

## THE BASILIAN FATHERS

### THE ST. BASIL SYMPOSIUM\*

The Basilian Fathers came to Toronto in 1850. There were four of them. Their number in France totaled eighteen at that time, so that the gift of four members to the Canadian mission was generous. They came because the new bishop of Toronto, Armand-Marie, Comte de Charbonnel, asked them to come. He himself had been a student at their College in Annonay, France. So when he thought of a school he thought of his old masters, the Basilians. They took up residence in a house on Bond Street, and later in the building on Church Street, parts of which today form St. Michael's Cathedral rectory. So began St. Michael's College, now one of the ancient Toronto institutions.

The name «Basilian Fathers» comes from St. Basil, and not, as many think, from Brazil. When the first members banded themselves together in 1822, in a little town in Annonay, France (where, by the way, the Montgolfier brothers invented the first balloon and sent it soaring in 1784), they chose as their patron a man who had lived many centuries before, and who had no obvious and natural affinities with them or the place, Basil of Caesarea (329-379). But there were other affinities which made Basil a good choice. He was a teacher, a theologian, a lover of classical learning, a friend of youth, a natural leader, a humanist, and a saint. For a group of men who had dedicated themselves to teaching he was ideal. Near their first community house stood a tiny eleventh-century church dedicated to Basil. They took his name and became the Congregation of St. Basil (C.S.B.), or more popularly, the Basilian Fathers.

It was under this name that the Congregation came to Toronto, established St. Michael's College, and spread to Windsor, Detroit, Western Canada, and ultimately to other points in North America. Questions were often asked, «Why St. Basil?» «Did St. Basil found you?»

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\* This essay on the Basilian Fathers, independent of the preceding Report, circulated before the Toronto Symposium.

or even, «How are things in Brazil?» The answer was never quite so satisfactory as one would have liked it to be: «An arbitrary choice». «An accident of geography». «Well, he *is* a patron of youth». But so are many others. A natural and obvious connection between Basil and the Basilians is hard to argue. But a providential and devotional reason is not.

Throughout their 157 years of existence the Basilian Fathers have fostered a devotion to St. Basil. His works were read, his example studied, and his help sought. But the Basilians, students and educators though they were, never undertook a serious and systematic study of their patron. With the approach of the sixteenth centenary of Basil's death (1979) just such a study was envisioned. It was decided to bring the best scholars on St. Basil from various parts of the world to meet in Toronto this year for a Symposium. Five years in preparation, the Symposium will take place from June 10 to June 14, at the University of St. Michael's College. It is being sponsored jointly by the Basilian Fathers and by the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, which is a Basilian foundation. Scholars from Greece, Poland, Belgium, Roumania, Sweden, Germany Italy, Spain, Mexico, Holland, Czechoslovakia, the United States, and Canada, will meet for a week, read papers, discuss Basil, trade ideas, and explore as deeply and richly as possible the heritage of this remarkable figure from the fourth century. The results will be published in a volume, which should represent the latest and best in scholarship on Basil of Caesarea.

*Basil the Man of Action:* Apart from any association with a contemporary religious order, Basil stands out as a world figure, and as a man who has enriched the growth of civilization. He is also ancient enough to be a man of unity, a bridge between East and West, for he pre-dates the unhappy schism which has divided Rome and Constantinople.

He learned early to appreciate classical learning, and he saw no incompatibility in a Christian accepting the truth, beauty, and wisdom of pagan authors. But the Christian life itself was another matter, and here Basil the student followed the Gospel strictly. His learning and talents indicated the profession of teacher of rhetoric when he returned to his native town of Caesarea (now Kayseri in Turkey), but his family example, particularly that of his mother and sister, inclined him to a life of retirement for prayer and study. He was soon surrounded by others who wanted to follow the same kind of life under his leadership. Thus began the early monasteries, which became models for religious life in both the East and West.

Basil was not to have his quiet life. He was too gifted and too important. He was brought from retirement, ordained a priest, and plunged into theological controversy. After all, he was living in perhaps *the* most vital area of the Church at that time. Caesarea was no backwater; rather it was an exciting centre of Christian life, which, of course, also meant politics and controversy. In 370 he became bishop of Caesarea by popular choice, and in his nine years as bishop he left an indelible mark on his century and on history—as witnesses this present gathering of scholars.

We must not see Basil as a man lost in his books. On the contrary, he is a political and social leader, on his own family estates he established a kind of model city for the poor. It consisted of hospice, school, housing, and commerce. It was called «New City», or «Basiliada», and ultimately became the heart of Caesarea itself.

Basil was not above ministering to the poor with his own hands, feeding them, tending the sick, providing alms. Nor was he below meeting the Emperor Valens, face to face, and confronting him with the rights of religion and orthodoxy of doctrine. History provides this anecdote: When Basil was confronted with the Emperor's right-hand man, the following dialogue took place:

Modestus: 'No one up to this day has ever spoken in such a manner and with such boldness to me'.

Basil: 'Perhaps you never met a bishop before'.

He was fearless, he was convinced, he was firm, sensitive, hard-working, with a saving sense of humour.

What did he write that would rouse the interest of scholars today? He wrote theology, particularly on the nature of the Holy Spirit, which belief was not fully and clearly defined in his day. He wrote commentaries on Scripture, rules for his followers, refutations of those he believed to be in error, and letters. These latter, some three hundred of them, show us the man and his times. They are written to a great variety of people: bishops, friends, enemies, governors, popes, emperors, and simple acquaintances. They sum up and include, in a way, all his other work, and are the best commentaries on all his treatises.

Basil has been studied through the centuries. The body of commentary on him is considerable. The St. Basil Symposium is using the sixteenth centenary of his death to bring this study and knowledge to a high point, which will acknowledge Basil as not just an important

man of the fourth century, but as an important man for this present one, and for those which are to follow.

In conjunction with the Symposium, the Royal Ontario Museum has prepared a special exhibit related to the times of Basil of Caesarea. It will be opened on Monday, June 11, by Cardinal Willebrands from Rome, who is representing Pope John Paul II at the Symposium. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Demetrios I, will be represented by His Grace Sotirios, Greek Orthodox Bishop of Toronto. Special messages from both Church heads will be read at the opening ceremonies of the Symposium on Sunday, June 10.