

# **St. Macrina (c. 327-380), St. Basil (c. 330-379), Naucratius, St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395) and St. Peter of Sebaste**

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## Introduction

There are few families from ancient times about whom we know more than we know about the family of the saintly siblings Sts. Macrina, Basil of Caesarea, Peter and Gregory of Nyssa. The family had long been Christians. They were well-to-do and well educated. The family owned land in three provinces in what is now Turkey. They were connected with Gregory the Wonderworker, a pupil of Origen, who became bishop of Neocaesarea in 240. Their paternal grandparents had to flee to the mountains during the persecutions of Diocletian. Their maternal grandfather had lost his life and his property because he stood up for his faith in opposition to the empire. Their paternal grandmother was St. Macrina the Elder. Their parents were Basil and Emmelia; both are venerated as saints. Their father was a distinguished rhetorician, who died in 340. Macrina was the eldest of 9 or 10 children, and she was twelve when her father died. Thereafter she was very close to her mother (who had had a vision of Thekla shortly before Macrina's birth), whom she helped to run the household and to raise the siblings. Macrina's brothers included three future bishops: Basil of Caesarea, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Peter of Sebaste. Basil and Gregory were important theologians and influential in the formulating of the classical Trinitarian creed at the First Council of Constantinople (381). Gregory was a pioneer theorist of the Christian life of prayer; Basil and Peter founded monasteries, and Basil became the most influential theoretician of monastic life in the Eastern church. A fourth brother, Naucratius, lived as a hermit.

## Macrina, Naucratius and Peter

In 380-383, shortly after her death, her brother Gregory wrote a life of Macrina. He presents her as a perfect exemplar of the philosophic (that is the wise and reflected and monastic) life, in whom were embodied both the virginity and dedication of Thekla (St. Paul's legendary associate) and Socrates, whose attitudes toward death are paralleled by Macrina's, which Gregory presents in another work of his. Macrina is presented as a perfect Christian woman, who grew steadily toward sanctity.

Macrina was a gifted girl who learned easily. The usual education for boys included Homer, Plato, Demosthenes and some of the Greek tragedies. Macrina's education was probably similar. It would have been done at home. Gregory says Macrina was educated by her mother and didn't study the tragedies or Homer, which would not be edifying. Macrina studied the Scriptures, especially the Wisdom of Solomon and the Psalms.

By the time she was 12 she was a renowned beauty. She was engaged to a young man of 25, well-educated, well-to-do and of good character. During the two years of their engagement (the legal age for marriage was 14) the young man died. Macrina's Father died about the same time, and Macrina said that her engagement with this young man was to be her one and only marriage while on earth. Henceforward a widow, she wanted to be the bride of Christ. Macrina wished to remain "by herself (ep' heautes), to lead a solitary, Christian, philosophic life of virginity. She and

her mother moved from Neocaesarea to the family estate of Annisa in Pontus, in the valley of the River Iris. She remained in her family, did her regular duties, including baking bread, which was servile work beneath her station, while spending much time in prayer.

Basil's Great Asceticon contains over 400 precepts, 13 of which deal specifically with women ascetics who apparently lived in a community associated with the male community at Annasi. They were guided by a leader, who seems to have been assisted by a committee of able elder sisters. They were to have little contact with the brothers in the monastery, and that with a brother of advanced age. The brothers performed manual labor for the women; the women did textile work. The brothers celebrated the sacraments for the sisters and provided spiritual guidance, but they were not to interfere in the life of the sisters' community or to do anything without the female superior's knowledge. The women dressed differently than the men.

Meanwhile, Macrina, her mother Emmelia, and her brother Naucratius were pursuing their own paths. From what we can conjecture, from Annisa, Emmelia managed the family estates with Macrina's assistance. They were very successful, and the estates grew. Peter, Macrina's youngest brother, lived with them. Macrina was for him "father, teacher, pedagogue, mother and counselor."

Naucratius was very talented. But in 352, when he was 21 he embraced a life of solitude, poverty and celibacy in a forested spot near the river Iris. He took care of some destitute old men in the neighborhood. Basil evidently followed his example when he went to the same area in search of solitude in 357, choosing that form of ascetical life in preference to Macrina's family-based asceticism. Before Basil arrived, Naucratius was killed in a hunting accident. Gregory described his brother in very complimentary terms:

Naucratius, the second of her four brothers after the great Basil surpassed the others in the good fortune of his nature, his physical beauty, strength, swiftness and facility for everything. At the age of 21 he gave such proofs of his industry at a public recital that the whole assembled audience was deeply moved by him. But prompted by some divine providence he looked down upon all the opportunities at hand and went off in some real inspiration of thought to a life of solitude and poverty, taking nothing with him but himself....

