through the Son, in the Spirit, to the Father.

¹⁷¹ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 44.

1.2.4.2 *Sacramental Dimension*

The Greek equivalent to the Latin usage of sacrament (*sacramentum*) is *mysterion* (mystery). At the time of the Fathers, this term was used to refer both to the ‘mystery of salvation’ (Trinity, Incarnation, Church etc.) and the ‘rites that confer sanctification’ (sacraments). With regard to the latter, Gregory notes that holy mysteries purge out from soul and body every sin, and bring man back to God’s image.¹⁷² Mysteries cannot be grasped intellectually and yet may be known through personal participation.¹⁷³ In Col 1:26-27, St Paul equates Christ with mystery that was hidden but now revealed. Incarnation is a mystery in the sense that the invisible and incomprehensible God makes himself visible and known while remaining beyond man’s capacity to exhaust the knowledge of him. The burning bush that showed Moses the manifestation of the presence of God is a mystery.¹⁷⁴ For the Nyssen, in a mystery (sacrament), spiritual gifts are rendered to man by that which is subject to senses. In other words, the power that operates in mysteries (sacraments) does not derive from sensible things, but from God.¹⁷⁵ The divine power reveals itself and operates through the material outward sign. In this sense Christ himself is the first and most perfect sacrament: his Sacred Humanity is the outward sign through which the divine presence and power of the Word radiates and operates. In Orthodoxy the sacraments are tied to the mystery of Incarnation. In every sacrament there is the combination of an outward visible sign with an inward spiritual grace, corresponding to the human and divine natures of Christ. In the sacraments the Church takes material things – water, bread, wine, oil etc. – and makes them a vehicle of the Spirit.¹⁷⁶ In this way the sacraments look back to the Incarnation, when

¹⁷² GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Baptism of Christ*, in P. SCHAFF (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa – Dogmatic Treatises Series II Volume 5*, 973.

¹⁷³ A. DEMETRIOS, “Anthropology in Eastern Orthodox Christian Theology”, in D. PATTE (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, 48.

¹⁷⁴ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Baptism of Christ*, 976.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 974-975. In order to illustrate the transformation that happens in a sacrament to something that is contemptible in appearance by the power of God, the Nyssen points out the rod of Moses: “The rod of Moses was a hazel wand. . . . common wood that every hand cuts and carries, . . . But when God was pleased to accomplish by that rod those wonders, lofty, and passing the power of language to express, the wood was changed into a serpent. And again, at another time, he smote the waters, and now made the water blood, now made to issue forth a countless brood of frogs: and again, he divided the sea, severed to its depths without flowing together again.”

¹⁷⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 975. Gregory says, “The holy altar is stone, ordinary in its nature, nowise different from the other slabs of stone that build our houses and adorn our pavements; but seeing that it was consecrated to the service of God, and received the benediction, it is a holy table, an altar undefiled, no longer touched by the hands of all, but of the priests alone,

Christ took material flesh and made it a vehicle of the Spirit.¹⁷⁷ The divine element in each sacrament calls for an apophatic ascent. Thus, the one true mystery is Christ himself and all material things which signify the presence of Christ in the world are sacramental.

The term mystery occurs several times in the Nyssen's treatise. He speaks of the mystery of the water (LM II:121), the mystery of the Paschal lamb (LM II:126), the mystery of the wood (LM II:133), the mystery of the Virgin (LM II:139), the mystery of the rock (LM II:149) etc. For Gregory, sacraments, as mysteries, are a prolongation of and participation in the Incarnation, i.e., in the divine life.¹⁷⁸ According to him, the sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist – enable the believer to ascend with Christ onto his royal mountain of transfiguration. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen states that our present life on earth is transient and a preparation for departure (LM II:106). For him, the preparation for the better (incorruptible or heavenly goods) is alone properly called preparation for if we live here for things corruptible or material, it is privation of good and lack of preparation (LM II:146). The sacraments constitute one's initial transposition into the ecclesial reality of the eschaton and thereby enable one to start living eschatological incorruptible life here on earth. According to Gregory, death does not interrupt this newly found existence but rather ensures its everlasting continuation because, as we have already seen, spiritual life is a perpetual ascent in the infinite God.

The treatise is interspersed with symbols of the sacraments of initiation. Israelites crossing the Red Sea is interpreted as a type of Baptism that puts the passions (Egyptian army) to death. The cloud that leads the Hebrews

and that with reverence. The bread again is at first common bread, but when the sacramental action consecrates it, it is called, and becomes, the Body of Christ. So with the sacramental oil; so with the wine: though before the benediction they are of little value, each of them, after the sanctification bestowed by the Spirit, has its several operation. The same power of the word, again, also makes the priest venerable and honourable, separated, by the new blessing bestowed upon him, from his community with the mass of men. While but yesterday he was one of the mass, one of the people, he is suddenly rendered a guide, a president, a teacher of righteousness, an instructor in hidden mysteries; and this he does without being at all changed in body or in form; but, while continuing to be in all appearance the man he was before, being, by some unseen power and grace, transformed in respect of his unseen soul to the higher condition.”

¹⁷⁷ K. WARE, *The Orthodox Church*, 238.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. *COr*, (XXXVII), 955. Gregory says, “He disseminates Himself in every believer through that flesh, whose substance comes from bread and wine, blending Himself with the bodies of believers, to secure that, by this union with the immortal, man, too, may be a sharer in incorruption.”

towards the greater mysteries of God is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The uncultivated bread ‘manna’ that the people of God ate is the symbol of the Incarnate God who is the bread of life which came from above and is to be received in oneself with one’s pure soul because it unites man with God. The three stages of spiritual progress in the treatise are related to the three sacraments of Christian initiation: the first stage to Baptism, thanks to which one is liberated from the old man and becomes like a new-born baby; the second stage to Confirmation (Chrismation), which indicates spiritual growth; and, the third stage to Eucharist, which denotes the culmination of perfection.¹⁷⁹ Thus, through the sacraments one enters into one’s right of resurrection, which Christ has won for all humanity. The spiritual life, for Gregory, is the flowering of the faculties of the soul, insofar as they have been raised to the supernatural level by the sacraments.¹⁸⁰ *Vita Consecrata* presents religious profession as a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in Baptism, a development of the grace of the sacrament of Confirmation as it opens new possibilities and fruits of holiness and apostolic work, and the offering of oneself in communion with Christ who offers himself to the Father for the salvation of the whole world¹⁸¹ (VC 30-31). Even though the consecrated life is not treated as a sacrament, the fruits of the sacraments of initiation are shone through it in a special way. It is a visible sign of closer union with God/Christ and in Christ, all of life becomes a sacrament.

1.2.4.3 Virtue Dimension

We have already seen that in *The Life of Moses* Gregory identifies virtue with Christ himself. For the Nyssen, virtue is not a set of qualities we must acquire, but is God/Christ dwelling within us.¹⁸² “The one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit” (LM I:8) because Christ is infinite in his divinity. The growth in virtue and perfection, which has also no limit (LM I:5), depends on one’s continuous participation in Christ. Virtuous life is the outward manifestation of divinization, manifesting outwardly the divine presence in which one participates.¹⁸³ The Incarnation aimed at providing for mankind in Christ a most perfect model and exemplar of perfect virtue. The

¹⁷⁹ G. MASPERO, “Christian Initiation”, in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 133.

¹⁸⁰ J. DANIELOU, *From Glory to Glory*, 22.

¹⁸¹ Cf. *RD* 7.

¹⁸² M. LAIRD, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence*, 188.

¹⁸³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 197.

imitation of Christ in the practice of virtue is not a matter of repeating the physical gestures of Christ but of imitating their spiritual intent, of using the sentiments of Christ as models for our feelings.¹⁸⁴ According to Gregory, religious virtue has two parts – Divine and human, i.e., knowledge of God or theology and right conduct or spiritual life (LM II:166). Therefore, participation in Christ – the God-Man who is the embodiment of virtue – leads to both God-experience (divine knowledge) and virtuous life (right conduct) as it is a participation in both the divinity and the humanity of Christ. Moral life that is deprived of God (the eternal foundation and source of virtue) leads to the relativization of morality as man’s unstable nature is not stabilized in God, but is centred on the fleeting world. Gregory’s concept of virtue safeguards man’s progressive participation in God.

Each stage of Moses’ journey also marks his growth in virtue. Among other virtues, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love – which have God as their direct object, and lead to the ‘union with’ and ‘knowledge of’ God – stand out in his spiritual ascent. After the first theophany, the staff in Moses’ hand is termed “the rod of faith” (LM II:34) only with which an Israelite can “win over the one who schemes against the soul” (LM II:63). The Hebrews, who leave Egypt, move ahead with the “hope” of divine help, and it is the cloud that gives them the light of hope (LM II:117,124) and makes Moses slip into the contemplation of the divine. In the final stage of the ascent, Moses becomes an ardent “lover” of Beauty (God) and is filled with the stamp of that Beauty, i.e., divinized (LM II:231).

In the treatise, Gregory likens the life of virtue to a journey through a high narrow pass (the royal way) formed by two precipices on either side (LM II:287). Turning either to the right or to the left would bring peril to the traveller. He wants to say that virtue always lies in the middle and all evil naturally operates in a ‘deficiency of’ or an ‘excess of’ virtue. Courage as a virtue lies in the middle of the two extremes of cowardice and rashness, both of which are evil (LM II:288).¹⁸⁵ The Nyssen is indebted to Aristotle for this

¹⁸⁴ Cf. T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 41. The imitation of Christ in the practice of virtue may include prayer, meditation, physical labour, acts of benevolence etc.: cf. C. D. SUNBERG, *The Cappadocian Mothers: Deification Exemplified in the Writings of Basil, Gregory, and Gregory*, 79

¹⁸⁵ Cf. *Virg*, 32. The Nyssen identifies the Christian virtue of courage with fortitude (a steadiness of will in doing good in spite of difficulties faced in the performance of one’s duty). He says, “Cowardice and rashness are two opposites recognized as evils, the one because of a deficiency, the other because of an excess, and fortitude is the mean between them.” In line with his notion of virtue, he continues, “Again, the pious man is neither atheistic nor superstitious, for there is the same irreverence in believing in no God and in believing in many. ... Reason recognizes virtue as the mid-point between opposites.”

notion of virtue which he uses to adorn the Church. Aristotle had defined moral virtue as a mean between two vices; the one relating to excess, the other to deficiency.¹⁸⁶ In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory comments on Mt10:16 and points out that it is not the shrewdness of the serpent alone or the simplicity of the dove alone that is to be praised as virtue; rather it is the disposition which closely unites these two by the mean that is virtue (LM II:289). The appetitive and the spirited movements of the soul are to be controlled by reason. In the treatise, Moses (a type of Christ) is an embodiment of virtue. He was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated (Ex 34:7; LM II:314). In his ripe old age Moses had the wisdom and maturity of an old man (i.e., his sight was unimpaired), and the agility and spirit of a youth (i.e., his vigour had not abated). Without going to any one of the extremes – either to the right (old age) or to the left (youthfulness) – at the expense of the other, he kept himself in the middle at the convergence of both.

The vows of chastity, poverty and obedience are moral virtues too. The “royal way” for consecrated persons lies between the excesses of rigorism and laxity. *Vita Consecrata* reminds them that Jesus is the model in whom every virtue comes to perfection (VC 18). Christ lives his life as a virgin, even while affirming and defending the dignity and sanctity of married life (VC 22); he lives in detachment from earthly goods, while he proclaims the beauty of the creation; he assumes the condition of a servant, while he is the master of the disciples. The consecrated life is called to make the characteristic traits of the virginal, poor and obedient Jesus constantly visible in the midst of the world.¹⁸⁷ Every virtue has a double effect: first, it naturally inclines the person who possesses it toward a certain kind of action, and second, it spontaneously distances him or her from whatever is contrary to that action.¹⁸⁸ This aspect of virtue has special significance when we treat the evangelical counsels as virtues. The binding of vows with the theological virtues and participation in Christ saves the consecrated life from being mere moralism.

¹⁸⁶ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (II, 9:20), trans. R. C. Bartlett – S. D. Collins, 40.

¹⁸⁷ VC 1; cf. SAO 1.

¹⁸⁸ SF 52. Thomas Spidlik defines virtue as a steadfast disposition and at the same time a participation in Christ, in the divine life: cf. T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 105.

1.2.4.4 Ministerial Dimension

In the treatise, the Nyssen ascribes to Moses the character of the perfect priest, prophet and king, and takes him as a model for the spiritual life. Moses is a perfect Christian, for Gregory. The unction restricted in the Old Testament to kings, priests and prophets is extended in the Church to all the faithful.¹⁸⁹ It is because Jesus fulfilled the messianic hope of Israel in his threefold office of priest, prophet, and king,¹⁹⁰ and through baptism one is born into Christ. The faithful participate, each according to his own vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet and king.¹⁹¹ Christian perfection, for Gregory, is not only of the soul through contemplation but also of the body through action: "Practical philosophy should be joined to contemplative philosophy. So, the heart becomes the symbol of contemplation, and the arms, of work" (LM II:200). He recommends not a withdrawal from society but an engagement in it. Following God is imitating and participating in the saving love of God.¹⁹² This way God is made visible to the world. Through the ministry one does, the material body reflects the image of the soul that is the image of God and thus becomes "a mirror of the mirror". *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes thus: "the whole people of God participate in the three offices of Christ and bear the responsibilities for mission and service that flow from them" (CCC 783).

We have to understand Gregory's concept of ministry in line with his notion of virtue. According to the Cappadocian, the man, who shall "do" and "teach" as Scripture says – Mt 5:19; Acts 1:1 –, is truly alive and outstandingly beautiful and effective in his movements.¹⁹³ He prefers neither a contemplative withdrawal from the world to active life in the society nor vice versa. An ascent in the ministerial dimension signifies a combination of 'action and contemplation' – Martha and Mary (cf. Lk 10:38-42) – imitating Christ, and avoiding excessive adherence to either side at the expense of the other. We find in Gregory's thoughts deep consonance with the consecrated life as understood today. The consecrated life is a particular call to participate in the ministry of Christ, leaving everything behind and closely imitating his own way of life and thereby becoming a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting, to contribute in a profound way to the renewal of the world by the profession of the evangelical counsels, which makes a person totally

¹⁸⁹ P. EVDOKIMOV, *Orthodoxy*, 286.

¹⁹⁰ CCC 436.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 1546; AA 2.

¹⁹² N. CARNES, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa*, 84.

¹⁹³ *Virg*, 69.

free for the service of the Gospel.¹⁹⁴ Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* reminds consecrated men and women that no one should think that religious have become strangers to their fellowmen or useless citizens of this earthly city by their consecration (LG 46). Their life involves a going up the mountain of Transfiguration and coming down the mountain¹⁹⁵ – contemplation and action. Ministry is an antidote to isolation and indifference.

The threefold ministry of Christ is also soteriological. We have already seen that in Orthodoxy salvation is *theosis* (deification). Therefore, participation in Christ's ministry aims at "the realization of *theosis*, i.e., communion of man – and through him of creation – in the very life of the Trinity."¹⁹⁶ The Church's ministry realizes here and now the very saving work of Christ, which involves the 'very personal life' and presence of the one who saves.¹⁹⁷ Consecrated men and women are called to continue the ministry of Christ in a special way, leading a 'life in Christ.' Through their ministries, they proclaim to the world the nearness of the kingdom of God (cf. Mt 4:17) and prolong in history the presence of Christ.

1.3 Matrix of Religious Life

Gregory's indebtedness to the earliest tradition of Christian asceticism is conspicuous in *The Life of Moses*. It is generally believed that the consecrated life developed in the Eastern Roman Empire – the Greek East – as a movement of the Church toward the peripheries, i.e., toward the deserts. But we have to note that before 'desert asceticism' there existed 'village asceticism' because in *The Life of Saint Antony* Athanasius of Alexandria (297-373) writes that at the time Antony (c.250-356), who is generally considered the "Father of Christian monasticism," entered ascetic life, "whoever wished to concern himself with his own destiny practised asceticism by himself not far from his own village."¹⁹⁸ A developed form of village asceticism existed in the Syriac Orient (another branch of eastern Christianity), which lay beyond the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire, where "a native Syrian tradition of the consecrated life which had already been in existence when monasticism inspired by the Egyptian model spread

¹⁹⁴ VC 14, 22, 25, 72.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 14.

¹⁹⁶ J. D. ZIZIOLAS, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 211.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 212.

¹⁹⁸ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of St Antony*, (no.3), trans. R. T. Meyer, 20.

north into Syria in the second half of the fourth and in the fifth century.”¹⁹⁹ Aphrahat²⁰⁰ (mid-4th century) in his *Demonstrations* dated to 337 speaks of the *Bnay Quama*²⁰¹ (Sons of the Covenant) who lived with the Christian community in towns and villages either in common households, or within the family itself. They were secular ascetics. Sebastian Brock, a British scholar in Syriac literature, calls this native Syriac ascetic tradition, which distinguished itself from early monastic developments at the same time in Egypt, “proto-monasticism.”²⁰² He considers the Syriac Orient as the third component (third lung) of Christian tradition together with the familiar pair of Greek East and Latin West.²⁰³ Thus, we cannot say that Egypt was the first or only place in which the ascetical ideal came to expression in the early Christianity.

Paul of Thebes (c.227-c.340) who fled into the Egyptian desert is said to be the earliest trailblazer for the Desert Fathers and his *Life* was written by St. Jerome (c.342-420).²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, as we saw above, St Antony, who visited Paul and whose *Life* was written by St Athanasius in 357, is generally known as the “Father of Monasticism”²⁰⁵ and “the first monk”²⁰⁶ (from Greek *monos*, alone). Even though the names of men are usually mentioned with

¹⁹⁹ S. BROCK, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, xxi.

²⁰⁰ Aphrahat was evidently a prominent figure in the Christian Church in the Persian Empire. He lived and wrote somewhere in what is today the modern state of Iraq.

²⁰¹ APHRAHAT, *The Demonstrations*, (VI), trans. A. Lehto, 169 -198. The *bnay quama* included both men and women. They consisted of two categories of people, *bthule* or virgins (the term is used for both sexes) and *qaddishe* (literally, holy ones), married people who sanctified themselves. The goal of the consecrated life was to become an *ihidaya* (single-minded, undivided in heart), a word used of Adam in his pre-fallen state, as well as of Christ, the Only-Begotten. Sebastian Brock observes that only in Syriac texts of the fifth century and later does *ihidaya* come to be used as an equivalent to the Greek *monachos* in the sense of ‘monk.’ Brock calls this primitive form of Syriac consecrated life ‘proto-monasticism’: cf. S. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 133.

²⁰² S. BROCK, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 102. Mar Awgin or Eugenius (an Egyptian monk who died in 363 AD) introduced Egyptian monasticism to Syriac Christianity in the fourth century. According to Brock, this led to the fading away of the Syriac proto-monastic tradition and the accreditation of the foundation of Syrian and Mesopotamian monasticism to the Egyptian Mar Awgin and his disciples: cf. *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰³ S. BROCK, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, xxxiii.

²⁰⁴ N. THANNER, *New Short History of the Catholic Church*, 36.

²⁰⁵ P. EVDOKIMOV, *Orthodoxy*, 107.

²⁰⁶ J. BINNS, *The T&T Clark History of Monasticism: The Eastern Tradition*, 33. Since there were other ascetics before Antony (e.g., Paul of Thebes), he cannot be considered as the first monk. However, he was the first known ascetic going to the desert. This geographical move might have contributed to his renown.

regard to the origin of monasticism, we can trace an already existing fully organized community of consecrated women in the Greek East even before Antony left the world from the fact that when he went to the desert, “he had placed his younger sister with known and trusted virgins, giving her to the nuns to be brought up.”²⁰⁷ It shows that before the custom of men committing themselves to religious life had made much progress, it was already in vogue among women. In Syriac proto-monasticism also their existed women ascetics called “Daughters of the Covenant” (*Bnat Quama*).

Egyptian desert monasticism that began as hermitic (solitary) style of Christian life passed to semi-hermitical life “when a little colony of monks gathered around St Antony and he put an end to his solitary life becoming the Father of the Monks.”²⁰⁸ The development of the consecrated life to ‘common life’ (coenobitic life - Greek, *Koinobion*, from *Koinos*, common, and *bios*, life) was taken place with Pachomius of Egypt (290-346) “who founded seven such communities for men and two for women and wrote for them a *Rule*, the earliest monastic Rule to survive.”²⁰⁹ St. Basil (329-379), Gregory of Nyssa’s elder brother, after studying the three different types of Monasticism existing in his day – hermetic, semi-hermitic, and coenobitic – adopted the coenobitical ideal of St Pachomius, in greatly modified form, and introduced it into his Cenobium at Neocaesarea (present day Niksar in Turkey) around 360. Basil’s urban monasticism can be understood as a developed form of the early village asceticism.

The religious toleration brought by the Edit of Milan in 313, and Christianity becoming a state religion in 380 under the protection of Emperor Theodosius I gave an impetus to Greek monasticism. Christian monks, as authoritative spokesmen of the Church, bore witness against a worldly Church and saved it with their moral power from being transformed into an imperial Church.²¹⁰ Monks became the temples of the Holy Spirit, radiated the divine light as bearers of God, heralded the Second Coming of Christ (*Parousis*) and thereby thwarted the misconception of identifying the Kingdom of God with the earthly kingdom.

Gregory wrote *The Life of Moses* as a response to a request for guidance concerning the perfect life. The addressee is named Caesarius by the Nyssen in the conclusion of the work (LM II:319). There are sufficient reasons in the treatise to believe that this Caesarius is a monk. When Gregory calls him

²⁰⁷ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of St Antony*, (no.3), 20.

²⁰⁸ N. F. ROBINSON, *Monasticism in the Orthodox Churches*, 5.

²⁰⁹ N. THANNER, *New Short History of the Catholic Church*, 37.

²¹⁰ Cf. J. MEYENDORFF, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 12.

Caesarius in the conclusion, he adds the appellation “man of God” (LM II:319), an appellation used by Athanasius of Alexandria for St Antony of the Desert.²¹¹ In the prologue of the work, he calls him “friend and brother” who is “competing admirably in the divine race along the course of virtue, light-footedly leaping and straining constantly for the prize of heavenly calling” and considers him also a “beloved child” (LM I:1), the Nyssen himself being his spiritual father. From this we can assume that the recipient of the work is a religious. Even though nowhere in the work he uses the term ‘monk,’ we can presume its religious character from a few terms he uses elsewhere to denote the way of life to which he prescribes perfection: divine race (LM I:1, II:245), divine course (LM II:108), perfect life (LM I:2,3,15), greater philosophy (LM I:19), higher life (LM II:44,200,305), ascetic way of life (LM II:187), virtuous life (LM I:77, II:5, 49,314, 319, 320), desert way of life (LM II:228).

The Nyssen tended not to use vocabulary that could be understood as typically monastic because he presented Christian perfection, not as reserved to a restricted group, but as accessible to all Christians.²¹² He understood that the essence of Christianity in general and of the monastic ideal in particular consists in personal union with God. The consecrated life is understood by him as no more than an attempt to live the Christian life in its fullest and most ideal fashion. The monk is not a special kind of Christian. On the contrary, monks and virgins are simply Christians seeking to actualize the Christian ideal in the fullest possible way. Monastic rules are not meant to be restrictive barriers but are thought to establish the external conditions in which living out the ideal will be possible.²¹³ All Christians can live the religious life, even though it is harder without the structures and support of a monastic community and with the temptations and distractions of the secular world. Gregory notes that in monasteries men and women were treated equally and slaves were welcome and treated as equal members in the community.²¹⁴ Thus, the Nyssen considers the consecrated life as an anticipation of true equality in the eschatological life. It was also for him a practical means to secure the conditions which allow at least some men and women to experience equality in the here and now.

Gregory begins his treatise introducing Christian life as a “contest” (LM I:1) between virtue and vice. The timeless value of the treatise can be

²¹¹ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of St Antony*, (no.70,71,93), 79,96.

²¹² J. NOUMOWICZ, “Monasticism”, in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 507.

²¹³ M. LUDLAW, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post) Modern*, 149.

²¹⁴ *LSM*, 168.

understood from the fact that in every age, consecrated men and women are called to exercise their ministry where “the tyrant Pharaoh’s – *evil’s* – law seeks to prevent the birth of male offspring – *virtues*” (LM I:16). Christians experience this struggle between the opposites not only from without but also from within. So, it calls for their social action and personal perfection. We have already seen that God placed human beings between these contradictions after the original sin so that they may desire with freedom for their original state of existence. The garments of skin were “added” to human beings as their second nature. But, as Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) said “man has the tendency to deal with this second nature as natural.”²¹⁵ As a result, “original sin is folly in men’s eyes,”²¹⁶ evil has become normal and “redemption through Christ is denied.”²¹⁷ The world is in need of God’s witnesses.

For Gregory of Nyssa, those who lived the life of perfection in history are like a beacon fire that directs those who are sailing aimlessly on the ocean in the dark, and prompts them to steer towards it from the open sea.²¹⁸ He asks Christians to raise their eyes toward these virtuous people. This can be understood also as an admonition to those living the consecrated life to be models whom others can imitate. In this regard, in *The Life of Moses*, the Cappadocian gives a relevant interpretation to Isaiah 51:2, *Look to Abraham your father and Sarah who bore you:*

Scripture gives this admonition to those who wander outside virtue. Just as at sea those who are carried away from the direction of the harbour bring themselves back on course by a clear sign, upon seeing either a beacon light raised up high or some mountain peak coming into view, in the same way Scripture by the example of Abraham and Sarah may guide again to the harbour of the divine will those adrift on the sea of life with a pilotless mind. Human nature is divided into male and female, and the free choice of virtue or of evil is set before both equally. For this reason, the corresponding example of virtue for each sex has been exemplified by the divine voice, so that each, by observing the one to which he is akin (the men to Abraham and

²¹⁵ B. PASCAL, *Pensees and Other Writings*, trans. H. Levi, 54, 122.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹⁸ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Gregory the Wonderworker*, 42.

the women to Sarah), may be directed in the life of virtue by the appropriate examples (LM I:11-12).²¹⁹

The Church gives her sons and daughters men-saints and women-saints so that they (Christians) might freely choose from them those virtues which are not burdening but conducive to their nature. Consecrated men and women, like Abraham and Sarah, are called to become signs of virtue for the men and women of today. *Vita Consecrata* presents it as the uniqueness of religious life:

... all are equally called to follow Christ... But those who are called to the consecrated life have a special experience of the light which shines forth from the Incarnate Word. For the profession of evangelical counsels makes them a kind of sign for the community of the brethren and for the world (VC 15).

Religious life is a vocation to be signs of the primordial vocation of men and women – signs of holiness.

Eastern Orthodox theologian George Florovsky (1893-1979) notes that in the early Church neither the Fathers nor the first seven Ecumenical Councils thought of giving a formal definition of the Church because the glorious reality of the Church was open to their spiritual vision and one does not define what is self-evident.²²⁰ In the time of the Fathers the vitality of the Church was so plain to see that the question of its nature scarcely arose.²²¹ According to Florovsky, the Church as a whole is a sacred (consecrated) community, distinguished thereby from the (profane) world.²²² The definition of the Church became a necessity when ‘the glorious reality’ of the Church got blurred. The religious life is a special call to make manifest in the world this glorious reality of the Church in a unique way.²²³ The glorious reality of the Church is that she is holy. Holiness comes only from God, the Holy One, and a person can be holy only by sharing the Divine Life. Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* states unequivocally that holiness is the most attractive face of the Church (GS 9). As “God’s plan was to raise man to a participation of the Divine Life,”²²⁴ the only source of holiness, “the

²¹⁹ Thomas Merton observes that for the early Fathers, the saints were for the most part the saints of the Old Testament, except for the martyrs: cf. T. MERTON, *A Course in Desert Spirituality*, 55.

²²⁰ G. FLOROVSKY, *Bible, Church and Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, 57.

²²¹ P. EVDOKIMOV, *Orthodoxy*, 131.

²²² G. FLOROVSKY, *Bible, Church and Tradition*, 61.

²²³ *LG* 39.

²²⁴ *Ibid.* 2.

religious life is not a thing apart from the Christian life; it is the Christian life itself lifted to its fullest dimension.”²²⁵ The religious are invited ‘to live’ the Christian perfection, having taken the religious vows, “for the edification of the Christian people.”²²⁶ We can say that the consecrated life is a true sign of the Church that is holy.

1.4 Religious Vows

Among the Greeks the significance of the term ‘vow’ (*euche*) is more of an offering than a promise. For a Greek who made a vow, the essential thing was not that it was something difficult or expensive, but that it expresses his or her gratitude (*eucharistia*) to the divinity.²²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, in his second homily on the Our Father, defines vow as a grateful pledge to present some offering.²²⁸ It means that vow is an undertaking, not just a promise. It is a free-will offering with an attitude of gratitude or thankfulness (*eucharistia*). Each vow of consecrated persons is their self-offering as a response in gratitude to God who “has loved them first with an everlasting love” (Jer 31:3); they become what they promise. The structure of this offering has two aspects: the exclusion from secular use and the destination to a sacred function.²²⁹ A model for this type of offering can be found in the book of Exodus 35:29, “All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a ‘freewill offering’ to the Lord.” They make this offering for the construction of the Tabernacle on earth. In his treatise *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen identifies this Tabernacle with the Church and says that it is possible to see persons (monks like Basil the Great) making this type of ‘personal contribution’ for the adornment of the Church even now (LM II:116). The ascetic way of life, according to Gregory, adds to the decoration of the Church (LM II:187). Vatican Council II’s *Perfectae Caritatis* accentuates this point where it says that a wonderful variety of

²²⁵ AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 14

²²⁶ PC 11

²²⁷ M. J. SEDANO, “Voti Religiosi”, in T. GOFFI – A. PALAZZINI (eds.), *Dizionario Teologico della Vita Consacrata*, 1923.

²²⁸ HOF, 122; cf. WIMCOC, 86. According to Gregory, when a person calls himself a Christian, the promise of the name proclaims an imitation of God, i.e., the profession of the name Christian is to be followed by an imitation of Christ.

²²⁹ K. WOJTOWICZ, *The Priceless Gift: A Primer of the Theology of Consecrated Life*, trans. Pascale-Dominique Nau, 22.

religious communities makes the Church appear adorned with the various gifts of her children like a spouse adorned for her husband (PC 1).

“Every person is the painter of his own life, and choice (freewill) is the craftsman of the work, and the virtues are the paints for executing the image,”²³⁰ says Gregory. Consecrated men and women are called to paint their lives in freedom by means of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience as paint, looking at Christ as their model. It is because living the vows is the most radical ‘divine’ way of living the Gospel on this earth for it was embraced by Christ himself (VC 18). In this sense, vow is also a self-imposed obligation.²³¹ In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory provides an allegorical interpretation to Aron’s priestly tunic that extends from his head to his feet and the tassels added to it (LM II:191-194). For the Nyssen, the tunic denotes a Christian’s virtuous life lived according to the commandments of God in order to be worthy to enter the sanctuary of one’s heart as a priest, and its “tassels” stand for the “extra adornment of virtues by one’s own personal endeavour” to a life according to the commandments. Thus, according to Gregory, Christian life will become more beautiful, if one personally contributes something virtuous to the gospel imperatives. As far as consecrated men and women are concerned, this contribution that adds beauty to their Christian life is their self-imposed obligation to live the vows.

Explicit vows are not the essence of Monasticism.²³² The Father of Monasticism, St Antony, entered this narrow way of ascetic life without formal vows, tonsure or habit. In Pachomius’ coenobitic community, there emerged the practice of stripping the novice of his secular garments and having him put on the monk’s habit.²³³ Basil of Caesarea in his *Long Rules* 14 speaks of a pact (*syntheke*) made in the presence of God by the one who is admitted to the community.²³⁴ Basil is of the opinion that retraction of the promise will render the monk a sinner against God. The core of monastic profession in St Basil was the vow of virginity through which a monk offered himself as a votive offering to God in the presence of ecclesiastical officials as witnesses.²³⁵ After Pachomius, St. Shenoute of Atripe (c.348-c.466) is the

²³⁰ *Perf*, 110.

²³¹ Cf. B. COLE – P. CONNER, *Christian Totality: Theology of the Consecrated Life*, 70.

²³² N. F. ROBINSON, *Monasticism in the Orthodox Churches*, 30.

²³³ A. VEILLEUX (trans.), *Pachomian Koinia Volume Two: Pachomian Chronicles and Rules*, (precept 49), 152-153.

²³⁴ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *The Long Rules*, in M. M. WAGNER (trans.), *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, 263.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, (Rule 15), 264-268. A. M. Silvas notes that Basil was responsible for elevating the profession of celibacy by male ascetics from its earlier more empiric status to the echelon

most important monastic figure of coenobitic monasticism in Egypt. Anyone who wanted to join Shenoute's monastic community had to renounce all his possessions and make a solemn vow called a *diatheke* or covenant before the altar.²³⁶ It was a written declaration. The candidate avowed his individual obligation to secure the holiness of the monastery through his own personal holiness. According to Bibawy, it is the first known form of a formal monastic 'profession' vow.²³⁷ Through the profession of vows one declares one's personal obligation to cooperate with God's grace and edify one's neighbour.

The roots of Western Monasticism are in the East. St Athanasius of Alexandria, who visited Rome during his second exile caused by the Arian sympathizers in 339, is said to have introduced monasticism to the Latin West. Although Martin of Tours (316-397) – an ex-soldier who lived as a hermit in the region around Poitiers (in France), founded a monastery in 361 near Tours and became the bishop of Tours in 371 – is traditionally regarded as the first monk of the West, women's presence in the consecrated life – not as an organized community – can be traced in the first Christian centuries.²³⁸ In the Christian Church, women were first in the field with regard to the celibate and definitely religious life. From the fourth century, entry into the 'Ordo virginum' took place through a solemn liturgical rite presided over by the diocesan bishop. The first mention is that of Marcellina, sister of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who was publicly veiled as a virgin by Pope Liberius in

of an ecclesiastically witnessed, canonically recognized state in life equivalent to that of professed virgins: cf. A. M. SILVAS, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters – Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, 24.

²³⁶ H. BINNS, *The T&T Clark History of Monasticism: The Eastern Tradition*, 48.

²³⁷ A. BIBAWY, "St. Shenoute of Atripe and His Monastic Order", in J. A. MCGUCKIN (ed.), *Orthodox Monasticism Past and Present*, 252. The Shenoute vow runs thus: "I vow before God in his holy place, the word which I have spoken with my mouth being my witness: I will not defile my body in any way; I will not steal; I will not bear false witness; I will not lie; I will not do anything deceitful secretly. If I transgress what I have vowed, I will see the kingdom of heaven, but will not enter it. God, before whom I made the covenant, will destroy my soul and my body in the fiery Gehenna because I transgressed the covenant I made."

²³⁸ Cf. *ESI* 2. The document states that women's evangelical life of virginity appeared in a spontaneous way in the different regions where ecclesial communities developed and in the first three centuries, large numbers of consecrated virgins – such as Agatha of Catania (c.231-c.251), Lucy of Syracuse (c.283-c.304), Anges of Rome (c.291-c.304) and Cecilia of Rome (c.200-c.230) – underwent martyrdom in order to remain faithful to the Lord. Marcella of Rome (ca.325-410) is remembered as the founder of the first religious community for women in the Western church. She was at the centre of an aristocratic circle of virgins and widows which St Jerome directed during his stay in Rome, between 383 and 385.

352/3.²³⁹ John Cassian (360-433) from Scythia Minor (modern Dobrogea, with a part in Romania and a part in Bulgaria), who lived as a monk in Bethlehem, Egypt and southern France, carried the monastic wisdom of the East to the West. St Benedict of Nursia (480-547) built upon this foundation Western coenobitic monasticism. St. Benedict, who established twelve monasteries of twelve monks each at Subiaco (Italy) before founding a monastery at Monte Cassino in the mountains of central Italy in 529, in his *Rule* (chapter 58) introduced a new custom, and not only enjoined upon each of his monks the vows of stability, conversion of morals, and obedience, but required him also to sign a written formula of Profession, and lay it on the altar with his own hand.²⁴⁰ The first noted example of the three vows – chastity, poverty and obedience – in a religious profession is found in the rule of the Parisian Canons of the Abbey of St Genevieve in Paris, in 1148.²⁴¹ J. F. Conwell observes that Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) uses the term *consilia evangelica* in a document approving the Poor Catholics (an early Catholic mendicant order) in 1208.²⁴² But, according to him, when the term ‘evangelical counsels’ first emerged is uncertain.

The consecrated life, which began with the tacit profession of St Antony the Great, took centuries to be identified with the explicit profession of the evangelical counsels – chastity, poverty and obedience. The Church felt the need to define the consecrated life within the explicit confines of the vows only when the original nature of this life began to fade in the sight of the world. Gregory of Nyssa comments on virginity (consecrated life) that whatever has greatness in its nature provides wonder of itself and has no need of verbal support.²⁴³ The explicit vows assure us a secure path leading to Christian perfection, and the pilgrim who treads this path will never miss the mark. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory speaks of two taskmasters over the Israelites in their Egyptian life – uncontrolled passion and covetousness (LM II: 129). The Nyssen wants to show that Christian perfection lies in freedom

²³⁹ M. DUNN, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*, 47. The ‘Order of Virgins’ demonstrated in a unique way the image of the Church as the Bride of Christ. Since apostolic time many women dedicated their lives with spousal love to Christ in virginity.

²⁴⁰ T. FRY (ed.), *The Rule of St Benedict in English*, 78-80.

²⁴¹ K. WOJTOWICZ, *The Priceless Gift*, 45; cf. T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 161. In a letter from Odo, Prior of the Canons Regular of Saint Genevieve of Paris, from the year 1148, it is said: “Therefore, in our profession which we make, we promise three things, as you well know: chastity, common life and obedience.”

²⁴² J. F. CONWELL, *Impelling Spirit; Revisiting a Founding Experience: 1539 – Ignatius of Loyola and His Companions*, 300.

²⁴³ *Virg*, 9.

from these masters through chastity and poverty, and in ‘straining forward toward what lies ahead’ (Phil 3:13-14), i.e., ‘a perpetual ascent from glory to glory’ or ‘stability in following God in unconditional love and obedience.’ The profession of vows does not deprive a Christian of his freedom, but is the response of his own freedom in the decision to embrace his divine call definitively. Thus, a life of vows is not a life of law and precepts, but a life of participation in Christ. The vows do not lead one to depravity, but to enrichment; through each vow one ascends toward the better.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that the Eastern Church, Orthodoxy, identifies Christian perfection with *theosis* (divinization or deification). Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses* unravels the doctrine of *theosis* centring its theology and spirituality on the person of Christ – the God-Man. This treatise is not merely an exposition of the doctrine; it provides us practical guidelines to attain Christian perfection. The three stages in the spiritual ascent of the soul require from us three types of responses to God’s self-revelation in Christ. God is not an object to learn about, but the subject who comes to us, makes us participants in him, divinizes us and imparts knowledge about himself while being beyond the limit of our intellectual comprehensibility due to his infinity. There is no dualism of theology and spirituality or divine knowledge and morality (right conduct) in Gregory because perfection consists in the Christification of one’s personal being. We found in Gregory’s treatise a fertile ground for developing a theology of the consecrated life from the fact that he wrote it drawing inspiration from the Eastern Christian tradition that is fundamentally ascetic and monastic. Consecrated persons are called to be models of Christian perfection by overcoming “the rupture between theology and life”²⁴⁴ in themselves. Only in this way could the consecrated life be meaningful in contemporary society that is being tempted to live either as if there were no God or thinking ‘even if there is a God, he has no role in the world.’ Participation in Christ and divinization makes consecrated persons witnesses to the truth that “the Church is Christ dwelling in and saving the world by our faith.”²⁴⁵ The four dimensions of Christian life that we have traced in *The Life of Moses* call for consecrated persons’ journeying together with other Christians.

²⁴⁴ H. BOERSMA, *Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery*, 2.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

In comparison to any other culture, the Christian East has a unique and privileged role as the original setting where the Church was born.²⁴⁶ It is in the East that the Word of God was made flesh, the Church took its initial shape, the Gospel was preached first and the consecrated life in its three forms – hermetic, semi-hermetic and coenobitic – originated. Unlike in the West, in the East we cannot find religious orders or institutes of consecrated life each with its own spiritual tradition and specific mission. In the Eastern Church, there is only one spiritual tradition for all – monks, clerics and laity alike –, and that is monastic, with the sole goal of Christian perfection.²⁴⁷ According to the Eastern tradition, all the vocations are rooted in baptism and all are called to Christian perfection. “The Saviour’s commands are binding on all the faithful and are capable of fulfilment by those who are willing,”²⁴⁸ says St Nicholas Cabasilas (c.1322-c.1392), a Byzantine lay theologian and mystic. The difference between commandments and counsels is that the commandment is a matter of necessity while the counsel is left to the free choice of the person to whom it is proposed. In *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Layola points out that Christ has given us an example of both the life of commandments and the life of counsels.²⁴⁹ Jesus exemplified the first in his own obedience to his parents, Mary and Joseph. He exemplified the second by leaving his family so as to ‘devote himself exclusively to the service of his eternal Father’ (cf. Lk 2:49). A consecrated person is the one who has vowed to follow not only the commandments but also the counsels. The difference between consecrated persons and other Christians lies in their approach to the instruments of perfection, rather than the goal itself.²⁵⁰ All

²⁴⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Orientalis Lumen*, no. 5.

²⁴⁷ The disadvantage of the Western style can be that the presence of religious Orders and Congregations with different spiritual traditions (Benedictines, Carmelites, Claretians etc.) and specific missions might promote individual search for God and the institutionalization of religious life. Very often it is impossible for consecrated persons to study and work together because their spiritualities and missions are different. It can also happen that in their quest for promoting distinctive missions, they may sideline the real purpose of religious life, i.e., union with God.

²⁴⁸ NICHOLAS CABASILAS, *The Life in Christ*, trans. C. J. deCatanzaro, 161. St Nicolas Cabasilas, an Orthodox mystic and theological writer, wrote his 14th century classic of Byzantine spirituality with the title *The Life in Christ* at a time when the spirituality of *Theosis* achieved its perfect form with Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). This work presents *theosis*/deification as the Christification of the whole person.

²⁴⁹ IGNATIUS OF LAYOLA, *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. G. Ganns, in G. GANNS (ed.), *Ignatius of Layola. The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, 153-154.

²⁵⁰ The means of perfection in the Church can be understood as sacramental life, care of Christian families, ascetical practices, evangelical counsels, withdrawal, contemplation etc. Vatican Council II also in its dogmatic constitution on the Church *LG*, chapter V, presents

Christians are called to ground their life and conduct in Christ. But what others find as difficult is approached with dedication in the consecrated life; when others may lag behind, consecrated persons tread the path of Christian life in an exemplary manner.

In the following three chapters, we will look at the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in support to the three stages of Moses' ascent and present them as means of progressive participation in Christ and divinization. The three stages of ascent in *The Life of Moses* are not three separate stages. They are inter-related, and together make the soul reach its perfection. In the same way, vows of chastity, poverty and obedience are not separate from each other, but lead to a total profession that brings about religious perfection. Metaphorically speaking, chastity is the sun, poverty its light, and obedience, heat. The three vows are three dimensions or perspectives of a single vow of 'total freewill offering,' in perichoresis or mutual indwelling, with the intention to live for God alone.²⁵¹ Christ is the true man without sin. Therefore, his chastity is the perfect chastity, his poverty is the perfect poverty, and his obedience is the perfect obedience. Consecrated persons attain perfection in their vows only according to the measure they participate in Christ's true perfections.

the call to holiness as a universal call in the Church and says that this call is manifested in a very special way in the practice of evangelical counsels.

²⁵¹ Cf. J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada: Una Alianza y Tres Consejos*, 11.

CHAPTER 2

Theophany of the Burning Bush: Chastity

2.0 Introduction

In *The Life of Moses*, the theophany of the burning bush, the first stage of the spiritual ascent, occurs in Moses' life when he has already been on the path of virtue. Here, Moses represents a Christian who encounters Christ at a certain point in his or her life and receives a special vocation to lead a life of Christian perfection in its fullness, i.e., the consecrated life.²⁵² The consecrated life is defined as a response of some from among the clerical and

²⁵² In the treatise Gregory of Nyssa tells us how a Christian can imitate the birth and growth of Moses in Egypt in every epoch. According to the Nyssen, as in the case of the Israelites who lived under the rule of Pharaoh who values only the material and fleshly life, the Church – the new Israel – is called to exercise her ministry in a world where demonic power prevails. This power prefers the birth and growth of vices to that of virtues, as Pharaoh preferred the female birth to the male birth. The demonic power in the world is afraid of the growth of virtues, and so Christians are forced to lead a material and passionate life at the cost of virtues. In contrast to the birth of the body which takes place by chance, the birth to a life of virtue or vice depends on one's free choice. According to the Nyssen's interpretation, the birth of Moses is a symbol that marks a moment in one's life when the soul chooses the path of virtue over vice (*LM II:3*). He warns that there are many Christians who give themselves to the wish of the tyrant (devil represented by Pharaoh) and kill the virtuous life in them drowning it in the turbulent and passionate life of the world, represented by the Nile (*LM II:6*). But a life that is well protected by Christian education, symbolized by the ark in which child Moses was placed on the waters of the Nile, withstands the attractions of sinful life (*LM II:7*). The world, in reaction, may reckon such a life as a useless burden and exclude it from the mainstream as child Moses was washed to the side of the Nile (*LM II:8-9*). Now, Gregory observes that as the cry of the child attracted the attention of the Pharaoh's daughter, a Christian's austere life will not go unnoticed, and its beauty will lead to his secure life in a secular society with those who love wisdom. For Gregory, the daughter of Pharaoh is a symbol of secular pagan philosophy (*LM II:10*). But life in a secular society does not deprive Moses of his mother's milk (*Ex 2:9*). What the Nyssen wants to point out is that Christians are not to separate themselves from the teachings of the Church when they are in a secular world (*LM II:12*). The secular society always tries to have its control over the Church. When there arises a clash between the values of the Church and that of the secular world, a Christian, like Moses who sided with the Hebrew who was fighting against the Egyptian (*Ex 2:11*), should join the Church for her victory. Moses' fleeing from Egypt can be understood as a Christian's feeling of disenchantment with the ways of the world. This often happens in one's life before one receives the special call of God. The call to the consecrated life may be extended to those who, like Moses, co-operate with the grace that is at work in them from the moment of their birth.

lay states of life to a special calling of the Lord to imitate more closely the very life of the Lord.²⁵³ The vocation to this state of life is a call from within the Church, i.e., Church life precedes and follows one's entry into this life of perfection. The first theophany is a prime example of how Gregory sees someone imitate Moses while being a follower of Jesus Christ. The imitation of the very life of Christ, before anything else, calls for a shedding of the 'garments of skin,' fleshly life, that was attached to the human nature after the fall. According to the Nyssen, the burning bush stands for Christ whose divinity shines through his humanity divinizing it. The removal of the 'sandals,' which symbolize the 'garments of skin,' is the pre-condition to participate in the life of Christ, i.e., "to stand within the rays of the true light" (LM II:22). For Gregory, the removal of the garments of skin (fleshly life) leads to the restoration of the true human nature; man, once again, stands before God with his dynamic vocation to participate more and more of God and grow in Divine likeness.

In the beginning, the nature of man, as the image of God, reflected the virginity of God himself who is absolute purity and source of all purity. Only in a state of purity is man able to participate in God. In the theophany of the burning bush, Christ reveals who man is, besides revealing the truth about God and creation as we saw in the first chapter: a true man is the one who participates in God and reflects God's glory in the world. By uniting oneself with Christ's 'pure' humanity that is united to Divinity, one can be transposed to the original state of Paradisical life, again with the dynamic vocation of continuous participation in God. Virginity as purity heralds the resurrected state in which the spiritual ascender can participate here and now. Thus, virginity constitutes the first stage of man's return to Paradise, and it implies the chastity of the body and the soul, i.e., being pure in all the aspects of life. In this chapter we will see how consecrated chastity works as the foundation of the ascent to Christian perfection through the Christification of one's biological being, and based on the teachings of Gregory, we will explain how its trinitarian, sacramental, virtue and ministerial dimensions contribute to one's own and the world's divinizing transformation.

²⁵³ VC 60. The document states that the consecrated life by its very nature is neither lay nor clerical; cf. J. KOONAMPARAMPIL, "Consecrated Life in the Two Codes of the Church", in *Commentarium pro Religiosis et Missionariis*, 102 (2021), 11.

2.1 Chastity as Purity

The word chastity (from Latin *castus*, pure) speaks of being free from all that makes dirty.²⁵⁴ Chastity, the most ancient of Christian vows, in its origin does not belong to Christianity. Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006), an American scholar of Christianity, observes that the world early Christianity entered was experiencing a series of vigorous movements dedicated to the denial of the claims of the physical life and to the cultivation of the disciplines of self-restraint in relation to food, drink, bodily comfort and above all sexuality.²⁵⁵ The Greek world was in favour of the philosophic life, and it identified the philosopher as the one who abstained from seeking ephemeral worldly goods and pleasures through the cultivation of self-restraint and strength of soul. The aim of the philosophic life is the emancipation from the world of shadows and lies into the world of truth.²⁵⁶ In the ancient Rome, the vestal virgins (priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the ‘hearth’) were obliged to preserve their virginity for the duration of their service, and they were subjected to entombment alive, if they violated their commitment to virginity. The Nazarites in Judaism were a group who bound themselves by sacred vows to live in self-denial, “to separate themselves unto the Lord” (Num 6:2). Philo of Alexandria (c.20 BC-c.40 AD) gives us information about a group, in Hellenistic Judaism, called ‘Therapeutae’ – men and women who lived in a monastic community in the Egyptian desert near Alexandria with a passion for wisdom, disregarding pleasures connected with body.²⁵⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan opines that even though there were striking similarities between this community of Therapeutae in Hellenistic Judaism and early Christian monasticism, the apologists for Christian asceticism fixed the Virgin Mary as a model of the life of virginity and self-denial.²⁵⁸ Mary is Virgin and Mother.

²⁵⁴ K. WOJTYLA, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. G. Ignatik, 128.

²⁵⁵ J. PELIKAN, *Mary through the Centuries*, 114.

²⁵⁶ A. MEREDIT, *The Cappadocians*, 72; cf. SS 6. Pope Benedict XVI notes that on ancient Christian sarcophagi the figure of Christ was interpreted also by the image of the philosopher. The ancients did not see philosophy a difficult academic discipline, as it is today. Rather, the philosopher was someone who knew how to teach the essential art: the art of being authentically human – the art of living and dying. Christ is the true philosopher. Both educated and simple people found him as a philosopher. He tells us who man truly is and what a man must do to be truly human.

²⁵⁷ PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, *On the Contemplative Life*, (4C:68), trans. J. E. Taylor, 85. The Therapeutae were different from the Essenes. The Essenes were mainly a male celibate group, living communally. The married Essene men did not live differently to those that were entirely celibate, but only married in order to ensure they had physical offspring. The Essene women were therefore not celibate and were expected to be mothers.

²⁵⁸ J. PELIKAN, *Mary through the Centuries*, 116; cf. VC 28. Here Mary is depicted as a perfect model for the religious to imitate.

In his homily *On the Nativity of Christ*, Gregory explains the mystery of the Virgin who became a mother, and yet remained a virgin:

God crosses over into human life, not by boat or by chariot, but through the incorruption of a Virgin. ... The Virgin becomes a mother, and yet remains a virgin. You see the innovation in nature. Among other women, as long as one is a virgin, she is not a mother. But when she becomes a mother, she no longer possesses virginity. But in this case the two names coincide. For the same woman is both a mother and a virgin; and neither did her virginity prevent her childbirth nor did her maternity annul her virginity.²⁵⁹

Mary conceived in her virginity, gave birth to Christ as a virgin and remained a virgin after the birth of her Son. The Virgin Mary is the crown and culmination of the Old Testament sanctity or purity; the greatest of the righteous men and women of the Old Covenant, and the supreme offering made by human race to God.²⁶⁰ In Mary human race offers its purity in response to God's grace and gives birth to God in the concrete history. The consecrated life in Christianity has as its goal from the very beginning "to give birth to Christ in one's own virgin body."

In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen sees in the theophany of the burning bush and in the miracle of manna the mystery of the Virgin besides that of the Incarnation. The burning bush, the bush that was not consumed by the fire, is a symbol of Mary in the sense that the divinity which through birth shone from her did not consume her virginity²⁶¹ (LM II: 21). Manna, the bread from

²⁵⁹ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Nativity of the Saviour*, in B. E. DUNLOP (trans.), *Earliest Greek Patristic Orations on the Nativity: A Study Including Translations*, 155, 162.

²⁶⁰ Cf. K. WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, 102-103. According to Eastern theology at every point the soul works together with God. Eastern theologians do not accept the Western teaching that Mary responded to God in her obedience because God had already prepared her in grace (the dogma of the 'Immaculate Conception'). The Western notion is based on St Augustine's doctrine of grace, according to which the soul does not work with God so much as simply responds to his prevenient action. Regarding Mary's antepartum holiness, Gregory upholds the traditional belief that she was consecrated to God by her parents and was brought to the Temple as a child. The priests brought up the girl in the same way as Samuel in the holy precincts (cf. *On the Nativity of the Saviour*, 166-167).

²⁶¹ Gregory appears to be the first to connect the burning bush with the virginity of Mary postpartum. In *On the Nativity of the Saviour*, the Nyssen notes that in Moses' words, "I will pass over and see this great sight" (Ex 3:2) the 'passing over' does not indicate a local movement, but the passage of time in which the truth will clearly be revealed in the mystery of the Virgin. The burning bush prefigures the God-bearing body of the Virgin: cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Nativity of the Saviour*, 163.

heaven, points to her in the sense that “the earth which remained uncultivated and unchanged” – Mary’s virgin body – was found full of this “divine food” – Christ (LM II: 139). What the Nyssen wants to communicate is that God became man through a virgin birth in order to demonstrate the great mystery of purity through which one can spiritually give birth to Christ in one’s soul:

Purity alone is sufficient for receiving the presence and entrance of God, a purity that cannot be otherwise achieved fully, unless one alienates himself entirely from the passions of the flesh. For what happened corporeally in the case of the immaculate Mary, when the fullness of the divinity shone forth in Christ through her virginity, takes place also in every soul spiritually giving birth to Christ, although the Lord no longer effects a bodily presence.²⁶²

In his letter *To Eustathia and Ambrosia and Basilissa*, Gregory employs the ancient Alexandrine epithet of Mary as the *Theotokos*, the ‘God-bearer.’²⁶³ Gregory ascribes to Mary the ‘vow’ of virginity as her personal consecration to God from the fact that when the angel brings the glad tidings of childbearing, Mary is concerned with her virginity:

For if she had been taken in marriage by Joseph, how would she have been surprised by him who announced that she was to bear a child, for in that case she would surely have expected to become a mother according to the law of nature? “Since it behoved me to preserve inviolate, as a holy offering, the flesh that I have consecrated to God, for this reason,” she says, “although you are an angel, although you have come from heaven, and although this phenomenon surpasses human nature, it is nonetheless impossible for me to know a man. How am I to be a mother without a man? For I know Joseph as my betrothed, but do not know him as a husband.”²⁶⁴

According to the Nyssen, Mary loved virginity so much so that she did not intend to depart from her desire to remain a virgin when the angel proclaimed the glad tidings of the birth of Christ, but asked the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Lk 1:34). Mary consecrated her body to God and kept

²⁶² *Virg*, 11.

²⁶³ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *To Eustathia and Ambrosia and Basilissa*, in A. M. SILVAS (trans.), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters*, 131.

²⁶⁴ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Nativity of the Saviour*, 168. According to L. Gambero, an expert in patristic Mariology, Gregory of Nyssa would be the first author to propose that Mary took a vow of virginity: cf. L. GAMBERO, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. T. Buffer, 157.

it inviolate. She is ever-virgin because it is an absolute sacrilege for a person to be master of something consecrated to God. Joseph guarded the sacred treasure of Mary's purity.

Every soul that maintains its original purity, like the Virgin Mary, is able to become mother of Christ. One receives in oneself with one's 'pure soul' the food (Christ) which comes down from above (LM II:138). Gregory sees virginity as the foundation for the life wholly devoted to God – "Let there be built upon this foundation all the products of virtue."²⁶⁵ Considering virginity as the foundation recalls the prelapsarian state of man created in the image of God. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen specifies that the purity of the soul makes the soul a mirror that can reflect the image of God when it is placed facing God in a participating way (LM II:47). He teaches that when one approaches God, one should be pure also in all the "outward pursuits of life" (LM II:155), that is, pure in both body and soul. Purity of life gives wings to the ascent as it liberates one from the "heavy and fleshy garment of life and makes all the pursuits of life as thin as the thread of spider web" (LM II:191). Moreover, the prayer that ascends to God's hearing is not the cry made with the organs of speech but the meditation sent up from a 'pure' conscience (LM II:118).

For Gregory, the beauty of virginity (of both the body and the soul) lies in the fact that it somehow goes against the innate inclination of man in the direction of marriage.²⁶⁶ Therefore, it is a special grace, a special vocation. The virginity of the body and the soul is called 'true virginity' by him: "Achieving it is not as simple as one might think, nor is it confined to the body; it pertains to all things and extends even to thought which is considered one of the achievements of the soul."²⁶⁷ Every sin, for Gregory, means lack of holiness and purity, and thus implies the loss of virginity. When he proposes models who can show the way to attain 'true virginity,' he immediately refers to the 'unmarried or celibate saints' – notably and specifically his brother Basil.²⁶⁸ The significance of true virginity is that, like the Virgin Mary, it puts desire for God above all else. Christ is the unique way to human perfection for every man and woman including Mary.²⁶⁹ The

²⁶⁵ *Virg*, 56.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶⁹ We can say that in the Old Testament period God called humankind, as is evident in the case of Moses, to look forward to the Incarnation of the Lord and live a life of perfection in virtues, and in the New Testament God calls everyone to participate in the Incarnate Lord and attain human perfection.

Virgin Mary, as the disciple of Christ (the Word), willingly put herself at the service of God's plan by the total gift of self.

The uniqueness of the evangelical counsel of 'perfect chastity' lies in the mystery of Christ. Through it one, like the Virgin Mary, participates in Christ and in his mission making oneself an image of him in order that the world can hear, see with its eyes, look at and touch with hands (1Jn 1:1) the humanity of Christ as an invitation to conversion. Virginité divinizes those who participate in its pure mysteries for they participate in God's purity and commune with his glory.²⁷⁰ According to *Vita Consecrata* chastity (of celibates and virgins) is the first and essential of the evangelical counsels (VC 14). Purity helps consecrated men and women love God with an undivided heart.

2.1.1 Purification

The Nyssen presents purification as the first thing Christ asks us to do in order that we may be able to participate in him. Purification is the experience of divine love drawing the soul to itself, and it is painful as the soul is to be severed from its passionate attachments.²⁷¹ Moses' life with "the sandaled feet" or "the dead and earthly covering of skin" (LM II:22) stands for a life that has mistaken 'the garments of skin' for the true nature of man. It is a fleshly or biological life that, like a heavy stone, is gravitated toward earthly life with passionate attachments. The Nyssen makes a distinction between corporeal or material life and incorporeal or spiritual life. The former is a life of descent while the latter is one of ascent: "Bodies, once having received an initial thrust downward, continue in that direction, whereas the soul, incorporeal and airy, once it is released from its earthly attachments, rises upward toward God" (LM II:224).

It is Jesus Christ – 'true' God and 'true' Man – who reveals the true nature of man. A true man is the one who is in union with God.²⁷² For the Nyssen, purification means liberating oneself from the darkness of error in order to participate in Christ who reveals the truth about God and man. A life

²⁷⁰ *Virg*, 9.

²⁷¹ *SRe*, 241.

²⁷² Cf. P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 42. Nellas explains, "For man God is not an external principle on which man depends, but truly and in reality, his ontological origin and consummation. Having been made in the image of God, man has a theological structure. And to be a true man he must at every moment exist and live theocentrically. When he denies God, he denies himself and destroys himself."

attached to earthly life is the result of ignorance of the truth revealed in Christ. The postlapsarian state does not devoid man of the image of God because “it is ever present in each individual, unknown and forgotten when one is chocked by the cares and pleasures of life, but discovered again when one turns one’s attention back to it.”²⁷³ The human effort in purification consists in “the removal of the filth which has accumulated through evil and the bringing to light again the beauty in the soul which we had covered over.”²⁷⁴ Therefore, through purification one is to get rid of from oneself those obstacles that alienates one from ‘faith in’ and ‘imitation of’ Jesus Christ.

In the first chapter, we saw that, for Gregory, the ‘garments of skin’ – passions, sexuality, mortality etc. – that were attached to man’s true nature after the fall are, indeed, a blessing in disguise. This second nature makes him fit not only for earthly life, i.e., to survive, but also for salvation, i.e., to realize its original goal in Christ. In this sense, the garments of skin introduce a new potentiality which God gives to man.²⁷⁵ By using this second nature correctly man can imitate or participate in the human nature of Christ, i.e., man is called to purify himself and consider Christ as the ultimate goal of all his endeavours. In Christ – the God-Man – the garments of skin became a channel for God’s glory to shine forth. Christ’s resurrection shows that by death is put to death not man but ‘the corruption’ (the second nature) which clothes man. Purification on earth does not lead to the elimination of the garments of skin, but spiritualizes it through the imitation of Christ and the life of sacraments. Man’s goal is to make the resurrected body of Christ his/her own. Therefore, purification is an assimilation to Christ.

We have to also keep in mind that the three stages of the ascent in *The Life of Moses* are not strictly exclusive of one another. Therefore, as the great French patristic scholar Jean Danielou notes, though each stage has its dominant trait, the trait may also be found to some extent in the others: the first stage is characterised by purification, but this remains as well in the other two stages; the second stage is characterised by illumination (knowledge), but this had already begun in the first stage and, of course, continues in the third.²⁷⁶ For Gregory, purification is not only a continuous process but also a long and painful process. But, choosing it proves the free exercise of human freedom and, therefore, the life according to virtue. In his fourth homily on

²⁷³ *Virg*, 44. Gregory interprets Lk 17:21 – “the kingdom of God is within you” – as the hidden presence of the image of God in man.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁷⁵ Cf. P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 63.

²⁷⁶ J. DANIELOU, *From Glory to Glory*, 24.

the *Song of Songs*, he likens regaining the image of God through purification to a work that takes place in a goldsmith's workshop:

People who know how to clean gold – if its glowing beauty has been obscured by the treacherous admixture of some base material – get rid of the bad colouring by smelting it down in fire. They do this repeatedly, moreover, and watch closely each time to observe the extent to which the gold has become fairer in the later smeltings as against the first, and they do not stop purifying the metal with fire until the very look of the gold bears witness for itself that it is pure and unadulterated.²⁷⁷

Continuous purification to what is better is the soul's way to perfection. He knows that the closer the soul comes to God, the more it is aware of its sinfulness and the necessity for purification: "The ascent to the Divine shows that even after the former stripping, the soul finds something on her to be taken off."²⁷⁸ The Nyssen speaks of purification not only during this life, but also beyond death. In *The Life of Moses*, the "fire in Gehenna which touches only those who imitate the Egyptians in their manner of life" (LM II: 83) is a purifying fire, and this purifying fire is even offered to the devil.²⁷⁹ The

²⁷⁷ *HSong*, (Homily 4), 111.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, (Homily 12), 381.

²⁷⁹ *COR*, (XXVI), 932. It is because the Nyssen believes in *apocatastasis* or universal salvation. The benefit of Incarnation is extended to all, including the devil. According to the Nyssen, none of those who have come into being thanks to God will fall outside God's kingdom. This will happen once all intellectual souls of all rational creatures have 'voluntarily' rejected sin entirely, and evil has definitely vanished. Purification is not a punishment, but God's saving will. Through purification God attracts the soul to himself because if the soul is pure it ascends to God without impediments. Restoration of the soul can be achieved only through purification. Some are purified from evil during the present life and others will have been purified by means of the hell fire. In *LM II*: 82, the return of light after the three days of darkness over Egypt is interpreted as the final restoration which is expected to take place later in the kingdom of heaven of those who have suffered condemnation in Gehenna. In the mind of Gregory, hell is not a place, but a state of life, an invisible and incorporeal state in which the soul resides (cf. *SRe*, 235). In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man in the hell fire is placed in direct opposition to Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. Gregory sees Lazarus as the soul purified of all fleshly aspects of life and the rich man as the soul that requires a second death (cf. Rev 21:8) to be purified of all carnal inclinations because even after death he clings to the carnal aspect of life. The second death is a state of purgation through which the sinful soul is released from the bondage to passions (cf. *SRe*, 235-236). Orthodox theologian Lossky identifies the purifying fire with the deifying fire of the Spirit and says, "The deifying fire of the Spirit will be an intolerable external flame to all those whose will is opposed to God because those who understand that they have sinned against love undergo greater suffering than those produced by the most fearful tortures" (V. LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 234).

physical death of the non-deified does not imply annihilation but rather a state of radical separation or alienation from God. It is the freewill, that man never loses, that enables man to make a return to God having gone through the fire of purification.

In the spiritual tradition of the Greek East, purification comes under “praxis” – ‘work of salvation.’ Praxis usually refers to transformative practice.²⁸⁰ The monks were convinced that the spiritual life is laborious: it is necessary to take great pains and without pains one cannot come to God.²⁸¹ In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen assimilates the inedible hard rind of the pomegranate to the painful austere discipline (*paideia*) that a Christian should have, and the neatly ordered and sweet inside part of the fruit to the hidden beauty (virtue) of the Christians that would be revealed by God (LM II: 193). Christian *paideia* is different from secular *paideia* in the sense that while the latter “is always in labour but never gives birth” (LM II:11) to God’s justice (righteousness), Christian *paideia* always seeks God’s justice, i.e., what God wills, and forms a life according to virtues – a life according to Christ.²⁸² Discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb 12:11). According to Gregory, the freewill must undergo great pain to give birth to virtues (LM II:5). Praxis is negative when it is aimed at ‘overcoming obstacles’ (purification) and it is positive when it is directed at cultivating virtues.

Gregory begins *The Life of Moses* comparing the life of perfection to a ‘horse race’ (LM I:1). It points to the toil and effort that the Christian must put in. Moses who purified himself after the theophany of the burning bush is depicted as the one who has developed as an “athlete” (Greek, *agonizomenos*, “he who contends with an adversary”) by strenuous practice under his trainer (LM II:36).²⁸³ The Nyssen devotes the last chapter of his treatise *On Virginit*y to emphasize the need of those who aspire virginity to learn the rules of this state from a good guide and trainer “lest, on account of their ignorance, they

²⁸⁰ D. B. FORRESTER, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology*, 7.

²⁸¹ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 177.

²⁸² *HBeat*, (Homily IV), 47-56. Unlike the Christian *paideia* that is externally austere but internally beautiful, the secular *paideia* is externally charming but internally repulsive.

²⁸³ Gregory describes his sister Macrina as an ‘undefeated athlete’ who in no way was overcome by the onslaught of misfortunes: cf. *LSM*, 173; cf. Col 1:28-29, “It is he (Christ) whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, ... For this I toil and ‘struggle’ (*agonizomenos*) with all the energy ...” According to Gregory, the purity necessitates an ongoing struggle (athletic contest) against the flesh and the devil.

enter upon trackless places and wander away from the straight road.”²⁸⁴ In the Apostolic Fathers and the second century apologists, the Christian was called an athlete because an athlete must train hard freeing himself or herself from each defect, and so must the disciple of Christ be; and an athlete must be totally dedicated to his/her sport, and so must the Christian be totally and wholeheartedly devoted to Christ and the Gospel. For Gregory, in order to lead a life of chastity one has to undergo athletic training. He describes Joseph as “an athlete experienced in chastity for fleeing from the Egyptian mistress (Gen 39: 12) and resisting her guiles.”²⁸⁵ Man has to make daily progress in this virtue of chastity until he reaches maturity in it.

The consecrated life is a way of life that requires athletic endeavour, i.e., daily discipline and intentionality in bodily behaviours. Celibate chastity is a virtue in continuous growth, and it requires continuous purification. Consecrated men and women receive this virtue as a gift from God and make daily progress until they reach maturity in it. The purification that leads to perfect purity or perfect chastity does not take place once and for all on the day of profession. “Canonically, one becomes a vowed chaste on one’s day of profession. Psychologically, one becomes chaste by being chaste – for days, months and years,”²⁸⁶ observes Maranan. The life of vows asks from consecrated persons praxis – both negative and positive. As noted in the first chapter, when the Nyssen speaks of human toils (praxis), he is not thinking of autonomous human acts because grace is present in man from the moment of his/her birth. Only with the assistance of God’s grace can one attain to virginity.²⁸⁷ What God seeks of human beings is his own image in themselves. The vow of chastity aims at the regaining of the image of God through praxis assisted by grace.

²⁸⁴ *Virg*, 70.

²⁸⁵ R. A. CADENHEAD, *The Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa’s Ascetical Theology*, 77.

²⁸⁶ T. H. MARANAN, “Chastity: The Vow to Love”, in *Religious Life Asia*, 4/4 (2002), 62.

²⁸⁷ *Virg*, 9; cf. JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. C. Luibheid – N. Russell, 173. The author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, John Climacus, expresses this truth succinctly: “The truth is that unless the Lord overturns the house of the flesh and builds the house of the soul, the man wishing to overcome it has watched and fasted for nothing. Offer up to the Lord the weakness of your nature. Admit your incapacity and, without your knowing it, you will win for yourself the gift of chastity.”

2.1.1.1 Purification of Passions

According to the Nyssen, passion (Greek, *pathos*) is a deceased condition of the will (Greek, *thelema*),²⁸⁸ and it leads to sin: “The producer of evil gives birth to lust before adultery and anger before murder” (LM II:94). Therefore, one can be purified from sin by exterminating ‘the first beginning of evil’ – passion. The killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians, in *The Life of Moses*, stands for the elimination of the first beginning of evil and along with it the offspring which follow (LM II:92-94). The Nyssen notes that the devil – inventor of evil – throws out pleasure, especially licentious pleasure, lightly as a bait and draws the gluttonous souls to the fishhook of destruction (LM II:297). He regards the sin of a ‘bride of Christ’ (the soul) as a spiritual adultery with the enemies of Christ.²⁸⁹ Every sin, for Gregory, means lack of holiness and purity and thus implies the loss of virginity. Passion is the opposite of virtue that has moderation as its characteristic. He defines moderation as the well-ordered economy of all the movements of the soul with wisdom and prudence.²⁹⁰ In the first chapter, we saw Gregory’s notion of virtue as a ‘royal way’ or middle road between two precipices or evils. Passion is a deviation from the middle road of virtue to the chasm on either side. It is an unreasonable affection or senseless hate for a person or a thing.²⁹¹ Gregory presents a passionate man as the one who does not like to have God in his knowledge (LM II:75). In other words, a passionate person is the one who fails to participate in God. Adam, who was created in the image of God, was in an ‘unimpassioned state’ (i.e., not filled with passion or without excess of any kind) and so was able to participate in God who is absolutely unimpassioned, because ‘like attracts like.’

The Cappadocian argues that passions are not consubstantial with human nature;²⁹² they are accidental of origin. Passions (i.e., irrational animal nature) were added to the original human nature (i.e., rational nature reflecting God’s image) after the fall as the appetitive and irascible (spirited) movements of the soul. As we have already seen, God’s intention was that man using his reason to control passions would make his return to God in

²⁸⁸ *CE III*, (VI: 29), 128.

²⁸⁹ *CML*, 138; cf. *HSong*, (Homily 2), 53. When Gregory comments on the bride’s words “I am dark and beautiful”, he calls Paul ‘the bride of Christ’ who was dark and later became bright. Paul was dark because he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence (1 Tim 1:13). Christ came into the world, to save the sinners (1 Tim 1:15), to make dark ones bright, calling the sinners to repentance (Lk 5:32).

²⁹⁰ *Virg*, 58.

²⁹¹ T. SPIDLIK, *Spirituality of the Christian East*, 240.

²⁹² *SRe*, 266.

freedom.²⁹³ To allow our passions to rule is to abdicate our responsibility as human beings.²⁹⁴ The Nyssen notes that Christ was devoid of passions because “he was in all points tempted like as we are yet without sin” (cf. Heb 4:15).²⁹⁵ More clarification will be given on this point, when we deal with *apatheia*.

Gregory ascribes the name passion only to that which is opposed to the virtuous unimpassioned state. Chastity as a virtue can be treated a mean between the extremes of licentiousness (deficiency of chastity) and insensibility (excess of chastity). Chastity is temperance (Greek, *sophrosyne*) or moderation for Gregory in *On Virginit*.²⁹⁶ Temperance/moderation is essentially self-control (Greek, *enkrateia*). Gregory uses the term *enkrateia* (self-control) in *The Life of Moses* synonymous with chastity (LM II:274, 286). Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215) had already defined self-restraint as that quality which does not overstep what appears in accordance with right reason.²⁹⁷ In the absence of chastity – moderation/self-control – one may give oneself up without restraint to pleasures like a libertine and another one may condemn marriage as if it were adultery (LM II:289). The fight of the Egyptian against the Hebrew (Ex 2:11) is likened to the fight of licentiousness against self-control (LM II:14). In his work *On Virginit*, self-control appears as a strong wall against passions: “It is necessary for a person to separate himself from pleasures with a large and strong partition (wall), so that the purity of the heart will, in no way, be defiled by coming near them. A safe protective wall is the complete estrangement from everything involving passion.”²⁹⁸ God remains exterior in the proportion that the passions are interior.²⁹⁹ The walls around the monasteries and the houses of consecrated men and women are more symbolic than protective: they proclaim the estrangement of those within from worldly passions (cf. Prov 25:28); the seclusion of the religious is not from their neighbour, but from the distractions of the world.

