

Theology and Spirituality

The Theme of Suffering in St. Gregory of Nazianzus's Poetry

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Abstract: When we refer to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, we think in particular of his theological writings for which he was named „The Theologian”, of his fight in the defense of Christian Orthodoxy against the heresies of his time. In this perspective we see „the saint”. Gregory, as a common person, however, a complicated character, unveils himself in his poetry in a different way than we are accustomed to thinking of him; in this posture he is much less known to the public.

Poetry is the place where we identify his inner life, his way to sainthood, meaning the man with his struggles, doubts, weaknesses, sufferings, temptations, problems, frustrations, indignations, depressions, faults, failures, discontents and complaints.

Keywords: Gregory of Nazianzus, illness, flesh, spirit, solitude, Christ, salvation.

Introduction

St. Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390) was a personality of first rank in the complex world of the fourth Christian century.⁷ John McGuckin believes that St. Gregory was the greatest rhetor of his time,⁸ whereas A. Benoit calls him one of the greatest rhetors that ever existed⁹ and one of the literary giants of the Church¹⁰ with a special vocation for poetry.

Excelling in the fields of theology, philosophy, and literature, as one of the most remarkable intellectuals of his century, St. Gregory was well known for the depths of his

⁷ Michele Pellegrino, *La Poesia de S. Gregorio Nazianzeno*, Societa editrice „Vita e pensiero”, Milano, 1932, p. 107.

⁸ John McGuckin, „Preface” in *Saint Gregory Nazianzen: Selected Poems*, SLG Press, Convent of the Incarnation, Faircross, Oxford, Third impression, 1995, p. VIII.

⁹ Alphonse Benoit, *Saint Gregoire de Nazianze*, Typographie Marius Olive, Marseille, 1876, p. 715.

¹⁰ John McGuckin, *op. cit.*, p. V.

knowledge and for the subtlety of his philosophical and theological interpretations. He was admired but also envied by his contemporaries. His poetic production was immense; towards the end of his life, in particular, he wrote over 400 poems of autobiography, theology, and history, nearly 20,000 verses - 30,000, according to other sources.¹¹

Gregory as a Common Person

When referring to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, we think in particular of his theological writings, for which he was named „The Theologian”, of his fight in the defense of Christian Orthodoxy against the heresies of his time. In this perspective we are seeing „the saint”, Gregory, as a common person, however, a complicated character (as Brian Matz notices¹²), unveils himself in his poetry in a different way than we are accustomed to thinking of him; and this aspect of him is much less known to the public.¹³

Poetry is where we can see his inner life, his way to sainthood, that is, the man in his struggles, doubts, weaknesses, sufferings, temptations, problems, frustrations, indignations, depressions, faults, failures, discontents and complaints.

As John McGuckin comments, St. Gregory’s poetry shows a man aware of his failures and shortcomings.¹⁴ As such, he wrote poetry, among other reasons, based on an inner need for personal consolation in moments when he suffered physical pain, as he himself testifies, but also when he was overwhelmed by sadness at the thought that “an old swan” as he was, would soon have to leave this life.¹⁵

St. Gregory is writing about himself with an overflowing sincerity, openly, as if to someone who knows him in all aspects and details of his life, and from whom he cannot hide anything. However, it is easy to assume that, in the Saint’s mind, God himself was that “someone”. That is why his poetry is a type of confession and at the same time a dialogue with God. However, it is also clear that his poetical laments were meant to be left to posterity. As such, it is a kind of kenosis, of public repentance, and he is showing courage in his overwhelming sincerity, as if saying: this is me, just the way you see me, and what you don't see, I will tell you. The great theologian shows us a total assumption of his physical and spiritual states. That is why in the poem *On his troubles* he can write with surprising detachment: “I will expose my misery in front of all.”¹⁶

With a visible Platonic influence - according to which there is a total difference

¹¹ Theodor Damian, *Gregory of Nazianzus. Discovering a New Face of His Personality*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2022, p. 3.

¹² Brian Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, Baker Academic, Gd. Rapids, MI, 2016, p. 4.

¹³ Theodor Damian, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁴ John McGuckin, *op. cit.*, p. VI.

