

THE CHURCH-STATE RELATIONSHIP IN THE WRITINGS OF ST. BASIL THE GREAT



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The second half of the fourth century produced the greatest minds of the patristic era. However, their legacy was not the fruit of some peaceful possession of divine revelation and its equally peaceful development. In fact, this "golden age of the patristic era" was characterized by struggles between orthodox Christians and the heterodox movements of Arians and their offshoot, the Pneumatomachians. The latter denied the divinity and consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit. Against this situation, the famous *De Spiritu Sancto* of St. Basil the Great came into being.¹ It was a response to a tremendous controversy and to church-political struggles in which the imperial party, headed by the Emperor Valens (364-378 A.D.) himself, was siding with the Arian and Pneumatomachian heresy.²

In 374, Amphilochius, the first cousin of St. Gregory of Nazianzus and spiritual son of St. Basil, paid the first of his annual autumn visits to Caesarea. On this occasion, he asked St. Basil to clear up all the doubts as to the true doctrine of the Holy Spirit and to write a treatise against the Pneumatomachians. St. Basil complied and dedicated the completed work to Amphilochius.³

De Spiritu Sancto is the most important work of St. Basil, not only because of its theological contents, but also, because it superbly illustrates both the intellectual climate as well as the church-political situation of that turbulent period. The last chapter, ch. XXX (or sections 76 to 78), is especially revealing. In it, St. Basil compares the then-prevailing conditions to a naval battle. Redactional committees usually insert an explanatory subtitle, like 'Exposition of the present state of the Churches.'⁴ But this is very misleading, for a closer analysis reveals that St. Basil is not only describing the sad and divided—that is, heretical and schismatical—state of the Churches, but hints that the naval battle was a suitable veiled image of the clash between the Church and State—which was a brutal reality at that time in Cappadocia and elsewhere in the Empire.

But first of all, let us read the text describing the analogy to the naval battle:

76. To what then shall I liken our present condition? It may be compared, I think, to some naval battle which has arisen out of time old quarrels, and is

fought by men who cherish a deadly hate against one another, of long experience in naval warfare, and eager for the fight. Look, I beg you, at the picture thus raised before your eyes. See the rival fleets rushing in dread array to the attack. With a burst of uncontrollable fury they engage and fight it out. Fancy, if you like, the ships driven to and fro by a raging tempest, while thick darkness falls from the clouds and blackens all the scene, so that watchwords are indistinguishable in the confusion, and all distinction between friend and foe is lost. To fill up the details of the imaginary picture, suppose the sea swollen with billows and whirled up from the deep, while a vehement torrent of rain pours down from the clouds and the terrible waves rise high. From every quarter of heaven the winds beat upon one point, where both the fleets are dashed one against the other. Of the combatants some are turning traitors; some are deserting in the very thick of the fight; some have at one and the same moment to urge on their boats, all beaten by the gale, and to advance against their assailants, Jealousy of authority and the lust of individual mastery splits the sailors into parties which deal mutual death to one another. Think, besides all this, of the confused and unmeaning roar sounding over all the sea, from howling winds, from crashing vessels, from boiling surf, from the yells of the combatants as they express their varying emotions in every kind of noise, so that not a word from admiral or pilot can be heard. The disorder and confusion is tremendous, for the extremity of misfortune when life is despaired of, gives men license for every kind of wickedness. Suppose, too, that the men are all smitten with the incurable plague of mad love of glory, so that they do not cease from their struggle each to get the better of the other, while their ship is actually settling down into the deep.⁵

After this picturesque and vivid analogy to a naval battle in section 77 of *De Spiritu Sancto*, St. Basil writes:

Turn now I beg you from this figurative description to the unhappy reality. Did it not at one time appear that the Arian schism, after its separation into a sect opposed to the Church of God, stood itself alone in hostile array?⁶

This is an allusion to the condemnation of Arius and Arianism at the Council of Nicaea (or Nikaia) in 325. St. Basil continues:

But when the attitude of our foes against us was changed from one of long standing and bitter strife to one of open warfare, then, as is well known, the war was split up in more ways that I can tell into many subdivisions, so that all men were stirred to a state of inveterate hatred alike by common party spirit and individual suspicion. But what storm at sea was ever so fierce and wild as this tempest of the Churches?⁷

The mention of the “war” is quite significant, for in Ep. 242, written in 376 A.D., St. Basil says: “This is the thirteenth year since the war of the heretics against us originated.” The year 363 is the date of the Acadian Council of Antioch; the year 364 is the date of the accession of Valens and Valentinian to the imperial throne, also of the Semi-Arian Synod of Lampsacus, of St. Basil’s or-