²⁹³ The Nyssen finds the difference between a life of passions and a life of reason from the fact that in the same place when the Egyptians were affected by the plagues, the Hebrews were not because they did not choose to follow the passions (LM II:66). Each man brings plagues on his soul by his own free choices that reveal his alienation from God.

²⁹⁴ P. PEARSON, *Spiritual Direction from Dante: Avoiding the Inferno*, 65.

²⁹⁵ *CE III*, (I:93), 61.

²⁹⁶ *Virg*, 32.

²⁹⁷ CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Stromata*, 599.

²⁹⁸ *Virg*, 65.

²⁹⁹ P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Struggle with God*, 102.

Purity (chastity) is a pre-condition to approach God, and it is self-control that makes it possible. Both carnal indulgence and excessive mortification are opposed to the soul's attaining perfection. The Nyssen presents the goal of self-control as "not to concentrate on the suffering of the body but on the efficient working of the instruments of the soul."³⁰⁰ It is because the goal of the consecrated life is to free the mind to turn toward God, not focusing it back downward. In religious life, asceticism (Greek, *askesis*) is a means, not an end. Those who glory in grand and dangerous mortification may miss the point of their consecration.

According to Gregory, passions are to be purified through the ascetical disciplining of the garments of skin or 'biological life' which is man's animal nature. In *The Life of Moses*, he pays attention to the fact that the Church is especially beautified by the ascetic way of life (LM II:187). The term asceticism derives from the Greek word *askeo* (to exercise/struggle). St Paul writes, "I do my best (*askeo*) always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people" (Acts 24:16). In the Eastern tradition, asceticism means the commitment to live as one decides and chooses, and to follow one's ideals.³⁰¹ This way of life does not imply a negative withdrawal from society and a denial of the good things of life. Instead, it is a positive commitment to a set of ideals, and describes the process of shaping life to conform to these.³⁰² In monasticism, asceticism upholds the interior combat (struggle) necessary in order that the spiritual acquire a mastery over the material.³⁰³ Perfect Christians are the "soldiers of virtue" (LM II:147) and they struggle against sin in their entire lives. This nature of Christian life is well presented by John Climacus when he says, "The place of temptation is the place where we find ourselves having to put up a bitter fight against the enemy, and wherever we are not involved in a struggle is surely the place where the enemy is posing as a friend."³⁰⁴ The goal of asceticism is a life of virtues and union with God. Its content is positive, not negative: it characterizes not selfishness and escape, but service and reconciliation.

³⁰⁰ *Virg*, 68. According to Gregory the body is the instrument of the soul.

³⁰¹ J. BINNS, *The T&T Clark History of Monasticism: The Eastern Tradition*, 24.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 24; cf. J. CHRYSOAVGIS, "The Spiritual Way", in M. B. CUNNINGHAM – E. THEOKRITOFF (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 160. According to Orthodox theologian Chrysavgis the ascetic is the person who is free, uncontrolled by attitudes that abuse the world; uncompelled by ways that use the world; characterised by self-control, by self-restraint, and by the ability to say 'no' or 'enough'.

³⁰³ P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Struggle with God*, 135.

³⁰⁴ JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 180.

For Gregory, the virgins are not ‘solitary beings’ (anchorites). He condemns as “sloths” those virgins who consider a zeal for deeds harmful to their soul and like to eat without working; as “dreamers” those virgins who consider their fantasies as revelations; and as “unsociable brutes” those virgins who stay in their own houses considering being unsociable a virtue.³⁰⁵ In *The Life of Moses*, he presents Moses as a perfect ascetic, but who lives among men. This Moses foreshadows Christ, who is not only the most perfect ascetic but the perfect sign of God’s love for the world. Passions are to be purified through the imitation of Christ. Therefore, it is a common vocation for all. “Without asceticism, none of us is authentically human,”³⁰⁶ says Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware. Gregory avows that Christ would never command what is impossible. If chastity is impossible, a virgin would be a fish out of water. What is commanded is moderation (in one’s state of life), not all-round passionlessness.³⁰⁷ The one who feels desire in one circumstance or other is not to be condemned, but the one who deliberately attracts passion. Consecrated men and women are called to live their perfect chastity imitating Christ, i.e., being in love and communion with God with an undivided heart, and with people in unconditional selflessness. *Vita Consecrata* exhorts consecrated persons to practice both personal and communal asceticism which protects them against the temptation to “self-centredness and sensuality” (VC103).

In the light what we have just said, we can understand that when Gregory speaks about the elimination of passions, he does not take the passions for the bodily inclinations as such, for these will not be removed until death. For the Nyssen, passions are the ‘perversion’ of these bodily inclinations.³⁰⁸ Instincts and emotions are not necessarily sinful at all. When allied with God and human reason, they become virtues.³⁰⁹ The source of

³⁰⁵ *Virg*, 71.

³⁰⁶ K. WARE, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?”, in V. L. WIMBUSH – R. VALANTASIS (eds.), *Asceticism*, 13.

³⁰⁷ *HBeat*, (Homily II), 36.

³⁰⁸ J. DANIELAEU, *From Glory to Glory*, 23; cf. *SRe*, 222. According to Gregory, if passions were evil, the Creator would have been the cause of evil. The irrational faculties of the soul exist because of the need to choose good or evil. When reason controls these faculties, man becomes the ruler over all irrational things. None of the faculties within us is activated towards the service of evil – fear engenders obedience, anger courage, cowardice caution; the desiring faculty fosters in us the divine pleasures.

³⁰⁹ N. V. HARRISON, “The Human Person as Image and Likeness of God”, in M. B. CUNNINGHAM – E. THEOKRITOFF (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 84.

passions is God; passions, then, must be redirected or transfigured.³¹⁰ They are granted by God with a sacred purpose: namely, to reveal one's passionate love for God and virtuous deeds. In his book on vows from the perspective of monastic tradition, Thomas Merton opines that since the passions are given by God, the purpose of vows is not to crush and exterminate the passions, but to bring them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we are able to love God with our whole heart.³¹¹

Consecrated men and women are called to spiritualize the life of their body through the control of passions. The Gospels shed light on the operation of passion in the human nature of Christ who reveals the unimpassioned God whose energies are always a force for good: his love for his disciples; his tears at the tomb of Lazarus and over Jerusalem; his anger with the money changers and Pharisees; his indignation with pettiness and selfishness in the disciples, etc. Imitating Jesus, uncontrolled rage must be turned into righteous indignation, spiteful jealousy into zeal for the truth, sexual lust into love that is pure in its fervour. The passions, then, are to be purified, not killed; to be educated, not eradicated; to be used positively, not negatively; to be transfigured, not suppressed.³¹² Passions can also be purified through an authentic Church life: through prayer, through the regular use of the sacraments of Confession and Communion, through daily reading of Scripture, through feeding our mind with the thought of what is good, through practical acts of loving service to others etc.

In the Greek philosophical world, there existed a duality between passion and reason.³¹³ The dominant philosophical tradition looked askance at the passionate element in life considering it incompatible with the philosophical way of rational life. The Nyssen points out that Christianity overcomes the duality between passion and reason. For him, Christians are those who participate in Christ. When the passionate instincts and emotions are turned toward God/Christ, they become virtues. Man, who was created by God like God and for God,³¹⁴ is to make this ascent using his freedom of will. According to Gregory, with a man of uncontrolled passion virginity is like a

³¹⁰ J. CHRYSSAVGIS, "The Spiritual Way", 156.

³¹¹ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 160.

³¹² K. WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, 155.

³¹³ D. B. FORRESTER, *Truthful Action*, 10. The God of the great philosophers is absolutely free of passions. There is nothing that could provoke him because he is utterly disinterested in the world, take no interest in human affairs, and is immune from suffering and other emotions. The ideal of the philosophic life is to imitate God.

³¹⁴ A. MEREDITH, *The Cappadocians*, 56.

golden ring in the swine's snout.³¹⁵ The rational part of the soul, like a master of the house, should control and use other faculties of the soul (appetitive and spirited faculties) for the purpose of beauty. In homily 9 on the *Song of Songs* he specifies that 'the bride of Christ' (the soul) is protected from the thief who comes to rob her of her 'treasure' (virtues) by her self-control. In order to possess self-control, the bride has to imitate the nature of a pomegranate tree that protects its sweet fruits from thieves by a hard exterior that is disagreeable to the senses. As he comments on Song 4:13 – *You are an orchard of pomegranates*, he writes,

The Word cultivates pomegranates in the hearts of those who have come to faith. Now the pomegranate is hard for a thief to take. It puts forth shoots that are full of thorns and both encases and nourishes its fruit within a husk that is harsh and bitter to the taste. ... we may learn from the text that, in this present life, we are not to make ourselves weak through laxity or softness but to prefer a form of life that has been rendered firm and severe by self-control. In this way, the fruit that is virtue can be inaccessible to thieves because it is secured from without by the harsh sheathing of self-control, and because by its stern and noble demeanour it lacerates, as though with sharp thorns, those who draw near with evil intent.³¹⁶

Gregory holds that the hard exterior of self-control (ascetic discipline that is disagreeable to senses) is protection for the virtuous soul. In *The Life of Moses*, pomegranates that adorn the priestly vestments (Ex 28:33-35) are compared to the outwardly austere and unpleasant philosophic life (LM II:193). The purification of passions cannot be disconnected from the purification of the flesh.

2.1.1.2 Purification of the Flesh

In Gregory, as we have already noted, the fleshly life of man signifies a life that has mistaken the garments of skin or biological life for the true nature and yields to the pleasures of the body. It is the non-rational life that is characterised by the passions. St Paul calls it "the old man" (Rom 6:6) "sold as a slave under sin" (Rom 7:14). According to Gregory, purification of the flesh is done through the mortification of the sinful flesh or through the ascetic

³¹⁵ *Virg*, 56.

³¹⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 9), 297-299.

way of life (LM II:187).³¹⁷ He wants Christians imitate Christ's saving passion or Christ's body. Mortification of the body was a basic principle in the lives of the monks of old who committed themselves to Christian perfection. Therefore, any spirituality devoid of this element is to be rejected by consecrated persons. Through mortification one shares in the sufferings of Jesus, and the flesh is humbled for the soul to ascent. That being the case, as Prosper Gueranger writes, "the thought of mortification should inspire consecrated persons to suffer without complaint, even joyfully and happily, those discomforts arising from bad weather, from coarse or badly-prepared food, uncomfortable quarters, illness and other minor complaints, or from the practice of the Constitutions."³¹⁸ In his apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis notes that in a world that constantly exalts sexuality, maintaining a healthy relationship with one's body and a serene affective life is not easy (CV 81). This uneasiness to live in chastity in the modern world proclaims the paramount importance of assimilating the perennial value of ascetic principles into the organism of the consecrated life.

True asceticism is an imitation of Christ who won over the enemies of the soul through fasting and prayer (Mt 4:1-11). Gregory of Nyssa is of the opinion that the Incarnation, the manifestation of God in the flesh, did not take place at the outset of creation, but only when the evil reached its zenith, i.e., when its grip on humankind became manifest in its entirety, lest any hidden evil remain unhealed.³¹⁹ Christ defeated evil, when evil had reached the zenith of its ferocity. Asceticism is the antidote to the victory of evil. Consecrated men and women can sabotage the claim of invincibility of the present sexual immorality and idolatry only through their imitation of and participation in Christ.

In the Eastern spiritual tradition, fasting and abstinence is advised as a means to purify the flesh "that includes everything which is opposed to the Holy Spirit."³²⁰ Ascetic fasting is directed, not against the body, but against

³¹⁷ Gregory interprets the "skin dyed red" and the "coverings made of hair" of the heavenly tabernacle (Ex 25:4-5) as denoting mortification and ascetic life. The "skin dyed red" stands for those persons who have become "*dead to sin or dead to animal life* (flaying is done when an animal is dead) and live in *chaste modesty* (*red dye* which is shining like a *bright and fragrant lily* – cf. *HSong*, Homily 5, 167)." The "woven hair," which produced a fabric rough and hard to touch, foreshadows the "self-control" which is rough and consumes the habitual passions.

³¹⁸ D. M. GUERANGER, *On the Religious Life*, 30.

³¹⁹ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Nativity of the Saviour*, 159; cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 37.

³²⁰ T. SPIDLIK, *Prayer*, 286.

the flesh. “Its aim is not destructively to weaken the body, but creatively to render the body more spiritual”³²¹ through the subduing of the flesh. Fasting and abstinence is an antidote to “gluttony that leads to the catastrophe of fornication.”³²² Gregory teaches that human being as a person is a unity of both the body and the soul, and both the body and the soul need protection against the harm caused by sin.³²³ According to the Cappadocian, ‘flesh and blood,’ not the body, was added to the human nature as a consequence of sin,³²⁴ and in the Incarnation, Christ reconstituted the flesh as spiritual because of his own participation with human beings in flesh and blood.³²⁵ Man can become a new creation in Christ.

For the Nyssen, the authentic Christian life is one which is Christ-like and therefore not conformed to the ways of the world. The person is not to be controlled by passions, but the other way round. In *The Life of Moses*, he writes that self-control works as a nail that holds the flesh to be crucified to the world (LM II:274; cf. Gal 6:14). Through moderation/self-control that avoids excess on either side one should mortify or put to death the deeds of the flesh, i.e., one’s passionate nature that belongs to worldly life. Worldly passions are unable to budge a self-controlled person. It is also a participation in Christ’s crucified body through ascetical practices: the inner treasure of virtue is hidden by the outward austere appearance. In Eastern monastic tradition, the concepts of ‘world’ and ‘flesh’ carry the moral meaning of what is in revolt against man’s true nature.³²⁶ Therefore, in comparison with an

³²¹ K. WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, 156.

³²² JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 169. According to John Climacus, the man who imagines he can conquer the demon of fornication by gluttony and by stuffing himself is quite like someone who quenches fire with oil.

³²³ His view of human person does not accord with the modern culture that has separated the body from the person saying that the body is not the person, but a ‘thing’ that the person possesses, and that he/she can use at will. The modern culture promotes individualism and undermines the spiritual and relational dimensions of the body and sexuality. We shall deal with the difference between person and individual in the third chapter.

³²⁴ *CE III*, (X:14), 222. Gregory of Nyssa takes his cue from St Paul’s distinction between *soma* (body, 1 Thess 5:23) and *sarx* (flesh, Gal 5:16-21). *Soma* simply refers to the body as distinguished from the soul, while *sarx* denotes the whole human being as oriented toward sin. According to Gregory, human bodily condition underwent change through the fall, i.e., ‘flesh and blood’ (garments of skin) was added to it. He does not see *soma* as an addition to human nature: *soma* (body) is not part of the divine nature per se, yet it is not an addition, nor is it shed in the resurrected life.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, (II:54), 82.

³²⁶ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 218. It should be noted that the terms world and flesh have two meanings each in the Bible. The term world stands for ‘all of God’s creation’ that is good (Gen 1:12; Lk 2:11) and ‘creation in rebellion against God’ (Jn 15:18-19). The term flesh also has these two meanings. In the positive sense it means man

athlete who exercises his body, a monk exercises his flesh. The flesh is always contrasted with the Spirit which gives the soul wings to ascend to God. In this regard, the Nyssen gives a spiritual interpretation to the circumcision of the Old Testament and says that a circumcised person symbolizes the chaste person who had rejected concerns for the body, i.e., the fleshly life that is foreign to the true nature of man (LM II:38).³²⁷ Christians amputate the passions of the soul without touching the body. For the Nyssen, now man's vocation is to make his flesh a channel for the divine light to shine through, as at the theophany of the burning bush "the Radiance shone through the thorny flesh" (LM II:26).

As we have already seen, Gregory does not underestimate the human body and sexuality for they are God's gifts to man out of his love. Nevertheless, they are not ends in themselves, but means to attain one's salvation through self-purification. *The Life of Moses* warns against the danger of sexual lust. He observes that sexual pleasures are the strongest of all the passions which afflict men's thinking (LM II:301). History gives us an account of those great warriors who prevailed over enemy's assault made with iron weapons in great battles but were conquered by women (LM II:298). Licentious pleasure is evil's bait to draw souls to the fishhook of destruction (LM II:297). It is hard to fight and difficult to overcome this pleasure (LM II:301). It makes men beasts and renders many, who are not conquered by weapons, subject to dishonour and public scorn (LM II:302). According to Gregory, a person who is a Christian by name but has not overcome his fleshly life is like a 'double-natured monster' (like those mythical creatures constructed by combining different animals) with a Christian facade and a bestial body.³²⁸ It is the lack of the mortification of the sinful flesh through self-control that turns a Christian into a 'monster Christian.' In the Old Testament, Joseph prevails over the wantonness of Potiphar's wife with the virtue of chastity, athletically maintained through his self-control. A person may feel the inner stirring of concupiscent desires, but

himself (Jn 1:14) and in the negative sense it is used in the same negative way as 'the world' (Rom 8:5-8). Flesh is not evil but considering the fleshy body as end in itself is evil.

³²⁷ Cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 44. In his 8th homily on the Beatitudes Gregory says that the circumcision explains the discarding of dead skins, which we put on when we were stripped of life after our disobedience. Consecrated persons are to keep in mind that to seek Christian perfection while pampering and cherishing the body above its needs is like the vain attempt to befriend a snake and carry it about in one's shirt.

³²⁸ *Perf*, 99; cf. LM II:70: According to Gregory, in the plague of frogs (Ex 8:1-4), the amphibious frog (that lives both on land and in water) symbolizes a person who is "a man by nature and becoming a beast by passion".

this is not the same as giving the will consent to follow those desires and treat the other person as a potential object of enjoyment. The virtue of chastity demands that these desires are to be subordinated to reason and the law of grace by striving wholeheartedly after what is noblest in human and Christian life.³²⁹ For Gregory, God provided man with the garments of skin as an aid to salvation, and man's enslavement to fleshly life is caused by the misuse of freedom.

As a remedy the Nyssen suggests that one should stay far away from the thing that enflames "licentious passions of the flesh" or "the disease of pleasure" (LM II:303):

Everyone readily recognizes the life of the profligate and the life of the pure man by what is valued in each one's household. In the house of the one there are frescoes on the wall which by their artful pictures inflame the sensual passions. ... But in the house of the prudent man there is every precaution and foresight to keep the eye pure from sensual spectacles (LM II:71).

A virtuous person does not prefer the pleasant to the useful. Gregory quotes Soloman to say that one should not walk upon hot coals with bare feet or hide fire in his bosom (Prov 6:27-29). He notes that the way Jesus proposed to overcome licentious pleasure is the custody of the eyes (Mt 5:28-29) and, according to the Cappadocian, this discipline of the eyes cuts off the very root of evil (LM II:304). Basil, the Nyssen's brother, in his *Rules* (18) presents continence as the mother of chastity.³³⁰ J. Cristo Rey makes clear how continence is different from incontinence and lust: "In continence there is fight, and despite everything it is won. In incontinence you fight but you lose the battle. In lust you don't fight, you just follow your own desires."³³¹ The effects of a lustful lifestyle are generally recognized as a darkening of the mind, thoughtlessness, rashness, inconstancy, excessive self-love, hatred of God, and excessive love of this world and aversion for the world to come.

Against this backdrop, it is easier to grasp the real sense of Gregory's admonition to the virgins that pleasure is not the correct criterion by which

³²⁹ SV 35; cf. JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 172. "The beginning of chastity is refusal to consent to evil thoughts," says John Climacus. See also *Perf*, 120. According to Gregory of Nyssa, thought that is not directed to Christ is outside of light and life; a person who directs his thought to pleasure is in darkness and death, and succumbs to passions.

³³⁰ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *The Long Rules*, 274.

³³¹ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 185-186.

one should judge whether something is good or bad.³³² Persons consecrated to God are called to prudently comply to their sixth sense, a kind of spiritual instinct, which enables them to discern the right way to behave even in the most complex situations, spontaneously perceiving what is appropriate to do and what to avoid.³³³ Again, modesty helps for the purification of the flesh and upholds in a special way the dignity of women because “it not only protects women from being treated as objects, it also inspires men to respond to them with the kind of authentic, selfless love that every woman longs for in her heart.”³³⁴ According to Gregory, modesty is an adornment for the soul as it is for a woman; the soul’s modesty is revealed in its shyness before things of the flesh and that of the world. Those who practice perfect chastity value God above all else, dedicate themselves to the cause of the Lord and are like the salt of the earth; they present the ultimate meaning of Christianity for all. Purification of the biological life (garments of skin) leads to its Christification.

2.1.2 Christification of the Biological Being

Christological doctrines developed in the Church in line with the doctrine of *theosis* or deification. In the first chapter, we understood *theosis* in the light of Christification in which one puts on Christ through faith, imitation, sacraments, ascetical practices etc. and receives as free gifts things that naturally belong to Christ. Incarnation has made it possible that human beings take off their old garments of skin and put on “the new garment (holy garb) that is Jesus.”³³⁵ Notwithstanding that “early ecumenical councils on Christology”³³⁶ took place after the death of Gregory of Nyssa, his doctrine

³³² *Virg*, 34. For Gregory, a Christian is not a lover of pleasure, but a lover of God. Therefore, he/she should ascend toward incorporeal goods.

³³³ *SF* 52.

³³⁴ E. SRI, *Men, Women and the Mystery of Love: Practical Insights from John Paul II’s Love and Responsibility*, 78.

³³⁵ *HSong*, (Homily 11), 347. In the Incarnation the Word assumed the ‘sinful human nature’ (i.e., human nature previous to the moment when he assumed), but from the very moment of its assumption the union of the divine nature with it cleansed it from its sinful propensities. So, we can say that the Word assumed the full and original human nature, but not the fallen human nature. Sin does not belong to the original human nature. As his human nature is sinless, it is the garment of glory. Gregory says, “... no one shall see ‘the face’ of the Lord ‘and live’ (Ex 33:20). Therefore you, the glorious one, came, but you came in such wise as we are able to receive you. You came with the radiance of Divinity shaded by the garment of a body”: *Ibid.*, (Homily 4), 119.

³³⁶ Roman Catholic Church usually accept twenty-one ecumenical councils, from Nicaea I (325) to Vatican II (1962-1965). But the Eastern Orthodox Church recognizes only the first

of salvation as participation in Christ (Christification) lies at the foundation of those councils. As we try to understand chastity in the light of the first stage of Moses' spiritual ascent as the Christification of the 'biological life' (garments of skin) of man, the first Christological council – council of Ephesus in 431 – deserves our special attention. This council throws light on the Nyssens' teaching of Christ as true God who assumed human nature from the Virgin Mary. The council stated that the Virgin Mary is *Theotokos* – 'God-bearer' or 'Mother of God' against the teaching that Mary was only a human being, and it is impossible that God should be born of a human being.³³⁷ For the Council Fathers, the title *Theotokos* was an affirmation, not primarily about the Virgin, but about Christ: God was born. The Virgin is Mother, not of a human person united to the divine person of the Logos, but of a single, undivided person who is God and Man at once.³³⁸ The Word made flesh is the God-Man.

seven as being truly ecumenical or universal since they took place before the Great Schism between the East and the West in 1054. The first two Ecumenical Councils – Nicaea I (modern Iznik, Turkey) of 325 and Constantinople I (modern Istanbul, Turkey) of 381 – were Trinitarian, and the other five – Ephesus (modern Selcuk, Turkey) of 431, Chalcedon (modern Kadikoy, Turkey) of 451, Constantinople II of 553, Constantinople III of 680 and Nicaea II of 787 – were Christological in nature. The heresies of this period rendered impossible the Orthodox concept of salvation as deification, i.e., be united to God as far as possible by participating in the humanity of Christ. While the Trinitarian Councils substantiated the truth of God as three persons (*hypostases*) in one essence or substance (*ousia*) against the heresies of Arianism and *Pneumatomachianism* (Spirit-fighters), the Christological Councils fortified the truth of 'the Word incarnate Jesus Christ' as one person Jesus Christ who is true God and true man without division or confusion (i.e. one person in two natures) and is possible to be portrayed because of the Incarnation that made matter the vehicle of divinity, against the major heresies of Nestorianism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism and Iconoclasm. "Through the doctrines emerged in the Councils, the Council Fathers did not try to exhaust the mystery of the incomprehensible God; rather, excluding certain false ways of speaking and thinking about it, they drew a fence around it to prevent the people from deviating into error", says Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware (K. WARE, *The Orthodox Church*, 20).

³³⁷ L. D. DAVIS, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787)*, 140. The Holy Virgin is *Theotokos* because the one begotten from the Father, through whom all things came into being, was incarnate, was made man, suffered, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and will come as the judge of the living and the dead. When the Council proclaimed that Christ suffered and died, the Fathers were affirming the true human nature the Son of God assumed. Even though Christ was sinless and the human nature he assumed was not a fallen one, he experienced the effects of the Fall to save mankind: cf. R. PRICE (trans.), *The Council of Ephesus of 431: Documents and Proceedings*, 105.

³³⁸ The heresy of Nestorianism against which the Council combatted taught that in Christ there are two different persons, one human and the other divine, who are separate subjects linked by a manifest union of love. The problem is that the single metaphysical subject in

For Gregory, deification is a Christological term. This term expresses the transformation of the human nature of Christ by the divine. The human body (the common human nature) which Christ assumed from the Virgin is divinized by its union with God. This transformation is granted potentially to human beings in baptism, and accepted freely and progressively throughout the whole course of life, it leads to union.³³⁹ In *The Life of Moses*, the theophany of the burning bush reveals the two natures of Christ – Divine and Human. While the bush stands for the human nature of Christ, the light that shines through it stands for his divine nature. Since the human nature Christ assumed from the Virgin is a common one that includes the whole mankind, in Christ the ontological chasm between God and man is bridged (but, not cancelled), i.e., through Christ human beings can participate in God, but they remain human beings. Through the Incarnation Christ creates a new humanity that is united with God. The Council of Chalcedon (451) by its affirmation of the two natures of Christ proclaimed a very great truth about man himself: to be a real man, our human nature should participate in God. The Council Fathers also proclaimed the virgin birth of Christ affirming that Christ was begotten outside time from the Father without a mother, and he was begotten within time from his Mother without a father. In this sense, the birth of Christ from the Virgin without a father also signifies man’s spiritual birth in Christ through the sacrament of baptism in the Church, who is also virgin and mother.

Christ defeated sin by dying a sinless death overcoming all the temptations of the flesh and spirit. It was not Christ’s personal victory, but the victory of mankind incorporated to his humanity. Through Christ’s resurrection, humanity conquers death. Christ inaugurates a new humanity on which sin and death have no power.³⁴⁰ This holy and immortal humanity is the true image of God who is Holy and Immortal. The true human person, as

Christ, the ‘I’ was not the person of the Word but the product of the conjunction of the Word with the man. This heresy smacked dualism in stating that divinity and humanity come together in Christ through ‘conjunction’ without mixing the natures.

³³⁹ J. MEYENDORFF, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 39.

³⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa makes a distinction between Christ the ‘Only-Begotten’ and Christ the ‘Firstborn’ (First-Begotten). In as much as the Only-Begotten, he is uncreated, has the form of God, and does not have brothers and sisters; in as much as the Firstborn he is created, has taken upon himself the form of servant, and has many brothers and sisters. Christ is the Firstborn from among the dead (Col 1:18) by vanquishing death by his own death. He is the Firstborn among many brethren (Rom 8:29) by having made them be born anew through baptism. By his resurrection Christ restored us again to the grace which we had at the beginning. By the new birth of regeneration in water (baptism) we can participate in the resurrected life of Christ and, thereby, become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17) in him: cf. *CE III*, (II:43-56).

the image of God, comes into existence through being born in Christ because union with God is not some additional element but actually constitutes man. In this spiritual birth, Christ gives man ‘his own eyes’ and ‘his own members’ – a new spiritual organism – and thereby makes him able to live the spiritual life. In the Eastern spiritual tradition, salvation is not just the liberation from sins, but Christification.

Through the vow of chastity consecrated persons commit themselves to participate in the divinized virgin human nature of Christ which establishes here on earth the beginning of eschatological life. To be united with Christ is to be united with God. Gregory identifies consecrated chastity (virginity) with the divine characteristics of blamelessness, holiness, purity and – above all – incorruptibility, an attribute human beings had at the beginning of creation but was lost on account of sin. All the characteristics of virginity are divine characteristics; human beings merely participate in them.³⁴¹ God’s very nature is virginity, and one participates in God’s virginity only according to the measure one has prepared oneself through purification. It means that ‘the putting off the old self’ (Eph 4:22) – garments of skin –, and ‘the putting on the new self’ (Eph 4: 24) – Christ³⁴² –, go hand in hand. What makes man new is the fact that he is no longer alone: he is the man who has ‘put on Christ.’ “The primordial garment of blessedness, which mankind was stripped of when they came into contact with what was forbidden,”³⁴³ they regain in Christ, as “the garment of salvation” (cf. Isa 61:10), through their participation in his virginity. Monastic habit is more of a garment of salvation than a uniform. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory gives to the priestly robe, which extends from head to feet (Ex 28:31-35), an interpretation that accentuates his notion of Christification:

He has put on that airy tunic which extends from his head to feet. He should not inflict upon his soul a heavy and fleshy garment of life, but by the purity of his life he should make all the pursuits of life as thin as the thread of a spider web. Reweaving this bodily nature, we should be close to what rises upwards and is light and airy ... Then we shall be borne on high through the air to be together with the Lord, not drawn down to earth by anything heavy (LM II:191).

The priestly robe, as a light and airy tunic, stands for the purified bodily nature that is akin to the body Adam had in Paradise, and with which he could ascend

³⁴¹ *Virg*, 9.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, (1:52), 53.

³⁴³ *COR*, (VIII), 899.

to divine perfections. Consecrated men and women through the putting off the garments of skin or the life of the flesh and the putting on Christ (Christification) enter the primordial vocation of mankind which they must now fulfil living in Christ, their new Paradise. For all of them “the body becomes a word, announcing their total belonging to the Lord and their joyful service of their brothers and sisters.”³⁴⁴ Hence, their chastity becomes an ‘imitation of’ and ‘participation in’ Christ himself.

2.1.3 Apatheia

Praxis leads to the Christification of the biological being which in turn engenders in the soul *apatheia*, the summit of the first stage of the spiritual ascent. The Nyssen identifies virginity or ‘consecrated chastity through purification’ with a state of *apatheia*. *Apatheia*, in general, signifies complete freedom from the invasion of agitating external ‘passions’ (Greek, *pathe*, “strong feelings – emotions – which are not guided by God”). The term *apatheia* (impassibility/passionlessness) already has a long and rich history by the time it reaches Gregory. This term belonged principally to the terminology of the Stoics who considered passions or emotions as the soul’s diseases analogues to diseases of the body.³⁴⁵ They propose an ethical ideal of *apatheia*, freedom from all emotions – both positive and negative³⁴⁶ so that they may remain calm in the face of the attractions and adversities of the world. But the Nyssen does not see the monastic goal of *apatheia* as the absence of passions and emotions but their transformation through being rightly ordered toward God.³⁴⁷ In *The Life of Moses*, he makes use of “Plato’s imagery of the chariot”³⁴⁸ in order to show how the rational faculty of the soul

³⁴⁴ *ESI* 16.

³⁴⁵ J. SELLARS, *Stoicism*, 117.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁴⁷ J. W. SMITH, “Gregory of Nyssa: Formed and Reformed in God’s Image”, in M. A. HINSDALE – S. OKEY (eds.), *T & T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, 151; cf. *HBeat*, (Homily II), 36. Gregory states that it is not possible in a material existence to achieve a wholly immaterial and passionless life. Moreover, according to him, no just law-giver would command things which nature is incapable of.

³⁴⁸ PLATO, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield, 28. Plato says, “In my analogy, a soul is like an organic whole made up of a charioteer and his team of horses. ... Although our inner ruler drives a pair of horses, only one of his horses is thoroughly noble and good, while the other is thoroughly the opposite. This inevitably makes driving, in our case, difficult and disagreeable” (246a, b); cf. *LM* II:96. The Israelites marked the upper doorpost and the side posts of the entrance with the blood of the lamb to protect their first-borns from death (Ex 12:7,13). The Nyssen interprets the upper doorpost as the original rational nature of the soul, and the side posts below but supporting the upper doorpost as the appetitive and the

like a charioteer keeps together the non-rational spirited and appetitive faculties like two horses, and makes use of their force to participate in Christ (LM II:96-98). Thus, according to Gregory, a man is dispassionate not insofar as he lacks the passions, but insofar as he is not subject to their tyranny. Passionate life results from one's failure to participate in Christ (LM II:75). Gregory's 'royal way' is a state of *apatheia*. It is the purity of the soul. In the fallen state, the soul is attached to the flesh. But through purification, moderation can be achieved, and the soul's appetitive and spirited energies are reoriented to the heavenly, immaterial goods that are the objects of contemplation.

The basis of *apatheia* is self-control or mastery over the flesh through moderation that leads to virtues. The practice of virtue is therefore called "the spiritual method for cleansing the affective part of the soul,"³⁴⁹ because the soul must operate according to its nature: concupiscible (appetitive) while desiring virtue, and irascible (spirited) while struggling against demons. In Gregory, *apatheia* is the opposite of earthly or fleshly attachment; so, a detachment by which "the soul becomes light and swift for its movement upward" (LM II:224) or a detachment by which "the innate natural impulses are transformed for the immaterial participation in good things."³⁵⁰ The fruit of *apatheia* is a heart in accord with God. The soul now dispassionately (i.e., without the perversion of natural inclinations) and uninhibitedly contemplates God, sees him who is the Invisible, and comprehends him who is the Incomprehensible.³⁵¹ Therefore, it is *apatheia* that makes possible the soul's ascent to the next stage – to the stage of divine knowledge through illumination in blessed poverty.

Gregory envisions a state in which no fleck of worldly anxiety intrudes, and the passions, in their positive sense, are grafted into the virtues as the whole person grows toward God. This is what he means by virginity. Virginity or purity is a must for the Nyssen to begin the spiritual ascent. Moses was asked to wash his cloths and keep the animals away before approaching Mount Sinai (Ex 19:10-15). According to Gregory, the washing of garments stands for purity in the outward pursuits of life besides the purity of the soul, and the driving away of the irrational animals signifies control

spirited natures added to the soul after the fall. He teaches that the protection of virtue depends on the purification of the passionate parts of the soul, and making them cooperate with the natural function of the rational soul.

³⁴⁹ EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, *The Praktikos*, (no.78), in J. E. BAMBERGER (trans.), *Evagrius Ponticus: The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, 36.

³⁵⁰ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep*, 113.

³⁵¹ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 3), 101.

over passions (LM II:154-156). When *apatheia* is attributed to God it means immortality, incorruptibility, purity, and impassibility – a state beyond every pain and every change.³⁵² Divine *apatheia* and human *apatheia* are found in Christ. Christians receive *apatheia* as a gift from Christ – the source of *apatheia* –, and in *apatheia* they return to a primal order of soul in which the reason guides and nurtures the passions toward God. When the passions are turned toward God, the disordered movements of the soul are under control or the inner struggle against inordinate attachments has ceased, and peace is achieved.

We understood that, as Ware writes, “*apatheia* is not a negative condition of indifference or insensitivity in which we no longer feel temptation, but a positive state of reintegration and spiritual freedom in which we no longer yield to temptation.”³⁵³ In *The Life of Moses*, we see that Moses who prefigures Christ experiences human passions like anger, sadness etc. However, all his passions are oriented toward virtues. Therefore, Gregory understands *apatheia* in a Christological sense: the Incarnation – “the human birth, the growth of infancy to maturity, the eating and drinking, the fatigue and sleep, the sorrow and tears, the false accusation and judgment hall, the cross of death and consignment to the tomb”³⁵⁴ – was not unworthy of Christ because it is not passion but sin that brings degradation. The passion for God is good. *Apatheia*, as passion for God, is dynamic: it is a state of the soul in which a burning love for God and man leaves no room for selfish and animal passions.³⁵⁵ In short, we can say that, in Gregory, passionlessness (*apatheia*) is reached through passion and desire for the Bridegroom, Christ.

2.2 Dimensions of the Ascent in Chastity

We shall now proceed to see how the vow of chastity is related to the different dimensions of Christian life, and helps consecrated men and women grow into the fullness of Christian perfection. The main elements are culled from Moses’ journey from the first stage to the second: Moses who participates in Christ at the theophany of the burning bush is strengthened in the virtue of faith, manifests the mystery of the sacrament of baptism at the

³⁵² *Virg*, 10.

³⁵³ K. WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, 156.

³⁵⁴ *COr*, (IX), 904.

³⁵⁵ Cf. K. WARE, “Silence in Prayer: The Meaning of Hesychia”, in M. B. PENNINGTON (ed.), *One yet Two Monastic Tradition East and West*, 40.

crossing of the Red Sea, and offers himself for the redemptive mission as a priest.

2.2.1 Trinitarian Dimension: Through the Son

In the Nyssen's view, mankind together with Adam was expelled from Paradise and now returns to Paradise with Christ, for both Adam and Christ have a corporate humanity: Jesus is the Good Shepherd who carries the whole flock (the whole human race) on his shoulders.³⁵⁶ For Gregory, as already mentioned, it is participation in Christ that not only constitutes the journey of ascent but that also makes it possible in the first place. No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is already laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11). Through Christ one can begin his or her ascent toward God because "the Word will not cease at all from leading toward the Good" (LM II:58). As explained already, the theophany of the burning bush reveals that Jesus belongs authentically to the two orders of existence, that of God and that of man. Through the words "I Am Who Am" (Ex 3:14) Christ sets himself apart from all other forms of being.³⁵⁷ His perfectly chaste humanity is inseparably united to his divinity. This way, Christ's Incarnation plays the inaugurating role in the life of Christian chastity. Christian chastity aims at union with God. God's saving plan for human race is summarized and revealed in the God-Man. Christ reveals the beauty of Christian chastity through his mystery of union, and invites all to enter into his mystery.

As far as the consecrated life is concerned, Moses' encounter with Christ at the burning bush manifests how a true vocation takes place. The call to the way of the evangelical counsels springs from the interior encounter with the love of Christ.³⁵⁸ Consecrated men and women are those who have encountered Christ. However, it is true that Christ may not reveal himself to them as clearly and irresistibly as he did to Moses. Vocation begins with an attraction towards Christ as Moses was attracted by the burning bush. Garcia Paredes notes that one makes a vow, first of all, in response to an attraction towards the Lord, and it becomes an act of the will and freedom only in the

³⁵⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 2), 69; cf. *AAp*, 127. Gregory says, "We human beings are that sheep, we who have strayed through sin from the flock of the one hundred rational sheep. Christ lays the whole sheep on his own shoulders." The Nyssen treats Christ as the heavenly Shepherd of the angels, who abandons the ninety-nine sheep, the world of the angels, to set out in search of the lost sheep, which is humanity. The Ascension is the counterpart of the Fall. At the Ascension, Christ reinstated humanity, the lost sheep, in Paradise.

³⁵⁷ Cf. E. D. GAAL, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift*, 83.

³⁵⁸ *RD* 3.

second place.³⁵⁹ In the first chapter, we have already dealt with vow as a free-will offering in response to an attraction towards the Lord. Encounter with Christ and attraction towards him can be born in reading Scripture, in prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church etc.

Gregory's interpretation of the burning bush as the Incarnation has also a reference to the mystery of the Transfiguration of the Lord in which the divine light shone through him (cf. Mt 17:1-3). *Vita Consecrata* states that for the chosen disciples the Transfiguration was not only the revelation of Christ's glory but also a preparation for facing Christ's Cross as it involved both going up the mountain and coming down the mountain (VC 14). In a similar vein, the theophany of the burning bush not only helps Moses begin his vertical ascent towards God but inspires him to begin his horizontal movement of 'mission' (from the Latin *missionem*, 'act of sending') toward the people of God. Therefore, through Christ we establish a new relationship not only with God but also with our neighbours. Being united to God and humanity, the consecrated life becomes a prolongation of Christ's humanity. We shall now see how the vow of chastity helps consecrated men and women participate in the Trinitarian life in their ascent through the Son.

2.2.1.1 Participation in Divine Purity

Gregory holds that virginity exists originally in the Trinity. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are absolute purity and source of all purity. Virginity in God designates an absolute transcendence beyond any type of evil or corruption, and an eternal and absolute possession of the fullness of being. In *On Virginity*, the Cappadocian emphasizes that virgins are virgins by participation in God's virginity:

What greater praise of virginity is there than its being proved that in some way those who have a share in the pure mysteries of virginity become themselves partakers of the glory of God, who is alone holy and blameless, since they participate in His purity and incorruptibility?³⁶⁰

According to him, "Jesus Christ," the Word eternally generated by the Father virginally and became man by a woman in time virginally, "is the source of incorruptibility"³⁶¹ for every human being. The great fascination and

³⁵⁹ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 58.

³⁶⁰ *Virg*, 9.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

attraction which Gregory experienced toward the reality of virginity was an attraction towards the splendour of the glory of Christ the Virgin: there was not a stain of sin in Christ; he was true God and true man but undivided. Jesus Christ is the true Image of God – the absolute virginity. As the images of the Image, human beings participate, in a greater or lesser degree – “each according to his ability”³⁶² –, in Christ’s virginity. Virginity through participation in Christ allows the human beings to be found in their original innocence as it “restores the divine image in its original state”³⁶³ and “guides to a contemplation of the things on high.”³⁶⁴ Thus, virginity is the foundation of the spiritual ascent.

We should not identify, however, the vow of chastity with celibacy or celibacy with virginity in its literal sense. The word celibacy comes from the Latin ‘caelebs’ which means ‘single’ or ‘alone.’ Traditionally celibacy is a religious practice of non-marriage or the choice of a commitment to the single life for specifically religious reasons,³⁶⁵ while virginity (Greek, *parthenia*) generally signifies the condition of physical integrity usually applied to females. The virginity of the Roman vestal virgins was a purely physical fact. Chastity does not necessarily imply celibacy or physical virginity: it stands for a virtuous sexual life; it refers to the way one lives one’s sexuality. The virtue of chastity is not exclusive to a particular state of life, but is an element of every state: physical virginity, marriage, celibacy.³⁶⁶ “A chaste person is one who has a healthy, holy, loving and God-directed attitude to the gift of his own and others’ sexuality. It indicates a person whose sexual life is blameless, be he or she married or celibate,”³⁶⁷ says Moloney. There can be many celibates who are not chaste, and there can also be many non-celibates who are extraordinarily chaste. The right ordering and sacred engagement of the sexual appetites within the sacramental bond of married life is chastity.³⁶⁸ In

³⁶² Ibid., 21. Participation in God while living on earth has an impact on the mode of resurrection as well. In *Perf*, Gregory says that in the life after this there will not be the same resurrection for all, for it says: “They who have done good shall come forth unto resurrection of life; but they who have done evil unto resurrection of judgment” (Jn 5:29): cf. *Perf*, 116.

³⁶³ *Virg*, 45. According to Gregory it is difficult for the soul which is divided in a multiplicity of things to attain this goal.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁶⁵ D. J. GOERGEN, “Celibacy”, in J. A. KOMONCHAK et al. (eds.), *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 174.

³⁶⁶ M. G. BIANCO, “Chastity”, in A. D. BERARDINO (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Ancient Christianity*, 1:496.

³⁶⁷ F. J. MOLONEY, *A Life of Promise: Poverty, Chastity, Obedience*, 76.

³⁶⁸ M. C. STEENBERG, “Chastity”, 111.

Amoris Laetitia, Pope Francis presents chastity as an invaluable virtue in family life for the genuine growth of love between persons (AL 206).

The general notion of chastity is that the virginity of the body belongs to a small number, but the virginity of the soul should belong to all.³⁶⁹ Chastity is an evangelical imperative that is to be followed by all participating in Christ. Christians are free to marry or to commit themselves to virginity as an evangelical counsel, and to live the virtue of chastity in whatever way of life they choose. Never does the Nyssen despise marriage which is not deprived of God's blessing and for which man, who came to birth through marriage, has a natural inclination.³⁷⁰ For him, the moderate and measured use of the duty of marriage is not against the virtue of chastity. Based on his principle of "virtue lies in the middle," he opposes both those who glorify marriage in favour of extreme carnal pleasures and those who condemn marriage in favour of extreme asceticism or rejection of the body. Celibate chastity of consecrated men and women is tantamount to Gregory of Nyssa's notion of virginity. In the Eastern spiritual tradition, chastity is a condition of spiritual and bodily purity in which the Christian person retains control over his or her impulses and desires, presenting a life to God that reflects and realizes the condition of humanity's first innocent formation.³⁷¹ Since all Christians are called to perfection, what brings consecrated men and women nearer to God than the married is not their celibacy but their commitment to perfection in chastity. They are called and consecrated to be pure both in body and soul.

2.2.1.2 Participation in Trinitarian Fecundity

In the Trinity there is generation, though pure virginity. Virginity exists in the Father who generates the Son without passion.³⁷² Then, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. The purity and incorruptibility of the triune God does not stand in the way of 'begetting.' A great paradox of the Christian faith, according to Gregory, is that virginity and offspring go hand in hand. The virginity of Mary, who gave birth to Christ without losing her virginity, reflects the virginity of the divine nature and the eternal begetting of the Word. The virginal voice of the Father and the virginal voice

³⁶⁹ Cf. P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Struggle with God*, 126.

³⁷⁰ Cf. *Virg*, 31.

³⁷¹ M. C. STEENBERG, "Chastity", in *The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 110.

³⁷² *Virg*, 10.

of Mary say the same thing – “You are my son.”³⁷³ Again, Mary’s virginal motherhood demonstrates that purity alone is fit to receive the coming of God in this world and lift man up to a desire of heavenly things. Chastity of consecrated men and women also is a reflection of God’s inner life. They give birth to Christ spiritually in their soul as Immaculate Mary gave him birth corporeally. Their perfect chastity is inviolate but fruitful. They participate in God’s fecundity through “spiritual childbearing in the world.”³⁷⁴ Every uncorrupted virgin soul, having conceived by the Holy Spirit to engender the will of the Father, is a mother of Christ.³⁷⁵ We have already seen that what differentiated Christian monasticism in the beginning from asceticism that existed in other religions and sects is the fixing of Mary – Virgin and Mother – as its model.

The vow of chastity does not restrict but liberate the power of consecrated men and women to love. They are not barren, they are not ecclesiastical bachelors or spinsters.³⁷⁶ Like St Paul, they are constantly in labour until Christ is formed in the souls committed to their spiritual care. They become spiritual fathers and mothers by their committed love for these people. Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) in her lifetime was simply known by the epithet ‘Mother.’ *Vita Consecrata* reminds consecrated men and women of the aspect of the fruitfulness of their ministry as they, in a special way, represent the Church, the ‘Bride’ of Christ (VC 34). Through their social ministry too consecrated men and women reflect the virginal fruitfulness of the life of the Blessed Trinity. They give birth to wisdom, justice, holiness etc. in the society. The fruit of virginity is always spiritual as the fruit of Mary’s virginity was Christ. Thus, virginity brings an end to the tyranny of death.³⁷⁷ Death cannot conquer the fruits of virginity. The Nyssen does not alienate the life of virginity from that of marriage. The virtue of married life and virginity lies in the fact that married men and women should have the desire for God of the virgins, while consecrated men and women should have the fecundity of the married in giving birth to virtues. J. Pelikan notes that the portrait of Mary as the Virgin combatted the perceived excess of sexuality in Late Antiquity (3-7 century), and the portrait of Mary as the Mother likewise combatted the perceived excess of asceticism.³⁷⁸ By living

³⁷³ AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 33.

³⁷⁴ LG 42.

³⁷⁵ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 221.

³⁷⁶ F. C. ARINZE, *Radical Discipleship: Consecrated Life and the Call to Holiness*, 24.

³⁷⁷ *Virg*, 49.

³⁷⁸ J. PELIKAN, *Mary through the Centuries*, 122.

their virginity in spiritual fruitfulness, consecrated persons, like Virgin Mary, can become a sign of the Trinitarian purity and fecundity.

2.2.1.3 From the Visible to the Invisible

Moses first encountered God with his physical eyes as a burning bush. For Gregory, it applies to the Christian's first participative encounter with Christ on the way to spiritual perfection. The philosophic concept of the soul's ascent to 'the world of reality' negating and rejecting the material creation is not found in the Nyssen. The burning bush proclaims the truth that the Word has become flesh, i.e., God has shown himself not on the farthest boundary of the world, but in its midst. And since God prepared himself a body within the sphere of the finite, man does not draw near to him by denying all that limits him. A movement of ascent to God leaving the world behind was only justified if God had not descended, not revealed himself in a human body, in human words.³⁷⁹ God's descent to man makes possible man's ascent to God in a way that lies within the abilities of his material nature, i.e., in his condescending love for humankind, God reveals himself in Christ's human form, and man, through participation in Christ's human nature, can ascend to God. In the creation of man, God foresaw both the fall of man and the Incarnation of the Son, and created him "with his unity of body and soul, the power to hear Him and sense His presence, the ability to walk with Him and respond obediently to Him"³⁸⁰ in the material world. In Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, the wonderful works of God that are seen in the whole creation are likened to the perfume (fragrance) of the Bridegroom's (Christ/God) presence that the soul (bride) senses.³⁸¹ *Gaudium et spes* articulates this fact when it says, "Believers, no matter what their religion, have always recognised the voice and the revelation of God in the language of creatures" (GS 36). God reveals himself to man in the world and history.

The encounter with God in the material sphere, however, is only the first step in man's spiritual ascent toward the invisible and incomprehensible God. Christ communicates himself to man gradually and "makes him capable of knowing and loving him far beyond man's natural capacity."³⁸² Thus, the

³⁷⁹ H. V. BALTHASAR, *The Word Made Flesh: Explorations in Theology I*, trans. A. V. Littledale, 175.

³⁸⁰ H. V. BALTHASAR, *Prayer*, trans. G. Harrison, 264.

³⁸¹ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 1), 41. Gregory writes, "And all of these refer to some slight trace of the divine fragrance, which the whole creation, after the manner of a jar for ointments, imitates within itself by the wonders that are seen within it."

³⁸² CCC 52.

first invitation to the consecrated life may approach one in a visible way. It can be an attraction felt towards somebody or something – a ‘burning bush’ that reveals God’s beauty somehow and points to Christ. A vocation is a matter of following the footsteps of Christ. The Nyssen exhorts consecrated persons not to stop with the literal imitation of Christ. For him, Christian life is a participation in God through Jesus Christ. Therefore, chastity is the foundation of the ascent to the invisible God through the humanity of Christ who is the way to the Father (cf. Jn 14:6). Christ calls consecrated persons to “go up with him from the low ground and away from the hollows of lowly thoughts”³⁸³ to behold the Father. According to Gregory, one who is stupid looks downwards and hands his soul over to pleasures of the body, as cattle to pastures, being alienated from the life of God.³⁸⁴ The burning bush led Moses to the conviction that one should not attach oneself to anything changeable or transient. It was an invitation to transfer his power to love from the body to God who is the true Being. The Nyssen sees it as an invitation to imitate Christ, and, according to him, the imitation consists in “those actions that are free from all evil.”³⁸⁵ The consecrated life as an ascent from the visible to the invisible is also a call to get rid of one’s fleshly life and lead a life of holiness in the purity of both the soul and the body.

2.2.2 Sacramental Dimension: Baptism

The vow of chastity necessitates living the mystery of baptism. In *The Life of Moses*, the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14:19-31) is a type of baptism. For Gregory, baptism is primarily a victory over the forces of evil. The Egyptian army – horses, chariots and their drivers, archers, slingers, heavily armed soldiers, and the rest of the crowd in the enemies’ line of battle – are the various passions of the soul by which man is enslaved (LM II:122). Those who pass through the mystical water in baptism must put to death in the water the whole army of evil—such as covetousness, unbridled desire, rapacious thinking, the passion of conceit and arrogance, wild impulse, wrath, anger, malice, envy, and all such things. This way, they, who have been in slavery, drown the tyrant in the water and make a totally new beginning. In baptism the garments of skin are removed.

According to Gregory, through his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus acts as mankind’s guide in this new birth, and he also becomes the “firstborn among

³⁸³ *HBeat*, (Homily 1), 23.

³⁸⁴ *Virg*, 24.

³⁸⁵ *WIMCOC*, 87.

many brethren” (cf. Rom 8:29) because “all those brought into life by this spiritual rebirth are called brothers of the One born before them through water and spirit.”³⁸⁶ Through his baptism, Christ teaches that sanctity is God’s gift because baptism is not something that we do for ourselves; it is always given, and we can only receive it. For the Nyssen, the Hebrew’s journey with Moses stands for the Church’s journey with Christ. Thus, baptism signifies one’s death and resurrection with Christ. Through baptism one becomes God’s property, i.e., a member of Christ, and a partaker of divine nature.

Today, at baptism God’s word of creation for men and women is still being spoken in an active present tense: “Let us make man in our own image and after our own likeness.”³⁸⁷ Christians as the special bearers of the image of God are to be missionaries in the world and impel others through their attractive Christian life to become ‘images of the images.’ The regeneration of baptism becomes meaningless if and when a life of virtue does not follow. The imitation of Christ’s death in baptism must be followed by the imitation of Christ in a transformed life. According to Gregory, those who “truly cross the water” (LM II:130) are the ones who “drag along nothing foreign in their subsequent life” (LM II:126). However, we have to keep in mind the words of P. Evdokimov, “The deliverance of which the Gospel speaks is never the mechanical destruction of evil, but a cure. As long as the last human being has not freely participated in Christ’s victory, evil will continue to condition history.”³⁸⁸ Like baptism, the vow of chastity does not bring about mechanically the state of virginity. Consecrated persons need to cooperate with God’s grace and consciously commit themselves to a life of virtues.

2.2.2.1 Perfection of the Baptismal Consecration

By becoming a true man in the Incarnation, Christ became the “firstborn” and inaugurated on earth “a new beginning of true human nature” uncorrupted by sin. Baptism is man’s new birth in Christ, and in this sense a new creation of man. One’s spiritual regeneration through baptism, and incorporation into Christ signifies not only a deliverance from the consequences of original sin but also a fresh start to realize the goal which Adam failed to achieve. Thus, baptism constitutes the foundation of the spiritual life; it is the fundamental Christian consecration, on which all the

³⁸⁶ *Perf*, 114.

³⁸⁷ J. H. MCGUCKIN, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*, 198.

³⁸⁸ P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Struggle with God*, 30.

other consecrations are based.³⁸⁹ The vow of chastity is a bringing to fulfilment of the initial consecration of one's body that took place in baptism, an attempt to make the sacramentality of the Christian body as utterly luminous and transparent as it possibly could be.³⁹⁰ Moses' entry into the light of God having removed the sandals that represent the sin of darkness is his new baptism, and it is the starting point of his spiritual ascent. The consecrated life is a call to live the Christian life to the full. Consecrated men and women "follow Christ by renouncing all that might impede one in following him and by allowing oneself to be transformed in him,"³⁹¹ i.e., to be divinized.

The rite of religious profession (monastic tonsure) in the Eastern Church manifests many elements of baptism. "The vows are taken, as at baptism, in answer to formal and explicit questions. A new name is given, as at baptism. ... The religious habit given to the monk or nun at the profession may be compared to the baptismal garment of the newly-baptized,"³⁹² writes N. F. Robinson. Monastic profession is a kind of 'second baptism' in which all sins are remitted as in baptism or as P. A. Aydin says, it is the realization of what the gift of the Spirit at baptism really implies.³⁹³ According to Thomas Merton, it is by the baptismal vow that every Christian is called into friendship with God and the religious vows are simply a way to intensify the love and the intimacy of this relationship that is open to all.³⁹⁴ John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Redemptionis Donum* explicitly states the baptismal nature of the profession of evangelical counsels:

Religious profession is deeply rooted in baptismal consecration and is a fuller expression of it. ... Upon the sacramental basis of baptism in which it is rooted, religious profession is a new burial in the death of Christ: new, because it is made with awareness and by choice; new, because of love and vocation; new, by reason of unceasing conversion. This burial in

³⁸⁹ K. WOJTOWICZ, *The Priceless Gift*, 24.

³⁹⁰ AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 34.

³⁹¹ D. P. GUERANGER, *On the Religious Life*, 9.

³⁹² N. F. ROBINSON, *Monasticism in the Orthodox Churches*, 58. In this regard, Mullahy points out why religious profession is not considered a sacrament as Marriage and Priestly Ordination: "Religious profession is but Christian profession at Baptism made perfect. In the profession the religious remove everything incompatible with their character of baptized Christians. It is a renewal of the grace of baptism. If religious consecration were to be a sacrament that imprint an indelible character on the soul, it would have been a mere repetition of the baptismal seal": AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 13.

³⁹³ P. A. AYDIN, *The Syriac Order of Monastic Profession and the Order of Baptism*, 6.

³⁹⁴ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 85.

death causes the person buried together with Christ to walk like Christ in newness of life. In Christ crucified is to be found the ultimate foundation both of baptismal consecration and of the profession of the evangelical counsels (RD 7).³⁹⁵

The profession of evangelical counsels aims at making one capable of deriving more abundant fruit from the baptismal grace. It does it by freeing himself or herself from those obstacles, which might deviate him or her from the love of God and love of neighbour. Through the vow of chastity consecrated men and women bind themselves to a life of continuous purification and spiritual warfare against the enemies of the soul so that their purity will become a reminder to those who have become “ignorant of the mystery of the water” (LM II:121).

2.2.2.2 Restoration of the Image of God and Angelic Life

According to Gregory, the bath of rebirth causes those darkened by sin to shine like the stars of heaven.³⁹⁶ Baptism is a return to and an intensification of that luminous state which characterized the human condition before it was obscured by sin. Nicholas Cabasilas likens baptism to a work that takes place in the workshop of a goldsmith or a silversmith: as a material like gold or silver receives a name (ring, bangle etc.) when it is transformed with the blows of an iron tool into a new shape, on the day of baptism Christians are formed and their undefined life gets a definition³⁹⁷ – Christian. Baptism is an invitation to become constantly richer in grace, to grow up in this new life unto the plenitude of Christ.³⁹⁸ The Cappadocian teaches that a Christian regains the the image of God by becoming an image of Christ who is the perfect “Image” of the Father. In *The Life of Moses*, Moses’ removal of sandals to make himself worthy to stand within the rays of the true light at the burning bush was his return to Paradise (Christ) with the dynamic vocation to participate more and more of God and to lead a life of perfection. Hence, Moses represents a consecrated person who commits himself to live his baptismal life in its fullness. But it does not mean that a consecrated person is impregnable to the attack of devil. Repentance of sins that have been committed is related to baptism. Reconciliation makes religious life a continuous conversion.³⁹⁹ In the treatise, Gregory points out repentance as a

³⁹⁵ Cf. VC 6, 30-31.

³⁹⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 2), 53.

³⁹⁷ NICHOLAS CABASILAS, *Life in Christ*, 68.

³⁹⁸ AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 11.

³⁹⁹ D. P. GUERANGER, *On the Religious Life*, 9.

mystery, and says that those who abandoned Christ can find him again by repentance (LM II:269-270).

The birth in baptism is the beginning of the life to come. Similarly, for Gregory, the life of the virgins is inevitably linked to the restoration of man to his/her original nature as the image of God and the hoped-for perfection of the life to come: virginity wants to anticipate the end of the world by the extinction of the human species.⁴⁰⁰ It is a protest against the human tendency to mistake the worldly kingdom for the Kingdom of God. The virgins eliminate the world from their being by ‘dying to the world.’ They set aside matrimony as a sign of their return to Paradise. According to Gregory, since marriage was the point of departure from the life in Paradise, it is reasonable for those returning to Christ to give up marriage as a kind of early stage of the journey.⁴⁰¹ He labels the lifestyle of the community of virgins headed by his sister Macrina as ‘philosophic life,’ and says that they strove to replicate the angels by freeing themselves from worldly concerns, i.e., through their ascetic piety and chastity.⁴⁰² The profession of vows imitates baptism in as much as it serves the anagogical purpose of leading consecrated men and women away from the pleasures of the body and of material wealth. Jesus himself called virginity an angelic virtue (Mt 22: 30). Thus, virginity is a preparation and a prefiguring of the blessed life in heaven. Garcia Paredes opines that without hope in the resurrection of bodies, without future world, without reign of God, celibate chastity is not participation in Christ.⁴⁰³ Virginity announces in the world future resurrection and eternal life.

Virginity or perfect chastity is an angelic life for Gregory mainly in the sense that through virginity one can overcome one’s gender like the angels who are neither male nor female. When the Nyssen speaks of virtues, he proposes “a wonderful mixture of opposites and a release from what is peculiar to each.”⁴⁰⁴ Old age and youthfulness are opposites but a mixture of them in each age of one’s life effects a virtuous life: in one’s youth one should have the maturity of the aged in avoiding evil, and in one’s old age one should have the youthfulness in doing good. In line with Gregory’s thought, we can say that angelic life of virginity as a virtue consists in the mixture of male and female characteristics. According to the Nyssen, however, it is in their conformity with and participation in Christ – the true ‘Man’ – that the virgins

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. *Virg*, 48-51.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 46. In the first chapter we have already identified Paradise with Christ himself.

⁴⁰² *LSM*, 170-171.

⁴⁰³ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, “Covenant in Our Own Body: Celibacy and Matrimony in the Normal Chaos of Love”, in *Religious Life Asia*, 4/4 (2002), 34.

⁴⁰⁴ *Virg*, 72.

transcend their gender. Therefore, celibate chastity makes consecrated men and women like the angels not by making them sexless, but by making them transcend their sex or gender in Christ. We will come back to this theme later, when we deal with the equality of man and woman.

Since consecrated persons stand at the place of the perfect Church – the bride of Christ without blemish or wrinkle (cf. Eph 5:27)– like the angels, they are called to participate fully in the liturgical life of the Church. In *On Virginit*y, the Nyssen presents Miriam, Aron’s sister who leads a chorus of women in singing and dancing with a tambourine (of virginity) in her hand immediately after crossing the Red Sea (Ex 15: 20), as an example for the virgins who are active in liturgical worship.⁴⁰⁵ He takes the tambourine in Miram’s hand for virginity because, for him, it is an absolutely “dry” instrument that symbolizes the mortification of the flesh. As the tambourine produces a loud sound, having no moisture in it and being quite dry, so also the sound of virginity is clear and distinct in praising and serving God, having no moisture of fleshly life in it and being quite free of passions. He includes the virgins among the thousands upon thousands of angels ministering God (cf. Dan 7:10).⁴⁰⁶ Consecrated men and women anticipate that state which all will have in heaven when all share in the life of the angels – a life of praise and worship. It is for this reason, T. Hopko points out that in the Eastern monastic tradition those following the monastic life are said to have taken the ‘angelic habit.’⁴⁰⁷ Since “angles in heaven always see the face of the Father” (Mt 18:10), angelic life of consecrated persons leads them to contemplation.

2.2.2.3 Perfection of the Mystical Body of Christ

One becomes a Christian through the “virgin birth,” a birth characterised by the absence of passions, given by the Church in baptism and is, thereby, united to Christ, the source of incorruptibility. Baptism, by establishing an internal union with Christ, consecrates a person for God, elevates him or her to being a child of God and also incorporates all baptized together into one family, the Church, where there are no more strangers and homeless, but all are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household (Eph 2:19), in other words participants in the life of the Holy

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 60-61. For Gregory, Miriam (the first Mary) was the prototype of the Virgin Mary who uttered the Magnificat.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁰⁷ T. HOPKO, *The Orthodox Faith Volume 4: Spirituality*, 117.

Trinity.⁴⁰⁸ The entire Christian community, as the Mystical Body of Christ through baptism, is a chosen race principally separated from the world, although they are strongly rooted in the earthly reality. Since the consecrated life is a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in baptism, the virgins are the separated ones from among the separated ones, the Church. They are called to manifest the true nature of the Church: in the Mystical Body, there are no more strangers and homeless, but all are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household (Eph 2:19). As the revelation of mystical body of Christ in the world, they, like the Hebrews among the Egyptians, remain unaffected by the 'plagues of passions' that befall on "those who do not acknowledge God" (LM II:76). They are called to exhibit the highest degree of conformity with Christ who granted the family of his followers priority over his own family and stood in contrast to the mainstream Judaism of his time and its emphasis on procreation – and thus family life – as a universal responsibility.⁴⁰⁹ The vow of chastity manifests one's readiness to serve God, seek his Kingdom above all else and, thereby, serve as reminders to their fellow Christians of the "heavenly calling" (LM I:1) to renounce worldly pleasures in service to Christ.

As the Mystical body of Christ, Christians are Christ's very members bound to him body as well as soul in the most intimate bonds of grace and love, i.e., the Church, the bride of Christ, is a social organism in which all live a communal life in Christ. The consecrated life embodies this social dimension of the 'bride of Christ' especially in the life of virginity because the vow of chastity enables them to deal with all the faithful as members of the same family: "Whereas conjugal chastity is ordered to fidelity and the totality of the bodily gift of self within the marriage covenant, celibate chastity is ordered to the gift of one's body and sexuality in non-genital expressions of friendship, love, and service within the Church."⁴¹⁰ Consecrated persons are available for mission without the burden of a family, and they give their sexuality as a gift (in non-genital ways) in the service of God and members of the Christian community. This way, each 'bridal soul' both in her own ascent and in her love for other souls contributes to the building of the Body of Christ.⁴¹¹ Chastity enables them to love especially the poor and the neglected. Through living the vow of chastity in the Mystical

⁴⁰⁸ K. WOJTOWICZ, *The Priceless Gift*, 23.

⁴⁰⁹ G. HOLLAND, "Celibacy in the Early Christian Church", in C. OLSON (ed.), *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, 67.

⁴¹⁰ J. S. GRABOWSKI, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics*, 88.

⁴¹¹ A. CONWAY-JONES, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in its Jewish and Christian Contexts*, 27.

body of Christ, consecrated men and women ascend to perfection becoming the living presence of Christ in the world.

The material culture often views virginity as anti-human and anti-social as virginity calls for the sacrifice of the natural pleasurable and satisfying experience of sexual life, matrimony, and procreation of children. Even when faced with population explosion, society recommends contraception and not celibacy.⁴¹² But, in truth, the vow of chastity as participation in Christ is not a mere rigorous self-imprisonment devoid of communion with the other. It does not make consecrated persons socially introverted and psychologically frustrated personalities because it is a call to relationship. For Gregory, spiritual life is always an ascent to the better. Therefore, virginity is an opportunity for growth, and, therefore, a positive and unrelenting zeal for the highest good. Virgins renounce sexual life and family not because these are bad. The married persons can indeed give priority to spiritual values. But it is extremely difficult for them to love God with an undivided heart. Consecrated persons remind the society that true happiness does not depend on the physical realm. Their virginal chastity is a creative collaboration with the Incarnate Word in bringing forth members of Christ's Mystical Body through the supernatural union of love.⁴¹³ Consecrated chastity protects love from falling into selfish, utilitarian attitudes and enables one to love selflessly. Their ministry becomes the manifestation in the world of the human heart of Christ.

2.2.3 Virtue Dimension: Faith

For the Nyssen, the beginning of the high 'tower' (Lk 14:28) of spiritual ascent is the faith in Christ.⁴¹⁴ The theophany of the burning bush leads Moses to the conviction that "none of the things apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe (God), on which everything depends, alone subsists" (LM II:24). Faith sees beyond what is provided by sense perception and reason. By presenting the theophany of the burning bush as the mystery of the Incarnation, the Nyssen teaches that Christian faith is born above all from a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ. Again, Moses'

⁴¹² M. P. FERNANDO, "What Does the Vow of Chastity Mean to the Religious in Asia Today?", in *Religious Life Asia*, 4/4 (2002), 1.

⁴¹³ AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 38.

⁴¹⁴ *Perf*, 109. Lk 14: 28, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?"

response to the divine revelation shows that faith is not a mere intellectual assent of the human person to specific truths about God; it is an ‘act’ with which one entrusts oneself freely to God. Faith is not a feeling in the soul of man but an entrance into reality. This reality is not the abstract God of the philosophers, but a personal God whom we can call “you.” God’s initiative and man’s response lead us to the conclusion that “faith is a gift of God, but it is also a profoundly free and human act.”⁴¹⁵ A life of faith, like baptism and virginity, is a separation from a life attached to earthly realities; it moves Christians to the act of ascent. Christian faith indicates the relationship of the human being to Christ.

For Gregory, the spiritual ascent presupposes participation in Christ through faith. By faith divine nature becomes part of the believer as his second nature and he reacts spontaneously on the basis of that participated divine nature, in the same way that living beings react instinctively to what does or does not suit their nature.⁴¹⁶ The believer clings spontaneously to what conforms to the truth of faith and shuns what is contrary to it. He sheds the old man with his actions and desires, and in faith, puts on Christ who alone guarantees freedom from error. Jesus is the light of the world and whoever follows him (imitates him) will never walk in darkness (Jn 8:12). In Gregory’s spiritual vision, human life is purified by baptismal grace. But this grace is rendered active through faith, from which, as from a seed, all of the spiritual possibilities of the human being are developed.⁴¹⁷ In the treatise *The Life of Moses*, the staff of Moses is called the “rod of faith” (LM II:34) and is the weapon with which he conquers the adversaries of the soul.⁴¹⁸ Moses’ victory over the enemies of the soul with the ‘rod of faith’ stands for Christian life that has ‘faith in Christ’ as its foundation. The Nyssen underscores this fact when he says that Moses led the Hebrews through the sea on foot without making a fleet of ships for himself but making their faith a ship for crossing through the water (LM II:311). Christians, the Mystical body of Christ, separate themselves from the world in faith and feel in themselves a state of desire for Christ above all else. Consecrated chastity exemplifies this fact in an outstanding way.

⁴¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *The Year of Faith: What is faith?*, General Audience, St Peter’s Square 24 October 2012.

⁴¹⁶ *SF* 53.

⁴¹⁷ J. KROLIKOWSKI, “Faith and Reason”, in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 342.

⁴¹⁸ According to the Nyssen, the rod that changed into a snake (Ex 4:1-5) signifies the mystery of the Lord’s incarnation (LM II:26,31) through which mankind will have victory over snakes (sins) that seek their life (Num 21:7-9).

2.2.3.1 *Spiritual Marriage with Christ*

Gregory says that Christians are united to Christ by faith.⁴¹⁹ Through faith the bride (the soul) becomes a dwelling place of the Bridegroom (Christ).⁴²⁰ Faith is the acceptance not of a proposition about Christ, but of Christ himself as the Life and Light of life, and it's starting point is not belief but love.⁴²¹ Therefore, in its deep sense, faith in Christ is a nuptial union with him. For the Nyssen, the goal of virginity is to become the bride of Christ, and like a bride who in her desire to be closely united with the bridegroom takes on the ways of him through imitation, the virgin longs to be like Christ as far as possible.⁴²² It is in identifying oneself with the Church that one enters into bridal relations with Christ, i.e., chastity of consecrated men and women manifests the undivided love of the Bride (Church) to the Bridegroom (Christ). Perfect chastity is the most eloquent and obvious witness to the fact that one has left the world to follow Christ, to seek perfect union with him, to be united to him in spiritual marriage.⁴²³ In perfect chastity, the virginity of the body is the co-worker and sponsor of an inner and spiritual marriage.⁴²⁴ In the Incarnation, as the theophany of the burning bush implies, God united himself to human nature and established the most perfect and intimate union of God and man: the Sacred Humanity is the spouse of the Word.⁴²⁵ This truth lies at the heart of the theological basis for the spiritual marriage of the virgins with Christ. The union with Christ is a transformative union as it divinizes the one who surrenders one's whole being, body and soul, to Christ in faith.

For Gregory, the life of the virgin is not a life without a bridegroom. Rather, it is a life in which the virgin is one body with the incorruptible Bridegroom.⁴²⁶ Virgins are not lonely: in virginity the Master of the house (Christ) is always present and at home, so that death effects, not a separation, but a union with is longed for.⁴²⁷ Therefore, we can say that the vow of virginity is a marriage vow with Christ as the groom. This vow is not a question of being celibate 'for something'; it is about being celibate 'for

⁴¹⁹ *WIMCOC*, 84.

⁴²⁰ *HSong*, (Homily 3), 93.

⁴²¹ A. SCHMEMANN, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 104-105. We can say that love is both the starting point and the ending-point of faith. The theophany of the burning bush symbolizes Christ who attracts and invites others to fall in love with him.

⁴²² *CML*, 133.

⁴²³ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 312.

⁴²⁴ C. D. SUNBERG, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 94.

⁴²⁵ Cf. AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 9.

⁴²⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 9), 295.

⁴²⁷ *Virg*, 18. The Nyssen states it based on Phil 1:23, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better."

someone' and that 'for someone' is born from freedom.⁴²⁸ Just as in the case of faith that is a positive response of man in freedom to God's love, so too it belongs to the person to accept or reject the invitation to a life of perfect chastity. The virgins were highly regarded in the early Church because they were married to Christ. To leave this state of life and marry a man or a woman would be considered as an act of adultery.⁴²⁹ The Nyssen treats virginity as purity, and, according to him, a state of sin makes the virgin a fallen one.⁴³⁰ But the Bridegroom, who is the physician of the soul, does not turn his back on this fallen virgin; he continues facing in the direction of the one who is lost. Using the free-will a fallen virgin can again become a bride of Christ.

In Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, which gives a mystical orientation to the monastic movement organized by his brother Basil like *The Life of Moses*, the soul is portrayed as the bride. Through attributing a feminine nature to the soul, Gregory encourages all, male and female, to fall deeply in love with Christ and live a life of preparation as his virgin bride. While all are encouraged to be brides of Christ irrespective of their states of life, a consecrated person is called to embody this common vocation. It is possible that one may embrace 'virginity' from a psychological fear of, or even hatred for marriage, sexual life or personal responsibility. It can also arise in unaffirmed personalities who have grown up being treated as inferior and have never felt good about themselves nor about intimate relationship.⁴³¹ The Nyssen considers as authentic only that virginity which is infused with love of God for the purpose of "becoming one spirit with him" (1Cor 6:17) and loving him alone, and was chosen not as a means to escape from the world of temptations. He identifies as 'false virgins,' who cause the state of virginity to be blasphemed by the non-Christians, those virgins who not only indulge in the pleasures of the stomach but also immodestly relate with the opposite sex giving it a pious term 'brotherhood.'⁴³² As there is no marriage in heaven, spiritual marriage with Christ on earth is a foretaste of heavenly life.

⁴²⁸ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 194; cf. *PC* 5. The document points out that "members of each (religious) institute should recall first of all that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call, so that by being not only dead to sin (Rom 6:11) but also renouncing the world, they may live for God alone."

⁴²⁹ C. D. SUNBERG, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 94.

⁴³⁰ Cf. *Virg*, 52. Gregory of Nyssa treats anger, greed, envy, malice, hatred, slander, enmity etc. as adultery.

⁴³¹ B. COLE – P. CONNER, *Christian Totality: Theology of the Consecrated Life*, 60.

⁴³² *Virg*, 71.

The Life of Moses teaches us that perfect chastity of consecrated persons is not a negative renunciation of earthly love and sex pleasure. On the other hand, it is an ascent from the bonds of earthly love in order to be free to unite oneself to Christ in spiritual love. Pius XII in *Sacra Virginitas* agrees with Gregory: “This, then, is the primary purpose, this the central idea of Christian virginity: to aim only at the divine, to turn thereto the whole mind and soul, to want to please God in everything, to think of Him continually, to consecrate body and soul to Him” (SV 15). In a sense, every soul (every Christian) that is in a state of grace is married to Christ. But the virgin soul (consecrated person) that has left all desires and pleasures and seeks him alone, finds joy in him alone, seeks creatures only in him and for his sake. Christ lived in his celibate chastity with the Church the total gift of self and reception of the other in an authentic situation of Christian marriage. Consecrated men and women, through the vow of chastity, ascend to the spiritual love existing between Christ and the Church; they become a sign to the fact that the Church is united to Christ in faith as his bride.

2.2.3.2 Purification of Human Conjugal Love

Gregory teaches that death casts its shadow on married life.⁴³³ Since death separates husband from wife and children from parents, human beings’ desire for true companionship can be satisfied only in fellowship with God. Therefore, married life calls for transcendence – an ascent from what is impermanent to what is permanent, from fleshly life to spiritual life. Virginity comes to the aid of married persons: virginity is an art that teaches those living in the flesh how to be like the incorporeal nature.⁴³⁴ Since the original nature of man is the genderless image of God, humans are called to find completion not in another person, but only in God. The virgins possess the “reality” (the soul’s union with God or the Church’s bridal union with Christ) of which marriage is only the symbol. The Cappadocian interprets the literal presentation of the love between the bride and the bridegroom in the *Song of*

⁴³³ Ibid., 12-20.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 27; cf. *MMa*, (XVI:9), 751-752. Gregory of Nyssa teaches that human nature is the mean between two natures: “the Divine and incorporeal nature” (image of God in man) and “the irrational life of brutes” (the garments of skin or the biological life of man). In the compound nature of man, the rational and intelligent element (image of God) does not admit the distinction of male and female, while man’s bodily form and structure (irrational nature) is divided into male and female as a provision for reproduction. We can understand Gregory’s teaching on virginity as a corrective to the mistaken view that biological nature is the true nature of man. Even when he does not reject marriage, he wants that married people ascend toward Christian perfection.

Songs in a spiritual sense as a figure or symbol of the soul's love for Christ, and points out that the final end of marital love is one's union with God, i.e., the couple have to ascent from 'bodily love' in which the body is akin to what is its nature to 'spiritual love' in which the soul is akin to what is its nature:

This is why the most intense of pleasurable activities (erotic love) is set as a figure at the very fore of the guidance that the teachings give: so that by this we may learn that it is necessary for the soul, fixing itself steadily on the inaccessible beauty of the divine nature, to love that beauty as much as the body has a bent for what is akin to it and to turn passion into impassibility, so that when every bodily disposition has been quelled, our soul within us may boil with love, but only in the Spirit, because it is heated by that 'fire' that the Lord came to 'cast upon the earth'.⁴³⁵

For Gregory, the erotic power is a supremely valuable gift that needs to be steered to its highest end so that the soul will reach out without ceasing toward the ultimate and incomparable beauty of God.

Garcia Paredes notes that the root meaning of the term 'wedding' is vow or pledge.⁴³⁶ The marriage vow of the husband and wife takes its meaning from the vow of the virgin to Christ. The exemplary spousal love is that of the virgins, and ordinary spousal love in married life is to be modelled on the virgin soul's love for God. The very existence in human society of a virginal love that is deeply sacrificial and emptied of all selfishness will help to elevate and purify human conjugal love.⁴³⁷ The married can learn from the life of the virgin that the source of their love ultimately transcends anything that their limited human affection can ever hope to demonstrate.⁴³⁸ Consecrated men and women in their celibate chastity give witness to God's faithfulness to man and vice versa. They show that faith in God helps one tide over all difficulties in life.

We have to remember that married Christian men and women living in the world are also brides of Christ because baptism has united them to Christ as his brides. Baptism is a nuptial mystery.⁴³⁹ The consecrated life is always bound to Christian life. There exists a relation between the white garment

⁴³⁵ *HSong*, (Homily 1), 29.

⁴³⁶ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 45. The Spanish term 'boda' – wedding – derives from the Latin term 'vota' – vows. English word 'wedding' comes from Old English 'weddung' meaning 'pledge' or 'vow'.

⁴³⁷ AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 40.

⁴³⁸ F. J. MOLONEY, *A Life of Promise: Poverty, Chastity, Obedience*, 110.

⁴³⁹ CCC 1617.

given at baptism and the religious habit of consecrated men and women. Through wearing the habit, they make their bridal union with Christ ever visible. The profession of consecrated men and women is ‘a further consecration of’ (an ascent from) what is already there through baptism. This consecration transforms them and makes them true brides of Christ. In their mystical marriage, there is no sanctuaries in the soul which Christ cannot penetrate; he possesses them fully. Their consecration to God in chastity is a model for the faithful in a lifelong marriage bond with God. In a culture that is prone to evaluate the success of family life just on the basis of sexual satisfaction, chastity of consecrated men and women frees the conjugal love from the idolatry of sex.⁴⁴⁰ Moses’ injunction to the Israelites to abstain from sexual relations (Ex 19:15) in order to “be cleansed of every bodily concern and pure of passion” (LM I:42) to approach the mountain of God can be interpreted as the negation of the idolatry of sex and the affirmation of the value of virginity.

2.2.3.3 Faith in Divine Assistance

We saw that through faith one entrusts oneself totally to God, and the life of virginity is not a solitary journey. According to Gregory, grace is at work in man from the moment of birth and this grace is manifested in a life of faith founded on one’s free choice (LM II:44). Consecrated persons who entrust themselves fully to God in faith bear witness to this truth in the world. To those who say that the ‘mutual help’ which is sought in Christian marriage is a more effective aid in striving for personal sanctity than the solitude of the heart of virgins and celibates Pope Pius XII responds in his encyclical *Sacra Virginitas*, calling attention to the heavenly gifts that the virgins receive from their Heavenly Spouse, and that enrich their personality:

For those who embrace the life of perfect chastity, the privation of human love permitted in the married state does not diminish and despoil the human personality. For they receive from the giver of heavenly gifts something spiritual which far exceeds that ‘mutual help’ which husband and wife confer on each other. They consecrate themselves to Him Who is their source, and Who shares with them His divine life, and thus personality suffers no loss, but gains immensely (SV 39).

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. VC 88. The document observes that “the present hedonistic culture separates sexuality from all objective moral norms and justifies a kind of idolatry of the sexual instincts. The reply of the consecrated life is above all in the joyful living of perfect chastity.”

What the Pope highlights is that the virgins consecrate themselves not to something but to ‘the Person who will live in them and enable them to produce fruits’ (cf. Jn 15:4). Moreover, virginity prompts the married couple to ascend from the level of ‘mutual help’ to ‘divine help’ because salvation comes from God alone; trust in ‘mutual help’ does not lead man to salvation, but trust in ‘divine help’ does.

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory assures divine assistance to all who lead a life of virtue and says that “this assistance (Greek, *summachia* – “fellow feeling”, “fighting with”), that was already there at our birth, is manifested in our life when we apply ourselves to diligent training in higher life and strip ourselves for the more vigorous contests” (LM II:44) – the life of virginity. As we saw in the first chapter, we can understand this assistance as the presence of a guardian angel, who “shows us the benefits of virtue” (LM II:46), or conscience, which enjoins us at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. The soul is never alone, never without assistance. Angels serve men with their care and protection. “There is a doctrine which derives its trustworthiness from the tradition of the Fathers,” Gregory states, “which says that after our nature fell into sin God did not disregard our fall and withhold his providence. No, he appointed an angel with an incorporeal nature to help in the life of each person” (LM II:45). Consecrated men and women experience this assistance in a special way as they apply themselves to diligent training in higher life. In the treatise, the Nyssen presents Moses as a symbol of the soul that always seeks divine assistance in its spiritual ascent. Gregory likens Aron – whom God gives Moses (Ex 4:27) as a “brotherly assistance” (LM II:42) in his mission in Egypt – to an angel who assists the soul in its fight against evils (LM II:47). He assures that those who correctly live the life of virtues (especially the virgins) will never be devoid of divine assistance. In *On Virginity*, the Nyssen says, “The life of virginity does not bewail orphanhood, nor does it lament widowhood; it is always accompanied by an incorruptible Bridegroom.”⁴⁴¹ One cannot live consecrated chastity depending only on one’s own strength; it is God who helps consecrated men and women in their weakness. Estrangement from divine assistance means intimacy with evil (LM II:229).

2.2.3.4 Preparation for Martyrdom

Faith in Christ calls for conformity to Christ. According to the Nyssen, the bride of Christ is to be like Christ, and she bears witness to her spiritual

⁴⁴¹ *Virg*, 18.

marriage by faith to Christ through her conformity to him.⁴⁴² In Jn 18: 37, Jesus says, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” He not only proclaimed the truth but also testified to it through his life. The word martyr (Greek, *martus*) literally means “a witness,” while the verbal form (*martureo*) refers to the action of witnessing.⁴⁴³ Christ was the perfect martyr (witness) for the truth because there was no separation between theology and spirituality or faith and life (morality) in him. Spirituality is the implementation and translation of faith (theology) into everyday life situations. “Where there is faith, there is present the power of Christ,”⁴⁴⁴ says Gregory. He ties boldness of speech (*parresia*) to faith. Boldness of speech refers to the confidence, courage, and determination of the martyr to confess one’s faith in the face of danger and then to maintain this confession.⁴⁴⁵ Moses, when he had been enlightened by the light which shone from the bush, made haste to share with his countrymen the good things which came to him from God (LM II:310). The encounter with God at the burning bush not only enlightened but also empowered Moses. He, with *the rod of faith*, like “the one who has developed as an *athlete* by strenuous practice under his trainer, would boldly and confidently strip for the contest with his opponents” (LM II:36). Here Moses symbolizes the soul that became a soldier of Christ – a Christian who is ready to die for Christ. Every martyr is a confessor of faith in public. Christian martyrdom is the supreme expression of one’s union with Christ in love. Thus, it is a nuptial mystery particularly relevant for the chaste virgins of Christ.

A martyr is a faithful witness for Christ in word and deed; he confesses his faith in the closest possible imitation of Christ’s Passion and death. Thus, a martyr is a true disciple of Christ, one who “follows the Lamb wheresoever he goes” (Rev 14:4). When Constantine’s final defeat of Licinius in 323 brought an end to martyrdom in the Roman Empire, the monks eagerly preserved the continuity with Christ himself. When Christianity became the official religion of the empire and was imperialized, they felt the need to demonstrate the stark reality of Christianity as being “in the world, but not of the world” (Jn 15:19, 17:14-16). Until the victory of Constantine, it was

⁴⁴² Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 15), 469. Gregory interprets the bride’s conformity to the bridegroom in these words: “I have scraped off everything that is discerned as alien to that nature of his, and I have in me nothing such as is not found in him.”

⁴⁴³ E. L. SMITHER, *Mission in the Early Church: Themes and Reflections*, 52; cf. CCC 2473.

⁴⁴⁴ *CML*, 129.

⁴⁴⁵ J. C. SKEDROS, “The Suffering of Martyrdom: Greek Perspectives in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries”, in N. V. HARRISON – D. G. HUNTER (eds.), *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, 28.

martyrdom that proclaimed this truth in an incontrovertible manner. The martyrs were the *athletes* of the Christian life, those who had achieved a mighty victory in a great ‘race or combat’ (*agon*). Their combat is often represented as a combat with the forces of evil, represented by the State and its idolatrous demands.⁴⁴⁶ In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa likens Christian life to an athletic ‘race’ (LM II:246) or combat (*agon*) to keep the faith and, for the Cappadocian, “the one who directs the games and the one who supports his own competitors against their opponents are one and the same”⁴⁴⁷ – Christ. The contest’s judge (*agonothetes*) who will crown the victor is also none other than Christ himself (LM II:246).⁴⁴⁸ Therefore, a life of faith is ‘a participation in Christ’s martyrdom’ or ‘a race under Christ’s direction and encouragement’ (cf. 2 Tim 4:7), to be crowned by Christ himself.

Every revelation, whether it is big or small, is a dialogue between God and man, and the purpose of this dialogue is not so much the transmission of information but rather the transformation of the person in the life of the Trinity.⁴⁴⁹ Every consecrated person has encountered Christ in a personal way, entered into a dialogue with him and received a special invitation for transformation. Therefore, the consecrated life must manifest the ‘adult faith’ of the Christian community. Being an ‘adult’ means having a faith that does not follow the waves of today’s fashions or the latest novelties.⁴⁵⁰ A faith that is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ is adult and mature, and it sticks to Jesus words, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). Virginité is the spiritual exclusivity of faithfulness to God.⁴⁵¹ In the monastic tradition, virginité is usually associated with martyrdom because it sacrifices the life of the body.⁴⁵² The strength of virginité is manifested in the missionary audacity of those who are not afraid of losing their life; who are not overly concerned with preserving it. Consecrated men and women, like Moses, are to be in the front line of the battle against the powers of evil.

⁴⁴⁶ Cf. A. LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys*, 95.

⁴⁴⁷ *HBeat*, (Homily VIII), 87.

⁴⁴⁸ The Nyssen says this in line with 2 Tim 4:7-8, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

⁴⁴⁹ T. ROWLAND, *Ratzinger’s Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, 51.

⁴⁵⁰ E. D. GAAL, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift*, 79.

⁴⁵¹ H. V. BALTHASAR, *Convergences*, 76.

⁴⁵² AA. VV., *Il Monachesimo secondo la Tradizione dell’Oriente Cristiano*, 32.

2.2.4 Ministerial Dimension: Priest

For Gregory, Christ became “a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:6), when he, the great High Priest, solemnly sacrificed his own lamb, i.e., his own body.⁴⁵³ It implies that, according to the Nyssen, Christian priesthood is a participation in Christ’s perpetual priesthood, and as priests, Christians present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (cf. Rom 12:1). In *The Life of Moses*, he introduces a priest as a chaste Christian who, adorned with virtues, enters the sanctuary of his soul, brings his own body to the altar, becomes a “living sacrifice” by making the soul weightless incessantly through the shedding of the heavy and fleshy garment of life, and ascends to God (LM II:191). All Christians, both men and women, are called to be priests. For the Cappadocian, what distinguishes priestly life from fleshly life is its fruit: the fruit of priesthood is self-control, that of the other is self-indulgence (LM II:286).

Zizioulas notes that in the New Testament the term ‘priest’ is used for Christ alone.⁴⁵⁴ Later this term was applied to those who represent Christ by participation. The laity participate in Christ’s priesthood, as we have just said above, by presenting themselves, having received regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit in baptism, as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1), and thereby bearing witness to Christ – the priest and victim being offered – everywhere on earth. The clergy (Greek, *kleros*, ‘portion’ – of the laity), without bypassing the priesthood of the laity, participate in Christ’s priesthood by acting in the person of Christ in teaching and guiding the laity and in offering the Eucharist to God in the name of all the people. *Lumen Gentium* names the priesthood of the laity “the royal or common priesthood,” and that of the clergy “the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood” (LG 10). As the Body of Christ, the participation of the Church in the ministry of Christ is primarily corporate, and this ministry refers primarily to the royal priesthood which pertains to the whole membership of Christ’s Body.⁴⁵⁵ The vow of chastity of consecrated persons is a call to

⁴⁵³ CE III, (IV:19), 125.

⁴⁵⁴ J. D. ZIZIOULAS, *Being as Communion*, 230. Christ is mentioned as priest in Heb 2:17, 5:6, 8:4, 10:21.

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. T. F. TORRANCE, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 35. The Old Testament speaks of the universal priesthood of the people of God in its totality: “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). In the New Testament St Peter takes up the expression, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9). The book of Revelation presents Christ as the one who has made all Christians ‘to be a kingdom and priests who will reign on earth’ (Rev 5:10). Scripture teaches in a most firm and constant manner the sacred and priestly character of each member of the people of God.

manifest the beauty of the priestly life of all Christians in a perfect way. Through the vow of chastity, consecrated men and women, like Moses who purified himself of the fleshly life, offer their biological life as a living sacrifice to God.

In the Orthodox Church, while all monks follow the path of virginity, married men are allowed to enter ministerial priesthood. The reason is that the Church sees both marriage and virginity as holy states.⁴⁵⁶ The individual who plans to enter the priesthood must decide before ordination whether he desires to serve the Church as a married man or as a celibate, as no ‘marriage’ – “clerical marriage” – is permitted after ordination. But the monks’ virginity is placed as an ideal for everyone. The influence of the monks on the Church was so much so that in Orthodoxy from the sixth century candidates for episcopate have been chosen exclusively from the monasteries, while in the West the ideal of monastic celibacy was later extended to the clergy in general.⁴⁵⁷ The reasons presented by the Second Vatican Council’s *Optatum Totius* for priestly celibacy accentuate the monastic nature of ministerial priesthood:

They renounce marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and hold fast to their Lord with that undivided love which is profoundly in harmony with the new Covenant; they bear witness to the resurrection in a future life and obtain the most useful assistance towards the constant exercise of that perfect charity by which they can become all things to all men in their priestly ministry (OT 10).

⁴⁵⁶ D. CONSTANTELOS, “Marriage and Celibacy of the Clergy in the Orthodox Church”, in W. BASSET – P. HUIZING (eds.), *Celibacy in the Church*, 30. The Orthodox believe that their faith and practice in this area correspond to the faith and practice of the Apostolic Church. In the Apostolic Church there were married and unmarried clergymen, deacons (1 Tim 3:12) as well as priests and bishops (Tit 1:5-6; 1 Tim 3:2, 4-5). There were married and celibate Apostles. Among the twelve, only John seems to have been single, and after him St Paul. There was no distinction between married and unmarried Apostles. St Paul did not condemn marriage, nor did he force anyone to stay celibate. He merely expressed an opinion, which was not binding upon the Christian community and found few devoted followers. Intercourse of a man with his lawful wife is chastity. A life of perfect chastity (virginity) or perpetual monogamy is the norm for all Christians including ministerial priests in Orthodoxy. Two categories of priests exist in Orthodoxy: married priests and unmarried priests (monastics). The reason for forbidding marriage after ordination in the Tradition can be that such an act would indicate the priest’s descent to worldly life after his ascent to Christ’s priesthood. Christian life is a perpetual ascent to the divine.

⁴⁵⁷ J. MEYENDORFF, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*, 23.

Here, what distinguishes the ministerial priests from consecrated persons who live virginity is only their special ordination to priesthood and the characteristics this ordination entails. Now let us see how the vow of chastity of consecrated persons become an ascent to the embodiment of the royal priesthood of all Christians.

2.2.4.1 Perfection of the Royal Priesthood

According to the Nyssen, Christian perfection consists in identifying oneself with that which the name of Christ signifies.⁴⁵⁸ The names of Christ include the names of ‘Passover’ – paschal lamb – (1Cor 5:7) and ‘high priest’ (Heb 4:14).⁴⁵⁹ Christ was truly sacrificed as the paschal victim on our behalf. But the priest, bringing in the sacrifice to God, was none other than Christ himself. Gregory exhorts those seeking Christian perfection to be both priests and victims imitating Christ and offer their fleshly life in sacrifice to God by not being conformed to the world:

For the wisdom of the flesh is hostile to God and is not subject to the law of God. As long as the flesh is not ‘offered up’ through the life-giving sacrifice by mortifying the members upon the earth from which passions spring, it is not possible for the pleasing and perfect will of God to be achieved expeditiously in the life of the faithful.⁴⁶⁰

What the Cappadocian makes clear is that the virtue of chastity is the foundation of the ascent toward God, and that chastity springs from the priestly nature of Christian life.

In *On Virginity*, the Nyssen encourages the virgins to attain perfection in their priestly life.⁴⁶¹ The virgins are “priests for God” who offer as a gift to God not what is external to them but a gift that is truly theirs; they offer themselves as a sacrifice. Since the Law forbids unholy men to be priests (Ex 19:22), they are to be purified of fleshly life. Like St Paul, they are to lead a life that is “crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20). Being crucified with Christ, they should “die daily.” It is a living sacrifice, and a rational service not dominated by passions. They should never give themselves up to sinful life but keep their bodies under constant control. The virgins carry Christ’s death wherever they go. They live not their own lives, but let Christ live in them.

⁴⁵⁸ *Perf*, 98.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁶¹ *Virg*, 74-75.

The result of this type of ‘constant purification’ (i.e., being crucified with Christ) is that they would be able to see God and called blessed, because only the clean of heart are worthy of it (Mt 5:8):

Be one of those crucified with Christ, to stand beside Him as a pure priest, to become a pure sacrifice in all purity, preparing yourself through your holiness for the presence of God, in order that you yourself may see God in the purity of your heart according to the promise of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.⁴⁶²

For the priestly soul of the virgins, purity is the tool of the vision of God. Moses who removes the sandals in order to participate in the divine light is a symbol of the soul that is in need of ‘ongoing purification’ to continue its spiritual ascent. Gregory demands from the virgins the most perfect form of purification which transforms their human nature into angelic. In this sense, to be crucified with Christ also means to rise with Christ to lead a life of resurrection here on earth.

In the Old Testament, communion with God is reserved only for the High Priest who enters the Holy of Holies. The Nyssen understands it as an allegory and presents the grace of (High) priesthood as common to all who purify themselves from their fleshly life and enter the sanctuary of their soul offering their body as a living sacrifice (LM II:177-183). In *The Life of Moses*, the high priest who enters the Holy of Holies symbolizes the Christian who enters the Holy of Holies of his heart that was converted into the temple of God through purification to meet God there in contemplation. The ascent to the stage of contemplation requires freedom from the fleshly life: “It requires that he who would be a priest to God also bring his own body to the altar and become a sacrifice, not by being put to death, but by being a living sacrifice and rational service. He should not inflict upon his soul a heavy and fleshy garment of life” (LM II:191). According to him, the Incarnation of the Son of God frees us from the literal sense of Scripture and leads us to the deeper

⁴⁶² Ibid., 75. A. Seebohm has written an article on a curious drawing of a “crucified monk” appears in two manuscripts dating from the first third of the fifteenth century: MS 49 of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in London and MS 1404 of the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome. The monk is tonsured, barefoot, and wears a long, greyish-white, cowed and belted habit, reminiscent of that of the Cistercian order, which was made of undyed wool and was therefore not pure white. His eyes are blindfolded and his mouth is padlocked shut. Four large, thick nails with trefoil heads fasten his hands and feet to a yellow cross, which stands on a green, grassy mound. The drawing highlights the fact that every monk should daily crucify his flesh through mortification with all his might: cf. A. SEEBOHM, “The Crucified Monk”, in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 59 (1996), 61-10.

levels of meaning. Christ confers the grace of priesthood to all those who adorn themselves with virtues, pure conscience, commandments, self-control, faith, hope, heavenly thoughts, fragrance of the soul, and ever-blooming grace of Paradise, and he lets them enter the inner most sanctuary of their mind that is closed off to evil and offer themselves by putting to death the mind of the flesh by the sword of the Word of God as an acceptable sacrifice pleasing to God.⁴⁶³ For Gregory, the beauty of priesthood manifested by the vestments of the priests of the Old Testament calls for the interiorization required of ‘the priests’ (all Christians) of the New Testament. The beauty of the new priesthood is not manifested in the beauty of the vestments but in the virtues that adorn the soul. This sinless state of the soul endows it with boldness of speech (*parresia*) in the presence of God because with an innocent conscience the soul can speak to God and intercede for others, free of fear, shame and remorse. Moses, who converses with God and intercedes for the Israelites

⁴⁶³ Cf. *HOF*, (Homily III), 128-129. Gregory writes, “But when the spiritual lawgiver, our Lord Jesus Christ, strips the law of its corporeal veils and brings the types’ hidden teachings into the open, he does not first select one person out of the whole to bring him alone into conversation with God, but bestows this dignity upon all equally, making the grace of priesthood available to those who want it. Then the priest’s beauty is not contrived by any external make-up concocted from a dye and a weaver’s tricks, but rather (Christ) clothes him with the adornment that is proper and connatural to him, colouring him with the graces of the virtues rather than with a many-colored robe. And he does not adorn the breast with earthly gold but rejuvenates the beauty of the heart with an unsullied and pure conscience. Into this guard he also inserts the gleams of precious stones; these are the brilliant rays of what the Apostle calls the holy commandments. Moreover, that part whose adornment requires this kind of garment is protected by the leg-band; for surely you are not unaware that the clothing of self-control is this part’s adornment. And when he had hung intelligible pomegranates, flowers, and bells on the fringes of the lifestyle’s garment – one might reasonably understand these to be the conspicuous elements of the virtuous life, which publicize this way of life – and so instead of the bell he attached to the garment-fringes the resounding doctrine of the faith, instead of the pomegranate the hidden preparation for the coming hope, covered by a strict way of living, and instead of the flowers the ever-blooming grace of paradise, only then did he bring the person into the priest’s innermost sanctuary and its most interior part. Yet this innermost sanctuary is not lifeless nor built by hand but is his mind’s secret chamber, provided that it is truly closed off to evil and inaccessible to wicked reasoning. Moreover, he adorns the head with thoughts of heaven, not stamping the imprint of letters on gold leaf but imprinting God himself on the commanding reason. The perfume he pours on the hair is the inner one prepared by the soul itself. The victim and sacrificial animal that he provides for the person to offer to God through the mystical sacrifice is nothing other than himself. For the one who is really led by the Lord to this priesthood, having put to death the mind of the flesh by the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God, he then propitiates God when he comes into the innermost sanctuary, offering himself through this sacrifice and presenting his own body as a living sacrifice, holy, and pleasing to God.”

with the confidence that God will hear him, is the ideal priest and the model for consecrated persons to attain perfection in their priestly life.

2.2.4.2 Participation in the Redemptive Work of Christ

In *The Life of Moses*, the theophany of the burning bush teaches that the vow of chastity is also a special readiness to participate in the redemptive work of Christ. According to Gregory, anyone who goes through the experience of Moses at the burning bush “becomes able to help others to salvation, to destroy the tyranny which holds power wickedly, and to deliver to freedom everyone held in evil servitude” (LM II:26). It is one’s participation in the redemptive work of Christ who “came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). Priestly work is a central dimension of Christian practice: Christians, as a royal priesthood, are called to share in the pain, anger, grief and confusion, as well as joys, of their fellows so that they will bring these things to God for healing imitating Christ their High Priest who shares human feelings, sufferings, uncertainties and despair.⁴⁶⁴ In the treatise of the Nyssen, Moses is presented as the one who fulfils this priestly ministry in a perfect way. Moses, foreshadowing Jesus, announced the Kingdom of God among the Hebrews, who were travailing under the Egyptians, through his priestly function, i.e., ‘through bearing their burdens and gaining deliverance for them from God’ (cf. Ps 68:19-20) in imitation of Christ.

Vita Consecrata states that the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the Kingdom of God by the lives of consecrated persons (VC 1). The respect and protection that the society and the Church accorded to them from ancient days show that they were considered as persons dedicated to the well-being and goodness of the society. They devoted their lives to the service of the poor and the sick without distinction of race, social rank or religion. D. J. Unger opines that the persecutors of the Church of all times are the greatest witness to the social blessings that perfect chastity has been, is and will be.⁴⁶⁵ Precisely because such single men and women are so beneficial to the Church and are such a power to the Church’s apostolate, they are persecuted by the adversaries of the Church. Consecrated chastity does not make persons mere selfish bachelors or spinsters. On the other hand, it impels them to give their

⁴⁶⁴ Cf. D. B. FORRESTER, *Truthful Action*, 13.

⁴⁶⁵ D. J. UNGER, *The Mystery of Love for the Single: A Guide for those who follow the Single Vocation in the World*, 23.

life at the service of the Kingdom of God without calculating the consequences.

In giving birth to Christ in the world where “the tyranny holds power wickedly” (LM II:26), consecrated men and women “show themselves to be the sons and daughters of the Apocalyptic Woman (Virgin Mary) who gives birth to the Messiah before the dragon”⁴⁶⁶ (Rev 12:5). This woman is a symbol of the fighting virginity that is irreconcilable with the evils of the world. She is a virgin but she conceives by the work of God and gives birth to life. On the other hand, the prostitute woman (Rev 17), who does not conceive life, and is a friend of the dragon and the beasts, may represent those leading a fleshly life. As the sons and daughters of the Virgin, consecrated men and women are to exercise their priestly ministry as brothers and sisters of Jesus. It is to be noted that at the beginning of the consecrated life there were only brothers and sisters. Monasticism began as a lay movement, ‘a secular institution.’⁴⁶⁷ The formal definition of a consecrated man is a layman, not a cleric. St Antony, Father of Monasticism, was a lay man. Ordained priests came later because monks needed priests for the celebration of the Eucharist. The virgins, like Christ who is “the firstborn among many brothers and sisters”⁴⁶⁸ (Rom 8:29), are called to be brothers and sisters of every person, and their chaste flesh, like that of Jesus, is a sign to the world that they are ready to give their life for those whom they love. Religious priests also are to live this fundamental dimension of ‘brotherhood in Christ.’

Another aspect of Moses’ royal priesthood, which Gregory highlights, is that “he intercedes with God for his brethren” (LM II:263). Here, according to the Nyssen, Moses is imitating Jesus who “is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us” (Rom 8:34). As participants in Christ, consecrated persons are universal intercessors because “nothing would be more plainly contrary to charity, which is the hallmark of the followers of Christ, than a petty preoccupation with one’s self which would close one’s eyes to the needs of those who will always remain one’s brothers and sisters.”⁴⁶⁹ According to Gregory, the prayer that rises to God is that which comes from a pure heart. Therefore, royal priesthood presupposes a chaste life. Here, with reference to the consecrated life, we can receive an insight from Geza Vermes who

⁴⁶⁶ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 177.

⁴⁶⁷ AA. VV., *Il Monachesimo secondo la Tradizione dell’Oriente Cristiano*, 240.

⁴⁶⁸ *CE III*, (II:50), 81. Gregory of Nyssa says that Jesus became the firstborn among many brethren in his baptism. Jesus makes those who share a like birth with him his own brothers and sisters.

⁴⁶⁹ D. P. GUERANGER, *On the Religious Life*, 34.

presents Moses, based on the Talmudic tradition, as a perfect priestly intercessor before God:

According to the Talmud, Moses freely decided to terminate cohabitation with his wife after he received his call from God. He reasoned that if the Israelites, to whom the Lord spoke only once and briefly, were ordered to abstain from women temporarily (Ex 19:15), he, being in continual dialogue with Heaven, should remain chaste permanently.⁴⁷⁰

Those who dedicate themselves to perfect chastity exert a powerful influence on society through prayer for their fellow men.

Royal priesthood calls for cosmic priesthood. Being a microcosm or a universe in miniature,⁴⁷¹ every human being is a mediator and is called with Christ to a cosmic priesthood whose task is to offer the world to God and bestow God's blessing on the world.⁴⁷² Christian's priestly relationship with nature, i.e., understanding nature as God's gift, revelation and a means to commune with him, prevents them from the desire for domination, oppression and violence. Abstinence was understood by ancient monks as an expression of their "virginal" relationship with nature.⁴⁷³ Orthodox theologian Schmemmann notes that in the Genesis account of creation story, God creates man as a hungry being and places him at a banquet table, the created world, so that man takes the world into himself in the form of food and becomes a microcosm, a representation of the universe in miniature. Through offering the world back to God in 'thanksgiving' (*eucharistia*), man transforms his life that he receives from the world into life in God, into communion with him.⁴⁷⁴ Through presenting the spiritual ascent as a journey from the visible to the invisible, the Nyssen is actually underscoring the perfection of cosmic priesthood of the Christians. If the essence of God is inaccessible, his existence is manifested by his action in the world. The wisdom and the glory of God shine forth in the creation (LM II:168). The entire cosmos is a burning

⁴⁷⁰ G. VERMES, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*, 100. In Judaism The term Talmud, which means 'study' or 'learning,' is used to refer to opinions received from predecessors, to a whole body of learning within the Oral Law which contained a revelation of all possible interpretations of the written Torah to Moses, or to teaching derived from exegesis of a Scripture text: cf. C. KANNENGISSER, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, 126.

⁴⁷¹ Cf. *SRe*, 204. Gregory speaks through the mouth of Macrina, "Man is a microcosm, encompassing in himself the elements by which he is made complete."

⁴⁷² N. V. HARRISON, "The human person as image and likeness of God", 86.

⁴⁷³ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 191.

⁴⁷⁴ A. SCHMEMMANN, *For the Life of the World*, 15.

bush that reveals God's glory.⁴⁷⁵ Every man and woman as a cosmic priest "stands before the altar of the world"⁴⁷⁶ and offers the world back to God in thanksgiving. Consecrated men and women embody the cosmic priesthood of each man and woman by purifying the world with their own purity, especially the context in which they live,⁴⁷⁷ and as worthy priests, who participate in the only priesthood of Christ, "the Mediator,"⁴⁷⁸ they, with their chaste soul, offer the world in its purity to God.

2.2.4.3 Equality of Man and Woman

We saw that as participants in the royal priesthood of Christ man and woman are equal: human beings are priests by nature; equality rests on their soul than their physicality. The Nyssen's view of human equality primarily springs from the 'first sense' of the creation of man: God created the 'common human nature' (all mankind – male and female) in his image. For him, inequality and division are not present in the original human nature that God has created, nor will they be present in the eschatological restoration of God's original creative plan. He also teaches that gender distinction (male and female), which God granted foreseeing the fall of man, splits apart the original unity of mankind. Now man and woman are spiritually equal, but physically different. But sexual differentiation and sex had nothing to do with the fall which happened due to the misuse of freewill, i.e., it is not sexual differentiation that led to the fall but the misuse of freewill. In order to ensure that the human race did not become extinct, sex was necessary following the fall, which had plunged the human being into mortal existence. Sex meant for the Nyssen reproduction in the postlapsarian state.⁴⁷⁹ In Christ, human beings overcome the difference between male and female because "there is neither male nor female in Christ" (Gal 3:28), and he is all things for all human

⁴⁷⁵ K. WARE, "Through Creation to the Creator", in J. CHRYSSAVGIS – B. V. FOLTZ (eds.), *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 90.

⁴⁷⁶ C. M. GSCHWANDTNER, "All Creation Rejoices in You": Creation in the Liturgies for the Feasts of the Theotokos", in J. CHRYSSAVGIS – B. V. FOLTZ (eds.), *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, 307.

⁴⁷⁷ Cf. AA. VV., *Il Monachesimo Secondo la Tradizione dell'Oriente Cristiano*, 156. In the first chapter we had a view of the monks of old who withdrew to the desert, attained holiness through purification and transformed the world.

⁴⁷⁸ *Perf*, 116.

⁴⁷⁹ A. D. DECONIK, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*, 116.

beings.⁴⁸⁰ Gregory develops the theology of the Incarnation on the basis of Christ as ‘human’ rather than as ‘male.’ Christ, who assumed the human nature, calls the whole mankind, not only men but also women, to participate in him, i.e., to Christify their biological being. Even though the resurrection body will be the same as that which has dissolved in the grave, the eschatological life is Christ will be “genderless in character,” i.e., the unity (the confluence) of the male and the female in an angelic life.

The humanity of Christ reflects the original image of God that is devoid of gender difference. In the seventh homily on the *Song of Songs* Gregory identifies Solomon’s ‘mother’ who crowns him (Song 3:11) with God himself and writes that both words ‘father’ and ‘mother’ must be understood to mean the same thing when referencing to God because the Divine is neither male nor female.⁴⁸¹ Christ manifested the true human nature, free from the characteristics of male and female, at its deepest and most unified level, which is common to both sexes.⁴⁸² Even though he has a gender, he incorporated both into himself. Human nature is free from (the perversion of) passions in Christ. A. P. Rodriguez makes it clear when he says how Jesus lived his celibate chastity:

Jesus had not only men companions but also women companions. Jesus did not marry, and yet, he valued and loved concrete men and women with tenderness and respect, and accepted their love as well. He made the revelation of (chaste) love the corner stone of his Good News, a love that he enhanced, cherished, praised and dignified in the women he met, when the

⁴⁸⁰ *Virg*, 64. For Gregory, there was not a time when Christ was not. Adam and Eve could overcome their gender through participating in the pre-incarnate Christ.

⁴⁸¹ *HSong*, (Homily 7), 225. God transcends human gender. The terms ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ were not used by the Church to magnify maleness; they were not part of a patriarchal ploy to keep women ‘in place.’ They were theological terms used to describe the inner relationships among members of the Trinity, and to describe as well as humanly possible the unknowable, ineffable Godhead. They imply relationships among the persons of the Trinity, and distinguish them as separate persons who yet exist in a community of love. Even more crucial, the names lead one to contemplate the correct relationships among the three persons, and their particular personalities and modes of existence: cf. D. BETONICK, “The Spirit of the Female Priesthood”, in T. HOPKO (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood*, 157-159. Gregory of Nyssa taught that a deviation from these traditional terms causes deviations in doctrine. If one does not use these precise theological terms, he warned, an unclear image of the reality of the Trinity emerges, a misguided conception occurs, one contemplates a mistaken impression of God. Any terms other than ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ serve as a starting point for the deflection of sound doctrine: cf. *CE I*, (XXXIX: 643), 187.

⁴⁸² P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 81.

religious and cultural prejudices of his time saw only shame and condemnation.⁴⁸³

Intimacy with Christ – in which the soul increasingly becomes like Christ himself, and the body becomes a mirror of the soul – is the basis for human transcendence. This transcendence is possible for man because the image of God in man is properly an image so far as it fails in none of those attributes which are found in God.⁴⁸⁴ Christ, the man from whom consecrated persons learned not to marry, can teach them to relate to their brothers and sisters, without renouncing love and tenderness.⁴⁸⁵ As brides of Christ, consecrated men and women are called to love others not with the love of a male or a female but with the chaste love of Christ himself. For them, sexuality does not refer to sexual acts, but the love between man and woman which transcends the physical. In Christ they overcome the perversion of passions, and look at and love the other as a sacred person.

According to Gillian Clark, in the Greco-Roman antiquity there existed two assumptions about women, and Christianity inherited both: a) women in general are both physically and morally weaker than men; more dominated by the needs and desires of the body; and therefore, less able to understand what is good and to hold fast what they know to be good, and b) some women, at least, are capable of understanding and living by moral principles, and of being the moral equals, or even superiors, of men.⁴⁸⁶ It can be because of this that in *The Life of Moses* Gregory interprets Pharaoh's preference for female offspring over male offspring as his preference for a life of passions over a life of virtues, and exhorts Christians – men and women – to give birth to male (virtue) in their soul by their free choice (LM II:5-6). To be 'manly' (for both male and female) is to live beyond the passions, i.e., to be rational, while to be 'womanish' (for both male and female) is to be fleshly, sinful, sensuous, passionate and bodily. In this sense, for Gregory, a life of virginity is a perpetual commitment to acquire 'manly' qualities.

Garcia Paredes notes that the consecration in virginity helped not a few Christian women – in ancient times and perhaps also today – to free themselves from the social rules that forced them to accept certain gender

⁴⁸³ A. P. RODRIGUEZ, "Male and Female Created Them", in *Religious Life Asia*, 4/4, (2002), 43.

⁴⁸⁴ *MMA*, (XI: 3), 736.

⁴⁸⁵ Cf. A. P. RODRIGUEZ, "Male and Female Created Them", 46.

⁴⁸⁶ G. CLARK, "Women and Asceticism in the Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender", in V. L. WIMBUSH – R. VALANTASIS (eds.), *Asceticism*, 34; cf. L. SWAN, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*, 39.

roles; her virginity became not only a symbol of the power of God that conquers the evils of this world, but even more, a sign of the feminine power to overcome and break the social structures of gender.⁴⁸⁷ Participation in God through virginity changed the virgins' perspective on everything. Beauty took on a new meaning as it was no longer defined by the world's standards, but by God's.⁴⁸⁸ The light which shone from Moses' face after he had been spending time with God became the goal of the virgins. In a society where gender difference determined the role each one should play, "the consecrated virginity of women and the celibacy of men became dangerous and anti-cultural: men found the highest perfection in humility, silence and obedience – usually a woman's thing. The prostitutes became virgins and the virgins became men, soldiers of Christ actively fighting against the forces of evil."⁴⁸⁹ In this regard, N. F. Robinson observes that there is no distinction between the religious habit of the monk and the nun⁴⁹⁰ in Orthodoxy as their equality is stabilized in Christ. Taking into account Gregory's teaching that the soul reflects the beauty of God while the body receives the beauty indirectly from the soul, we can say that the monastic habit reflects also the genderless state of the soul.

Equality of man and woman has a special emphasis in *The Life of Moses* that presents man's spiritual ascent as the soul's ascent to perfection. In itself the soul is undifferentiated, neither male nor female; it is incorporeal. And again, the image of God is equal in men and women by virtue of the common humanity they share. The Nyssen's brother Basil in his first homily *On the Origin of Humanity* had already said that in the creation account the term 'man' means both male and female and that which is according to God's image is of equal honour.⁴⁹¹ Nobody can accuse women of weak in body because it is vigorous in patient endurance and earnest in vigils.⁴⁹² Basil's monasticism was receptive of both sexes and all classes of individuals. Gregory built upon that foundation and brought a greater depth to the understanding of monasticism. According to him, the presentation of woman as a helper for man in the second account of creation (Gen 2:18) does not mean the inferiority of woman because this 'help' should be understood as participation in the contemplation of the face of God which, before the fall,

⁴⁸⁷ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 171.

⁴⁸⁸ C. D. SUNBERG, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 90.

⁴⁸⁹ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 172.

⁴⁹⁰ N. F. ROBINSON, *Monasticism in the Orthodox Churches*, 3.

⁴⁹¹ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *On the Human Condition*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, 45.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 46.

was Adam's sole desire.⁴⁹³ Moreover, as J. S. Grabowski observes the Hebrew word *ezer* (help) is never used in the Old Testament to designate an inferior status; the term often refers to God as the one who gives 'help' to Israel.⁴⁹⁴ For Gregory, as we have already seen in the first chapter, woman is in the image of God equally with man.

In his hagiographic portrait of his sister, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, Gregory presents the life and works of Macrina as a model not just for women but for all men and women hoping to be united with Christ. Macrina became the abbess (Greek, *hegoumenos* 'leader') of a monastery at the banks of the river Iris in Pontus (modern-day north-eastern Turkey) even before her brother St Basil the Great started his monastic settlement nearby. The Nyssen presents her as a person who went beyond (transcended) the nature of a woman.⁴⁹⁵ Macrina was as a woman of extraordinary strength in her decision not to marry after the death of her betrothed, in her ability to lead her mother to the contemplative life, and in her energetic education of her younger brothers. It was she who led Basil from the worldly life of a rhetorician to the asceticism of priesthood. She remained like an undefeated athlete in the midst of misfortunes. When she entered into a common life with her maids, she made them 'sisters and equals' rather than her slaves and underlings. She became everything to her young brother Peter: father, teacher, attendant, mother, and the counsellor of every good. Macrina acquired the power of healing, the casting out of demons, and also prophesy. On her death bed, Gregory found her as a person who had transcended the common nature, i.e., in appearance an angel who belonged no longer to the world of men. When she died, her body glowed with rays of sanctity. She attained Christian perfection through divinization.

Through presenting Macrina as a model for Christian perfection, the Nyssen is underlining the equality of man and woman in the exercise of their royal priesthood. For Gregory, as noticed earlier, the overcoming of male-female difference does not mean the rejection of sex or gender. Virginity, as in the case of Macrina, is not the rejection of sex, but a way of consecrating it. Purified of their fleshly life, consecrated men and women love the world not with a male or female love but with a divine love. The goal virginal women seek to achieve is not the 'male mind' but the 'celestial mind,' the mind that acts in agreement with and in adoration of God.⁴⁹⁶ Gregory's

⁴⁹³ *Virg*, 46.

⁴⁹⁴ J. S. GRABOWSKI, *Sex and Virtue*, 99.

⁴⁹⁵ *LSM*, 163, 170,

⁴⁹⁶ G. HOLLAND, "Celibacy in the Early Christian Church", 72.

preference for ‘male’ that we see in *The Life of Moses* is only his allegorical presentation of a life of virtue. In their perfect chastity, which enables them to become ‘all things’ (father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, teacher etc. like Macrina) to all people, all those who are living a consecrated life transcend their gender and manifest the equality of man and women.

2.2.4.4 Women and Ministerial Priesthood

Gregory of Nyssa does not confuse the ministerial priesthood with the royal priesthood exercised by all the baptised, when he upholds the Pauline doctrine of “there is neither male nor female in Christ” (Gal 3:28) in order to emphasize the equality of man and woman. Ministerial priesthood exercised only by men is part of the unbroken Tradition of the Church. Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testaments presents women priests. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen, in fact, warns Christians against the separation from the laws and customs of the Church (LM II:12). According to him, where there is no explicit Scripture teaching, the tradition of the Fathers provides a trustworthy guarantee of the doctrine (LM II:45). He stipulates the uniqueness of ministerial priesthood when he condemns those consider themselves worthy to exercise this ministry irrespective of God’s will: “When some individuals punish the passion of desire by living a disciplined life, they thrust themselves into the priesthood, and with human zeal and selfish ambition they arrogate to themselves God’s ministry” (LM II:279). What he means is that ministerial priesthood is not a human initiative; one can’t make oneself worthy through good conduct and claim to be ordained; there is no self-willed priest. In other words, as Pope Benedict XVI says, “Priesthood is not something one can give oneself nor seek oneself. It can only be a response to God’s will and to his summons.”⁴⁹⁷ Having said that, the interior nature of the royal priesthood is not compromised in the ministerial priesthood.

The sprouting of Aron’s rod (Num 17:8), for Gregory, is a sign for the fact that ministerial priesthood is God’s special call and the heavenly ordination extended to those who are virtuous in their soul (LM II:284): “It seemed a very great marvel to the unbelievers that what was dried, polished, and rootless all at once produced the growth natural to things which are planted. Instead of earth, bark, moisture, roots, and time, it was the divine power at work in the wood” (LM I:71). The budding, blossoming and fructifying dried staff of Aron symbolizes the life that must characterize

⁴⁹⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Ministers of Your Joy: Meditations on Priestly Spirituality*, trans. R. Nowell, 31.

priesthood – a life self-controlled, tough and dried in appearance but containing on the inside invisible virtues that come into the open at an opportune time (LM II:285). For the Nyssen, ministerial priesthood, like royal priesthood, is not primarily a question of rank or status but rather of spirituality, and has nothing in common with the lives of many false priests who are extravagant (LM II:286). Based on his teaching, we can say that in true priesthood the life of virtue is incontrovertibly linked to man's response to God's initiative; the dignity of priesthood is a sacred responsibility rather than a rank for the ambitious.

Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware notes that even though several Fathers, most notably Gregory of Nyssa, inveighed vehemently against slavery (that took hundreds of years after them to get abolished) as a necessary evil, not a single Father ever spoke of the limitation of ministerial priesthood to men as a necessary evil.⁴⁹⁸ Ware is of the opinion that “if women can and should be priests, then their exclusion for two millennia is a grave injustice and tragic error. And, those responsible for this error will be the Fathers, the ecumenical councils, the apostles and the Son of God.”⁴⁹⁹ J. Danielou points out that in the history of the first centuries of Christianity we cannot find any mention of women filling strictly sacerdotal offices, while all Christian history shows that women have played a considerable part in missionary work, in worship and in teaching.⁵⁰⁰ Gal 3:28 cannot be cited in favour of

⁴⁹⁸ K. WARE, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ”, in T. HOPKO (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood*, 17; cf. *HEccl.*, (Homily 4), 73-75.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁰⁰ J. DANIELOU, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. G. Simon, 7. Danielou notices that when St Paul speaks on the qualifications of deacons (1Tim 3:8-13), he does not apply the word ‘deacon’ to women. However, in Rom 16:1, Paul calls Phoebe ‘deacon’. Danielou argues based on early Christian writings that the so-called ‘deaconesses’ in the early Church were not ministers with the ‘laying-on-of-hands’ (*cheirotonia*, an “ordination”), but a sort of subordinate female counterpart of male deacons to assist the bishop and the deacons in their religious duties concerned with women. Even though, in the Byzantine period (324-1453), deaconesses were ordained with a laying-on-of-hands in the East, this order of deaconesses declined later. It is to be noted that the word used often to denote the laying-on-of-hands for women is *cheirothesia* (a “blessing”). Danielou notes that in women's ascetic communities in the East had been presided over by deaconesses who were later called abbesses. In *The Life of Saint Macrina*, Gregory of Nyssa mentions deaconess Lampadium who was in charge of a group of the women (*LSM*, 183). In the Syriac Orient, deaconesses were allowed to read the Gospel, to cense (but not to bless the incense) etc. in the Church. In the early Church, feminine titles such as ‘Episcopa’, ‘Presbyteria’ and ‘Diakonissa’ were used honorifically to refer to the wives of a bishop, a priest, and a deacon respectively. An elder woman or widow was also given the title ‘Presbyteria’ as in 1 Tim 5:2. The inscription ‘Episcopa Theodora’ on a 9th century mosaic in the church of Santa Prassede in Rome names the mother of Pope Pascal I (817-824); the

women's ordination to priesthood because Paul is thinking here of baptism, not ordination; this text refers to the royal priesthood of the whole people of God, not to the ministerial priesthood. Ministerial priesthood is clearly affirmed by St Paul when he says, "We are ambassadors (Greek, *presbeuomen*⁵⁰¹) for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:20); "you welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" (Gal 4:14). As ambassadors of Christ, priests make Christ present, and offers Christ's own sacrifice, not another.

The royal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood are two ways of sharing directly in the priesthood of Christ. They are different, even though not opposed to each other. The model for the exercise of the royal priesthood of both men and women is Mary – Virgin and Mother: Christians can offer themselves as a living sacrifice and give birth to Christ in the purity of their soul. The specificity of the ministerial priesthood is that it is a special call to function as the 'icon' of Christ, to act in the place of Christ.⁵⁰² The ministerial priesthood 'images' the person and effects the ministry of the Son and Word of God Incarnate in human form, in his specifically 'masculine' being and activity.⁵⁰³ There must be something in the very nature of the person to be ordained that allows him to be the sacramental presence of the Lord, the

title is an honorary one because of her son's position. Today, proponents of the ordination of women make use of such feminized clerical titles to drive their point home: cf. A. KATEUSZ, *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2019. Early heretical movements (Gnosticism, Pepuzians, Priscillianism, Collyridians) ordained women as priests and bishops favoring equality among men and women in Church ministries.

⁵⁰¹ The Greek word for ambassador is *presbeuo* which derives from the base of *presbuteros* (presbyter) meaning an elder or senior who presides over an assembly, i.e., (by implication) an overseer acting as a representative. The English word 'priest' has its etymological origin in the word 'presbyter'. In the customary sense an ambassador is a person representing one government in its dealings with another. Priests as ambassadors represent God's Kingdom or Christ himself.

⁵⁰² K. WARE, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ", 24. The notion of the priest as an icon has far reaching implication. 1) Since an icon is in no sense identical with that which it depicts, there can be no question of any identification between the priest and Christ. An icon is not the same as a photograph and so the priest is not like an actor on the stage, made up to look like Jesus; 2) when an icon is venerated the honor is not given to the wood or painting but to the prototype, and, in the same way, the priest is not honored for himself but the honor is referred to Christ; 4) as an icon makes present a spiritual reality that surpasses, the priest makes present Christ; and 5) since Christ is a man, the priest as his icon should be a man: cf. K. WARE, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ", 24-26.

⁵⁰³ T. HOPKO, "Women and the Priesthood: Reflections on the Debate", in T. HOPKO (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood*, 184.

mystical embodiment of the Church's husband and head.⁵⁰⁴ The image or icon of the historical Christ can only be actualized and effected by certain male members of the Church. It is a matter of 'natural competence.' The priest must represent Christ the Bridegroom who loves and gives himself for the Bride, the Church. It is this marriage of the priest with the Church that makes him really priest and reveals the Church as the immaculate bride of Christ.⁵⁰⁵ In an ecclesial community a woman cannot fulfil this masculine spiritual activity. Therefore, certain members of the Church are set apart in a more specific way, through prayer and the laying-on of hands, to serve God in the ministerial priesthood.

In the Church, through baptism, all – both men and women – have received the vocation to holiness. Each particular vocation is a completion of baptism. In order to attain Christian perfection, an ordained priest has to transcend his gender in Christ; he has to be purified of his fleshly life because ordination does not perfect priest's human nature while it guarantees the fruitfulness of the sacraments he administers. In *The Life of Saint Macrina*, Gregory presents ministerial priesthood as a "holy vocation,"⁵⁰⁶ which "Macrina always honoured."⁵⁰⁷ But, for him, Christian perfection consists not in ministerial priesthood, but in becoming like Macrina, an angelic virgin, whose body was carried in her funeral procession by Gregory and Araxius (two bishops) at the feet of the bier, and two other distinguished priests at the head of the bier.⁵⁰⁸ The Church does not place an ordained priest, as a human being, on a higher level than others because "the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven are not the clergy but the saint."⁵⁰⁹ The ordination to priesthood of some does not divide the laity (people of God) into sacred and profane Christians, but establishes only a difference of ministries among those who bear the royal priesthood. Since "the priesthood is something divine and not human" (LM II:283), it is to be exercised in humility, without any tinge of arrogance; glory is to be rendered to God, not to man.

While clericalism that seeks to concentrate everything in the hands of the clergy is about power, priesthood is about service. It is worth noting Ware's observation on the campaign for the ordination of women:

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 185.

⁵⁰⁵ A. SCHMEMANN, *For the Life of the World*, 94.

⁵⁰⁶ *LSM*, 173.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 184.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 187.

⁵⁰⁹ K. WARE, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ", 25.

The present campaign for women priests may thus be seen as ‘the bitter fruit of the clericalization of the Church,’ a typically western and medieval form of clericalism. Women are being wrongly led to seek priestly ordination because other forms of ecclesial service have been neglected. But this point has a relevance for men as well: often men assume that, if they ‘have a vocation,’ it must be to the priesthood, because they do not think in terms of any other type of ministry. We need to recover the full Pauline vision of the Church as unity in diversity.⁵¹⁰

According to Ware, different ministries that pertain to the gifts the baptized received are to be encouraged in the Church with due importance. There is no single way in life that is an ideal fit for everyone. *Vita Consecrata* exhorts consecrated women to understand their own gifts and promote a ‘new feminism’ which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination’ (VC 58). They are not to be deceived by the superficiality of a culture that is the fruit of masculine ideologies which uproot woman from the depth of her true being.

It is a fact that in the ancient world many pagan religions had women priests, but it did not guarantee the equality of man and woman in those societies. The Church ordains men and not women; women serve in other roles. But in spite of that, as the Nyssen teaches and M. Aquilina writes, “A man is not superior: he is not more of a person than a woman, and certainly not more valuable to God.”⁵¹¹ All are called to live this truth in Christ through the Christification of their biological being. At the same time, we have to remember that Gregory’s teaching that “gender is not essential to what it means to be human as man is the image of God” cannot be used to justify “the demand that radical feminism draws from the widespread modern culture, namely, the ‘trivialization’ of sexual specificity that makes every role interchangeable between man and woman.”⁵¹² It is because what the Nyssen proposes is an upward journey of the soul away from gender and sexuality

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁵¹¹ M. AQUILINA, *The Witness of Early Christian Women: Mothers of the Church*, 9.

⁵¹² J. RATZINGER – V. MESSORI, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. S. Attanasio – G. Harrison, 95. Some see sexual difference as a ‘slavery of nature’ and demand the right to be male or female at one’s will through surgery. For some others, sexual difference is obsolete, senseless, if not racist. What interests them is to be simply humans, not male or female. They emphasize the functionality of human nature (as a consumer or a worker) at the expense of sexual differences. The present socio-political and cultural movement of postgenderism that argues for the abolition of gender roles has no reference to the virtuous life and the ascent of the soul. In Gregory, the genderless state is achieved through progress in virtues. The soul is at the center.

altogether as the life of Macrina exhibits. In other words, while the Nyssen is concerned with the soul and its growth in virtue with the ultimate goal of a spiritual or heavenly body, the modern culture is concerned with the body without any special reference to the soul.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter the first stage of the ascent toward Christian perfection in *The Life of Moses* is seen in relation to the vow of Chastity. Even though, chastity as a virtue is applicable to all, we tried to understand Gregory of Nyssa's notion of virginity that reflects the purity of God in line with the perfect chastity professed by consecrated men and women. We have seen that, for Gregory, perfect chastity or virginity is perfect purity. Consecrated persons are called to achieve this purity by putting off the fleshly life and by putting on Christ who is purity itself. They convert the members of their body into the members of Christ's body. We tried to understand this by the phrase 'Christification of the biological being.' Christification of the body presupposes an athletic effort (praxis), that is painful, from the part of the ascender. But the undertaking of this strenuous effort gives proof to the fact that the journey towards Christian perfection is a freely chosen one. Pope John Paul II unmasked moral weakness of contemporary man who has an aversion towards the virtues in general and especially towards the virtue of chastity, when he pointed out that a higher value demands a greater effort of the will if we want to attain it, and in order to be subjectively excused from this effort, in order to justify to ourselves our lack of this value, we see in it some evil.⁵¹³ Living the vow of chastity is not easy. It requires ongoing purification, constant effort and self-denial as we battle against our fallen human nature. The modern world resents this virtue just because it necessitates ascetical endeavour from the practitioner. Nevertheless, we are not to give way to the misconception that the spiritual achievement of perfect chastity or purity is mere moralism for Gregory. The Nyssen always presents Christian perfection as a gift man receives thanks to his collaboration with divine grace. On the one hand no one can succeed alone; on the other, God will not substitute for one's personal effort.

According to Gregory, the realization of virginity is a return to the prelapsarian state in Paradise. Paradise or heaven is not to be understood in a spatial sense, but as a spiritual dimension into which we transfer ourselves with a decision of the will. We reflected on *apatheia* as that special

⁵¹³ K. WOJTYLA, *Love and Responsibility*, 125.

characteristic of perfect chastity which is devoid of perversion of passions but turned toward further participation in Christ. The different dimensions of the vow of chastity help us liberate this vow from the unbased charges levelled against it by the modern culture characterised by sexual idolatry and immorality. It condemns chastity as detrimental to man, and the virgins as dangerous opponents of love between man and woman and friendship. We have seen that the vow of chastity does not diminish human personality, but raises it to a higher level that protects love from falling into selfish and utilitarian attitudes. It enables consecrated men and women to keep chaste relationship with all – married and unmarried. For Gregory, salvation is not merely a return to the prelapsarian state, but it is the acquisition of and the ascension towards perfection that has yet to be attained.

Perfect chastity is not Christian perfection, but only the foundation, as the image of God in the first man was the foundation for further participations. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that, according to Gregory, the characteristics of the second and the third stages of the ascent are potentially present in the first stage of virginity through purification because it is the new birth that retrieves the original nature of man created in God's image with the dynamic vocation to participate of God to attain perfection. He says, "Just as the power which destroys what is born is begotten along with physical birth, so it is clear that the Spirit bestows a life-giving power upon those born through it."⁵¹⁴ As death is potentially present at physical birth, life is potentially present at the spiritual birth of virginity. Therefore, we can say that just as baptism is the foundation of Christian life, so too celibate chastity of consecrated men and women is the foundation of the consecrated life because without purity further ascent in poverty and obedience is not possible. Purification, in the strict sense, belongs only to the first stage. In our study it is extended to the second and the third stages in order to emphasise the types of purification that strictly appertain to poverty and obedience, but potentially present in chastity itself.

⁵¹⁴ *Virg*, 48.

CHAPTER 3

Theophany of the Heavenly Tabernacle: Poverty

3.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we tried to understand the first theophany in *The Life of Moses* – the theophany of the burning bush – in connection with the vow of chastity that consists in the ‘Christification’ of the biological being. The second theophany in *The Life of Moses* – the theophany of the heavenly tabernacle – occurs on Mount Sinai. It is Moses’ ascent in the Holy Spirit to the knowledge of the invisible mysteries of God. The poverty of the knowledge of God or spiritual poverty is the gravest poverty in the modern world, and because of it men and women suffer from ruptured and flawed relationship with God, each other, their community and creation. In the Eastern spirituality, knowledge of God (theology) is not the result of one’s rational endeavour, but of contemplation, the highest form of prayer. In the East, theology is always mystical knowledge which is accessible to “all Christians” as all of them are recipients of grace. The more a Christian participates in grace, the more he or she can acquire spiritual senses and understand human realities from the perspective of celestial ones. The consecrated life is a special call to embody the above said nature of Christian life and to alleviate the spiritual poverty in the world through the spiritual fruitfulness effected by consecrated persons’ intimate participation in Christ “through whom God the Father pours out the Holy Spirit richly” (Titus 3:6). Living the vow of poverty, they leave behind all their worldly attachments as the Gospel demands (cf. Lk 14:33). Material detachment (*apatheia*) enables them to ascend towards God’s riches, participating in grace, and descend to be good stewards of these riches in the world.

To emphasise Moses’ perfect attuning of himself to the gift of grace, Gregory of Nyssa presents him as the one who is separated from all other people, things, and irrational animals, and who in his poverty of spirit is led to the contemplation of divine mysteries on Mount Sinai (LM II:156-157). God is totally invisible and incomprehensible to the created eyes and inaccessible to the created mind. The darkness on Mount Sinai (Ex 20:21) stands for this truth. Moses, in his absolute poverty – i.e., not depending on his sense perception and intellectual comprehension –, slips into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge in the darkness on Mount Sinai, being enlightened by the Spirit of God. Now he has the vision of the tabernacle not

made with hands (Ex 25:9). Gregory identifies this tabernacle that encompasses the universe as Christ – God who encompasses everything in himself. Since the tabernacle has two manifestations – celestial and earthly – , the ‘tabernacle not made with hands’ (heavenly tabernacle) corresponds to the uncreated pre-existent Christ and the ‘tabernacle erected on earth’ corresponds both to the Incarnate Christ and to the mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ. To Moses’ vision of the heavenly tabernacle is adjoined his mission to erect this tabernacle on earth.⁵¹⁵ Here Moses becomes a prefiguration of Christ who in the poverty of his human nature revealed the mysteries of God in the world. Thus, Moses’ ascent in poverty takes him to a deeper participation in, and knowledge and mission of Christ himself. What the Nyssen wants to say is that the ascent to the knowledge of God and the descent to communicate this knowledge for the building up of the Church are but two sides of the same coin. In this chapter, it is our interest to see how the vow of poverty helps consecrated men and women participate in Christ’s poverty, ascend to the knowledge of God, and partake of his mission in the world.

3.1 Poverty as Illumination

Mystical poverty, i.e., poverty that is concerned with union with God, in *The Life of Moses* can be understood as the soul’s ascent from the ‘perversion of passions’ which enslaves it to fleshly and material life. In mystical poverty, the soul, unweighted by purification, regains the natural function of passions, i.e., orientation towards God, and, guided by the Holy Spirit, rises to the darkness of God’s incomprehensibility where the intellect is illuminated in contemplation under the action of the Spirit and gains divine knowledge that is otherwise always lies beyond its grasp. Thus, poverty is the radical emptying of the soul of all finite content⁵¹⁶ – detachment from the things of the world, and no dependence on the created intellect – in order to be enriched by God (cf. Jer 33:3). Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai, for the Cappadocian, is a classic symbol of mystical poverty or poverty in spirit that raises one to God:

Moses leaves behind the base of the mountain and is
separated from all those too weak for the ascent. Then as he rises

⁵¹⁵ Ex 25:9, “In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it”; Ex 25:40, “See that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is shown you on the mountain.”

⁵¹⁶ D. E. LINGE, “Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart”, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 46/4 (1978), 482.

higher in his ascent, he hears the sounds of the trumpets, i.e., the knowledge of the divine power which comes from the contemplation of reality. Thereupon, his intelligence lets him slip into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge. ... he passes on to the tabernacle not made with hands. For truly this is the limit that someone reaches who is elevated through such ascents (LM II:167-169).

The Nyssen says that the “tabernacle not made with hand” (heavenly tabernacle) is the limit of the spiritual ascent because Christ – the tabernacle that ‘encompasses’ the universe and is ‘not encompassed’ by anything else – is infinite, and one can progress infinitely as regards participation in and knowledge of Christ who is absolute virtue. Thus, a consecrated person ascends to the virtue of poverty only when he or she is detached from everything finite in order to find one’s true treasure in Christ who encompasses all things and in whom all things exist. In this sense, illumination is the intensification of the spiritual and intellectual gifts through which one becomes sensitive to the presence and activity of God/Christ in all things.⁵¹⁷ Poverty as illumination helps us look at creation as pointer to God/Christ.

For Gregory, mystical poverty is one’s ‘journey with,’ ‘participation in,’ and ‘higher knowledge of’ Christ himself:

A disciple of the Word is the one who goes up with him from the low ground and away from the hollows of lowly thought to the spiritual mountain of sublime contemplation. Having risen above all evil and illuminated by the radiance of true light, the disciple sees what is invisible to those labouring in the hollow – Christ, God the Word himself.⁵¹⁸

Christ reveals the mysteries of himself to those who climb up with him, in poverty of spirit, the spiritual mountain of contemplation in the geography of the soul. According to Gregory, Scripture speaks of two kinds of wealth: one sought after and one condemned (cf. Mt 6:19-21). The sought-after wealth is the wealth of the virtues, and the condemned, the material and earthly because while the former becomes the property of the soul, the latter is bound up with the deceitfulness of perceptible things.⁵¹⁹ Christ bids us to set our mind on virtues and forbids us to treasure those things that are subject to “the Corrupter

⁵¹⁷ C. BERGER, “Dumitru Staniloae”, in S. J. KRISTIANSEN – S. RISE (eds.), *Key Theological Thinkers from Modern to Postmodern*, 396.

⁵¹⁸ *HBeat*, (Homily I), 23.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, (Homily I), 25-26.

of the treasures of the soul”⁵²⁰ – the devil. The ascent with Christ in poverty of spirit is a means to higher participation in virtues because “Christ is himself absolute virtue” (LM I:7; II:244). Just as there are two kinds of wealth, according to Gregory, so too there are two kinds of poverty: wretched poverty and blessed poverty. The one who is poor in virtues is in ‘miserable or wretched poverty,’ while the one who is willingly poor where things considered evil are concerned is in ‘blessed poverty.’⁵²¹ Thus, in the spiritual ascent, both the intellect and the moral life undergo illumination. In *The Life of Moses*, right knowledge and right conduct go together because on Mount Sinai, Moses is given not only knowledge of God but also instructions on how the virtuous life is perfected (LM II:166). Therefore, we can say that in Gregory there exists no dichotomy between theology and everyday life. It is because, for the Nyssen, Christian life is an imitation of Christ, the God-Man.

Gregory gives “the image of Moses ascending Mount Sinai” not as something to be imitated in the geographical space. On the other hand, it is a process of stripping oneself of all disordinate loves in order to attain the love of God, a process at first is painful but becomes progressively luminous. As for Moses who had left sensory knowledge and knowledge by reason, and acquired a new knowledge, God reveals to the ‘spiritual mountain’ climber a value which transcends every other reality:

The soul, having left behind whatever is accessible to human nature, enters within the innermost shrine of the knowledge of God and is entirely seized about by the divine darkness; and in this darkness, since everything that appears and is comprehended has been left outside, only the invisible and the incomprehensible remain for the soul’s contemplation.⁵²²

The darkness of divine incomprehensibility is gradually brightened by an inner, mysterious light: God is known inwardly, and this constitutes a great progress in the knowledge of God.⁵²³ Darkness on Mount Sinai (Ex 20:21) indicates the ultimate meeting: when the human being, in a state of ontological poverty, becomes pure movement towards God, God comes down

⁵²⁰ Ibid., (Homily I), 26.

⁵²¹ Ibid., (Homily I), 26.

⁵²² *HSong*, (Homily 11), 341.

⁵²³ T. SPIDLIK, *Prayer*, 217. The mysticism of darkness in Gregory of Nyssa does not have the sense of divine absence. Nor does it imply one’s sinfulness because only when the sins are purified does one enter into this darkness. He uses the metaphor of darkness in order to specify the incomprehensibility of God who is present in the soul. It has an apophatic thrust: the absolute transcendence of God who makes himself accessible to human thought and experience. In Gregory’s words, “this is the seeing that consists in not seeing” (LM II: 163).

infinitely lower than his own transcendent state.⁵²⁴ We find it in Moses who ascends the mountain of divine knowledge as a Spirit-filled person, a God-intoxicated person, and attains that knowledge. What Gregory of Nyssa wants to reiterate is that those who have not had an illumination of the intellect in blessed poverty, and who are not guided by the Holy Spirit, should not presume to instruct others on transcendent realities.

3.1.1 Purification

According to Gregory, true knowledge of God can be gained neither by senses nor by conceptual discoveries of truth based on sense-knowledge because God is not an object that makes an impression on the senses. Therefore, the moral and intellectual illumination of the one who ascends is to be preceded by purification of the senses and the intellect: “Leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, the soul keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God” (LM II:163). Poverty is freedom from intellectual vanity and obsession with things. The Nyssen states that the soul has access to God only through contemplation, which takes it beyond sense-knowledge and intellectual concepts. Adam sinned by failing to maintain his single-minded contemplation of God, and by turning his mind from the Creator to creatures.

The Cappadocian is of the opinion that the mind (intellectual or rational part – *nous* – of the soul) works by means of the senses.⁵²⁵ The senses are the different entrances to the mind. The mind, like a city that receives all comers by different entrances, is filled by things (knowledge) coming in by different senses. If the senses are separated from God and turned to material realities alone, it shows the failure of the intellect to control the passionate parts (animal nature) of the soul. As a result, the rational part of the soul falls from its controlling position and becomes subject to the non-rational appetitive and

⁵²⁴ O. CLEMENT, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 247. Ontological poverty indicates the creatureliness of man. He does not independently possess the means to begin to exist or to continue in existence. He is constantly and utterly dependent on God’s creating and conserving power to sustain him.

⁵²⁵ *MMa*, (X:1-7), 734-735. Mind refers to the immaterial soul, which includes the faculties of intellect and will. Gregory says that the mind is created in the image of God, and it mirrors and participates in the divine beauty while the body receives its beauty by functioning as a mirror of the mirror: cf. *Ibid.*, XII:9, 740. The mind is not confined to any one part of the human person, but is in every part of the person: cf. *Ibid.*, XV:3, 749.

spirited dispositions.⁵²⁶ This separation from God makes the soul lead a life confined to sense knowledge and intellectual concepts. Mystical poverty is a return journey of the soul from this state to the knowledge of the invisible Creator in freedom. Therefore, in order to live poverty that empties the soul of its finite content, there must occur the purification of the senses and the intellect. The light that shines on man in contemplation is a light which fills at the same time both the intellect and the senses, revealing itself to the whole man, and not only to one of his faculties.⁵²⁷ In illumination man acquires a new relationship not only with God but also with the world. Mystical poverty as illumination through purification makes consecrated men and women ascend from geo-centrism to heaven-centrism, from anthropocentrism to God-centrism.

3.1.1.1 Purification of the Senses

In the consecrated life, poverty is one's choice to live before God above and beyond the externals. Therefore, it is a virtue contrary to the vice of covetousness (Greek, *pleonexia*, "the desire for more", i.e., lusting for a great number of temporal things that go beyond what God determines is eternally best). In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory presents covetousness as one of the Egyptian taskmasters who always drives the slaves (fallen souls) to acquire more and more what he desires (LM II:129). If chastity is freedom from uncontrolled passion (*pathos*) – the first taskmaster –, poverty is freedom from covetousness – the second taskmaster. Covetousness makes one burn with the fuel of the objects of sense. In the treatise, the Nyssen likens Pharaoh's decision to increase the workload of the Hebrews, when they asked him permission to worship God (Ex 5), to the threat by the Adversary (devil) with an onslaught of temptations in every age when people identify themselves with the Gospel (LM II:56). A material culture, with its excessive demands on labour, always tries to blot out the memory of God. The demon of covetousness, who does men harm and corrupts them, is intensely concerned that his subjects not look to heaven but that they stoop to earth and make bricks within themselves out of the clay (LM II:59). When the

⁵²⁶ After the fall, the appetitive and the spirited parts, which are common both to man and animals, were added to the rational nature of the soul. In a well-ordered soul the rational part controls both the appetitive and the spirited parts, and the soul is trained for courage by the spirited part and elevated to participation in the Good by the appetitive part. Thus, all the parts cooperate for good. In the first chapter, we saw that the addition to the soul was not an evil, and God did it not as a punishment but as a sign of his providence.

