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## Saint Basil: Monastic Reformer

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SAINT BASIL: MONASTIC REFORMER

by

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A Graduate Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
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Collegeville, Minnesota

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This Graduate Paper was written under the direction of

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## SAINT BASIL: MONASTIC REFORMER

## Description of the Project:

Ascetical practices and theological disputes, in particular the Christological controversy initiated by the teaching of Arius, came to divide the ascetic groups of Asia Minor from the orthodox institutional church during the fourth century. Witnessing and experiencing the ascetical conflicts and theological divisions within the church was distressing for St. Basil. In the course of time, Basil would offer himself as an example of harmonizing the ascetic life with an orthodox union with the church. In order to demonstrate Basil as such a worthy example, I will show how Basil domesticated the ascetical currents of his locality by providing a Scriptural foundation for the ascetical life and encouraging ascetics to live in communities separated from the world. The use of Scripture gave Basil a universal alphabet in which to base his teaching. At the same time, separation from the world would lend itself to having a settled mind, the fruit of which would be pure prayer.

*This paper may be duplicated.*

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Signature of Student Writer

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Date

The fourth century was a time of incredible growth and tumult for the church. The Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity and his move to legalize the Christian religion gave Christians a prominence they had not known before. The teaching of an Alexandrian priest, Arius, whose teaching was condemned in 325, led to years of tumultuous theological conflict. The beginning of the monastic life would not only aid the church's spiritual growth but, at times, add to the tumult.

The church of Asia Minor, now modern day Turkey, was a microcosm of the larger church. One particular trouble spot was the relationship of the institutional church and the charismatic ascetic movement. Due to Constantine's legalization of Christianity, many more people, some with questionable motives for joining, flooded the ranks of the church. This influx of people led, in some people's view, to a complacency among both the faithful and the hierarchy. In Asia Minor, as well as in other places of the Roman Empire, there arose aspirations, sometimes violent ones, for a more authentic and rigorous form of Christianity. These new forms of asceticism were often outside of ecclesiastical control as the founder often claimed the Spirit as the exclusive property for themselves and their movement. As such, the ascetic movements could not resign themselves to staying within the limits imposed by the pastors of the church.<sup>1</sup>

Ascetical practices were not the only causes of division within the church. Theological disputes, in particular the Christological controversy initiated by the teaching of Arius, came to further complicate relationships between ascetical groups themselves and their relationship with the orthodox institutional church. Witnessing and experiencing the ascetical conflicts and theological divisions within the church was distressing for St. Basil. In the course of time, Basil himself became an example of harmonizing the ascetic life with an orthodox union with the church. Basil domesticated the ascetical currents of his locality by providing a Scriptural foundation for the

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<sup>1</sup> There were several rigorist and unorthodox tendencies existing in the first to the fourth centuries. These include Gnosticism, Encratism, Montanism, and Manichaeism, to name a few.

ascetical life and encouraging ascetics to live in communities separated from the world. The use of Scripture gave Basil a universal alphabet in which to spread his teaching. At the same time, separation from the world would lend itself to having a settled mind, the fruit of which would be pure prayer. In order to ground this claim, I will first give a biography of Basil, second, describe some of the theological and ascetical currents that were contemporaneous with Basil, and, finally, examine the first seven Questions of the *The Large Asketikon* to tease out a few of Basil's major spiritual teachings that are based in Scripture and describe the separation from the world that Basil desired for his followers.

St. Basil of Caesarea was born around 330 in Pontus, Asia Minor, to Basil and Emmelia, who were wealthy landowners of the region. In all, Basil and Emmelia would be the parents of ten children of which four sons and five daughters would survive to adulthood. Macrina, the eldest daughter, consecrated herself to virginity at the age of twelve.<sup>2</sup> Her brother, Gregory, would write her biography extolling her virtue and ascetical lifestyle. The other daughters found spouses for themselves. Basil was the eldest of the sons. After Basil came Naucratus. Naucratus died as a woodsman ascetic in a hunting accident at a youthful age.<sup>3</sup> The other sons, Gregory and Peter, would both become bishops, and be known as Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebaste.<sup>4</sup>

Growing up, Basil was taught the Bible by his paternal grandmother, Macrina (d.c. 345), and his mother, while his father taught him elementary classical subjects. After his father's death around 345, Basil went to the city of Caesarea to continue his studies.<sup>5</sup> It was at this time, 346-348, that Basil met his life-long friend Gregory Nazianzen. At the age of nineteen, around 349, Basil traveled to Constantinople for further studies. A year later he was studying in Athens where again he

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<sup>2</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*, trans. Kevin Corrigan (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>4</sup> For this biography of St. Basil I am following the timeline provided by Augustine Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God: The Spirituality of the Rules of St. Basil* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> *The Life of Macrina*, 30-31, describes her as taking up the responsibility of teaching her youngest brother, Peter. Furthermore, at Macrina's suggestion the now widowed Emmelia moved to the family estate at Annesi. At this location, according to the *Life of Macrina*, 25, the family lives ascetically as best as they can in face of the responsibilities that they had as wealthy landowners.

