

DID ST. BASIL THE GREAT HAVE «NEPHEWS»?*

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St. Basil's work, «Πρὸς τοὺς νέους, ὅπως ἂν ἐξ ἑλληνικῶν ὠφελοῦντο λόγων», (*Ad Adolescentes*), so important from very many aspects, has given cause for the assertion that it is a special work written by the saint for his «nephews». We believe, however, that this work is not simply a «special treatise» written from purely theoretical motivations; rather, it is to be considered in reality a *homily* delivered possibly in two parts, before an audience of youths who either desired to be ordained or to dedicate their lives to salutary asceticism. As J. Grimbomont¹ has rightly characterized this work, it constitutes essentially, in a wider sense, an «*Apology*» in behalf of Christian asceticism, and employs examples taken from ancient Greek literature and philosophy.

St. Basil, pressed by the manifold currents prevalent during the vibrant spiritual renaissance of the fourth century A.D., turned his attention towards finding ways to compromise the rival and opposing tendencies, pursuits and inclinations of the educated class of his age on the one hand, and on the other towards securing in different ways and preserving the value of the Christian principles and traditions by imparting the ideals of Christianity especially to the younger generation, and indeed, to those who intended to become leaders and transmitters of these same lofty Christian teachings.

The work in question, or better still, the Homily, «Πρὸς τοὺς νέους, ὅπως ἂν ἐξ ἑλληνικῶν ὠφελοῦντο λόγων», belongs to St. Basil's first period of spiritual creativity and therefore to the years preceding his ordination. This has been shown to be the case by Oskar Ring in his excellent monograph ("Drei Homilien aus der Frühzeit Basilius' des Grossen". *Grundlegendes zur Basiliusfrage*. Paderborn 1930 p. 227). Ring considers the *Nine Homilies on the Hexameron* as Basil's earliest work. Then follow in chronological order: «Μὴ δὴ κακῶ τὸ κακὸν ἰᾶσθαι» or «Κατὰ ὀργιζομένων», «Εἰς τὸ Πρόσεχε σεαυτῶ», and finally, the «Hom-

* A communication delivered at the International Congress for Patristic Studies in Oxford from September 7-14 (1976).

1. Texte und Untersuchungen 64 (1957) 422, Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Freiburg (Herder), Bd. II (1958) 33/5.

ily», «Πρὸς τοὺς νέους, ὅπως ἂν ἐξ ἑλληνικῶν ὠφελοῦντο λόγων». Ring proves in his monograph (p. 228) that this work of St. Basil is neither a treatise in a narrow sense nor an essay, but a homily. Moreover, he takes issue with the opinion first put forth by Büttner² and repeated ever since by all subsequent scholars: that the Homily was composed by St. Basil for his «nephews».

However, we doubt whether Basil ever had any nephews at all — at least from his four married sisters. That St. Basil was not the second but the third child of his parents — a brother having died in infancy before Basil's and after Macrina's birth — and that he had five sisters in all, four of which married, has been shown by J. Emile Pfister, S.J. in his excellent study³. Thus, not nine but ten children were born of the saintly couple, presbyter Basil and Emmelia. As concerns the supposed «nephews» of St. Basil, it is our opinion that it was not possible for him to have had nephews and indeed of such a mature age as to have been able to follow the sublime content of the Homily in question, simply because his four married sisters would have had to have been born between 336/7 and 344/5 A.D. since the youngest child of the family, Peter, was born c. 347, as we can ascertain from *The Life of St. Macrina* by Gregory of Nyssa (M. 46, 972B. 968B. 965/A-B). How then is it possible for St. Basil the Great to have had «nephews» from his married sisters when they were born between 336/7 and 344/5? In order for them to marry they would have had to reach the age of at least 16-20 years old, and an equal number of years would have had to elapse for the supposed «nephews» to reach an age mature enough to be able to follow a homily of such sublime content; and indeed, a homily delivered before Basil was ordained, i.e. before 364, a time when his sisters as yet did not have any children, or if they did have, these would have been so young as to be barely able to talk. Further, in the saint's Epistles we find only one passage mentioning his «nephews». We suppose, however, that here he is referring to nephews of a young age. Here is the passage in question: «Ἰδίᾳ δέ σου ἡμεῖς πῶς ἂν ἐπιλαθώμεθα, τοσαῦτα ἔχοντες τὰ κινουῦντα ἡμᾶς πρὸς μνήμην, ἃ δ ε λ φ ἦ ν τοιαύτην, ἃ δ ε λ φ ι δ ο ὺ ς τοιούτους, σ υ γ γ έ ν ε ι α ν οὕτω χρηστήν, οὕτως ἀγαπῶσαν ἡμᾶς, ο ἶ κ ο ν, οἰκέτας, φίλους, ἐξ ὧν, κἂν μὴ βουλώμεθα, ἀναγκαιῶς ὑπομυνησκόμεθά σου τῆς ἀγαθῆς προαιρέσεως;» (How could I ever forget you, as

2. Basilius' des Grossen Mahnworte an die Jugend über den nützlichen Gebrauch der heidnischen Literatur. Würzburg 1908.

3. A biographical Note: The Brothers and Sisters of St. Gregory of Nyssa. «Vigiliae Christianae». *A Review of Christian Life and Language* 18 (1964) 108-113.