⁵²⁷ V. LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 221.

Cappadocian presents slavery to covetousness through the symbol of “an Israelite who stoops to earth and makes bricks within himself out of the clay without interruption,” what he has in mind is that the soul that is inclined to earthly goods experiences always unsatisfaction and emptiness until death. He drives his point home stating that desire for material goods constantly makes man empty. Man, once he has fulfilled his desire in one of the things he pursues, inclines his desire to something else and finds himself empty again in that regard (LM II:61). According to Gregory, a life of this sort is irrational and, therefore, appertains to mere animals.

Never can man find satisfaction in the possession of material goods that are finite. He is destined to go beyond earthly life and participate in God. But senses do not lead man beyond earth. Therefore, according to Gregory, they are not safe yardsticks of the good.⁵²⁸ The devil, man’s adversary in spiritual life, compels man to lead an animal life by showing him “the material pleasures in which there is no hope of future benefits, but which are present, visible, can be partaken of, and enslave the senses of those who do not exercise their intellect” (LM II: 46). Moses was instructed by God to keep all animals away from Mount Sinai upon which he (God) would descend (Ex 19:10-13). The Nyssen interprets it allegorically to say that those who depend only on their senses like the animals for knowledge and gratification will not be able to make their spiritual ascent, experience illumination in the contemplation of the intelligibles, and acquire divine knowledge or theology (LM II:156-157). According to him, human beings can be freed from animal life and attain to spiritual and eternal goods through the acquisition of spiritual senses. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory makes use of the biblical account as a parabola of the Christian spiritual ascent, and describes how the meeting with God occurs in the darkness without the help of created vision.⁵²⁹ Even though God is totally invisible to the created eye, he is, nevertheless, seen and perceived by man, when man, by baptismal and ascetic purification, by effort and virtues, is enabled to acquire spiritual senses.

The phrase ‘spiritual senses’ means that just as there are corporeal senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell that apprehend physical

⁵²⁸ *HEccl*, (Homily V), 87.

⁵²⁹ Cf. J. MEYENDORFF, “Preface”, in A. J. MALHERBE – E. FERGUSON (trans.), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, xiii. Parabola signifies a U-shaped curve. In the treatise, the Egyptian life of the Israelites stands for the fallen state (descent) of the soul, and their journey to the Promised Land stands for the return (ascent) of the soul to its original state in Paradise. For Gregory, human life is a journey, and its end is a return to the beginning. But the end will differ from the beginning in the sense that it is the completion of God’s intention in creating humanity.

objects, there are also spiritual senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell that perceive spiritual entities.⁵³⁰ In other words, besides the five physical senses, there exist five spiritual senses, i.e., spiritual faculties with which the soul, inner man, perceives transcendent realities. This tenet of the five spiritual senses has its starting point in Origen who distinguishes in each human being between the inner man (the soul or the spiritual man) and the outer man (the body or the corporeal man).⁵³¹ The spiritual senses or the senses of the soul are awakened and developed through ascetical training by the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ. For Gregory, the acquisition of spiritual senses is a mandatory for the ascent to the knowledge of God in contemplation.⁵³² In a body, which has successfully fought its battle with the passions, the lower senses can come into their own in a profound intimacy with the bridegroom, Christ.⁵³³ In such a state, man's very acts of visual perceiving and sensual response will be affected by his spiritual maturity. Therefore, we can say that it is through participation in Christ that the spiritual senses in man are awakened ultimately. The five senses no longer eschew the body, but rejoice in its transformed anticipation of the resurrection through the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ.⁵³⁴ The bodily perception, the result of the fall, is overcome by spiritual perception that leads into the transformed life of resurrection or the prelapsarian state. The Nyssen's

⁵³⁰ M. MCINROY, *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendor*, 2.

⁵³¹ ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, (I:1:2; I:1:4), 25-29,79-80. Origen develops his teachings on spiritual senses based on 2 Cor 4:16.

⁵³² Cf. *LM* II:157, "The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind. For no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, nor does it belong to those things which usually enter into the heart of man. He who would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual and irrational emotion. He must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions, which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain."

⁵³³ S. COAKLEY, "Gregory of Nyssa", in P. L. GAVRILYUK – S. COAKLEY (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, 54; cf. *HSong*, (Homily 4), 131. Commenting on Song 2: 3 – "As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men" – Gregory writes that the Bridegroom (Christ) is the one who awakens the spiritual senses of the bride (the human soul): "Christ is joy to our eyes when he comes as light, perfume to our sense of smell, and life to those who eat him. ... the Bridegroom is an apple tree among the trees of the wood ... and his fruit was sweet in my throat. For the sense organs of the soul are truly touched with sweetness by the Word ..."

⁵³⁴ S. COAKLEY, "Gregory of Nyssa", 51; cf. NICHOLAS CABASILAS, *Life in Christ*, 122. According to Cabasilas, through baptism every believer is united with the spiritual senses and functions of the body of Christ and makes them his own.

aspiration for spiritual senses implies his conviction, as we saw in the first chapter, that gender and sexuality – as they are not part of the image of God – do not enter into the definition of what it means to be human. To regard the bodily senses themselves as ultimate would be, according to Gregory, to misconstrue the nature of the good and the beautiful. Salvation means transposition of our passions from this-worldly to otherworldly realities. Spiritual senses make God accessible to man.

The Nyssen introduces the analogy between the sense organs of the body and the operations of the soul or the spiritual senses in the first homily on the *Song of Songs*: the spiritual ‘touch’ is experienced in handling the Word of God in our hearts; the soul can ‘taste’ the divine realities using its intellectual power; the ‘smell’ of God’s perfume does not come from bodily nostrils, but pertains to a certain intelligible and immaterial faculty that inhales the sweet smell of Christ by sucking in the Spirit.⁵³⁵ Spiritual ‘seeing’ consists in seeing God’s presence throughout the created order, in keeping one’s eyes fixed on Christ rather than being preoccupied with earthly trivialities,⁵³⁶ while spiritual ‘hearing’ consists in the listening attitude of the soul toward God. Christ is the object of each of the soul’s senses. In the sixth homily on the *Song of Songs*, Gregory recommends the ascetical weapons of contemplation for the eye, hearkening to divine teachings and refusal of loose-talk for the ears and self-control for the organs of taste, touch and smell so that the spiritual senses can be safe.⁵³⁷ According to him, the physical senses of a person are transformed into spiritual senses only according to the measure Christ is received in his or her life.⁵³⁸ Putting on Christ, the new man, the believer overcomes his or her mere sensible existence. The human nature of Christ is a bodily garment that overshadows his divinity. Thus, putting on Christ is an ontological transposition for the believer. For Gregory, this ontological transformation of physical senses into spiritual senses by means

⁵³⁵ *HSong*, (Homily 1), 37; cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep*, 104-105. The Nyssen sees death as a birth of the humans to another life in which the five senses of the soul are active.

⁵³⁶ *HEccl*, (Homily V), 89.

⁵³⁷ *HSong*, (Homily 6), 209; cf. H. BOERSMA, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 95. Boersma observes that the Nyssen’s understanding of the spiritual senses is moral in character. Spiritual sight looks to the Lord instead of anything unclean; spiritual hearing listens to divine precepts rather than to vain words; and spiritual taste, touch, and smell protect our temperance.

⁵³⁸ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 3), 107. Gregory writes, “Jesus grows within those who receive him in a variety of different ways in wisdom and stature and grace. For the child who was born for us is not the same in all but indwells in a way that accords with the capacity of the one into whom he comes. He is manifested in a character that fits the ability of the one who takes him in, either as a babe or as making progress or as being perfected.”

of participation in Christ is also categorically tied to a virtuous life, i.e., an increasing participation in Christ by means of “right conduct” (LM II:166). Those with spiritual senses recognize Christ in the poor (cf. Mt 25:40).

Gregory says that the human soul has two natures: “One of them is incorporeal and intelligent and pure, while the other is corporeal and material and nonrational.”⁵³⁹ Salvation is the perfection of the former through developing spiritual senses. It is an ascent from material to spiritual. Man’s ultimate goal is a spiritual or heavenly body. The transposition from physical to spiritual senses involves mortification of the physical senses, which like myrrh prepares a Christian to offer his/her life as frankincense burned for God.⁵⁴⁰ He prescribes self-control which necessitates great human effort as the best means to become myrrh. Through the ascetical discipline of self-control that curbs the perversion of passions via a purgative process of “death of evil habits” (LM II:208) and regeneration in Christ, ordinary perception and the gross physical senses are capable of a progressive transformation in this life into spiritual senses. We have already dealt with mortification and self-control in detail in the second chapter.

We have to keep in mind that Gregory’s focus on the spiritual senses does not mean that he regards the bodily senses as unimportant because God endowed human beings with material senses so that they can fortify the life of virtue through the right use of free-will which can be used either to follow or reject material pleasures. Those with the spiritual senses have no inability to focus on earthly realities, but they possess the spiritual capacity to focus on these realities without attachment. T. Merton, who draws on Gregory’s teachings, says that in mortification one only puts to death the movements that gratify the senses, not the sense faculties themselves.⁵⁴¹ It is the denial of sinful pleasures, pleasures that enslave one to mere animal life. Pope Francis is insisting on the importance of spiritual senses through purification when he says that “only by listening and speaking with a pure heart (soul) can we see beyond appearances and overcome the vague din which does not help us

⁵³⁹ Ibid., (Homily 11), 353. The soul exhibits its incorporeal nature in its natural orientation towards God, and its corporeal nature is revealed through its enslavement to earthly goods.

⁵⁴⁰ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 6), 203. Gregory writes, “The person who intends to dedicate himself to the worship of God will not be frankincense burned for God unless he has first become myrrh – that is, unless he mortifies his earthly members, having been buried together with the one who submitted to death on our behalf and having received in his own flesh, through mortification of its members, that myrrh which was used to prepare the Lord for burial.”

⁵⁴¹ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 361.

discern in the complicated world in which we live.”⁵⁴² In *The Life of Moses*, the transformation of the physical senses into spiritual senses is depicted through the journey of the Hebrews – who in Egypt were condemned to stoop to earth and engage in the “wretched labour of brick making” (LM II:54) under the overpowering hand of covetousness (the taskmaster) – through the wilderness looking at the cloud that symbolizes the Holy Spirit. Life in the Spirit with the ascetic discipline, symbolized by the journey through the wilderness, helps consecrated persons transform their physical senses into spiritual senses in Christ and lead a heavenward life in poverty of spirit. With spiritual senses, they seek and experience heavenly riches.

3.1.1.2 Purification of the Intellect

The theophany of the heavenly tabernacle necessitates from Moses a sense of poverty of the intellect – *nous* or “the eye of the soul” (LM II:189) – characterized by humility. It is because God is beyond all our intellectual concepts. Moses is in company with the Invisible in the darkness on Mount Sinai, and, for Gregory, it means that “the one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and lifting up his own mind, as to a mountaintop, to the invisible and incomprehensible believe that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach” (LM I:46). According to the Nyssen, there exists a gulf between the infinite divine nature and the finite human intellect; the highest degree of the knowledge of God presupposes a radical renunciation of all intellectual concepts. From the darkness on Mount Sinai, God asks Moses to get rid of all intellectual concepts of God: “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Ex 20:1-4).⁵⁴³ In the second stage of the ascent, Moses moves from the visible Christ (theophany of the burning bush) to the invisible Christ (the tabernacle not made with hands) crossing the limit of his

⁵⁴² FRANCIS, “Message for the 57th World Day of Social Communications: Speaking with the Heart”, in *L’osservatore Romano: Weekly Edition in English*, 27 January 2023, 4.

⁵⁴³ Cf. *LM I*:47. Gregory explains: “The divine nature, inasmuch as it transcends all cognitive thought and representation, cannot be likened to anything which is known. He (Moses) was commanded to heed none of those things comprehended by the notions with regard to the divine nor to liken the transcendent nature to any of the things known by comprehension. Rather, he should believe that the Divine exists, and he should not examine it with respect to quality, quantity, origin, and mode of being, since it is unattainable.”

intellect by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴⁴ The desire for the invisible God is given by Christ himself. He is both the author and the end of this desire.

In the prelapsarian state, human intellect was luminous and directed man towards God in a spirit of higher participation and communion. The fall occurred when the intellect was alienated from God. When human intellect does not participate in God, the contents of the intellect – the thoughts – wander over the external world and make a person lose touch with reality, go out from himself, and chase outside himself insubstantial idols of his own making.⁵⁴⁵ As a result, man is attached to earthly realities and has lost the ‘blessed hunger’ for heavenly realities. Therefore, for Gregory, the purification of the intellect depends primarily on the overcoming of passionate thoughts: the life of evil thoughts within us brings about our death, and their death brings about our life (LM II:208). At the beginning of homily 1 on the *Song of Songs*, he invites Christians who have put on Christ to enter the inviolate bridal chamber dressed in the white robes of ‘pure and undefiled thoughts’ and without any indecent imaginings attached to ‘evil thoughts’ lest they should be prevented from understanding the undefiled words of the Bridegroom and the bride.⁵⁴⁶ Only if a person’s thoughts (intellect) participate in God, can he/she avoid stumbling at the semi-erotic romance in the *Song of Songs*, and ascend to its spiritual meaning.

In Eastern spirituality passionate thoughts are overcome through the custody of the heart. For Gregory, “the heart is the symbol of contemplation” (LM II:200), the point of contact between God and man in the ground of the soul. Attention to the heart (custody of the heart) means keeping away all evil thoughts coming from outside, healing the heart, educating it by means of watchfulness.⁵⁴⁷ Since the heart is the seat of intelligence, custody of the heart

⁵⁴⁴ Cf. *CE II*, (III: 84-96), 78-81. Gregory presents the migration of Abraham (Gen 12; Heb 11:8-9) after the fashion of Moses ascent from what is visible to what is invisible. Abraham goes out on a journey eager for divine knowledge. Instead of leaving his land, Abraham leaves himself and the realm of base and earthly thought. He journeys from sensible knowledge through intellectual knowledge to faith, and by faith reaches God and acquires divine knowledge. Everything that he grasped as his reasoning advanced was a ‘means’ and ‘staircase’ for his upward journey. Therefore, we can interpret Abraham’s journey also as his ascent from simple or rational faith based on sense knowledge and intellect to true faith based on the vision of God (*theoria*) through the illumination of the *nous*.

⁵⁴⁵ P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 180.

⁵⁴⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 1), 15.

⁵⁴⁷ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 107. Abstinence, counter-speaking, invocation of Jesus, discernment of spirits, manifestation of thoughts to a spiritual father or mother, examination of conscience etc. are a few means employed in the East for the

is also called ‘guarding the intellect.’ This attention paid to the intellect, according to the Nyssen, is the mother of prayer because freedom from passionate thoughts creates the state of prayer in the soul.⁵⁴⁸ He teaches that those with rebellious thought cannot succeed in spiritual life because like stones they will be drowned in the bitter waves of life as were the Egyptians in the Red Sea.⁵⁴⁹ The mind should be free of all wicked motivations, sinful intentions, and self-seeking desires so that in the absence of anything that darkens the mind, it can see things clearly and honestly. Prayer was divine philosophy, the science of sciences, for the monks of old.⁵⁵⁰ Through prayer they, like philosophers, always searched out first principles, the reason for things that are – God – in the purity of their heart.

Gregory holds that true prayer safeguards the purity of the intellect. Prayer is the antidote to sin because “as long as the memory of God is established in the heart, the schemes of the adversary remain ineffective.”⁵⁵¹ He who prays does not place his hope in anything created but in God himself. The Cappadocian presents prayer as the guardian of prudence, training of anger, moderation of pride, purging the memory of resentment, overthrow of envy, destruction of injustice, and correction of impiety.⁵⁵² From praying comes being with God; the one who is with God is separated from the adversary, the devil. Thus, for the Nyssen, prayer is participation in Christ himself. In the treatise, Moses who journeys towards Mount Sinai is a person who has acquired in his heart the state of prayer: while he exhorted the Israelites, he cried out to God, although outwardly making no sound, and God always heard the meditation rose from his pure conscience (LM II:118). Moreover, Moses is also able to listen to the voice of God. Since this state of prayer is not very easy to achieve, Gregory says, “The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb” (LM II:158). Ascending this mountain is possible, as we have already heard Gregory say, only for those who do it with Christ in a spirit of poverty. Therefore, in Eastern spirituality Jesus Prayer is practiced as a preparation for contemplation.

custody of the heart. In watchfulness, the soul distinguishes divine (good) thoughts from the demonic (passionate) ones, and rejects the latter.

⁵⁴⁸ *CML*, 154. The Nyssen says, “It is not the falling on one’s knees nor the placing of ourselves in an attitude of prayer, which is important and pleasing in Scripture, while our thoughts wander far from God, but rather the giving of the soul to prayer after rejecting all idleness of thought and every undue preoccupation with the body.”

⁵⁴⁹ *Virg*, 60.

⁵⁵⁰ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 307.

⁵⁵¹ *HOF*, (Homily 1), 111.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, (Homily 1), 112.

The Jesus Prayer – “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” – is an ejaculatory prayer. Its aim is to live in a state of prayer, to pray without ceasing (cf. 1Thess 5:17). According to Orthodox theologian P. Evdokimov, this prayer contains the whole message of the Bible: the lordship of Christ, his divine Sonship, the Trinity, the abyss of the fall and the invocation of the abyss of the divine mercy.⁵⁵³ This prayer starts as the prayer of the lips, grows inward becoming prayer of the intellect, and finally descends into the heart, becoming prayer of the heart or prayer of the whole person. Thus, the one who makes the spiritual ascent becomes prayer all the time. He adds prayer to works that are of obligation and good works to his prayer.⁵⁵⁴ In the words of the Nyssen, “The heart becomes the symbol of contemplation, and the arms, of work” (LM II:200). The spiritual strategy behind the Jesus Prayer is not negative, but positive: the immediate objective is not to empty the mind of what is evil but rather to fill it with what is good. The frequent invocation of the name of Jesus grafts the name to the person’s heart, and he experiences the actual presence of Jesus in the interior of his being. According to Gregory, a Christian is someone who bears Christ’s name, and recognizing Christ as ‘peace’ (Eph 2:14), he will exhibit the true title of Christian in himself through the peace in his life by reconciling the elements at variance within him or by expelling the civil war in his nature.⁵⁵⁵ Even though there exist different conditions of life, there is one obligation common to all who are named after Christ – the concentration of the thoughts on Christ.⁵⁵⁶ As we have already seen, this concentration of thoughts on Christ is the offering of the content of the intellect to Christ in prayer. “The temple of God, containing no idol or shrine of evil,”⁵⁵⁷ is no longer a building but the heart of the faithful. The faithful carry Sinai within them; they ascend to the heavenly tabernacle of divine knowledge that lies beyond intellectual

⁵⁵³ P. EVDOKIMOV, *Orthodoxy*, 122. In Orthodoxy, the Jesus Prayer is an aid to Hesychasm – the highest form of prayer of unceasing remembrance of God and his ‘indirect’ vision in the heart through interior silence and contemplation. Hesychia or inner silence involves a progressive self-emptying, in which the mind is stripped of all visual images and man-made concepts, and so contemplates in purity the realm of God. The hesychast is not so much one who refrains from meeting and speaking with others, as one who in his life of prayer renounces all images, words and discursive reasoning. The aim of this self-naughting is constructive – to be filled with an all-embracing sense of the Divine Indwelling. His silence is not negative, but an attitude of alert attentiveness, of vigilance, and above all listening: cf. K. WARE, “Silence in Prayer: The Meaning of Hesychia”, 22-47.

⁵⁵⁴ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 315.

⁵⁵⁵ *Perf*, 102-103.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

concepts having attained a state of prayer. Purification of the intellect leads to its union with Christ's human intellect that is united with the Logos.

3.1.2 Christification of the Intellect

In the light of what we have dealt with thus far, we can say that poverty as an ascent to the knowledge of God and the translation of this knowledge into action presupposes the Christification of the intellect by which the spiritual mountain climber's intellect acquires the nature of the human intellect in the Word Incarnate. Gregory of Nyssa had to refute the Christological heresy of Apollinaris of Laodicea (c.310-c.390) that denied the full humanity of Christ. According to Apollinaris, there are three separate elements in the human constitution: the body or flesh, the animal soul which humans share with other living things, and the rational mind. He undercut the full humanity of Christ by holding that Christ had no 'rational mind,' this being replaced by the divine Logos. According to him, when the eternal Logos/the Son came to earth, he took the place of the rational mind in Christ, and the Son was not reduced to the state of a creature. Based on his argument, Christ cannot be considered as a true man because he has not a human rational mind.⁵⁵⁸ The Nyssen argued that Christ is true God and true man, and that Christ has a human mind besides the Divine Mind. His argument was in line with the anti-Apollinarian dictum of Gregory Nazianzen, another Cappadocian – "that which He (the Son) has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved."⁵⁵⁹ The human mind needs healing just as the body, and the Divine Word (the Son) had to join

⁵⁵⁸ Apollinaris' aim was soteriological. He assumes that it is the function of the rational mind to check and control the potentially disruptive impulses of man's flesh and animal soul. In the fallen state human rational mind, which is mutable, is unable to control these passions. Therefore, the place of the human mind in Christ was occupied by the divine Son. Having only a single intellect and will belonging properly to the Logos/Son of God, Christ was without sinful desires and incapable of sin. Moreover, according to Apollinaris, the presence of a human mind, besides the Divine Mind, in Christ would also mean that Christ is not one but two: "If the complete God were joined together with a complete man, they would be two" – Son of God by nature and Son of God by adoption. In order to avoid the existence of two Sons, Apollinaris denied the existence of a complete humanity in Christ: cf. *AAp*, 195.

⁵⁵⁹ GREGORY NAZIANZUS, *To Cledonius the Priest Against Apollinarius*, in P. SCHAFF (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen*, 861; cf. *COr*, (XXVII), 933. Gregory writes, "... since the life of man was defiled by sin, in its beginning, end, and all its intermediate states, there needed an abstergent force to penetrate the whole, and not to mend some one part by cleansing, while it left another unattended to."

himself to a complete humanity to heal it in its entirety. For Gregory of Nyssa, the lost sheep which the Good Shepherd bore on his shoulders (Lk 15:5) is none other than the fallen human nature.⁵⁶⁰ It is the ‘whole sheep,’ namely ‘our whole humanity,’ which went astray, and, therefore, Christ bore our whole humanity and not only a part of it, as Apollinaris had erroneously claimed.

The Nyssen regards Christ as identical with God’s wisdom to those who are called to salvation (1 Cor 1:24).⁵⁶¹ The human mind of Christ is an authentic human mind. Therefore, as a man Christ was not omniscient. The Divine wisdom is the source of the human wisdom of Christ.⁵⁶² His human mind acquired knowledge from the Divine Wisdom, and the human wisdom increased in him as he grew like other men. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory writes on the ability of the created intellect to know divine realities: “If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward thrust, the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher – by its desire of the heavenly things straining ahead for what is still to come” (LM II:225). Christ’s perfect human intellect acquired divine wisdom from this ascent, in a measure possible to man, at each stage of his life. The ignorance Christ expressed is not the sinful ignorance that the fall bequeathed to all people, but the natural ignorance which pertains to human being as such. According to the Cappadocian, the purpose of the Incarnation was the transformation of human into divine in the union. The transcendent Word assumed the weak human nature and made it his own so that everything that was weak and perishable in human nature, mingled with the Godhead, has become that which the Godhead is. As there is only one human nature, all human beings, through the purification of their intellect, can unite it with Christ’s human intellect that is one with divinity. “The wise have eyes in their head” (Eccl 2:14), and, according to Gregory, the wise are those who raise their soul’s eye (intellect) to Christ who is “the head” as St Paul says (Eph 1:22).⁵⁶³ Human ascent to divine knowledge is only possible by participating in the transformation initiated by Christ; it is an infinite journey with no possibility of crossing the created-uncreated divide.

⁵⁶⁰ *HSong*, (Homily 2), 69.

⁵⁶¹ Cf. *CE III*, (1:49), 52.

⁵⁶² Cf. *HEccl*, (Homily V), 88. In the fifth homily on *Ecclesiastes*, Gregory identifies the pre-existent Christ as the real Wisdom (cf. Ps 104:24; 1Cor 1:24) which consists of all that is real, and says that human wisdom is to follow the real Wisdom and to be led to the knowledge of good things.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 90.

However, the Nyssen does not say clearly how full humanity and divinity existed in Christ's earthly life without being two persons.⁵⁶⁴ Therefore, to understand the full implications of the Christification of the intellect, we must draw on the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which fills the vacuum in Gregory's Christology. This Council proclaimed that there are in Christ two natures, the one divine and the other human. According to his divine nature he is 'one in essence' (*homoousios*) with God the Father; according to his human nature he is *homoousios* with men. Christ is one person in two natures – divine and human. In a hypostatic (personal) union the divine nature is united, 'in the person of the Son,' with the human nature without mixture (confusion), without division and without separation, but without abolishing the distinction of natures. Through affirming that the human nature in Christ is complete, and not that the Logos formed the highest part of the human soul – intellect – in him, the Fathers of the Council stressed that in Christ there is something higher than the intellect or reason – the divine reality that can be grasped by the intellect only in a state of grace. Christ's human intellect is perfectly attuned and subject to his divine intellect which he has in common with the Father and the Holy Spirit. In the Incarnation, Christ united the human mind (intellect), in which every thought is generated, to the Divine Logos and purified the former keeping it intact without falling into sin. His human intellect, in and of itself, is limited because it does not have the full comprehension of divinity. Omniscience is possessed only by his divine intellect. Yet his human intellect has constant and habitual knowledge of all things that a created intellect can know.

For man, intellectual renunciation is a true sacrifice: the human person who is by nature rational being gives up the exercise of his or her essentially creative power and the concepts it engenders as its own offspring.⁵⁶⁵ But this death of the intellect leads to the resurrection of the intellect as it illumines the intellect and all that the intellect grasps by the light of God, and thus leads man to truth. The permanent, uninterrupted communion of the human intellect with the intellect of Christ constitutes Christification of the intellect.⁵⁶⁶ Since Scripture says that no one has ever seen God (Jn 1:18; 1 Tim 6:16), Gregory acknowledges Christification of the intellect that leads to the vision of God as a gift of the Holy Spirit who helps man transcends his nature. He bases his

⁵⁶⁴According to Gregory of Nyssa, the complete absorption of Christ's humanity by the divinity – "as a drop of vinegar is swallowed up in the ocean" (*CE III*, 3:68, 121) – occurred only when Christ was risen and glorified. Thus, for him, the full union of the man with God took place only with the resurrection of Christ.

⁵⁶⁵ T. SPIDLIK, *Prayer*, 221.

⁵⁶⁶ Cf. P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 134.

argument on the fact that the Protomartyr “Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). The Nyssen teaches that Stephen did not look at the divine by relying on human nature and power, but it was after illuminated with the grace of the Holy Spirit that he was exalted by him to the contemplation of God.⁵⁶⁷ Only if the light of the Spirit is in man, can he have a vision of God because “Scripture testifies that like is beheld by like” (cf. Ps 36:9).⁵⁶⁸ God is not seen without God, the Holy Spirit. When man’s intellect is constantly with God, there emerges unceasing or constant prayer. It leads to the vision of God, to see reality from the point of view of God, and to think with an intellect closely attuned to the intellect of Christ.

In the fourth homily on the *Song of Songs*, when Gregory comments on the Bridegroom’s praise on the bride’s eyes – “Your eyes are doves” (Song 1:15) –, he specifies how this Christification takes place in the soul’s intellect (the eye), explaining how the Bridegroom comes to see doves in the eyes of the bride. When someone’s eyes are pure and clean, one who looks into these eyes can see one’s own face reflected in them. The pure eye, then, that gazes at an object receives in itself the image of that object. When the Bridegroom (Christ) looks into the eyes of the bride (the soul), the bride’s eyes, as they are pure, receive the image of the Bridegroom. Gregory identifies dove with the Holy Spirit, the beauty of the Bridegroom. The luminous beauty which the Bridegroom sees in the bride’s eyes is his own beauty, the light and beauty of the Holy Spirit. The restoration of the soul’s beauty consists in her drawing near once again to the true ‘Beauty’ from which she departed.⁵⁶⁹ The soul that is freed from all material attachments is in conformity with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and therefore, with the human intellect of Christ. It has rendered the soul capable of gazing upon the Word who gazes at himself in the soul. The Nyssen associates the work of the Holy Spirit with illumination. The

⁵⁶⁷ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *In Praise of Stephen, Saint and Protomartyr I*, trans. R. A. Greer, in R. A. GREER, *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny*, 61.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁶⁹ *HSong*, (Homily 4), 113. According to Gregory, human nature is as undetermined as a mirror. Just as a mirror reflects or receives the shape of whatever objects that are placed before it, so too does human nature reflect or take on the shape of anything before which it places itself through its free-choice. The Nyssen adds to it his biological knowledge. The eye takes into the pupil the beauty or the image of the object at which it looks. Likewise, the soul becomes beautiful in seeing or contemplating and taking in the beauty of Christ, i.e., the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit “who reaches the depths of God” (LM II:110) illumines the intellect with the light of God and bestows divine knowledge.

3.1.3 Theoria

A Christified intellect or an intellect illuminated by the Holy Spirit through participation in Christ leads to a life of *theoria*⁵⁷⁰ or contemplation, the crown of the second stage of the spiritual ascent of the soul. On Mount Sinai, Moses reaches this state of the soul when his intelligence lets him slip into where God is (LM II:169); it is his entrance to the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge (LM II:167). Thus, we can understand *theoria* (contemplation) as an illuminative ascent towards the ‘knowledge of God’ (theology) leaving behind sensory knowledge and intellectual knowledge. It can be accomplished only when one loves one’s nothingness (poverty) and depends entirely on the grace of God, and its aim is the formation of Christ in oneself by acquiring his intellect. Here poverty means denying oneself in order to be possessed by Christ. This poverty is indispensable for contemplation as the Nyssen likens the latter to a ‘travel through the air’: “We shall be borne on high through the air to be together with the Lord, not drawn down to earth by anything heavy” (LM II:191). The more a Christian’s desire for God is purified by his separation from the sensual goods, the greater the illumination his mind is able to receive, and with it a clearer vision of God’s beauty and goodness. ‘The Spirit, who alone fathoms the depths of God’ (1 Cor 2:10) raises the intellect above its natural level and enables it to grasp the divine realities in an obscure but real manner.⁵⁷¹ Contemplation enables one to see and understand everything through the eyes of Christ. The object of one who contemplates is neither the ‘surface of things’ procured by the senses nor the ‘ideas’ procured by the intellect. Spiritual contemplation (*theoria*) means to see God in everything that exists, God’s word and God’s wisdom, the divine truth hidden under the phenomena of the world, the spiritual meaning of reality.⁵⁷² In Eastern spirituality contemplation is inherently transformative, leading those who pray towards a habitual recollection of God, holiness of life and a capacity for wisdom and discerning judgment.

⁵⁷⁰ The Greek word *theoria* is derived from *thea* (vision). *Theoria* means ‘an earnest and continued inspection’.

⁵⁷¹ J. DANIELOU, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, 174.

⁵⁷² T. SPIDLIK, “The Spiritual Heritage of the Christian East”, in P. PALLATH (ed.), *Catholic Eastern Churches: Heritage and Identity*, 85.

According to Gregory, a contemplative Christian penetrates into the ‘sanctuary’ of the knowledge of God in a manner like that of Moses who had access to the heavenly tabernacle. In the treatise, he identifies the tabernacle that is divided by a curtain into two parts – the one visible and accessible to certain of the priests, i.e., the Holy Place, and the other secret and inaccessible, i.e., the Holy of Holies or the inner sanctuary – with Christ himself: the Holy Place stands for Christ’s humanity and the Holy of Holies for his divinity (LM II:172, 178). What he has in mind is that Christian life is a participation in Christ’s humanity and divinity. We have already seen that in the third homily on the Our Father, the Cappadocian treats the entrance of the high priest into the Holy of Holies as an allegory of prayer. He describes prayer as the entrance of the virtuous Christian, who has put on Christ, into the ‘innermost sanctuary’ of divine presence in the soul, wearing the brilliant vestments of virtue.⁵⁷³ But *theoria*, for Gregory, is not a Christian’s withdrawal from society in pursuit of God, because all the renunciations and ascent take place only within the spiritual terrain of one’s soul. In the treatise, Moses is presented as the paragon who unites contemplation and action in his life: he works for the people while preserving an interior solitude for God (LM II:118, 200). Contemplation, according to the Nyssen, is a dynamic experience, not a static one. It moves us to focus on the needs of our neighbour, to reach out and offer help to those whom we encounter in this world of the senses. Gregory teaches that the better our progress in contemplation is, the greater our friendship with God and our ability to help others will be. It is, indeed, life in Christ.

According to the Cappadocian, all human beings are in the image of God and carry in themselves the vocation to the contemplation of God. It is their primordial dynamic vocation to participate in God and, thereby, grow in the likeness of God/Christ. Angels, being intellectual beings, are not exempt from this contemplation. When Gregory deals with the angel turned devil in his *Catechetical Orations*, he raises the question on how angel who had been created for no evil purpose by God fell away. The answer is that he closed his eyes before the good, i.e., he pulled himself away from the contemplation of God.⁵⁷⁴ In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen attributes the reason for man’s fall to his failure in contemplation, and exonerates God from all responsibility for the plight of man:

... he who is delivered up to shameful affections is ... he
who does not like to have God in his knowledge. God delivers up

⁵⁷³ *HOF*, (Homily 3), 129.

⁵⁷⁴ *COr*, (VI), 894.

to passion him whom He does not protect because He is not acknowledged by him. But his failure to acknowledge God becomes the reason why he is being pulled down into the passionate and dishonourable life. It is as if someone who has not seen the sun blames it for causing him to fall into the ditch. ... It is the failure to participate in the light that causes the person who does not see to fall into the ditch. In the same way ... it is those who do not acknowledge God who are delivered up to shameful affections ... (LM II: 75-76).

Thus, according to Gregory, the reason for the fall of both man and angel is that they closed their eyes before the light and saw nothing other than darkness or non-being. A human being, who closes his eyes before the light, i.e., God who is the good, meets the same plight of the fallen angel. The devil, “by his very unwillingness to perceive the good, became cognisant of the contrary to goodness – envy”⁵⁷⁵ that leads him to all evils. Man, by his unwillingness to participate in God, turns to be an individual confined to himself, seeks his own glory, and is envious of other’s glory. Angels who contemplate serve God and come to help human beings (LM II:45), and so do human beings who contemplate – they serve God and neighbour.

We have already seen that the Nyssen does not differentiate contemplation from prayer. He defines prayer as conversation with God, and contemplation of things unseen.⁵⁷⁶ Prayer is the ascent of the soul to God, from the visible to the invisible. The vow of poverty of consecrated persons is their commitment to a life of prayer which help them “have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16) and enables them, like Moses, to ascend toward divine goods and descend to alleviate the spiritual poverty of their brethren. *Perfectae Caritatis* underscores this aspect of contemplation for the religious reminding them that they should join contemplation, by which they fix their mind and hearts on God, seeking him solely and before everything else (PC 5). In the Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI presents contemplation as the principal purpose of the consecrated life: “Though they provide many services in the area of human formation and care for the poor, education and health care, consecrated men and women know that the principal purpose of their lives is the contemplation of things divine

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., (VI), 894-895. Gregory, inheriting the tradition of his predecessors, posits that the sin of the angel who turned to be the devil, the first sin of the intellectual nature, was that he was envious of man who alone was created in the image of God, and he, who suffered from the disease of the love of rule, shut his eyes to the good in his envy of man.

⁵⁷⁶ *HOF*, (Homily 1), 113.

and constant union with God in prayer” (SC 81). Contemplation safeguards the precious memory of God in all one does.

Consecrated men and women, by the very designation of their state and vocation as ‘the consecrated life,’ are called to cultivate their intimate relationship with God. This intimate relationship with God is impossible without self-denial and renunciation – poverty. According to Karl Rahner, it is spirit-poverty (self-forgetfulness) that unites in the life of consecrated men and women the vertical (contemplative) and horizontal (active) dimensions of Christian life in a meaningful way by making them absorbed in God in unrewarded service of man in a state of prayer.⁵⁷⁷ *The Life of Moses* helps us understand the vow of poverty as one’s readiness to ascend to the invisible God/Christ – the tabernacle not made with hands – and descend to one’s brethren with spiritual richness to be shared. Here the life of poverty of consecrated persons is a life of contemplation in action, a life that embraces contrasts, a life absorbed in God and neighbour. As Virgin Mary ‘in her lowliness’ (Lk 1:48) conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and gave birth to Christ in the world, consecrated persons ‘in their poverty’ conceive and give birth to Christ, and build up the Church in the world through the illumination of their soul by the Holy Spirit. The fundamental reason for the spiritual poverty in the modern world is the prevailing lack of familiarity with the traditional tool of spiritual knowledge – contemplation (*theoria*).

3.2 Dimensions of the Ascent in Poverty

The theophany of the heavenly tabernacle in the darkness on Mount Sinai calls attention to the illumination of the intellect (eye of the soul) by the Holy Spirit with divine Wisdom (Christ) in the soul of a Christian who has left behind in poverty of spirit all sensory and intellectual understandings. As Moses was commanded to construct on earth a tabernacle (the Church) after the model of the heavenly tabernacle (heavenly Christ) which he saw on the mountain, a Christian’s higher participation in Christ through contemplation is to contribute to the building up of the Church in the world. Action or

⁵⁷⁷ K. RAHNER, *The Religious Life Today*, 49. Rahner writes, “The person who truly forgets himself (because he is absorbed in God and his neighbour, in God in unrewarded service of man) can pray, already prays, and in order to pray needs only let the process of his self-forgetfulness with all its implications begin. From this point of view, the ‘horizontalism’ so much prized today is useful provided that it is rightly understood to imply no absolute opposition to ‘verticalism’ (rightly understood), that this verticalism is not misconstrued as the enjoyment of religious ‘interiority’ taken to mean a dispensation from selfless service of one’s neighbour or compensation for the ‘frustration’ of unrewarded service.”

mission is inseparable from contemplation. Through their vow of poverty consecrated men and women deepen their participation in Christ who “became poor though he was rich, so that by his poverty we might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). In their spiritual poverty, God enriches them, and they become capable of enriching others. Therefore, poverty is a sign of Christian perfection. Christians are to be reminded that the first of their needs is the spiritual welfare of their soul. It is possible only through the witness in poverty. Consecrated persons, as the poor who are the privileged heirs of the Kingdom of God, sever their attachment to body and entrust themselves to the care of God and spiritual men. Scorn for money is a possibility for someone who has tasted things on high. The result of this attitude is ‘freedom from care’ or ‘putting away anxiety,’ the freedom necessary for prayer. Their ‘flight from the world’ is not a withdrawal from the people, but a detachment from everything that hamper the precious remembrance of God in the soul. We shall now proceed to see how the vow of poverty helps consecrated men and women live the Church life in a perfect way through participating in the different dimensions of Christian life that are open to all.

3.2.1 Trinitarian Dimension: In the Spirit

For Gregory of Nyssa, the Holy Spirit who shares with the Father and the Son in the uncreated nature,⁵⁷⁸ is the glory that eternally surrounds the Son,⁵⁷⁹ and guides towards the Good those who are worthy (LM II:121). Therefore, the action of the Son is inseparable from that of the Spirit. “Christ is the pneumatophore par excellence, or the principal carrier and dispenser of the Spirit of God. With Christ, the Spirit is the co-transfigurer and the co-divinizer of man,”⁵⁸⁰ says Bilaniuk. According to Gregory, the one who has emerged from the water of purification (baptism) is to be led by the Spirit. In *The Life of Moses*, he identifies the cloud that guided the Israelites, who left the Egyptian life, day and night (Ex 13:21) with the Holy Spirit, and presents their march through the desert as a journey towards Christian perfection in an absolute spirit of poverty, not depending on themselves but letting themselves absolutely controlled by the Spirit:

By divine power a cloud led the people. This was no ordinary cloud, for it was not composed of the vapours or

⁵⁷⁸ *CE I*, (XXII:279), 123.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, (XXVI:385), 141.

⁵⁸⁰ B. T. BILANIUK, “The Mystery of Theosis or Divinization”, in D. NEIMEN – M. SCHATKIN (eds.), *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in Honor of the Very Reverend Georges Vasilievich Florovsky*, 339.

exhalations as normal clouds are. The winds did not press the vapours of the air into a misty composition; it was something beyond human comprehension. Scripture testifies that there was something amazing about that cloud. When the rays of the noonday sun shone with great heat, the cloud was a shelter for the people, shadowing those below it and moistening with a light dew the fiery heat of the atmosphere. During the night it became a fire, leading the Israelites as in a procession with its own light from sunset to sunrise. Moses himself watched the cloud, and he taught the people to keep it in sight. ... When the cloud which led the people in their journey continued to remain at the same place, the people could not move on, since there was no one to lead them to depart. ...The cloud in turn tempered the unpleasantness of being out in the open, forming a shelter from the heat by day and at night dispelling the darkness by shining with a torch-like radiance. So, they experienced no discomfort in that desert at the foot of the mountain where they had pitched camp (LM I:30-31, 41).

What Gregory makes clear is that spiritual life is a life that is led according to the guidance of the Spirit, and that the Spirit provides comfort to those following him in all adverse situations of life. The soul, taking up the Spirit as guide and ally, is inflamed with the love of God and burns with desire for him. In Eastern spirituality prayer is the breathing of the Spirit.⁵⁸¹ One who prays truly is led by the Spirit to such a height where he slips into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge (LM II:167). The whole aim of the Christian life, especially of the consecrated life, is to be a Spirit-bearer (pneumatophore) and grow in divine wisdom. *Vita Consecrata* accentuates this fact when it says that living in the Spirit, consecrated persons never cease to ask the Almighty for the gift of wisdom in the struggles of everyday life (VC 71). Since the Holy Spirit leads Christians towards all virtues, the poverty that consecrated men and women espouse to let go all worldly ambitions is a blessed poverty. It makes them participate in the mystery of the Trinity in a special way.

3.2.1.1 Participation in God's Poverty

For Gregory, poverty is an ascent from the visible to the invisible. God identifies himself with poverty in invisibility. God's invisibility teaches us that true riches are, in fact, spiritual. This invisible God, who is the

⁵⁸¹ T. SPIDILIK, *Prayer*, 39.

Good/Beauty, incarnated on earth. Christ lived a life of poverty and in him “the riches are hidden by obscurity.”⁵⁸² By his life of poverty on earth, Christ forbids us to treasure wealth on earth, but bids us to set our minds on the wealth of sublime things which will not be destroyed by anything (Mt 6:19-21). We have already seen that, according to the Nyssen, Christ speaks of two kinds of wealth which imply two kinds of poverty. He places the ‘sought after or admirable wealth’ (the invisible wealth of virtues) and the ‘condemned or unsafe wealth’ (the visible material wealth) in relation to ‘blessed poverty’ and ‘wretched poverty’: the one who is poor in virtues is in wretched poverty, and the one who is willingly poor where things considered evil are concerned and has none of the devil’s treasures laid up in his own storehouses (the soul) but is fervent in his spirit is in blessed poverty.⁵⁸³ The reward for blessed poverty is the kingdom of heaven.

In the third homily on the Beatitudes, he expounds the theme “Blessed are the sorrowful, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4), and points out that the only reason for man to be sorrowful is the deprivation of the Good itself.⁵⁸⁴ This Good is the invisible and transcendent God in whose image man was created, and from whom man separated himself by sin. Man’s real poverty consists in his lack of likeness to God or lack of virtues. It is through acquiring likeness to Christ that man can free himself from the wretched poverty of the want of virtues and rise to the blessed poverty of the lack of everything that corrupts the soul. Through participation in Christ’s ‘blessed poverty’ (i.e., by the life according to virtues), which is revealed in his humanity, mankind is able to look into the dwelling place of the Triune God. Here we have to keep in mind that it is the acquisition of spiritual senses that stabilizes consecrated people’s participation in Christ’s poverty and alienates them from the pursuit of ‘condemned wealth’ which entails ‘wretched poverty.’ It is because, according to Gregory, sin results from errors of perception: “The area of our life in which we are most often wrong is this, that we are unable to perceive correctly what is actually good and what is mistakenly supposed to be such. If evil were presented stark to people, and were not overlaid with the appearance of good, mankind would never have defected to it.”⁵⁸⁵ Spiritual sight makes consecrated men and women capable of distinguishing between what is actually good and what is good only in appearance. When human beings acquire spiritual senses through purification (praxis), “the Holy Spirit

⁵⁸² *HBeat*, (Homily I), 24.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, (Homily I), 26.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, (Homily III), 41.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, (Homily V), 58.

who guides towards the Good those who are worthy” (LM II:121) leads them “into all the truth” (Jn 16:13).

In the first homily on the Beatitudes, the Cappadocian takes to mean Christ’s words “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3) with ‘voluntary humility’, and says that the model for this humility is the humility of God who, “though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that we by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).⁵⁸⁶ While all other aspects of divine nature exceeds the limit of human littleness, i.e., man finds it impossible to acquire likeness to them, in order to make likeness to God a real possibility for human beings, God by his Incarnation, i.e., descent to the humility of what is human, gave them the divine humility, which they can imitate because the divine humility (humanity of Christ) shares the nature of them.⁵⁸⁷ For the Nyssen, humility is the antidote to pride, the prime source of evil.⁵⁸⁸ In *The Life of Moses*, the fight of the Egyptian against the Hebrew (Ex 2:11) is interpreted as the fight of arrogance (pride) against humility, and the killing of the Egyptian by Moses (Ex 2:12), who prefigures Christ, is shown to point out that arrogance is slain by humility (LM II:14-15). The Cappadocian holds the opinion that the devil uses the weapon of pride, by which he himself fell, to make human race share his own fall. Therefore, by following the example of God/Christ, whose humility reached its culmination in the death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8),⁵⁸⁹ in undergoing voluntary humility or ‘deliberate poverty’ human beings can rid themselves of the source of all evil.

All are called to imitate the humility or poverty of God, and consecrated persons are called to take this imitation to its highest dimension. Through imitating and participating in Christ’s humility, man can be united to the infinite God as “in Christ the infinity of God and the humility of the flesh are united in an ineffable way.”⁵⁹⁰ In this sense, we can say that, for the Nyssen, humility is a descent toward the heights. But this descent is not extremely easy. He refers to the sense of superiority that is ingrained in almost every member of the human family and points out that the achievement of divine humility by the eviction of pride necessitates greater effort.⁵⁹¹ Christ’s Passion and death on the Cross manifests the mystery of humility because, as

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., (Homily I), 26.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., (Homily I), 27.

⁵⁸⁸ Cf. Ibid., (Homily I), 27.

⁵⁸⁹ Cf. *CE III*, (III:24), 111.

⁵⁹⁰ M. BRUGAROLAS, “The Incarnate Logos: Gregory of Nyssa’s in Canticum Canticorum Christological Core”, in G. MASPERO et al. (eds.), *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Canticorum Analytical and Supporting Studies*, 214; cf. *HSong*, (Homily 4), 139.

⁵⁹¹ Cf. *HBeat*, (Homily I), 27.

Pope Francis points out in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* humility can only take root in the heart through humiliations, and without humiliations, there is no humility or holiness (GE 118). In the consecrated life, humiliation is an unavoidable part of the imitation of Christ and it makes the religious partake of Christ's humility. Their fidelity to God's love is revealed and confirmed in the humility of a hidden life, in the acceptance of sufferings for the sake of completing in their own flesh "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24).⁵⁹² Humility prevents them from attributing the gifts of God to themselves as "it places the axis of human being in God."⁵⁹³ To be poor in spirit is to recognize clearly that "no one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven" (Jn 3:27), that one is nothing except by the grace of God (cf. 1Cor 15:10). The Nyssen is of the opinion that pride results from the wrong perception of what one has, what is ephemeral, as oneself.⁵⁹⁴ The truth about man lies in the fact that he is the image of God and as God's image all are equal. Therefore, one who has become poor in spirit, imitating Christ, will give equal respect to all members of humanity and will not inflict injury on those who share his origin. Humility is the mother of gentleness,⁵⁹⁵ which is a slow and reluctant attitude towards natural inclinations that slide into evil.

For Gregory, spirit-poverty is not a mere mental attitude; it is to be incarnated in material poverty. In the spiritual ascent the two – spirit-poverty

⁵⁹² VC 24.

⁵⁹³ P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Struggle with God*, 143.

⁵⁹⁴ *HBeat*, (Homily I), 28. Gregory says, "You glory in your youth, you look to the blossom of your fresh years, and you boast of your full bloom, because your hands are strong for lifting, your feet agile for jumping, your curls blow about in the wind, the first beard lines your cheek, and because your clothes glow bright with purple dye, and your dresses of silk are embroidered, with embroidery of wars or hunts or legends. Yes, perhaps you look even to your shoes, carefully polished with blacking and smart with extravagantly stitched lines, yet do you not look at yourself?" According to the Nyssen, meditation on death is an antidote to pride. When he comments on 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' he says that man can find out the mysteries of his earthly existence in a cemetery. This present life deceives man only when he fails to see that he doesn't have sovereignty over his life: cf. *Ibid.*, (Homily I), 28-30. But for Gregory, this present life on earth is not a lie to be refused. The world is a stage on which people act out their different roles. What is important is that people are to see to it that their faces do not conform to their masks. A king must govern, and such governance might entail representing his people by wearing gold and purple and jewels and crowns. But it is important that the king not confuse his role with his person, for at the end of the short day that is his life, the man who played the king will hang up his crown and be brothers and sisters with those who played his servants: cf. *Ibid.*, (Homily I), 29.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, (Homily II), 35-37; cf. *CML*, 151. Gregory says that from humility comes gentleness which leads to grace, grace to love, and love to prayer.

and material poverty – are inseparable. Voluntary material poverty is required by the teachings of Jesus for Christian perfection: “If you want to be perfect, sell all you have, and give to the poor, and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). This is the verse which, according to Athanasius, inspired St. Antony, around 270, to pioneer the ascetic lifestyle in the Egyptian desert.⁵⁹⁶ In the opinion of G. Florovsky, in the beginning of the consecrated life, the main ascetical emphasis was not on taking special or exceptional vows, but rather on accomplishing those common and essential vows, which every Christian had to take at his baptism.⁵⁹⁷ All Christians were bound to renounce the world and pledge an undivided loyalty to Christ, and they were taking this oath of undivided allegiance at their baptism. Monks wanted to raise this baptismal promise to the Lord to its highest dimension and monasticism meant primarily a total renunciation of this world with all its lust and pomp. Therefore, consecrated persons’ profession of poverty is only their upholding of the grace of baptism by which they embrace Christian perfection and remind the Christians that they are to disown the world and dwell in this world as strangers, even though it does not imply contempt for the world. In *The Life of Moses*, Moses who is poor in spirit is also the one who has exchanged material wealth for riches of the soul, who has shaken off earthly riches like a burden in order to float upwards. Material riches make the soul heavy, while virtue is a light and uplifting thing. Gregory teaches that it is impossible for someone to become light if he has nailed himself to the weight of material wealth. If, therefore, consecrated men and women are to come near to the things above, they must become poor in the things which drag them down.

Gregory tells us also that ascending with Christ requires that we descend with him, sharing his poverty with the poor. Since the Lord became poor, one should not be afraid of poverty. When we share with the poor, we take the part of the One who became poor for us.⁵⁹⁸ Mary Francis writes that the best gift consecrated men and women can bring to the poor is their own poverty because their deliberate poverty brings joy to the world’s deprived, and it is the quality of their life that touches and ennoble the poor beyond the service they can perform for them.⁵⁹⁹ Consecrated persons are to rise above all things that are not God. Without spirit-poverty, one can have no proper fellowship with the poor, and without material poverty, it is difficult to avoid

⁵⁹⁶ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of Saint Antony*, (no.2), 19.

⁵⁹⁷ G. FLOROVSKY, *Christianity and Culture Volume 2*, 84-85.

⁵⁹⁸ *HBeat*, (Homily I), 31.

⁵⁹⁹ M. FRANCIS, *Chastity, Poverty and Obedience*, 45.

the accusation of superficiality.⁶⁰⁰ In today's world where the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, consecrated poverty is a sign indicating that man must not use worldly goods abusively, that these goods are not the source of man's happiness, and that human person is called to loftier goals. However, this renunciation of personal property of the religious is not moralism because "the dispossession of goods will not necessarily lead to the union with God, if it is not Christ himself who moves one to do this."⁶⁰¹ According to Gregory, one should become poor in spirit looking to the one who willingly became poor for us.⁶⁰² Where there is genuine poverty of spirit, there is also poverty of the body. The consecrated life that began as a lay movement renouncing worldly riches is primarily a call to become a brother or a sister to all men and women.

In the Nyssen, poverty and glory are bound together. He underscores the point that Christ is the God of poverty and the God of glory.⁶⁰³ Christ who became poor for us in his humanity, reigns over all creation in his divinity. His poverty in the Incarnation cannot be separated from his glory in the resurrection. What Gregory has in mind is that if we, like Christ, share poverty (material poverty) with the impoverished, we will also share his kingdom when he reigns. Therefore, in the concrete life on earth, poverty is a blessing in disguise, according to Gregory. Because of Christ's material poverty, those without material possessions or wealth are the poor who have a special solidarity with Christ; "they bear the countenance (*prosopon*) of the Saviour."⁶⁰⁴ As the one who came as a human, Christ is poor. But as the one who will reign at the last judgement, Christ is rich. In like manner, as those disadvantaged by the material inequalities of the human situation, the materially disadvantaged are poor. Yet as those given Christ's special solidarity, as those participating in the poverty of the one who is coming in glory, they are rich. For the Nyssen, if we could see God's glory together with God's poverty, we might ourselves respond rightly to material wealth and

⁶⁰⁰ Thomas Merton's words cast light on this point: "It is especially important to note that religious can in fact be objectively guilty of very great injustice merely by living too well and too comfortably on the wealth of which others are deprived. In a world of poverty and suffering, religious who give themselves to a life of bourgeois comfort, even though they can do so without violating the vows, are nevertheless guilty of injustice, as well as scandal": T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 53.

⁶⁰¹ J. RIDICK, *Treasures in Earthen Vessels: The Vows*, 12.

⁶⁰² *HBeat*, (Homily I), 30.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*, (Homily I), 31; cf. N. CARNES, *Beauty*, 76.

⁶⁰⁴ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Love of the Poor*, (Homily 1), trans. S. R. Holman, in S. R. HOLMAN, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, 195.

poverty.⁶⁰⁵ All humanity is called to imitate Christ in the move both to assuage poverty and to be in solidarity with it.

The ‘glory’ in spiritual life also depends on one’s participation in Christ’s ‘poverty.’ The one who ascends the spiritual mountain of contemplation with Christ participating in his poverty (spirit-poverty) will participate also in his glory. Gregory proclaims that the Holy Spirit is the glory: the Spirit is the glory that the Son received from the Father before the cosmos existed – the glory that eternally surrounds him –, and the Son passed on this glory to the entire humanity beginning with the apostles (Jn 17:5, 22).⁶⁰⁶ Thus, participation in God’s poverty and his glory helps consecrated persons become truly spiritual (Spirit-bearers) because when God breathed the breath of life, the breath of the Spirit, into the nostrils of Adam, he raised him to spiritual life, i.e., to a life really and truly theocentric.

Only through a life of poverty can consecrated men and women give true witness to Christ, the true man, on earth. The sign that the shepherds received from the angels to recognize God Incarnate was the sign of the Lord’s poverty (Lk 2: 12). Pope John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Redemptionis Donum* asks consecrated men and women to be authentic human beings in today’s civilization, especially in the context of the world of well-being based on consumerism in which man bitterly experiences the essential incompleteness of personal ‘being’ which affects his humanity because of the abundant and various forms of ‘having’ (RD 4). The Pope also reminds consecrated persons that the evangelical poverty is a call to enrich others through one’s own poverty because when one freely accepts this call, the infinite richness of God is transferred to the human soul in the mystery of grace, and it creates in man a source for enriching others not comparable with any other source of material goods, a source for bestowing gifts on others in the manner of God himself (RD 12).⁶⁰⁷ Being poor, consecrated men and women can share nothing but ‘their being,’ like Christ.

⁶⁰⁵ N. CARNES, *Beauty*, 76.

⁶⁰⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 15), 497.

⁶⁰⁷ Cf. VC 21. The document expresses this truth in its Trinitarian imprint: “When poverty is lived according to the example of Christ, who ‘though he was rich ... became poor’ (2 Cor 8:9), it becomes an expression of that total gift of self which the three Divine Persons make to one another. The gift overflows into creation and is fully revealed in the Incarnation of the Word and in his redemptive death.”

3.2.1.2 *Synodality in Community Life*

The word synodality derives from the Greek term *synodos*, from *syn* (together) and *odos* (way or journey). Thus, synodality indicates the path along which the people of God walk together.⁶⁰⁸ The theophany of the heavenly tabernacle leads to a deeper understanding of the mystery of synodality and its relation with spirit-poverty. In the second stage of the spiritual ascent, the Holy Spirit lets Moses, who has attained spirit-poverty by relinquishing all his affirmations based on senses and intellect, participate in a higher mystery of Christ – the all-encompassing tabernacle not made with hands (heavenly tabernacle). Moses was commanded to gaze at this tabernacle as an archetype so that he might reproduce it later in a handmade structure. In Gregory’s interpretation, the heavenly tabernacle stands for Christ in his uncreated pre-existence and its handmade structure denotes both his incarnation and the Church:

This tabernacle would be Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God, who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us. Thus, the same tabernacle is in a way both unfashioned and fashioned, uncreated in pre-existence but created in having received this material composition. ... if one should look at the tabernacle below ... the Church is also called Christ by Paul ... (LM II:174, 184).⁶⁰⁹

Gregory notes that the heavenly tabernacle consists of diverse things, each of which is unique and beautiful (cf. Ex 25-30) – gold pillars, an ark made of wood, a candlestick with a single base, an altar, a throne of mercy, cherubim, curtains artistically woven of diverse colours, lavers, braziers, hangings etc.⁶¹⁰ These diverse things exist in perfect order and harmony in the tabernacle – Christ, the common protector of all, who encompasses everything in himself. The words of St Paul in Col 1:17 echo here: “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” The vision of the heavenly tabernacle reveals to Moses the truth about the universe: “The wonderful harmony of the heavens proclaims the wisdom which shines forth

⁶⁰⁸ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 3.

⁶⁰⁹ In 2 Cor 5:1, St Paul writes, “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

⁶¹⁰ For Gregory, each of these things carries spiritual meaning. “Each thing seen leads to the contemplation of a concept appropriate to God” (LM II: 178). The heavenly tabernacle stands not only for the divine nature of Christ but also for the celestial world where angels contemplate God and exist in harmony.

in the creation” (LM II:168). According to Gregory, the harmony in the creation results from the wisdom of the Creator who encompasses the universe uniting opposites.

The Cappadocian likens the orderly arrangement of the universe to a diverse and variegated musical harmony designed and composed by God himself.⁶¹¹ The cosmos, which is a unity of opposites, is a hymn of the glory of the inaccessible and inexpressible God as there exist melody derived from variety and harmony produced from opposites. Gregory notes that all the music perceived in the universe is seen in human nature, the miniature cosmos:⁶¹² in man there exists a harmony of opposites.⁶¹³ From this he arrives at the conclusion that the vocation of humanity as a whole is to become an instrument for God in rhythmical music imitating the harmony of the universe in the variety and diversity of virtues.⁶¹⁴ According to him, in the beginning the ‘dance’ of the rational nature (of human beings and angels) was one, looking to the leader of the chorus (God) and ordering its movement in relation to his command; the first humans used to sing chorus with the angelic powers until sin occurred.⁶¹⁵ From what we saw, we can understand that the synodality (journeying together) that existed from the very beginning was broken by the fall of man, and it can be retrieved only through man’s participation in God’s wisdom.

The Church is the reproduction of the heavenly tabernacle, and thus an embodiment of synodality. She is a concrete reality reflecting the beauty of ‘unity in diversity’ and ‘holiness’ of the heavenly tabernacle because “Moses was counselled not to represent these things in mere writing but to imitate in material construction that immaterial creation, employing the most splendid and radiant materials found on earth” (LM 1:49). The Church as the

⁶¹¹ *IPs*, (I: III: 19), 89; cf. *SRe*, 23-24.

⁶¹² *IPs*, (I: III: 22), 91.

⁶¹³ Cf. *Virg*, 67. The Nyssen writes that human body is made up of four elements which are direct opposites to each other, namely, hot and cold, wet and dry, mixed together. Each of these elements is diametrically opposed to the other, but they fit together by nature through some affinity of the qualities in them, the cold and hot being present equally in the wet and dry, and the wet and dry in the hot and cold. The identity of the qualities appearing equally in the opposites creates by itself a union of opposites. Health consists in not having one element in us dominate the others. See also *MMA*, (XXX: 6, 12), 790-791. Gregory notes that in a human being the moist element is not dried up by excess of heat, nor the hot element is quenched by the prevalence of moisture. The domination of any of the elements constitutes a state of disease. He uses the harmony of opposites in human nature as a paradigm for man’s communitarian existence and says that those who go beyond the bounds of fairness should learn that covetousness is a disease that breeds destruction.

⁶¹⁴ *IPs*, (I: IX: 115), 120.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, (II: VI: 60), 138-139.

representation of the common humanity assumed by the Word in the Incarnation is not an ideology, but rather she is the Body of Christ and makes present in the world the living Christ, who produces harmony of opposites. According to the Nyssen, through the Incarnation, Christ and the Church join to become a common body, a body in which unity is so intense because the head (Christ) is of the same nature as the body. The Church is humanity⁶¹⁶ and within this body of Christ, the various members all have their distinctive roles. Based on Gregory's teachings we can say that when a person looks at the Church, he looks at the body of Christ, and a description of the Church is a description of Christ.

According to the Cappadocian, just as different but appropriate materials are used for the tabernacle, so too the Church is composed of unique persons with different responsibilities. There is only one Church because of "the harmony, love, and peace of the believers" (LM II:186). The stability and the glory of the Church do not depend on a few. All believers are called to be the pillars and the lights of the Church: "It is not only Peter and John and James who are pillars of the Church, nor was only John the Baptist a burning light, but all those who themselves support the Church and become lights through their own works are called *pillars* and *lights*" (LM II:184). All Christians have the common responsibility of fulfilling the mission of the Church in the world; they are called to walk together creating harmony in diversity. Christian life is not a solitary ascent into the divine world, but a participation in the Christian community on earth. Since the consecrated life is a sign of Christian perfection, synodality in the community life of the religious gives witness to their higher participation in the mystery of Christ and of the Church. We have to keep in mind that as Moses was introduced into the mystery of heavenly tabernacle only when he had attained spirit-poverty, it is the spirit-poverty of consecrated persons that makes this participation a reality.

Synodality as a participation in the mystery of Christ, first of all, calls attention to the Trinity: the perfect synodality – journeying together – exists in the Holy Trinity. The God of the Christians is a community; "he is not an anchorite god."⁶¹⁷ For Gregory, the heavenly tabernacle is a type of the 'heavenly Christ' (God) whose mystery is beyond intellectual comprehension but can be grasped by faith. Christ as the heavenly tabernacle that encompasses everything within it, but not being encompassed by anything

⁶¹⁶ J. R. VILLAR, "Gregory of Nyssa's View of the Church", in N. DUMITRASCU, *The Ecumenical Legacy of the Cappadocians*, 215.

⁶¹⁷ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 23.

else, takes us to the mystery of the Trinity – the one infinite divine nature/essence (*ousia*) totally possessed by three distinct persons (*hypostasis*). The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who maintain their personal characteristics are one in their one uncreated divine nature.⁶¹⁸ Even though each Divine Person maintains his personal characteristics – the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son –, there is perfect unity in diversity in the Trinity because there is ‘only one’ divine essence for the three Divine Persons. There exists in the Triune God the mystery of poverty: the perfect common life in the Trinity is based on the mysterious divine poverty which makes it impossible for any of the three persons to possess anything absolute as exclusively his own.⁶¹⁹ None of the three Persons possesses anything absolute that the other two do not also possess. Christ’s own poverty reveals something of the interior life of the divine Trinity itself, that is, “the total gift of self which the three Divine Persons make to one another.”⁶²⁰ In the Holy Trinity, there exist both the unity of nature and the distinction of persons.

Consecrated men and women, through Christ and in the Holy Spirit, share in the life of communion of the blessed Trinity. In the Trinity, there are three ‘persons,’ not ‘individuals.’ Being a person is basically different from being an individual. An individual is only a part of a species; he divides the nature to which he belongs, and as the possessor of his own nature, he sets his ‘I’ in opposition to the natures of all other individuals.⁶²¹ The concept of the persons in the Trinity is different. None of the Persons breaks the divine

⁶¹⁸ Cf. *CE I*, (XXII: 278-280), 121-122. Gregory of Nyssa delineates how the three Divine Persons of the Trinity are one while each being unique in the following words: “The particularity attributed to each of the persons (hypostases) plainly and unambiguously distinguishes them from each other. Thus, the Father is confessed to be uncreated and unbegotten, for he is neither begotten nor created. This being uncreated, therefore, he has in common with the Son and the Holy Spirit. But he is both unbegotten and Father; this is personal and incommunicable, and it is not perceived in either of the others. The Son is connected to the Father and the Spirit in being uncreated, but has his individuation in being, and being called, Son and Only-begotten, which does not belong to the God over all or to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, who has a share with the Father and the Son in the uncreated nature, is again distinguished from them by recognisable features. ... Connected with the Father in being uncreated, he is conversely separated from the Father by not being Father as he is. His connexion with the Son in being uncreated, is not continued when it comes to the personal characteristic, since he did not come to be Only-begotten from the Father and has been manifested through the Son himself.”

⁶¹⁹ AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 8.

⁶²⁰ VC 21.

⁶²¹ V. LOSSKY, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Ian and I. Kesarcodi-Watson, 41, 126.

nature to own it exclusively; the divine nature remains undivided. It is precisely because, unlike individuals, each Person in the Trinity opens himself to the other two and they share nature without restriction. And this indivisible nature confirms the uniqueness of every Person: every Person is fully divine. In the Trinity every Person shares integrally in all the others, and there exists oneness in diversity and diversity in oneness. In the prelapsarian state Adam and Eve had shared the same nature – “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). Having been created in the image of God, they had one nature and their own personhood. But after the fall human nature lost its likeness to the divine nature, became parts and was broken into two individuals or two separate natures. Man and woman lost harmony not only with God but also with each other and all of creation (cf. Gen 2:12-19). They became unequal: woman became subject to man and man exercised rule over woman.

“The person is otherness in communion and communion in otherness,”⁶²² says Zizioulas. The doctrine of the Trinity overcomes the notion of persons as autonomous selves. The person is an identity that emerges through relationship; it is an ‘I’ that can exist only as long as it relates to a ‘thou’ which affirms its existence and its otherness. Persons are always persons-in-relationship. A person is more than an individual: while a person is in relationship to other people, an individual is an isolated part; while a person bears the common human nature and represents the whole without losing personal distinctiveness, an individual is a numerical unit and the smallest component of society, which cannot be further divided;⁶²³ while a person is communitarian, an individual is autonomous. Thus, personhood implies the ‘openness of being,’ that is, a movement towards communion which leads to a transcendence of the boundaries of the self and thus to freedom.⁶²⁴ A person cannot be a part or a fraction of a whole. We have to keep in mind that the word ‘person’ derives from the Greek ‘prosopon’ (face). The human being is to be a ‘prosopon’ (face) turned toward the other in the freedom of encounter. Mankind is to realize its social nature by following God who turns his face toward the other in willingness to share himself with

⁶²² J. D. ZIZIOULAS, *Communion and otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and Otherness*, 9.

⁶²³ The term ‘individual’ derives from Latin *individuus* (from *in* ‘not’ + *dividuus* ‘divisible’ = *individuus* ‘indivisible’).

⁶²⁴ J. D. ZIZIOULAS, *Communion and otherness*, 213.

the other in communal life.⁶²⁵ We can unambiguously state that a communion of persons makes a religious community, but a group of individuals does not.

As we saw in the first chapter, for the Nyssens, the creation of Adam signified the creation of the one human nature common to the mankind. Man was created in the image of the Trinity:⁶²⁶ the distinction between persons and nature exists in God, and it exists also in man because he is the image of God. To be the image of God is to have the same kind of distinction between nature and person that exists in the Trinity. Man as a person is not a part of the human nature, just as the Persons of the Trinity are not parts of God. “God is a Nature and three persons; man is a nature and innumerable persons. God is consubstantial and in three persons; man is consubstantial and in innumerable persons,”⁶²⁷ writes Christos Yannaras. Therefore, when Gregory of Nyssa says that Christianity is an imitation of the divine nature,⁶²⁸ he is reminding the Christians of their primordial vocation to be persons, not individuals. Christians, as persons, can live the fullness of humanity, if they are in their vertical fellowship with God and horizontal fellowship with neighbor, imitating Christ’s oneness with the Father and his ‘for-youness’⁶²⁹ with mankind in absolute sinlessness. Since this life is a participation in the invisible richness of God and the condescension of the Word, we can say that to be a person is to participate in God’s poverty.

God, in his Incarnation, has assumed the common nature of humanity. In Christ all are united in one nature, and in him they can cease to be individuals who live for themselves and have their separate individual natures. In Christ the distinctiveness of the persons is maintained by the work

⁶²⁵ D. C. AUGUSTINE, “The Spirit and Vision of Life: Seeing the World and Humanity Otherwise in the Light of God’s Face”, in D. CASTELO – K. M. LOYER (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Pneumatology*, 126. The Greek word ‘prosopon’ is formed from the prefix ‘pros’ which means ‘toward’ and the noun ‘opos’ which means ‘look’, ‘eye’ or ‘face.’ To be a person can mean to have one’s ‘face toward’ someone or something: cf. C. YANNARAS, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Keith Schram, 30.

⁶²⁶ Cf. *CE III*, (V:48), 148. Gregory says, “... we propound the unity of nature and diversity of individual beings in Peter and Paul ...”; cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *To Ablabius that There Are Not Three Gods*, 617.

⁶²⁷ C. YANNARAS, *Elements of Faith*, 59.

⁶²⁸ *WIMCOC*, 85.

⁶²⁹ What is meant here is that Jesus Christ was a man for others. The institution of the Eucharist symbolically stands for this truth also: cf. Lk 22: 19-20: Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

of the Holy Spirit who diversifies them with his gifts. Moreover, as Moses was able to participate in the mystery of the tabernacle only when he made his ascent in the Spirit who made him go out of himself, it is the Holy Spirit who leads the believer out of his 'I-ness' into *koinonia* – communion/fellowship – by the illumination of his intellect. The Holy Spirit is associated with fellowship (2 Cor 13:13): he de-individualizes and personalizes beings wherever he operates. When the Spirit blows, he creates not good individual Christians, individual saints, but an event of communion, which transforms everything the Spirit touches into a relational being.⁶³⁰ Synodality in the communities of consecrated men and women presupposes the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in which each one overcomes one's 'I-ness' in spirit-poverty and treats the other as an ontological part of one's own identity. Lossky affirms that a person who asserts himself as an individual, and shuts himself up in the limits of his particular nature, far from realizing himself fully becomes impoverished.⁶³¹ When a human person renounces his own possession, his individual part of the nature, gives himself freely, and ceases to exist for himself, he finds full expression in the one nature common to all. In giving up one's own special good, one expands infinitely, and is enriched by everything which belongs to all.⁶³² Gregory says, "The perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness" (LM I:10).

The consecrated life is also a participation in the mystery of the earthly tabernacle, the 'synodal Church.' On the day of Pentecost, the Church was born as a community. The permanent presence of Christ in history is made possible by the Holy Spirit in the form of the Church Community.⁶³³ It is the whole Church that represents Christ in the world. From the very beginning, Christianity was not primarily a 'doctrine', but exactly a 'community.' This community manifested a "unity which radically transcended all human boundaries of race, culture, social rank, and indeed the whole dimension of *this world*. They were brethren to each other and members of one body, the Body of Christ."⁶³⁴ Thus, the very nature of the Church is synodal from the beginning. The inner harmony of the heavenly tabernacle in *The Life of Moses* symbolically depicts the synodal nature of the Church. Now, according to the Cappadocian, the Holy Spirit, whom Christ gave to humanity as a gift, is the bond of unity of the Body of Christ (the Church)⁶³⁵ and leads her into all truth

⁶³⁰ J. D. ZIZIOULAS, *Communion and otherness*, 6.

⁶³¹ V. LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 123.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶³³ D. STANILOAE, *Theology and the Church*, trans. R. Barringer, 49.

⁶³⁴ G. FLOROVSKY, *Christianity and Culture Volume 2*, 67.

⁶³⁵ *HSong*, (Homily 15), 497.

(Jn 16:13; LM II:121). Therefore, the principal authority (the protagonist) in the Church is the Holy Spirit, and all are called to live in accordance with the Spirit. Being truly 'synodal,' therefore, means moving forward in harmony, spurred by the Holy Spirit.⁶³⁶ Therefore, hierarchical powers are not powers over the Church, but powers of the Church, and they are to be exercised in obedience to the Church.⁶³⁷ The authority in the Church rests in holiness, spiritual power, love, mercy, sacrifice, compassion, truth etc. Synodality does not support any kind of self-sufficiency and centralism. Subsidiarity and decentralization – a sharing of the responsibility with all the chosen of God – is an expression of the Church that journeys together. The Church is a spiritual construction, the work of the Spirit who unites, and she stands in striking contrast to the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), a material construction of man's pride that divides.

