

The Ontology of Virginitv in Gregory of Nyssa

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Abstract

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Saint Gregory of Nyssa's *Treatise on Virginitv* reflects on the pain of married life in order to call Christians to a deeper vision oriented towards divinization. Virginitv has universal dimensions. Most fundamentally, Gregory's praise of virginitv can be appropriated today as a call to transcend commonness.



Introduction

"Blessed are those who do not live the common life." So Gregory of Nyssa proclaims in his *Treatise on Virginitv*. To the contemporary reader, this treatise may seem odd or simply ancient, but its vitality and attraction are in its call to something deeper, something extraordinary even within the ordinary life. The "common life," the "ordinary life," sometimes seems to be the new ideal of our jeans-and-fast-food society. Gregory, with his language and ideals so alien to ours, calls us to the uncommon. His text may repel or shock us. We may be tempted to categorize his work as

rhetoric or narrative, and so denude it of its impact; or to rationalize or “soften” it, removing that which seems embarrassing or unacceptable. To do so would be to deprive ourselves of the deep understanding of human nature, sexuality and relationship with which Gregory is so rich; but we must enter with courage and openness into his world in order to receive the wealth of his vision of nature, both human and divine.

A Nobler State

“The aim of this discourse is to create in the reader a desire for a life of virtue. But because of the many distractions associated with what the divine apostle calls the married life, the treatise suggests, as a kind of door or entrance into a nobler state, the life of virginity.”¹

A “nobler state of life:” can such a conception hold true, even today? Not so long ago, common opinion might have suggested that all states of life were the same in the eyes of God: married or celibate, secular or religious. For Gregory, however, not only is virginity a nobler state, but indeed, it transports life to another ontological level altogether: “Virginity exists with the whole of other-worldly nature and associates with superior powers; it neither separates itself from things divine nor does it attach itself to their opposites” (p. 10). So transcendent is the “power of virginity” that it “resides in heaven with the Father of spiritual beings, and takes part in the chorus of hypercosmic powers (καὶ μένειν καὶ μετὰ τῶν ὑπερκοσμίων χορεύειν δυνάμεων), ... it brings God down to a sharing in human life and lifts humans up to a desire of heavenly things, becoming a kind of binding force in the human affinity to God ... what power of words could be found to equal the grandeur of this marvel?”

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Treatise on Virginity* in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1967), 6. All references to this work are taken from this edition and will be cited in the text.

Gregory does not intend to give a long eulogy on virginitv: "In my judgement, persons who compose long and detailed panegyrics and think that thus they add something to the wonder of virginitv deceive themselves. They effect the opposite of their intention, for what they exalt grandiloquently they render the object of suspicion with their praise. Whatever has greatness in its nature provides wonder of itself and has no need of verbal support" (p. 9). Nevertheless, he feels inclined to say a few words on virginitv so that no one may imagine he has failed to recognize its beauty, or that he remains unresponsive to it. Wishing to create a sense of modesty, he warns: "Let no one expect pompous words from me. Perhaps such a thing would be impossible for us, even if we should wish it, since we are unpractised in such manner of speech" (p. 12).

Instead of proceeding to speak directly about virginitv, therefore, Gregory begins a long speech on the tribulations encountered in the married life, "a reminder of the difficulties of marriage and proof that the author was not unmarried," as he remarks. He informs his audience, who most likely are monastics, that they are fortunate not to have married – unlike himself: "Blessed are they who have the power to choose the better things and those who are not cut off from them by having chosen the *common life previously*, so that we are kept as if by an abyss from the boast of virginitv to which one cannot return once having set one's foot upon the path of worldly life."

Gregory does have some positive words to offer on the married life: "Do you want us to begin with the most delightful features of married life? Truly, what is chiefly sought after in marriage is the joy of living with someone," but this joy, according to Gregory, quickly turns into a grief-filled anxiety. If only it were possible for those marrying to know this ahead of time, "how frequent would be the race of deserters from marriage to virginitv." Gregory vividly describes the psychological shock which soon overcomes the newlyweds:

laughter moistened by tears, grief mingled with joy, death, everywhere present, fastening itself upon each of our pleasures. When the bridegroom looks upon the face of his beloved, the fear of separation immediately overcomes him; while he listens to her sweet voice, he is aware that sometime he will not hear it; when he is delighted by the sight of her beauty, then, especially, does he shudder at the expectation of misfortune. When he perceives the qualities in youth sought after, e.g., the shining eye, the lovely eyebrows, the cheek with their sweet smile, lips blooming with their natural redness, hair golden and heavy, shining about the head with its intricate braid, and all that ephemeral splendour, then, most of all, even if he is not given to brooding, it dawns upon his soul that this beauty will not go on forever, that it will come to nothing, that in place of what he now beholds there will be bones, disgusting and ugly, with no trace, no reminder, nor remains of this present blossoming (p. 15).

Criticism of Gregory

In the commentary to his translation of the text, Michel Aubineau criticizes Gregory for such passages: "There is no doubt about it, here you have an artist who knows how to play all cards, use all of his resources in order to seduce his reader (symmetries, metaphors, rare or poetical words, incantation of certain recurrences): one admires his virtuosity, but not without regretting at times such a waste of talent. It becomes harder and harder to take him seriously."² It is not so evident, however, that such words reflect a waste of talent, nor that they cast doubt on Gregory's seriousness. On the contrary, the passage is perfectly in keeping with his system of thought. Gregory has no desire to discard marriage altogether, for "marriage is not to be despised either" (p. 31); rather, it is "that which the human inclines to naturally since it is the means by which

² Michel Aubineau, "Introduction," *Sources chrétiennes* 119 (1966), 93.