



ST. BASIL THE GREAT (329-379AD)

by Robert Payne

Black-bearded, with a bull-like head, heavy eyebrows, glittering eyes, small lips pressed tightly together, Basil stares out from mosaics and icons found in churches in Greece, Constantinople and on Mt. Athos. In Russian icons of the Middle Ages, those heavy features can be easily recognized and it is evident that there was a continuing tradition of portraiture. Of himself, Basil said that he was always sickly and suffered from a lifelong malady involving almost continual gnawing pain, but his icons suggest a sober strength, his feet planted firmly on the ground, with no hint of the physical dejection he speaks about so often in his letters. His forehead was like the prow of a ship. He saw clearly and he seems never to have allowed the infirmities of his body to obscure his essential sobriety and the depth of his spiritual vision. Basil the Great: he wears the title well, if only because he established the foundations of monasticism and threw his vast energy into the establishing of a vast monastic complex, the *Basilead*, that cared for the sick, elderly and poor and was the ancestor of today's hospital.

Basil, a man with a powerful intellect, was from the ancient Roman province of Cappadocia in Asia Minor, what we today call Turkey. He was recognizably Cappadocian, at once stern and tender like the country he lived in, a place of gaunt, nightmarish pinnacle-like mountains and flowering orchards, of bitter cold in winter, of feverish heat in the summer. Cappadocia is a mountainous land, in those days famous for its horses and the wry humor of its people, who had a reputation for toughness. Cappadocia, Karia and Crete were called "the three bad K's" – *tria kappa kakista* in Greek – and the story was often told in Roman times of the viper that bit a Cappadocian – and the viper died!

About 329AD, four years after the 1st Ecumenical Council in Nicea, Basil was born in Caesarea, the modern Kayseri in Turkey. The city lay in the foothills of Mount Argaeus and in 260AD was said to have a population of over 400,000 – a large city by ancient standards. Basil, a second child, was named after his father, a rich lawyer who possessed property in three provinces of Asia Minor, a man also famous for his devotion to Christianity. His mother Emmelia was a woman of great beauty who had ten children: five sons and five daughters – and of these, three sons and one daughter have been canonized as saints in our Church.

In 351 AD, Basil began university studies in Athens where he remained for five years, studying history, poetics, rhetoric, geometry, astronomy, medicine and the classics under the greatest teachers of his time. Late in life, Basil was to say bitter things about the schools in Athens, where a man learned "fire-breathing rhetoric" but it was all "a vain felicity." Nevertheless, it was a period of great intellectual growth and Basil never lost his love for the classics of Greek literature that he had studied there.

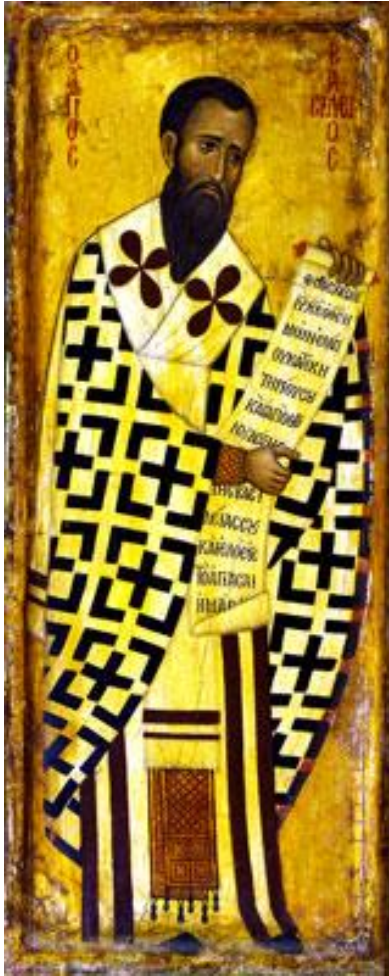
When Basil returned from Athens to Caesarea, he was a graduate of the best university of his day and was wonderfully proficient in rhetoric, the studied art of

public speaking. He was offered the chair of rhetoric at the university in Caesarea and he accepted it. He taught some classes and delighted in his learning and the opportunity to display it. He might have continued as a professor of rhetoric, with a satisfactory law practice, if it had not been for his older sister Macrina and the shock of the death of his younger brother, Naukratios, who had been deeply religious. One day, he just went out to fish and was brought home dead. There was no warning sickness. He died suddenly, on a clear day, like someone struck by lightning. Earlier, Macrina had accused Basil of "being puffed up like a blowfish with the arrogance of oratory" and had upbraided him for not taking his Christian faith seriously enough. The shock of his brother's sudden death overwhelmed Basil. He renounced his professorship and sat at his sister's feet, learning from her the Christian traditions of his family and developing in him the desire for a different life, a life lived with integrity and virtue and oriented towards Christ and his coming kingdom. It was the turning point in Basil's life. Now baptized as an adult, Basil left Caesarea and toured the monastic establishments of fourth century Egypt and Syria, where he learned of the constant need for repentance, of always turning one's life towards Christ and the rigorous discipline necessary for living the monastic life. Basil's life found new focus. Stern, calm and vigorous, there was steel in him. In 359 AD, Basil was made a reader in the Church and five years later, the aging Bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, ordained him a presbyter, much against his will, and he began to preach on a regular basis. In 370 AD, with the death of Eusebius, Basil became the Bishop of Caesarea.

