

# 14 Gregory of Nazianzus

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## 14.1 Introduction to Gregory of Nazianzus and 'On Christmas'

### **14.1.1 Who was Gregory of Nazianzus**

Gregory (ca 329-390) was born near Nazianzus in Southwestern Cappadocia, from wealthy landowning parents. By the time Gregory was born, his father had become the bishop (!) of Nazianzus. Gregory was friends with Basil the Great and his brother Gregory of Nyssa. With them, he studied in Caesarea and Athens. He also studied some time in Alexandria. He taught rhetoric in Athens after finishing his studies there. Gregory would become one of the foremost speakers in the early Church.

### **14.1.2 Gregory's Baptism, Ordination, Escape (357-372)**

Gregory wanted to be a monk, in the monastery of Basil the Great in Pontus. He did spend some time there. His father however wanted him to be a priest to help in Nazianzus. During Christmas 361, he was made a priest by force. Soon he escaped back to Basil's monastery. Basil convinced him to go return to Nazianzus. The problems facing the diocese were enormous. Emperor Constantius (337-361) had forced a semi-Arian confession on the Church, and even Gregory's father, the bishop, accepted this. Many Christians, and especially the monks, broke all relations with the bishop. Gregory convinced his father to retract and accept homo-ousianism again. This brought peace back into the diocese. During this time, Gregory helped Basil to write the *Philokalia* – a selection of the works of Origen.



### **14.1.3 Bishop of Sasima; living in Seleucia (372-379)**

In 372, Basil the Great, Metropolitan of Caesarea, had problems in his province. He decided that it would be helpful for his brother Gregory and his friend Gregory to be made bishops of Nyssa and Sasima. The diocese of Sasima was created by Basil in order to increase the number of bishops that supported him. Gregory of Nazianzus despised the place because 'it was a rat hole'. He was vehemently against the idea of ordination, but Basil used force to ordain him in 372. Gregory held a strong grudge against his friend for this; he refused to work in Sasima and instead lived in Nazianzus to help his aging bishop-father. His father died in 374, and Gregory continued to administer Nazianzus. A year later he escaped to a monastery in Seleucia where he stayed four years.

### **14.1.4 Gregory at Constantinople and 2<sup>nd</sup> Ecumenical Council (379-381)**

In 379, Theodosius I became the Emperor; he was a determined Orthodox believer. Those faithful Orthodox had become a small minority in Constantinople, after years of Arian Emperors and bishops. They asked Gregory to come to Constantinople to set the church in order, which he did. His sermons were famous all over the empire.

The Arians had been teaching that the Holy Spirit was a creature, Apollinaris taught that Jesus did not have a real human spirit; both heresies were a reason for the calling together of the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople. (381) Meletios, bishop of Antioch, presided, but died during the meetings. Gregory then became the chairman, and he was then also formally recognized as bishop of Constantinople. This was contrary to ecclesial law, as he was still bishop of Sasima. Especially from Egypt there was much resistance against him; the Egyptian patriarch Peter had hoped to become the bishop of Constantinople and felt passed by when Gregory was appointed.

### ***14.1.5 Last years and death (381-390)***

After the Council, Gregory returned to Nazianzus, as the diocese still had no bishop after his father's death in 374. When in 383 a bishop was appointed, Gregory withdrew to the estates he has inherited not far from Nazianzus, to live there until his death in 390. He led a very strict monk's life and he wrote hymns and poems, including one on his own life.

### ***14.1.6 Impact of Gregory of Nazianzus***

Gregory made a significant impact on Trinitarian theology. He was especially influential by his writings on the relationship among the three persons in the Trinity; he for instance introduced the term *perichoresis* for describing the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity. He was also known for his defense of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. His views on *theosis*, the goal of the Christian life, have also played an important role in theology.

Gregory's nephew Nichobulos served as his literary executor and preserved many of his writings. A cousin, Eulalios, published several of his works in 391. By 400, they were being translated into Latin. During the Council of Ephesus (431) his views were quoted as authoritative. By 451, he was called the 'Theologian' of the Council of Chalcedon.

## **14.2 On Christmas**

### ***14.2.1 introduction of the sermon***

> **Read together** On Christmas #1-3 (booklet pp. 13-15)

> **Discuss together:** is this our faith?

### ***14.2.2 How to celebrate the Feast***

> **Read together** On Christmas #4-6 (booklet pp. 15-18)

> **Discuss together** how we must not celebrate Christmas and why?

### ***14.2.3 God***

The third part of the Christmas-sermon explains how the Eternal God created the world, and how Man sinned against God. The only solution was that God himself descended and became Man. 'He himself now partakes of the worse. This more Godlike than the former action [of creation], this is loftier in the eyes of all men of understanding.'

### ***14.2.4 Answering Arians***

> **Read individually** On Christmas #14 (booklet pp. 27-28)

> **Discuss together** how Gregory argues that the incarnation does not lower Christ.

> **Read in groups** On Christmas #15-16 (booklet pp. 28-30)

> **Discuss together** how Gregory presents the two natures of Christ.

> **Discuss together** what the goal of the Incarnation is?

### ***14.2.5 Christian response to the Incarnation***

> **Read together** On Christmas #17-18 (booklet pp. 30-32)

> **Discuss together** the proper attitude toward Christmas