connected with Gregory Nazianzen. Upon his return from Athens, Basil took up a post teaching rhetoric in Caesarea.<sup>6</sup>

Having heard of the ascetical teaching of Eustathius of Sebaste, Basil undertook to meet him personally.<sup>7</sup> Basil followed after Eustathius as he took a tour of the monastic sites in Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt, although, due to poor health, Basil was unable to catch up with him.<sup>8</sup> After Basil had completed his own tour of the monastic sites just mentioned, he returned to Caesarea. Upon his return he was baptized by Bishop Dianius and retired to the family estate at Annesi, living on the opposite bank from his mother. While there, Basil addressed a letter to his friend Gregory Nazianzen asking him to consider joining him in the ascetical life. After some negotiation of the matter, Gregory joined his friend. While they were together, the two worked on compiling passages from Origen in a book entitled the *Philocalia*.

Ending his two to three year stay at Annesi, Basil traveled to Constantinople in 360 for a synod. Upon his return to Caesarea, Basil was ordained a lector by Bishop Dianius after which Basil retired to his family estate. A year or so later Basil returned to Caesarea in mid-362 to attend to the dying bishop and shortly thereafter was ordained a priest by the new bishop, Eusebius. By 363 Basil had returned to Annesi after a disagreement with the bishop. About two years later, in 365, Basil would be recalled to Caesarea and work closely with the bishop. In about 368 or 369 Caesarea found itself in the grips of a famine during which Basil aided those most severely struck by it. In 370,

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<sup>6</sup> Just as Basil is leaving Athens to return home, Naucratus dies, which changes the family dynamic. *The Life of Macrina*, 29-30, describes Macrina as convincing her mother to live a life more fully devoted to asceticism. Emmelia is convinced and she subsequently distributes the land and wealth among the children.

<sup>7</sup> What happened to Basil upon his return home from Athens and what was the catalyst behind his striving for an ascetical life is open to question. *The Life of Macrina*, 26, describes Macrina as confronting her prideful brother. Gregory Nazianzen in his funeral oration describes the two of them as dabbling in the theatre: Gregory Nazianzen, "On St. Basil the Great: Bishop of Caesarea," trans. Leo P. McCauley, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 22 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), 49. Finally, Basil in Letter 223 describes his disappointment at pursuing the wrong kind of knowledge: Basil of Caesarea "Epistle 223," trans. Agnes Clare Way, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 28 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955), 127.

<sup>8</sup> St. Basil, "Epistle 2," trans. Agnes Clare Way, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 13 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1951), 3.



Eusebius died, and Basil was chosen to be his replacement. Nine years later Basil died having faithfully served the church at Caesarea.

As was noted above, Basil undertook and eventually found Eustathius as a guide for himself. Some things need to be related concerning Eustathius himself, his role in the ascetical movement in Asia Minor, and his influence on Basil. Unfortunately, we do not know much about Eustathius. None of his followers wrote his biography. What we do know about the activities of Eustathius can be gleaned from other writings which are generally hostile to him. Eustathius himself did not write anything, or at least did not leave any writings behind him. The chief (though approximate) dates of his life are the following: he was born in about 300; he was consecrated the bishop of Sebaste before the year 356; and he died in the year 377. He was a disciple of Arius in Alexandria which would forever brand him as an Arian in the eyes of the authorities of the church. As a result of his time in Egypt, Eustathius was in a prime position to know Egyptian monasticism quite well. Furthermore, Eustathius made a second investigation of the monastic sites of Egypt and other places to determine how the monastic life had evolved. Eustathius himself was a great promoter of the ascetical life in Pontus and in Roman Armenia.<sup>9</sup> The fact that he was a bishop and lived with great austerity combined to give him great authority in the eyes of those who were inclined to the ascetical life.

Given that the spiritual atmosphere in Asia Minor was in great ferment, it is little surprise that some ascetical groups became extreme. At the center of the ferment was Eustathius with his captivating example. Somewhere around the year 340-360 (the date is uncertain and disputed), Eusebius of Nicomedia called a synod in Gangra of Paphlagonia. In the letter written by this assembly, it warned the other bishops in Armenia about radical ascetical groups that were, perhaps, inspired by Eustathius. The letter produced by the assembly also contained twenty canons that list

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<sup>9</sup> Salaminus Hermias Sozomenus, "The Ecclesiastical History of Salaminus Hermias Sozomenus," trans. Chester D. Hartranft, *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 293. Sozomen states that Eustathius "founded a society of monks in Armenia, Paphlagonia, and Pontus and became an author of a zealous discipline."

and condemn the excesses of the radical ascetics who had gone further in their zeal for a holy life than their master. Judging from the canons of the Council of Gangra, the radicals were bringing turmoil into Christian families by discoursing in favor of continence; the radicals threatened the public order with their disdain for social obligations, e.g., paying taxes, military service, and the duties of slaves toward their masters; finally, they endangered the peace of the church by creating difficulties between the laity and the married clergy, whom they criticized.<sup>10</sup>

The radical ascetics wished to impose their own criteria on all Christians. They were seeking to reform a church that they saw as complacent. In opposition to them, the council fathers at Gangra rebuked them for failing to participate in the liturgical assemblies because of their scorn for the married clergy, and for their disobedience towards the laws of the church by their fasting on Sundays. We can assume that Eustathius himself was opposed to such open sectarianism. Otherwise, he would not have promoted to the episcopal see at Sebaste nor would he have gained the admiration of Basil.