As Bishop of Caesarea, Basil was also the metropolitan of Cappadocia and the Exarch of Pontus and his authority extended over eleven provinces of Asia Minor. He simmered with energy. He administered his diocese, preached and taught, fostered monasteries, wrote innumerable letters and published a small flood of books, many of them key theological texts still read to this day. He wrote to governors, tax collectors, widows, generals and more. His letters are often long by ancient standards, carefully considered and written in a hard-driving style characteristic of everything he wrote: a style composed of seemingly boundless energy, a fierce strength and an overwhelming love. He prepared the plans for the huge hospital he proposed to build outside the walls of the city of Caesarea, the first of its kind in the ancient world, with dispensaries and dormitories, a soup kitchen for the hungry and a special building for lepers. To this hospital, the poor and the sick would be admitted free. Basil confronted corruption among the clergy and was unafraid to confront even the Emperor's personal envoy, if necessary.

Sometime in 372 AD, the Roman Emperor Valens, who denied the divinity of Christ, sent the prefect Modestos to Caesarea to make Basil conform to imperial policies and accept Arianism or be removed from the episcopacy. Modestos, who bore the title Count of the East, possessed only a little less power than the Emperor. He summoned Basil before an imperial tribunal in Caesarea and fortunately, we have a record of their conversation.

"Basil," Modestos shouted, ignoring Roman protocol and omitting all of Basil's titles and honors, "how dare you defy imperial power? Do you know what I can do to you? Don't you fear my power?"



"What can you do?" Basil answered quietly.

"What! You dare say that to me! I can confiscate your possessions, banish you, torture you and put you to death!"

"Is that all?" Basil replied. "None of these things bother me. You cannot confiscate my property and possessions because I have none, unless you want to take the clothes that I'm wearing and the few books that I have. Banishment and exile – what have these to do with me? I am at home everywhere on God's earth. You cannot exile me from the grace of God! I am already a pilgrim and sojourner in this life. To be put to death is the only power you have over me. As for death, it is welcome to me, for it will bring me all the sooner into His blessed Presence, close to Him whom I already serve."

Startled, Modestos said: "No one ever spoke to me in such a manner until now."

No doubt," retorted Basil. "You've probably never met a bishop until now."

Basil's defiant rejection of Modestos was so surprising that he had earned the man's respect.

By 372 AD, Basil had only seven more years to live. He would be dead by the time he was fifty. He lived those years to the full, driving himself hard, forever writing or dictating, visiting churches, thundering his defense of the divinity of Christ or quarreling with the enemies he made because of his devotion to Christ. He refused to rest. He had a strong sympathy for the poor and downtrodden. He developed a passion for embracing lepers. His sermons on the Christian necessity of helping those who are poor cannot be read without challenge to this day. Basil's homilies are characterized by a deliberate attempt to humanize and personalize the plight of the poor. Basil brings his powerful rhetorical skills to bear in order show us the face of our neighbor: the emaciated face of the starving person who has gone blind as a result of malnutrition, the agonized face of a parent forced to sell a child into slavery in order to save the rest of the family from starvation. Basil is determined that the faces of our suffering brothers and sisters should not be ignored or remain hidden from us. He harshly criticizes the wealthy of his day for their excessive consumption - sumptuous meals, lavish dress, large and ornately decorated houses, all of which he sees as directly linked to the plight of the poor. For him, to love Christ and to care for the poor were the two sides of a single coin.

Basil the Great – a learned man devoted to the sacred truth of Christ in a singular fashion, afraid of no man and in love with God.

Quotes from St. Basil the Great

Do all you can to love everyone, without exception. If you are not yet able to do even that, at the very least do not hate anyone.



You must love everyone with all your soul, knowing that according to the commandment to love your neighbor, Jesus has established so close a bond that he takes as done to himself anything done to our brothers or sisters. He says 'I was thirsty and you gave me drink,' (Mt. 25:35) and he adds 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me,' (Mt 25:40). Whoever loves God loves his neighbor. So then, whoever loves his neighbor loves God, and God reckons our unity with our brothers and sisters as unity with Him.

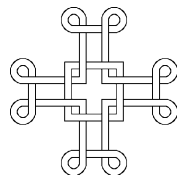


The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry man; the coat hanging unused in your closet belongs to the man who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the man who has no shoes; the money which you put in the bank belongs to the poor. You do wrong to everyone you could help, but fail to help.



When someone steals a man's clothes we call him a thief. Shouldn't we give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not?

In the life of the Church, the memory of St. Basil the Great is celebrated on January 1st and January 30th each year.



Saint of God, pray for us!