

Basil the Great: About Fasting, Homily I

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1 Introduction

1.1 Who was Basil the Great

St Basil (ca. 329/330-1 January 379) was a bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia. He was an extremely influential theologian and monk, both due to his personal abilities and the importance of Caesarea. The major theological battle in his time was over Arianism.

Some of the Emperors supported Arianism and forced many bishops to accept it. Basil refused and almost singlehandedly defeated the impact of Arianism in the Empire.

Basil, his (physical) brother Gregory whom he ordained bishop of Nyssa, and their common friend Gregory Nazianzus are together called ‘The Cappadocian Fathers’.

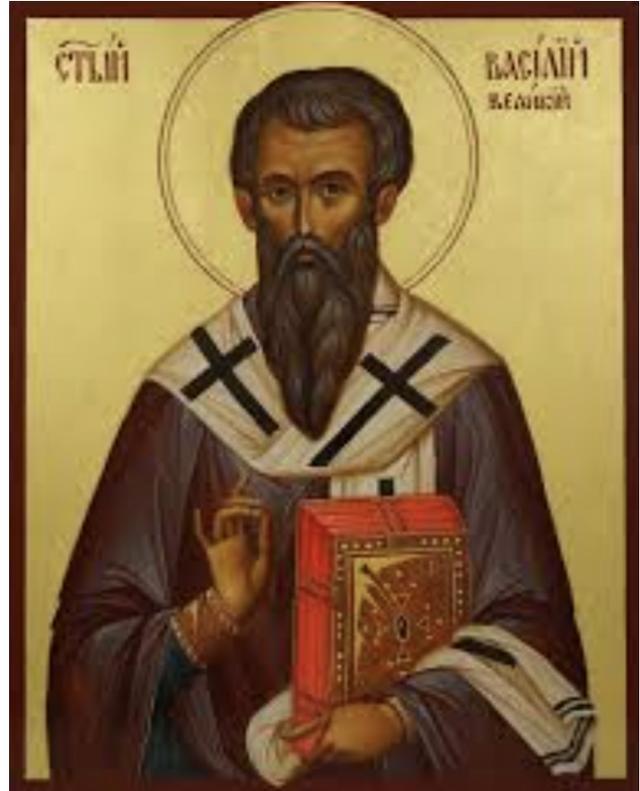
1.2 Early studies (345-357)

Basil was born in an extremely wealthy and pious family from Pontus. His maternal grandfather had been a martyr in the time before Emperor Constantine I’s conversion. Basil lived his early life in Pontus, and was deeply influenced by his grandmother and mother. He moved to Caesarea in Cappadocia for studies around 345. There he met Gregory Nazianzus. These friends also studied together in Constantinople and Athens.

Their studies included rhetoric, logic, philosophy, astronomy, geometry and mathematics. In Athens, one of their fellow students was Julian, who later became the Emperor who wanted to reintroduce paganism as the state religion, among other reasons because he feared Christianity meant losing the cultural tradition of the Greeks.

1.3 Monk (357-362)

Basil returned to Caesarea for a legal career, but he soon decided to become a monk. He was baptized in 357, and travelled to Palestine,



Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt for learning from the monks. Having seen those examples, he then decided to organize monks in Cappadocia into ‘monasteries’ with common life and common rules. In his large family estate in Pontus he began a monastic settlement, focusing on a pious and prayerful life and charitable work. During that period he wrote his works about monasticism; these would be central in the development of the monastic tradition in the Eastern Church.

In 360, Basil participated in the Council of Constantinople. It seems that he somewhat sided with the ‘homoi-ousians’, a semi-Arian group that said that the essence of the Son of God was not of one substance with the Father, and also not different, but ‘like’ the essence of the Father. In any case, shortly thereafter, Basil became the major defender of the ‘homo-ousian’ Nicene faith.

Basil also invited Gregory Nazianzus to come to Pontus. Together they wrote the *Philokalia*, an anthology of writings of Origen. One reason for doing this was in order to support their anti-Arian viewpoint.

1.4 Priesthood (362-370)

In 362 Basil was ordained a deacon in Caesarea, and in 364 he became a priest. He was ordained by the rather weak bishop Eusebius, who at that time suffered from the efforts of Emperor Julian (361-363) to destroy the Church. The Emperor especially targeted Caesarea as that was a major Christian bulwark.

Gregory of Nazianzus was the one who urged Basil to leave his monastic life and to come to Caesarea and who convinced Eusebius to ordain him.