far as I am individually concerned, when I have so many reasons to stir me to recollections, such a sister, such nephews, such kinsfolk, so good, so fond of me, house, household, and friends? By all these, even against my will, I am perforce reminded of your good disposition»⁴. This passage is to be found in Letter CLV (II, 381, Def.), bearing the title: «'Ανεπίγραφος ἐπὶ ἀλείπτῃ» («Without Address. In the case of a trainer»), but according to the edition of the Benedictines found in Migne P.G., this epistle was sent to his relative, Julius Soranus, Duke of Scythia c. 373. St. Basil mentions other relatives in his Epistles CVII (11,202), CVIII (11,204), CIX (11,208). In this last epistle (CIX), sent to «Helladius the Count», Basil pleads: «Τὴν γοῦν ἀδεληφὴν τήνδε, καὶ πρὸς γένος ἡμῶν οὖσαν καὶ διὰ χηρείαν καταπονομένην καὶ παιδὸς ὀρφανοῦ πράγματος φροντίζουσαν, ἐπεὶ εἶδον λοιπὸν ὑπὲρ δύναντι ἀφορήτοις ἀνάγκαις συνεχομένην, κατελεήσας καὶ παθῶν τὴν ψυχὴν ἔσπευσα παρακαλέσαι...» («Our sister, who is a relative of mine, and now in the sorrowful position of a widow, has to look after the affairs of her orphan boy. On seeing her above measure oppressed by intolerable responsibilities, I felt great compassion for her, and, feeling deeply on the subject, I have hastened to invoke...»). In all probability Basil is referring to his sister Julitta, concerning whom all the above-mentioned epistles deal with. Also, in Epistle CCLXXX (IV, 166), addressed to «Modestus the Prefect», Basil writes: «...καὶ καταθαρροῦμεν ἐπιστέλλειν ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπων, οἱ κείων μὲν κατὰ γένος, τιμῆς δὲ ἀξίων διὰ τὴν δεξιότητά των ἡθῶν. Ὁ τοίνυν τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἡμῶν ταύτην ἐπιδιδούς ἐν υἱοῦ μοι τὰ ξεῖ καθέστηκεν» («My plea is for a relative of mine, a man worthy of respect for his integrity. He is the bearer of this letter, and he stands to me in the place of a son»). This letter was sent c. 378. Also Epistle CCCX (IV, 246/8), bears the title: «'Ανεπίγραφος, ὑπὲρ συγγενῶν» (Without Address. On behalf of kinfolk).

The opinion put forth by Roy J. Deferrari — Martin R. P. McGuire (St. Basil, *The Letters*, IV, 365) that the work, *Ad Adolentescentes*, was composed by St. Basil towards the end of his life is not well grounded. This opinion is based upon the opening passage of the Homily: «Πολλὰ με τὰ παρακαλοῦντά ἐστι συμβουλευσαί ὑμῖν, ὦ παῖδες ἃ βέλτιστα εἶναι κρίνω, καὶ ἃ ξυνοίσειν ὑμῖν ἐλομένους πεπίστευκα. Τό τε γὰρ ἡλικίας οὕτως ἔχειν καὶ τὸ διὰ πολλῶν ἡδὴ γεγυμναῖσθαι πραγμάτων καὶ

4. English translation in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of The Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. VIII, St. Basil. Letters and Select Works, Grand Rapids, Mich. 1894.

μὴν καὶ τὸ τῆς πάντα παιδευούσης ἐπ' ἄμφω μεταβολῆς ἱκανῶς μετασχεῖν, ἔμπειρόν με εἶναι τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πεποίηκεν, ὥστε τοῖς ἄρτι καθισταμένοις τὸν βίον ἔχειν ὡσπερ ὁδῶν τὴν ἀσφαλεστάτην ὑποδεικνύουσαι» (IV, 378). (Many are those things which make me want to advise you whatever I consider to be best for you and which I believe will benefit you if you adopt it, for I find myself at this age and I have already been trained by many matters and chiefly because I have partaken sufficiently in both lives[i.e. the secular and the ascetical] so as to have experience in human matters and be able to point out to those who are just beginning to embark on life, the most secure path».⁵ It is clear then that the scholars in question, precariously declared so, arriving at the incorrect conclusion from the above passage that Basil composed this most extraordinary work in old age.

Very briefly we conclude that Basil considered himself a second «father» after the natural parents, since he was teacher and spiritual guide of his audience⁶. Thus he felt the need to expound to his disciples the then much discussed and burning issue of what was Christianity's position vis-à-vis classical literature and philosophy in general. Was it proper for young students to study, besides sacred letters intended for Christian children, secular paedeia? This issue was and shall always be one of the most important in the midst of ever changing attitudes throughout the centuries vis-à-vis Christian thought and the continuously interchanging ideological currents of each particular age and especially of today's predominant materialistic attitude.

5. Translation is our own.

6. Cf. Epistle 634 of Libanius to Amphilochius whose two sons, Amphilochius and Euphemius, were his students, in which he writes: «there are many things which make me father to these boys, the chief of which is that they were made for learning». *Libanii opera*, recensuit Richardus Foerster, X, 611/2. For an analysis of this epistle see our study on *Gregory the Theologian*, Athens 1953, p. 15.