¹⁵ Theodor Damian, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁶ Saint Grégoire de Nazianze, *Oeuvres Poétiques. Poèmes Personnels*, II, 1, 1-11, text traduit et annoté par Jean Bernardi, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2004, p. 9.

between body and soul as far as their nature is concerned, and based on which the body, being inferior to the soul, is considered negatively, evil, and a jail for the soul, St. Gregory has a constant tendency to culpabilize the body (the term most often used is actually “flesh”) and its senses for the many mistakes one makes, which in turn lead to the numerous problems one suffers in life. Of a delicate physical constitution, constantly ill, which marked his life profoundly, he argues often with his own “flesh” that he blames and reprimands, as, for instance, when he complains about the unhappy soul dressed in flesh, the “dense flesh” of the present human condition.¹⁷

In the poem *Against the flesh*, as in other poems, too, Gregory discusses the paradoxical union between body and soul and indicates clearly that human dignity is linked to the soul, even if the human “I” is both body and soul, at the same time. That is why, as if chastising the body, he asks decidedly: “Body, respect me, control your desires and stop exerting your fury on my soul.”¹⁸ The hard fight with the bodily drives, not easy at all, is evident from the epithets he uses in a different address: “Flesh, I am telling you, you are so difficult to heal, sweet enemy..., ferocious animal..., fire that cools - incredible thing. Yet, it would be even more incredible if you would end up becoming my friend.”¹⁹

However, in all his troubles and sufferings, physical and psychic, Gregory always turns to Christ and places his hope in Him.

Solitude

The great theologian of the 4th century liked to live a solitary life. He had an undeniable passion for philosophy, which for him meant withdrawal in solitude in order to contemplate the beauty of all things divine. In a letter to his friend Theodore of Tyana, Gregory, while explaining his withdrawal from the world in order to philosophize in peace, the most profitable thing of all, as he puts it, complains that his health had not improved, and asks Theodore to pray for him.²⁰

St. Gregory was made for a hermit lifestyle; he lived ascetically. Solitude was in his heart and mind. One could think that this was not a proper environment for his shaky condition, yet, it is what he considered the most appropriate place in order to complain to God of all his pains. And the greater the suffering, even among protests, the greater his attachment to God. He was living the experience of the desert even while living in the world. It seemed as if the illness would make his longing for solitude stronger. Even when

¹⁷ Theodor Damian, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁸ *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze, Poèmes et Lettres*, Textes choisis et présentés par Edmond Devolder dans la traduction de Paul Gallay, Les Editions du Soleil Levant, Namur, Belgique, 1960, p. 57.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 77-79.

²⁰ Brian E. Daley, S.J., *Gregory of Nazianzus*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 203, note 180.

he was younger, in his prime, these two, illness and the longing for solitude, asceticism, were obvious in his physiognomy and in his life. One can see that even in the complaint about his appointment as bishop of Sasima, a hamlet he calls a “pit hole”, when he writes this deplorable self-portrait: “a man who has nothing, wrinkled, crooked, poorly dressed, melted by fasting and tears, with an undignifying face.”²¹

Even when he was patriarch of Constantinople during the Second Ecumenical Council, which he led in part, the state of his health was not good and the desire to withdraw into seclusion incessant. In 381, after the problems he had to go through during the debates of this council, he resigned in order to retreat to Nazianzus, on the family's estate, yet in isolation, in order to dedicate himself to prayer, meditation, and poetry, where he found consolation. In his farewell speech departing from Constantinople, he invoked as the reason for his resignation the condition of his health. He describes himself, while deploring his physical state, degraded by time, illness, and work, as being an old man, shy, dying every day, tired physically and mentally, so much so that he could barely speak.²² He left the imperial capital telling those he left behind that he owed nothing to anybody putting it in this way: “the only debt I have to pay is death, and this belongs to God.”²³

Health problems

As time passed, several diseases found their place in Gregory's body. Around the year of 368, a terrible infection appeared in his mouth, reaching to the end of the throat and preventing his normal breathing. At times he could not breathe at all, making him think that he lived his last days. Then he was hit by asthma that tormented him for the rest of his life.²⁴ After 380, his health deteriorated further. Now he was having problems with his legs. The care offered by several doctors was of little help.²⁵

John McGuckin mentions an acute rheumatism that around the years 382, 383 debilitated him even more. That determined Gregory to go to the Xanxaris baths, near Tyana (in Cappadocia), for treatment,²⁶ which did not help much, however.