The Church was founded precisely by the infusion into all believers a common understanding, an understanding which was shared by faithful and Apostles alike. The common mind does not mean uniformity. All those who received the same understanding preserved their distinct languages. It points to their unity in diversity. Different gifts of the Spirit also testify to this unity in diversity. Staniloae explains, "One who receives a particular gift has need of another's gift in order to turn his own good to good account and to complete what he himself lacks. Similarly, the same man contributes with his own gift to the full use of another's gift, thereby helping his brother towards his own particular fulfilment."⁶³⁸ Thus, all are dependent on the same Spirit by virtue of the different gifts, and on one another as well. Docility to the Spirit binds everybody together with love (cf. Col 3:14). Each one should have an awareness of belonging to all the rest. Each one should believe that the gifts of each exist for the sake of the others. All those who have received gifts within the Church are subordinated to and serve the whole body. The needs of the whole Church are satisfied through the continual activity of each believer. The existence of mutually interdependent gifts neither makes all members the same nor allow them to work in isolation from one another. There exists unity of communion, not of exterior command or uniformity. It protects the dignity of the persons involved in the union. Each person is unique, and one's unique gift, whether it is big or small, cannot be replaced by another.⁶³⁹ So, there is equality that envisages humility in listening and

⁶³⁶ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 48.

⁶³⁷ D. STANILOAE, *Theology and the Church*, 51.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶³⁹ Cf. *LG* 12; *AG* 28.

boldness in speaking. The unity of communion of the believers permits transcending individualism and manifests the mystical body of Christ. Thus, the more the spirit-poverty is lived by the believers, the more visible the ‘earthly tabernacle’ will be.

The consecrated life is a “sign”⁶⁴⁰ of the Church, which by its nature is a community. A religious community is called to represent a synodal Church through a life of “communion, participation and mission.”⁶⁴¹ Persons, not individuals, are open to synodal life. All the peculiar characteristics of the Church have their reflections in the consecrated life. Incorporation into a religious community is to be understood as participation in a supernatural family after the model of the ‘heavenly tabernacle.’ In the monastic community established by Gregory of Nyssa’s brother Basil, renunciation of worldly possessions was recommended not only to avoid distraction for the soul but to promote the life in common so “that there be in all one heart, one will, one desire, and that the entire community be one body consisting of diverse members.”⁶⁴² There is no subordination, persons are united in equality, and the community is the expression of their communion. For Basil, the loss of equality is the origin and foundation of envy and hatred.

Jesus called each of his disciples personally to live in communion with him and with the other disciples. At the last supper, by giving the humble example of service, he inverted the relationship based on power and domination. Communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs to the world that fraternal life is possible, that mutual service and the exchange of gifts are possible, that dialogue is always possible, and that communion can bring differences into harmony in societies frequently marked by conflicting passions and interests. “If the Church is the body of Christ,” Pope Francis says, “the spirit of service (*ministrare*) of the Incarnate Word must completely imbue her members, each of whom – because of his or her uniqueness, which responds to a personal calling from God – manifests one feature of the face of Christ the Servant. Their “harmonious action” reveals to the world the beauty of the One who *came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life*

⁶⁴⁰ PC 1; LG 44.

⁶⁴¹ SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*, no. 10.

⁶⁴² BASIL OF CAESAREA, *An Ascetical Discourse*, in M. M. WAGNER (trans.), *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, 217.

as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45).”⁶⁴³ In line with the Pope’s teaching, we can say that a community of consecrated persons, as it is a sign of the Church, can give witness to Christ, not through a part of its members but through the synodal life of all.

The journeying together or synodality in community life presupposes ‘spirit-poverty’ that engenders humility, simplicity, selflessness, self-sacrifice, respect for others, solidarity, and willingness to serve and help in each of its members. Equality depends not so much on each member receiving from the Lord the same number of ‘talents’ as on recognizing that all are servants of the Lord. In other words, equality is to be established on ‘being,’ not on ‘having’ and each one should contribute to carry out the plan of salvation “according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph 4:7). The concentration on ‘having’ begets envy. Because of envy towards man, who alone possessed the image of God, the angel became the devil.⁶⁴⁴ Envy is the greatest challenge to synodality in religious communities. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen comments on envy that arises from pride and the desire to rule, the primary and fundamental cause of propension to the bad:

Envy armed Cain contrary to nature and instituted the death which is vindicated seven times. Envy made Joseph a slave. Envy is the death-dealing sting, the hidden weapon, the sickness of nature, the bitter poison, the self-willed emaciation, the bitter dart, the nail of the soul, the fire in the heart, the flame burning on the inside. For envy, it is not its own misfortune but another’s good fortune that is unfortunate. Again, inversely, success is not one’s own good fortune but the neighbour’s misfortune. Envy is grieved at the good deeds of men and takes advantage of their misfortunes (LM II:257-258).

Spirit-poverty is an antidote to envy because in this poverty one is neither self-seeking nor non-dependent on God.

The interior poverty is an emptying of self or a death of self, i.e., a disappearance of ‘I’ and ‘mine.’ One ceases to be attached to one’s desires, opinions, tastes, progress – everything that makes the ‘I’ solid and evident. Interior poverty helps consecrated men and women realize that in all moments of dialogue, decision making and discernment, it is God’s will that they are seeking to discern and discover, not their own or that of their group. In this

⁶⁴³ FRANCIS, “Message on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Apostolic Letter Issued ‘Motu Proprio’ *Ministeria Quaedam* of Saint Paul VI”, Rome 15 August 2022.

⁶⁴⁴ *CO*, (VI), 894; (XXIII), 925; cf. J. DANIELOU, *The Angels and Their Mission According to the Fathers of the Church*, trans. D. Heimann, 45.

sense poverty is the detachment from the desire to be the centre and the deciding person of what happens.⁶⁴⁵ Each religious community is to stress the common dignity and mission of all the members, not only because of their baptism but also because of their belonging to the same community that is a sign of the Church. Consecrated men and women should have the creative courage to deny oneself. Where there is creative courage, there is risk and the doubt implied in risk.⁶⁴⁶ According to Karl Rahner, this courage is always rewarding in the consecrated life: “Religious life means the courage to take advice from others, to conquer an overhasty fondness for one’s own opinions and feelings. Once you have dared to try that courage, you notice that entrusting yourself to the larger mind of a group is rewarding.”⁶⁴⁷ The consecrated life manifests its creative courage in the members’ ability to receive, and to recognize how one really is poor and limited and in need of brothers and sisters. Synodality of the Church means that the whole Church is a subject and that everyone in the Church is a subject.⁶⁴⁸ It is applicable to a religious community as well. Each member of the community, as in the case of the Holy Trinity, in some sense within his/her own *hypostasis* (person) is the centre of all because of his/her uniqueness and unrepeatability.

General Chapters, Provincial Chapters, and plenary meetings in each local community are venues of living synodality. They must guarantee the participation of each member in matters affecting all. Synodal life in the consecrated life is founded on the principle that both the hierarchy and the charisms of the members derive from the same Spirit and are reciprocally related.⁶⁴⁹ Thus, synodality goes beyond the superficial vision that puts the hierarchy on the one side and the charisms of the members on the other, in a sort of hierarchal and charismatic opposition. Schmemmann notes that “the perfect Synod, the Holy Trinity, is a hierarchy, and not an impersonal equality of interchangeable members. Synodality is the unity of persons, who fulfil their personal being in conciliarity with other persons, who are council (synod) in as much as they are persons, so that many are one without ceasing to be many. Synodality is the oneness of the many. Unity results from the recognition and the knowledge of the personal gifts and charisms of each by

⁶⁴⁵ F. C. ARINZE, *Radical Discipleship: Consecrated Life and the Call to Holiness*, 33.

⁶⁴⁶ P. TELLICH, *Systematic Theology Volume III: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 239.

⁶⁴⁷ K. RAHNER, *The Religious Life Today*, 44.

⁶⁴⁸ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 55.

⁶⁴⁹ U. SARTORIO, “Sinodalità e Vita Consacrata”, in *Vita Consacrata*, LVIII/1 (2022), 27; cf. LG 4.

all.”⁶⁵⁰ As the Church from the very beginning is a community, the first mission in the consecrated life is fraternal life in common. Those who create division sin against the Holy Spirit who is the source of Christian unity.

Clericalism has no place in an authentic consecrated life. G. Florovsky notes that in the beginning monasticism was distinctively a lay movement and the monastic state was clearly distinguished from the clerical because priesthood was a dignity and an authority, and as such was regarded as hardly compatible with ‘the basic principles of monastic life’ – life of obedience and penitence.⁶⁵¹ Religious community is not the place for those who are self-seeking and megalomaniac; it is the place where the daily troubled passage from ‘me’ to ‘us’ takes place – from ‘my commitment’ to the ‘commitment entrusted to the community,’ from the search for ‘my things’ to the search for the ‘things of Christ’ – in spirit-poverty. Thomas Merton calls superficial unity devoid of spirit-poverty found in the consecrated life ‘organized hypocrisy.’⁶⁵² Synodality emerges when one stops living for oneself and starts living for another – God and brethren –, and where individuals become persons. Through the practise of synodality in community life, the consecrated life will become an anticipation of the eschatological life and an imitation of the prelapsarian ‘one dance’ of the rational nature (angels and human beings), looking to Christ – the leader of the chorus – and ordering its movement in relation to his command.

3.2.2 Sacramental Dimension: Chrismation

In his treatise against Apollinaris, Gregory says that the name *Christ* signifies the one who is anointed with ‘chrism’ (“oil of gladness,” Ps 45:7) that represents the power of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵³ The Only Begotten was called *Christ* from the beginning for the Father eternally anoints Christ with the Spirit. Then, in becoming man and entering into humanity he made the man whom he assumed beautiful with the same chrism.⁶⁵⁴ We have already seen that, for the Nyssens, the Holy Spirit is the ‘glory’ that Christ had from the

⁶⁵⁰ A. SCHMEMMANN, *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West*, 165.

⁶⁵¹ G. FLOROVSKY, *Christianity and Culture*, 86.

⁶⁵² T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 158. Merton writes, “A religious community that lives tied up in a complex of formalities and conflicts, involved in a tangle of observances cultivated for their own sake, engaged in ritual and exterior worship, with nothing of true family spirit, not of fraternal peace and union, but only petty jealousies and envies – such a community is not living the religious life. It is organized hypocrisy.”

⁶⁵³ *AAp*, 240.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

Father before the world existed and that he gave to his disciples: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one” (Jn 17:22). It makes clear that the Holy Spirit is the principle of unity in the Church as well as in the Trinity, and that it is the Holy Spirit who unites man with God. When Gregory of Nyssa says that the Israelites who left the Egyptian life and crossed the Red Sea (symbol of baptism) were led by the cloud, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, it is a clear reference to the sacrament of chrismation. Just as the Israelites who followed the cloud were not overpowered by the Egyptians who pursued them, so too Christians who follow the Spirit will not become a prey to the soul’s enemies who want to bring their soul into bondage again after baptism. The guidance by the Holy Spirit also means that Christians cannot reach the goal of perfection on their own. They have to accept their poverty. Christian life consists in acquiring the Spirit. The sacrament of chrismation is the personal Pentecost of man. It is the fulfilment of baptism, its confirmation by the Holy Spirit; the person who has been incorporated into Christ at baptism, becomes a *laikos* (“one who belongs to the people” – layperson), a full member of the people (*laos*) of God. Through baptism a person receives a new being in Christ and through chrismation he acquires a new movement and activation of this being in accordance with Christ.⁶⁵⁵ It means that once freed from the flesh, one has to be led by the Spirit. However careless and indifferent the baptized may be in their subsequent life, the indwelling presence of the Spirit is never totally withdrawn;⁶⁵⁶ it will remain hidden and forgotten.

Secular education, according to Gregory, “is always in labour but never gives birth” (LM II:11) as it does not take us to the knowledge of God, the Truth. The Holy Spirit strengthens Christians with the knowledge of God. After Pentecost, people were amazed at the fearlessness and wisdom shown by Peter and John who were uneducated and ordinary men (Acts 4:13). The light of the Holy Spirit has enlightened the Apostles and made them ‘soldiers and athletes of Christ’ (2 Tim 2:3-5) to render testimony without fear or weakness. Consecrated men and women are called in a special way to manifest this mystery of chrismation in the Church through their life according to the Spirit. They can give witness to the power of the knowledge of God only if they let themselves be guided by the Spirit who “leads towards the Good those who are worthy” (LM II:121). Like Moses, they have to empty themselves in poverty of spirit and acquire the spiritual knowledge by the light of the Holy Spirit. It is also a life of action because a special gift of the Spirit opens the way to new possibilities and fruits of holiness and apostolic

⁶⁵⁵ P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 125.

⁶⁵⁶ Cf. NICHOLAS CABASILAS, *The Life in Christ*, 109.

work.⁶⁵⁷ Through their spirit-poverty consecrated men and women bring to perfection the inherent powers they received in the sacrament of chrismation.

3.2.2.1 Charisms

Gregory of Nyssa notes that in the heavenly tabernacle Moses sees a candlestick with a single base, divided at its top into seven branches, each supporting a lamp. The candlestick was made of solid gold and not of wood overlaid with gold (Ex 25:31-40). The Nyssen allegorically interprets “the candlestick with lamps that cast a full and brilliant light all around the tabernacle” as the varied rays of the Holy Spirit which shine brightly in the tabernacle (LM II:181). As the tabernacle is assimilated to Christ and the Church (Body of Christ), the varied rays of the Spirit which shine brightly in the tabernacle can be understood as the continuation of the Incarnation in the world through the Church by the action of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit prepares persons with special gifts of grace to give tangible witness to Christ in the world. These supernatural gifts bestowed by the Spirit for building up the body of Christ are called charisms.⁶⁵⁸ A charism (Greek, *charisma*, “grace-gift”) is never given or imposed by man; it is not foreseen by the structures of the Church, not obtained through a sacrament;⁶⁵⁹ it is always a gift. Incorporated into the Body of Christ through baptism and strengthened by the power of the Spirit through chrismation, all believers are assigned to the apostolate in the Church by being faithful to the extraordinary charisms (prophesy, discernment of spirit etc.) or ordinary charisms (administration, works of mercy etc.) they receive. A genuine charism implies a certain element of genuine originality and of special initiative for the spiritual life of the Church.⁶⁶⁰ Every charism is a participation in the victory of Christ, and those who live their charisms manifest in the Church, as J. A. McGuckin writes, “the conquering of the fear of death, the willingness to prefer heavenly things to earthly, cheerful self-sacrifice for the sake of others, the offering of the warm joy and simplicity of Christ to those one meets, an overarching philanthropy that constantly seeks out the poor to hear them and lift them up to the common table from which they have been pushed away, the love of poverty and humility for the sake of Christ, celibacy and chastity: things which are ‘unnatural’ in the common world order, but ‘signs’ of new life in

⁶⁵⁷ VC 30.

⁶⁵⁸ Cf. AA 3.

⁶⁵⁹ K. WOJTOWICZ, *The Priceless Gift*, 57.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

Christ.”⁶⁶¹ Charisms are great signs of the power of life – the power of the Spirit – in a human being.

We can say that just as the human body is an organic structure with many members having different functions, so the body of Christ (the Church) is complex and has many Spirit-inspired ministers; each minister is unique and irreplaceable because of the ‘grace-gift’ he or she has received. Charisms are always destined for the common good and so are related to various services and functions.⁶⁶² Therefore, it can be exercised only in spirit-poverty. *Vita Consecrata* reminds that a person who receives charism should let himself /herself be guided and sustained by the Spirit in order to embody the attitude of service (VC 36).⁶⁶³ There is no ministry in the Church other than Christ’s ministry.⁶⁶⁴ Therefore, each charism is a participation in Christ. It is a special way of perceiving and experiencing him, emphasizes a particular aspect of his mystery, and is also a way of conforming oneself to him. *Vita Consecrata* says that the Spirit through the distribution of charisms makes ever present in the Church and in the world, in time and space, the mystery of Christ (VC 4). Christ, who came not to be served but to serve (Mt 20:28), is the best model for exercising one’s charism. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen presents Moses, who selflessly lives for the people, as a prefiguration of Christ. Moses is a model for the Christian soul who seeks to fulfil his or her mission in the Church. The service of God demands a radical exercise of self-renunciation and spirit-poverty.

The spirit-poverty helps consecrated men and women live their charisms in humility, without downplaying the charisms of others. This

⁶⁶¹ J. A. MCGUCKIN, “Christ”, in *The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 123; cf. J. M. ARNAIZ, “From Sunset to Dawn: Reflections on Refounding”, in AA. VV., *For a Creative Fidelity: Refounding*, 10. Arnaiz notes that those who live an authentic charism make God the single Absolute and everything else relative.

⁶⁶² AA 3; cf. W. HARRINGTON, “Charism”, in J. A. KOMONCHAK et al. (eds.), *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 180. He writes that the Greek word *charisma* means free gift, favour. It is Paul who introduced this term into religious language; the word means a free gift of grace. A charism is a gift which has its source in the *charis* – grace or favour – of God and which is destined for the common good (1 Cor 12:7).

⁶⁶³ Cf. EG 130. Pope Francis underscores the ecclesial character of charism: “These gifts (charisms) are meant to renew and build up the Church. They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safe-keeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church, drawn to the centre which is Christ and then channelled into an evangelizing impulse. A sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God’s holy and faithful people for the good of all.”

⁶⁶⁴ J. D. ZIZIOULAS, *Being as Communion*, 210.

poverty demands that they understand, accept, and tolerate the gifts and particular abilities of others, especially in the community they belong to. Each member brings an abundance of personal gifts. Therefore, each new vocation enriches the ‘original charism of the community,’ which is “a foundational reality in the same way that baptism is foundational for Christian life,”⁶⁶⁵ and makes it dynamic. Gregory draws from St Paul’s words – “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor 13:2) – the conclusion that love is the foundation of the treasure of grace for the soul.⁶⁶⁶ It means that charisms, the treasure of grace, fail to produce fruits in ‘the absence of love,’ which, in turn, prevents one from respecting the charisms of one’s brethren. Since each member of the community has received his/her own charism from the Spirit, the community members listen to the Spirit when they discover, respect, and accept the charisms of each other.

According to Gregory, all believers are called to be the pillars of the Church by supporting her, and become lights through their own works (LM II:184). Here, charism refers to the gratuitous vocation to faith given equally to all Christians. In *The Life of Moses*, we see that the cloud (the Spirit) always leads the Israelites to higher ascent. The Spirit always prepares them for greater tasks, i.e., preparation always precedes a mission. The Nyssen has this in mind when he deals with how the Israelites, who were once weak and fearful, were prepared by God to fight against the Amalekites (Ex 17:8-16), and likens this fight to Christians’ fight against the enemies of the soul: “Just as in military conscription the commander of the army first supplies money and then gives the signal for battle, in the same way also the soldiers of virtue receive mystical money and move in battle against the enemy” (LM II:147). Here we can understand the ‘mystical money’ as special charisms that enable Christians to do their mission in the world, fighting against the enemies of the soul. The new Israel, the Church, is called to march ahead under the guidance of the Holy Spirit along the course of history marked with spiritual deserts. Without charisms, the Church cannot respond to her challenges timely and effectively. Thus, it becomes clear to us that it is not economic self-sufficiency that assures the survival of the consecrated life nor is material wealth the barometer of the growth the Congregations, but charisms that consecrated men and women can receive only as gifts and live only in spirit-

⁶⁶⁵ J. M. ARNAIZ, “From Sunset to Dawn: Reflections on Refounding”, 10.

⁶⁶⁶ *CML*, 141.

poverty.⁶⁶⁷ Christian victory depends not on self-sufficiency, but on “living by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16).

3.2.2.2 *Sacramental Vision of the Created World*

The wisdom which shines forth in the creation, and the reason for the beauty of the things which are seen can be traced in the wonderful harmony of the heavenly tabernacle (LM II:168), according to Gregory. The knowledge of God (Christ) leads to the knowledge of the world, and vice versa. “Now the world is good, and all its contents are seen to be wisely and skilfully ordered. All of them, therefore, are the works of the Word, of one who, lives and subsists,”⁶⁶⁸ writes he. We have already seen that, for the Nyssen, knowledge of God (Christ) can be acquired only in spirit-poverty that leads to the illumination by the Holy Spirit. Thus, we can say that spirit-poverty also leads to a new experience of the world because Christian mysticism is not a denial but a contemplation of the world.⁶⁶⁹ The contemplation of creation leads to recognizing the existence of God: the beauty and harmony of the world point to the Creator and are an eloquent refutation of atheism. According to the Nyssen, man was brought into existence last because God wanted him to trace the Maker from the beauty and majesty of the things he saw.⁶⁷⁰ The world is a sacrament for man from the beginning because it manifests the invisible God through its visible beauty

⁶⁶⁷ It is said that while the charism of consecrated life as such in the Church is unchanging and perennial, the institutional forms of consecrated life do not have a patent for eternity. K. Wojtowicz in his book *The Priceless Gift: A Primer of the Theology of Consecrated life* (page 61) says that some authors identify four stages of development in the history of an institute: 1) the initial period (which lasts 10-30 years); 2) the period of rapid growth; 3) the period of stabilization (about 120-150 years); and 4) the period of decadence. Together these four phases cover approximately 200 years. He observes that as the history of the old monastic orders shows, these stages may periodically repeat themselves. Religious communities have an inner vitality to renew themselves. They have to return to their origins and gather strength and vitality. See also VC 63.

⁶⁶⁸ *CO*, (I), 884.

⁶⁶⁹ B. T. BILANIUK, “The Mystery of Theosis or Divinization”, 357.

⁶⁷⁰ *MMa*, (II:1), 722. Gregory of Nyssa writes, “When the Maker of all had prepared beforehand, as it were, a royal lodging for the future king (and this was the land, and islands, and sea, and the heaven arching like a roof over them), and when all kinds of wealth had been stored in this palace – the whole creation, all that is in plants and trees, and all that has sense, and breath, and life; and ... that for their beauty are reckoned precious in the eyes of men, as gold and silver –, he thus manifests man in the world, to be the beholder of some of the wonders therein, and the lord of others; that by his enjoyment he might have knowledge of the Giver, and by the beauty and majesty of the things he saw might trace out that power of the Maker which is beyond speech and language.”

and harmony. The whole world is the sign and means of God's presence and wisdom, love, and revelation.⁶⁷¹ The original sin, the fall of man, occurred when man failed to see the world as a sacrament, but considered it as the goal per se, instead of seeing it as a means of communion with God. According to A. Schmemmann, the forbidden fruit is an image of the world loved for itself and the eating of it is the image of life understood as an end in itself.⁶⁷² Today, "secularism and materialism"⁶⁷³ affirm the primacy and self-satisfaction of human life and the self-sufficiency of the world. It induces man to live in this world without any necessary reference to God; man seeks not heavenly wealth, but material wealth; he finds not blessed poverty, but wretched poverty.

When the Nyssen says that Christ, the tabernacle, encompasses the entire universe (LM II:174), he makes clear that the world has its sacramental nature because of its union with God. The world is not profane because it can become profane only if God is alienated from it to an area called 'sacred.' In the Incarnation, Christ assumed humanity (corporeal body/world) and became in himself a sacrament. Through his visible humanity the invisible God was revealed: in the Word made flesh the world saw the light of divine love shining from material eyes, heard God speak with human lips, felt the miraculous power of God in the touch of human hands. Through participating in Christ's body, man can ascend to his divinity. Through the union of the Creator with the creation in God-Incarnate (Christ), the world was also redeemed and regained its sacramental nature. The blessing of 'matter' (water, oil etc.) in the Church signifies the return or redemption of matter to its initial or essential meaning – a means of communion with God.⁶⁷⁴ The architectural structure of the church building reveals the gathering of all

⁶⁷¹ It is not 'pantheism', identifying God with the world, but 'panentheism', i.e., God is in all things yet also beyond and above all things.

⁶⁷² A. SCHMEMANN, *For the Life of the World*, 16. For Gregory, to love the world for itself is tantamount to preferring non-being to Being, and to consider life as an end in itself is tantamount to choosing death instead of life.

⁶⁷³ Secularism is an atheist or agnostic ideology that 'ignores' religious beliefs and values, and that explains everything exclusively in this-worldly terms. (Secularism is to be distinguished from secularity, or the attitude of being concerned with this world and its affairs but not necessarily in an antireligious way. For example, secular clergy are diocesan priests. Secularization refers to a historical process that brings a change away from ecclesial control and sacred purposes). Materialism 'denies' spiritual entities such as God and the human soul, and accepts the existence only of perceptible, extended reality: cf. G. O'COLLINS – E. G. FARRUGIA, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 151, 236.

⁶⁷⁴ A. SCHMEMANN, *For the Life of the World*, 72.

creation under the dominion of God.⁶⁷⁵ For Gregory, man can become a saint only by constantly growing in the participation in the divine life.

The vow of poverty helps consecrated men and women to ascend like Moses from the visible world to the invisible, making the former only a means and not the goal per se. In this manner, this vow of poverty is also a vow to safeguard the sacramentality of creation negating secularism and materialism. The materialistic culture, devoid of its relationship with God, encourages consumerism and tends to look at creation as something to be exploited and used. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis exhorts all to see the earth that ‘groans in travail’ (Rom 8:22) as the most abandoned and maltreated of the poor: “We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (LS 2). He also reminds the Christians of their responsibility “to accept the world as a sacrament of communion” (LS 9). The life of vowed poverty of the religious as an ascent to the invisible richness of God is a corrective to unbridled materialism and exploitation of nature. By their poverty, consecrated men and women renounce their destructive ‘possessive relationship’ over things. They do not intend to make things their own, but to stand next to them to establish a relationship of mutual belonging.⁶⁷⁶ “They replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing. It is a way of loving, of moving gradually away from what I want to what God’s world needs,”⁶⁷⁷ says Pope Francis.

Poverty in spirit leads to a contemplative attitude of openness toward God, man, and nature. Contemplative men and women listen to the Word of God not only through Scripture and in their own hearts. They listen to God’s voice coming also through their brethren and nature, and in the signs of the times, in the events of history, past and present. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen liberates matter from the materialistic outlook by using them as pointers to divine realities: crossing of the Red Sea is a symbol of baptism (LM II:125); the cloud, of the Holy Spirit (LM II:121); the wood that sweetened the waters of Marah, of the Cross (LM II:132); the seventy palm trees, of the seventy disciples whom Jesus appointed in addition to the twelve apostles (LM II:134); the springs in the desert, of the Twelve Apostles whom the Lord chose for this service and through whom he caused his word to well

⁶⁷⁵ W. C. MILLS, *Church, World, and Kingdom: The Eucharistic Foundation of Alexander Schmemmann’s Pastoral Theology*, 107.

⁶⁷⁶ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 264.

⁶⁷⁷ LS 9.

up (LM II:134); the rock, of Christ himself (LM II:136, 244). As Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si*, poverty is a radical refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled (LS 11). Christian poverty frees material things from the bondage of man's selfishness.

3.2.2.3 *Lectio Divina*

Generally, a particular way of listening to what the Lord wishes to tell us in his Word and of letting ourselves be transformed by the Spirit is called *lectio divina* (Latin for 'divine reading' or 'sacred reading').⁶⁷⁸ One does not engage in *lectio divina* for the sake of being intellectually informed or enlightened; rather, he or she engages in *lectio* truly to 'listen' and 'respond' to God's invitation to lead a fuller and richer life illumined by God's revealed Word and through God's gracious invitation and action.⁶⁷⁹ In this practice, one does not depend on any scientific or historical-critical method, nor is it a reflection on the Word aimed at theological insight in the modern sense of academic theology. *Lectio divina* is dialogical, and it restores the scriptures as proclamations to be heard and responded to. In other words, the aim of *lectio divina* is to draw out the spiritual meaning of Scripture and grow in God's wisdom, i.e., it is contemplative in nature.

Before we speak about the relation of the vow of poverty with *lectio divina*, we have to note Gregory's contribution to it. As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out, Origen of Alexandria (c.185-c.254) played 'the primordial role' in the history of *lectio divina*.⁶⁸⁰ He is said to be the first to write about this practice. According to Origen, the whole Bible is divinely inspired. In *Philocalia* he says that it is fitting to believe that not a single letter of the sacred scriptures is without something of the wisdom of God.⁶⁸¹ All Scripture being inspired by God is profitable (2 Tim 3:16).⁶⁸² Origen makes a threefold division of the meaning of Scripture: literal sense, moral sense, and spiritual

⁶⁷⁸ EG 152.

⁶⁷⁹ K. W. IRWIN, "Lectio Divina", in W. M. JOHNSTON – C. KLEINHENZ (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 751.

⁶⁸⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Origen of Alexandria: The Thought 2*, General Audience, St Peter's Square 2 May 2007. Gregory of Nyssa's grandmother was converted to Christianity through the preaching of Gregory Thaumaturgos (the apostle of Cappadocia) who had been a pupil and convert of Origen. The influence of Origen was strong in Cappadocia.

⁶⁸¹ ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA, *Philocalia*, (I:28), trans. G. Lewis, 28.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, (XII:2), 56.

sense.⁶⁸³ It is parallel to the Pauline division of the human person into body, soul and spirit (1 Thess 5:23). It is also related to the division of Christians into the simple, the progressing and the perfect. The literal sense is the ‘body’ of Scripture. Simple Christians may be edified by it. The moral sense (soul) is found by those who make progress. They come to know what they must do in living the word. The spiritual sense (spirit) belongs to those who are mature (1 Cor 2:6-7). It speaks of Christ or heavenly things. The literal sense covers the spiritual sense like a veil. One of the reasons behind Origen’s exhortation to seek spiritual meaning in Scripture is the lack of sequential order (*akolouthia*, logical order) in certain Biblical texts.⁶⁸⁴ According to him, through this lack of order God invites the reader to go beyond the obvious meaning.

Gregory of Nyssa unites the spiritual sense and the sequence (*akolouthia*) in Biblical exegesis. For Gregory, the scriptures present an internal *akolouthia*, an ordered and progressive style. It is not the ‘chronological sequence,’ but the ‘spiritual sequence,’ that can be found in the Bible. In *On the Inscription of the Psalms*, the Nyssen notes that if one should take note of the chronological interval in which the life of David occurred and the sequence of the events, he would not find the arrangement of the psalms to be in agreement with the order of history.⁶⁸⁵ The Psalms are presented in chronological disorder and do not correspond to a historical succession. But, for Gregory, the Holy Spirit is the true author of the Psalms. The Spirit is not preoccupied with chronology, but keeps continuity in

⁶⁸³ ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA, *On First Principles*, (IV: III: 4-5), trans. G. W. Butterworth, 391-396.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, (IV: II: 9), 378-379. There is more to the biblical text than meets the eye. Origen says, “If the ... sequence and case of the narrative were at first sight clearly discernible throughout, we should be unaware that there was anything beyond the obvious meaning for us to understand in the scriptures. Consequently, the Word of God has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks, as it were, and hindrances and impossibilities to be inserted in the midst of the law and the history, in order that we may not be completely drawn away by the sheer attractiveness of the language, and so either reject the true doctrines absolutely, on the ground that we learn from the scriptures nothing worthy of God or else by never moving away from the letter fail to learn anything of the more divine element.” In the *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Origen observes a lack of sequence (*akolouthia*) where the evangelist says that Jesus arose from supper to wash his disciples’ feet when guests customarily wash their feet not after, but before, supper. Something unhistorical is inserted into this narrative. According to him this lack of sequence has been done to raise our understanding to the spiritual sense of the details in this passage. For Origen, God has two aims in inspiring scriptures: the first is to teach the mysteries of salvation to those who are ‘capable of receiving them’ (worthy); the second is to hide them from those who are unworthy (cf. *Ibid.*, IV: II: 8).

⁶⁸⁵ *IPs*, (XI:131), 163.

spiritual meaning that leads to the formation of Christ in us.⁶⁸⁶ According to the Cappadocian, what God intends to communicate through his revelation in Scripture is not its material sense, but the spiritual sense: “the Word knocks at the door of our understanding.”⁶⁸⁷ Therefore, we can say that with Gregory of Nyssa *lectio divina* comes to be founded on a clear Christian approach to Scripture.

Moses’ ascent in spirit-poverty, having left behind all sensory and intellectual conceptions, into the darkness on Mount Sinai to receive divine knowledge is tantamount to the notion of *lectio divina* in Gregory. According to him, the scope of the scriptures is to take those who are prisoners of the perception of the senses by the hand, and through exterior appearances guide them to that reality which is beyond sensory knowledge.⁶⁸⁸ Man, who is created in the image of God who is invisible, has the natural vocation to go beyond appearances. *Lectio divina* is “the power by the Spirit to search the depth of God” (LM II:173) in Scripture. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory makes an ascent in the Spirit from the literal senses of the Exodus account to divulge the spiritual meaning hidden beneath the surface of the account. According to him, there should not be anything unworthy of God in Scripture. He observes that if a person looks only to the literal sense (history), he will not be able to preserve in the description of what happened a concept worthy of God. In the treatise, he comments on the death of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians, which appears to be an injustice from the part of God in its literal sense:

The Egyptian acts unjustly, and in his place is punished his new-born child, who in his infancy cannot discern what is good and what is not. His life has no experience of evil, for infancy is not capable of passion. He does not know to distinguish between his right hand and his left. The infant lifts his eyes only to his mother’s nipple, and tears are the sole perceptible sign of his

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., (XI:135), 164. The Nyssen writes, “The order of the psalms is harmonious, therefore, since what is zealously pursued by the Spirit is not to teach us mere history, but to form our souls in accordance with God through virtue. Consequently, he seeks the continuity of the spiritual meaning of the things which have been written in the psalms; the historical sequence has no significance.” In *LM*, Gregory concentrates on “the sequence of the development of virtue” (LM II:39) in the account of the Exodus. He omits many episodes narrated of Moses in the Bible, and is concerned simply with Moses’ life as a model of virtue. The three stages he sets forth are based on the chronology of Moses’ life. Each episode in Moses’ life takes us beyond the preceding one in showing us the way of perfection in the virtuous life. According to him since “those who emulate the lives of honored men in Scripture cannot experience the identical literal events, they might substitute a moral teaching for the literal sequence” (LM II:49).

⁶⁸⁷ *HSong*, (Homily 11), 343.

⁶⁸⁸ H. R. DROBNER, “Skopos”, in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 682.

sadness. And if he obtains anything which his nature desires, he signifies his pleasure by smiling. If such a one now pays the penalty of his father's wickedness, where is justice? Where is piety? Where is holiness? Where is Ezekiel, who cries: The man who has sinned is the man who must die, and a son is not to suffer for the sins of his father? How can the history so contradict reason? (LM II:91).

As we have already seen in the first chapter, the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians stands for the extirpation of the first beginning of evil in *The Life of Moses*. An ascent in the Holy Spirit in poverty of spirit, not depending on one's own intellect, helps Christians rise above the literal understanding of those concepts that are unworthy of God in Scripture.⁶⁸⁹ The Nyssen teaches us that in reading Scripture if we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit in spirit-poverty, the Holy Spirit, by whose power the Word of God became flesh in the womb of Mary and Sacred Scripture is born from the womb of the Church, will guide us to the invisible Truth and divinization. In this sense, *lectio divina* can also be understood as an ascent from the outward reading to the inward listening. Scripture is a sacrament as it reveals the inward grace to the reader who approaches it worthily, in a prayerful manner.

The Bible is found to be always contemporary.⁶⁹⁰ Each faithful is addressed personally through Scripture and is brought to a point of meeting with the Lord by the Holy Spirit. Since the Lord who is encountered with is infinite, the reader can never exhaust the meaning of Scripture. Christian life in general – the consecrated life in particular – is a call to progressive divinizing participation in Scripture. The importance of Scripture in the consecrated life can be traced from the fact that the movement of the early Christians into the desert “was a response to a call from God mediated through

⁶⁸⁹ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 7), 243. Gregory writes, “We learn that whatever came to pass at the instance of the holy persons whom God inspired came to pass as a type and a teaching concerned with things accomplished for the sake of virtue. The marriages, the emigrations, the battles, the constructions of buildings – all prefigure, by way of analogy, the mode of life that comes after them, with intent to provide instruction. For “these things were written down,” it says, “for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11). Battle against alien peoples counsels us to be courageous in the struggle against evil, while attention given to marriage enjoins upon us, in a riddling manner, cohabitation with the virtues. In the same way, emigration points to the settling and establishment of the virtuous life, while whatever these holy people seriously undertook by way of the construction of buildings enjoins upon us earnestness regarding our own dwellings as they are being built through virtue”: *Ibid.*, (Homily 7), 243.

⁶⁹⁰ K. WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, 149.

Scripture.”⁶⁹¹ Moreover, as we saw in the first chapter, there existed village asceticism prior to the emergence of the anchoritic and coenobitic models in the desert: men known as *apotaktikoi* or “renunciants”, i.e., those who renounced their possessions in accordance with the command of Jesus, practised forms of asceticism in the villages of Egypt.⁶⁹² The most common term for ascetics in Egypt was *renunciant*. Thus, the vow of poverty and the life according to the Gospel are intimately connected. Monks renounced their personal possession in order that they may be enriched by the imperishable Word. Athanasius of Alexandria in his *The Life of St Antony* introduces the Father of Monasticism as a person who learnt Scripture by heart so much so that “his memory served him in place of books.”⁶⁹³ According to the *Rule* (140) of Pachomius, founder of coenobitic monasticism, “there shall be no one in the monastery who does not learn to read the scriptures and one should learn by heart at least the New Testament and the Psalter.”⁶⁹⁴ In his ascetical work *The Morals*, Basil the Great, Gregory’s brother, puts as the eighth rule, “We must neither doubt nor hesitate respecting the words of the Lord, but be fully persuaded that every word of God is true and possible even if nature rebel; for therein is the test of faith.”⁶⁹⁵ For Basil, Scripture was the base of Christian life.

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory compares the ‘dark passages of the Bible’ to the bones of the paschal lamp that must not be broken (Ex 12:46), but to be consumed by the fire (Ex 12:10). By ‘fire’ he means the Holy Spirit and says that ‘the things in the Bible that are beyond our understanding’ (the bones of Scripture) we must not try to grasp using our reason, but concede to the Holy Spirit, the fire (LM II:104-111). This renunciation of the power of reason is an expression of one’s spirit-poverty. Thus, as far as consecrated men and women are concerned, their faithfulness to Scripture is their faithfulness to Christ. *Lectio divina* makes them true theologians who gain knowledge of God through communion with him in contrast to mere academic theologians whose knowledge of God depends on their acquaintance with various scholarly books. When *lectio divina* ‘burns the

⁶⁹¹ D. BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in early Christian Monasticism*, 43.

⁶⁹² A. STERK, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, 14; cf. D. BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert*, 47.

⁶⁹³ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of Saint Antony*, (no.3), 21.

⁶⁹⁴ A. VEILLEUX (trans.), *Pachomian Koinonia Volume Two: Pachomian Chronicles and Rules*, 166.

⁶⁹⁵ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *The Morals*, in M. M. WAGNER (trans.), *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, 81.

heart within' (Lk 24:32) and enlightens the intellect with the truth, *lectio libri* (book reading/academic theology) burns the head and pushes the reader to "be always in labour but never giving birth" (LM II:11) to the truth.

3.2.3 Virtue Dimension: Hope

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory speaks of two types of hope: 1) material or temporal hope, and 2) spiritual or eschatological hope (LM II:46-47). Those who live by temporal hope are attached to the material pleasures which do not assure any future benefits, but which are present, visible, can be partaken of and enslave the senses. On the other hand, those who live by eschatological hope live aright, withdraw from everything that seduces the soul and through contemplation attain on the purity of their soul an impression of those good things which they hope for. Thus, the vow of poverty is a call to establish the foundation of one's life on eschatological hope. Moses who had the vision of the heavenly tabernacle is a symbol of the soul that has received on it an impression of the good things which await the followers of Christ. Since the tabernacle is Christ himself, the impression of good things that one attains on one's soul is an impression of Christ who reflects on the purity of the soul that rises in prayer to face him. All the treasures of good things are in Christ, and he who finds any good finds it in Christ (LM II:248).

Moses was imbued with 'Christian hope' by the theophany of the tabernacle, as he was strengthened in faith by the theophany of the burning bush. Hope is the assurance of the good outcome of our lives lived by faith in God.⁶⁹⁶ This hope is God's gift, and it draws the soul from what is seen to what is hidden. Moses was further strengthened by the gift of hope and was able to instil hope in others. For the Nyssen, the ability to instil hope in those who follow Christ is a specific characteristic of Christian leadership. He notices that those who leave Egypt (a life of passions and covetousness) will surely face the assault of temptations that drain them off all hope for what is good. However, if some leader of the people like Moses happens along, "he will counsel them against fear and will strengthen their downcast minds with the hope of divine help" (LM II:117). Chastity and poverty cannot be lived without the virtue of hope because "life removed from Egyptian pleasures seems at first difficult and disagreeable. But the hope of things to come will

⁶⁹⁶ T. HOPKO, *The Orthodox Faith Volume 4: Spirituality*, 38; cf. SS 2. Pope Benedict XVI says, "A distinguishing mark of Christians is the fact that they have a future, and it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness."

render the sacrifices one makes on pleasures meaningful, and, like the wood – a symbol of the Cross – that sweetened the bitter water (Ex 15:25), will make one’s virtuous life sweeter and more pleasant than all the sweetness that tickles the senses with pleasure” (LM II:132). A person will be ready to abandon temporary hope only if eschatological hope as something better than material pleasures is placed before him in its beauty.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). Only those who live voluntarily in spirit-poverty can manifest the beauty of eschatological hope in the world. Today, Christianity faces an oozing out of this hope from the hearts of many so-called Christians because of their preoccupation with temporal hope. Without eschatological hope Christianity will be reduced to an earthly morality. In the fourth homily on the Our Father, Gregory contrasts temporal hope which is unreal as it is not focused on life after death with eschatological hope which is real as it corresponds to the true nature of the soul. According to the Nyssen, even though temporal hope is futile as it does not benefit the soul, man often mistakes temporal hope for real hope and drags the soul for the enjoyment of the present.⁶⁹⁷ The consecrated life is a corrective to this tendency of man. If consecrated men and women live spirit-poverty with eschatological hope, they will be able to imitate “the most marvellous thing that the history says about Moses. He did two distinctly separate things at once: by spoken word he encouraged the Israelites and exhorted them not to abandon high hopes, but inwardly, in his thoughts, he pleaded with God on behalf of those who cowered in fear” (LM I:29). They will always be in touch with God and will be able to strengthen those who struggle to find meaning in virtuous life because of the onslaught of temptations. In other words, they will be people of interior contemplation and exterior activity. Their activity is born of their contemplation and resembles it, i.e., it bears fruit in the same detachment they have found in contemplation.⁶⁹⁸ Moreover, those who have eschatological hope live differently; their different lifestyle sets a different goal before the people. The consecrated life is a sign of good things to come in human civilization. Hence, the more authentic the consecrated life is, the more credible the goal it proposes will be. An authentic consecrated life becomes

⁶⁹⁷ Cf. *HOF*, (Homily IV), 145. Gregory writes, “The life in the body belongs only to the present, but the life stored up through hope is what belongs properly to the soul. And yet, the thinking of human beings is wrong when it comes to the use of either: the life of the body it stretches through hope, but the life of the soul it pulls towards enjoyment of the present. Thus, through preoccupation with the visible world, the soul inevitably alienates itself from the hope that is real and grounded; clinging to unstable things through its hopes, it has neither full custody of one thing nor possession of another.”

⁶⁹⁸ T. MERTON, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 115.

an impetus for all “to face the present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.”⁶⁹⁹ The eschatological hope of consecrated men and women are made manifest mainly through their trust in divine providence, freedom from idolatry, and works of charity.

3.2.3.1 *Trust in Divine Providence*

Poverty of spirit is a humble dependence upon and unshakable trust in God’s providence (Greek *pronoia*, Latin *providentia*, meaning ‘foreknowledge’).⁷⁰⁰ According to Gregory of Nyssa, divine providence is ever present with man (LM II:45). To save mankind, God perceives beforehand and provides for man’s salvation. The garments of skin were given to man by providence. After the fall, God’s providence – ‘a guardian angel’ – prompts man towards a virtuous life, while the enemy of the soul tries to turn his soul towards material pleasures (LM II:45). Therefore, trust in divine providence means man’s free choice to cooperate with God.⁷⁰¹ The spiritual ascent to Christian perfection is the journey of the soul towards a clear goal. But this journey is without an itinerary because this ascent can be undertaken by only those who have spirit-poverty, by those who let themselves be guided by the Spirit. The Nyssen is of the opinion that those who make their ascent with Christ should have the confidence that their present necessities will be provided for. Material poverty may create fear and threaten hope. But the believer can rest assured that God will come to their help. Gregory expresses it succinctly in *The Life of Moses*, when he says, “Whenever someone flees Egypt and, after getting outside its borders, is terrified by the assaults of temptation, the guide produces unexpected salvation from on high” (LM II:120). The true guide in Christians’ spiritual

⁶⁹⁹ SS 1.

⁷⁰⁰ B. COLE – P. CONNER, *Christian Totality*, 95.

⁷⁰¹ In Gregory, God’s providence and man’s free will are not in conflict. God’s providence is not coercive both because love cannot compel but only persuade and because God wants that man should have the freedom to choose virtue. Providence assists and benefits those who use it wisely, while it *hardens* (Pharaoh’s heart was hardened) and punishes those who misuse it. Yet the punitive effect of providence has a remedial purpose, namely, to help human beings to learn by their mistakes. In principle, all divine punishments are healing and educative: cf. R. A. GREER, *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny*, 171.

journey is Christ himself with the Holy Spirit who prompts them to avoid undue worry about the future.

Pope Benedict XVI begins his encyclical *Spe Salvi* stating that according to Christian faith salvation is not simply a given, but it is offered to us as a trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present (SS 1). Christian faith demands ‘a trusting in God’ for salvation of oneself, one’s neighbours and the world. J. G. Stackhouse speaks of two aspects of trust in God’s providence: 1) one should trust the work of God in oneself, in one’s neighbours, and in the world, and 2) one should trust the work of God through oneself, through one’s neighbours, and through the world.⁷⁰² In his eighth homily on the Beatitudes, Gregory of Nyssa presents the story of the Old Testament figure Joseph (Gen 37-41) in order to show how God’s providence works in the vicissitudes of life:

If someone who had knowledge of the future had told Joseph beforehand, ‘Plotted against, you will be blessed,’ he would not have seemed straight away convincing to his hearer, who was facing the immediate prospect of pain; he would not have thought it possible that the result of evil intent might turn out to be good.⁷⁰³

Gregory exhorts Christians to side with God like Joseph through their free choice even amidst pain, in which the carnally minded hardly find God’s providence. Garcia Paredes defines voluntary poverty as love liberated from the demonic powers of the world and of things, with the confidence that God will meet every need according to his wealth.⁷⁰⁴ A life of poverty voluntarily chosen does not despair consecrated men and women, when they are maltreated by others or forced by circumstances to live deprived of the world’s goods. They may resign themselves to inconveniences and see in them the providential means for them to grow in sanctity.

The vow of poverty is a challenge to those people who habitually find their identity secured by their material possessions and social standing. Consecrated men and women are called to find their identity in their personal relationship with Jesus Christ and in spiritual realities that go beyond material possessions. Nevertheless, they are to keep in mind that “it is not so much the lack of material goods that makes their life happy but, rather, the spirit of seeing oneself as small, as not self-sufficient, as dependent, not on self or

⁷⁰² J. G. STACKHOUSE, *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World*, 288.

⁷⁰³ *HBeat*, (Homily VIII), 86.

⁷⁰⁴ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 277.

personal resources, but on God.”⁷⁰⁵ At the same time, we should not misunderstand the Nyssen’s insistence on material poverty and unwavering trust on divine providence as a smack of “Messalianism.”⁷⁰⁶ For Gregory, virtue lies in the middle, and only excesses are to be avoided. He always seeks the golden mean between the excesses of rigorism and laxity.⁷⁰⁷ In *On Virginit*y, he condemns “those who starve themselves to death on the ground that such sacrifice is pleasing to God.”⁷⁰⁸ It can be considered as a reproach to the Messalians. Trust in divine providence is not an excuse to avoid work or to overlook the divine injunction to eat one’s bread by the sweat of one’s face (cf. Gen 3:19)

In the present culture of privatization and profit maximization consecrated men and women should be able to give hope to the people through their life of poverty. They should be like Joshua and Caleb, two of the spies whom Moses sent to spy out the land of Canaan, who carried back on a pole a bunch of grapes from the land they spied out and encouraged the people to occupy the land (Num 13-14:10). The Nyssen interprets the bunch of grapes suspended from the wood as a symbol of Christ who is a saving drink to those who believe (LM II:267-268). If the life of consecrated persons becomes a manifestation of the richness of the Kingdom of God, people will be impelled to trust in God in this “historic hour of eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God, through which the world is passing.”⁷⁰⁹ The vow of poverty impels consecrated persons to cherish an interior detachment from material goods, an austerity of life and a conscious and deliberate economic

⁷⁰⁵ F. C. ARINZE, *Radical Discipleship*, 25.

⁷⁰⁶ The word ‘Messalians’ derive from the Syriac word ‘msallyane’ meaning ‘people who pray.’ Messalians were Christian ascetics who devoted themselves to constant prayer, refused to practice physical labour, and claimed to attain spiritual perfection thereby. They held that, through Adam’s sin, a devil was united to every soul and could be expelled only by sustained prayer and asceticism. This sect was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431: cf. G. O’COLLINS – E. G. FARRUGIA, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 153.

⁷⁰⁷ From the beginning of the consecrated life, there exists a conflict between two main tendencies regarding the practice of poverty. One leads to an absolute renouncing of all security coming from both goods and institutes in order to follow faithfully the exhortation of the Gospel. The other relies on human prudence and emphasizes that, if the soul is to be free from any material concern, it is preferable to ensure that life has a solid material and institutional basis. In coenobitic monasticism, like that of Basil, the second tendency got prevalence, but with a particular emphasis – “No personal property, everything in common.” Even though material things are needed for security, security does not lie in material things but in God.

⁷⁰⁸ *Virg*, 71.

⁷⁰⁹ M. BUBER, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy*, 18.

dependence on others so that they may consciously bear witness to the graciousness and goodness of God and to the primacy of the Gospel.⁷¹⁰ The history of the consecrated life teaches us that affluence always leads to a false trust in God's providence and to the spiritual dilapidation of the institute. The renewal of the consecrated life always centres on the emphasis on poverty. Through their poverty they can give witness to the truth that "those who wait for the Lord will not be put to shame" (Ps 25:3).

3.2.3.2 Freedom from Idolatry

Based on Gregory's teachings, we will see that the vow of poverty, with which the religious "set their minds on things that are above" (Col 3:2), impels them to guard themselves against all kinds of idolatry. For the Nyssen, anything, other than God, that is considered as an end in itself is an idol, a God-substitute. He speaks of different kinds of idolatry. An idol is always finite in nature, comprehensible, and therefore not an object of eternal contemplation. The encounter with God in the darkness on Mount Sinai brought Moses to the conviction that God is infinite and, therefore, incomprehensible to the human intellect. From this the Cappadocian draws the real sense of the first commandment that forbids the making of idols (Ex 20:4):

The divine word at the beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men, since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God (LM II:165).

Idolatry is caused by an intellectual error, according to the Nyssen.⁷¹¹ It is because idolatry emerges from a mistaken apprehension of Being: the intellect misconceives as real existence that which does not exist (LM II:23). It is an idolatry of concepts. Gregory warns us that man's concepts or ideas can become idols. When those intellectual idols become wedded to particular social, political, and economic modalities, they begin to exert an almost

⁷¹⁰ J. SHEEHY, "Poverty: To Share and to Serve in Hope", in *Religious Life Asia*, 4/3 (2002), 49.

⁷¹¹ In theophanies God descends towards creatures. But these theophanies conceal God in that which he is, while manifesting him in that which he is not by nature (essence). Therefore, to form a rational concept of God based on any of his manifestations is to make an idol of God.

irresistible pull.⁷¹² People would claim unquestioned allegiance to their ideas at the expense of transcendent values.

In the treatise, Gregory likens the fight of the Egyptian against the Hebrew (Ex 2:11) to the fight of idolatry against true religion in the soul of man (LM II:14). What the Nyssen has in mind is that the temptation to idolatry is something that Christians constantly find themselves confronted with. According to him, “Moses teaches us by his own example to take our stand with virtue as with a kinsman and to kill virtue’s adversary. The victory of true religion is the death and destruction of idolatry” (LM II:15). The consecrated life from the very beginning exhibited its contempt for idolatry of all types. First of all, it was a fight against the idolatry of the self. Man has the tendency to make himself his own goal and objective, to become his own idol. Monks confronted this temptation embracing voluntary poverty which they expressed through their ascetic dress and lifestyle. ‘Changing one’s clothes’ became an immediate recognizable metaphor for adopting the ascetic life.⁷¹³ The ascetic dress also indicated the renunciation of one’s gender. In their ascetic clothing men and women refused all power of sexual attraction, and they went beyond being recognized in terms of gender. Love of body forces man to comply to pleasure-loving bodily passions and draw life and joy from material things; instead of participating in God, man participate in material things and worship them. Thus, as Panayiotis Nellas remarks idolatry is the inevitable consequence of hedonism.⁷¹⁴ The Nyssen considers idolatry of this type as resulted by a moral error because man with his free choice alienates himself from the knowledge of God and is drawn by passion towards material and malicious earthly realities (LM II:75). Man makes created things his gods and partake in them as his last end.

Impiety and greed lead to idolatry, and idolatry, in turn, prevents the inflow and outflow of grace. Avarice, “the mother of idolatry,”⁷¹⁵ makes the man who covets a victim by making him dominated and enslaved by riches. He would be like one of those Israelites who was forced in Egypt to make bricks always stooping to earth and prevented from looking up to heaven. Earthly goods are turned out to be his gods. Pope Francis calls this type of idolatry polytheism in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei*: “Idolatry is always

⁷¹² C. C. CARLTON, “Apophaticism and Political Economy”, in D. BUXHOEVEDEN – G. WOLOSCHAK (eds.), *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church*, 152.

⁷¹³ G. CLARK, “Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender”, 36; cf. PC 17. See also VC 25. Pope John Paul II reminds men and women religious to wear their proper habit.

⁷¹⁴ P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 178.

⁷¹⁵ EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, *The Praktikos*, 14.

polytheism, an aimless passing from one lord to another. Idolatry does not offer a journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth. Those who choose not to put their trust in God must hear the din of countless idols crying out: *Put your trust in me!*” (LF 13). Idolatry of earthly goods makes man self-centred, alienates him from genuine relationships, transforms him to an individual, and in the end abandons him in nothingness and death.

In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen identifies heresies or erroneous doctrines of faith also as idols that deviate man from union with God. He interprets Moses’ encounter with the two Hebrew men fighting each other (Ex 2:13) as a fight between right doctrine and erroneous doctrine in the Church (LM II:16). Heretical doctrines emerge in the Church when Christians try to understand God using only their reason. It shows the ‘absence of spirit-poverty’ that leads them to place their hope on their own findings and to be recalcitrant. Ignorance does not make a heretic, but rather the obstinacy of pride.⁷¹⁶ While those who uphold the true doctrine say, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28), the heretics say, “It has seemed good to our reason.” Heretics are not open to the promptings of the Spirit.

Gregory says that the Incarnation has abolished idolatry.⁷¹⁷ In the Incarnation man’s true vocation – union with God – was revealed in the God-Man, and the ‘true religion’ – life in Christ – was inaugurated on earth. Incarnation made humanity, that had conformed itself to immovable idols and become frozen in life, melt with the warmth of the Spirit and rays of the Word, and, thereby, spring up to eternal life.⁷¹⁸ Thus, for Gregory, participation in Christ is the antidote to every form of idolatry. The Kingdom Christ preached was not of this world, it was not a kingdom that man could build up. By living

⁷¹⁶ E. J. FORTMAN, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, 181.

⁷¹⁷ *CO*r, (XVIII), 917-918.

⁷¹⁸ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 5), 159-161. Gregory writes, “There was a time when humanity was frozen stiff by the chill of idolatry because the changeable nature of human beings had been altered to conform to that of unchangeable idols. For it is written: *Those who make them are like them; so are all who believe in them* (Ps 113:16). And what happened back there was equitable. For just as those who look upon the true Godhead take to themselves the characteristics of the divine nature, so too the person who is devoted to the vanity of idols is transformed into the stone he looks upon and becomes other than human. Since, then, once it has been petrified by the worship of idols, human nature cannot be changed for the better because it is frozen stiff by the chill of idolatry, the Sun of Righteousness rises upon this harsh winter and brings the spring of the Spirit, which melts such ice and, as its rays rise up, warms everything that lies beneath it. So it is that the person who has been petrified by the frost, once warmed by the Spirit and heated by the ray of the Word, again becomes water that springs up to life eternal (Jn 4:14).”

their poverty with eschatological hope that liberates them from idolatry, consecrated men and women will be able to reveal the gift of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The consumeristic society that divides people into ‘the haves and the have nots’ compels consecrated men and women to compromise their vow of poverty in order to escape social exclusion and marginalization. They tend to rely on power and money as the most adequate means to contribute to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The various institutes run by religious congregations can be idolized when they are considered as ends in themselves and are not directed toward the Kingdom. A consecrated person may be ready to do anything for them, even bribe. Many sacrifice their lives on the altars of such idolized institutions under the guise of religious fervour. One’s own culture, secular study etc. also may become idols for consecrated persons and put them behind the bars of xenophobia and abstract intellectualism.⁷¹⁹ Garcia Paredes notes that as idolatry approaches modern times it become more secular and the ‘gods of heaven’ give way to the ‘gods of the earth.’⁷²⁰ As a result, teams, parties or persons who excel in sports, politics, spirituality, art etc. are deified and placed at the centre of life with dire ethical consequences as they separate the follower from the alliance with the true God. The consecrated life that began as an anti-idolatrous movement should impel consecrated persons to ascend in their spirit-poverty from the temptation to be gods of the earth, placing their hope on things above. Jesus makes them see that living in poverty, like ‘not marrying’, is a charism, a gift from God: “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26). The consecrated life invites men and women not to enter a world of competitiveness or to augment their personnel and community resources, but to “pulverize the golden calf” (LM II:202) with the vow of poverty that raises one’s hope towards the goodness of God whose “power is made perfect in the weakness” (2 Cor 12:9) of man. Consecrated persons cannot have spirit-poverty without simplicity in lifestyle, as they cannot live chastity without self-control.

In the light of the second stage of the spiritual ascent, we can understand the vow of poverty as the fulfilment of the first commandment – “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3). It was Moses’ spirit-poverty that made him able to break away from sensory and intellectual concepts that might have enslaved him to idolatry by forcing him to pedestalize them as truths in the sanctuary of his soul. What Gregory

⁷¹⁹ Cf. VC 79, 98.

⁷²⁰ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 38.

wants to say is that man should place his hope not on any material things or any rational concepts (idols), but on God alone, the true Being. Jesus warns every man against the danger of riches (an idol) and asks those who want to follow him more closely to embrace actual poverty, to renounce all goods. In Christian life, eschatological hope founded on spirit-poverty takes precedence over temporal hope founded on covetousness. In *The Life of Moses*, the destruction of the golden calf – idol – (Ex 32:20)⁷²¹ symbolizes the wiping out from one's life the desire of covetousness (LM II:316).

3.2.3.3 Works of Charity

For Gregory, spirit-poverty is not only a means to ascend with Christ to have a vision of the eschatological hope of good things but also a means to descend with Christ to become a man for the poor, and the latter (descent) too, like the former (ascent), leads one to the Kingdom:

The one who has shared with the pauper takes the part of the one who impoverished himself because of us. The Lord became poor, so do not you fear poverty. The one who for us became poor reigns over all creation. If therefore you share poverty with the impoverished, you will surely also share his kingdom when he reigns.⁷²²

When the Nyssen asks us to share poverty with the pauper, what he has in mind is that we should imitate the poverty of Christ. Through his poverty Christ became a friend of the afflicted and restored their dignity; becoming the friend of Christ requires becoming a friend to the afflicted because the poor are icons of Christ. As such, “the poor are the stewards of our hope, doorkeepers of the kingdom, who open the door to the righteous and close it again to the unloving misanthropists.”⁷²³ The ontological equality in poverty of all human beings before God is recognized by the Nyssen from the facts that all receive their existence from God, all humanity is governed by a single

⁷²¹ Cf. LM II:202. The golden calf was pulverized by Moses. He mixed the gold powder with water, and made the Israelites drink it. Moses' action may denote that the water mixed with gold powder which the Israelites drank would cause the powder to come out as waste – corrupted and defiled –, as material looked at with disgust. The soul should have an aversion towards every kind of idolatry.

⁷²² *HBeat*, (Homily I), 31; cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Love of the Poor*, (Homily 1), 197. Gregory says, “Mercy and good deeds are works God loves; they *divinize* those who practice them and stamp them into the likeness of goodness, that they may become the image of the Primordial Being, pure, who surpasses all intelligence.”

⁷²³ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Love of the Poor*, (Homily 1), 195.

nature, and no one possesses any guarantee of continual happiness as all sail on the same sea, prone to waves and tempests.⁷²⁴ All have to keep in mind this equality in dealing with each other. Since all human beings belong to the common nature, the poor and the afflicted are not strangers, and in the descent with Christ to assist them, one leaves behind one's individual nature in spirit-poverty, and as a person participates in Christ's humanity that exists in communion with all.

When Gregory comments on the supplication "Give us this day our daily bread" in *Homilies on the Our Father*, he calls our attention to the fact that the true needs of life are not numerous, and points out that the error of worldly man is to confuse necessity with passionate desire. "Stop at what you need,"⁷²⁵ exhorts the Nyssen. He emphasizes the principle that the needs of life are not exclusively material. Consequently, more attention is to be given to spiritual needs. In *The Life of Moses*, he makes use of the account of the Israelites gathering manna (Ex 16:1-36) to warn "the covetous that the insatiable greed of those always hoarding surplus is turned into worms" (LM II:143). According to Gregory, it is the ruin of Judas that awaits those who do not care for the poor. In homily 14 on the *Song of Songs*, he equates those who administer the common goods of the Church to 'hands,' and exhorts them to sculpt their own hands after the model of the Bridegroom's "skilfully sculpted golden hands" (Song 5:14) so that they, unlike Judas, prove themselves trustworthy and wise stewards.⁷²⁶ The problem with Judas was that even though he was with Jesus, he failed to master his greed and adorn his hand with virtues (cf. Jn 12:6). Basil had already said, "Whatever a man may possess over and above what is necessary for life, he is obliged to do good with."⁷²⁷ Those who live only with temporary hope can't become 'friends of the poor.'

⁷²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, (Homily 2), 206.

⁷²⁵ *HOF*, (Homily IV), 142.

⁷²⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 14), 433-435. Gregory of Nyssa writes, "Therefore, the trustworthy and wise steward, who in the Church plays the role of a hand, shows the body's (Church's) hand to be golden after the likeness of its head (Christ) by imitating his wise master in the mode of his life. No such hand as this was Judas in the body of the apostles: ... Entrusted with the care of the poor, he did not scrape down the stone of money-loving. He was the guardian of the chest against thieves but himself stole from himself ... looking not to the commandment but to the money that was in it for him. And what enjoyment did he derive from this? Suicide by strangulation, alienation from life, total destruction of his soul, an evil memorial reaching down to every generation that should succeed him."

⁷²⁷ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *The Morals*, 125.

Pope Francis' vision of "a Church which goes forth"⁷²⁸ reflects Christians' ascent and descent with Christ in Gregory of Nyssa. The ability to read deeply the signs of the times, to understand in them God's call to work according to his plan, to discover the presence of God in people, especially among the poor, is all the result of cultivating contemplation (*theoria*), which helps one to see things and people as God sees them.⁷²⁹ The Pope encourages Christians to leave behind them a worldly Church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings, in order to breathe the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees them from self-centredness cloaked in an outward religiosity bereft of God.⁷³⁰ The consecrated life from the very beginning had exhibited through its stress on contemplation and charitable living the vision of Pope Francis. Christians had to set a model of the new society, in order to counterbalance the disruptive tendencies of the age.⁷³¹ Monasticism acquired coenobitical lifestyle, the life in common, because monks had the conviction that man is a social being. Christians are not independent individuals, but brethren, members of the body of Christ, who himself lived in a community with his disciples. Monasteries owned common property and monks worked in the property. They created a theology of labour recognizing that man was created to work, and idleness is spiritually destructive. But their work was not selfish because they worked for common purpose and benefit, especially to be able to help the needy.⁷³² They overcame self-love through working for common benefit and acts of charity.

According to Gregory, works of charity are connected with the ascetic virtue of self-control with which one avoids two contrary evils – one's own gorging and the hunger of one's brethren.⁷³³ He also notes that physical abstinence and material self-control will not lead to virtuous life unless they spring from 'spiritual abstinence and immaterial self-control', i.e.,

⁷²⁸ EG 20-24.

⁷²⁹ CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brothers in the Church*, no. 19.

⁷³⁰ EG 97.

⁷³¹ G. FLOROVSKY, *Christianity and Culture*, 85.

⁷³² *Ibid.*, 87. An early example of work and charity in monasticism can be found in Athanasius' *The Life of Saint Antony* itself: "Seeing that people were coming to him again, he (Antony) began to raise a few vegetables too, that the visitor might have a little something to restore him after the weariness of that hard road": ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of Saint Antony*, (no.50), 62-63.

⁷³³ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Love of the Poor*, (Homily 1), 194.

renunciation of sin.⁷³⁴ Consecrated men and women of today can draw inspiration from the early monks who practiced both interior and exterior poverty and had no attachment to surplus goods. At the same time, they have to keep in mind that monks of old did not consider earthly goods to be bad because they could be used for the service of God and for the good of all people. Like the monasteries of old, communities of consecrated persons can indicate to the world what must be done so that each man, especially if he is in need, can find help among his fellow men.

We have seen that it is eschatological hope, which results from a vision of truth in contemplation – the highest form of prayer –, that impels consecrated persons to descend with Christ towards brethren. The vision of heavenly truth frees the soul from all selfishness, and eschatological hope instils in consecrated persons not a desire for reward, but a genuine love for all here on earth. “The treasure (in heaven) is not so much a reward after death for the good works done following the example of the divine Teacher, but rather the eschatological fulfilment of what was hidden behind these good works here on earth, in the inner treasure of the heart,”⁷³⁵ says Pope John Paul II. One’s relationship with heaven is to be established here on earth, because what is more important than learning to live is learning to die. At present the world has become a global market and man exists for things. The spirit-poverty of consecrated men and women help them imitate “Christ, who is the author or the original designer of good and philanthropic deeds as he created all things not for himself and maintains them on behalf of mankind.”⁷³⁶ The poor are a touchstone of their authenticity. What they do to the poor and fail to do to them is a clear test of their ‘following Christ.’ They are called to conform their life to that of the poor. When Jesus asked his disciples to leave everything and follow him, he made it clear that the true treasure is in the heart of his disciples, which Christ makes capable of giving to others by the giving of self. According to Thomas Merton, the norm for consecrated persons is to live on the level not of the rich farmer but of the average farmer in their area, and to help the indigent farmer.⁷³⁷ The consecrated life is a call “to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and

⁷³⁴ Ibid., (Homily 1), 193. In order to emphasise his point, he adds, “Judas fasted along with the eleven, but failed to master his greed; his salvation gained nothing by fasting. And the devil does not eat, for he is an incorporeal spirit, but he fell from on high through wickedness.”

⁷³⁵ RD 5.

⁷³⁶ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Love of the Poor*, (Homily 1), 196.

⁷³⁷ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 411.

for enabling them to be fully a part of society,”⁷³⁸ but without replacing the concept of ‘love of neighbour’ with that of ‘social welfare.’ The vow of poverty as a virtue is the mean between penury and affluence. Both excesses are to be rejected. It consists in working to avoid penury and sharing to avoid affluence. The dependence of the poor and the generosity of the rich are to be converged in spirit-poverty. Consecrated men and women who live this poverty will be able to impart hope to the poor and remorse to the rich.

3.2.4 Ministerial Dimension: Prophet

In *The Life of Moses*, Moses also exemplifies a Christian who participates in the prophetic ministry of Christ in the Church. Moses is a prophet (Greek, *prophetes* “an interpreter of the divine will) whose “eye of the soul” is illuminated by the truth (Christ) with its own rays (the Holy Spirit) so that he might attain to a vision of divine things (LM II:19, 183). As we have already seen, it is spirit-poverty that helps Moses acquire the prophetic eye and vision. His understanding and wisdom do not derive from any of the things pursued here on earth, but from contemplation. He sees invisible things, and delights in those things which are beyond sense perception. Therefore, for the Nyssen, prophets are the eyes of the Church. In homily 7 on the *Song of Songs*, he establishes that all the leaders whom God assigned to lead the people, such as Samuel, Ezekiel, Micha and Moses were ‘eyes’: Samuel was an eye because he was called the ‘seer’ (1 Sam 9:11); Ezekiel was an eye because he was set by God to watch over the salvation of those in his charge (Ezek 3:17); Micha was also a seer and, therefore, an eye (Mic 1:1); and Moses was the ‘overseer’ and for this reason was called ‘god’ to Pharaoh (Ex 7:1).⁷³⁹ God gives to his people ‘eyelike authority’ over them.

According to Gregory, ‘those who fill the place of the above said prophets’ – leaders – in the Church at present are also ‘eyes,’ on condition that they should fix their eyes on Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, and never dim their sight with the work of darkness. ‘This would make them men of eschatological hope, and not attached to things ephemeral that are alien to human nature, the image of the invisible God. Secondly, as bodily eyes recognize friend and foe, the Church’s eyes may love their ‘true Friend’ (Christ) with all their heart and soul and strength while manifesting a ripe hatred for the ‘enemy of life’ (devil). Thirdly, like bodily eyes, they are conspicuous or noticeable beyond others because of the exalted character of

⁷³⁸ *EG* 187.

⁷³⁹ *HSong*, (Homily 7), 229.

their mode of life that provides instruction in what to do, teaches what is fitting and gives guidance for the journey God-ward – the work of a pure and healthful eye.⁷⁴⁰ The leaders of the Church are set to the front, like bodily eyes, by God. As eyes, they should be unstained by evil and maintain the purity and simplicity of doves: “The person to whom God assigns the place of the eye in the Church’s body must wash away all the teary haze of vice with ‘water’ (virtues), if he is to supervise, oversee, and inspect in purity.”⁷⁴¹ For the Nyssen, the dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and one’s eyes can become doves because “one assumes the form of that toward which one looks.”⁷⁴² The most perfect praise of Christians as ‘eyes’ is that the form of their life is shaped in conformity with the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Church acknowledges as saints those divinely inspired by the Spirit.⁷⁴³ All the baptized participate in the prophetic office of Jesus Christ by the gift of the Holy Spirit and they are to bear witness to the gospel and to the apostolic faith in the Church and in the world.⁷⁴⁴ The vow of poverty helps consecrated men and women make their ascent in their prophetic ministry as their voluntarily chosen poverty is a denial of gazing upon anything material and corporeal. They are called to be aware of the designs of God in the world and grasp the providential course of history under the eyes of God.

3.2.4.1 *Spiritual Father or Mother*

The God-thirsty monks of the early Church who lived in the deserts of Egypt developing religious life from its Gospel origins and laying the groundwork for all future institutes of Christian perfection were called (Desert) ‘Fathers’ (*Abbas*). There were also some ‘Mothers’ (*Ammas*).⁷⁴⁵ These fathers and mothers dedicated themselves to a whole life of prayer and became ‘Spirit-bearing’ figures with the charisma of guiding others on ‘the Way.’ They became fathers and mothers to the sons and daughters whom they begot in Christ and, therefore, were called spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory introduces prophets as the instruments of the Holy Spirit; as instruments they ring out the Spirit’s sound, and their voice goes out through all the earth and their message to the ends of the world (LM II:159). Thus, spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers are prophetic figures

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., (Homily 7), 229-231.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., (Homily 13), 417.

⁷⁴² Ibid., (Homily 7), 229.

⁷⁴³ *CE III*, (I:11), 44.

⁷⁴⁴ *SF 1*; cf. *CCC* 94-97.

⁷⁴⁵ Cf. L. SWAN, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*, 11-14.

who can teach the Church the authentic message of the Spirit of God in any given age or era.

Benedicta Ward who translated *Apophthegmata Patrum* into English – *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* – writes in the foreword that the abbas were not spiritual directors in the later Western sense.⁷⁴⁶ It is because what they offer to their spiritual children is not primarily moral instructions or a rule of life, but a personal relationship. The Holy Spirit has given them, as the fruit of their prayer and self-denial (spirit-poverty) the gift of discernment or discrimination and the gift of spiritual healing.⁷⁴⁷ They are enabled by the Spirit, who searches the depths of God and gives life to the human spirit, to read the secrets of men’s heart and answer their questions – even those questions which they have not thought of asking. They restore men’s soul. This spiritual healing is supplied not only through their words of counsel, but through their silence, very presence and intercessory prayer in which they take on their shoulders the burden of the guilt and anxiety of their spiritual children. Since they are prophetic figures or instruments of the Spirit, they cannot be appointed by any human authority. They are made known by the Holy Spirit who speaks directly to the hearts of the Christian people and makes it plain that this or that person has been blessed by God with the grace to guide and heal others.⁷⁴⁸ In the Eastern spiritual tradition, such a person can be a priest, a monk, a nun or a lay man or woman. Spiritual fathers and mothers do not apply abstract rules learnt from books but wait upon the will and voice of the Holy Spirit to guide others. To each one they show his or her true face, which before was largely hidden from that person. They do not demand a mechanical obedience but lead their children to the point of spiritual maturity where they can decide for themselves. In *The Life of Moses*, we can discover these characteristics in “Moses who, having an elevated soul, was totally devoted to the coming inheritance which had been promised by God to those who departed from Egypt and made their way to that land flowing with milk and honey” (LM II:265).

