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THE CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP IN THE 4th CENTURY CAPPADOCIA†

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Abstract

In the triumph of Christianity after Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge some of the members of the curial aristocracy of the Roman Empire entered the Church and they became the fourth century Christian bishops. Most of them, like Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Elder, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus were by birth members of the eastern empire's municipal aristocracy, the so called curial class. Their education was founded on three traditional values: civic patriotism, devotion to Greek paideia and a strong sense of the importance of family ties and tradition. The implication of the Cappadocian Fathers in the social and political life, in civic and patriotic actions speaks about the 'human aspect' of their holiness, about their aristocratic background as premise of the Christian leadership in the 4th century. Being aristocrats, they had the possibility to choose a leading position in their social class, but they did not because they understood with so much eagerness that only the imperatives of the Christian Gospel can give the true aristocracy, the Christ's aristocracy.

Keywords: Cappadocian Fathers, Christian leadership, civic patriotism, Christian aristocracy

1. Preliminaries - Constantine the Great and the new situation of the Christian Church

The reign of Constantine the Great was a time of profound changes for the Church. The freedom of speech granted to Christianity brought with it an unforeseen development of all ways of faith expression. The researchers into this period agree that the most important phenomenon then was the encounter between the state and the Church, between faith and politics, between bishops and the senatorial aristocracy of the Roman Empire [1, 2].

Most fourth-century bishops came from the *curiales*, known also as *decurions*, the leading citizens of the 2000 or so cities of the Roman Empire [3, 4]. Constantine's laws exempting *curiales* in clerical orders from their statutory

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municipal obligations helped enormously to induce them to enter ecclesiastical office, especially the episcopate. Curial eagerness to escape civic *munera* by taking holy orders was whetted not only by such material advantages, but also by the unprecedented respect tendered bishops by the emperor, who even deigned to associate himself with them by claiming that he too was a bishop. After Constantine, Christian emperors generally continued his favors, so that throughout the Empire in the fourth century, many of the bishops were former *curiales.* So, "between Phileas of Thmuis at the start of the century in Egypt and Augustine of Hippo at the end of the century in North Africa, there are dozens of bishops whose curial antecedents are discernible in our sources. In some cases the evidence is clear and explicit, as it is for Phileas and Augustine, and for Eugenius of Laodicea (in Phyrgia), Evagrius of Antioch, Faustinus of Iconium, and Helladius of Caesarea (in Cappadocia). More often, a bishop's curial status must be inferred, much as it has been for the 'Cappadocian fathers' and their fellow bishops: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Amphilochius of Iconium, Eusebius of Caesarea, and others…" [3]

It would be interesting to re-construe the way the Edict of Mediolanum influenced the ecclesiastical hierarchy and particularly the life of the Church. On the one hand, the freedom granted to the Christians by Saint Constantine the Great yielded a thriving cult and life within the Church; but on the other hand, it produced a paradoxical lessening of the Christians' enthusiasm for and devotion to the Gospel imperatives. This 'alteration' and secularization of the Church life also entailed the birth and growth of the monastic movement, which came for the Christians as a natural reaction of rejection and departure from all of the lures of the secular world.

2. The Christian leadership between monastic ideals and active life in serving the Church

At the dawn of Christianity, the election of bishops used to be one of the most important issues that the patristic tradition concerned itself with, as the worldly success of the Church mission was largely dependent upon it. The religious fervour and ardour felt during the apostolic age engendered a clergy fully dedicated to missionary purposes. Yet over and after the reign of Constantine the Great, with Christianity having been set free, the clergy started to decline, their spiritual life grew secular, in the same proportion as their role in the social life of the Roman Empire became more and more important [2].

In time, members of the local aristocracy - who were often neophytes or people with little spiritual experience - entered the clergy, which was at that point associated with the state. Those people found a great support among the masses, which wanted the rich to have as much power within the Church as well as outside it [5].

The augmenting decline and secularization of the Church life was noticed by the Cappadocian Fathers who, although being descendants of aristocratic families themselves, understood that the demands of the Christian life, just as

they were preserved in the monastic lifestyle, should and must reinvigorate the authority and leadership of the Church [5]. For the Cappadocian Saints, the greatest challenge was not to rebuke the intemperance of their contemporary hierarchy, but rather to have their lives and writings provide the layout of a lifestyle that held together the contemplative and ascetic ways of the monachism and the social activism of the clergy.