By the mid-fourth century, Eustathius, Marathonius of Nicomedia, and Macedonius of Constantinople would form the nucleus of a powerful group called the *Homoiousians*.<sup>11</sup> Susanna Elm considers this *Homoiousian* group of ascetics to be those who dwelt in the cities and were

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<sup>10</sup> For a closer look at the canons produced at Gangra, see *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent Wimbusch, "Canons from the Council of Gangra," trans. O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 448-455. There is evidence that exonerates Eustathius from Gangra's condemnation. Sozomen in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, chap. 14 makes a distinction between Eustathius and his followers stating that it was the latter that were in error. Furthermore, Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford Press, 1994), 130, follows the work of Andre Loofs and Jean Gribomont who argue that the followers of Eustathius had received Gangra's condemnation.

<sup>11</sup> Theological positions influenced the labeling of this group. By the mid-fourth century what scholars call semi-Arianism gained ascendancy. On one side of the spectrum there were those who championed Nicene orthodoxy by advocating the use of the term *Homoousian* to describe the Son's relationship with the Father. On the other side of the spectrum, there were the *Anomoeans* who taught that the Son was unlike the Father. For those who protested that the term *Homoousian* was unbiblical, a middle group was formed. They called themselves *Homoiousians* and taught that the Son was similar in being to the Father. It was this *Homoiousian* party that came to power in key episcopal sees, namely, Nicomedia and Constantinople. They were ousted from power in the late 350's when their theological position was rejected. After this, Basil was conflicted as to what his own theological position ought to be. Anna Silvas in *The Asketikon of Saint Basil the Great*, 86-98, examines Basil's intellectual conversion from being a *Homoiousian* to a *Homoousian* theologian. Basil championed Nicene orthodoxy throughout his career. He made a definitive theological break with the *Homoiousians* in the early 370's when Eustathius denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. By the time of this break Basil himself was the archbishop in Caesarea.

enmeshed in the life of the church and the life of the city.<sup>12</sup> The common ascetical link among this group was that they founded hospices in the city which were staffed by ascetics. Eustathius, Macedonius, and Marathionius follow this pattern. When Basil became bishop of Caesarea he would likewise found a hospice staffed by ascetics.<sup>13</sup> Susanna Elm speculates that there may have been at least one other hospice founded by Basil.<sup>14</sup> The founding of hospices by this group had the effect of channeling the enthusiasm of the ascetics into charitable works, while, simultaneously, integrating them into the structures of the church and of society. The best group to represent the kind of ascetic in need of integration is the group called Nazarites in Gregory's funeral oration. This particular group of ascetics caused difficulties in the city of Caesarea just after Dianius died. Their desire to have Basil consecrated as bishop was so fierce that Basil had to leave the city to return to retirement, rather than risk a split in the church when Eusebius was installed as the bishop.<sup>15</sup>

Elm, in describing the importance of *On the True Identity of Virginitas to Letios, Bishop of Melitene* by Basil of Ancyra (a member of the *Homoiousian* party), links the treatise just mentioned with an earlier anonymous homily on virginity. Considering this treatise, Elm points out two things. First, it testifies to the growth, development, and moderation of asceticism for women. Second, Elm comments that the document advocates a middle way.<sup>16</sup> This middle way has the following characteristics: “[It is] distinct from rigoristic excesses, while at the same time postulating an ascetic ideal based on rejection of property, separation from the natural family, and performance of charitable acts.”<sup>17</sup> However small, this new middle way represents a shift away from the rigorous ascetic life condemned at Gangra towards one of moderation.

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<sup>12</sup> Chapters 4 & 6 of Elm, *Virgins of God*, describe the *Homoiousian* ascetical group.

<sup>13</sup> The most well-known hospice founded by Basil was called *Basileiados* and was located near Caesarea. Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God*, 158, and Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 139-141, indicate that this hospice was located away from the city. On the other hand, Elm, *Virgins of God*, 135, suggests that the majority of Basil's communities were located in the countryside, except for the hospice at Caesarea.

<sup>14</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 212.