Stelianos Papadopoulos describes how a horrible arthritis tormented him awfully. Gregory could barely move his legs, could not bend them any more, thus forcing him to write daily while standing. Yet what hurt him the most was that he could not kneel

²¹ Jean Bernardi, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²² Brian E. Daley, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

²³ Jean Bernardi, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

²⁴ Stelianos Papadopoulos, *Vulturul rănit. Viața Sfântului Grigorie Teologul [The Wounded Eagle. The Life of St. Gregory the Theologian]*, Translation from Greek by Constantin Coman and Cornel Coman, Bizantină, Bucharest, 2006, p. 73.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 275.

²⁶ John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2001, pp. 387-388.

anymore for prayers.²⁷ Around the year 387, Papadopoulos specifies in his book *The Wounded Eagle*, asthma and arthritis were simply torturing Gregory, and the stiffness of the body caused him unbearable pains.²⁸ In the following years those pains increased further, he became weak, felt more and more cold, was just skin and bone. The doctors who came to see him were completely powerless. His body wasted away, and the asthma cut off his breathing.²⁹ In 390 Gregory became bedridden. He could not bear the pains anymore and could not control his groanings and sighs. This is how St. Gregory the Theologian died in the second half of the month of January 390.³⁰

The Lamentations

Nowhere can one find more details about St. Gregory of Nazianzus's sufferings and especially about the way in which he was bearing them than in his poetry. His poems are full of lamentations, complaints, one can even say whining in the proper sense of expressions of self pity, accompanied by moaning and sighs.

Thus, poetry is the place where one sees the theologian as crying, victimizing and underestimating himself, protesting, showing regret and unhappiness through a large variety of expressions, one more impressive than the other. Here are some of them: "my pains," "my sufferings," "my illnesses," "my failures," "my miseries," "my tortures," "my burdens," "my wounds," "a groaning heart," "my dead limbs," "sad life," "I am tormented over here," "fragile old age," and others. Some lamentations also indicate a state of harsh self-judgment with accents of repentance, as for example, when he bitterly culpabilizes himself: "I am bad" "cry, cry, sinner," "the serpent caught me again," "I am terrified."³¹

Repenting for "my bitter mistakes," he addresses himself: "Oh, unhappy me! Oh, soul that suffers sad punishments!" In many other places Gregory talks to himself, moaning in desolation and bitterness: "All that is left in me is a hopeless pain. This is what makes me groan." However, a glimmer of hope is visible from the way he speaks about purification of all his "filths" through rivers of tears, weeping to match his mistakes (*On his troubles*).³²

Then, with analogies to the Gospels, he describes himself: "I am a new Lazarus among the dead," "I am a new paralytic lying in bed," "This is my pain and the illness that overtakes my limbs," and again: "an ugly illness devours and destroys me, weakening my

²⁷ Stelianos Papadopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 297.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 314 și 322.

³¹ Theodor Damian, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

³² Jean Bernardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 32, 18, 21, 22, 25, 38.

limbs every year” (*Against the deceiver in time of sickness*).³³ In the poem *To himself in form of question and answer*, the suffering Saint asks and responds: “Where is the strength of my well-made limbs? Exhausted by sickness.” And then, as if taken by despair: “Where should I throw my body?” In the poem *Lamentation* he even asks Lord Jesus, somehow as if reproaching, yet as if waiting for a confirmation related to this tormented destiny, and as if this confirmation would have brought a certain consolation: “Alas, alas, my sufferings! What did I do wrong? Am I the only one who treated improperly your pure sacrifices?” And then he continues complaining about temptations, just as a child does when he runs to his parent, seeking protection: “Alas, my Christ, the serpent came to me again...” and then, crying out, using a metaphor: “Sword, extinguish the cursed fire at least a little” (*Lament to Christ*).³⁴

Speaking about his tormented old age, Gregory confesses his powerlessness and also his disagreement with what is happening to him, even though with some kind of resignation: “Old age has poured on me its embarrassing ordeal; I bend to the ground, multiplying the sadness in my heart” (*On his troubles*).³⁵ In another poem he describes his weakness but also the permanent fight with the flesh: “Old age advances, my limbs are weak, yet the rebellious flesh continues to make its madness felt” (*Elegy*). And in the poem *Lamentation*, announcing again the suffering, he writes: “I am wounded by many evils and bodily pains,” which causes him to actually weep: “Alas, alas, my tears are flowing,” he addresses Christ the Saviour, telling Him that he gave up a sin and consequently Jesus should take away his pain: “My pride is gone; you make the pain of my flesh go as well.”³⁶

Impressive and very touching is also the moment when the Saint from Nazianzus describes the depth of his passion in his old age: “Already my hair is white and my articulations contract...,” “I have started already to get closer to the evening of a painful existence...,” “I have never had such a profound pain” (*On his troubles*).³⁷ He seems shaken, becomes skeptical, interrogative, with a penchant to nihilistic evaluations: “Nothing is sure. I am, indeed, a murky stream of a river, always passing, having nothing stable,” “I am nothing. Why am I hit by so many evils?” (*On human nature*).³⁸ In other words, if he were “somebody,” he could understand the reason for the blow or even for the devil’s temptations. Yet, being a “nothing,” the question would be: why?