Gregory ends his ascetical work *On Virginit*y dealing with the importance for the one who seeks Christian perfection to be taught by the one who has achieved it.⁷⁴⁹ According to him, an eager attitude towards divine commandments, alienation from worldly desires, deadness to worldly esteem and vitality in deeds of virtue are the main characteristics of a person who can

⁷⁴⁶ B. WARD (trans.), *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, xxii.

⁷⁴⁷ K. WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, 127.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁷⁴⁹ *Virg*, 68-75.

be a model for Christian perfection. From such a person, one can receive ‘guidance in deeds’ that is more effective than ‘instructions in words.’ Gregory compares the spiritual father to a lighted candle from which the flame can be equally distributed to other candles without causing any lessening in the original light. He exhorts the virgins to imitate the old age and youthfulness of this man: in his youthfulness, he is old enough to do nothing related to evil, and in his old age, he is young enough to have the strength and vigour to do good. According to the Nyssen, a spiritual father need not necessarily be old in years because many of the saints in the Church are youths. Although they are young in years, are old in the purity of their self-control. Their spirit-poverty has enabled them to be wise in experience of divine truth. Gregory says that those who seek spiritual perfection should not look at those who have faltered and think that this life is impractical. On the other hand, they should look to the one who has succeeded, and being encouraged by him, set out in spirit-poverty i.e., “using the intelligence of the Holy Spirit with Christ as the pilot.”⁷⁵⁰

From the beginning the Fathers of the Church understood the Church as a hospital for the soul, in which penance and reconciliation were the medicines. The Church was not a cloister of the perfect, but a school for the imperfect who hoped to move toward perfection.⁷⁵¹ She healed the soul not only through sacraments but also through the Spirit-bearing spiritual fathers. According to Gregory, spiritual fathers are successful physicians of the soul. Therefore, he accentuates that it is not necessary to gain a knowledge of the healing art of the soul through conjectures and assumptions.⁷⁵² At this juncture, it is important to know that there exists a difference between psychology and the Christian method of healing of the soul in the Eastern spiritual tradition. Greek Orthodox theologian Hierotheos Vlachos in his book *The Illness and Cure of the Soul in the Orthodox Tradition* deals with this subject in the light of the teachings of the Fathers who were not psychologists but saints.⁷⁵³ The cure of the soul is related to the fall of man,

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁵¹ J. L. PAPANDREA, *Reading the Early Church Fathers: From the Didache to Nicaea*, 108. Gregory of Nyssa’s near contemporary John Chrysostom in his third homily on repentance and almsgiving explicitly states, “The Church is a hospital, not a court of justice”: cf. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On Repentance and Almsgiving*, trans. G. G. Christo, 39.

⁷⁵² *Virg*, 69.

⁷⁵³ H. VLACHOS, *The Illness and Cure of the Soul in the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. E. Mavromichali, 29-33. Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos accepts the value of contemporary psychology in two special cases: 1) it may help those people whose nervous system has been harmed because of psychical or mental overstress and now faces psychological

and, therefore, to the garments of skin and purification. Man became ill after Adam's fall. His eye of the soul (*nous*) was darkened and lost communion with God. With the separation of man from God, who is the Life, death entered his being with many anthropological, social, and ecological problems. The fall did not deprive man of the image of God, but the likeness to God.⁷⁵⁴ Man can regain what he lost in Christ and, through him, be in communion with God and divinized. Eastern spiritual tradition understands this passage from the fallen state to divinization as the healing of the person.

Vlachos is of the opinion that psychology is an offspring of Western Christianity. People discovered psychology when the Church lost touch with the contemplative tradition (hesychastic tradition) of the East. According to him, for a contemplative person who knows by experience the inner state of the soul, the crafts of the devil and the manifestation of the 'old man' as well as the energies of the grace of God, the discoveries of psychology would be less interesting. When Vlachos compares psychology with the healing of the soul in the Eastern spiritual tradition, he notices that the Christian concept of the soul does not exist in psychology. Man is not considered as an image of God. When psychology, that does not believe in the existence of the devil, speaks about the illness of the soul, it simply means man's psychological imbalance or the various traumatic experiences of his previous life. Therapy in psychology aims at the balance of the inner power of the soul, whereas in the contemplative Christian tradition it is associated with man's union with God or salvation. When the psychologist, who works on the basis of an anthropocentric view of man, uses the views of whichever school of psychology he represents, the spiritual father, who works on the basis of theocentric anthropology, depends on the eternal word of God. The psychologist's method of questioning and listening to assist the client to become aware of his problems and mature psychologically is not found in the spiritual father who, illumined by the Holy Spirit, locates the problem and guides the person to repentance by means of the transformation of his passions. Based on Vlachos' observation we can draw the conclusion that psychologists, like Gnostics who insisted on the value of knowledge in contrast to the Christian principles of love and faith, may be tempted to judge others based on their ability to understand the complexity of certain doctrines, but without the depth of charity by which a person's perfection is measured throughout the history of the Church. Moreover, as Rupnik notes

problems; and 2) it may help those people who by choice do not have any relation with the Church and her mysteries.

⁷⁵⁴ According to Gregory, likeness to God together with image of God was only obscured by sin.

psychological tranquillity can become an idol at the expense of God.⁷⁵⁵ What really heals a Christian is the discovery that his “life,” with all wounds, “is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

The document *Keep Watch!* of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) observes that today formation for the consecrated life is very often limited almost entirely to simple psychological companionship or to standardised exercises of piety (no. 9). According to the document, spiritual formation is a pressing need of the time because in a world in which secularization has become selective blindness towards the supernatural and men have lost sight of the footsteps of God consecrated men and women are called to rediscover and study the fundamental truths of the faith (no. 9).⁷⁵⁶ We have seen that Gregory wants those who seek spiritual perfection form their life looking at a spiritual father (mother), whom he likens to a lighted candle, so that they may not falter. The presence of spiritual fathers or mothers in institutes of formation in the consecrated life is an urgent necessity of the time. A return to the origins of the consecrated life will help the religious acquire the spirit of the spiritual fathers and mothers and become effective instruments of the Spirit and, thereby, champions of faith in the present world. They will be able to alleviate the widespread poverty regarding the knowledge of God. The spirit-poverty helps consecrated men and women become effective instruments of the Spirit, look at others through the eyes of Christ and keep their fruitful youthfulness also in old age by being spiritual fathers and mothers for others.

3.2.4.2 Prophetic Sign of Social Justice

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory says that Reuel, priest of Midian, saw in Moses, who, even though a foreigner in the land, defended the priest’s seven daughters against the assault of the shepherds at the well (Ex 2: 15-17), the virtue of ‘poverty’ (Greek, *penia*):

This man (the priest of Midian) saw in one act – the attack on the shepherds – the virtue of the young man, how he fought on behalf of the right without looking for personal gain.

⁷⁵⁵ M. I. RUPNIK, *Nel Fuoco del Roveto Ardente: Iniziazione alla Vita Spirituale*, 57.

⁷⁵⁶ Cf. VC 66. The document on the consecrated life sees formation as a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women. Those in charge of formation must therefore be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to accompany others on this journey. See also J. RATZINGER – V. MESSORI, *The Ratzinger Report*, 100.

Considering the right valuable in itself, Moses punished the wrong done by the shepherds, although they had done nothing against him. Honouring the young man Moses for these acts and judging his virtue in his manifest poverty more valuable than great riches, the man gave him his daughter in marriage ... (LM I:19).

According to the Nyssen, a man with the virtue of poverty considers the right valuable in itself and fight on behalf of the right without looking for personal gain, notwithstanding the wrong does not affect him personally. Poverty becomes a virtue when a person values God and his Kingdom above material wealth and worldly glory. Moses preferred the Hebrews to the treasures of Egypt. In Scripture, the prophets inveigh against those who have forgotten the divine laws and who go about extorting gain from the poor, oppressing them, and failing to hear the cry of the widow and orphan. They are in the position of the poor who cannot protest, and bear the burden that rightfully belongs to others. The Church has always identified self-denial and poverty as the basic criterion to distinguish a prophet.⁷⁵⁷ A prophet is a man who stands up for others in his spirit-poverty. It needs courage, a courage that has its source in things invisible, in God. When people are overcome with fear and compelled to recede, the prophet marches ahead. At the foot of Mount Sinai, people, who trembled and feared to approach the mountain because of the terrifying things they witnessed (Ex 19:16), became convinced of God's intervention through Moses, when they saw Moses courageously ascend the mountain alone. The Nyssen writes that whereas all other men feel confidence in the face of fearful things when in the company of their associates, Moses was more courageous after he had been left by himself (LM I:45). Moses who rebukes the Israelites on their idolatry and destroys the golden calf (Ex 32) is also a symbol of the prophetic figure in the Church who stands alone on the side of Christ, when Christians deviate from the path of virtue. The virtue of

⁷⁵⁷ Cf. C. N. JEFFORD (trans.), *Didache: The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, (11:1-12), 38-42. *Didache*, a work from around the first century, attests to this fact: "Not everyone who speaks in a spirit is a prophet, but if they have the Lord's traits.... And anyone who says in the spirit, 'Give me money' or something else, do not listen to them. But if they should ask from you on behalf of others who are in need, let no one judge them." See also J. C. R., GARCIA PAREDES, "The God We Proclaim: Religious as New Evangelizers", in GARCIA PAREDES, J. C. R. (ed), *The God We Believe in, the God We Announce*, 23. Dealing with the religious' prophetic dimension of evangelization Garcia Paredes reminds them that if Jesus made himself Jewish with the Jews and Paul Greek with the Greeks, the religious have to makes themselves women and men of their time to be able to proclaim the message.

poverty also brings about in Moses 'philosophic life' which emphasizes the lack of want as the key to living the good life.

The daughters of the priest of Median represent all those people who suffer unjustly at the hands of the more powerful. In the encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis enumerates "a number of injustices prevalent in the present world" (FT 9-53) in which consecrated men and women are called to exercise their prophetic ministry.⁷⁵⁸ If we understand these challenges in the light of the teachings of the Nyssen, we can say that a life founded only on temporal hope breeds injustice. The forgetfulness of God leads to the forgetfulness of the truth about man and to the divinization of money. In Gregory's time, he condemned a slave owner as someone who turned the property of God into his own property and arrogated dominion to his own kind so as to think himself owner of men and women overstepping his own nature through pride regarding himself as something different from his

⁷⁵⁸ Pope Francis notices that millions of people today – children, women and men of all ages – are deprived of freedom and forced to live in conditions akin to slavery which treats them as objects and denies them the dignity of human persons created in the image and likeness of God (FT 24). Luring young men and women through modern means of communication by criminal networks, human trafficking, sexual exploitation of women, kidnapping persons for the sake of selling their organs etc. are contemporary forms of enslavement. Globalization that strengthens the identity of the more powerful, who can protect themselves, and tends to diminish the identity of the weaker and poor regions by making them vulnerable and dependent, imposes 'a single cultural model at the expense of local cultures' (a cultural colonization), and creates a unity that does not respect the brotherhood of all mankind (FT 12). The proponents of a culture of limitless consumption and individualism uproot the youth from their historical heritage of values and exploit them by making them their puppets. Political life has become founded not on healthy debates about long-term plans to improve people's lives and to advance the common good, but on slick marketing techniques and discrediting the opponents (FT 15). The voices raised in defence of the environment are silenced or ridiculed (FT 17). A throwaway culture that values persons on account of their use has become a threat to the sick, the disabled, the poor and the elderly (FT 18). Poverty, unemployment, inequality in human rights, racism etc. further divide the people. War, terrorist attacks, racial or religious persecution, and many other affronts to human dignity are judged differently, depending on how convenient it proves for certain, primarily economic, interests (FT 25). Walls are being raised both around land and heart to obstruct encounter with other cultures and people. Migrants are being maltreated. Many people feel abandoned by the system and in their loneliness, fear and insecurity tend to join various 'mafias' (FT 28). Communication media facilitate the spread of fake news and false information, fomenting prejudice, and hate. Information has become information without wisdom (FT 47). The Pope is of the opinion that the main reasons for the many forms of injustice persisting in today's world are a reductive anthropological vision and a profit-based economic model that does not hesitate to exploit, discard, and even kill human beings (FT 22).

subordinates.⁷⁵⁹ Taking into account the fact that the world had to wait until the nineteenth century for witnessing an unequivocal stand against slavery like that of Gregory's, J. K. Carter calls the Nyssen "a fourth century abolitionist intellectual."⁷⁶⁰ Consecrated persons can become a prophetic sign of social justice in today's world by courageously testifying to the eschatological truth through their entire life, and thereby presenting themselves as a sign of contradiction, like Jesus, for people to choose between virtue and vice. The friendship with the world prevents them from becoming a sign of contradiction in the world. Hence, for consecrated men and women, "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (Jas 4:4). According to the document *Keep Watch!* of the CICLSAL, consecrated persons are called to "become *memoria Dei*: they recall the action of the Lord" (no. 19) or demonstrate how Jesus lived on this earth.⁷⁶¹ Their "poverty consists in remaining faithful to the image of the Saviour, who died a scandalous death on a cross, and any attachment to wealth or power or prestige would distort that image of Christ,"⁷⁶² whose very sign of identity was poverty when he was born in Bethlehem.

The history of 'Holy Fools' in Eastern Christianity is a typical reminder of how spirit-poverty helps a Christian manifest the prophetic ministry of the Church creatively and effectively. Holy Fools voluntarily take upon themselves the mask of insanity, as a simulation to the kenosis of Christ, in order that they may thereby conceal their own perfection from the world and hence avoid the vanity of worldly praise.⁷⁶³ They practice an absolute voluntary poverty, renouncing not only material possessions but also what

⁷⁵⁹ Cf. *HEccl.* (Homily 4), 73.

⁷⁶⁰ J. K. CARTER, *Race: A Theological Account*, 231. According to Carter, what enabled Gregory's radical theological abolitionism is his ascetical contemplation or "living in the Holy Spirit" that draws the reader of the scriptures more deeply into the unfathomable mystery of Christ as the Image of God and of all human persons existing in the Image, who is Christ: cf. *Ibid.*, 231-251.

⁷⁶¹ The document asks consecrated persons to "continue their journey with courage and watchfulness so as to make daring choices that will honour the prophetic character of their identity, a special form of sharing in Christ's prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God, so that people today may see the unsurpassed breadth of the strength of Christ and the infinite power of the Holy Spirit marvellously working in the Church" (no. 1). Through the exercise of their prophetic ministry with boldness of speech and apostolic courage, each of them will become "a precious opportunity for others to meet with God" (no. 12), as Moses did become to the Israelites when he descended from the mountain.

⁷⁶² J. SHEEHY, "Poverty: To Share and to Serve in Hope", 48.

⁷⁶³ S. A. IVANOV, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, trans. S. Franklin, 1.

others regard as his sanity and mental balance,⁷⁶⁴ and become living witnesses to the truth that Christ's kingdom is not of this world. They become channels of the higher wisdom of the Spirit and set themselves against guilty silence denouncing without fear every hypocrisy with stinging irony and irresistible humour. They awaken men from complacency and Pharisaism, and thereby become "the living conscience of society."⁷⁶⁵ In the fifth homily on *Ecclesiastes*, Gregory points out that those who fix their eyes on Christ and are not preoccupied with material life, but are filled with the good things on high in contemplation are regarded as fools by the world.⁷⁶⁶ It is because the world does not understand that a living Christ, who is humanity's final reality, really exists. Holy Fools are fools for Christ's sake.

Consecrated persons should be vigilant to be faithful to their identity as they live in a world marked by injustices and an eclipse of God. Thomas Merton reminds them of the challenge of their prophetic ministry: "In connection with the corruption of justice, there is also the attempt to pervert the holy and to silence the prophets. Three things go together: avarice with injustice, unholiness, and efforts to silence the voice of truth. This is typical of the 'great' – the rich and powerful."⁷⁶⁷ Today violent assaults are being made to rob Christianity of its primacy as the conscience of the world. Henri de Lubac insists that in the present state of the world, Christianity must become a heroic Christianity, which consists in resisting with courage, in the face of the world and perhaps against one's own self, the lures and seductions of a false ideal and in proudly maintaining, in their paradoxical intransigence, the Christian values that are threatened and derided.⁷⁶⁸ He wants Christians to reject with 'a categorical No' the neopaganism that has set itself against Christ, and exhibit their heroism in their courage to call evil by its proper name. The strength and efficacy of Christianity depends on this prophetic witness in the power of the Spirit. 'God is dead' to the world, if Christianity slacks off in her robust and joyous austerity and prophetic spirit of primitive Christianity. Indifference to be prophets of social justice, in the name of Christian piety, humility, solidarity, peace etc., is Christian hypocrisy. Christianity is to be rediscovered in its original purity, and the forms of Christian living buttressed by the privileges of wealth and political power are to be thwarted, keeping in mind that Christians fled to deserts to be monks, when Emperor Constantine founded an empire (324 AD) whose greatness and

⁷⁶⁴ K. WARE, *The Orthodoxy Way*, 132.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁶⁶ *HEccl.* (Homily V), 90; cf. 1 Cor 4:10.

⁷⁶⁷ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 423.

⁷⁶⁸ H. LUBAC, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. E. M. Riley et al., 129.

prosperity were more dangerous than the cruelties of his predecessors. Consecrated men and women are called to give a counter witness to the corruption of a society manifested in luxury, injustice, falsification of truth, hypocrisy in religion etc. by their prophetic ministry rooted in poverty both inner and outer.

3.3 Conclusion

In the light of the second stage of Moses' spiritual ascent, the theophany of the heavenly tabernacle, we understood poverty as the radical emptying of the soul of all its finite content in order to gain knowledge of God (theology). This ascent to divine knowledge is made possible by one's participation in Christ through the processes of purification and the Christification of the intellect, and it manifests Christian life as a journey being illuminated by the Spirit, enkindling the grace of the sacrament of chrismation, living the theological virtue of hope, and participating in the prophetic ministry of Christ. In poverty one ascends with Christ in the light of the Holy Spirit to Christ himself not only to be enriched in Christ with a participation in his human intellect but also to participate in his mission in the world. Thus, it becomes an ascent from self-centredness to Christ-centredness. Freedom from self-centredness leads to self-transformation: man is no longer an individual who sets his 'I' in opposition to the natures of all other individuals, but a person who lives in communion with others. We saw this transformation as a participation in God's poverty and as the basis of synodality in the Church. In voluntary poverty a person becomes a "chosen vessel" (Acts 9:15) to 'receive God's gift of the Spirit without limit' (Jn 3:34). Spirit-poverty enables Christians to live their charisms, and thereby unite contemplation and action in their own lives: they become spiritual fathers and mothers, prophetic signs of social justice, good stewards of God's creation etc. The renunciation of the idolatry of sense objects and intellectual concepts in poverty enables Christians not only to focus on eschatological hope trusting in God's providence but also to convert Bible reading into a dialogue with God.

We have seen that the vow of poverty does not impoverish but enriches consecrated persons. The consecrated life that differentiates the Kingdom of God from worldly kingdom is founded not on worldly riches but on heavenly ones. Consecrated men and women build up God's kingdom through a Christ-centred life, in which their eyes of the soul are being illuminated by the light of the Holy Spirit. The consumeristic world of today that surrounds man with an enormous multiplicity of material things and commercial advertisements

that invade his life creating unprecedented needs, wants and appetites cajole consecrated persons also to be dependent more and more on material things, creating the impression that they cannot achieve happiness without them. Idolatry of money, power and positions makes consecrated men and women once again consign themselves to ‘Egyptian slavery under Pharaoh.’ The Pharaoh culture that invades into the consecrated life interprets the growth of the institutes not on the basis of holiness, but on the basis of bank balance, land property, number of members, vehicles, buildings etc., and virtuous members are thrown into the Nile of worldly passions. The renewal of the consecrated life is always a return to spirit-poverty. As Gregory Nazianzen says, this poverty is a sign of superiority: “No man, even if he has the desire, can gain possession of all things, but one can know how to despise all and thereby show himself superior to all.”⁷⁶⁹ Consecrated men and women are called to resist the invasion and domination of the world by their vow of poverty and prove that real happiness lies in things invisible. They proclaim that God is the true wealth of the human heart. Their self-forgetfulness (a life that does not seek personal gain) in spirit-poverty leads to obedience or submission to God.

⁷⁶⁹ GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *On St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea*, (no. 60), 78.

CHAPTER 4

Theophany of God's Back: Obedience

4.0 Introduction

If the first theophany in *The Life of Moses* – the theophany of the burning bush – is an invitation to participate in the human nature of Christ through chastity or the Christification of the biological life by purification and the second theophany – the theophany of the heavenly tabernacle – an invitation to acquire divine or spiritual knowledge through poverty or the Christification of the intellect by the Holy Spirit's illumination, the third theophany – the theophany of God's back – is an invitation to retrieve in Christ man's primordial vocation of continuous and progressive participation in God through obedience or the Christification of the will by uniting the human will to the Divine will.

Notwithstanding that the third theophany represents a higher ascent than the previous one, it does not take Moses beyond the tabernacle itself. For the Nyssen, the heavenly tabernacle stands for the infinite Christ who encompasses the universe, and Moses is able to progress infinitely within the tabernacle. The third theophany occurs in the heavenly tabernacle in response to Moses' request that God appear to him (Ex 33:18). In the treatise, Gregory explains that God 'fulfils without satiating' Moses' desire to see him: God tells Moses, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen" (Ex 33:21-23). The Cappadocian interprets the rock, in the cleft of which Moses was asked to stand, as Christ, who is the perfect virtue (LM II:244). If the soul plants its feet in Christ, who is the rock, it will have a firm ground to make progress in virtue. According to Gregory, standing in the cleft of the rock, Moses is not simply to 'watch' God's back: God is asking Moses to follow him wherever he wishes to guide him (LM II:252). One who 'follows' one's guide sees only the back of the guide. Thus, to see God's back is to follow him in obedience to his will.

The final stage of the ascent is both a standing still and a moving: the ascent takes place by means of 'standing still' or 'life' in Christ. Christ guarantees stability and progress. In other words, in Christ the soul finds stability that allows for movement. For Gregory, the opening in the rock is a

synonym for Paradise, the bosom of the patriarch Abraham to which Lazarus was carried by angels, the land of the living etc. (LM II:247). Thus, as we have already seen in the first chapter, we can say that, for the Nyssen, Paradise is not so much a geographical place as a spiritual place, Christ himself. Entry into the opening in the rock means that the soul regains its Paradise, which Adam lost because of his disobedience, in Christ, and it can fulfil in Christ the primordial vocation of Adam, i.e., to unfold the image (likeness) of God through progressive participation in God's perfections. Adam's vocation was none other than the vocation Moses received at the final theophany – "to follow God wherever He might lead" (LM II:252). In this chapter, we will see how consecrated men and women are called to live their vow of obedience in Christ as stability and movement. In order to follow God wherever he might lead, they have to keep their will united to God's will. This stability not only leads them to a vertical movement towards divinization but also to a horizontal movement towards people. Here, they may represent Moses who came down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the covenant in his hand while his face was shining because he had been talking with God (Ex 34:29). Since Christ is "the true Lawgiver, of whom Moses was a type" (LM II:216), who through his shining human nature revealed God on earth and impelled others to follow him, consecrated persons through their unflinching obedience to God's will can become the living presence of Christ – a force of attraction towards God's will – in the world.

4.1 Obedience as Union

In the previous chapter, we understood *theoria* (contemplation) as a radical self-abandonment or self-forgetfulness in spirit-poverty renouncing 'all sense knowledge and intellectual concepts' (the finite wealth of the soul) in order to rise above the visible world and have a knowledge of the invisible divine mystery illumined by the Holy Spirit. *Theoria* helps Moses realize that his self-abandonment is meaningful because there is "Someone" beyond the sensible world to whom he can be abandoned. The beauty of the 'tabernacle not made with hands' (pre-existent Christ) makes Moses an "ardent lover of beauty, and he longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype" – Christ (LM II:231). It means that *theoria* or contemplation is not the goal of the soul's ascent. The soul will pass beyond contemplation to a unifying relationship with God through divine love. Christian obedience is always contemplative obedience.⁷⁷⁰ obedience is born of a Christian's relationship of

⁷⁷⁰ Vatican Council II's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation *Dei Verbum* stipulates that obedience to God is to be preceded by the opening of the eyes of the mind through the grace

love with Christ which results from contemplation. The contemplative becomes gradually identified with Christ,⁷⁷¹ as Moses (the soul) longed to be filled with the very stamp of the heavenly tabernacle (Christ). The recovery of the contemplative dimension in the life of the individual Christian is essential to a recovery of an authentic approach to obedience. The decline in the experience and understanding of contemplation erodes the notion of obedience as a form of love. In the absence of contemplation, obedience is understood only as a moral duty or a mere response either expecting reward or fearing punishment. True obedience is, first of all, a union with God in love.

According to the Nyssen, Adam sinned when he failed in this contemplative obedience to God. Contemplation, the highest form of prayer, would have led him to continuous participation in God, and he would have never ceased from his radical change for the better. His communion with God would have been a constant ascent, a stretching forward, “from glory to glory” (Phil 3:13; 2 Cor 3:18). Disobedience of Adam, which was an action of his created will, brought an end to his union with God. According to Gregory, the placing of Moses in the cleft of the rock, the theophany of God’s back, and the divine injunction to follow him set before Christians God’s invitation to regain in Christ all that they had lost in Adam. For the Nyssen, Christ is the Alpha or the Creator and the Omega or the final goal. Seeing the incorporeal God’s back and following him stands for the apophatic and contemplative nature of Eastern spirituality – God is beyond all his manifestations, “not the being of God, but his operations are visible,”⁷⁷² but in contemplative obedience that springs from love one is led to a life of communion with God and to progress in God infinitely.

As man is endowed with free will, obedience is a free act of the will. Christian obedience is a participation in Christ’s obedience to the Father. His ‘divine will’ is united with the ‘Father’s will’ so much so that they are one, and his ‘human will’ is united to his ‘divine will’ in such a way that the former always follows the latter. For the Nyssen, a life of obedience is a life of

of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit. The document says, “The obedience of faith is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals, and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it” (DV 5).

⁷⁷¹ T. SPIDLIK, *Prayer*, 221.

⁷⁷² *HBeat*, (Homily VI), 68.

friendship with God, and there is no true friendship without love. In *The Life of Moses*, he writes that Moses was named the ‘friend of God’ by God himself (cf. Ex 33:11), and it is a trustworthy witness to the fact that Moses did attain the perfection which was possible (LM II:319). In the treatise, friendship with Moses, who is the symbol of the Law, is proposed to the Hebrews as a means to acquire friendship with God: “This is the Law commanding all: *If anyone wishes to be the friend of God, let him be a friend of me, the Law* for the friend of the Law is certainly a friend of God” (LM II:207). From the fact that it is friendship that determines one’s life of obedience to God, we can affirm that, for the Nyssens, obedience is neither slavery in the fear of punishment nor a business-like contract in the expectation of a reward. As far as Christians are concerned, the Law, which was represented by Moses in the Old Testament, is Christ himself because in *The Life of Moses* the stone tablets prepared by Moses himself and on which the commandments were written (cf. Ex 34:4) symbolize the human nature of Christ who “became a stonecutter of his own flesh” (LM II:216) in the Incarnation. Christ came to make human beings his friends (cf. Jn 15:15), and their obedience is a response to his love. Christian perfection consists in one’s true friendship with Christ.⁷⁷³ In friendship, obedience is not one-way. Moses obeyed God in response to his self-revelations, and God ‘obeyed’ Moses in response to his prayers. Christians are Christ’s friends and, like Moses, they are ‘to be known by him’ and named ‘friends’ (LM II:319-320). Those who do the will of God are known by Christ (Mt 7:21-23) and named friends. Hence, we can say that obedience is union with Christ in love, in response to his love.

Gregory of Nyssa wants that, in order to be virtuous, Christian obedience should be devoid of all elements of compulsion and expectation of any rewards. What is coerced or ambitious is not love because love must be freely given and freely received. He declares firmly that virtue has no master because it is voluntary and free of all compulsion.⁷⁷⁴ True obedience is voluntary obedience in love (a virtue). In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory presents his own obedience as a model for others to follow. He writes this treatise in

⁷⁷³ In the treatise, Gregory summarizes his notion of Christian perfection as ‘becoming God’s friend’ in the penultimate paragraph in these words: “This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like and contractual arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God’s friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honour and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life” (LM II:320); cf. BASIL OF CAESARIA, *The Long Rules*, (preface), 227.

⁷⁷⁴ *HSong*, (Homily 5), 173.

response to the letter sent by Caesarius, a young monk, requesting the bishop to furnish him with some counsel concerning the perfect life (LM I:2). Gregory is a bishop and in old age. It is possible for him to discard the request from this youth. But he complies to the request neither fearing punishment nor expecting any reward. The Nyssen hopes that “although there may be nothing useful for the youth in his words, his example of *ready obedience* will be profitable to him” (LM I:2):

For if we who have been appointed to the position of fathers over so many souls consider it proper here in our old age to accept a commission from youth, how much more suitable is it, inasmuch as we have taught you, a young man, to obey voluntarily, that the right action of *ready obedience* be confirmed in you.

The Greek word used for ‘ready obedience’ is *eupeitheia* which stands for ‘obedience paid to someone of one’s own accord,’ without being forced. The ordinary word for obedience in Greek is *hupakoe* (from *hupo* = under + *akouo* = hear/listen). It literally means ‘hearing under,’ that is, listening from a subordinate position in which compliance with what is said is expected and intended. The Nyssen wants that when one obeys (*hupakoe*) one’s superior, the correct duty of obedience (*eupeitheia*) must be established in that person.

In his translation with commentary of Alcinous’ *The Handbook of Platonism*, John Dillon traces the origin of the term *eupeitheia* to Plato’s use of the adjective *eupeithes* at “*Phaedrus* 254a1” to denote the good horse’s obedience to the charioteer.⁷⁷⁵ One obeys of one’s on accord only whom one admires. Ready obedience (*eupeitheia*) was a prevalent concept in the medical field of the ancient Greco-Roman world. According to Galen (c.129-c.216) – a Greek physician, surgeon and philosopher in the Roman Empire – an ideal patient is the one who is ‘blindly trusting and obedient’ (*eupeitheia*) to his or her doctor.⁷⁷⁶ The Nyssen was familiar with a fair number of Galen’s works. Galen recommends that physicians have a friendly attitude to secure the patient’s obedience, and stresses that correct prognoses and other striking

⁷⁷⁵ ALCINOUS, *The Handbook of Platonism*, trans. J. Dillon, 179. Plato in his “chariot allegory” portrays the soul as a chariot drawn by two horses. The charioteer of the human soul is intellect or reason. A white horse and a black horse pull the chariot. While the white horse represents the moral impulses, the black horse represents the irrational passions. The white horse wishes to rise and follow the wisdom of the charioteer, but the black horse attempts to pull the chariot back towards the earth. The charioteer – reason – has to restrain the wild black horse and rise upward. In the second chapter, we already dealt with Plato’s imagery of the chariot in connection with *apatheia*.

⁷⁷⁶ S. P. MATTERN, *Galen and the Rhetoric of Healing*, 148.

demonstrations of excellence will command the patient's respect.⁷⁷⁷ When Galen treated patients in their homes, he visited them frequently. His professional relationships were not easily distinguishable from friendship. However, his visits differed from friendly interactions in the intimate nature of the therapy he applied. Patients were ready to undergo the drastic remedies he sometimes applied because of their affinity with the physician, and they were healed. H. J. Horstmanshoff comments on the success of Galen: "Friendship is decisive for *eupeitheia*. The patient must feel some affinity with the physician. The physician must inspire the patient's confidence. ... A successful therapy is only guaranteed by the patient's *eupeitheia*."⁷⁷⁸ According to the Nyssen, Christ is "the true physician of the soul's passions, who entered the life of human beings for the sake of those who are not well."⁷⁷⁹ Man's healing (salvation) depends on his *eupeitheia* to Christ who established his friendship with mankind in the Incarnation. What Gregory has in mind is that those who represent Christ in the Church should have the ability to command the *eupeitheia* and respect of others. The sheep will not follow a stranger (Jn 10:5). The office of the pastor was often likened to that of a physician in antiquity, and the regimens of bodily care and the regimens of soul care were not easily distinguishable forms of therapy, the former pursued by physicians and the latter by pastors.⁷⁸⁰ In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen presents Moses as a physician who heals the souls of the Israelites from their slavery to passions (LM II: 272, 278).

Adam failed in the *eupeitheia* to God, who revealed his love/friendship in creating Adam in his own image so that the creature has affinity and communion with the Creator, through the misuse of his free will. Through the vow of obedience, consecrated men and women promise to live in communion with Christ by their *eupeitheia* to him. *Perfectae Caritatis* speaks of the unitive nature of obedience in these words: "In professing obedience, religious offer the full surrender of their own will as a sacrifice of themselves to God and so are united permanently and securely to God's salvific will" (PC 14). Obedience of consecrated persons is their participation in the human will of Christ that is united perennially with the divine will or the will of the Father in *eupeitheia*. In the Greek ascetic tradition, a consecrated person is called monk. The term 'monk' derives from the Greek word *monos* (alone) and

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid., 146.

⁷⁷⁸ H. J. HORSTMANSHOFF, "Galen and His Patients", in H. J. HORSTMANSHOFF et al. (eds.), *Ancient Medicine in Its Socio-Cultural Context Volume 1*, 95.

⁷⁷⁹ *HOF*, (Homily IV), 137; cf. *LM II*: 177.

⁷⁸⁰ J. D. PENNIMAN, "Blended with the Savior: Gregory of Nyssa's Eucharistic Pharmacology in the Catechetical Oration", in *Studies in Late Antiquity*, 2/4 (2018), 517.

refers to someone who chooses to be alone with God. As we saw in the first chapter, the fact that human beings are created in the image of God does not denote their humanity but signifies an intrinsic relation between God and human beings. Monks of old dedicated themselves to this relation with God so that they would safeguard the truth about man. According to the Nyssen, to be on the side of God is to be a friend of God (LM II:207). In the Syriac ascetic tradition, the word *ihidaya* (single-minded) is used to denote a consecrated person: an *ihidaya* is united to Christ – *the Ihidaya*, the Only-Begotten or ‘Single One’ of the Father – with an undivided will, i.e., one becomes an *ihidaya* by putting on Christ, the *Ihidaya*.⁷⁸¹ In the consecrated life, obedience is union with God as his friends through the deliberate and voluntary submission of the human will to God’s will.

4.1.1 Purification

To obey is ‘to give ear’ (Greek, *hypakouo*; Latin, *obedire* from *ob* ‘to’ + *audire* ‘listen’). In *The Life of Moses*, hearing God or obeying him is figured as an ornament of gold for the ear: “Moses adorned the ears of the Israelites with an ornament for the ears, which is the Law” (LM II:212). Gregory compares Aron’s command to take off the gold earrings of the Israelites to make an idol cast in the shape of a calf (Ex 32:2) to the fall of Adam (LM II:212-213). God’s commandments were earrings for Adam in Paradise. But the advice to disobey the commandment (Gen 3:4-5) removed his earrings, and his unwillingness to listen to the voice of God in ‘ready obedience’ (*eupeitheia*) made him an idolator: he chose to participate in what is not God, in material goods. Likewise, Aron through disobedience removed the ornament – the Law – which Moses placed on the ears of the Israelites and made an idol with it. Disobedience is placing one’s will against the will of God, and replacing God with an idol. According to Gregory, in disobedience one stops following behind God looking at his back, but looks directly God in the face from the opposite direction like an enemy (LM II:253). Gregory specifies that while the good only follows God, what looks God (virtue) in the face, and is face to face with the good is evil (LM II:253-254).

For Christians, “Christ’s guidance is the law and way of life,”⁷⁸² the adornment for their ears. The one to whom a Christian gives ear is in the first instance always Christ. Like Moses who did not look God in the face, but

⁷⁸¹ Cf. S. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 136-137. An *ihidaya* is a single-minded person who is not divided in heart and allegiance to God

⁷⁸² *CML*, 143.

looked at his back and followed him, Christians are called to follow Christ's will without exhaustion in their desire to know him more and more, and without countering his will with an opposite will. To do this they are to be purified of everything that leads to disobedience. We have already seen in the first chapter that, for Gregory, evil exists only as a privation in the free will of intellectual creatures⁷⁸³ – angels and men. By selling the birth-right of its self-determination to sinful passions the will becomes ungovernable and is subjected to pleasure. Now man is governed by 'self-will' – "a desire contrary to the true nature of man, the passionate movement that follows the evil thought."⁷⁸⁴ The first of all the evil thoughts is that of 'self-love,' i.e., "an unreasonable affection for one's body."⁷⁸⁵ The vow of obedience demands consecrated persons' commitment "to learn how to follow God" (LM II:255) having purified from sins, and necessitates primarily their freedom from self-love and self-will for the Christification of the will and the progressive participation in God.

4.1.1.1 Purification from Sin

In religions purity is a disposition that is necessary to approach sacred things.⁷⁸⁶ For a Christian, the one real evil that prevents him or her from approaching God is sin. According to Gregory, sin is the refusal to grow or the refusal to participate in God: "Just as the end of life is the beginning of death, so also stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil" (LM I:6). Adam's disobedience was his refusal to grow. By choosing to live in an autonomous way, i.e., without participating in God, man endowed sin with existence and life, although it has no existence. It exists only in the exercise of free choice and comes to naught when man participates in God. Sin is not the use of one's freedom but, on the contrary, the refusal to

⁷⁸³ *COr*, (VII), 897. Gregory says, "All wickedness has its form and character in the deprivation of the good; it exists not by itself, and cannot be contemplated as a subsistence. For no evil of any kind lies outside and independent of the will; but it is the non-existence of the good that is so denominated. Now that which is not has no substantial existence, and the Maker of that which has no substantial existence is not the Maker of things that have substantial existence"; cf. *MMA*, (IV), 724. For Gregory, human freedom derives from the freedom of God who is not controlled by anything and governs the universe through the free exercise of will. Human will in the beginning was royal in nature because it was not controlled by passions.

⁷⁸⁴ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 256.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

use its natural function – to respond to the love of God.⁷⁸⁷ In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory teaches that the devil lives through sin (LM II:211). Therefore, man is able to kill the devil in himself because “evil not done and not carried out is the death of the devil.”⁷⁸⁸ It calls for an ‘inner warfare’ or ‘invisible struggle’ through which “the free-will give birth to virtues amid great pain” (LM II:5). Taking a cue from the fact that the Israelites were asked to cover their feet with sandals before departing from Egypt (Ex 12:11), the Nyssen admonishes Christians to wear “the shoes of the self-controlled and austere life which breaks and crushes the points of the thorns (sins) and prevents sin from slipping inside unnoticed” (LM II:107). The self-controlled and austere life as “shoes” is an armour for the soldiers of Christ to outwit the adversary (the devil) who litters the battlefield with traps (cf. Eph 6:15). There is no victimless sin for the reason that sin always obscures the image of God in man. Freedom from sin is the sign of true obedience to God by which the free-will gives birth to virtues without conceding to the suggestions of the enemies of the soul.

According to the Cappadocian, the soul can be purified from sin through repentance. By repentance man can again find Christ whom he/she abandoned and again receive the fruits of the sacraments (LM II:269-270). The Nyssen alludes not only to interior repentance but also to “confession of sins”⁷⁸⁹ – ecclesiastical reconciliation – as one of the customs of the Church. In the Eastern tradition, ‘tears’ place a significant role in a life of repentance. Spiritual fathers speak of the purification through the baptism of tears. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory treats the tears as the unfailing guardian of those saved by virtue (LM II:9). Repentance manifests our capacity to be human, to reflect on our actions.⁷⁹⁰ One who repents recognizes the sins, condemns the faults, blames oneself and decides to cleave to the Good. Gregory teaches that Christ brings an end to sin in himself. To interpret it he connects the miracle of Moses’ rod changing into a snake (Ex 4:3) with the mystery of the Incarnation. He notes that in Scripture sin is called a serpent. Christ, for our sake, became a sin (2 Cor 5:21), i.e., a serpent, that he might devour and consume the ‘Egyptian serpents,’ i.e., those who lead the Egyptian life (sinners), produced by the ‘sorcerers,’ i.e., the enemies of the soul (LM II:32-33). Therefore, for Gregory, man is freed from sin through Christ (LM

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁷⁸⁸ *CML*, 149.

⁷⁸⁹ *CE III*, (IX:58), 218; cf. *HEccl*, (Homily III), 61. Gregory says that the person who has branded himself by confessing his secret sins will be given lessons by the memory of his feeling of shame for the rest of his life.

⁷⁹⁰ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 191.

II:276), and sinners can participate in Christ, who is in their nature but without sin, through repentance and have stability in following God.

The Nyssen cautions Christians that the devil always tries to take away from the soul the fear of the Lord and love for him so that it becomes without spiritual arms and unprotected,⁷⁹¹ and advises them to use the sense of ‘modesty’ and the sense of ‘shame,’ which are given by God and are inherent in mankind, as great and powerful weapons for avoiding sin.⁷⁹² Modesty protects us from sin before the event, and shame protects after, to avoid falling again. According to Gregory, modesty is revealed by a blush at the sight of sin. In accordance with the principle “virtue consists of finding an appropriate middle ground between two extremes,” modesty is a mean between shamelessness and bashfulness.⁷⁹³ Modesty exists everywhere as an intuition of the spiritual dignity proper to man. Sin committed generates shame not only from within but also from without, and the fear of shame impels us “to put off like a garment whatever stained and dishonourable shame we are clothed in.”⁷⁹⁴ We can conclude that free will is supported by modesty and shame in choosing God and resisting evil.

4.1.1.2 Purification of the Will

The will (Greek, *thelema*) is the rational appetite of the soul. By the faculty of the will, the soul seeks the good as known by the intellect. In the second stage of the spiritual ascent, the intellect, having been illumined by the Holy Spirit, finds the heavenly tabernacle (Christ) as the true good. And in the third theophany of God’s back, the will follows behind the true good that the intellect has found. The will – the rational appetite – is distinguished from the sensitive appetite, which seeks the good as known by the senses ignoring the proper reason of goodness as such.⁷⁹⁵ When the rational appetite is proper to intellectual beings, even the animals possess a sensitive appetite. Under the influence of passions, the intellect can judge as a true good something which is only an apparent good. The consent of the will to follow the apparent good apprehended by the intellect leads to sin. The natural function of the will, according to Gregory, is to follow God because God made man for the participation in God’s own peculiar good. By original sin,

⁷⁹¹ *CML*, 150.

⁷⁹² *HEccl*, (Homily 3), 60.

⁷⁹³ ARISTOTLE, *The Great Ethics*, trans. P. L. P. Simpson, 29:1193a, 33; cf. CCC 2521-2524.

⁷⁹⁴ *CML*, 133.

⁷⁹⁵ A. R. MARIN – J. AUMANN, *The Theology of Christian Perfection*, 264.

the will became inclined to evil. As long as the natural faculty of the soul – reason – fails to control the spirited and appetitive parts that were added to the soul after the fall, the soul is unable to regain its primordial vocation of following or obeying God through a progressive participation in him. Therefore, purification of the will consists, first of all, in bringing the spirited and appetitive parts of the soul under the absolute dominion of reason, and in subjecting the will wholly to God by means of a total submission and conformity to his divine will.

In his fourth homily on the Our Father, based on the theme “Your will be done” (Mt 6:10), the Nyssen exhorts the Christians to denounce that life which is far removed from the divine will, and presents ‘self-control, humility, moderation and love’ as means for the purification of the will. According to him, a Christian who wishes to return to God’s will, which will eliminate the wicked tendency of the free will in his soul, through the ascetic disciplines of self-control, humility, moderation and love has to take responsibility for his/her own faults – i.e., he/she has to admit that the cause of his/her fault is self-will – and make the following confession to God:

Since the Adversary’s will worked perniciously in me in my past life, and I became an underling of the wicked tyrant, inasmuch as I carried out against myself, like an executioner, the enemy’s sentence, for these reasons take pity on my destruction and grant that one day your will too be done in me. For just as darkness vanishes when light has penetrated into the dark gloom of caverns, so too will every wicked and harmful movement of our faculty of choice be reduced to nothing when your will is done in me. For self-control will quench the uncontrolled and passion-dominated impulse of the mind; humility will consume arrogance; moderation will cure the illness of pride. Furthermore, the good of love will chase away a long list of the soul’s contrary vices. For once this love is in me there is withdrawal of hatred, envy, wrath, bouts of anger, an irascible disposition, intrigue, hypocrisy, holding of grudges, desire for revenge, the boiling of blood around the heart, the evil eye.⁷⁹⁶

In *The Life of Moses*, self-control is the nail that holds the flesh unmoved by evil (LM II:274), humility is that which slays arrogance (LM II:15), moderation makes a person no more a libertine (LM II:289), and those who love virtue receives the cooperation of the One who turns everything to their good (LM II:241).

⁷⁹⁶ *HOF*, (Homily IV), 138.

The root of disobedience is self-will. In the eighth Catechetical Oration, the Nyssen mentions how self-will had adulterated the pure human nature:

... by a motion of our self-will we contracted a fellowship with evil, and, owing to some sensual gratification, mixed up this evil with our nature like some deleterious ingredient spoiling the taste of honey, and so, falling away from that blessedness which is involved in the thought of passionlessness, we have been viciously transformed...⁷⁹⁷

Self-will is a wall between man and God, and those who want to follow God must, first of all, bring down this wall. For Gregory, to eliminate self-will is to imitate perfectly the death of the Lord:

There is one antidote for the evil passions: the purification of our souls which takes place through the *mystery of godliness* (i.e., God manifested in the flesh, 1 Tim 3:16). The chief act of faith in the *mystery* is to look to him who suffered the passion for us. The cross is the passion, so that whoever looks to it, ... is not harmed by the poison of desire. To look to the cross means to render one's whole life dead and crucified to the world, unmoved by evil (LM II:273-274).

According to him, to look to the Cross is to participate in Christ's Cross. Christians should not be ashamed of the Cross because passion (suffering) for the sake of virtue and the removal of evil is good; it is not evidence of weakness, but of power. In order to overcome self-will, they have to crucify the flesh with the nail of self-control (LM II:274). Since self-will is irrational, it is against the true nature of man and an opponent of conscience. In *The Life of Moses*, Moses is a self-controlled person, who has overcome self-will, because he does not look God in his face from the opposite direction like an enemy, but looks at his back from behind, i.e., he follows behind God in the same direction (LM II:253-254). Moses, who follows God, represents typologically a Christian who has regained his natural will in Christ and without being controlled by passions, i.e., in freedom, voluntarily participates in God.

We have already noted that self-will is born when one gives consent to the evil thought of self-love. The self-lover is a lover of self against self⁷⁹⁸ because he harms the true nature of self that is oriented towards God. One moves from self-love to the quest for sensuous pleasures and thus through all

⁷⁹⁷ *CO*, (VIII), 899.

⁷⁹⁸ T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 256.

the vices of pride,⁷⁹⁹ which is the “peak of arrogance.”⁸⁰⁰ In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen explicates the danger of pride in the spiritual ascent, when he deals with the attempt of Korah, Dathan and Abiram to thrust themselves into the honour of priesthood by claiming holiness (right conduct) and by thrusting out those who had obtained this ministry from God (Num 16: 1-3). The rebels with their households were swallowed up by the yawning chasm and were destroyed (Num 16: 31-35). Gregory interprets it as a metaphor that stands for the fact that arrogance with which one elevates oneself above others is, in fact, a downward descent (LM II:280-281). Pride is the culmination of self-love. Gregory of Nyssa’s Western near-contemporary St Augustine of Hippo (354-430) connects self-love with earthly city and divine love with heavenly city.⁸⁰¹ While self-love seeks glory from men, divine love finds its highest glory in God. Thus, divine love is the antidote to self-love. Augustine is in agreement with Gregory’s notion that (divine) love will chase away the soul’s contrary vices. In order to overcome pride, one has to ascribe one’s right actions to God and practice humility. Humility means one cares about the other over oneself. While pride is an ascent toward the abyss, humility is a descent toward the heights. According to the Nyssen, the punishment meted out to the usurpers of priesthood is a lesson for others “to be moderate and not to be puffed up by their right conduct but always to keep a good disposition in the present” (LM II:282).

In pride a consecrated person would ascribe his virtuous deeds to himself and scorn his brethren who seem to be imperfect. In self-love, “the souls seek themselves in everything, even in holy things. They prolong prayer when they find sweetness and consolation in it but they abandon it when they experience desolation or aridity. They seek sacraments only for sensible consolation. In spiritual direction they always seek the director who is most popular, or who will let them live in peace with their egoistic values and selfish aims. Their desire for sanctification does not aim at the greater glory of God and the good of souls, but is directed to themselves as the best ornament of their souls here on earth and as the source of increased happiness

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., 256.

⁸⁰⁰ *HEccl*, (Homily 4), 82.

⁸⁰¹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. and ed. R. W. Dyson, (XIV:28), 632. Augustine writes, “Two cities, then, have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by *love of self* extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by *love of God* extending to contempt of self. The one, therefore, glories in itself, the other in the Lord; the one seeks glory from men, the other finds its highest glory in God, the Witness of our conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, *You are my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.*”

and glory in heaven.”⁸⁰² Hiding one’s backsliding under the guise of goodness, justice, zeal etc. is also an aspect of self-love. In order to have the purity of will, consecrated persons must examine the true motive for their actions, continually rectify their intentions, and not place the goal of all their efforts on anything other than the glory of God and the perfect fulfilment of his divine will. “Unhesitating obedience is the first step of humility,”⁸⁰³ and it plays a great role in their lives for obtaining the purity of will.⁸⁰⁴ With the purity of will, man finds again the grace of “the dignity of royalty”⁸⁰⁵ – the image of God – that he has once lost. But, for Gregory, a greater task than finding grace is keeping the grace that is found; therefore, after all purifications man has to watch his heart with all vigilance (cf. Prov 4:23).⁸⁰⁶ We can say that the means for the purification of the will – Self-control, humility, moderation and love of virtues – are, indeed, a participation in Christ whose said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work” (Jn 4:34). The goal of purification is the Christification of the will.

4.1.2 Christification of the Will

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory discovers in ‘the stone tablets which were chiselled out by Moses himself (after the first set of tablets, inscribed by the finger of God, were smashed by Moses when he was enraged by the idolatry of the Israelites) and rewritten by the finger of God’ (Ex 34:1-4; 32:15-16) an image of the Incarnation (LM II:216-217). Jesus Christ is the restorer of the human nature that was broken by the disobedience of Adam. The human nature is symbolized by the stone tablets of the divine Law. The first pair of stone tablets which was the work of God and the writing on them was the writing of God (Ex 32: 16), and which Moses threw and broke at the foot of the mountain when he saw the idolatry of the Israelites out of disobedience (Ex 32: 19) stands for the original unbroken character of the first human nature created by God, but was broken by Adam through his

⁸⁰² A. R. MARIN – J. AUMANN, *The Theology of Christian Perfection*, 269.

⁸⁰³ T. FRY (ed.), *The Rule of St Benedict in English*, (5:1), 29. Gregory speaks of “ready obedience” (*eupitheia*).

⁸⁰⁴ Cf. T. MERTON, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 117. Merton writes, “A spirit that is truly drawn to God in contemplation will soon learn the value of obedience: the hardships and anguish he has to suffer every day from the burden of his own selfishness and clumsiness and incompetence and pride will give him a hunger to be led and advised and directed by somebody else.”

⁸⁰⁵ *MMA*, (IV:1), 724.

⁸⁰⁶ *HEccl*, (Homily 7), 120.

disobedience. Identifying the ‘stone tablets’ with “hearts,”⁸⁰⁷ the foremost part of the soul, the Nyssen writes that in the beginning the unwritten characters of the Law, with which God beautified the human nature fashioned by his own hands, aimed at turning human beings away from evil so that they might honour God with an undivided heart (LM II:215). The unwritten Law of God in the heart indicates the grace of divine filiation; with this grace human beings can penetrate into the intimacy of God with the dignity of sons and daughters. To become a son or a daughter of God is beyond all felicity and every gift.⁸⁰⁸ According to the Nyssen, in disobedience one cannot have any share in the God-given grace (LM I:59).

The broken tablets were restored again by Moses with a second pair of stone tablets (Ex 34:1-4): “The tables were not wholly the same, only the writing on them was the same. Having made the tables out of earthly matter, Moses submitted them to the power of the One who would engrave his Law upon them” (LM II: 214). Here, Gregory identifies Moses as a type of Christ who became the creator of his own human nature and lived his human nature according to the law inscribed by the Holy Spirit in his heart and thereby regained its unbroken character and immortality:

... the true Law Giver, of whom Moses was a type, cut the tables of human nature for himself from our earth. It was not marriage which produced for him his ‘God-receiving’ flesh, but he became the stonecutter of his own flesh, which was carved by the divine finger, for the Holy Spirit came upon the Virgin and the power of the Most High overshadowed her. When this took place, our nature regained its unbroken character, becoming immortal through the letters written by his finger. The Holy Spirit is called ‘finger’ in many places by Scripture (LM II:216).

Jesus Christ who lived without sin is the person who practised the most perfect obedience. The relation of Jesus to his Father is characterised by obedience. This obedience manifested the harmony of the two wills – the human will and the divine will. In the fourth homily on the Our Father, Gregory explicates how Christ as a true physician healed the common humanity he assumed:

⁸⁰⁷ 2 Cor. 3:3, “You show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts”; cf. T. SPIDLIK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 104. In the Eastern spiritual tradition heart is the point of contact between God and man.

⁸⁰⁸ Cf. *HBeat*, (Homily VII), 75.

... the true physician of the soul's passions, who entered the life of human beings for the sake of those who are not well, restores us to intellectual health by enfeebling the sickness-producing cause ... Keeping to the straight path of the divine will is the soul's health, just as contrariwise the falling away from the divine will is the sickness of the soul that culminates in death. So then, since we fell ill by forsaking the good way of life in Paradise, when we gorged ourselves on the poison of disobedience and human nature for this reason was overpowered by that wicked and fatal illness, the true physician came, who brings full healing to the diseased part through contraries ..., and those who had succumbed to sickness because they had separated themselves from the divine will he frees again from illness by conjoining them to the will of God.⁸⁰⁹

In the humanity assumed by Christ, his human will always maintained its natural function, followed the divine will, warded off evil, and thereby he healed the sickness of the soul caused by the poisonous disobedience of Adam by its contrary obedience.

We can understand the Nyssen's portrayal of Christ as the one who restored human nature through a life of obedience in his assumed humanity as a refutation Apollinaris' teaching that Christ had no human will because the divine Logos took the place of the rational human mind in God-Incarnate. Apollinaris denied that there could be two autonomous minds in a single person. Therefore, there can be only one will in Christ. In his anti-Apollinarian writings, Gregory exposed the contradiction involved in Apollinaris' argument pointing out Jesus words, "Not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). Here, the 'my will' is not the will of the Logos because "whoever does not wish his own will to be done wishes precisely this, that what he wishes should not be done."⁸¹⁰ According to Gregory, when Jesus says "not my will," he is referring to his human nature. But when he adds "your will," he indicates the unity of his divinity with that of the Father. Because of their common nature, there is no difference between their respective (divine) wills. Speaking of the Father's will, he reveals that of the Son as well.⁸¹¹ The Nyssen refers to Jesus Christ's obedience to the Father (divine will) to the point of death in line with Moses' desire to follow God wherever he might lead (LM II:252).

⁸⁰⁹ *HOF*, (Homily IV), 137.

⁸¹⁰ *AAp*, 171.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

Gregory holds that there are two wills and two operations (divine and human) in one Christ. The Nyssen is one of the most important Fathers who contributed much to refute the Christological ‘Monothelite heresy’⁸¹² in the seventh century. The doctrine of the two wills of Christ was formally established in the Council of Constantinople III in 680. St Maximus the Confessor (c.580-662) was the champion of the *dyothelite* (two wills) Christology in the seventh century. When he analyses the concept of will, he distinguishes two sorts of will – natural will and gnostic will.⁸¹³ Natural will is the tendency of nature, when it is in its natural state and is not disfigured by sin, towards that which suits it – God. But as a consequence of the fall, humans acquired a gnostic will which makes nature tend most often to ‘anti-nature.’ Gnostic will can choose or ignore the real good – God. In Gregory of Nyssa, the gnostic will appertains to the postlapsarian state in which man is endowed with the garments of skin and is placed between a demon and an angel so that he may exercise his freedom of choice or free will (LM II:45). According to Maximus, the free will to choose between good and evil corresponds to the state to which sin has reduced man. In Christ there are two ‘natural’ wills (a human will and a divine will), but no gnostic will or free will. Christ had a fully human natural will corresponding to the will that Adam had in his prelapsarian state. In the one person of God’s Son, the two natural wills cannot enter into conflict. His human will adheres without doubt or hesitation to its perfect good. The sixth ecumenical council of Constantinople III (680) declared, “In Christ there are two natural wills and these two wills are not contrary the one to the other. His human will follows, not as resisting and reluctant, but rather as subject to his divine and omnipotent will.”⁸¹⁴ In human beings salvation and deification consist in bringing the gnostic will, through redemption in Christ, into conformity with Christ’s natural human will. Hence, Christification of the will is to make the human will conform to the will of Christ that follows the divine will in *eupitheia* or ready obedience.

Man’s will tends towards the infinite good (God) and that is how it was created from the beginning. Therefore, man, whose will is activated by desire, is not satisfied with anything created, but finds himself, as we saw in the third chapter, constantly empty when his desire is turned towards material pleasures; when one desire is fulfilled, desire for something else is born in him (LM II:61). The Nyssen notes that when Moses came to the Israelites

⁸¹² Monothelitism maintained that Christ, while having a human nature, lacked a human will and possessed only one (divine) will.

⁸¹³ L. D. DAVIS, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787)*, 271-273; cf. V. LOSSKY, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, 105-107.

⁸¹⁴ L. D. DAVIS, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787)*, 283.

with the intention of removing his countrymen from evil, what he did first was to implant in them a more intense desire for freedom by holding out worse suffering to them (LM II:90). Moses was a type of Christ who implanted in his followers an intense desire for the ‘will of the Father’ that will free them from sin, and made himself an example to follow “having become obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). In order to conform one’s will to that of obedient Christ, one should have an intense desire for Christ himself because, according to Gregory, Christ’s human nature is the perfect Image of God, and looking towards that Image and adorning one’s own form clearly in accordance with that One, each person becomes himself an image of the invisible God or an image of the Image. Man, who models his life after Christ, obtains freedom from every passion and every evil. At the same time, Christians’ desire for Christ cannot be alienated from Church life that assures their union with Christ through sacraments and a life according to Scripture.

Christification of the will endows with the capacity of discernment that is, for Gregory, conforming one’s thoughts, words and deeds to that of Christ:

Each of us must examine his thoughts, words and deeds, to see whether they are directed toward Christ or are turned away from him. Making the distinction is very easy. For whatever is done or thought or said through passion has no agreement with Christ, but bears the character of the adversary, who smears the pearl of the soul with the mud of the passions and dims the lustre of the precious stone. What is free from every passionate inclination looks to the source of passionlessness, who is Christ.⁸¹⁵

Discernment is a participation in Christ because, according to Gregory, “three things characterise the life of Christians: action, word and thought.”⁸¹⁶ Thought comes first because it is the beginning of every word; second is the word which reveals through the voice the thought coined in the soul; and action has the third rank after thoughts and words, for the deed carries out what the mind has conceived. Christ’s thoughts, words and actions were

⁸¹⁵ *Perf*, 120-121. The Gospel of John does not use the words obey, obedience or obedient, but states approximately 37 times that Jesus was sent by the Father to do his will. Paul never speaks of obedience to the will of God or of obedience to a law. He speaks only of obedience to Christ or to the Gospel; cf. CV 281: Pope Francis presents the formation of conscience which allows discernment as a lifelong process in which we learn to cultivate the very sentiments of Jesus Christ, adopting the criteria behind his choices and the intentions behind his actions.

⁸¹⁶ *Perf*, 120.

directed towards the Father and his will. From Christ a Christian can learn that discernment, if it is to be authentic, must not just remain in one's thoughts but must be carried forth into words and actions. Christ, who is the Wisdom of God, is the light for Christians in the discernment of what is right. For the Nyssen, "to achieve the discernment of what is right is to find the true Good; it is enduring, not transitory, and it lasts all our life long, equally good at every age, in early youth, in middle age, at the end, indeed throughout the whole number of our days."⁸¹⁷ Christians participate, in a way, Christ's privilege of having two wills: 'human will' and 'divine will.' A person who does not acknowledge God's will seeks only his own will; he seeks justice and truth only in his own way.⁸¹⁸ From Christ, they learn that the will has been created in order to seek the good, perfect happiness and well-being, the source of which is God. Gregory notes that man fails to discern the true good when he is controlled by sensual pleasures and defines good as what is enjoyable and pleasant.⁸¹⁹ Therefore, to discern skilfully the good from the evil is a mark of a more perfect condition, and it belongs to the spiritual man (Spirit-bearer).⁸²⁰ It shows that Christification of the will is not moralism, but a gift of the Spirit.

In *The Life of Moses*, it is precisely when Moses is sheltered 'in the hole of the rock' (in Christ) that he is able to see God. For Gregory, Christian perfection consists in the ascent not just to Christ, but into Christ; Christ is not just an external model that his moral virtues are imitated, but the Life to be lived. It is by their life in Christ (in thoughts, words and actions) that Christians are able to achieve the perfection, i.e., progressive participation in God through following him. Standing firmly in the hole of the rock – in Christ

⁸¹⁷ *HEccl*, (Homily 2), 57.

⁸¹⁸ Cf. G. AGAMBEN, *Pilate and Jesus*, trans. A. Kotsko, 40.

⁸¹⁹ Cf. *HEccl*, (Homily 8), 130-131. Gregory writes, "The reason why discernment of the true good is difficult, and hard for us to achieve, is that we are prejudiced by sensual criteria, and we define good as what is enjoyable and pleasant. For just as we cannot see the beauties of the heavens when a cloud fills the air above our heads, so neither can the soul's eye have a clear view of virtue when it is dulled through pleasure as by a mist over the eyes. When sense looks towards pleasure, but the mind is prevented by pleasure from looking towards virtue, that is the beginning of evil, because when the mind is dominated by sense it too favours the irrational judgment of what is good, and if the eye says that goodness lies in superficial attractiveness, the understanding goes along with it; and in the other cases likewise what pleases the sense wins the verdict as good"; cf. *GE* 175: Pope Francis sees discernment as an ascent from what is human to what is divine. In the apostolic exhortation he defines discernment as an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God, who helps us to carry out the mission to which he called us, for the good of our brothers and sisters. We can understand it in the light of the ascent from sense knowledge and intellectual concepts to the will of God.

⁸²⁰ *MMA*, (XX:1), 762.

– makes the content of spiritual life ontological, and this life is directed not by laws external to man but by Christ who has become the law of the soul from within. It signifies the firmness and permanence of Christians’ virtuous life, the steadfastness of their endurance of suffering, and the soul’s opposition and inaccessibility to the assault of sin.⁸²¹ Human beings can be a rock imitating, as far as possible in their changing nature, the unchanging and permanent nature of Christ. For Gregory, the purpose of self-denial is nothing but the Christification of the will and the acquisition of the unchanging and permanent nature of Christ.⁸²² The completion of the participation of the human will in Christ, the Christification of the will, is the content of the spiritual life at its highest degree.⁸²³ But this transformation does not mean that one loses oneself because, as John Paul II has said, “choosing Christ means in some way choosing oneself, choosing one’s self in a new way.”⁸²⁴ In Christ one discovers one’s natural will and in the natural will, total liberation.

Christians are called to live obedience by participating in the obedient Christ who hears and fulfils the salvific word of the Father. Christ’s earthly life was a continuous search for ‘the will of the Father’ or ‘the divine will.’ Consecrated persons follow this way of life so that they can participate in a special way in the same mission that Christ has received from the Father and entrusted to the Church.⁸²⁵ Christification of the will is not an impossibility. From the fact that Christ directed his disciples to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:10), we can understand that God’s will is done in heaven by sinless obedience. We are taught to pray for the same thing on earth and we cannot believe that Christ has taught us to pray for a thing which he is unwilling to grant.⁸²⁶ According to Gregory, the participation in the unchanging and permanent nature of Christ (the rock) or the Christification of the will assures stability and ‘perpetual progress’ (*epektasis*) in Christian life, while failure to have a firm grounding in the Good always prevents one from attaining to the height of virtue:

He is like those who toil endlessly as they climb uphill in sand: Even though they take long steps, their footing in the sand always slips downhill, so that, although there is much motion, no progress results from it. But if someone should pull his feet up

⁸²¹ *Perf*, 108; cf. *LG* 39-42.

⁸²² Cf. *CML*, 145.

⁸²³ P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 138.

⁸²⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *The Way to Christ*, trans. L. Wearne, 17.

⁸²⁵ J. KOONAMPARAMPIL, “Consecrated Life in the Two Codes of the Church”, 22.

⁸²⁶ C. FITCH, *Guide to Christian Perfection*, 14; cf. *HOF*, (Homily IV), 140.

from the mud of the pit and plant them upon the rock (the rock is Christ who is absolute virtue), then the more steadfast and unmoveable he becomes in the Good, the faster he completes the course. It is like using the standing still as if it were a wing while the heart flies upward through its stability in the good (LM II:244).

In the Christification of the will, man neither trusts in his own unstable and uncertain will nor becomes a prey to the will of the Adversary (devil) but conforms his will to the human natural will of Christ that is perpetually turned toward the good. He takes up again the vocation of Adam – the vocation for self-transcendence. Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being” (EG 8). Human beings need transcendence in order to be truly human. For consecrated persons who live the vow of obedience, the human will of Christ is a firm ground for them to plant their feet and transcend to the fullest truth of their being in God. In other words, through the Christification of the will, they reach the zenith of Christian perfection and regain in their soul its primordial dynamic vocation, *epektasis*.

4.1.3 Epektasis

Theology – knowledge of God – results from the spiritual ascent in *apatheia* (first stage) that leads to *theoria* (second stage) illuminated by the Holy Spirit. *Theoria*, in turn, leads to the destruction of the wall of self-will between man and God as the soul is filled with an ardent desire for union with God having been enamoured of divine beauty which makes the soul ‘act by the law of divine love established in Christ and follow God wherever he might lead,’ i.e., *epektasis*, in ready obedience or *eupeitheia*. For Gregory, union with God means “stability in Christ and movement” which consists in following God wherever he might lead (LM II:252). This is his doctrine of *epektasis*. The Greek word *epektasis* is composed of three elements: *epi* ‘toward’ + *ek* ‘out’ + *tasis* ‘tension.’ Philosophically speaking, *epektasis* is a ‘tension toward the Beyond.’⁸²⁷ For the Nyssen, it is the soul’s infinite loving desire stretching out to God in Christ. Christ is the meeting point of God’s reaching out to mankind and of mankind’s God-given tendency toward the divine.⁸²⁸ As it is mentioned in the first chapter, Gregory’s notion of Christian

⁸²⁷ A. G. KEIDEL, “Contemplation and Following Christ in Gregory of Nyssa”, 851.

⁸²⁸ L. D. DAVIS, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787)*, 272.

perfection as *epektasis* is based on St Paul's words in Phil 3:13-14, "... this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward (*epekteinomenos*) to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." At the beginning of his treatise, Gregory compares the life of Christian perfection with a horse race and identifies 'a consecrated person' (addressee, Caesarius) as the one who is competing admirably in the divine race along the course of virtue, light-footedly leaping and straining constantly for the prize of the heavenly calling (LM I:1). The divine race consists in attaining Christ. But Christ who is infinite in his divine nature can never be attained fully by anyone. Therefore, the race never stops, but continues eternally.

For Gregory, contemplation (*theoria*) is not the final consummation of Christian spiritual ascent. On the other hand, it leads to an authentic 'obedience to God's will' or 'following in God's footsteps.' To follow God is the climax of Gregory's spirituality. In the final stage of the spiritual ascent, Moses wants that God appear to him (Ex 33:13), and God responds to Moses' request by showing only his back and thus fulfilling the seeker's desire without satiating it:

God says there is a *place with himself* where there is a *rock with a hole in it* into which he commands Moses to enter. Then God placed his hand over the mouth of the hole and called out to Moses as he passed by. When Moses was summoned, he came out of the hole and saw the back of the One who called him. In this way he thought he saw what he was seeking, and the promise of the divine voice did not prove false (LM II:220).

To have the vision of God is to know the ways of God because in Ex 33:13 Moses actually expresses his desire to know the ways of God: "Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight." Seeing only the back of God means that finite human beings are unable to grasp fully the ways of the infinite God in their lives and in the world. But it is not that one is always travelling to meet someone who never actually appears, but that one is always in the presence of God (one has always arrived, in some sense), and yet there is always more to learn about God.⁸²⁹ The true satisfaction of the person who has fallen in love with God consists in never ceasing in his ascent, seeing that every fulfilment of God's will from his part continually generates a further desire for the will of the Transcendent One. This way, doing God's will becomes for the person the food that nourishes and gives unceasing growth (cf. Jn 4:34).

⁸²⁹ M. LUDLOW, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post) Modern*, 134.

Obedience is not just a single act, or even a series of actions. On the other hand, it is a whole lifestyle characterized by a spirit of obedience or a habitual attitude of obedience.⁸³⁰ Only through constant following behind God, only through constant obedience, does one come to know the ways of God. As Thomas Merton observes, man does not gain heaven or fulfil his destiny by one or two choices, but by a whole lifetime of right choices.⁸³¹ True obedience is always an ascent in faith, hope and love.

Consecrated persons are called to live a life of daily obedience to the will of God. Each moment is a moment of obedience in the sense that one seeks what God asks of him or her at each moment. Obedience is a call to live in the awareness of divine presence. A consecrated person should always have the sight of ‘God moving ahead’ of him/her. It assures that he/she follows only God, not any other person, thing, or concept. It is a life that constantly seeks God’s will, and the satisfaction that derives from knowing the immediate will of God ignites in the person the desire to know the ways of God more and more. In the treatise, Gregory puts into words this fact succinctly:

This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied (LM II:239).

Constant obedience to God is an ongoing participation in the Good (God). In this obedience, the love and desire for God is satisfied in a way that increases the person’s capacity to love, and so God is loved and desired all the more.⁸³² The soul ascends from glory to glory, is transformed more and more into the image and likeness of God, becomes ever more beautiful, and realizes that she is “a spiritual universe ever expanding.”⁸³³ Each human being is either moving toward God in obedience or away from God in disobedience. Man is always becoming.⁸³⁴ Christian life is a life of obedience, regardless of Christians’ location or their circumstances.

Gregory explains in vivid terms the significance of following God in a life of Christian perfection saying that someone who does not know the way

⁸³⁰ K. HAGIN, *The Life of Obedience*, 8.

⁸³¹ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 16.

⁸³² A. G. KEIDEL, “Contemplation and Following Christ in Gregory of Nyssa”, 851.

⁸³³ J. DANIELOU, *From Glory to Glory*, 57.

⁸³⁴ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 8), 259.

cannot complete his journey safely in any other way than by following behind his guide, and he who follows will not turn aside from the right way if he always keeps the back of his leader in view (LM II:252). In Gregory's apophatic tradition, the 'back of God' that Moses sees symbolizes God's manifestation to his creatures in his divine energies (grace), while he remains incomprehensible in his divine essence,⁸³⁵ and Moses who sees the back of God and follows him represents both the Incarnate God (Christ) who restored human nature through his life of obedience, and the soul that has regained the primordial vocation of Adam in Christ. For the Nyssen, Christ is Christians' model and teacher in the spiritual ascent because "the Lord (pre-incarnate Christ) who spoke to Moses came to fulfil his own law" (LM II:251), and in his humanity he lived a life of ready obedience and asked his disciples to "follow him" (Lk 9:23, 18:22; LM II:251). "Those who follow Christ see his back" (LM II:251) i.e., they are released from all earthly attachments and see only Christ before them. *Vita Consecrata* delineates the nature of *epektasis* in the consecrated life in these words: "The Son, who is the way which leads to the Father, calls all those whom the Father has given him to make the following of himself the whole purpose of their lives. ... he asks a total commitment, one which involves leaving everything behind in order to live at his side and to follow him wherever he goes" (VC 18). Obedience to God's will is accomplished by following directly behind Christ, which is, indeed, *epektasis*, i.e., a perpetual going beyond oneself in the direction of an ever more perfect God-likeness.

Living the vow of obedience as a constant following of Christ or *epektasis* helps a consecrated person realize and manifest the human nature as a mystery. Human beings, as created images of the uncreated God, are a mystery.⁸³⁶ The infinity and incomprehensibility of the divine nature reflects in them. Constant obedience to God through the Christification of the will enables them to grow infinitely in virtues, make their life ever new (a progressive metamorphosis) and be always on the way, like the bride in the *Song of Songs* (cf. Song 3:1-3), to God/Christ-likeness unravelling the incomprehensible potentialities hidden in them.