<sup>15</sup> Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God*, 36-37; Elm, *Virgins of God*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Another important document speaks of a middle way. This document is the funeral oration given by Gregory Nazianzen on the occasion of Basil's death. Gregory mentions that Basil combined the solitary life (ερήμικος βίος) with the mixed life (μυγάδος βίος). The latter term is difficult to translate and typically means "combination" or "mixture." After evaluating the relevant literature in which this term appears, W.K.L. Clarke argues that the word ought to be translated as "ascetics living in the world."<sup>18</sup> In considering the term, Elm concludes that there may have been three forms of ascetic life during Basil's time.<sup>19</sup> The first is the solitary life lived by Naucratus or Basil at Annesi after his return from touring the monastic sites. The second is that of the *Homoiousian* ascetics who, as was mentioned previously, lived in the city, performed good deeds, were vocal in matters of church and state, and perhaps some were priests. Basil created a third variety, a middle way, composed of ascetics living the common life away from the city as he had done at Annesi. These Basilan ascetics would be doctrinally tied to the church as Basil clarified his own theological position. Basilan ascetics were marked by a sensitivity to the needs of the Christian community, an openness to the works of the mercy, and a positive relationship to the Church and to Scripture.

It is impossible to understand Basil's influence without knowing three of his most important writings: *The Moral Rules* and *The Small and Large Asketikons*. *The Moral Rules (Moralia)* were written about 360. The work lays out what a Christian should do or avoid based on the authority of the New Testament. At this early stage Basil is not instructing a religious community as we might consider one now. Rather, he addressed fraternities of devout Christians who choose to live the ascetic life. Jean Gribomont observed that these groups did not condemn marriage or wealth, but they did preach continence and renunciation with a zeal that was disturbing for the officials of the

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<sup>18</sup> W.K. Lowther Clarke, *St. Basil the Great: A Study in Monasticism* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), 112.

<sup>19</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 209-223.

church.<sup>20</sup> Gribomont also observes that in composing this work it shows Basil at the outset of his ministry to be “a man of the Church, anxious to calm tensions, but with exigent fidelity to the Gospel; he corrects the excesses and the passions of ascetical radicalism around him as well as the mediocrity and worldly spirit he finds in the Church.”<sup>21</sup> *The Small Asketikon* is a collection of 203 questions Basil was asked and the answers that he gave when, as a priest-ascetic (363-370), he visited various fraternities around Cappadocia.<sup>22</sup> *The Large Asketikon*, which is twice as large as *The Small Asketikon*, consists of two parts. The first part consists of 55 Long Rules. The first 23 questions of this section amplify the first eleven questions of *The Small Asketikon*. The remaining questions, 24-55, are new material. Thus, the original questions and answers of *The Small Asketikon* have been expanded and reworked into a systematic exposition of the basic principles of Christian asceticism. The second part of *The Large Asketikon* consists of 313 Short Rules. This part of *The Large Asketikon* consists of 192 questions and answers from *The Small Asketikon* and 121 new questions and answers. Unlike the first part of *The Large Asketikon*, this section is unsystematic and remains in the state of improvisation in which it was first written down.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jean Gribomont, OSB, *Saint Basile. Évangile et Église: Mélanges*, Tome 1 [Saint Basil. Gospel and Church: A Mingling], *Spiritualité Orientale*, no 36 (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1984), 147. Unpublished translation by Marion Balsavich, OSB.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Furthermore, Basil wrote an ascetical discourse in which he depicts both the married state and the monastic life as having many trials but both leading to God if they are lived faithfully. St. Basil, “An Ascetical Discourse and Exhortation on the Renunciation of the World and Spiritual Perfection,” trans. M. Monica Wagner, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 9 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1950), 15-33.

<sup>22</sup> Judging from the preface of *The Small Asketikon*, it would appear that Basil is addressing a group of devout Christians some of whom may have been disciples of Eustathius, see Anna Silvas, *The Asketikon of Saint Basil the Great* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 273, n. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Themes treated in *The Large Asketikon*, e.g., order in the community found in Questions 24-36 or duties of the superior found in Questions 43-54, suggest that Basil is instructing, though not exclusively, ascetics who have formed themselves into communities. With his scriptural foundation for the ascetic life expressed in *The Moralia*, his instructions to devout Christians in *The Small Asketikon*, and his directives to communities of ascetics in *The Large Asketikon*, scholars point to an evolution in Basil’s teachings and to an evolution in the ascetical life in Asia Minor, see Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God*, 96-99.

Since *The Large Asketikon* is a systematic exposition, Basil begins by laying out his theological and anthropological reasons for the monastic life. In the first question and reply Basil is asked about the appropriate sequence of the Lord's commands. Basil bases his reply on Matthew 22:36-39. Like Jesus who looked back to Moses as the basis of his own reply, Basil looks back to Jesus. In his commentary on the Scripture passage Basil points out that while love of God is of supreme importance, the love of God is fulfilled by one's love of neighbor.

In Question 2 Basil is asked about our inclination to love God. Basil argues that our love of God is natural. To make this argument Basil uses the phrase *spermatikos tis logos* (σπερματικός τις λόγος), a rational seed. This phrase was originally used by the Stoic philosophers who used the word as "a generative principle of individual substances by which things are what they are, an undivided part of or participation in the Universal Logos."<sup>24</sup> In due course of time, the early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria borrowed the phrase but made use of it to express humanity's relationship with the Christian revelation. Basil inherits this use of the word but gives new meaning to the term by using it "in relation solely to human beings and to their natural tendency to love God, which their Creator placed in them at their creation."<sup>25</sup> Although love of God is rational and natural for us, sin has perverted our free will so that we no longer discern truly what is beautiful and worthy. The ascetical life is meant to hone our desires so that they pursue the good. Although we often wander from what is good God did not leave us alone. This is evident by the fact that the Father sent us his Son who emptied himself and became a servant. Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection won for us the dignity of divinity, the opportunity to become in every way like the Son who pleases the Father.