Therefore, in the Encomium he wrote for the commemoration of his brother's death [6], Saint Gregory of Nyssa describes the personality of Saint Basil the Great as the epitome of the ascetic bishop, who had managed to put together the virtues of monastic life with the active ministry. He thus compared Saint Basil with Saint John the Baptist, Saint Elijah, and Moses the Prophet. For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, this 'mixed life' and fusion between contemplation and activism represents the ideal lifestyle of a hierarch of the Church [7].

Saint Gregory the Theologian is even more precise in defining the hierarch's mission within the Church. Although he had difficulties in reconciling the contemplative and active dimensions of his sacerdotal life, he did succeed in drawing the same 'model image' of the ascetic bishop deeply involved in the social life, which he gave accounts of in many of his writings. Hence, in his second Oration, written in 362, immediately after his ordination and flight, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus emphasizes the unimpeachable character that a spiritual leader needs to possess [Saint Gregory the Theologian, *Apologetica (orat. 2) 2.71, 9-12; 2.69, 8-11*, PG 35, 409BC, 416AB, 428B]. He believed that a man, who had not reached dispassion through numerous ascetic struggles, and purity of mind through uninterrupted conversations with God, could not receive the tough mission of guiding souls on the path towards salvation without withstanding great risks [Saint Gregory the Theologian, *Apologetica (orat. 2)* 2.91, 10-19, PG 35, 409-412].

Saint Gregory manages to pencil a much clearer picture of the exigencies of the spiritual instruction in the Church. Thus, in his 43rd Oration, he records a panegyric for his friend, Saint Basil the Great, whom he depicts as the apotheosis of the shepherd of souls [8]. *Via media*, the lifestyle that combines asceticism and social activism, turned the great Caesarean hierarch into a model of Christian bishop who, by combining "φιλοσοφία πρακτική" with "φιλοσοφία θεωρητική", proved to be a true leader of God's new chosen people [8].

It becomes clear that, shortly after the liberation of Christianity by Saint Constantine the Great, and alongside the flourishing of the Christian civilisation and its affiliation to the state power, the demands of the sacerdotal ministry in the new social and political context also took shape. For the Cappadocian Fathers, a candidate for bishop should first of all be educated in the profane sciences, only to be able later to leave aside all academic ambitions and turn his mind and heart completely towards a contemplative life, wherein he might rid of passions and draw closer to God. Only by his personal encounter with God, just as Moses experienced on Mount Sinai, his receiving of the 'divine knowledge' and the 'initiation into Mystery' could convert him into a genuine mystagogue and a true spiritual teacher [9].

It is obvious that the patristic literature had the tendency to dwell upon the ideal image of the Christian leader, as it constantly emphasized the traits that the success of this difficult mission required. The striking thing in the case of the Cappadocian Fathers is the way they practically came to embody this very ideal. In order to illustrate this, the sequent chapter shall examine an oftentimes undervalued social aspect of their lives, namely their civic patriotism, with a special touch upon their involvement in the socio-political life of the age.

3. The civic patriotism of the Cappadocian Fathers - education or Christian devotion?

People generally forget or overlook the fact that the Cappadocian Fathers were descendants of aristocratic families, and that their entire activity was marked by their affiliation to the so-called curial class, which wielded over a significant number of people. All the Christian virtues that later proved the Cappadocian Fathers authentic Church aristocrats were grafted on their noble origins, which were rooted on three distinct traditional values: civic patriotism, devotion for the Greek culture and education, and the importance of tradition and family ties [10, 11].

The civic attitudes and reactions of three great Cappadocians - the two Gregorys, bishops of Nazianzus, and Saint Basil the Great - will be discussed below. These are representative for an extremely important phenomenon that took place during the 4th century, a period when the curial class gave the Christian Church a series of exceptional personalities, such as: Saint Gregory the Wonder-worker, Amphilochius of Iconium, Phirmilianus of Caesarea, and Ambrose of Milan. It is interesting to note the way in which these bishops managed to 'Christianize' the above mentioned three traditional values of the class they had been brought up in.

The first of the three defining characteristics of the curial class is the civic patriotism. The bishop of a 4th century Cappadocian metropolis, who was of a curial pedigree, was not inclined to give up on the social values of the context in which he was born. The civic patriotism could be visible in his involvement in grand construction projects and in his intervention in the political life of the time.

3.1. The civic patriotism of the two Gregorys of Nazianzus

According to a funeral epigram written by Saint Gregory the Theologian in honour of his father, the latter became bishop of Nazianzus shortly after he was baptized [12], and fell asleep in the Lord in 374, after performing a rich and impressive spiritual activity in his natal town, and after building a beautiful church where he appointed his own son as a priest [Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Anth. Pal.* 8, 15].