³³ St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Poems on Scripture*, Transl. and Introduction by Brian Dunkle, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York, 2021, pp. 143, 145, 141.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 137, 129, 157.

³⁵ Jean Bernardi, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

³⁶ Brian Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

³⁷ Jean Bernardi, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁸ *On God and Man. The Theological Poetry of St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, Translated and introduced by Peter Gilbert, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2001, p. 133.

After having such thoughts, he exclaims, as if being at the end of his power, yet also on a slightly nihilistic note, as if nothing is important, nothing counts anymore: “I have enough of all that the present can offer: wealth, poverty, joys and unjoyful things, honor, humility, enemies and friends.”³⁹

In the poem *Prayer to Christ*, speaking bluntly of the “life of suffering” and of “my poor body,” as he always does after lamentations, even after those that seem to be formulated in the negative, Gregory turns to Christ, his unmoved anchor: “Look to my poor body,” he tells Him, “Your own making, created with Your own hands. Now the time has come that I leave it; how pitiful it is, how badly it smells, how terribly fragile it has become.” Then the request comes: “Help me or take me out of this life before the end will bring me ever greater pains.” As if he had suffered enough, Gregory comes with his interesting logic meant to persuade Christ to bring his life to an end: “Lord, why is there a need for more pains in order to purify my soul?” The question is courageous, because it implies the idea that the pain he endures is sufficient and he feels he is already pure.

St. Gregory continues to lament, yet on a different tone, now expressing his faithfulness and adhesion to Christ: “I die, I die in these big tribulations; however, I am dying for You, my God, the one who disperses the darkness of sickness for this dead man, who just for a little more time, lives in this painful life.”⁴⁰

The reproaches

In order to better understand St. Gregory's troubled spiritual state that at times could bring him to the brink of despair; one needs, besides the few mentioned instances where the dialogue with Christ seems to be disrespectful, to get into more detail into his addresses to Lord Jesus, in particular those that indicate in more expressive ways, due to the dire suffering, his indignation, reproach, warning, order, even ultimatum.

Thus, in many places in his poetry, the great theologian seems to allow himself to be overwhelmed by dark thoughts, feeling abandoned by God, even though in the same moments he continues to have strong faith in Christ as his Savior. This situation is similar to the one when Christ, on the cross, on the one hand, cried to the Father: “Why did you abandon me?”, yet on the other hand, at the same time, He manifested His uninterrupted connection with the Father when He said: “In Your hands I entrust My soul.”

Gregory writes: “I fought bitterly, and I chased Satan away. Yet You, Lord, did not come to fill me, and inside me did not blow the grace of your Spirit... why are you scolding

³⁹ Brian Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁴⁰ John McGuckin, „Preface”, pp. 17-18.

me, why did you abandon me...? Do with me the way You want.”⁴¹ The idea of abandon appears also in guise of a conclusion: “I weep because Christ has abandoned me, He who used to take care of me” (*Against the deceiver in time of sickness*), yet continuing to keep Christ accountable in other ways: “If I am God’s breath, why, Christ, allow that I be bound to the earth?” (*Elegiac*); “why do the believers have problems and the sinners don’t? (*Lamentations about his pains and a prayer to Christ to take him from this life*).

About the end of life, this is what the Theologian from Nazianzus writes in the poem *Desire for death*: “If I am nothing, my Christ, why did You make me so? If You cherish me, why am I assaulted by so many evils?”⁴² One has to notice here St. Gregory's courage to reproach to Christ the Savior his problems and existential dilemmas.