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<sup>24</sup> Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

Having related that the Incarnation of the Son restores, elevates, and teaches us how to love unselfishly, Basil speaks of loving one's neighbor. As noted previously, love is our nature as created by God. Basil writes the following:

Now who does not know that man is a domesticated and sociable (κοινωνικόν) animal, not a solitary (μονάστικον) and wild one? Nothing is more characteristic of our nature than that we have fellowship with one another, need one another and love our own kind.<sup>26</sup>

The Greek words highlighted above are significant. The term *monastikon* (μονάστικον) comes from the Greek noun *monos* (μόνος). From this word such terms as *monachos* and *monache* are derived. *Monos* typically means alone, single, or solitary -- especially applied to celibate persons.<sup>27</sup> Basil uses a form of *monos* in connection with wild and savage animals, thus giving it a negative interpretation. On account of this interpretation Basil dismisses solitude as unnatural. From the fact that Basil was well versed in monastic terminology, it would be safe to say that he knows the term and the meaning of the term. Because he uses it negatively and otherwise avoids using it, these two facts point to the notion that he does not agree with the solitary life, a position that comes to full bloom in Question 7. The refusal to use such terms may also betray an anxiety about special terminology that suggests sectarian differences from the larger Christian community.

The term *koinonikon* (κοινωνικόν) is likewise important. The word comes from *koinonikos*, meaning "generous" or "common-minded." As a noun it means fellowship or partnership, while the verb typically means to share or have in common. The various forms of this word can be found sprinkled throughout the New Testament. Especially important for Basil is its use in Acts 2:44 and Acts 4:32 where Luke describes the primitive apostolic community. Basil's use of these words makes clear his displeasure with the solitary life and his promotion of a communal life.

With his foundation in place, Basil considers how one can adequately cultivate the love of God and the love of neighbor. Can one adequately fulfill these loves while living with those who pay

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<sup>26</sup> Silvas, *The Asketikon of Saint Basil the Great*, 172.

<sup>27</sup> Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God*, 93.

no heed to the commandments? To answer these questions one must examine significant monastic terms and significant terms used by Basil in Questions 5-7. I will be appealing to texts of *The Large Asketikon* as well as to letters written by Basil for further clarification and confirmations.

Basil, like most philosophers of his day, had a Platonic notion of the world. Letter 2, written to his friend Gregory Nazianzen, demonstrates this view. Basil tells Gregory that the things seen and heard in the world leave their mark on one's soul. Good things seen in the world leave one thinking about or recollecting goodness. Bad things, however, leave one desiring to pursue and to fulfill wrong desires which only drag a soul down. For this reason Basil encourages Gregory to a life of retirement away from all that could contaminate the soul. In the letter Basil does not argue for a complete and physical separation from the world as a permanent solution. He writes as follows:

There is but one escape from these distractions, a complete separation. Withdrawing from the world, (κόσμου δὲ ἀναχώρησις) however, does not mean mere bodily absence, but implies a disengagement of spirit from sympathy with the body, a renunciation of the city, home, personal possessions, love of friends, property, means of livelihood, business, social relations, and learning acquired by human teaching; also a readiness to receive in one's heart the impressions produced there by divine instruction.<sup>28</sup>

The Greek word highlighted above: *anachōrēsis* (ἀναχώρησις) is another important monastic term. It is also the first step in living the ascetical life according to Basil. The noun and its related verb were used in Roman Egypt to describe one who had fled one's village or family to the desert in order to escape from the payment of taxes or some other societal obligation.<sup>29</sup> The term was borrowed by early Christian writers, most significantly, Athanasius, to describe one who withdrew from the world to take up the ascetical life. In this connection a noun, *anachorētēs* (ἀναχωρήτης), was formed to speak of persons who withdrew from the world. Athanasius used the term to describe what St. Anthony was doing in the desert. Augustine Holmes observes the following about the use of this term:

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<sup>28</sup> St. Basil, "Epistle 2," *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 13, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God*, 111.



In this sacred context the word came to have two aspects in the Christian vocabulary, firstly indicating a physical flight and secondly referring to an inner spiritual attitude which could exist on its own apart from the question of location.<sup>30</sup>

Returning to a consideration of Letter 2 one can see the qualities that withdrawal from the world had for Basil. Basil admits to Gregory that he has left the city behind to come to this out of the way place. Yet, he confesses that he has received no spiritual benefit from this activity. He denied himself such benefits by failing to leave himself behind. As was quoted above Basil considered separation from the world not to be primarily physical, but spiritual, in the sense of severing sympathy with self-will, for example. The idea of *anachōrēsis* that Basil supports in this letter is likewise found in Question 5. The *anachōrēsis* that Basil foresees is a spiritual one that flees from attachments and everyday cares of the world. He writes that if one wishes to be a follower of God one “must be loosened from the chains of attachment to this life.”<sup>31</sup> Such a loosening can only be “achieved by complete withdrawal from and forgetfulness of one’s former habits.”<sup>32</sup> Basil does imply a physical separation when he mentions cutting family ties. Nevertheless, his overarching theme of withdrawal is a spiritual one.