For Gregory, *epektasis* is life in Christ. In *The Life of Moses*, he likens Christ to Jacob's ladder which God set up on earth, with its top reaching to

⁸³⁵ Gregory exhorts us not to think of God's back in a literal fashion as God is incorporeal and incorruptible. Front and back pertain only to those things which are observed to have shape. Therefore, 'God's back' is to be understood in its spiritual sense. The Unknowable makes Himself known while remaining unknowable because he is not an idea, but a Person: cf. LM II:221-223.

⁸³⁶ Cf. *MMA*, (XI:3), 736.

heaven (Gen 28:12). One who sets his foot on this ladder will continually climb to the step above and never cease to rise higher because he always finds a step higher than the one he had attained (LM II:227). In the fifth homily on the Beatitudes, he points out that on the top of the ladder is God Himself.⁸³⁷ Thus, Christ is both the way and the goal. The centrality of Christ in one's *epektasis* is emphasized in *The Life of Moses* through presenting Christ as the *hand of God* (Ex 33:22) that shadows the one in the divine race, the *place with God* (Ex 33:21) for those who run the divine race, the *way* (Jn 14:6) of the course, the *rock* (Ex 33:21) to those who are well established, and the *hole in the rock or house* (Jn 14:2) to those who are resting (LM II:249). In Gregory's theology, by the gift and power of divine infinity, God shattered the boundaries of created finite humankind in Christ and so Christians can live a new Christian ethical and spiritual life of authentic freedom as a contemplative and ever-active life of *epektasis*: moving out of oneself toward ever greater loving desire for God and love of neighbour.⁸³⁸ Following Christ or obedience to him is the authentic 'freedom' of man, which is the chief attribute of the human as God's image according to Gregory.

Epektasis is not a mission accomplished. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory points out that since human perfection consists in the participation in the infinite God, perfection is not marked off by limits (LM I:8). Virtue is God himself, and so "there is no stopping place in the racecourse of virtue" (LM I:5). He defines perfection as the continual development of life to what is better (LM II:306). Identifying perfection with the idea of rest is alien to the Cappadocian. Christian perfection is an unending journey in the course of virtue, and this perfection is bound to obedience because Christ said, *If anyone wants to be a follower of mine* and not *If anyone wants to go before me* (LM II:251). In following Christ, Christians are ever unsatisfied in their desire for more of God (LM II:230, 239), and never think that they have finished their journey towards perfection; they are always on the way. In the treatise, the Nyssen describes Moses' death (Deut 34:1-8) as a 'living death' which is not followed by the grave (LM II:314). It can mean that the soul's ascent toward perfection continues even after death. Salvation will not be an achieved repose. For an authentic Christian, death does not exist. He casts himself into the risen Christ who is infinite. Moses' death on the brink of the promised land also indicates that he has reached his goal (God) and yet he

⁸³⁷ *HBeat*, (Homily V), 57.

⁸³⁸ D. TRACY, "God as Infinite: Ethical Implications", in M. RENAUD – J. DANIEL (eds.), *God and the Moral Life*, 141.

will never quite be there.⁸³⁹ Gregory's notion of perfection implies a positive idea of the process of change and differs from the Platonic concept of change as a defect.⁸⁴⁰ According to Gregory, human mutability enables us to make constant progress, but God's transcendence can never be grasped. The vocation to the consecrated life is a mission to become a Christian who grows, to be always on the path to holiness. The Christification of the will is their full union with the unchanging human will of Christ. But this union is not a static union: it continues to be a place of perpetual growth – *epektasis*. In *epektasis*, they neither measure their spiritual progress nor compare their progress with that of others, but “forgets what lies behind and strains forward to what lies ahead” (cf. Phil 3:13), always considering themselves just beginners. Gregory works out his doctrine of *theosis* as *epektasis*: *theosis*, the transforming encounter with God, is not just a static mystical union with God, but a journey unceasingly through God or a constant becoming in God's infinity.

However, *Epektasis* is not perfectionism. In psychology, perfectionism is described as a person's tendency to value and pursue excellence, to set and adhere rigidly to extremely high standards, and to examine outcomes in a highly judgmental and critical fashion.⁸⁴¹ In other words, it is the fixing of highly demanding self-imposed standards of excellence, and the emotional conviction that perfection is the route to personal acceptability. Perfectionism is characterised by the utopian views of human ability (egoism) and the

⁸³⁹ A. CONWAY-JONES, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in Its Jewish and Christian Contexts*, 28.

⁸⁴⁰ J. DANIELOU, *From Glory to Glory*, 47. According to Danielou, Gregory's notion of perfection is a most important contribution to the Christian theology of man. For the Platonist, change is a defect; and the intelligible world is superior to the world of the senses insofar as it is immutable. But change is essential to man's nature; it is that which distinguishes him from God. Gregory had to destroy the equation: good = immutability, and evil = change. He showed the possibility of a type of change which would not merely be a return to immobility, but a progressive perpetual ascent toward the Good. The soul can also have a downward change for ill; cf. *SRe*, 248. The Nyssen says that the soul is always unstable.

⁸⁴¹ Cf. B. THANNICKAL, “Perfectionism in Religious Living: Some Psychological Considerations”, in *Sanyasa: Journal of Consecrated Life*, VII/1 (2012), 81. The dangers of the consecrated life always have been exclusivism and perfectionism, the creation of a “little Church for the perfect” within the Church, based on a dualistic view of the world (sacred and profane) and a contempt for the sacramental understanding of creation exercised by those outside its rank: cf. B. WARD, “Monastic Spirituality, Monasticism”, in G. S. WAKEFIELD (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 268.

tendency to ignore divine grace.⁸⁴² For the Nyssen, to be fully human is to be in an infinite state of becoming without ever being the best. Humility is one of the main characteristics of his view of perfection: Christians do not think that they are better than others.⁸⁴³ According to him, Christ's injunction, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48), does not demand some sort of self-achieved perfectionism apart from God's grace. On the other hand, Christ wants that Christians commit themselves to live as God's true children, seeking his holiness, to call him our Father.⁸⁴⁴ Perfection comes from God who alone is perfect; to think perfection can be achieved on one's own is an unrealistic delusion. Gregory is not for extremely high standards because one can never attain perfect likeness to God. He does not ask Christians to cross the creature-Creator divide, but to have attained a semblance of God's holiness through an abiding participation in the divine nature that transcends worldly passion and flux.⁸⁴⁵ Their heart should be settled in its love of God rather than tossed by the caprice of passion. According to him, Christians are to imitate those virtues of Christ that they are able to imitate, and reverence and worship those virtues which their nature does not approximate by imitation.⁸⁴⁶ In Christ we become perfect, not on our own terms, but as God intends us to be. Constant obedience to God's will, in Christ, is the antidote to perfectionism as it is a life of participation in divine virtues. Perfectionism is not a virtue, but reveals an obvious or hidden form of egotism which says, "My will, not your will, be done." Since perfectionists

⁸⁴² R. L. SHELTON, "Perfection, Perfectionism", in W. A. ELWELL (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 906.

⁸⁴³ Cf. *LSM*, 167. Gregory writes, "Basil, when he came home from school where he had had practice in rhetoric for a long time, was excessively puffed up by his rhetorical abilities ... and considered himself better than the leading men in the district, but Macrina took him over and lured him so quickly to the goal of philosophy... providing for himself, through his complete poverty, a mode of living that would, without impediment, lead to virtue."

⁸⁴⁴ Cf. *HOF*, (Homily 2), 126; cf. *WIMCOC*, 87. Gregory says, "It does not seem to me that the Gospel is speaking of the firmament of heaven as some remote habitation of God when it advises us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, because the divine is equally present (everywhere) ... (Therefore,) not being separated by choice from God is the same as living in heaven." Christian perfection consists in representing God who is already always near.

⁸⁴⁵ In the last stage of the ascent, Moses does not attain the divine essence. There is no ontological fusing that swallows differences. But his continuous participation in God displays something of God: his face reflects God's glory. Here Moses stands for the ontological transformation of the soul into God's image: cf. M. MOTIA, *Imitations of Infinity*, 167-168.

⁸⁴⁶ *Perf*, 99.

rely on their own plans, choices and efforts, perfectionism is an enemy of obedience.

4.2 Dimensions of the Ascent in Obedience

In the Eastern spiritual tradition, *theosis* (deification) is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as possible.⁸⁴⁷ In *The Life of Moses*, the last stage of Moses' spiritual ascent, the theophany of God's back, invites him to an unending union with God in obedience that leads to the progressive participation in divine attributes and the transformation of the person. Moses, who ascended the mount of divine encounter as a mere man, descended with the commandments of God in his hands and the glory of God in his face. Moses prefigures a Christified person or a deified person in Christ. *Vita Consecrata* exhorts consecrated persons to acquire the above said state of spiritual ascent, when it says that those who by the power of the Holy Spirit are led progressively into full configuration to Christ reflect in themselves a ray of the unapproachable light (VC 19). For the Nyssen, *theosis* is not simply an intellectual pursuit, but rather a lifestyle that affects every facet of one's daily life. Union through obedience does not petrify the person, but makes the person unite dynamically not only with God but also with people. As *Vita Consecrata* points out, the first duty of the consecrated life is to make visible the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called, and consecrated persons bear witness to these marvels not so much in words as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world (VC 20). Union with God through obedience leads to an integral transformation of consecrated persons, and it manifests and strengthens the different dimensions of their Christian life. We shall look into these different dimensions based on the life of obedient Moses interpreted by the Nyssen.

4.2.1 Trinitarian Dimension: To the Father

The "royal highway" (LM II:287) of human deification, according to the spiritual writers of the East, is the way through the Son in the Spirit to the Father. The Son, who assumed humanity and thereby became the meeting point of God and man, invites each person to put on him (Christify) and become in him, by the grace of the Spirit, a son or a daughter in filial relationship to the Father. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen presents Moses' standing in the cleft of the rock (Christ) also as his simultaneous movement

⁸⁴⁷ N. RUSSEL, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 1.

toward God (LM II:244). He puts forward the paradox of stability and movement (mobile stability and stable mobility): if the soul is in Christ, it will be stable and rise upward. Even though, for Gregory, Christ himself is the God whom Moses is asked to follow (because there is only one God and Christ is God), we can understand Moses' following God as his obedience to God the Father with whom Christ is one in essence and will. According to Gregory, "God is called the Father because He has begotten the Son and is without an originating cause,"⁸⁴⁸ and "the one truly Father is always Father, from the beginning,"⁸⁴⁹ i.e., there never was a time when the Son was not – the Son is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. Therefore, we can say that 'filiality is the eternal nature of relationship' of the second Person of the Trinity (the Son) with the first Person of the Trinity (the Father). In the Trinity, the love of the Son as an eternal response to the Father's eternal love brings about a single divine will. Behind Christ's human obedience to the Father lies this eternal response of the Son to the Father's love⁸⁵⁰ – love that holds no place for subordination. Since this obedience springs from his most intimate relationship with the Father, his obedience is *eupeitheia* (ready obedience).

We can see that in the finite realm, i.e., in the world where we live in, the personality and the freedom of each human being tend to cause division and there exists a tendency to suppress both in order to bring about unity. But in the unity of the Trinity the personality and the freedom of each Divine Person are not lost in their most intense union of love that unites them in one common will. The vow of obedience of consecrated persons, in a special way, invites them to respond to the love of the Father and be united to him without losing their personality and freedom. *Vita Consecrata* specifies this fact in these words:

Obedience, practised in imitation of Christ, whose food was to do the Father's will (Jn 4:34), shows the liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial, marked by a deep sense of responsibility and animated by mutual trust, which is a reflection in history of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons (VC 21).

Even though human beings have only one common nature, each one has his/her own personality and freedom, as one body has different members with different functions. When each Christian lives his/her personality in

⁸⁴⁸ *CE I*, (XXXVIII:580), 176.

⁸⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, (XXXVIII:591-592), 178.

⁸⁵⁰ J. D. ZIZIOLAS, *Communion and Otherness*, 138.

freedom obeying God's will, he/she is building up the Body of Christ, the Church, where there exists unity in diversity. Now let us see in detail the different characteristics of the trinitarian dimension of the vow of obedience as an ascent to the Father.

4.2.1.1 Children of God in Christ

According to Gregory, obedience is the mode of being itself of the Son. In obedience, the eternal Son is the 'Image of the eternal Father' because like a mirror that possesses by reflecting without any defect the image of the person who looks in, the Son makes all that is of the Father, including the will, his own:

... when one looks in a mirror, the image will reflect in every aspect the original object, so that the figure looking in is the cause of the figure in the mirror, and the image neither moves nor bends by itself, unless the original initiates the movement or inclination; only if the first figure moves, then of course the reflection in the mirror also moves with it. In just the same way, we would say, the "Image of the unseen God," the Lord, is disposed immediately and directly like the Father in every movement. The Father wills something, and the Son who is in the Father has the Father's will – or rather becomes himself the Father's will. He who has in himself all that is the Father's – there is nothing of the Father's he has not. If indeed he has in himself all that belongs to the Father, or rather the Father himself, then surely with the Father and all that the Father has, he also has in himself the whole will of the Father.⁸⁵¹

Making of himself the will of the Father is properly the being of the Son. But it does not mean that the Son is subordinate to the Father because in God there is no domination of superior on inferior; obedience is identical to liberty, total self-gift is identical to total self-possession.⁸⁵² The Son gives himself to the Father who gives himself to the Son. The obedience of the Son is active and is his perfect conformity to the Father's being without excluding personal distinction. The Son becomes the will of the Father, and both the Father and the Son have a unique action. We can say that, for Gregory, the Son is absolutely obedient to the Father, and absolutely united to him so much so that there is only one will. However, divine obedience of Christ – the Son's eternal 'yes' – is different from his human obedience – the Son's historical

⁸⁵¹ *CE II*, (V:215-216), 106.

⁸⁵² G. MASPERO, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa's 'Ad Ablabium'*, 65.

‘yes’ – with which he became a servant. It is through obedience in his human nature that “Christ made himself *again* an image of God because of his love for man,”⁸⁵³ and, in St Paul’s words, became “Image of the invisible God and the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15).

Man’s creation in the image of God denotes his intrinsic vocation to live in obedience to God’s will and participate in the divine perfections. Since the difference of nature between God and man – the Uncreated nature and the created nature – had already existed from the beginning of man, what Adam’s disobedience brought anew was the division or separation between God and man, between the Uncreated nature and the created nature. But in God-Incarnate the division between God and humankind came to naught again. In order to save humankind, the Son of God made himself “again an image of God” and became “the firstborn of all creation.”⁸⁵⁴ According to Gregory, unity with God and sinlessness are interrelated. To be sinless is to be united to God; to be united to God is to be sinless. Christ’s humanity was sinless because it was in union with God. Through his perfect submission and obedience to the Father’s will (the divine will), Christ fulfilled in himself the vocation of Adam and manifested the image of God through his life of virtues. Christ is obedience itself – the ‘Eternal Obedience’ became for man an image of God and presented himself as obedience to the Father’s will.

From Christ we can learn that to be a son or a daughter of God means to be obedient to God’s will. The soul that is unstable with the fall finds its stability in Christ through the Christification of the will, and in Christ man’s obedience to God’s will is not extrinsic obedience hoping reward (heaven) or fearing punishment (hell), but reaches to the being itself. In Christ every man can be one with the Father, and the love of the Father for men is not distinct from that of the Father for the Son,⁸⁵⁵ i.e., in Christ human beings are ‘sons

⁸⁵³ *Perf*, 110.

⁸⁵⁴ For Gregory, Christ the ‘Only-begotten’ is the pre-temporal or pre-incarnate One, and Christ ‘the firstborn of creation’ is the manifestation of the pre-temporal One in the flesh. When the original creation of man (Adam, humanity) through disobedience severed from God, and though being the children of God became attached to an evil father falsely so called, another new creation was wrought in Christ. Hence, Christ became the firstborn of this new creation of men. Christ assumed ‘the first-fruits of all human nature’ (all men and women in original purity) and presented all humanity (first-fruits) to God the Father in obedience. Thus, through the work of the firstborn of all creation, true God and Father became again God and Father of all men. Gregory does not use the phrase “the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15-17) to denote the pre-Incarnate or pre-existent Christ because in that sense the phrase has a smack of Arianism which treats the Son as a creature: cf. *CE III*, (II:55), 82.

⁸⁵⁵ G. MASPERO, *Trinity and Man*, 190.

in the Son' (Gal 3:26, 28; 2 Cor 6:18). In the second chapter, we saw celibate chastity (virginity) as angelic life. But the ascent of the soul in obedience to God's will leads it even higher than the angels.⁸⁵⁶ For the Nyssen, the Christian mystery is the exaltation of humanity above the sphere of the angels, i.e., participating in Christ's obedience, human beings will become children of God.⁸⁵⁷ In *The Life of Moses*, Moses who follows behind God standing on the rock is a symbol of the soul that leads a life of obedience in Christ having attained complete separation from evil through "self-control."⁸⁵⁸ Obedience vouchsafes likeness to God because children resemble their parents (cf. Jn 8:42-45).

Through the vow of obedience consecrated persons strive to become 'perfect' children of God. They practise this obedience not as slaves but as people who are free and elevated to the highest dignity that human beings can dream of – children of God in Christ. They give witness to the fact that "every person may become of his/her free will that which Adam refused to become, on the one hand a creature of God by nature, and on the other a son or daughter of God."⁸⁵⁹ According to the Nyssen, only irrational beasts can be slaves, and man can never be a slave because his (the soul's) worth exceeds the worth of the whole earth (Mt 16:26).⁸⁶⁰ Seeking God's will means seeking a friendly, benevolent will that wants our fulfilment, that desires above all the free response of love to his love, to become instruments of divine love.⁸⁶¹

⁸⁵⁶ Cf. J. DANIELOU, *The Angels and Their Mission According to the Fathers of the Church*, trans. D. Heimann, 84.

⁸⁵⁷ Cf. *HOF*, (Homily II), 125-127. For Gregory, children of God are those who have acquired likeness to God, and likeness to God, i.e., becoming just, holy, good and the like, is tantamount to flight from evils. It is in Christ that human beings acquire likeness to God by choosing good, and become children of God. In order to accentuate his teaching, the Nyssen quotes Jn 1:12, "To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God." Like the prodigal son (Lk 15) who turned back to the father's house, and was clothed again with the initial robe – the robe of likeness to the father's son – stripped off through disobedience, Christians can return to the heavenly Father and call him "Our Father" having acquired likeness to God through participating in Christ's obedience.

⁸⁵⁸ According to Gregory of Nyssa, all evil naturally operates in a deficiency of or an excess of virtue (*LM* II:288). In the fourth homily on the Our Father, when he comments on 'Your will be done', he says that 'salvation of human beings is the will of God' and 'self-control is the will of God' (*HOF*, Homily IV, 137, 139). Self-control cures the illness of the soul through the restoration of the elements thrown out of balance to their proper and natural state (*HOF*, Homily IV, 136). The Nyssen presents the prayer for daily bread as the prayer for the ephemeral (Greek, *ephemeros* – 'daily' or 'lasting but a day') bread and exhorts, "Stop at what you need" (*HOF*, Homily IV, 140-142).

⁸⁵⁹ P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ*, 84.

⁸⁶⁰ *HEccl*, (Homily 4), 74.

⁸⁶¹ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 39.

Therefore, obedience of consecrated persons has the nature of *eupeitheia*. Jesus, by his obedience, participated in the unlimited power of the Father in favour of humanity. His obedience arose in his experience of loving intimacy and union with the Father and differed from the Hebrew tradition of obedience to the law. Obedience lets consecrated men and women follow Jesus in his obedience to the Father and docility to the Spirit in freedom, and be strengthened by divine power in their mission.

R. Garcia Paredes presents the life of obedience of consecrated persons as their participation in the intra-trinitarian relationship of “Perichoresis”⁸⁶²: “Obedience is perichoresis. It is mutual back and forth. We listen to God and God hears us. We obey God and He obeys us. Obedience must be understood as an alliance of mutual love, of mutual listening.”⁸⁶³ He places obedience in the ambience of perichoretic love. Perichoresis denotes the interpenetration or mutual indwelling, without any coalescence or commingling, of the three divine Persons in the Trinity through the absolute self-offering of the one to the other in a relationship of perichoretic love or reciprocal self-giving love. The immediate result of this interpenetration is that the three persons know each other perfectly, having the same knowledge, the same will, and the same work.⁸⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa notes that Christ invites the soul that thirsts and hungers for divine presence into the trinitarian perichoretic love – “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (Jn 14:23).⁸⁶⁵ The soul continually falls in love with God (perichoresis) through participating in the Son’s offering of himself completely, willingly and out of love, in total

⁸⁶² The term Perichoresis is originally a Stoic one meaning “interpenetration.” In Greek, *perichoreo* means to “make room,” to “go or revolve around.” The first Church Father to employ this term in a theological sense was Gregory of Nazianzus, a Cappadocian. He used this term to denote the union of the two natures in Christ in a hypostatic union. The first author who used this term in a Trinitarian sense was Pseudo-Cyril, sometimes between 657 and 681. Later, John of Damascus made it a classical one as he referred to this term as interpenetration of the divine Persons. Gregory of Nyssa does not use the noun perichoresis in his writings; he employs its verb form. The basis of the doctrine of Perichoresis lies in Christ’s declaration about the co-inhabitation between him and the Father (“I and the Father are one,” Jn 10:30; “I am in the Father and the Father is in Me,” Jn 14:11) which indicates a relation of consubstantiality (homoousion) of the trinitarian persons: cf. M. TELEA, “The Use of the Term Perichoresis in the Trinitarian Dogma According to St Gregory of Nyssa”, in N. DUMITRASCU (ed.), *The Ecumenical Legacy of the Cappadocians*, 235-246; cf. T. DAMIAN, “Perichoresis”, in *The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 444.

⁸⁶³ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 40.

⁸⁶⁴ M. TELEA, “The Use of the Term Perichoresis in the Trinitarian Dogma According to St Gregory of Nyssa”, 242.

⁸⁶⁵ *HBeat*, (Homily IV), 56.

obedience to the Father. At the end of *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen expresses beautifully the perfection Moses achieved through the above said perichoretic-alliance (mutual give-and-take) with God:

What more trustworthy witness of the fact that Moses did attain the perfection which was possible would be found than the divine voice which said to him: *I have known you more than all others?* (Ex 33:17). It is also shown in the fact that he is named the “friend of God” (Ex 33:11) by God himself, and by preferring to perish with all the rest if the Divine One did not through his good will forgive their errors, he stayed God’s wrath against the Israelites (Ex 32:31-32). God averted judgment so as not to grieve his friend. All such things are a clear testimony and demonstration of the fact that the life of Moses did ascend the highest mount of perfection (LM II:319).

Through his obedience, Moses has actually participated in the relation Christ has with the Father. Consecrated persons can also attain this perfection imitating Moses who, in fact, imitated Christ. Christ is the ultimate criterion of human conduct. Through imitating Christ’s obedience, consecrated men and women can satisfy the Father-heart of God and become signs of the obedience of Christ.

4.2.1.2 Unity of Wills and Community Life

Gregory of Nyssa, when he speaks on the Trinity, presents God as one but a community of Persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In *Against Eunomius I*, he likens the Holy Trinity to the sun: the Father is the unbegotten Sun, the Son is like the ray coexisting with the Sun or a second Sun shining out together with and from the unbegotten Sun (the Father), and the Holy Spirit is like the third Light shining through the ray or the begotten Sun (the Son) and is sundered by no interval of time from the ray (the Son) and has the cause of its existence in the unbegotten Sun (the Father).⁸⁶⁶ In the Trinity there are three Lights (Suns). One Light does not differ from another merely because it is another, when it appears in no way lacking or defective in illuminating grace.⁸⁶⁷ It means that in the Trinity none of the Persons is insignificant or smaller than any of the other Two. But there is a perfect order

⁸⁶⁶ *CE I*, (XXXVI:532-533), 168-169; cf. EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *The Hymns on Faith*, (Hymn 40), trans. J. T. Wickes, 225-228. In Ephrem’s hymn on the Trinity, he symbolizes the Father as the sun, the Son as the light and the Holy Spirit as the heat.

⁸⁶⁷ *CE I*, (XXXVI:534), 169.

in the Trinity: “from the Father through the Son we arrive at the Spirit.”⁸⁶⁸ God is one because the three Divine Persons are united in one nature and will. The Trinity is the perfection of community life. All the members of the Divine Community, though really distinct Persons, share in the one divine will, and it guarantees the perfect unity in the Community. The religious community is a communion of consecrated persons who profess to seek together and carry out God’s will.⁸⁶⁹ The community life of consecrated persons is to be a resplendent reflection of God’s community life.

In human societies, where there is a plurality of individual will, the only way in which unity can be achieved and maintained is by means of obedience.⁸⁷⁰ Only when the wills of all the members of a religious community are perfectly conformed to the will of the superior, can they be perfectly united among themselves and thereby become a sign and a symbol of the community life of the most blessed Trinity to the world. In *The Life of Moses*, the people of Israel journey as a community of God or God’s people, when all of them agree to the will of Moses who, indeed, follows the will of God. The Egyptians who agreed with their leader Pharoah (LM I:25), who did not follow the will of God, could not become God’s people. Obedience to the superior who follows God is that which makes consecrated persons God’s people: at the sight of the disobedience of the Hebrew’s golden calf idolatry, Moses, the Lawgiver, proclaims to all, “If any man be on the Lord’s side, let him join with me” (LM II:207). Through obedience consecrated men and women are able to lead a heavenly life on earth. Gregory writes, “Not being separated by choice from God is the same as living in heaven. . . . a heavenly sojourn is easy for anyone who wants it even on earth. One achieves heaven not through a change of place but through choice.”⁸⁷¹ Consecrated persons are virgins united to Christ in spiritual marriage. Mullahy observes that in ordinary human marriages most of the divorces are caused by the lack of union of wills, and lack of union of wills through obedience is also the reason for the failure of religious life.⁸⁷² The rupture with the superior who follows God’s will blocks one’s intimacy with Christ.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid., (XXXVI:532), 168.

⁸⁶⁹ SAO 1.

⁸⁷⁰ AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 50.

⁸⁷¹ WIMCOC, 88.

⁸⁷² AA. VV., *The Vows and Perfection*, 54.

4.2.1.3 *Delegation of Authority*

A type of obedience which crushes out all initiative, which reduces the subject almost to the status of a mechanical automation, which prevents the subject from growing and becoming a mature person, is anything but Godlike.⁸⁷³ In the Trinity, the Father is unbegotten and is not from some superior cause. The Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. But the Father is not an authoritarian enforcing strict obedience at the expense of personal freedom. In the Trinity each of the Divine Persons has his personal characteristics. According to Gregory, it is the Father who is the source, it is the Son who became the Mediator between God and man, and it is the Holy Spirit who is the principle of unity in the Trinity and who unites man to God. In the Trinity none of the Persons is insignificant. The common nature and will make every movement of the Persons an act of one God. The mystery of the Trinity reflects in the created universe. The one divine will rules and governs the entire universe of created things. However, God, who is Love, loves to communicate his goodness to others and make them participants in his governing power. He governs the created world through many intermediaries because he wants others not to be merely governed and ruled, but governors and rulers in their own right.

The word ‘authority’ derives from the Latin root *augere* which means ‘to increase, promote, or advance.’ The purpose of authority is to help others to grow. Obedience should not deprive a person of his or her personal dignity that is nothing but his and her right to grow in the likeness of Christ. The obedience of Christ was, above all, obedience in mission. Jesus fulfilled his mission in freedom assuming responsibility for each of his actions ‘without being forced’ (Jn 10:18) because his obedience was a response to his Father’s love. The Church is a prolongation of the obedient Christ because “she is missionary by her very nature”⁸⁷⁴ and is called to fulfil her mission in freedom, and exhaust her potentialities. Each Christian, according to the talents he/she has received from the Lord, manifests a particular aspect of Christ’s life through the mission he/she is called to fulfil. Since self-realization and actualization of one’s natural powers (talents) are different

⁸⁷³ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁷⁴ AG 2; cf. EG 20. Pope Francis reminds the Christians of their missionary mandate which is, in fact, a delegation of divine authority: “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that *the Lord points out*, but all of us are asked to *obey his call* to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel.”

from person to person, Christians' divinization through participation in Christ's mission varies from person to person:

There are many ways in which God comes within those who are worthy of him. *He comes to be in each individual in a way that corresponds with that person's power and worthiness.* One becomes God's *place*, another his *house*, another his *throne*, another his *foot stool*. There is one who even becomes his *chariot* or the *docile steed* that receives the good rider on its back and finishes its course in obedience to what seems good to the one who guides it. ... there is also one who becomes his *palanquin*.⁸⁷⁵

Difference in God-given talents, self-realization, and self-actualization in fidelity to God's will save Christian perfection from being monolithic and monotonous (cf. Mt 25:14-30). The responsibility that is assigned to a consecrated person is a mission and a delegation of authority, and it leads him/her to divinization through revealing Christ in the above said manner. In order to be a virtue, the mission is to be exercised in freedom, and freedom, in turn, safeguards one's personal dignity. It is unbecoming for the superior of a religious community to demand obedience, like Pharaoh, to his/her self-will suppressing the personal dignity and self-actualization of others. And it is impossible for a religious to live the vow of obedience without ready obedience to the superior who, like Moses, follows God and communicates God's paternal love to him/her.

In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen presents Moses as a leader who received authority from God and delegated his authority to others. Moses empowered the people who were languishing under Pharaoh in Egypt and made them, who were feeble, capable of fighting and winning against their enemies in his absence: "While Joshua, who was to succeed Moses in leading the people, led the army out against the Amalekites (Ex 17:8-13), Moses, standing on a hilltop away from the furore of battle, was looking up toward heaven with a friend stationed on either side of him" (LM I:39). Here Moses is a model for all who hold leadership in the Church. Authority in Christianity is a participation in the nature of the authority exercised by God-Incarnate on earth: Lk 9: 1-2, "Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." It is because of his goodness that God shares his authority. Delegation of authority is part of the communication of goodness, and it calls for a response of 'obedience in love' – ready obedience or *eupitheia*. In a community of consecrated persons, if the

⁸⁷⁵ *HSong*, (Homily 7), 219.

personal wills of all the members are united, every personal mission of the members will become the mission of the one community, and thereby a reflection of the Trinity.

4.2.2 Sacramental Dimension: Eucharist

In Gregory of Nyssa, one's obedience to God's will, and the eating and drinking of the Lord's Body and Blood are closely connected: both of them signify union with God. In *The Life of Moses*, he mentions that the miracle of the Manna (a symbol of the Eucharist) occurred in the life of the Hebrews, when they had no more of the foreign food, when the supplies from Egypt ran completely out (LM II:137). It means that the Hebrews were provided with heavenly food, when they were fully purified of everything foreign to human nature, i.e., in the absence of sin: "We learn by what purifications one should purify himself of Egypt and the foreign life so that he empties the sack of his soul of all evil nourishment prepared by the Egyptians. In this way he receives in himself with his pure soul the food which comes down from above, ..." (LM II:138). Alienation from evil is both the obedience to God and the qualification to partake of the Lord's Body. The relation between obedience and Eucharist is well established in Gregory's tenth homily on the *Song of Songs* in which he deals with Song 5:1, "You who are close to me, eat! And you, my brethren, drink and be drunken!" He interprets these words of the Bridegroom as an invitation extended to 'those who do his will,' and thereby are his brothers and sisters (cf. Mk 3:35) to participate in the Eucharistic food and drink.⁸⁷⁶ The vow of obedience helps consecrated persons participate in the mystery of the Eucharist as an ascent to 'union with' and 'total offering to' God.

4.2.2.1 Union

The thirty-seventh Catechetical Oration of the Nyssen is dedicated to speak about the mystery of the Eucharist.⁸⁷⁷ According to him, man is

⁸⁷⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 10), 327.

⁸⁷⁷ *COr*, (XXXVII), 952-955. In this oration, he presents the Eucharist as the antidote to the poison of the forbidden fruit. We can summarize his teachings as follows: The forbidden fruit dissolved human nature: the soul was ruled by the body rather than the other way around and in the end, death separated the soul and the body; human beings who were persons turned to be individuals; and the separation from God led to spiritual death. According to the Cappadocian, the Eucharist is the mystery of union. Human body can become immortal only by participating in incorruption through its fellowship with the

composed of the soul and the body. Therefore, both are to be united to Christ. The soul is fused into Christ through faith (which culminates in the Christification of the will), and the body through the Eucharist. By the mystery of the Eucharist, Christ blends himself with the bodies of believers and makes them sharers in incorruption and, at the same time, deified. By eating the Eucharist, Christians are re-enacting Christ's own Incarnate existence on this earth: they eat Christ's Body and become Christ. We become what we eat.⁸⁷⁸ The vow of obedience, as union with God, is incomplete, if consecrated persons fail to live the mystery of the Eucharist.

Norman Russell sums up the Nyssen's teachings on the Eucharist: "The humanity that was deified was the flesh of Christ. But that flesh is the same flesh that believers receive in communion. The Eucharist thus enables them to participate in the deifying effect of the Incarnation."⁸⁷⁹ The vow of obedience, as alienation from all that is evil through the union of will with God's will, makes consecrated men and women "brothers and sisters of Christ whom he finds worthy, and calls to partake of his body and blood" and be united to him in the soul and the body, which is nothing other than *theosis* or deification. Christification of the will safeguards the purity of the body as the

immortal Body, the Eucharist. One Body that is portioned to so many myriads of the faithful throughout the whole world, enters through that portion, whole into each individual, and yet remains whole in itself. Human body is, in fact, bread, and human blood is, in fact, water because the food that human beings eat is changed into their body and the water they drink is changed into their blood. Christ, when he became man, also ate food and drank water (sweetened with wine) and changed them into his body and blood. Since his humanity was united to his Divinity, his body and blood (the food and the drink he took) were transmuted to the dignity of Godhead. In Christ who lived as a man on earth, bread and wine were changed into the body and the blood of God because of the indwelling of God the Word. This mystery is repeated in the Eucharist. As the bread Christ took was changed into the Body of God because of his union with God, now also the bread which is consecrated by the Word of God is changed into the Body of God the Word. The sanctification of the elements (bread and wine) in the Eucharist runs parallel to the sanctification of Christ's body in the Incarnation. Union with God makes them God's Body.

⁸⁷⁸ *COr*, (XXXVII), 954-955. When we dealt with the Christification of the will, we saw the primacy of 'thought' in Gregory's teachings. According to Gregory words and actions spring from thoughts, and a person must always match his or her thoughts, words and actions with that of Christ in order to remain worthy to have the name 'Christian.' Since virtuous thoughts lead us to conformity with Christ, we can also say that 'we are what we think.' In connection with the body, 'we are what we eat' and in connection with the soul, 'we are what we think.' The body and the soul affect each other. The soul's ascent in obedience to God's will makes the body worthy of ascent through the reception of the Eucharist. The body's passionate inclinations to material pleasures drag the soul down; cf. *HEccl*, (Homily 8), 132. Gregory writes that the reason why the one who eternally is offers himself to us to eat, is that taking him into ourselves we may become that which he is.

⁸⁷⁹ N. RUSSELL, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 228.

body is the reflection of the soul or “mirror of the mirror,” and makes the body fit to be united to the body of Christ. Moreover, as T. Merton notes, Eucharist is a sign of fraternal unity, and the Eucharistic concept of obedience lies also in the fact that the obedience of love is a sign and a principle of living unity in Christ, and a way of returning to the Father in and with the loving obedience of Christ.⁸⁸⁰ Eucharist demands active and intelligent participation of Christians in a common act of worship to be united with the one Church, the Body of Christ. Likewise, obedience demands active and intelligent participation in the obedience of Christ to be united with God.

4.2.2.2 Total Offering

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory says that the miracle of the Manna teaches in anticipation the mystery of the Virgin (LM II:139). He says this because the corporeal and edible Manna was found on the ‘uncultivated’ (virgin) earth. This miracle points to the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mother. Christ’s birth on earth was preceded by the total ‘yes’ of the Blessed Virgin Mary to God’s will. Her union with God, by becoming the first ‘tabernacle,’⁸⁸¹ is resulted from this total ‘yes’ to God’s will. As we have already seen in the second chapter, Mary is the crown and culmination of Old Testament sanctity and offers herself as a pure dwelling place to God. In Mary’s positive and creative response of ‘yes’ to God’s initiative, we see human liberty freely directed to its true end in God. Her obedience is an anticipated participation in the obedience of Christ.⁸⁸² It was the ‘yes’ of the Son (“I come to do your will” – Ps 40:7-8) which made possible the ‘yes’ of the Mother. Mary meditated on the Son hidden in the Old Testament and participated anticipatedly in his obedience when he would be in human form. Her spirituality was the radical renunciation of any special spirituality other than the overshadowing of the Most High and the indwelling of the divine Word.⁸⁸³ God accepted Mary’s radical offering of herself and blessed her with a deifying union with the Son of God who incarnated in her womb. Therefore,

⁸⁸⁰ T. MERTON, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 121.

⁸⁸¹ Cf. A. CONWAY-JONES, *Gregory of Nyssa’s Tabernacle Imagery in its Jewish and Christian Contexts*, 108. From the fifth century onwards, ‘tabernacle’ was used as a metaphor for the Virgin Mary. Gregory’s imagery of earthly tabernacle (a place of encounter between humanity and God) for Christ was not taken up by later Christian theologians as this imagery did not show clearly the distinction between the human and divine natures of Christ.

⁸⁸² A. NICHOLAS, *Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide through Balthasar’s Theology beyond the Trilogy*, 233.

⁸⁸³ H. V. BALTHASAR, *The Word Made Flesh: Exploration in Theology 1*, 218.

the Incarnation was also Mary's anticipated participation in the Eucharistic mystery – union with God and *theosis*. Like Mary, consecrated men and women receive the gift of Christ or they give birth to Christ in their soul through their total 'yes' to God's will, i.e., they grow in virtue, and virtue is Christ himself, according to Gregory.

The union of the human will with God's will through obedience makes the consecrated life a perfect holocaust. There existed a difference between sacrifice and holocaust in ancient religions. In a sacrifice a part of the victim was immolated; but in a holocaust the entire offering was consumed. When man vow one thing to God, and does not vow another, he offers a sacrifice. When he offers his entire life, it is a holocaust.⁸⁸⁴ The vow of obedience is a holocaust in the sense that it is the immolation of one's own will.⁸⁸⁵ Therefore, obedience of consecrated persons differs from all other forms of obedience by its universality and totality – one offers oneself totally to God always and everywhere. Christ in his voluntary self-offering let himself be rivetted to the Cross with three nails, and consecrated persons 'participate in' and 'nail themselves to' Christ's total 'yes' to the Father's will, which is different from their own (cf. Is 55:8; Mk 14:36), with their three vows. In the Eastern Monastic Tradition, tonsure (Greek, *koura*; Latin, *tonsura* – “shearing or cropping of the hair”) symbolizes monk's and nun's total offering to God, a real break with their previous life. Tonsure denotes the abandonment of the world through the cutting of self-will, i.e., an offering to God from the very top of the body or the consecration of the mind (will) to God. Monastic tonsure is already well-established in Christian circles by the beginning of the fourth century.⁸⁸⁶ Here, it is also worth noting Gregory's interpretation of the

⁸⁸⁴ Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 47 (2a2ae. 183-189) The Pastoral and Religious Lives*, trans. J. Aumann, (2a2ae. 186,6), 125. See also *Ibid.*, (2a2ae. 184,8), 53; *Ibid.*, (2a2ae. 188,1), 181.

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, (2a2ae. 186,8), 133.

⁸⁸⁶ P. A. AYDIN, *The Syriac Order of Monastic Profession and the Order of Baptism*, 91. It is said that the shaving of the head was adopted by the monks because among the Greeks and Romans such a custom was a badge of slavery. Later, the custom of monastic tonsure passed over to the secular clergy: cf. *Tonsure*, in *Catholic Encyclopaedia* online, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14779a.htm>, 8 September 2022. The early practice – “tonsure of St. Paul” – was to shave the entire head; the Roman practice – “tonsure of St. Peter” – was to shave the top of the head, leaving a ring or crown of hair; the Celtic practice – “tonsure of St. John” – was to shave the front half of the head: cf. D. PATTE (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, 1241. St Benedict, in *The Rule*, warns about those monks who are loyal to the world by their actions and clearly lie to God by their tonsure: cf. T. FRY (ed.), *The Rule of St Benedict in English*, (1:7), 20. In the Latin Church, once, clerics also received the tonsure in imitation of the monks, for whom it was a symbol of complete consecration to God. The tonsure was abolished by Pope Paul VI through

praise for the bride's hair in the *Song of Songs* (Song 4:1): the hair of the bride (the soul) is praised because she, like the hair that has no sensation of pleasure or pain, is undisguisedly dead and unmoved with regards to the affairs of the world.⁸⁸⁷ Taking into account the Nyssen's teaching, we can say that the cropping of the virgin's hair symbolizes that he/she has decided not to conform to the world, but has transformed by the renewal of the mind to discern God's will (cf. Rom 12:2).

According to Gregory, those who imitate the nature of the hair are insensitive to the world (i.e., they are neither puffed up by worldly honours nor cowed down by pain) to the point of suffering martyrdom because of their faith in Christ, and thereby, as hair is women's glory (1 Cor 11:15), bring glory to the Church.⁸⁸⁸ In order to emphasize the voluntary nature of obedience, in the Byzantine monastic profession, only after the candidate has three times placed the scissors in the abbot's hand does the latter proceed to tonsure him.⁸⁸⁹ The day of final profession of a consecrated person can be considered as the day of his/her spiritual holocaust. This spiritual holocaust is an imitation of Christ who instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. According to the Nyssen, Christ had already offered himself and was dead, when he instituted the Eucharist:

He who controls all things by his lordly will does not wait for the necessity of the betrayal and the brigandish attack of the Jews and the illegal judgment of Pilate, so as to let their evil become the starting-point and cause of the general salvation of mankind, ... He offered himself, unseen by men, as an offering and sacrifice for us, he who is priest and at the same time "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). When did this happen? When he made his own body food and his blood drink for his company. For it is clear to everyone that a sheep could not be eaten by a man unless the slaughter had preceded the eating. He then, who gave his own body to the disciples as

Ministeria Quaedam – Apostolic Letter given Motu Proprio: On First Tonsure, Minor Orders, and the Sub-diaconate in 1972. In the Eastern tradition tonsure consists of the cutting of four locks of hair in a cruciform pattern. Orthodox monks traditionally never cut their hair or beards after receiving the monastic tonsure as a sign of the consecration of their lives to God – reminiscent of the Vow of the Nazirite. In the Latin rite, the wearing of skull cap or zucchetto by the Pope, cardinals etc. is a continuation of the tradition of the tonsure.

⁸⁸⁷ *HSong*, (Homily 7), 233; cf. *LM II*:183.

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, (Homily 15), 479.

⁸⁸⁹ K. WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, 143.

food, plainly indicates that the sacrifice of the lamb is already complete.⁸⁹⁰

The Nyssen is highlighting the voluntary aspect of Christ's death, and hence its sacrificial character.

Offering oneself totally to God and offering oneself totally to one's neighbour are two sides of the same coin. Consecrated persons have no other gifts to offer at the offertory of the Holy Mass, apart from renewing their total offering of self. Vatican Council II's *Lumen Gentium* connects the profession of vows to the offertory of the Mass stating that the profession of vows always takes place in a liturgical setting and the self-offering of the newly professed is always accompanied by the Eucharistic sacrifice (LG 45). In the Holy Mass, religious make their vow of obedience a participation in Christ's total offering to God and to 'the world for its life' (Jn 6:51). Living the vow of obedience as a total offering helps them embody the eucharistic life of Christians' ascent and descent with Christ.

Schemmann writes that since Christ has assumed all humanity and already offered all that is to be offered to God and nothing has been left unoffered (i.e., he offered the whole mankind in his humanity and the world through the food and drink he took and were changed into his body and blood), his Eucharist is the end of all sacrifices.⁸⁹¹ The Eucharist that Christ offered is continued in the Church. Bread and wine represents Christ and, with him, all mankind and the world. Since Christ is both the offering and the offeror, the faithful make their ascension to the Father (Trinity) as Christ, in Christ, with Christ and through Christ. All that is offered as Christ and in Christ is given back to man as the deified body of Christ, as gift of new life. At the end of the Eucharistic liturgy, the 'paradisical man' is sent back into the space and time of the world to carry out the mission of the Church, to bring the peace, love and joy of the Kingdom to the whole world. The Eucharistic symbol – the bread given, the blood shed – is the great symbol of donation. Likewise, consecrated persons' total donation of giving themselves to God and through God to others in obedience to God's will is the great symbol of the Kingdom in the world they live in. Their life is a prolongation of the Mass, an incorporation of themselves and all that they do into the mystery of the Eucharist in a very close and special way.⁸⁹² *Vita Consecrata* exhorts consecrated men and women to join the offering of themselves in the

⁸⁹⁰ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 39.

⁸⁹¹ A. SCHEMANN, *For the Life of the World*, 35.

⁸⁹² T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 192.

celebration of the Eucharist in communion with Christ who offers himself to the Father for the salvation of the whole world (VC 30), and the document accentuates that the purpose of the consecrated life is conformity to the Lord Jesus in his total self-offering (VC 65).

Life of obedience, as a total self-offering, is a “daily martyrdom” (daily *witness*), a “living holocaust.” Origen of Alexandria teaches that martyrdom can be both outward (martyrdom of blood) and inward (martyrdom of conscience/secret martyrdom).⁸⁹³ Kallistos Ware notes that Origen’s notion of secret martyrdom or martyrdom of conscience (cf. 2 Cor 1:12) is taken up and applied in fourth-century monasticism.⁸⁹⁴ In the pre-Constantine period Christian perfection was identified mainly with martyrdom, an imitation of obedient Christ. Later monasticism became a substitute for martyrdom. They dedicated their entire life to fulfil the will of God and joyously underwent all suffering that came on the way. Like true athletes, they constantly engaged in spiritual warfare against the enemies of the soul. It is a participation in Christ who in his Incarnation took a body so as to be able to meet the powers of evil on their own ground and defeat them.⁸⁹⁵ St Antony of the Desert “was a daily martyr to his conscience ever fighting the battles of the faith”⁸⁹⁶ by voluntarily subjecting himself to a daily mortification and self-denial in order to uphold the primacy of Christ in his life. Monks believed that abandoning their self-will is shedding their blood. The martyr in a persecution is called to make, once for all, a single, all-embracing sacrifice. The ‘martyr of conscience’ is called to make a lifelong self-giving, continually renewed; not one great sacrifice, but a multitude of small ones.⁸⁹⁷ Martyrs of conscience engage in an “inner warfare” against the enemies of the soul (demons) and “die to sin” regardless of the conditions and laws of human societies.

Gregory takes up the notion of secret martyrdom and illustrates the superior nature of obedience as a total offering pleasing to God using the

⁸⁹³ ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, (XXI), in R. A. GREER (trans.), *Origen – An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, 55. According to Origen, in secret martyrdom, a Christian utters the apostolic cry in 2 Cor 1:12, “Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony (martyrdom) of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity.” (In the second chapter, we saw ‘preparation for martyrdom’ as a part of the faith dimension of the vow of chastity).

⁸⁹⁴ K. WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, 122.

⁸⁹⁵ A. LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys*, 96.

⁸⁹⁶ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of Saint Antony*, (no.47), 60.

⁸⁹⁷ K. WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, 124.

example of the offerings of Abel and Cain in Gen 4:1-5.⁸⁹⁸ Abel offered the ‘firstlings’ of the flock with fear and trust; Cain offered the fruits of the earth, not the first fruits. The Nyssen identifies the ‘firstlings’ of the flock that Abel offered with the superior part (the first fruit) of the soul – ‘will’ –, and invites the Christians to imitate Abel. He notes that everything offered with fear and trust is pleasing to God, but not that which is lavish and without love. All Christians are obliged to give testimony to their faith with the martyrdom of conscience in their daily life. Martyrdom of blood may not be possible in their life, but martyrdom of conscience is possible. Consecrated persons are called to live Christians’ universal vocation to martyrdom in its perfection through their vow of obedience that calls for their daily offering of ‘will’ in fear and trust. Every day they die to their will (through obedience to God’s will). Every day they fight against the enemies of the soul.

4.2.3 Virtue Dimension: Love

Obedience is love itself. “Love itself is the surrender of one’s entire will and being through faith, in the conviction that God merits to be placed first in every respect and is deserving of total surrender,”⁸⁹⁹ says Balthasar. Gregory defines love as a state of mind directed towards what is pleasing to the mind.⁹⁰⁰ What pleases the mind (the soul) is the Beauty (God/Virtue) that is beyond the grasp of physical senses and the natural beauty which is ordained to be transitory or ephemeral. For him, love leads the soul to unite itself to that which it loves, and the soul’s union with the Beauty results in its deification. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen likens Moses who shone with glory (Ex 34:29) because of his ‘union’ (*epektasis*) with God to “the soul which loves what is beautiful,” and says that the ardent lover of beauty always longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype (Christ/Beauty) whom he follows:

He shone with glory. ... Such an experience seems to me to belong to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived. Therefore, the ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he

⁸⁹⁸ *CML*, 151.

⁸⁹⁹ H. V. BALTHASAR, *The Word Made Flesh*, 168; cf. *SAO* 4.

⁹⁰⁰ *SRe*, 239.

desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype (LM II:230-231).

We can say that obedience as love is one's ardent desire to be united with the Beauty with which one has fallen in love, and to become beautiful oneself, having come close to the Beauty.⁹⁰¹ Moses, a "lover of God," follows God without any displeasure; his obedience is *eupitheia*.

However, Moses' obedience in love is a response to God's love that he made known to Moses through the beauty of his self-revelation that pleased Moses' mind. Therefore, in Gregory, obedience is man's ascending response in love to God's descending initiative in love.⁹⁰² To participate in God's love is to give one's whole soul to God⁹⁰³ – a total offering. Gregory uses the word *agape* (selfless/self-sacrificial love) to express both the love of God for human beings and the response of human love which is directed towards the Lord (LM II:231,241). God is descending in his *agape* towards man, and man is ascending in his *agape* towards God.⁹⁰⁴ There exists

⁹⁰¹ Cf. *Virg.*, 40. According to Gregory, the person who rises above all low and earthbound things, having ascended higher than the whole earth, will find the only thing that is worth longing for, and, having come close to beauty, will become beautiful himself. The beauty of virginity arises from pure union with the Beauty Itself, and is therefore imperishable.

⁹⁰² Gregory's concept of obedience as a self-offering to God in love bears certain characteristics of marriage. In the natural order of marriage man proposes, woman accepts. Man is Christ, woman is the Church. Her acceptance is not blind submission, because it is love, and love is always active. This love gives life to the proposal of man, fulfils it as life. In Gregory of Nyssa's concept of the soul's union with God, Christ – the heavenly Bridegroom – proposes, and men – both male and female – accept representing womanhood of the created world. Consecrated men and women in their virginity respond to Christ's call as his brides by their self-offering in love, and in return receive life from him – the life that gives birth to Christ in themselves and in the world. This self-offering is an imitation of Mary, Virgin and Mother. Her virginity is the totality of her self-giving to God. Motherhood is the fulfilment of womanhood because it is the fulfilment of love as obedience and response. Mary's motherhood is thus not opposed to the mystery of her virginity because her virginity is the fulness of love, and love gives life. Consecrated men and women, imitating Mary's womanhood, respond to God in love by their total self-giving, and receive 'Life' from him to be all things to all men: cf. A. SCHMEMANN, *For the Life of the World*, 83-94.

⁹⁰³ *CML*, 148.

⁹⁰⁴ Cf. *HSong*, (Homily 4), 141. Gregory presents God who is love (cf. 1Jn 4:8) as an archer who wounds those who are being saved with his 'arrow' – Christ –, having smeared over the 'barb' (faith) with the Spirit of life, and thereby introduces himself in the person in whom the arrow is planted. The 'wound of love' in the soul signifies God's desire to be united with the soul, and the soul, "wounded by love" (*God*; Song 2:5), ascends toward God. The spiritual wound of love does not destroy life, but protects and restores it (cf. Prov 23:13-14).

friendship between God and man. Therefore, we can say that the soul's ascent towards God in *agape* embodies *eupeitheia* or ready obedience.

At the end of purifications, the soul regains its original nature and rediscovers the beauty of God, whose image it is, and is naturally attracted to God as 'like is attracted to like.' Christian perfection consists in the familiarity and friendship between man and God, and "falling from God's friendship is the only thing dreadful" (LM II:320). According to Gregory, once man has attained stability in every good thing and remains unmoved, he can ascend to eternity in constant love.⁹⁰⁵ He espouses the view that people who 'look' at the divine beauty and feel the divine love will never exhaust their desire to 'see', i.e., to experience, it again. This is because what they await is always more magnificent than anything they have previously known.⁹⁰⁶ This ascent in obedient love will not deprive man of his dignity because the Nyssen bases his teachings on 1 Cor 15: 58, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain."

In love one is united to God and neighbour like Christ the God-Man, and is deified. For the Cappadocian, to love God means to estrange oneself from evil (LM II:299),⁹⁰⁷ and to love one's neighbour means to do no evil to one's neighbour (LM I:48).⁹⁰⁸ He repeats St Paul's dictum "love never fails" (1 Cor 13:4-8) and explains that love is 'the final remedy of salvation' for all evils in the soul, and if a person does not keep love steadfast and firm among his virtues, he is in danger of failing⁹⁰⁹ because the craftsman of evil finds that person disarmed and easily overpowers.⁹¹⁰ It is to be noted that in *The Life of Moses* too, love is presented as 'the final remedy of salvation';

⁹⁰⁵ *HEccl*, (Homily I), 40.

⁹⁰⁶ E. E. D-VASILESCU, "'Love Never Fails': Gregory of Nyssa on Theosis", in M. EDWARDS – E. E. D-VASILESCU (eds.), *Visions of God and Ideas of Deifications in Patristic Thought*, 58.

⁹⁰⁷ Cf. *HEccl*, (Homily VIII), 134.

⁹⁰⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, (Homily VII), 113.

⁹⁰⁹ *CML*, 141; cf. *SRe*, 240. In the Pauline triad of "faith, hope and love," love is the greatest (1 Cor 13:13). According to Gregory in the spiritual ascent hope motivates a person as long as he is not enjoying what is hoped for, and faith is a support of the uncertainty of what is hoped for. When what is hoped for arrives, i.e., God, faith and hope attain their goal, and what remains is love (*agape*) which finds nothing to succeed it. Love, in this life and in the life everlasting, will go on growing, without ceasing, because of the infinite beauty of God. If the soul ever attains this goal (love), it will need none of the others (faith and hope). Love alone preserves the soul in divine blessedness. The Nyssen is of the opinion that when a person loves God, he wants what God wants.

⁹¹⁰ *CML*, 148.

protagonist Moses falls in inseparable love with God only in the final stage of his spiritual ascent, even though it is present in a rudimentary way in the first stage of the ascent itself. It means that on the level of created human freedom love has to be learnt; and learning takes time. It is time that allows man to respond to God by his own free consent, that enables his love to mature, that permits him to grow in love.⁹¹¹ The vow of obedience of consecrated persons is a commitment to live the virtue of love in its perfection. One obeys in proportion to the measure one loves.

4.2.3.1 Obedience to Authority

We saw that, for Gregory, love is obedience itself. Man loves or obeys God because he recognizes that God is the ultimate Good and the imperishable Beauty. Since divine Beauty, which is real, lies beyond the sphere of sensible beauty, which is ephemeral, man is able to perceive it only through a mystical (contemplative) ascent. In *The Life of Moses*, the first stage of the spiritual ascent (the theophany of the burning bush) speaks mainly of the purification of the soul, the second stage (the theophany of the heavenly tabernacle) leads the soul to divine knowledge through the illumination of the intellect by the Holy Spirit, and the third stage (the theophany of God's back) makes the soul that has fallen in love with the Beauty follow him constantly, and thereby complete God's intention in creating humanity, i.e., *epektasis* – an infinite stretching out toward God's infinite beauty. In Gregory, Christ is the true Beauty whom the soul desires and follows, and who is constantly leading the soul forward. In the fourth homily on the *Song of Songs*, he makes the bride (the soul) say that the Bridegroom (Christ) is the true Beauty that never fades and can't be exchanged for anything worldly.⁹¹² According to the Nyssen, those who hold authority in the Church should be able to lead their

⁹¹¹ K. WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, 189.

⁹¹² *HSong*, (Homily 4), 119. Gregory writes, "Nothing else seems lovely to me, but I have turned away from all things that were thought noble before. My judgment of what is noble no longer errs so as to deem anything lovely besides you: not human approval, not glory, not celebrity, not worldly power. For these things are tinged with a show of nobility for those whose attention is focused on sense perception, but they are not what they are reckoned to be. For how should something be noble when it lacks entire reality? That which is honoured in this world, after all, has its being only in the heads of the people who make the judgment, but you are truly beautiful – not only beautiful, but the very essence of the Beautiful, existing forever as such, being at every moment what you are, neither blooming when the appropriate time comes, nor putting off your bloom at the right time, but stretching your springtime splendour out to match the everlastingness of your life – you whose name is love of humankind."

followers to the beauty of Christ. They should be true followers of Christ. They are the ‘eyes’ of the Church – eyes that are turned to Christ, eyes that never dim their sight with the work of darkness, eyes that make distinction between what is native and what is alien to the soul, eyes that distinguish right from wrong, eyes that know what is ephemeral and what is inalienable, eyes that recognize friends and foes of the soul, eyes that are set to the front as models for all, eyes that gaze upon nothing material and corporeal, but upon the spiritual and immaterial life.⁹¹³ In other words, they are contemplative persons who through love are united to the imperishable beauty of Christ, become themselves beautiful, and thereby impel others through the beauty of their virtues to obey them and fall in love with Christ who does not rule with earthly might but with divine love. Moses who follows God and, at the same time, leads the people is a model for them: in his heart, Moses flees from the desire to rule (Ex 3:11,13; 4:1,10,13), but in obedience to God’s will, he does rule in humility.

Moses follows God because he is attracted by God’s beauty, and the Hebrews follow Moses because they are attracted by the glory that shines through Moses. Moses became a friend of God and his obedience was ready obedience (*eupeitheia*). Likewise, the Hebrews obeyed Moses because of their friendship with him; their obedience was also not forced obedience, but ready obedience. In the light of Gregory’s teachings, we can conclude that obedience in the Church should be voluntary, founded on the subjects ‘attraction towards’ and ‘friendship with’ the authority. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen notes that before Moses’ encounter with God, he was rejected by the Hebrews when he tried to settle the dispute between two Hebrews who were fighting (Ex 2:13-14). But when Moses – who fled from the Egyptian life, underwent ascetical training and was strengthened by the burning bush – returned to the Hebrews again and delivered to them the message of freedom, he was accepted by them. Gregory makes use of this contradiction in order to emphasise the nature of authority in the Church:

What then does the history teach us by this? That he who has not equipped himself by this kind of spiritual training to instruct the multitude must not presume to speak among the people. For you see how, while he was still young and had not yet matured to so lofty a degree of virtue, two men who were quarrelling did not consider his peaceful advice worth accepting, yet now he addresses tens of thousands in the same way. The history all but cries out to you not to be presumptuous in giving advice to your hearers in your teaching unless the ability for this

⁹¹³ Ibid., (Homily 7), 229-231.

has been perfected in you by a long and exacting training such as Moses had (LM II:55).

What Gregory has in mind is that in order to receive obedience, one has to be worthy of obedience. Christ is worthy of obedience because of his divine beauty and goodness. Only those who participate in Christ's beauty and goodness, and thereby reveal him are worthy of obedience in the Church. Moses who comes down the mountain with the tablets of commandments to instruct the people is a person whose face is shining with God's glory (Ex 34:29-35). One who holds authority in the Church should be a true Christian. For Gregory, it is participation in Christ that makes one a Christian. Since Christ is absolute virtue, participation in him must be participation in virtues.

Christian obedience is a response to God's love, and in the Church (in a community), it is a response to those who participate in God's love and share it with others. In the Greek Eastern spiritual tradition, the ideal superiors in religious communities are spiritual fathers and mothers. Kallistos Ware in his introduction to the translation of John Climacus' (c.579-649) *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* notes, "By obedience John does not mean obedience to written monastic rule. He is thinking in more personal terms – of obedience to Christ, and of obedience to the spiritual father as the earthly icon of Christ the Good Shepherd. For a monk in a fully organized monastery, the spiritual father will normally be the abbot."⁹¹⁴ This tradition advocates total submission to the spiritual father. This submission indicates the relation between the spiritual father and his son; what transpires between them is nothing but 'perichoretic love' that consists in a mutual give-and-take. The Spiritual father has obtained from his disciple a total trust, and it is because of that the latter obeys him blindly.⁹¹⁵ Therefore, the submission of the disciple is *eupitheia* (ready obedience).

Spiritual fatherhood (or motherhood) is a charism for the service of others. Those who have this charism have the capacity to communicate the will of God to others. They are really fathers because they actively participate in divine paternity. "Call no one father" (Mt 23:9) means that all fatherhood shares in the fatherhood of God, that all obedience is obedience to the Father's

⁹¹⁴ K. WARE, "Introduction", in C. LUIBHEID – N. RUSSEL (trans.), *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 36.

⁹¹⁵ AA. VV., *Il Monachesimo secondo la Tradizione dell'Oriente Cristiano*, 101; cf. LM I:2. Bishop Gregory of Nyssa, who writes *The Life of Moses* in ready obedience to the request of young Caesarius and invites the young man to voluntary obedience, provides through his own example a model of Christian authority based on perichoretic love between the spiritual father and the spiritual son.

will in sharing in the acts of the obedient Christ.⁹¹⁶ They communicate not only a teaching but also the spiritual life. The Nyssen is of the opinion that all sinful deviations in spiritual life happen just because one is not wishing to associate himself with those esteemed in the sight of God.⁹¹⁷ He says that in matters regarding spiritual life one should be guided neither by a youth who is a precarious counsellor nor by an old man who has not attained spiritual progress. It is because,

... it is not merely money or worldly and temporary glory that is risked, or any of the other external things ..., for which there is little concern among the wise. The thoughtlessness touches the soul itself and the danger of punishment is not the loss of something just happened upon or something which can be recovered, it is the very destruction of oneself and the punishment of one's own soul.⁹¹⁸

In the consecrated life, men and women should be guided by those superiors in whom they can confidently trust for the sake of their salvation. It is only within the context of loving trust and personal relationship between two people in Christ, that the virtue of obedience occurs. This obedience is obedience to Christ because Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20). So, there is no obedience to human elements, no idolatry of a spiritual father. The spiritual father is convinced that it is the Holy Spirit who inspires the words that he addresses to his disciple, and the disciple overcomes his self-will in ready obedience. "In the spiritual life, man is often his own worst enemy"⁹¹⁹ because of his self-will. Where there exists a sufficient condition for ready obedience, consecrated persons do not talk themselves into thinking that they can solve their problems on their own without asking for directions.

We become that which we love because love leads to imitation and affinity. In early Eastern monasticism, there was a serious-minded conviction that if one imitated spiritual fathers, if one modelled one's life on theirs, one would arrive at a similar state of perfection (cf. 1Cor 11:1). Spiritual masters of the past were themselves disciples of holy men. They preserved historical continuity but added personal experience to what they had received from the past. These first superiors of Christian monastic communities were not elected by monks from among them. On the other hand, they gathered people

⁹¹⁶ P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Struggle with God*, 128.

⁹¹⁷ *Virg*, 71.

⁹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹¹⁹ P. PEARSON, *Spiritual Direction from Dante*, 18.

around them due to their charisma and gave birth to communities. What was primary in the ancient perspective was not the monastery, but the spiritual education of the monks which a spiritual father took care of.⁹²⁰ But it does not mean that the master was weak in the administrative aspect that his function demanded. Gregory introduces his brother Basil with the epithet ‘great’ and says that he dedicated his knowledge to God for the adornment of the Church (LM II:116).⁹²¹ His sister Macrina who was the head of a monastery “never turned away anyone who asked for something”⁹²² and her companions “called her mother and nurse.”⁹²³ In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen presents the ideal leader Moses as a contemplative in action.

The probity of life was a quality of leadership in the past because “the authority of a man intent upon forming others will never achieve results unless he is able to win the hearts of those who hear him by the successful example of his own labour.”⁹²⁴ Gregory presents authority as humble service that must be exercised without undermining the equality of status pertaining to all as travellers on the single road to Christian perfection.⁹²⁵ According to

⁹²⁰ AA. VV., *Il Monachesimo secondo la Tradizione dell’Oriente Cristiano*, 117, 179; cf. SAO 13.

⁹²¹ Cf. N. DUMITRASCU, *Basil the Great: Faith, Mission and Diplomacy in the Shaping of Christian Doctrine*, 132. Dumitrascu writes on Gregory of Nyssa’s brother Basil, who was a monk by vocation: “Aware of the mission entrusted to him by God, St Basil proposed to his contemporaries the model of an authentic Christian leader who can create, with wisdom and humility, but also with authority, a bridge between two cultures apparently irreconcilable, the Christian and the pagan, that complete each other, rather than exclude or reject each other. ... He cultivated friendships with significant public or military positions, he mediated the majority of the conflicts in the Church, he bore all the unfounded criticism which came from his opponents both within and without; all with humility, believing that his power and wisdom came directly from God, through an inner illumination and through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” Basil became an intermediary between the rich, those in positions of political, military or church authority, and the poor and the weak, with the conviction that this was his Christian duty. Writing to prefects, governors and great dignitaries, he tried to persuade them to show consideration to those who cannot pay their taxes either because of infirmity or ignorance, or family crisis. Due to his great love of people, he established the most advanced social care system (the first Christian hospital in history) of the early Christian ages, still known as the ‘Basiliad’, and which became the source of inspiration for his descendants to the present day.

⁹²² LSM, 178.

⁹²³ Ibid., 182.

⁹²⁴ P. ROUSSEAU, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, 189.

⁹²⁵ CML, 146-147. The Cappadocian gives a wonderful instruction to those who hold authority on the ideal relationship between the superior and the rest of the members in a religious community: “It is necessary to be subservient to all and to care for one’s brothers as if paying the debt of a loan, depositing in the soul consideration for all and fulfilling the

him, one who is in charge of a “spiritual band” should be a skilled educator (*didaskalos*) who learns from Christ the art of being a humble servant in love, and persuades his disciples to obey having educated well their souls through his own life. It shows that in early monasticism obedience had been the fruit of the disciples’ trust in the master who was a spiritual father. But in course of time man has become so weak in his faith that he is unworthy of being enlightened by the Holy Spirit.⁹²⁶ As a result, the tradition of spiritual fathers became blurred and “the dictates of authority changed from advice to judgement, and from guidance to command.”⁹²⁷ It is very difficult for a consecrated person to obey the superior when there is no love lost between them.

The present crisis in obedience results mainly from the failure in contemplative life of consecrated persons. This crisis can be overcome not by psychological techniques that provide immediate practical solutions or point out adjustments that will make life run smoothly and effectively here and now, but by rediscovering the real meaning of religious life, i.e., by a return

love that is owed. ... It is necessary for those in charge in matters of supervision to work harder than the rest, to think humbler thoughts than those under them, and to furnish their own life as an example of servitude to the brothers, looking upon those entrusted to them as a deposit of God. For, if they are carefully welding together the sacred band and providing instruction according to the need of each for preserving the rank which befits each person, and, at the same time, secretly preserving humility in the faith, like well-disposed slaves, then, they are thereby obtaining for themselves a large reward. Accordingly, care for them as if you were kindly tutors of tender children entrusted to you by their fathers. ... It is also necessary for you to put aside all hatred and stubbornness towards your brothers and to adapt your word to the ability and judgment of each of them. Censure this one, admonish that one, encourage another, bringing medicine for the need of each like a good physician. ... Do none of these to get the favour or the enmity of the child, but be concerned with what is pertinent to the situation and what the nature of each child requires if he is to become successful in this life. ... If you are related to each other in this way, those in charge and those under their instruction, the one obeying commands with joy, the other leading his brothers to perfection with pleasure, and if you outwit each other in honours, then, you will lead on earth the life of the angels”; cf. E. F. MORISON, *St. Basil and His Rule: A Study in Early Monasticism*, 52-53. Basil’s concept of monastic leadership had exercised a great influence on Gregory. Morison, based on his study of the Rules of Basil, points out that, according to Basil, the superior of the monastery never loses contact with each of the brethren. All the secrets of the heart are to be disclosed to him. He is to be an example to his brethren, and love them even as a nurse cherishes her own children. He is also to be a physician of the soul, who will have the proper remedy at hand for each man’s malady. Basil is of the opinion that a man with the necessary qualifications being difficult to find, it is better to have only one community and one superior in each village.

⁹²⁶ AA. VV., *Il Monachesimo secondo la Tradizione dell’Oriente Cristiano*, 111.

⁹²⁷ P. ROUSSEAU, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, 196.

to the contemplative dimension of the consecrated life and by applying the principles of synodality in community life to know the will of God and unite with him.⁹²⁸ A so-called contemplative who ascribes infallibility to himself and looks down on others is a dangerous person. Mutual respect in religious communities turns out to be obedience to God's will, and injustice to another turns out to be injustice to God.⁹²⁹ As we saw in the third chapter, synodality respects the right of each person and rediscovers that obedience is reserved to God alone. In a religious community, it helps the superior and other members journey together and discern together the will of God. It is living the great commandment of love (Jn 13:34).

The importance of synodality in community life emerges also from fact that today, there exists a distinction between religious superior and spiritual father/mother. The former exercises authority in the social areas of a Congregation, while the latter exercises authority in the private sphere of a person. At the dawn of the consecrated life, seekers of Christian perfection gathered around a spiritual father, who attracted them, and formed a religious community. Today, these seekers directly enter a religious community that attracts them and become one with it. The superior of this community is not necessarily a spiritual father or mother. The community has priority now, and what gives meaning to the office of the superior is the fact that he/she is the legitimate head of a God-willed and ecclesiastically approved religious community.⁹³⁰ Superior and subjects are both subordinate to the common cause and in its one service have only a different function.⁹³¹ K. Rahner observes that a religious superior has much to learn from a parent and his/her association with his/her grown-up sons and daughters.⁹³² Consecrated persons

⁹²⁸ Cf. T. MERTON, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 117-127.

⁹²⁹ Cf. T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 60-61. Thomas Merton writes on how mutual respect in religious communities turns out to be obedience to God's will, and how injustice to another turns out to be injustice to God: "To recognize the rights of another is to recognize him as a person. To recognize him as a person is to pay reverence to the creative act and will and love of God which keeps him in being as an individual, as an image of God. To render to another person what is his right is to pay reverence to the image of God in man, to do homage to the creative act of God and to God's own designs for man. In rendering to another his right, I am cooperating in God's plan for him. To deny to another his rights, a) is to depreciate him as a person; b) to depreciate the idea of personality itself; c) to refuse reverence to God, who is imaged in the human person; d) to despise the plan of God for others and for ourselves; e) ultimately, to be unjust is to put ourselves in the place of God and to live by our own 'providence,' which is a supreme disorder. ... our injustice to men flows from our injustice to God"; cf. T. MERTON, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 118.

⁹³⁰ Cf. K. RAHNER, *The Religious Life Today*, 53.

⁹³¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹³² *Ibid.*, 53.

are not children and their obedience as such has nothing to do with the obedience of minors living with their parents at home. The Church document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* notes that those who exercise authority are called ‘ministers’ (from Latin *minus* – “smaller”), because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all (no. 57). The document further states that an essential attitude in synodal dialogue is humility, which inclines each one to be obedient to God’s will and obedient to each other in Christ (no. 112). While all in a religious community are called to seek what is pleasing to God and obey him, the superior is the sign of unity and the guide in the common search both personal and communitarian of carrying out the will of God.⁹³³ Obedience of Consecrated persons is not handing over a blank check to a tyrant (like Pharaoh) who can do with it what he likes. In *Forma Vitae*, “the first Rule in Church history written by a woman for women,”⁹³⁴ Clare of Assisi speaks of discerning the orders of authority.⁹³⁵ Through obedience consecrated men and women surrender themselves to someone who has concern for their well-being, their growth, and they surrender themselves with that end in view. They practice obedience not just to produce a well-ordered community; the end of obedience is God himself.

In the Eastern monasticism of Pachomius and Basil, the coenobitic superior was a spiritual father (Abba) who was the centre or ‘eye’ of the community, and his relationship to the monks was horizontal rather than vertical. But when monasticism was brought to the West, the superior of the community (Abbot) was put on the same plane as the bishop and his relationship with the monks was vertical and more legal. Gregory sees people as inherently equal, and for him hierarchical relationships must be understood

⁹³³ SAO 1.

⁹³⁴ C. GRAZIANI, “Saint Clare of Assisi Today: Defeating Power with Poverty and Conscience”, in *L’osservatore Romano: Weekly Edition in English*, 24 March 2023, 11.