So he lived by himself, settled in a remote spot by the Iris, far from the disturbances of the city and from the preoccupations of military service or the rhetoric of the law courts. And having freed himself from all the usual, resounding noise of human life, with his own hands he took care of a group of old people living together in poverty and sickness....

By 357 Macrina had persuaded Emmelia to give up her former aristocratic life, to distribute her wealth among her children and to turn the household into a monastic community, where all--Emmelia, Macrina and their former servants--would live as equals. This last was a radical step. At this point, Macrina seems to reverse roles with her mother, and become teacher and mother of her own mother and the rest of the community. The virgin daughter turned virgin widow, now became virgin mother and teacher, and through her asceticism, in Gregory's phrase, "manly virgin."

Other women joined Macrina and Emmelia, and a community developed. Some of them were women whom Macrina had taken in when she found them wandering during a time of famine (there was a severe famine in 368-69). Thus, the community had members who had no previous connection with the family. Vetiana, the daughter of a rich noble is also known to have joined the community, and she and the deaconess Lampadion were at Macrina's deathbed. These women were widowed. They were all thought of as virgins, which in this context meant celibate ascetics. Macrina was the leader of the community. When she died the sisters exclaimed: "the light of our eyes is extinguished; the lamp guiding the path of our souls is gone; the safety of our lives has been destroyed; the seal of our incorruptibility has been removed; the bond of our union demolished; the support of the feeble has been shattered; the care of the weak has been taken away."

Gregory reports that when Macrina was in her final illness,

I told her all about the personal troubles I had.... "Will you not put an end,' she asked "to your failure to recognize the good things which come from your parents.... You are known in the cities, the townships and provinces. Churches send you forth and call upon you as ally and reformer, and you do not see the grace in this? Do you not even realize the true cause of such great blessings, that our parents' prayers are lifting you on high, for you have little or no native capacity for this?"

Macrina relied on the support and advice of some of her friends in the community; and sisters were assigned specific responsibilities. The community took in young girls and educated them. A story in her life indicates that later Peter became superior of the men in the community. Peter had the same charitable impulses as the rest of his family. Gregory reports that

Once when there was a severe famine and many people from all over, drawn by the fame of their generosity, came pouring into the remote country in which they lived, [Peter] provided such an abundance of provisions, thanks to his inventiveness, that because of the throng of visitors, the wilderness looked like a city.

In 380, Peter succeeded Eutstathius as bishop of Sebaste.

There does not seem to have been any public ceremony involved in joining the community. The women wore simple, distinctive dress. They served one another. They sought emotional and physical control (enkrateia), in order to be free for prayer. We have only a few hints of about the daily routine, which seems to have included Mass in the village church and evening prayer.

Thus, Macrina's family home was gradually transformed into a monastery, as they adopted personal poverty, freed the slaves, and accepted new members. As these changes took place, Macrina's role becomes more complex and public. When she died, the local bishop and his clergy attended her funeral.

## Basil (the Great)

Basil, like his brothers Gregory and Naucratius, received a traditional classical education which prepared them for public life. When Basil was about 16, after his father's death, he went to Caesarea in Cappadocia to study, and two years later to Constantinople. In 349 or 350 he went to study at Athens and remained there for five years. In Athens he became close friends with Gregory of Nazianzus, who also became an important theologian.

St. Basil returned home from his studies in 355. Gregory of Nyssa tells us that Macrina needed to bring him down a peg or two. Within a year he was baptized, and before long became a monastic organizer and ecclesiastical leader. For some months he traveled around monasteries in the Eastern Mediterranean. One of his goals was to make contact with Eustathius, a leader in the ascetic movement in Asia Minor, with whom his family had been in contact and who was a bishop, theologian and monastic leader. Basil later broke with him over both theological issues and monastic theory and practice.

Eustathius was born in Armenia c. 300. His asceticism led to a quarrel with his father (who may have been a bishop of Sebaste). Eustathius left Sebaste and tried unsuccessfully to join the clergy of Antioch. In the 330s he entered the clergy of Caesarea in Cappadocia. He was condemned at Synods in Neocaesarea and Garbra. He left no writings, but judging from the condemnations, he was associated with those who advocated a highly ascetical form of Christianity, which devalued family life and was disdainful of ordinary Church structures. On the other hand, Eustathius was a champion of monastic life and encouraged monastic communities to operate hospices for the needy.