In the poem *Imploration* there is another reproach to the Lord, in the context of the “sickness's fury,” specifying that his knees don’t obey him anymore, that his limbs lost their power, that illness and time have finished him: “Lord Christ, why did You bind me in this trap of the flesh, in this cold life, in this muddy and miserable hole, if I am, as one would say, Your inheritance, indeed divine?” Then follows a strange combination of prayer and warning: “Have mercy, put an end to this misery, or decide that I have fought enough and have me taken away from here, put an end to my sufferings.”⁴³

In another poem (*Lamentation*) one reads the same type of ultimatum, even though phrased slightly differently: “You either stop the evil and have mercy on Your servant, or allow this unfortunate soul to endure everything.” This imperative attitude is manifested also in the context of some questions through which the Saint wants to hold Christ accountable: “Did You turn off Your grace towards Your servant?”, as if telling Christ: while others still receive it? And also: “Why has Your servant been ruined?”, a question sweetened by its introduction: “Give me strength, my Christ” (*The prayer of a sick man to Christ*), and completed by a declaration of faithfulness: “If I ever betrayed You during the tempest, then You can throw me again” (away from your face),⁴⁴ implying that he never betrayed Jesus. Yet, in his mind the question seems to persist: why is all this happening to him?

Continuing in the same tone, Gregory manifests indignation for his illness, for the problems of his life, and, with the same courage that could seem out of place, he questions Jesus: “Why am I so much hit by the waves of life?” And then, as a possible, indirect accusation: “Had I not been Yours, my Christ, this life would be a crime.”⁴⁵

Notwithstanding all these reprimands, however, St. Gregory realizes what could be considered his “insolence,” guts or impiety of holding Christ responsible for what he has

⁴¹ Stelianos Papadopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

⁴² Brian Dunkle, *op. cit.*, pp. 141, 131, 135, 133.

⁴³ Brian E. Daley, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

⁴⁴ Brian Dunkle, *op. cit.*, pp. 131, 125.

⁴⁵ Brian E. Daley, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

to do in life or how he must be treated. Here is a surprising and welcome declaration: “This is something extraordinary for me to make laws for divinity. O Christ, do with me, Your servant, the way You want” (*Against the deceiver in time of sickness*).⁴⁶

All the above references to reproaches and questions offer us the most adequate chance to imagine the terrible, unbearable pains, maybe even the coming to the limits of despair in some moments of excruciating and indescribable suffering in the life of the Saint.

Yet, it is important to point to the fact that even in such moments he was clinging to Christ “as a child to the mother’s lap,” as nicely put by a Romanian poet.

Christ, the last refuge

Towards the end of his existence, having enough of pains, of life itself, St. Gregory of Nazianzus asks Christ to bring an end to his sufferings.⁴⁷ “Through Your death [O, Logos], liberate me from this life. Give me rest in my trouble” (*Lamentations about his pains and a prayer to Christ to take him from this life*).⁴⁸

The Saint's insistence indicates the unbearable state in which he was: “Come,” he prays Christ, “help Your servant, and don't send a gloomy end to my life;” then, with a certain type of courage combined with prayer, he writes: “If You hid Yourself from me, give me strength for help in the battle” (*Against the deceiver in time of sickness*). And again: “What kind of relief will I have in my troubles? O, Christ, my king, save me!” (*Lamentation concerning the sorrows of his soul*). At times, Gregory speaks as if Jesus were a common person, who can forget things or who could be taken by surprise: “Lord, don't forget me, lest the enemy wrest me when You will not notice” (*Request to Christ*). In the attempt to convince Christ, in the poem *Lamentation*, St. Gregory invokes the gift of priesthood in the hope that this could be a leverage in front of God in order to obtain preferential grace or treatment: “Give me strength,” he prays, “even if I am a sinner (yet still a priest!)”⁴⁹

The Saint’s fight with the devil is heartbreaking. He is at the end of his energy. His prayer to Lord Jesus is of profound fondness: “See me, my Christ! Satan finished me. For how long should I still endure? He held me with the petrification of my body, he poked me with the asthma ... I am like a dry tree with frail roots in the blows of the wind. Come, therefore, again, my Christ, and give me Your light so I can go through the torments that have come over me.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Brian Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁴⁷ John McGuckin, „Preface”, p. VI.

⁴⁸ Brian Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 147, 151, 157, 131.