⁹³⁵ Cf. CLARE OF ASSISI, *Forma Vitae*, (10:1-3), trans. J. Mueller, in J. MUELLER, *A Companion to Clare of Assisi: Life, Writings, and Spirituality*, 283. Clare (1194-1253) writes that sisters are strictly obliged to obey their abbess in those things they promised the Lord to observe that are not contrary to the soul and their profession. See also CLARE OF ASSISI, *Second Letter to Agnes*, (17-18), trans. J. Mueller, in J. MUELLER, *A Companion to Clare of Assisi*, 266. Clare writes to Agnes, “Indeed, if someone tells you something else or suggests anything to you that may hinder your perfection or seems contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, still, do not follow his advice. Instead, poor virgin, embrace the Poor Christ.”

in terms of an underlying equality.⁹³⁶ His model of human community is the ascetical movement in which men and women emphasize the divine image and likeness common to all people and work to develop the human capacities for virtue and sanctification that all share. Instability in the community results when one person tries to impose unwarranted authority over his equals and they naturally resist.⁹³⁷ The synodal and the non-synodal natures of Eastern and Western monastic traditions can be traced in the development of monastic rules as well. In the West monastic rules were produced without the intervention of the Church Councils, Apostolic Sea and public powers, whereas in the East the monastic legislation was the object of the canons of the Councils, of the ordinances of emperors and patriarchs.⁹³⁸ A community that promotes vertical (hierarchical) relationship does not give much importance to ready obedience (*eupeitheia*) based on friendship. The Nyssen's brother Basil in his *Long Rules* (Rule 36) allows a monk to leave his monastic community only for one reason: "If he has genuine grievances for which he cannot get redress from the community (after every effort for reconciliation based on Mt 18:15-16), then he may leave the brotherhood, for they are no longer brothers, but strangers, whom he is leaving."⁹³⁹ A monk should not leave the community because of his pride and self-will. But if he suffers spiritual harm in the absence of love and friendship, he has reason to leave.

4.2.3.2 *Obedience to God's Voice in Providence*

For Gregory, God is the ultimate Good: God is Virtue, God is Justice and God is Love. God always calls man into communion and friendship with him. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen states that after human nature fell into

⁹³⁶ N. V. HARRISON, "Greek Patristic Perspectives on the Origins of Social Injustice", in N. V. HARRISON – D. G. HUNTER (eds.), *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, 92.

⁹³⁷ Cf. N. V. HARRISON, "Greek Patristic Perspectives on the Origins of Social Injustice", 92; cf. S. WEIL, *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. A. Wills – J. Petrie, 137. Simone Weil observes that equality is one of the founding principles of Christianity. Christianity, when it first began, did not inspire the poor, the slaves, with the desire for power and the goods of this world. But it gave them the feeling of an inner value which put them on the same level as or higher than the rich. This way Christianity placed the established social hierarchy that then existed in danger.

⁹³⁸ AA. VV., *Il Monachesimo secondo la Tradizione dell'Oriente Cristiano*, 121. In the West, Apostolic Sea intervened, not to make, but only to confirm the rules and constitutions of institutes of consecrated life.

⁹³⁹ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *The Long Rules*, 305.

sin, God did not withhold his providence (LM II:45). The word ‘providence’ comes from the Latin *providentia* (from *pro* ‘ahead’ + *videre* ‘to see’) and means essentially ‘foresight’ or the ‘ability to see something in advance.’ The Greek equivalent is *pronoia* and means ‘foreknowledge’ or ‘foresight.’ Providence refers to God’s all-wise, all-loving, and all-encompassing guidance of nature, history, and the course of individual lives.⁹⁴⁰ In *The Life of Moses*, Christ – the heavenly tabernacle – encompasses everything in the universe, from the creation of the world to its consummation, inclusive of every aspect of human existence and destiny. Freedom allows human beings both to cooperate with and reject the providence of God who can write straight with crooked lines. God respects human freedom because what he expects from human beings is a response in love. Love cannot be constrained, but can only be tendered willingly. K. Ware says, “God is able to do anything except compel us to love him. Love comes always as an offer to which the beloved is invited to respond in freedom.”⁹⁴¹ Where there is no voluntary choice there is no love.

In the light of what we said, we can speak of two kinds of obedience: active obedience and passive obedience. Active obedience indicates obedience as hearing the word explicitly pronounced, and passive obedience consists in remaining in the condition in which God places us, by submitting ourselves to his will which he expresses through different happenings which we cannot choose.⁹⁴² God’s Law demands our active obedience and his providence demands our passive obedience. Christ’s descent into hell, which was the culmination of the Son’s obedience to the Father, is the best example for passive obedience: moved by his obedience, he enters the realm where God is absent, where the light of faith, hope and love is extinguished, where God is cast out of his own creation, and moving through the formlessness which is the world’s sin, the divine Son experiences its spiritual chaos.⁹⁴³ Those who obey God’s voice in providence participate in Jesus’ obedience and declares with St Paul that ‘nothing can separate them from God’s love’ (Rom 8:38-39).

Consecrated persons believe that nothing happens without the knowledge of God who always desires their salvation. This conviction is the root of Christian patience. They remain faithful to God and accept his will even if it seems sorrow, suffering and martyrdom. God speaks to human

⁹⁴⁰ G. O’COLLINS – E. G. FARRUGIA, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 212.

⁹⁴¹ K. WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, 187.

⁹⁴² AA. VV., *Il Monachesimo secondo la Tradizione dell’Oriente Cristiano*, 103.

⁹⁴³ A. NICHOLAS, *Divine Fruitfulness*, 116.

beings through the events that happen in their life and gives them signs. The contemplation of these events is an attitude of activeness. Even though, passive obedience is not among the happiest times in the consecrated life, it is the sign of Christian wisdom and strength in the dark periods of human life. This obedience springs from one's friendship with God. It is contemplative obedience which is inseparable from love. D. Haggerty compares contemplative obedience to the inner compulsion of an artist towards the sight of beauty.⁹⁴⁴ Obedience to God's voice in Providence is a participation in Christ's obedience to the Father as a response in love to the One who loved him. A disobedient consecrated person wants to be his own Providence and his own Lord.

4.2.3.3 Obedience to Written Law

Gregory of Nyssa gives special emphasis to the inspired nature of Scripture. The divine commandments on the stone tablets which Moses brought to the people were written by the finger of God – Ex 31: 18, “When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.” In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen identifies the ‘finger of God’ with the Holy Spirit (LM II:216). In *Contra Eunomium III*, he says that the divinely inspired Scripture is a writing of the Holy Spirit, and its intention is to be helpful to mankind.⁹⁴⁵ According to him, “inspired Scripture is our umpire,”⁹⁴⁶ and “denying one's own will is to make one's will the established word of God and use this as a good pilot which guides to the shore of the will of God.”⁹⁴⁷ Obedience to the Holy Scriptures and obedience to spiritual fathers (Spirit-bearers) were the two kinds of obedience that monks were asked to practise in early monasticism.⁹⁴⁸ Through Scripture and spiritual fathers, monks were

⁹⁴⁴ D. HAGGERTY, *Contemplative Enigmas: Insights and Aid on the Path to Deeper prayer*, 191-192. He says, “It is an obedience of intense attraction, not of duty or obligation. Obedience for contemplatives is like the inner compulsion of an artist drawn to hours of hard work by a fervour of love for creating things of beauty. No true artist will say he trudges to work in reluctance and distaste, forcing his soul to the task. Contemplatives are similar in their response. In a sense they recognize the Cross almost like their chosen art; no more to be evaded or refused than an artist running from the sight of beauty rising before his eyes.”

⁹⁴⁵ *CE III*, (V:8), 138.

⁹⁴⁶ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Holy Trinity*, in P. SCHAFF (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa – Dogmatic Treatises*, 609.

⁹⁴⁷ *CML*, 145.

⁹⁴⁸ D. BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert*, 110; cf. *CE III*, (V:15), 140.

led by the Spirit to the higher levels of virtue from the start of monastic life: Antony the Great began the ascetic lifestyle as he listened to the Gospel reading from Matthew 19:21 and immediately decided to respond to Jesus' command through a concrete act of obedience, and, according to Athanasius, his zeal for that which is good made him search out, like a wise bee, pious men who lived the ascetic life in solitude in nearby villages and subject himself in all sincerity to them to learn for his own benefit their virtues.⁹⁴⁹ Later in the Egyptian desert, when other spiritual seekers gathered around him, he himself put an end to his solitary life becoming "the Father of the Monks." The example of Antony, who was so attentive at the reading of Scripture that he could not but learn it by-heart, is an impetus for consecrated men and women not to be tone-deaf to the voice of God that comes to them through Scripture today. The practice of *lectio divina* leads them to deeper conversion of heart and obedience through listening to God's Word. Moreover, acquaintance with Scripture helps them avoid idle words which seriously disturb religious atmosphere in community, and engage in spiritual communication.

Consecrated persons are also obliged to obey the Constitution of the institute to which they belong. The ideals and practices of monasticism were communicated through hagiographies in the early period. In the first hagiography, *The Life of St Antony*, St Athanasius says in the preface that for monks the life of Antony is an ideal pattern of the ascetical life.⁹⁵⁰ In the text, Athanasius lays out an ascetic scheme (no. 16-43) and puts it into Antony's mouth as a long sermon that the Father of Monasticism delivers to the monks. This can be considered as the first monastic rule.⁹⁵¹ In coenobitic monasticism, the first written rules are in the name of Pachomius. He wanted to make a community that has an order. The rules were passed on by word of mouth during Pachomius's lifetime⁹⁵² and were written down after his death in order to preserve the tradition. These rules influenced Basil of Caesarea, were translated into Latin by St Jerome (c.345-420), and had an influence on St Benedict of Nursia (480-547), the Father of Western Monasticism. The Rules of various ancient monastic movements have an influence on the Constitution or proper law of each institute of consecrated life.

⁹⁴⁹ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of Saint Antony*, (no.3), 20-21.

⁹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17

⁹⁵¹ T. O'LOUGHLIN, "Hagiography: Christian Perspectives", in W. M. JOHNSTON – C. KLEINHENZ (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Monasticism*, 565; cf. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of Saint Antony*, 33-57.

⁹⁵² J. BINNS, *The T&T Clark History of Monasticism*, 45.

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory points to conscience when he likens the stone tablets of divine commandments to human hearts and says that God's laws are written in man's heart (LM II:215). Through Constitutions, human legislators bring a further determination to the natural law or conscience which tells us that we must do good and avoid evil. Human law must accord with conscience and has no power to impose evil. But in understanding human conscience, we cannot connive the fallen nature of man, and the difference between person and individual as we saw in the previous chapter. T. Merton notes that there would be insecurity and disorder if every individual were to interpret the whole natural law (conscience) and apply it for himself.⁹⁵³ Constitution provides security and order in the consecrated life by regulating the life of the community: it extols the consecrated life in common as the ideal life of Christian perfection, while at the same time indicating the dangers of individualistic life style.

Constitutions manifest God's will for consecrated persons. They are called to see it as a document leading them to God by love, and not just as a code harshly dominating them by commands and punishments. According to P. Gueranger, the main object of the Constitutions is to adapt the rules to the physical and moral weakness of the members.⁹⁵⁴ The rule supports consecrated persons in their weakness and gives an order to the consecrated life. The Church never gives its approval of any religious association without first having studied and confirmed its rule of life. The approval of the Church confers on the Constitution a divine sanction. *Vita Consecrata* observes that Constitutions provide consecrated men and women with a reliable criterion in their search for the appropriate forms of witness which is capable of responding to the needs of the times without departing from an Institute's initial inspiration (VC 39). The life of a consecrated person can only be fully acceptable to God, if it conforms in all respects with the rule according to which he/she took his/her vows.⁹⁵⁵ Love for the Constitution is tantamount to love for the Congregation. Thomas Merton is of the opinion that the presence in the Congregation of members who do not love the Congregation is a great danger to the stability and perseverance of many vocations because those who come to the Congregation seeking a spiritual life, spiritual support, encouragement, a climate of contemplative love, are unconsciously affected by the spirit of rebellion and opposition generated by those who, while bound by their vow, are nevertheless reacting against the Congregation.⁹⁵⁶ In a

⁹⁵³ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 48.

⁹⁵⁴ D. P. GUERANGER, *On the Religious Life*, 38.

⁹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁵⁶ T. MERTON, *The Life of Vows*, 472.

religious community, obedience to the Constitutions leads to common edification. Since Constitutions preserve, immortalize and make pertinent the teachings of the spiritual masters and saints of old,⁹⁵⁷ the Constitutions of all institutes of consecrated life represent these spiritual guides of the soul – as the Law symbolizes Moses in Gregory’s treatise (LM II:207) –, and fidelity to one’s institute’s Constitution is, in fact, ready obedience (*eupeitheia*) especially to the founder of the institute.

4.2.4 Ministerial Dimension: King

For Gregory, man is a king for he was created in the image and likeness of the King of all, and the best Artificer – God – made human nature as it were a formation fit for the exercise of royalty.⁹⁵⁸ When he speaks about the soul’s kingship, he points out its original self-governing nature (natural will) and the royal garment of virtues:

The soul shows its royal and exalted character in that it owns no lord, and is self-governed, swayed autocratically by its own will. The soul is clothed in virtue, which is in truth the most royal of all raiment, and in place of the sceptre, leading on the bliss of immortality, and instead of the royal diadem, decked with the crown of righteousness; so that it is shown to be perfectly like to the beauty of its archetype (Christ) in all that belongs to the dignity of royalty.⁹⁵⁹

According to the Cappadocian, the royal structure of the human body can be understood from the fact that while all animals bow their bodies downward, man’s form is upright, and extends aloft towards heaven, and looks upwards.⁹⁶⁰ Man was created to rule the rest. But Adam (and in him the whole mankind) forfeited his royal dignity and became a slave by his disobedience to God’s will. Adam and Christ stand for a twofold creation of human nature: the royal dignity that mankind lost in Adam, they regain in Christ who

⁹⁵⁷ For example, Gregory of Nyssa’s brother Basil follows a catechetical method in his *Rule*: the disciple asks a question to which the master replies: cf. BASIL OF CAESEREA, *Long Rules*, 223-338. The *Rule* of St Benedict, the Father of Western Monasticism, begins with this admonition: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice”: cf. T. FRY (ed.), *The Rule of St Benedict in English*, (Prologue: 1), 15.

⁹⁵⁸ *MMA*, (IV:1), 724.

⁹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, (IV: 1), 724.

⁹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, (VIII:1), 729.

assumed the whole mankind in his Incarnation and thereby became the first-born of the ‘new creation,’ in the ‘new order of existence.’⁹⁶¹ Man has three births – one is of the body, another in the sacrament of regeneration (baptism) and another by the resurrection of the dead –, and Christ is the first-born in all three.⁹⁶² Through participation in Christ, man becomes a new creation, child of God and immortal. It is his royal dignity.

Gregory teaches that Christians derive the name *Christian* from Christ, and it is necessary for them who call themselves after Christ, first of all, to become what the name implies, and, then, to adapt themselves to the title.⁹⁶³ He underscores that the title of Christ (from Greek *christos* ‘anointed’) means kingship.⁹⁶⁴ The various virtues of Christ are description of his kingship. One’s leader is revealed by the character of one’s life, and a person who prays for the coming of the Kingdom of God beautifies himself with virtues so that the ‘King of virtues’ – Christ – may be his King.⁹⁶⁵ Each Christian is called to be a ‘king of virtues’ participating in Christ the King’s virtues. Since Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God (1Cor 1:24), those who imitate Christ will be empowered against sin, and will also exhibit wisdom in themselves by their wise choice.⁹⁶⁶ It is only in Christ and in union with him that man becomes a king, and rules himself. In *The Life of Moses*, Moses, who stands on the rock and follows behind God, is the symbol of the soul that has

⁹⁶¹ *CE III*, (II:52-53), 82. For the Nyssen, Adam is the ‘old man’ and Christ is the ‘new man’: “We are aware of two creations of our nature, the first by which we were fashioned, and the second by which we were refashioned; but there would have been no need for our second creation, if we had not soiled the first through disobedience. The first having grown old and vanished, the new creation had to be made in Christ, as the Apostle says, expecting to see no more of the things grown old in the new creation: ‘Having taken off the old man with his works and desires, put on the new man created according to God’ (Col 3:9; Eph 4:22-24). ... he says, ‘If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the ancient things have gone, see, all things are made new’ (2 Cor 5:17). The Maker of human nature is one and the same, both at the first and thereafter.”

⁹⁶² *Ibid.*, (II:51), 81-82. Gregory writes, “There are three births among us, by which the human race is made alive, the physical birth, that which accords with the mystery of regeneration, and that which is from the expected rising again from the dead, and in all three he becomes Firstborn: when the two-fold regeneration operates in two, in the baptism and in the resurrection, himself having become the pioneer in each; in the flesh however he becomes Firstborn, by having first and uniquely achieved the birth unknown to nature through the Virginity, a birth which no human being had in so many generations anticipated.” According to the Cappadocian, Christ in his pretemporal existence is the ‘Only-begotten’, and in the Incarnation, he became the ‘Firstborn’.

⁹⁶³ *Perf.*, 98.

⁹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

conquered all its enemies (passions) in Christ and marches ahead on the royal road of virtues.

Man's royal dignity is of an ascetic nature; it is the mastery of the spiritual over the material, over the instincts and pulsations of the flesh, the freedom from all determination coming from the world.⁹⁶⁷ As we have already said, in the treatise of the Nyssen, Moses is both prefiguring and imitating Christ himself. It is Christ's imitation of the Father (God) that Christians are called to imitate, thus becoming 'images of the Image.' When the Only-Begotten God, Christ, became a man, he "took the form of a servant" (Phil 2:7). Therefore, the way Christ came to us, i.e., the way of a servant, is the way to imitate him. In *The Life of Moses*, the Nyssen notes that Moses was called "my servant" (Num 12:7) by God himself (LM II:314). A servant of God is a king: "To be called *servant of Yahweh* is the same as saying that he is better than all others. For one would not serve God unless he had become superior to everyone in the world" (LM II:314). For Gregory, the goal of spiritual life is to become a servant of God in ready obedience (LM II:317). Consecrated persons are called to be servants of God, and thereby kings over everything that is not God. They epitomize the kingly office of 'the Obedient Servant King' – Christ – by their vow of obedience with which they ascend to true freedom, become cross-bearers, and men and women for others.

4.2.4.1 Freedom

Today, consecrated men and women are called to do their mission in a world that is becoming progressively Godless. People are induced to live in this world as if there were no God. In a Godless world, man is not the image of God and his freedom is not naturally directed toward God. As a result, moral strength has not grown together with the development of science; rather, it has diminished, because the technical mentality relegates morality to the subjective realm.⁹⁶⁸ Freedom is understood as the right and opportunity to do just what one wishes and not to have to do anything one does not wish to do. In other words, man's superior is his self-will itself. But freedom without truth is no freedom at all.⁹⁶⁹ The truth about man is that he is the image of God, and, as we have seen in the first chapter, true freedom is part

⁹⁶⁷ P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Struggle with God*, 205.

⁹⁶⁸ BENEDICT XVI, "Europe's Crisis of Culture", in J. F. THORNTON – S. B. VARENNE (eds.), *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, 326. What is implied is the prevalence of relativism.

⁹⁶⁹ BENEDICT XVI, "Truth and Freedom", in J. F. THORNTON – S. B. VARENNE (eds.), *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, 343.

of the image of God who is Absolute Freedom, and whose freedom is always directed toward the good. Man's God-likeness consists primarily in freedom directed toward the good. Therefore, man is truly free so far as he participates in God's freedom by which his nature is transformed into 'divine power' – Christ (1 Cor 1:24) – and is empowered against sin. In other words, true freedom is true obedience to God through the Christification of the will, i.e., the ability to do the will of God. It is man's responsibility and capacity to choose good (for oneself and for others), and a total inability to make any evil choice. Freedom to destroy oneself or to destroy another is not freedom but its demonic parody.⁹⁷⁰ Living the vow of obedience as true freedom, as following Christ in obedience to God's will, makes consecrated persons effective witnesses for God and the truth about man in a world that is facing a God-eclipse, and, with it, an eclipse of true man.⁹⁷¹ Through the vow they "grow to the stature of the adults in Christ."⁹⁷² Their vow will become a proclamation to the world that it is not ideologies that save the world, but only a return to the living God, the guarantor of our freedom, the guarantor of what is really good and true.

For Gregory, the Israelites' exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land is the soul's ascent from the enslavement to a life according to self-will, i.e., from a sinful life, to a life according to God's will, i.e., a life of true freedom. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* gives us certain insights on freedom that can be contrasted with Gregory of Nyssa's notion of freedom. When Rousseau puts forward an ideology of freedom, the Nyssen proffers an imitation of freedom brought about by Christ. According to Rousseau, man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains.⁹⁷³ Since man is born free, he is not slave by nature: "The first slaves were made by force, and they remained so through cowardice. Slaves in their chain lose everything, even the desire to be rid of them; they love their servitude. If there are slaves by nature, it is because slaves have been made against nature."⁹⁷⁴ Rousseau's concept of people who think themselves 'slaves by nature' can be compared

⁹⁷⁰ Ibid., 348; cf. T. MERTON, *Seed of Contemplation*, 120-121.

⁹⁷¹ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, "Europe's Crisis of Culture", 335. Pope Benedict XVI writes, "The negative testimony of Christians who speak about God and live against him has darkened God's image and opened the door to disbelief. We need men who have their gaze directed to God, to understand true humanity. We need men whose intellects are enlightened by the light of God, and whose hearts God opens, so that their intellects can speak to the intellects of others and their hearts are able to appeal to the hearts of others. Only through men who have been touched by God can God come near to men."

⁹⁷² P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Struggle with God*, 130.

⁹⁷³ J. ROUSSEAU, *The Social Contract*, (I:i), trans. C. Betts, 45.

⁹⁷⁴ Ibid., (I:ii), 47.

to the Nyssen's concept of people who take the garments of skin for their real nature. According to Rousseau, slavery was imposed on man from without and his freedom depends on a change in the social system by which all obey the "general will" – the unanimous decision of all people or a collectively held will that aims at the common good instead of individual interests – that finds expression in the law: "To obey a law that we have imposed on ourselves is freedom."⁹⁷⁵ The Nyssen, on the other hand, says that slavery on man was imposed from within due to the misuse of his free will and man's freedom depends on his own free choices: "We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be" (LM II:3). Man can be free only when he has regained his prelapsarian natural will that obeys God's will. In Gregory, there is no dichotomy between human freedom and obedience to the will of God. Man is free if he chooses virtue; the choice of evil is never free, but derives from an enslavement to passions. Rousseau's theory of freedom awakened in people the desire for freedom and, in time, would lead to the worst excess of terror in France during the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799. For Christians, freedom is not an idea, but a person – Christ. To be free is to conform oneself to Christ by alienating oneself from all evil using one's free will. In a world where the distorted use of freedom leads to injustice and violence, consecrated persons manifest the mystery of human freedom as the path of obedience to the Father's will and the mystery of obedience as the path to the gradual conquest of true freedom (VC 91). In Christ they rule over everything that is not God. Christ came to give mankind spiritual freedom; this freedom is the antidote to every kind of violence.

To lead a life of freedom in Christ does not mean that one should be a rebel against those who seem to be against God's will. Christ has never been a rebel. He never advocated violent revolution. Never did he try to dethrone anyone and usurp power. Pope Benedict XVI, when he deals with the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple, says, "Jesus is in the Temple not as a rebel against his parents, but precisely as the obedient one, acting out the same obedience that leads to the Cross and the resurrection. What might seem like disobedience or inappropriate freedom vis-à-vis his parents is in reality the actual expression of his filial obedience."⁹⁷⁶ The cleansing of the Temple was

⁹⁷⁵ Ibid., (I:viii), 59. When a citizen obeys the law (general will), he/she is subject to his/her own will, and consequently, remains free. Rousseau associated freedom with obedience to the general will. The problem with Rousseau's idea was that it was difficult for people to decide the general will, and those who claimed to know the general will, i.e., the totalitarian rulers, unleashed terror for its implementation and defended their oppression in the name of freedom.

⁹⁷⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, trans. P. J. Whitmore, 86.

a gesture of his zeal for what belongs to his Father (Jn 2: 17). From childhood onwards Jesus is bound by the ‘must’: he must be with the Father (Lk 2: 49). Again, Jesus, before Pilate, divulges the complete otherness of his kingship and kingdom (Jn 18: 28-38). No one is fighting for his kingship. If military power is characteristic of kingship and kingdoms, there is no sign of it in Jesus’ case. He was considered a rebel by the corrupt system that expected him to submit himself to the status quo. Jesus’ civil disobedience was the fruit of his obedience to the mission; the referents of his obedience were neither the law, nor the institutions, nor the ideologies, nor the empire; his only reference was the Father’s will.⁹⁷⁷ His criticisms, rebukes and provocative behaviour were not out of hatred toward anyone. On the other hand, he was the true physician of the soul’s passions, who entered the life of human beings for the sake of those who are not well. Gregory says that through using his words and deeds as medicines, he tried to free from illness those who had succumbed to sickness, because they had separated themselves from the divine will, by conjoining them to the will of God.⁹⁷⁸ Freedom of consecrated persons results from their obedience to God’s will, and it obliges them to exercise, like Christ, their kingly corrective force without fear, and lead others also to God’s will. According to the Nyssen, the one, who searches for human honours instead of celestial ones and tries to please men instead of God, is an unbeliever.⁹⁷⁹ It means that Christian’s are called to obey and please not man, but God.

For Gregory, freedom means being independent and without a master, and all freedom, being without a master, consists in virtue.⁹⁸⁰ Virtue has no master because it is voluntary and free of all compulsion, and of all the things that one does, only those are pleasing to God that are done freely and therefore, virtuous.⁹⁸¹ Christian obedience is a virtue. Consecrated persons through the free will offering of their self-will characteristically reject any compromise with what is against God’s will, voluntarily choose what is pleasing to God, and ardently lead a life of freedom. It is their ‘imitation of’ and ‘participation in’ Christ’s ready obedience (*eupeitheia*) to the Father’s will. K. Ware notes that obedience to any authority on earth is not a prominent feature in the life of the ‘fool in Christ.’⁹⁸² The fool in Christ is free because

⁹⁷⁷ J. C. R. GARCIA PAREDES, *El << Encanto >> de la Vida Consagrada*, 89.

⁹⁷⁸ *HOF*, (Homily IV), 137.

⁹⁷⁹ *CML*, 149.

⁹⁸⁰ *SRe*, 243.

⁹⁸¹ *HSong*, (Homily 5), 173.

⁹⁸² K. WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, 161. Kallistos Ware cites as an example St Pelagia Ivanovna (1809-1884), a holy fool from Diveyevo in Russia, who rebuked a bishop by slapping him on the face: The incident occurred in 1861 at the Diveyevo Convent, of which

he has nothing to lose: he has renounced everything by his own choice. He cannot be exploited, for he has no ambition; and he fears God alone.⁹⁸³ Falling from God's friendship is only thing dreadful (LM II:320) for him. According to the Cappadocian, the reason St Paul called himself "a fool for Christ's sake" (1Cor 4:10) was that his mind was free from all earthly preoccupations.⁹⁸⁴ People are often considered useless and fools when they are not preoccupied with material affairs, but are filled with the good things on high and occupied in the contemplation of what really is.

The so-called "disobedience" of consecrated persons can become a sign of their freedom in Christ (cf. Jn 5:18) and a protest against those ambitious and megalomaniac people who accumulate power and usurp the place of God. Jesus affirmed his kingship before Pilate and said, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (Jn 18:37). The Father of Monasticism, Antony, introduced himself as "Christ's servant."⁹⁸⁵ During the persecution of Maximin Daja (311) he left the safety of the desert for the city of Alexandria, appeared in the court room and stimulated the zeal of the confessors of faith when all the others thought it well to remain in hiding.⁹⁸⁶ Through the vow of obedience consecrated men and women participate in Christ's kingship and, without fear, speak the truth and give witness to it with prophetic boldness, when others, afraid of the consequences, choose to keep silent. They are obliged to express and make active within history the will of Christ without wondering what will happen to them. Thomas Merton says that by obedience religious promise to use their freedom in the service of God alone and for his honour.⁹⁸⁷ But in exercising their freedom consecrated persons are to be quite sure that they are not

St Seraphim (1759-1833) of the monastery of Sarov, the best-known of the Russian nineteenth-century mystics, had been spiritual father until his death. The local hierarch, Bishop Nektary of Nizhni-Novgorod, had been conducting a visitation of the community, at which he illegally deposed the abbess, installing in her place someone acceptable only to a small minority of the nuns. On being struck by Pelagia on one cheek, Bishop Nektary – doubtless recalling the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:39) – offered the other cheek also. But Pelagia turned away, remarking in tones of contempt, "One slap is enough." The bishop, to his credit, insisted that she should not be punished: cf. *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁹⁸⁴ *HEccl.*, (Homily V), 90.

⁹⁸⁵ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Life of Saint Antony*, (no. 52), 64.

⁹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, (no. 46), 59.

⁹⁸⁷ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 241. Merton is of the opinion that to serve God, one has to overcome one's self-will; to serve God is to reign.

prisoners of their own self. Only he who escapes the prison of his self is free.⁹⁸⁸ Obedience liberates, while disobedience engenders fear and guilt.

4.2.4.2 Cross-bearers

Living the vow of obedience transforms consecrated persons into Cross-bearers (*staurophoroi*). *Vita Consecrata* reminds those who feel called to imitate the Incarnate Word who took on the condition of a ‘servant’ that it is a call to become bearers of the Cross (VC 6). We have already seen that, for Gregory, a servant of God, being superior to everyone in the world, follows or obeys only God (LM II:314). Christ was crucified only because he was the Servant of God. He did not surrender his will to worldly people, and out of ‘envy’ – “the passion which causes evil” (LM II:256) – they crucified him (cf. Mk 15:10). For the Nyssen, the Cross is the symbol of the kingship of Christ. In *On Virginit*y, he exhorts the virgins to carry the Cross as a banner against the Adversary.⁹⁸⁹ Gregory acknowledges that a Christian is persecuted only because he has become a stranger to sin and a friend of God; he is not a slave of sin, but a king, who has no master, by the exercise of his freedom of self-determination.⁹⁹⁰ Thus, persecution by evil proclaims the royal rank of the one who is persecuted. Sin came in through pleasure, but Christ expelled sin by suffering – the opposite of pleasure.⁹⁹¹ Therefore, he exhorts those who are persecuted because of the confession of their faith in Christ to see the intolerable tortures of their persecutors as medicine provided for the soul in order to cure the disease of pleasure. The power of God who destroys all evil is manifested in Christ’s ready obedience (*eupeitheia*) unto death on the Cross.

By the act of voluntary self-offering, a “pre-arranged death,”⁹⁹² Christ turned what would have been a piece of arbitrary violence, into a redemptive sacrifice. He endured the Cross for the joy set before him, despising shame. People usually prefer pain to humiliation. What Christ suffered more on the Cross was humiliation than pain. On the Cross, he established the victory of love (*agape*) over hatred. His ‘obedience to the Father’ – his love – was tested to the furthest point, but it was not overwhelmed. In his Chrism Mass homily

⁹⁸⁸ H. V. BALTHASAR, *Convergences*, 69.

⁹⁸⁹ *Virg*, 74.

⁹⁹⁰ *HBeat*, (Homily VIII), 89.

⁹⁹¹ *HBeat*, (Homily VIII), 88.

⁹⁹² *COr*, (XXXII), 941.

on 1 April 2010, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on this aspect of the mystery of the Cross:

Christ does not conquer through the sword, but through the Cross. He wins by conquering hatred. He wins through the force of his greater love. The Cross of Christ expresses his ‘no’ to violence. And in this way, it is God’s victory sign, which announces Jesus’ new way. The one who suffered (Christ) was stronger than the one who exercised power. In his self-giving on the Cross, Christ conquered violence.⁹⁹³

On the Cross, Christ bruised the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15) and returned to humankind the previous state of innocence in Paradise. His victory on the Cross was confirmed by his resurrection. In *The Life of Moses*, the antidote for all evil passions that lead to sin, for the Nyssen, is to look to the Cross: “To look to the Cross means to render one’s whole life dead and crucified to the world, unmoved by evil” (LM II:274). Christ on the Cross is the One who keeps the snake-bites, i.e., the attack of evil desires, from causing the death of the soul; the person who looks to the Crucified One rejects passion (LM II:276; Num 21:4-9). In the treatise, he notes that Moses, who has progressed in his journey with God to that stage in which he followed God looking at his back, did not try to defend himself against Aron and Miram who spoke against him out of envy and caused him sorrow, but besought God for mercy on their behalf (Num 12). He sees in Moses a Christified soul that imitates Christ who conquered the devil (who banished humankind from Paradise out of his envy) on the Cross through forgiving and praying for his persecutors without being provoked by their envy into succumbing to perverted passions and sin.

⁹⁹³ BENEDICT XVI, *Chrism Mass Homily*, St Peter’s Basilica 1 April 2010; cf. T. MERTON (ed.), *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, 46-50. Merton observes that the mystery of the Cross has greatly influenced Mahatma Gandhi in his nonviolent movement in India. Nonviolence meant for him voluntary submission to the penalty for non-cooperation with evil. According to Gandhi, a person practises nonviolence in obedience to the higher law – love – in contrast to the law of the brute – physical might –, and it is the highest form of bravery. Non-violent persons manifest their obedience to love through the suffering they endure. Gandhi says, “A non-violent man or woman will and should die without retaliation, anger or malice, ... This is the highest form of bravery. ... Cowardice is impotence worse than violence. The coward desires revenge but being afraid to die, he looks to others to do the work of defence for him. A coward is less than a man. ... Non-violence is not a cover for cowardice, but it is the supreme virtue of the brave ... Cowardice is wholly inconsistent with non-violence.” God manifested his greatest power when he, the omnipotent God who rules over the universe, died on the Cross without retaliation, despair, anger or malice. On the Cross, God revealed his ultimate power over all by renouncing coercive power that springs from passion, and by choosing to exercise power over all through the goodness of persuasion until at the final end all will be voluntarily subject to him.

According to Gregory, when envy attacked Moses, it was broken like a clay pot being dashed against a rock (LM II: 256-263). A Christified person is an impregnable rock for the devil. The Cross of Christ shows that sin and wickedness are not invincible; evil can be overcome.

Christ's death on the Cross was his victory not only over sin but also over death. In *Catechetical Orations* Gregory explains, using the imageries of fishhook and bait, how Christ's obedience unto death led to his lordship over death. The devil, who first deceived man by the bait of pleasure that veiled the fishhook of evil (death) with an outward appearance of good, was himself deceived when he took the bait of Christ's humanity and was caught by the fishhook of divinity (life) that was hidden in Christ's humanity.⁹⁹⁴ As the hook of divinity was gulped down by "the devil, who has power of death" (Heb 2:14), along with the bait of flesh, he found that he had been caught and defeated because life was introduced into the house of death. The Nyssen contrasts the deception of the devil with that of Christ and says that whereas the devil effected his deception for the ruin of human nature, Christ – who is at once the just, good, and wise – used his deception for the salvation not only of man who had perished but also of the devil who caused man's ruin, but is part of the goodness of the created order.⁹⁹⁵ The Cross reveals the wisdom of God: He does not overcome evil with evil, using brute (irrational) force, but rather works in such a way that the devil/evil in a sense causes his/its own downfall. Through the death on the Cross, Christ established the victory of redemptive love over hatred.

Gregory concentrates on the four parts of the Cross, protruding from their joint centre, to take it as a cosmic Cross that covers the breadth and length and height and depth of the universe (Eph 3:18; Phil 2:10), and says that Christ, when he died on the Cross as man, was pervading all things, binding together all things into himself, and bringing to one harmonious agreement the diverse natures of all existing things as God.⁹⁹⁶ While the Nyssen expounds God's love as the Creator using the symbol of the heavenly tabernacle (pre-incarnate Christ) that encompasses the universe and keeps the entire creation in harmony (LM II:177), he expounds God's love as the

⁹⁹⁴ *CO*, (XXII – XXVI), 924-932.

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, (XXVI), 930-931. Here the deception of Christ must be understood as an act of a physician who disguises healing medicine in something more palatable.

⁹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, (XXXII), 941; cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 46-47. According to Gregory, St Paul calls the upper part the Cross height, the lower depth, and the side extensions breadth and length (cf. Eph 3:18). In the light of the Nyssen's teaching, we can say that amidst the destructive forces of evil, it is God's enduring love that maintains the universe in a state of being.

Redeemer using the symbol of the Cross of the Incarnate Christ that pervades and gives unity to the whole universe. Christ was free to choose any type of death, and he chose the Cross to manifest the all-embracing and unifying nature of his redemptive love. In the light of Gregory's teaching, we can say that an obedient Christian is a cross-bearer who participates in the one sacrifice of Christ, in which he offered the undivided will of the created intelligent beings (angels and human beings) to God, and through whom God's redemptive love is extended to all. Those who are martyred because of their 'ready obedience' to God's love do not keep any grudge against their persecutors imitating Christ – who made his death the victory of redemptive love by offering it even to the benefit of the devil –, but rather invite them also to God's love. Cross-bearers, as kings, participate in the reign of Christ giving witness to the power of God's love, and their death, like the death of Moses, is not followed by the grave (Duet 34:6; LM II:314), but by an eternal life in the resurrected Christ.

According to the Nyssen, the mystery of the Cross will sweeten the seemingly difficult and disagreeable virtuous life of the Christians as the water of Marah was sweetened by the wood – a symbol of the Cross (Ex 15:25; LM II:132). "Anything and everything which frees man from himself becomes an organ through which he can be shown what God wishes to show him,"⁹⁹⁷ says Balthasar. Through obedience, which frees man from his self-will, one sees the divine beauty hidden behind the suffering for the sake of truth.⁹⁹⁸ In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory says, "This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more" (LM II:239). Obedience to God's will is always an ascent from what one has known to what is yet to be revealed. It is not a leap into darkness, but a leap into the illuminating mystery of God. It is the healing of carnal blindness and the vision of Christ who healed the disobedience of men by his own obedience. No one was ever so mistreated as Christ, no one so rejected, no one's talents so little used, no man ever so victimized by the authority.⁹⁹⁹ In his obedience to the Father's

⁹⁹⁷ H. V. BALTHASAR, *Prayer*, 162.

⁹⁹⁸ Cf. E. D. GAAL, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift*, 86. Pope Benedict XVI has aptly brought out the beauty and mystery of the Cross when he said, "Whoever believes in God, in the God who manifested himself precisely in the altered appearance of Christ crucified as Love 'to the end' (Jn 13:1), knows that beauty is truth and truth beauty; but in the suffering Christ he also learns that the beauty of truth also embraces offense, pain, and even the dark mystery of death, and that this can only be found in accepting suffering, not in ignoring it."

⁹⁹⁹ M. FRANCIS, *Chastity, Poverty and Obedience*, 4.

will, Christ humbled himself and underwent all these sufferings. The Father exalted him and given him a name above all other names (Phil 2: 8-9).

The Nyssen proclaims that it is God's strength to descend to the humiliation of humanity that furnishes a clearer proof of the omnipotence of the Divine nature than even the greatness and supernatural character of the miracles.¹⁰⁰⁰ In the Incarnate Christ, God transcends his own nature; he takes on the feeble humanity and heals its pride – “the desire to excel other people, and the seed and root of every sin”¹⁰⁰¹ – on the Cross by establishing the law of divine love, which belongs to the rational nature, over the law of physical might, which belongs to the animal nature. The law of self-sacrificial love (*agape*) is concerned for the good of others and guarantees life, while the law of physical might is self-interested and promotes death. By the obedience on the Cross, Christ confirmed the victory of the human nature overthrowing the devil who strives to drag man to death by alienating him from the love of God and neighbour. Therefore, Christ on the Cross attracts all people to himself (cf. Jn 12:32); at the name of him every knee should bend (cf. Phil 2:10).

For the Cappadocian, the Cross of Christ, which wards off evil and is all powerful, has a kingly image and is a great trophy of victory for those who willingly carry it unashamed of suffering because of their love (*agape*), and they model Christ's image of a king.¹⁰⁰² They are kings in the sense that participating in the Cross of Christ they manifest their power to transcend the fallen nature (cf. Rom 7:24-25). While suffering that is inflicted upon a person contrary to his own will, that he rejects with resentment, may prove to be entirely negative in its effect, suffering that a person accepts out of love, even though it may sometimes seem to destroy him, proves in the end to be creative and transfiguring. Suffering that a person embraces out of love is an expression not of weakness but of power, not of subjection but of victory. Rejection of Christ, who is the true Servant of God, will continue until the end of the world, and those who follow him, as his servants, can't avoid Cross from their life. But through the Cross they can participate in the victory of their Master, the undefeated God who offers a way through suffering.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *COr*, (XXIV), 927. Gregory writes, “It is not the vastness of the heavens, and the bright shining of its constellations, and the order of the universe and the unbroken administration over all existence that so manifestly displays the transcendent power of the Deity, as this condescension to the weakness of our nature...” In the ancient Greco-Roman world strength attained a great place in the culture, and weakness was demeaning and a disgraceful quality. The exaltation of the Cross was an assault on the values of power, glory, honour and success, so dear to these societies.

¹⁰⁰¹ *Virg*, 22.

¹⁰⁰² GREGORY OF NYSSA, *In Praise of Stephen, Saint and Protomartyr II*, 67.

Christians exhibit their victory over everything worldly in bearing the Cross of Christ. Being Cross-bearers, consecrated persons “do not feel anguish over the loss of earthly things, but rejoice at gaining the heavenly.”¹⁰⁰³ They boldly declare to the world that they are away from everything that sets itself in opposition to virtuous thoughts, words and deeds.

4.2.4.3 For Others

The Word-Incarnate, who “came not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28), taught that a true servant of God is a true servant of mankind. Obedience is a social virtue, and is a proof of love towards one’s neighbour, no less than of one’s love towards God.¹⁰⁰⁴ In *The Life of Moses*, we see that Moses, who has become a king over the enemies of the soul by his obedient following behind God, is a man who dedicates himself to free his people from the land of slavery and lead them safely to the Promised Land. Moses led the Hebrews as their kingly leader. But his kingship was a participation in Christ’s kingship. Christ, God’s obedient servant-king, did not want servility around him, but people who are free.¹⁰⁰⁵ Gregory sees in Moses, who receded to pray holding his hands aloft when the Hebrews fought against Amalek and his people under the leadership of Joshua (Ex 17:8-13), a ‘Servant of God’ who has educated others also to become ‘servants of God’ (LM II:148). When the Hebrews were children in their life of virtue, Moses fought on their behalf. But he gradually raised them to maturity and to that state of freedom in which they were able to fight and defeat their enemies using no longer him as their leader but God himself. In the homilies on the *Song of Songs*, the bride who falls in love with the Bridegroom teaches other virgins ‘the necessity both of looking toward the Bridegroom with love and of making one’s way through life in purity and in freedom from the disturbance of passion,’ and thereby she brings them to the Bridegroom.¹⁰⁰⁶ What the Nyssen has in mind is that one who has become a servant of Christ in the Church through his life of obedience helps others also grow in virtues and, without binding them to him, brings them directly under the guidance of Christ as adult Christians. The

¹⁰⁰³ *HBeat*, (Homily VIII), 88.

¹⁰⁰⁴ E. F. MORISON, *St. Basil and His Rule*, 50.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Cf. NICHOLAS CABASILAS, *The Life in Christ*, 143. “He exercises leadership over those whom he rules, being more cheerful toward them than friends, more tender than a father, more united to them than members of the same body, more necessary than a heart, making them yield without fear, nor bribing them by rewards, but by being himself the power that governs and attaches his subjects to himself,” says Cabasilas.

¹⁰⁰⁶ *HSong*, (Homily 13), 397.

effectiveness of Moses' leadership can be traced from the fact that Balam's demonic magic (Num 24:1) became ineffective against the Hebrews who lived in virtue (LM II:292) and proved that "people of God are invincible" (LM II:294).

The leadership that consecrated men and women exercise as servants of Christ or as 'kings' is that of educating and persuading others also to follow (obey) Christ as adult Christians, i.e., they exercise the role of spiritual fathers and mothers. The Nyssen's brother Basil had already found in the Book of Judges – which tells how each man did what was right in his own eyes and gives the reason for this in the words: "In those days there was no *king* in Israel" (Judg 21:25) – the cause of every discord and quarrelling among the members of the Church.¹⁰⁰⁷ The Church suffers because of the lack of "servants of God" or "kings" who are able to persuade and impel others on the path of virtues. Consecrated persons, as "kings," do not use their charisma to exploit others, but rejoice in others' growth in virtues and recede like Moses so that Christ may become everyone's sole leader.

Only the one who has conquered his self-will in obedience to God's will can serve people selflessly. Conscious conformity with the will of Christ makes consecrated persons God's true servants, who, "like Christ, gird their loins with the towel of obedience,"¹⁰⁰⁸ in the material world. Gregory teaches that service to mankind must be given freely, and what is done expecting glory and honour cannot be called a service; one can become a servant of mankind only if he disdains and despises the accolades of this world, 'rejects all earthly glory' (Jn 5:41), practises self-denial, and seeks God's will above everything else.¹⁰⁰⁹ Being obedient to God, consecrated men and women take an active role "for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51) by assuming responsibility for a certain creative contribution of their own. It saves the consecrated life from becoming a mere withdrawal, a burying of talents, a sterilization of vital gifts given to persons for the good of all.¹⁰¹⁰ As Balthasar observes a Christian who consecrates himself without reservation is in the end the man who is most fruitful for the world because he gives not only things and deeds; he gives himself to the world.¹⁰¹¹ Such a consecrated person renounces all private and limited interests and works for the common good in a community.

¹⁰⁰⁷ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *On the Judgment of God*, in M. M. WAGNER (trans.), *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, 38.

¹⁰⁰⁸ JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 103.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Cf. *CML*, 145.

¹⁰¹⁰ T. MERTON, *The Life of the Vows*, 58.

¹⁰¹¹ H. V. BALTHASAR, *Convergences*, 68.

According to the Nyssen, a follower of God cannot but manifest God's love for humanity. Love for humanity is a participation in Christ's salvific mission. In homily 14 on the *Song of Songs*, Gregory identifies the Good Samaritan who descended down the Jerico Road to become a neighbour to the man who fell among thieves with Christ who descended down to the level of humanity in order to save the world. The Cappadocian teaches that anyone who participates in Christ becomes a host to him and receives a pair of coins – one of which is to love God with one's whole soul, and the other, to love one's neighbour as oneself.¹⁰¹² Towards the end of the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI meditates on the inseparable connection between service of God and service of neighbour in the life of consecrated persons who achieved the third stage of the ascent in spiritual life:

In his encounter 'face to face' with the God who is Love, the monk senses the impelling need to transform his whole life into service of neighbour, in addition to service of God. This explains the great emphasis on hospitality, refuge and care of the infirm in the vicinity of the monasteries. It also explains the immense initiatives of human welfare and Christian formation, aimed above all at the very poor, who became the object of care firstly for the monastic and mendicant orders, and later for the various male and female religious institutes all through the history of the Church (DCE 40).

One who falls in love with God falls in love with mankind too. For consecrated persons, to serve others is to do the will of God.

To follow behind God having won over all enemies of the soul is to become a friend of God in *The Life of Moses* (II:319-320). Gregory notes that Moses who became a friend of God rendered great service to the Hebrews through his intercession with God for his people. Moses is an intercessor because of his friendship with God and love for his people. His love for the people was so profound that he preferred to perish with all the rest if God did not through his good will forgive their errors (Ex 32: 32) and stayed God's wrath against the Israelites. The Nyssen attests that God averted judgment so as not to grieve his friend (LM II:319). Through living the vow of obedience, consecrated men and women, like Moses, become God's servants and friends.¹⁰¹³ As God's true servants and friends, they wish all people obeyed

¹⁰¹² *HSong*, (Homily 14), 453.

¹⁰¹³ Gregory wants that the friends of God lead a blameless life and make any opponent be at a loss with no accusation to make against them: "Railing reproach does not touch those who live virtuously. For how can the man without possessions be reviled for covetousness? How can someone go around preaching on profligacy to the man who lives a retiring and

God's will, and, like Christ, voluntarily take upon themselves all the sins of others and intercede for them. All consecrated persons, especially those who dedicate themselves for contemplative life, are great missionaries and active participants in the saving work of Christ through their intercessory prayers.

Based on Gregory's teachings, we can conclude that by making their kingly ministry a service to neighbour following the example of the obedient Christ, consecrated persons would proclaim to the world that the consecrated life is not a kind of waste of human energies which might be used more efficiently for a greater good. The consecrated life is a priceless gift. *Vita Consecrata* likens this gift to the costly perfume with which Mary anointed Jesus' feet at Bethany and the fragrance of which filled the house (Jn 12:1-3):

The precious ointment poured out as a pure act of love, and thus transcending all *utilitarian* considerations, is a sign of unbounded generosity, as expressed in a life spent in loving and serving the Lord, in order to devote oneself to his person and his Mystical Body. From such a life *poured out* without reserve there spreads a fragrance which fills the whole house. The house of God, the Church, today no less than in the past, is adorned and enriched by the presence of the consecrated life" (VC 104).

For consecrated persons, becoming God's friends is the only thing worthy of honour and desire. Friendship with God guarantees their ready obedience (*eupeitheia*), which in turn would transform their lives into servants of God and servants of mankind for "those who love God cannot fail to love their fellow human beings" (VC 77).

4.3 Conclusion

In this last chapter of the thesis, the implications in the third stage of the spiritual ascent, the theophany of God's back, in *The Life of Moses* are applied to the vow of obedience, and this vow is presented as the culmination of consecrated persons' Christian perfection as it enables them to participate in Christ's human will and become another Christ. Consecrated men and women conform themselves to Christ in their thoughts, words and actions, and become an extension of the humanity of Christ in the world. Chastity

secluded life? Or about temper to the mild man? Or about luxury to the man of moderate habits? Or about any other blameable things to those who are renowned for their opposites?" (LM II:295-296). Freedom from passions and covetousness is the sign of their friendship with God.

through the Christification of the biological being engenders *apatheia* – dispassion –, poverty through the Christification of the intellect leads to *theoria* – contemplation – and obedience through the Christification of the will transform their life into an *epektasis* – a perpetual following of God in union with the divine will. According to the Nyssen, a person is able to follow God only when he is stabilized in Christ who is absolute virtue. Christian perfection is the perpetual progress in the infinite Good by ‘following behind God looking at his back,’ that is, by constantly obeying God’s will, always trying to discover and reach greater depths of understanding through humility. Since Christ is true God and true Man, he himself is the way, the director, the destination and the judge of one’s divine race to Christian perfection. Following Christ, the God-Man, consecrated persons can become true servants of God and mankind.

It is to be noted that in this chapter the vow of obedience is presented not as consecrated persons’ obedience to a human will, but as their obedience to God’s will. What distinguishes religious obedience from all other kinds of obedience is the fact that it is a means of closer union with God. Their obedience is a participation in Christ’s obedience to the Father’s will, which is a response to the Father’s love. Love differentiates Christian obedience from legal obedience, i.e., obedience under a sense of duty. We saw that true obedience, which is a virtue and is free from the expectation of reward or the fear of punishment, is born when there exists true friendship with God, which is nothing but estrangement from evil. In the light of these facts, we have seen that the ideal superior of consecrated persons is a spiritual father or mother who participates in the Father’s love and communicates that love (agape) to them. Synodality, in which everyone transcends one’s self-will and reaches harmony in an ambience of love, is also indicated as a means to discover the will of God.

All Christians are called to obey God’s will, i.e., Christian life is first and foremost obedience itself. We could see that this specific nature of Christian life demands ongoing spiritual warfare against the enemies of the soul. The goal of obedience is the same for all: Christian perfection. The Church provides equal opportunity for all to live in obedience, and all Christians are called to participate in the Trinitarian, sacramental, virtue, and ministerial dimensions of obedience. For Gregory, the darts of the devil (cf. Eph 6:16) or temptations are occasions of litmus test to discern the veracity of one’s Christian life. He makes use of a story taken from secular literature about “a monkey, dressed-up in a dancer’s mask and costume, that gained fame for its graceful dance in disguise, but once revealed its real nature during the show when someone threw almonds on to the stage making it tear off the

mask and rush to the almonds” in order to say that the ape-like souls of those who play the role of the Christian through pretence and imitation will be brought to light by the almond-like vices.¹⁰¹⁴ In this chapter, we saw that consecrated persons who dedicate themselves to live the common vocation of all Christians in its perfection live their vow of obedience as union with God, and as revealing the meaning of the eucharist, the theological virtue of love, and the kingly ministry of Jesus. They, through their vow of obedience, not only attain their own perfection but impel others through their own example of self-transcendence to follow Christ – vertically towards God and horizontally towards brethren – and be convinced that there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom.

¹⁰¹⁴ *WIMCOC*, 82-83.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa's concept of participation in God and infinite progress (*epektasis*) is of particular importance in the modern world which has sidelined God, considers man as an accidental product of evolution with no reference to eternity, and treats creation as a storehouse of resources to be exploited and used. The world has become a doubting Thomas who refuses to believe anything until he is shown proof. Therefore, it has become the need of the Church to evangelize the world with the first Christian proclamation of the apostles in the *Acts* who brought Christ to people who were unaware of him. In the spiritual desert of the modern world, Christianity cannot make an impact if the message it proclaims is not confirmed by signs. The greatest sign is the transformed life of the message-bearer. In the beginning, Christianity was able to attract and convert the world not through its magnificent buildings or grandiose economic and social endeavours but through persons who reflected Christ. Among others there were simple people who, filled with the Holy Spirit, imitated and proclaimed the chaste, poor and obedient Christ through consecrating themselves to a life of Christian perfection in cultures that vied for carnal pleasures, wealth and power. These 'consecrated persons' looked upon 'vows' as part of their 'relationship to' or 'participation in' Christ. It is what differentiated Christians' vowed life from that found in other religions. Their life of configuration with Christ through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience has a perennial significance in every epoch of the Church as she is called to give witness to Christ in the darkness of God-eclipse.

Today consecrated men and women by living their vows as means of participation and ontological transformation in Christ can become signs of God, and reveal the truth about man and creation. As their life unites contemplation and action, they will replace heretical humanism with theocentric humanism. The true renewal of the consecrated life does not consist in a reform of structures and observances, but in recovering the authentic spirit of monasticism that converses with contemporary people. The Nyssen's ascetical treatise *The Life of Moses* is a route-map for consecrated persons who see their vowed life as a means not only of moral perfection but also of ontological transformation in Christ. They give witness to the fact that "whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a

man”¹⁰¹⁵, i.e., fully human, and that having been created in the image of God, man is destined for self-transcendence, for *theosis*. Notwithstanding that they are unmarried and have no biological offspring, they still communicate life – divine life to men and women, and through them to the Church, and through the Church to the world.

In the thesis, we have seen how each vow serves consecrated persons to establish a union both with Christ and with people. Vows are means not only to conform oneself to Christ through the Christification of the biological being, the intellect and the will but also to embody the Church life in its trinitarian, sacramental, virtue and ministerial dimensions. In *The Life of Moses*, Christian perfection is presented as a return journey of the soul from its fallen state through the regaining of its primordial vocation in Christ to the fulfilment of this vocation in Christ himself. Since Christian perfection is a return journey, it is an estrangement from everything that led to the fall of Adam: passion, failure of contemplation, and lack of participation in God. The stages of purification, illumination and union, which constitute man’s return to God and which the spirituality of the Christian East proposes for human salvation (*theosis*), can be lived by consecrated people through their vows. The vow of chastity lays the foundation of the spiritual ascent by constituting a state of dispassion (*apatheia*) in the soul. Once the soul has been freed from the passions, the vow of poverty, having attained freedom from covetousness, takes the soul to the contemplation (*theoria*) of the invisible mysteries of God through the illumination of the intellect by the Holy Spirit. Finally, the soul, that has acquired divine knowledge in contemplation, falls in love with God, the ultimate truth, and through the vow of obedience that secures the natural function of human freedom makes a perpetual progress (*epektasis*) in following God through uniting the created will to the divine will. We have found that through the evangelical counsels consecrated men and women can conform their ‘biological existence, intellect and will’ with that of Christ in his human nature. Thereby Christ enables them to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in them.¹⁰¹⁶ Their Christian perfection, therefore, is a participation in Christ’s perfections.

Consecrated persons are lay persons or clerics who dedicate themselves totally to God in a more intimate consecration, rooted in baptism, by means of the evangelical counsels, and become members of an institute of consecrated life which is established and approved within the Church. In the

¹⁰¹⁵ GS 41, “... Quicumque Christum sequitur, Hominem perfectum, et ipse magis homo fit.

¹⁰¹⁶ Cf. CCC 521; GE 20.

Catholic Church, there are two main categories which constitute the state of consecrated life through profession of the evangelical counsels or vows: religious institutes and secular institutes.¹⁰¹⁷ Religious institutes are consisted of religious orders and religious congregations. The religious state is a public and complete state of consecrated life in which members observe the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience by means of “public vows”, i.e., vows that are accepted by a legitimate superior in the name of the Church. In religious orders solemn vows are made by at least some of the members, whereas in religious congregations all members make simple vows.¹⁰¹⁸ Fraternal life in community and a degree of separation from the world are characteristics of the religious institutes. Orders can be ‘contemplative’ (e.g., Benedictines, Carthusians etc.) or ‘active’ (e.g., Franciscans, Jesuits etc.), and so are congregations. In institutes of apostolic (active) religious life, members “consecrate themselves to God through the ‘public profession of the evangelical counsels’ in accordance with a specific charism and in a stable form of common life, for the sake of carrying out different forms of apostolic service to the People of God” (VC 9). They unite contemplation and action. Members who belong to institutes completely devoted to contemplation “direct the whole of their lives and all their activities to the contemplation of God, offer the ecclesial community a singular testimony of the Church’s love for her Lord, and contribute, with hidden apostolic fruitfulness, to the growth of the People of God” (VC 8). In

¹⁰¹⁷ *The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_profile_en.html (20 March 2023)

¹⁰¹⁸ The term “order” is associated with the word “Rule” (Latin *Regola*). In the Latin Church, religious orders, each with a specific rule of life, emerged as part of the renewal or reform of the monastic life. In the beginning, many of the orders founded by reformers followed the Rule of St Benedict (which bears certain characteristics of the Rule of Basil) or the Rule of St Augustine (the oldest monastic rule in the West that is somewhat in the Pachomian tradition). The Order of Cluny, which is said to have prepared the way for religious orders in the present sense, was founded in 910 by William the Pious to defend monastic patrimony against increasing interference from the laity who had begun to appropriate and adapt it. Community life of the monks of Cluny was organized under the Rule of Benedict. In the 11th century there was a flourishing of orders especially in France and Italy. The Order of the Carthusians founded by Bruno (c.1030-1101) in France did not use the Benedictine Rule, but a set of Statutes of their own devising. Between the 17th and the 19th centuries there emerged many religious congregations. Pius X, with the motu proprio *Dei Providentis* (1906), subjected any foundation of a religious institute to the approval of the Holy See: cf. J. T. GARCIA, “Ordini Religiosi”, in T. GOFFI – A. PALAZZINI (eds.), *Dizionario Teologico della Vita Consacrata*, 1187-1199. See also M. URIBE, “Religious Orders, Roman Catholic”, in D. PATTE (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, 1065-1071.

secular institutes, members “live out their consecration to God in the world through the ‘profession of the evangelical counsels,’ – i.e., through private vows that may or may not be accepted by a legitimate superior – in the midst of temporal realities; they wish in this way to be a leaven of wisdom and a witness of grace within cultural, economic and political life” (VC 10). The persons who make profession in this state of consecrated life do not normally live together in communities, and they continue to live and to work in the midst of the people of God in the normal conditions of their own social setting according to the secular style of life which is proper to them. Secular institutes call for the union of consecration and secularity.

Societies of apostolic life or of common life resemble institutes of consecrated life, and members who belong to them normally live without any formal religious vows. But there are a number of societies who make vows or other bonds defined in their constitutions to undertake to live the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They pursue the particular apostolic purpose of the society, and lead a life as brothers or sisters in common, observing the constitutions. Their form of life places a greater emphasis on apostolic works than does consecrated life. Hermits, anchorites and virgins with vows or sacred bonds in the Catholic Church are consecrated persons without necessarily belonging to institutes of consecration. They are under the direction of the diocesan bishop. When all is said and done, consecrated life in the Church can be understood as a garden of holiness in which men and women, who belong to different institutes, show forth variety of fruits of Christian virtues through metabolizing the same vows which they absorb into their very being through Profession. They become different facets of Christ’s presence in the world. Even though the vocation to Christian perfection is open to all Christians irrespective of their state of life, this thesis concentrates only on consecrated persons’ special commitment to Christian perfection through a life according to the vows.

A Christological approach to religious vows helps us spot consecrated life within the horizon of the incarnational character of Christian life. Configuration to Christ is not a mission of the consecrated life, but the consecrated life in itself is configuration to Christ. Vatican Council II’s *Perfectae Caritatis* insists on “the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel” (PC 2) as one of the main criteria for the post-conciliar renewal of the consecrated life. The consecrated life is a visible portrait of what Christianity, the Church, ought to be. In “a utilitarian and technocratic culture which is inclined to assess the importance of things and even of people in

relation to their immediate usefulness”¹⁰¹⁹ and which treats Church life, especially the consecrated life, as a waste of human energies, consecrated persons reveal the beauty and goodness of Christ and the joy which comes from being with him, and prove themselves to be the most useful for mankind through their total self-gift for others. The world can learn from them how the craving to seek pleasure, to possess and to dominate can be overcome without discrediting one’s own personal dignity and integrity. “In a polarized society, where different cultures experience difficulty in living alongside one another, where the powerless encounter oppression, where inequality abounds, consecrated men and women are called to offer a concrete model of community which, by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing their respective gifts, makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters,”¹⁰²⁰ says Pope Francis. Religious consecration provides an authentic contradiction which the world is in need of for its salvific renewal.

In the first chapter of this thesis, we saw how Gregory’s treatise provides both a doctrine of Christian perfection and a practical guideline to attain this perfection. For Gregory, God is not an object to learn about, but the subject who comes to finite men and women, makes them participate in him, divinizes them and imparts knowledge about himself while being beyond the limit of their comprehensibility because of his infinite nature. Human beings’ participation in God depends on their exercise of freedom. In the treatise, Moses prefigures a Christian (soul) who responds positively to God’s (Christ’s) condescending love in theophanies, and attains both divine knowledge and ontological transformation, i.e., divinization (*theosis*). In the light of the three stages of Moses’ spiritual ascent, the Nyssen teaches us that the perfection of Christian life consists in the soul’s progressive participation in Christ, and God’s self-revelation in Christ requires from the soul three types of responses: purification, illumination, and unceasing progress in God. We tried to understand the progressive participation in Christ as Christification, and noted that the three theophanies (stages of spiritual ascent) can be replaced with the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in the case of the consecrated life. We also saw how Christian monks in early monasticism endeavoured to live this perfection through their tacit profession of vows.

In the second chapter, the first stage of the ascent to Christian perfection in *The Life of Moses* – the theophany of the burning bush – is seen

¹⁰¹⁹ VC 103

¹⁰²⁰ FRANCIS, *To All Consecrated People*, Apostolic Letter on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, no. 2.

in relation to the vow of chastity. We saw that, for Gregory, perfect chastity or virginity is a participation in God's purity. By the vow of chastity, consecrated persons commit themselves to achieve God's purity by putting off the fleshly life through *praxis* that aims at both the overcoming of obstacles through purification, and the cultivation of virtues. We saw that even though the athletic effort of purification is painful, it proves the free exercise of human freedom, and helps man and woman to convert the members of their body into the members of Christ's body, i.e., the Christification of the biological being. We noted that, for Gregory, the achievement of perfect chastity is not moralism because man can achieve it only in collaboration with God's grace. Chastity is purity, not only of the body but also of the soul. In Chastity one's passions are directed toward God, and it constitutes the state of *apatheia*, the foundation of the soul's spiritual ascent. Taking cues from *The Life of Moses*, we tried to understand how chastity helps consecrated persons be tied to the baptismal life, live the theological virtue of faith, administer the royal priesthood of the faithful in the worthiest manner transcending gender, and begin their ascent to the Father through the Son. We found that since the vow of chastity throws light on the different dimensions of Christian life, the perfect chastity of consecrated persons is not an alienation from the common vocation of the faithful, but the fulfilment of this vocation by being spouses of Christ and effective instruments of God's works in the world. We also saw that the vow of chastity does not diminish human personality, but raises it to a higher level that protects love from falling into selfish and utilitarian attitudes.

In the third chapter, we understood the second stage of Moses' spiritual ascent – the theophany of the heavenly tabernacle – in relation to the vow of poverty. We explained poverty not as a mere material renunciation but as the radical emptying of the soul of all its finite content in order to gain knowledge of God. Consecrated persons' vow of poverty is their dedication for spiritual enrichment and the alleviation of the spiritual poverty in the world. We saw that, for Gregory, the true riches are invisible divine virtues. Once man has acquired those riches, he would become God's wise steward in the world. In poverty consecrated persons ascend from the state of *apatheia* gained through chastity to the next state of *theoria*. This ascent to divine knowledge and virtues is made possible by their Christification of the intellect, which enables them to see everything through the eyes God. Thus, the poverty of the religious is a participation in the poverty of Christ and an ascent to his divinity: in their spirit-poverty, they regard everything – their sense knowledge and intellectual concepts – “as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ” (Phil 3:8) and let their intellect be illuminated by

the Holy Spirit. This freedom from self-centredness leads to self-transformation; they give witness to the poor Christ in the world. We saw in this chapter how consecrated persons embody their Church life through their life of poverty by manifesting it as their 'life in the Spirit' that unravels the mystery of the sacrament of chrismation, points to eschatological hope, and actualizes the prophetic ministry of the faithful. They resist the invasion and domination of the world by their vow of poverty and prove that real happiness lies in things invisible. They proclaim that God is the true wealth of the human heart. We saw that the religious give witness to this truth especially through living their charisms, practising synodality in community life, and becoming spiritual fathers and mothers of their spiritual sons and daughters.

In the last chapter of the thesis, we expounded the vow of obedience in the backdrop of the third stage of Moses' spiritual ascent in *The Life of Moses* – the theophany of God's back. We presented this vow as the culmination of consecrated persons' Christian perfection as it enables them to participate in Christ's human will, and thereby unite themselves to God's will. Consecrated men and women, through the Christification of the will, conform themselves to Christ in their thoughts, words and actions, and become an extension of the humanity of Christ in the world. We understood their union with God not as static, but as dynamic: it is their 'perpetual following of God' (*epektasis*) in union with his will. In the light of the Nyssen's treatise, we saw that a person is able to follow God only when he/she is stabilized in Christ, only when he/she has acquired Christ's human will. True obedience, as a virtue, is a participation in Christ's obedience to the Father, and it always takes place in an ambience of love because love liberates the person from the fear of punishment and the expectation of reward. We saw that the vow of obedience of the religious makes them true friends and servants not only of God but also of mankind, and it proclaims their freedom from self-will. We also tried to see the vow of obedience within the purview of the four dimensions of Christian life and found that the religious, through their life of obedience, proclaim the truth of Church life: it is a journey through the Son, in the Spirit, to the Father. We saw how this vow of the religious is inextricably linked to the Eucharistic mystery as it is their total offering to God. For Gregory, love is obedience itself. Based on this teaching, we identified the ideal authority in communities of consecrated persons with spiritual fathers and mothers. By connecting the life of obedience to the kingly ministry of the faithful, we tried to overturn the worldly notion of authority and power based on physical might, and pedestaled the power of the soul to follow God's will without compromise as the true sign of man's kingship. To an obedient person, the Cross is a sign of victory, not of failure.

According to Gregory, the divine call to follow and imitate Christ meets each human soul at his or her own level. He encourages each person to live according to virtue – Christ – in his or her own position and task in the service of the one Body of Christ, as one of its members. In the thesis we have seen that the consecrated life, as a sign of the Church that ‘journeys together’ (synodality) in spirit-poverty, counters the growing Procrustes syndrome that refers to the tendency of some people or companies in the competitive world to belittle others who outshine them in talents or abilities out of envy. Synodality in community life reminds the religious that the work of the Spirit in each member is to be respected and taken heed of. In a world in which diversities seem to estrange people from each other, the beauty of unity in diversity that exists in communities of consecrated persons exemplifies the mystery of the Body of Christ in which harmony persists without endangering the uniqueness of each member. The beauty of the Church – the bride – in the world is nothing but her conformity to Christ – the Bridegroom –, which distinguishes her to be belonging to the One who has not a substitute. The consecrated life as an ascent to Christian perfection ‘represents the totality of the Church,’¹⁰²¹ reveals the truth of her as the true bride of Christ and adorns her with its beauty.

While the consecrated life is a sign of the Church, the aberrations in this state of life cause “God’s name be blasphemed among the gentiles” (Rom 2:24). Not least among the reasons for the present faith-crisis in the Church are the deviations of the consecrated life from its path to conformity to Christ. Early Christian monasticism – the first form and youthfulness of the consecrated life – was an attractive force in the world because of its counter cultural values and life-style. In every age, the consecrated life is tormented by the worldly spirit that tempts and constrains the followers of Christ to find ways to reconcile the paradoxes of gluttony and chastity, luxury and poverty and, individualism and obedience, instead of being tangible signs of Christ’s chastity, poverty and obedience in the world. In the life of many religious, the concepts of chastity, poverty and obedience got diverted from the teachings of the spiritual masters of the past and are given new meanings that justify one’s compromise to the world. Many consecrated men and women lost the true sense of dedication: the commitment of man’s whole life to something ontologically higher than himself – God. They are encouraged to dedicate themselves to tasks, to things and to spend themselves as instruments of production, and are repaid with worldly glamour and status. As a result, the gap between the consecrated life and Christ is becoming wider and that between the consecrated life and the world is becoming thinner. Consecrated

¹⁰²¹ All Christians are called to live in chastity, practice poverty and obey God’s will.

persons have much to learn from the second century Apostolic Father Hermas who had visions of the Church in the form of a woman. In the first vision, the woman is old, weak and helpless from the sins of her unfaithful children, and asks Hermas to repent. After his repentance, he sees her made younger in the subsequent visions. The more he distances himself from sin, the younger and the more beautiful the woman becomes.¹⁰²² The consecrated life also can be rejuvenated and made beautiful, if the religious follow the route map to Christian perfection laid down by Gregory in *The Life of Moses*.

The teachings of the Nyssen cast light on the fact that the modern materialistic and pragmatic view of man is an obstacle to live the vows. The present society affirms the primacy and self-satisfaction of human life, and the self-sufficiency of the world without any necessary reference to any transcendent reality. It induces man to live in this world as if there were no God. Relativism has reduced good and evil to what works and what does not work, what serves a purpose here and now and what does not. Having lost the sense of self-transcendence, man exists for the sake of things, objects, goods and machines. Christian values have been thrown down from their pedestals and were replaced with worldly values. Loss of faith and decrease in the number of children in Christian families reflect in the decreased number of entries to the consecrated life, and the little faith of those who enter are often shaken under the startling realization that all that glitters is not gold. The onslaught of secularism on the consecrated life has uprooted this way of life from its rich spiritual tradition and undermined the sense of the sacred. The gulf between the past and the present of the consecrated life is, indeed, the gulf between God and man. God-thirsty men and women of the past imitated and conformed themselves to Christ, the God-Man. A consecrated life without holiness is drawing a caricature of Christ and sows the seeds of atheism in the society.

¹⁰²² Cf. B. D. EHRMAN (ed. & trans.), *The Apostolic Fathers Volume II: The Shepherd of Hermas*, 221, 229-231. Hermas writes, "... in the first vision, brothers, the year before, she appeared to me as a very elderly woman, seated on a chair. In the other vision she had a younger face, but her skin and hair were older, and she spoke to me while standing. But she was more cheerful than before. And in the third vision she was very young and exceedingly beautiful in appearance; only her hair was older. ... (in the fourth vision) a young woman suddenly met me, clothed as if coming from a bridal chamber, dressed all in white and with white sandals, veiled down to her forehead. Her veil was a headband and her hair was white. From my earlier visions I knew that she was the Church, and I became cheerful." When the old woman becomes young, her hair remains white because, according to the vision Hermas received, the Church was created first and gathers in herself the experiences of all times: cf. *Ibid.*, 191.

It is time the consecrated life made a return to the monastic spirit of the past. It is not a return to become traditionalists, i.e., backward looking people who confine themselves to old rituals at the expense of living faith, but a return to be those who acknowledge the monastic spirit of the past as if it were the motor fuel for the vehicle of the consecrated life, i.e., forward looking people who embrace the living faith of those who have died and effectively responds to the signs of the time. In other words, 'ressourcement' (return to the sources) without a commitment to 'aggiornamento' (updating) makes consecrated life a museum piece; 'aggiornamento' without fidelity to 'ressourcement' turns this state of life to be a vanity fair. The need of the time is a combination of both and a balanced approach. When confronted with the fundamental tension between fidelity to the origins and attention to the new, Gregory teaches us to uphold the middle path – the royal highway of virtues. In every age, Christian perfection consists in a life according to virtues. The monastic tradition, like the roots of a tree, brings to the tree of the consecrated life with many branches the sap of the living faith of spiritual fathers and mothers of the past that allows it to grow, flourish and bear fruit. Returning to the source helps consecrated men and women understand what their spiritual ancestors were looking for, and stay focused on the original and authentic goal of consecrated life. This way, fidelity to the origins is the secret of the perennial youth and attractiveness of the consecrated life.

Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses* presents human life as a journey whose end is a return to the beginning. But this return to the beginning is not just a retrieval of Paradise which Adam forfeited, but the completion of God's intention in creating humanity. Thus, we can notice the convergence of 'ressourcement' and 'aggiornamento' in this treatise. Gregory invites consecrated persons to endow the world with a ray of divine beauty that lights up the path of human existence by their spiritual ascent imitating Moses who went up Mt Sinai as a mere man but descended carrying God with him, glory shining on his face. This life according the vows thus reveals the truth about human beings: they are simultaneously earthly and heavenly, transient and eternal, visible and invisible. It is also the apt answer to the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church today. This state of life that began as a movement of exemplary saintly persons grows through attraction. It attracts all humanity to enter into an alliance with God at a time when there are idolatrous deviations towards politics, towards economics, towards everything that brings fun and pleasure and towards one's own ego.

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