From 357-359, Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus studied in their retreat at Annisa. They followed a set written rules of life. Their life included regular prayer, reading, silence, simple dress, humble demeanor, limited sleep and food. The goal was emotional control, tranquility. They read the bible and compiled a selection of texts from Origen's writings (the Philocalia). After Gregory departed from Annisa, Basil attended a Synod of Constantinople toward the end of 359. He was appointed a Reader in the church, then returned to Annisa. In 362, Gregory returned to Annisa, after having been ordained a priest. Basil himself was ordained before the year was out, and became active in the church of Caesarea for a few months. Basil was again at Annisa in 363. In 365 Basil returned once more to Caesarea, and five years later he was ordained bishop of the city.

Beginning at Annisa, Basil gathered together a series of questions and answers of Christian life, which is known as the Small Asceticon. He is also responsible for a Great Asceticon, which contains some parts of the Small Asceticon, along with much other material. Both works are in question and answer form, and they seem to have originated in actual question and answer sessions between Basil and other Christians. Although these works are often termed rules, they are not monastic rules after the fashion of the Rule of Benedict or the Rule of Augustine. They have more affinity with the question-and-answers in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. However, Basil questions and answers, though many reflect a monastic setting, deal with matters of interest to Christians who are not monks.

Basil speaks of a life of *eusebeia* (piety), that is, a life lived according to the way of God, and so a life well pleasing to God (*euaristesis*). This is a life of effort (*askesis*), but effort in community (*synaskesis*). Those who seek to please God keep the commandments, do God's will, live strictly and keep a single aim (*skopos*) in mind: the glory of God. Such a life is rooted in the Bible. The first "rule" in Basil's collection of questions and answers is that the greatest commandment is the twofold commandment of all. For Basil love is the norm for each day of the Christian's life, not simply the goal (as it seems to have been for Evagrius). In this first rule, Basil united separation from the world to love God with love of neighbor in community. His spirituality and his monastic ideal were always communal, and he encouraged monastic and other communities to offer hospitality and other forms of charity. The second rule discusses how God has implanted a desire in each person a love or desire for the Good, which is God. Basil attempts to inflame such love by insisting on how much God has done for us. God has also made us social beings, hence the biblical command to love one another which is illustrated in the lives of holy people. The key to fulfilling the commandments of love is never to forget God, to live always in his presence. This requires a mental, and often a physical, separation from the crowd in imitation of Christ, though not from community.

### Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa was well educated, married and, though he was a Reader, beginning about 364 he pursued a secular career. When he was about 40, in 372, Basil convinced him to become bishop of Nyssa. When Basil died in 379, Gregory became a champion of Basil's theology and ecclesiastical policies. Gregory was a man of wide interests who wrote on many different theological subjects. He does not seem to have been a monk. For our purposes, most important are those works of his which supplied theoretical foundations for the monastic movement championed by his brother. Most of these works come from the latter part of his life. He emphasized the infinitude and incomprehensibility of God. Christian life is an unceasing striving or ascent of the soul to union with God. He interpreted the Song of Songs as a celebration of the union of love between God and the human soul. His *Life of Moses* encouraged withdrawal from human affairs to seek God, the need for asceticism and contemplative striving toward God and the need to return from contemplation to offer service to others.

### Conclusion

St. Benedict's Rule begins (Prol. 1 = [Pseudo?-]Basil, *Admonitio ad filium spiritualem*) and ends with references to St. Basil (73.5). Basil certainly had enormous influence on later monasticism, especially in the Eastern Church. Basil and Macrina lived at a time when the lines between lay Christians and ascetics and monks were blurred. Macrina seems to have gone from fianc\E9e to widow to family ascetic to organized community life in what was probably a double monastery. Basil (like his brother Peter) went from hermit to bishop, but he was clearly very interested in many forms of ascetic and monastic life. Naucratus died as a hermit. His brother Gregory of Nyssa was married, and perhaps never a monk, but he wrote on asceticism and contemplation. Basil, Macrina and their siblings lived at a times when there were many options open for Christians and the definitions of various vocations were still quite fluid.

Basil's ministry and writings, inspired and supported by his sister Macrina, built upon the work of Eustathius even while diverging from it, to promote communal (cenobitic) forms of celibate Christian communities, to keep monasticism firmly rooted in the life of the church and to encourage such communities to offer organized hospitality and toward the needy. This threefold legacy was great gift to St. Benedict and those who follow the Rule of Benedict.

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