Basil agreed, most likely because the Church needed him for the battle against both the renewed paganism of the Emperor and also because of Arianism. Emperor Valens (364-375) in Constantinople supported the Arians who were numerous in Cappadocia. Agents of Valens forced public debates about Arianism in Caesarea; Basil, with his friend Gregory, came out as superior debaters and theologians.

Although Eusebius was the bishop of Caesarea, for a long period Basil actually administered the diocese while giving credit to Eusebius. During these years Basil also renewed the liturgy. Basil is remembered for the liturgy that he simplified into what we know as the Liturgy of St Basil.

1.5 Metropolitan in Caesarea (370-379)

When Eusebius died in 370, Basil was elected as the new bishop. As bishop of Caesarea he was also the metropolitan over large parts of Asia, including his native Pontus.

Basil was very popular among the poor, as he gave away much of his personal wealth to feed the poor. He was also benign to the Arians while he fought them theologically. Emperor Valens gave banishing orders a few times, but Basil never left.

Valens came in 372 to the celebration of the Divine Liturgy on the Feast of Epiphany. He was impressed by Basil and donated some land to him for the building of Basil's hospital. In spite of this, Basil continued to refuse Holy Communion to Arians. This helped define the relationship between emperor and church.

As a bishop, Basil communicated with Athanasius in Alexandria (who died in 373). He also showed his delight in the appointment of Ambrose of Milan (374) as bishop of that city. He interacted with Pope Damasus in Rome when he needed help in the Arian matter, but he was disappointed to get none. There is no sign that Basil considered Damasus to be the final authority in matters of faith. In fact, the Western church hardly spoke out about the Arian question that was so important in the East; Rome did not seem to claim any superior role in these theological disputes.

1.6 Writings of St Basil

Principal writings of Basil are

- On the Holy Spirit (about the divinity of the Spirit)
- Refutation of the Apology of the Impious Eunomius (against Arianism)
- Sermons
- *Moralia* (moral manual for living in the world)
- *Asketika* (manual for monastic life)
- 300+ letters

1.7 Introduction to About Fasting, Homily I

We have two sermons of Basil about Fasting. This first sermon seems to have been preached in Caesarea before Lent, when the Christians indulged in eating and drinking to prepare for the fasting of Lent. The two sermons are the opening of the sermon collection of Basil. It is questionable whether the second sermon is of Basil; of the genuineness of the first sermon there is no doubt. St Augustine quotes from this first sermon.

2 Content of About Fasting, Homily I

2.1 introduction

- > **Read together:** About Fasting I:1-2.
- > **Discuss** how those who fast should behave, and what the advantage of fasting is.

2.2 Fasting before the Laws of Moses

- > **Read together:** About Fasting I:3
- > **Discuss together** how fasting began in Paradise.
- > Why would it be important for Basil to trace fasting back to Paradise?
- > **Discuss** the theologically loaded statements of Basil about fasting.

2.3 Fasting is physically healthy

- > **Read together:** About Fasting I:4
- > **Discuss** what the physical advantage of fasting and the disadvantage of sumptuous meals is.

2.4 Examples of Fasting

In Fasting I:5-7 Basil speaks of the saints of the Old Testament who fasted. He first mentions that there was no wine or meat in Paradise. This is why Noah was tricked into drinking and he got drunk.

Moses ascended the mountains and fasted for 40 days; due to this fasting, God gave his Law; the work of God was destroyed because the Israelites feasted: they ate and drank and worshiped the golden calf.

Esau lost his birthright because he did not want to fast but he wanted to indulge his desire for food. Samuel and Samson are mentioned as examples of people who fasted. Elijah and Elisha are mentioned, as well as the three young men in the oven in Babylon (book of Daniel).

Hanna fasted and was given a son, Samuel; Samson fasted and was made strong.

- > **Read together:** About Fasting I:7
- > list and discuss what the many advantages of fasting are.

2.5 Food is more enjoyable after fasting

- > **Read:** About Fasting I:8
- > **Discuss how** fasting makes you enjoy food more.

12.2.6 Intermediate summary

- > **Read:** About Fasting I:9
- > **Discuss together** whether there is much new material in this chapter?

2.7 Preparing for Lent and Easter

- > **Read together:** About Fasting I:10-11
- > **Discuss together** what true fasting is
- > **Discuss together** how to prepare for Lent and Easter
- > **Discuss together** what change Lent brings to the city of Caesarea