One of the advantages of withdrawal that Basil illustrates in his Letter 2 is “silence” *ησυχία* (*hēsuchia*). He uses this term three times, all of which appear in his epistles: twice in Epistle 2 and once in Epistle 45.<sup>33</sup> The most telling reference appears in Epistle 2 and reads as follows: *Ησυχία ουν αρχη καθάρσεως τη ψυχη, μήτε γλώττης λαλούσης τα των ανθρώπων, μήτε οφθαλμων ευχροίας σωμάτων...περισκοπούντων;*<sup>34</sup> “Now silence is the beginning of the cleansing of the soul, without the tongue speaking of human things, without his eyes looking around at healthy complexion of bodies” (translation mine). One wonders if *hēsuchia* evolved in

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Silvas, *The Asketikon of Saint Basil the Great*, 175

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The second reference to *hēsuchia* in Basil’s Epistle 2 points out that silence is advantageous for the soul. In Epistle 45, Basil uses the ascetical observance of *hēsuchia* to implore a monk who has left the monastery for the world to return to the monastic life.

<sup>34</sup> PG 32:228A

Basil's teaching becoming "disposition" *διάθεσις* (*diathesis*) as the latter term is used in Question 5 of *The Large Asketikon*.<sup>35</sup>

Fleeing a world that could drag one's soul down helps the ascetic to remain undistracted and so enhances one's memory of God. A settled mind allows for increased awareness and memory of God's goodness by eliminating distractions. The teaching on the state of undistractedness, *amesteōriston diathesis*, (ἀμετεώριστον διάθεσις), goes hand in hand with the teaching about memory, *mnēmē*, (μνήμη). John Eudes Bamberger analyzes this connection in an article appearing in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*. After carefully examining texts where Basil uses the terminology of memory, Bamberger concludes that "cultivation of the memory of God leads to an inner change resulting in the ability to experience delight in God and his words."<sup>36</sup> The settled mind leads the ascetic to chant God's praises with joy because one can recall with clarity the goodness of God. As one offers this joyful praise to God for his goodness, one "loses the taste for sin."<sup>37</sup>

Concerning *diathesis*, Bamberger likewise carefully examines the texts where this terminology is found. Bamberger finds that the term is a multi-layered word having many definitions. Bamberger makes the following conclusions about the meaning of the word: the term describes a person's emotional life, morality, and a person's unconscious, including their dreams.

In light of the evidence Bamberger supposes "that memory-diathesis in the area where they overlap and co-incide refer to the dynamic unconscious as seen from different aspects."<sup>38</sup> By pairing these words, Basil wishes to articulate, even if in a rudimentary way, the inner being of the person

<sup>35</sup> Both terms may be intrinsically connected in that the cultivation of *hēsuchia* enables a monk to flee from considering harmful things in the world. In a like manner, *diathesis* is the calm state which is produced by practicing *hēsuchia*. Basil expresses his teaching on *diathesis* in Question 5 of *The Large Asketikon* in the following way: Οὐτῶ καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς ὁ Κύριος μετὰ τὴν εὐκρινῆ καὶ ἀμετεώριστον διάθεσιν ἐμαρτύρει, λέγων Ὑμεῖς οὐκ ἐστε ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου (*PG: 31:920D*); "Thus, also, the Lord bore witness to his disciples' sincere and undistracted disposition saying, 'You do not belong to this world' (John 15:19)." (translation mine).

<sup>36</sup> John Eudes Bamberger, "Μνήμη-Διάθεσις: The Psychic Dynamism in the Ascetical Theology of St. Basil," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 34 (1968): 237-238.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 238

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

wherein the person meets God alone. It is in this place that the ascetic can offer continual and pure prayer.

As a final spiritual teaching in Question 5, Basil reminds his readers that they are always under God's careful watch. Basil makes use of the image of a smith forging an axe. The smith continually thinks about the person for whom the axe is being made. In the same way God thinks about us and we, in our turn, think about God and his blessings to us. The thought that God is always watching prevents one from indulging in wandering thoughts, especially at prayer. By recollecting that God is close at hand one will want to please God and so fulfill the commandments.

Before I take up considerations in the next Question it might be helpful to make a summary of what has been said thus far. We have seen that Basil encourages a withdrawal from society. The overarching emphasis of this withdrawal is spiritual. Such a spiritual withdrawal will lead one to a settled mind which only enhances one's memory of the goodness of God. Aware that God's gaze is upon them, the ascetics will guard against wandering thoughts so as to be pleasing to God as they fulfill the commandments.