It is also remarkable that both father and son were proud to have been founders, in the sense of the civic patriotism professed by the curial class, of a "sanctuary that cannot but be talked of, which was bigger than many others of the like, and more exquisite in beauty than most" [Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Funebris oratio in patrem, 18, 39,* PG 35, 1037 A]. This church was more than a simple source of happiness and pride for the curial class, it was rather a chance to increase the fame and prestige of the whole town of Nazianzus, just as the young Gregory states in the funeral oration he wrote in his father's honour: "How could anyone with due brevity describe a work which cost so much time and toil and skill: or will it suffice to say that amid all the works, private and public, which adorn other cities, this has of itself been able to secure us celebrity among the majority of mankind?" [Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Funebris oratio in patrem, 18, 39,* PG 35, 1037 B]

It is important that the old bishop had not only personally paid for all the expenses of the construction of that impressive sanctuary, but he also offered his flesh and blood as a serving priest for the community, by ordaining and appointing his own son as priest in it: "When for such a temple a priest was needed, he also at his own expense provided one..." [Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Funebris oratio in patrem, 18, 39,* PG 35, 1037 AB] His unworldly generosity that would later be emulated by his son, and which was most certainly understood as civic patriotism by the Nazianzus community, saw him through many years of unpaid service at the altar of that church.

Most of the edifices in the largest metropolises of the Roman Empire were not built by tax money, but rather with finances coming from the personal pockets of the local aristocracy who, out of profound civic and patriotic responsibility, as well as due to a great desire to enhance the prestige of the town, were pro-actively involved in the construction of theatres, schools, hippodromes, baths, aqueducts, and later on, churches. Thomas Kopecek believes that in Nazianzus, the building of this particular church that made both father and son so proud "was a project as much curial and patriotic as it was Christian" [10, p. 295]. By offering to finance the construction of the church, the old Gregory invested in his clerical life some of the values and mannerisms of the curial class he belonged to and, just like all the other aristocrats in the town were famous for the edifices they had sponsored, in the same way the former 'curialis' now turned bishop, understood that he had to construct a house for God, thus showing his aristocratic magnanimity and bringing fame to the town.

The pride with which Saint Gregory the Theologian writes about the 'aristocratic' life and achievements of his father must be understood from the viewpoint of curial patriotism, which was highly spread and appreciated in Cappadocia during the 4th century. The narration is written more in 'curial' rather than in Christian terms, and that signals the fact that, after becoming Christians, the two great Cappadocians continued to act and think according to the patriotic curial tradition they were brought up and educated within. That way, they made everybody understand that the Church had a say in all political and social aspects of a metropolis.

That fact would later be demonstrated during two other turning points in the history of Nazianzus, when the two bishops would get very much involved in the political life of their time. Consequently, the metropolis shepherded by the two Gregorys fell under great distress in the year 373 or 374, following an edict issued by the governor of the province with the purpose of imposing exorbitant taxes on the citizens of the town of Nazianzus. The problem seems to have been quite serious, since the governor announced and paid a visit to the insubordinate town [12]. Its citizens appealed to the young Gregory's patriotism, and asked him to intercede with the governor on their behalf. As the young priest knew the governor was a Christian who would attend church on Sunday, he prepared a sermon (Oratio 17) in which he pleaded with the ruler to solve the social problems arisen in the metropolis whose spiritual leaders Gregory and his father were. It is impressive how Saint Gregory the Theologian knew how to use a signally Christian argumentation in a Sunday sermon, delivered in the church, so as to arrive at a patriotic conclusion, one that was specific to the curial class he was born into. Thus, after a brief introduction wherein he pointed to a series of scriptural examples of spiritual sorrows and the comfort coming from above, Saint Gregory preached to the citizens of Nazianzus, and showed them that the hardships they were going through had been allowed by God Himself, the Master of the world, Who worked through the masters of this ephemeral world as well [Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ad cives Nazianzenos, 17, 2-3,* PG 35, 965-968]. At first, he suggested that people obey those who bear swords with God's blessing, and then, with great tact and elocutionary finesse, the preacher found a way to trap the attention of the one whom the whole sermon was targeted at. Then, in the last part of his homily, Saint Gregory addressed the governor in a direct manner, in the second person singular, and made him aware of the fact that God, the true Master of this world, is good and merciful, and that any servant of His could become a living icon of God and attain salvation if he or she emulates His goodness and mercy [Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ad cives Nazianzenos,17, 2-3,* PG 35, 972-976].

