

## To Love God, the Poor, and Learning: Lessons Learned from Saint Gregory of Nazianzus

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### Abstract

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The author, one of the most prominent theologians of our time, examines the relevance of Gregory of Nazianzus's oration "On Love for the Poor" and its implications for contemporary Christians and especially for academics. Drawing on the recent scholarship of John McGuckin, Brian Daley, Susan Holman, and Frederick Norris, Hauerwas argues that the Cappadocian father's reflections on the poor were born of his family's wealth and prestige but nonetheless put to powerful use rhetorically in defence of the poor and in arguing for the creation of a virtuous society where the poor could be seen as part of the commonwealth of God. Hauerwas describes the relationship between the poor and the university by envisaging the politics necessary for them to be properly welcomed, noting that universities desiring to both teach and especially live the gospel may need to have at the center of their work a l'Arche home or a Catholic Worker house or something similar. Such an arrangement would be in contrast to the sociopolitical and academic thought on poverty of modern liberalism which, Hauerwas says in citing Saba Mahmood, robs the poor of agency and leads to a monopoly of the state in ostensibly looking after them. In the end, Gregory's lesson to us today is that to live as an ascetic need not be in tension with learning if we understand the discipline of thought to be one of the forms asceticism must take for the good of rich and poor alike.



*“It is the poor who tell us what the polis is”*  
(Oscar Romero)<sup>1</sup>

### 1. *The Poor and the University*

“Woe is me,” wrote Gregory of Nazianzus when he was delayed from leaving Constantinople to return to Nazianzus and retirement.<sup>2</sup> These are exactly my sentiments faced with the task of writing on Gregory of Nazianzus. I am without eloquence yet I must write about this most eloquent theologian in the Christian tradition. My plight is even more deplorable. I am not a scholar or the son of a scholar. Even less can I count myself a patristic scholar. Alas, I am but a theologian, which means I live in fear that someday someone will say in response to a paper such as this, “You really do not know what you are talking about, do you?” To which I can only reply, “Of course I do not know what I am talking about because it is my duty to talk of God.” That, surely, is a self-justifying response that may indicate that theologians live in a permanent state of self-deception.

That I am in such a woeful state is the fault of Fred Norris. He told me I would be a natural for writing on Gregory of Nazianzus. So I have read Gregory’s Orations just as Fred told me I should. I have also read the extraordinary scholarly work on Gregory by Fred Norris, John McGuckin<sup>3</sup>, and Susan Holman. But my reading has only made me aware of my inadequacy. At best I can be no more than a reporter of their work. I can only ask you not to judge me harshly for I am only doing what Fred Norris asked me to do.

I must now report, however, that this opening gambit exemplifies the rhetorical device known as the “Southern con,” that is,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Susan Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Letter 182 in *The Fathers Speak: St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Georges Barrois (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), 71.

<sup>3</sup> *Editor’s note:* John McGuckin reviews Brian Daley’s new book on Gregory Nazianzus elsewhere in this issue.

feigned incompetence to secure your listener's sympathy. As far as I know the scholarly study necessary to trace the origin and development of the "Southern con" has not been done, but I suspect we – that is, those of us lucky to be born Southern – learned to use it on the Yankees who assumed if you talked with a drawl you must be stupid. It is a great advantage for your enemy to assume you are not all that bright.

My use of the "Southern con," however, is meant to pay homage to Gregory who, McGuckin observes, often disparaged "rhetoric" as "superficial decoration and verbosity." Yet McGuckin notes that if we look closely we will see that Gregory is "merely using a carefully crafted rhetorical device to persuade his audience to lay aside their resistance to the craft he is employing to convince them of his argument's merit."<sup>4</sup> It turns out the Greeks must have had roots in the South.

The only problem is that this time the "con" happens to be true. God only knows what I am doing writing a paper on Gregory of Nazianzus and, in particular, his oration, "On Love for the Poor."<sup>5</sup> It has been years since I originally read Gregory of Nazianzus. As a Wesleyan, I have always held the Cappadocians in high regard: *theosis*, we Methodists believe, was but an early anticipation of Wesley's understanding of perfection.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, reading Gregory again reminded me how deeply I admire his theology and style. Yet it remains true I have nothing new to say about Gregory's theology and, in particular, his "On Love for the Poor."

Nonetheless, I do want to put to work Gregory's reflections on poverty, and in particular lepers, to show why Christians have a stake in sustaining the work of the university. You may well

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<sup>4</sup> John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 41.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, "On Love for the Poor," in *Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 39–71. All references to "On Love for the Poor" will appear in the text using the usual format of the number of the Oration followed by the paragraph number.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. S.T. Kimbrough, ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002); and Idem., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005).