Having mentioned a few of Basil's important spiritual teachings, I will add a few more as we consider Question 6. In order to have a better understanding of the substance I need to do two things: determine what Basil means by "the world" and revisit the issue of the kind of withdrawal that Basil foresees.

Basil sees the world as consisting of two groups: those who follow God's commandments and those who do not. These latter ones are "fearlessly and disdainfully disposed toward the exact observance of the commandments."<sup>39</sup> In his discussion of Question 5 Basil describes those who do not follow God's commandments "as many wrongdoers."<sup>40</sup> It is from these persons that one must separate. In considering this dichotomy, one wonders if Basil then considers the majority of nominal

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<sup>39</sup> Silvas, *The Asketikon of Saint Basil the Great*, 178.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

Christians as a crowd of wrongdoers. One could assume so from his words in the preface of *The Large Asketikon* where he speaks of a “great number of Christians who do not keep all the commandments.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Basil states that becoming proficient in prayer and meditation is impossible when one is tossed about by so many distractions.<sup>42</sup> Based on the evidence, it would be safe to say that in Basil’s view the Christians who do not follow the commandments do not please God.

Concerning the issue of separation from the world, we have already seen that Basil suggests that an interior separation would be sufficient. Yet, in Question 6 Basil points to physical retirement as being necessary to maintain an undistracted mind. On the other hand, despite the title of the section -- which was added by a later editor -- which reads that separation is necessary, Basil himself says that physical retirement “is of great assistance in keeping the soul from distraction.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Basil goes on to say that to die to self as Christ commands “is very difficult, if I do not say entirely impossible to achieve while living in the midst of prevailing indifference.”<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps for further clarification appeal can be made to Letter 2 written by Basil to Gregory. From this letter we can glean what kind of separation Basil himself practiced. In this letter Basil supports a separation from the world that “implies a disengagement of spirit from sympathy with the body.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, it ought to be recalled that Basil writes this letter from his hermitage along the River Iris. Basil tells Gregory that “solitude provides us with the greatest help towards this achievement, quieting our passions, and giving leisure to our reason to uproot them completely from the soul.”<sup>46</sup> With these benefits in mind, Basil encourages Gregory to “choose a place such as ours, removed from association with men, so that nothing from the outside will interrupt the constant practices of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 178-79.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>45</sup> St. Basil, “Epistle 2,” *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 13, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

the ascetic life.”<sup>47</sup> While it is true that Basil spent some time in solitude, it is also true that Basil kept in contact with friends and associates by means of letters and, when necessary, leaving his retirement to conduct business. These contacts became even more vital after he became bishop. Basil may have considered cutting himself off from the contacts just listed, but he came to understand by the time the *Asketikons* were written that the ascetical life included freeing oneself from ties that cause a passionate attachment to life, avoiding distractions, and abandoning worldly cares. What things ought to be avoided and what sort of separation is needed are unclear. In *The Large Asketikon* Basil is speaking to communities that may be separated from the world by their celibacy and by other practices.

Basil continues his discussion in Question 6 of separation from the world by giving two further reasons for such a practice. The first is the avoidance of sin. As was discussed previously, our separation from those who do not follow God’s commandments fosters an undistracted mind which enhances the memory of God and his goodness. This leads to offering continual and pure prayer. Basil suggests as much when he counsels that “we shall be able to wear away the stains of sin by assiduous prayer and steadfast meditation on God’s will.”<sup>48</sup> Choosing to remain in the crowd of those who do not follow God’s commandments is not beneficial. In this case, the evil things seen and heard in the world leave a mark on the soul. In time this mark will become so ingrained in our soul that we become accustomed to seeing these things and so become inclined to do sinful acts ourselves. One’s seclusion from the world gives one the opportunity to overcome sin, to practice prayer, and to practice asceticism.

The other reason for leaving the world is in order to follow Christ. Basil quotes Luke 9:23 where Jesus announces that those who wish to follow him must take up their cross and deny

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>48</sup> Silvas, *The Asketikon of Saint Basil the Great*, 178.

themselves. For Basil self-denial is the forgetfulness of the past and the surrender of one's will.<sup>49</sup> To do so is to take up the cross and follow Jesus. As was discussed previously, distraction makes it impossible to follow Jesus. Basil grounds his understanding of separation from the world in Jesus' command and Scripture. In Basil's view, separation from the world is done in fulfillment of a command of Christ.

Before I move onto the consideration of our last question another summary might be in order. We have seen Basil call for a withdrawal, an *anachōrēsis*. One's separation from the world is meant to foster an undistracted mind which enhances one's memory of the goodness of God. In this state we can offer pure and continual prayer to God. Finally, *anachōrēsis* is an aid in avoiding and defeating sin which, in consequence, makes the following of Christ that much richer.