⁵⁰ Stelianos Papadopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

In many cases, the increased prayers to Christ, but also their tone indicate urgency. The Saint cannot wait anymore, has no more patience. In fact, he acknowledges that when he writes: “I am not an athlete of patience.”⁵¹ Yet from all his addresses one can see his sure, unquestionable, profound feeling that the Lord Jesus represents his last refuge, the anchor of his unshakeable hope, just as we read in this poem: “O Christ, God, You are my homeland, my strength, my richness, my fullness” (*To himself in form of question and answer*).⁵²

The consolation

In his old age, towards the end of his life, in those years of pain, suffering, and isolation, St. Gregory finds consolation in two main directions: his past and God. As far as the past is concerned, he finds comfort in thinking not of the old griefs but of his life marked by joy and accomplishments, of the talents, gifts, successes, glory, and admiration that he experienced. One can see in this context an awareness on his part of the meaning of his life, a conscientization of the human dignity which is not incompatible in any way with the humiliations that came from other people or that were caused by the illness that he had to go through. Thus, he remembers fondly his former parishioners who admired and loved him so much: “Those who sometimes enjoyed our sermons,” he writes (*Against the deceiver in time of sickness*) with a justified “humble pride” that confirms his preaching vocation. Also, remembering the administrative ecclesiastical position that he had and which placed him at the top of his society on personal and professional levels, brought him similar comfort, even if he writes about them as if having some kind of regret: “I am not sitting in the company of the victorious ones any more” (*Against the deceiver in time of sickness*).⁵³

But in his suffering, Gregory finds consolation in the idea that everything is part of God’s order: “I wonder about my old age and of my crippled limbs and about the sacrifices I suffer in my pains sent from heaven” (*Against the deceiver in time of sickness*).⁵⁴

It is with this kind of understanding that in his longest poem, *De vita sua*, he speaks of “blessed wounds,” and when he writes an epitaph for his friend Philagrios, ill and in pain on his deathbed, St. Gregory calls the illness “healing suffering.”⁵⁵

The thought of Jesus Christ’s suffering on the cross, yet of the glory of the resurrection that followed, brings a different kind of consolation as well. Assuming Christ’s crucifixion

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

⁵² Brian Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, pp. 141, 143.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ John McGuckin, „Preface”, p. 18.

in his own suffering, Gregory declares with no hesitation: “I bear a cross in my limbs, a cross on my way, a cross in my heart. This cross is my glory” (*Repelling the devil and invocation to Christ*). One can see here a type of resignation in the face of death, a serene acceptance of the end due to a sentiment of dignified satisfaction at the thought that in the fight with the devil he prevailed definitively. This is how he talks to the devil: “Never did I bend the knee of my heart to you, but invincible and unconquered I will descend into the mother earth.” And this is how he will meet Christ the Lord: “I will present to Christ the divine image that I received” (*Against the deceiver in time of sickness*).⁵⁶

Thus, just as one can see also in a very long poem, *On his troubles*, in particular towards the end, where the theologian enumerates, as in an inventory, all his worries, turmoil, and complaints, the thought goes toward God in whom he places all hope and whom he invokes under several theological names, as in a kind of doxological address meant to attract the divine mercy. And even if, in general, he describes negatively the human nature concerning the physical aspect, in final analysis he finds reasons to be convinced that everything has a sense and that God did not abandon the creation of His hands. In the poem *On human nature* the theologian becomes philosopher, writing as in a supreme consolation, for himself, yet for others too: “Stop. Everything is secondary to God. Listen to your reason. God did not make me in vain.”⁵⁷ Thus he feels relieved, spiritually set free, and can confess: “My poor soul aspires to see, finally, the day of its liberation,” as he begins his journey to what he calls “the divine homeland.”⁵⁸

Conclusions

St. Gregory of Nazianzus was a fascinating personality. In a way, as walking on the traces of Lord Jesus Christ, he was at once weak and strong, sarcastic, where necessary and uncompromising with his enemies, yet of a kind and loving nature. He experienced conflicts, dilemmas, and went through extreme situations, yet always with a stoic patience.

Indeed, his poetry unveils the real human being. It is an instrument of great significance for a necessary and objective knowledge we want and must have about the Saint, who was a redoubtable theologian, a bright philosopher, an unsurpassed orator, a Christian poet of most authentic vocation, considered by some biographers the poet *par excellence* of Eastern Christianity,⁵⁹ and an ascetic of high moral class, who dedicated his entire life to God totally and irrevocably.

⁵⁶ Brian Dunkle, *op. cit.*, pp. 155, 143.

⁵⁷ Peter Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁵⁸ Jean Bernardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

⁵⁹ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. VII, „Gregory of Nazianzus”, by K. Knight, updated Oct. 6, 2005, p. 8.

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