In Question 7 Basil speaks favorably of living in a community of like-minded persons separated from the world. At the same time Basil points out that a solitary can be successful only if the solitary can find a spiritual master who can give a correction and offer guidance. This kind of person is usually known to the solitary by previous association.<sup>50</sup>

Basil begins his reply by using two passages from St. Paul: 1 Corinthians 12:12 and Romans 12:6. In these texts Paul speaks of the church community as a body with Christ as its head. Basil borrows the imagery to speak of his ascetical communities. Christ is the head of the community just as he is for the church. At the same time, the Holy Spirit keeps harmony in the body. The Spirit is mentioned four times in this Question. This leads one to consider that the ascetic community is the home of the Spirit and a place where the Spirit's gifts can be used to their fullest. Basil makes the point that no one has the capacity to receive all the gifts of the Spirit, but the grace of the Spirit is given proportionally to the faith of each. As Basil points out, "in the communion of life the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 181.

individual charism becomes the common possession of fellow-citizens.”<sup>51</sup> Living the solitary life puts one outside of the unity of the community making it impossible to “to rejoice with the joyful or weep with those who weep.”<sup>52</sup> The lack of neighbors makes loving one’s neighbor difficult for a solitary, as well as benefiting one’s neighbors through one’s gifts.

A second scriptural source which Basil references is Luke’s description of the primitive apostolic community in Acts 2:44. I have already noted the importance of the Greek word *koinonia* for Basil. It ought to come as no surprise that Basil appeals to it here as well with a direct quotation. Basil also uses Acts 4:32 to highlight the importance of living together in community. In Letter 295 we glimpse Basil encouraging a group of loosely organized ascetics to undertake the communal life for the sake of apostolic witness.<sup>53</sup>

There are other scriptural passages that deserve attention. The first text is Ecclesiastes 4:10, which Basil uses to warn the solitary that if he should fall there would be no one to help him.<sup>54</sup> A second text worth mentioning is Matthew 25:18-25 where Basil compares the solitary one to the man in the parable who buried his one talent.<sup>55</sup> A third text is Psalm 132 wherein the psalmist extols the pleasures of living in unity with others. Basil points out that there is no apparent unity with others when one lives as a solitary. A final combination of two scripture passages also needs some reflection. A concern of Basil’s is that those living the solitary life cannot fulfill what Basil considers to be “the greatest commandment and that which tends toward salvation.”<sup>56</sup> This commandment is linked to performing good deeds for one’s neighbor: visiting the sick, showing hospitality, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, etc. By invoking service to the neighbor, Basil wants his listeners to think of the parable of the sheep and the goats. In that parable Jesus teaches that good deeds done for the poor are done unto him. So in this regard it is another example of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> St. Basil, “Epistle 295,” *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 28, 286-287.

<sup>54</sup> Silvas, *The Asketikon of Saint Basil the Great*, 182.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 182.

interplay between love of God and love of neighbor. The best example of service can be found at John 13:5 where the gospel writer describes Jesus teaching service by his example of washing the apostles' feet. Basil wonders how a solitary can perform such a service.

On a more practical level, Basil points out that living in community offers the opportunity for mutual dependence. On one hand, mutual dependence offers the fulfillment of our needs; the things that we cannot do ourselves, others in the community can. A second aspect of this mutual dependence is that the solitary does not have any one to critique his manner of living. To claim that scripture alone is sufficient to correct one's faults is to fool oneself. The communal person has others to train him everyday so that one can become pleasing to God.

The basis of this essay has been to demonstrate that Basil reformed the ascetical life in Asia Minor by basing it on Scripture and calling monks to a communal life separated from the world. I have conjectured, with some scholarly support, that of the three ascetic groups existing in Asia Minor, Basil belonged to the 'migados' group, or "mixed" group. Eustathius and others in the *Homoiousian* party founded hospices that were staffed by local ascetics. This work of the ascetics had the benefit of channeling their energies into useful and charitable work. These hospices, however, were near the city which led to ascetics becoming involved the politics of their city and of the church. We saw the rancor caused some of these ascetics when they desired to have Basil consecrated as bishop rather than Eusebius. When it came time for Basil to take a leadership role by becoming bishop, he maintained the practice of founding and developing hospices staffed by ascetics. Basil's communities, with a few exceptions, were in the countryside removed from the turmoil of city and ecclesial politics. This separation had the consequence that the ascetic's life was undisturbed which allowed an ascetic to reflect on God's goodness which, in turn, aided the ascetic in following Christ and avoiding sin. Basing his teaching in Scripture, Basil sought for a communal



way of life. The support of the communal life in Question 7 and in his other writings makes him a “whole-hearted” champion of “cenobitism.”<sup>57</sup>

Basil’s spiritual teachings have a perennial value for us. Our world is full of choices and temptations that Basil never considered and which would bewilder him. Temptations for our modern day include such things as the Internet, the television, the radio, magazines, newspapers, just to name a few. How do we determine what is to be avoided? What things in our culture can weigh a soul down? We need a certain amount of wisdom, discretion, and prudence to determine what we need to avoid in order to keep our minds undistracted, our memory of God’s goodness clear, and our prayer pure.

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<sup>57</sup> Clarke, *St. Basil the Great*, 113.

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