Eight years later, in 382, another and stronger social crisis would come over the town of Nazianzus. And once more, its citizens rebelled against the increase of taxes and financial contributions [13]. Saint Gregory the Theologian mentioned this event in one of his epistles (Ep. 141-142), when writing about a governor issued edict that made provisions for the cancelling of the municipal status of Nazianzus, and the destruction of its statues, thus enraging some of the younger citizens and prompting them to revolt. The governor then threatened them with the complete destruction of the town (Ep. 141, 6b-9). This move alerted the town aristocrats (curiales), which in turn appealed to the patriotism of Saint Gregory who had just returned from Constantinople, and asked him to make intercessions to his good friend, governor Olympius, for them. He obliged them by writing two letters to his friend Olympius, but not as a hierarch would, but rather as a citizen who was both a patriot and an aristocrat [11]. The tone of the said letters was very different from that he had used eight years before the social crisis of 373-374, for Saint Gregory had meanwhile ceased to don his

patriotic discourse into the cloth of Christian rationale. In Epistle 141, he identifies himself with the town aristocracy and makes a direct plea from that position, wording his requests as such: "Rather respect the supplication of all citizens and statesmen - curiales and men of rank - honorati - for remember the calamity will touch (affect) all alike — even if the greatness of your authority keeps them silent, sighing as it were in secret. Respect also my grey hair: for it would be dreadful to me, after having had a great city [Constantinople], now to have none at all, and that after your government the Temple which we have raised to God, and our love for its adornment, is to become a dwelling for beasts.." [14]

He employed all those arguments in order to impress his friend and show him the sorrow that the destruction of the town would bring to the entire curial class. When he wrote in the first person plural, the author of the letter literally hinted at a specific plural – he and his father, the persons who had built the exquisite Nazianzus church. The patriotic pride the two Gregorys felt regarding the beauty of the sanctuary attempts at becoming a strong argument, one that could demand from the governor some respect for the citizens of the town awaiting his destruction. The letter closes with a Christian appeal addressed to the governor. In it, the ruler is asked to analyse what is best for his reputation as a worldly leader and most useful for his salvation, and then give the curial class in Nazianzus an answer [14, p. 33].

3.2. Saint Basil the Great and his civic patriotism

Just like Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint Basil the Great came from a curial family and he was brought up and instructed in the spirit of the same tradition shared by the aristocratic families in Cappadocia, to whom patriotism and the involvement in the life of the metropolis were fundamental values of their daily journey. The whole life of the great Caesarean hierarch from Cappadocia was filled with events that put his patriotism and devotion to his country and to the people he guided under great trial.

To that end, in the winter of 371-372, the Arian emperor Valens visited Caesarea and, due to political, economical, and also religious reasons, he divided Cappadocia into two smaller provinces - Cappadocia I, with the capital at Caesarea, and Cappadocia II, with the capital at Tyana. Given that this division also produced a transfer of a large number of aristocrats and public officers from one capital to the other, the entire curial class in Caesarea became revolted and some of them even left town and relocated to their estates in the countryside [11].

At the moment that the Cappadocian divide was announced, Saint Basil was out of town, and the first to come to him for help were the town aristocrats. The issue was very delicate, and the great hierarch was determined to go to the imperial Court himself. Yet the new territorial division also threatened his jurisdiction over the most important towns in the province that was then reassigned to the Arian bishop Anthimus of Tyana. Sick and ailing, with no help

whatsoever, Saint Basil chose to write a series of letters addressed to certain important personalities from the imperial Court. His first addressee was Martinian, a high rank official born in Cappadocia, who would soon after become the prefect of Rome [15]. The epistle addressed to him, Letter 74 [16], is penned in the most authentic curial style. Its elevated linguistic choices and precise rationale, as well as the frequent use of the noun 'country' and of many themes and motifs drawn from Greek mythology, point more likely to a civil aristocratic sender, which was animated by a patriotic zeal, rather than to a Christian bishop:

"Why, then, am I now writing when I ought to be coming to see you? Because my country in her troubles calls me irresistibly to her side. You know, my friend, how she suffers. She is torn in pieces like Pentheus by veritable Maenads, demons. They are dividing her, and dividing [dismembering] her again, like bad surgeons who, in their ignorance, make wounds worse [for those who hurt]. Suffering as she is from this dissection, it remains for me to tend her like a sick patient. So the Caesareans have urgently appealed to me by letter, and I must go, not as though I could be of any help, but to avoid any blame of neglect [of my duty]. You know how ready men in difficulties are to hope; and ready too, I ween, to find fault, always charging their troubles on what has been left undone.

Yet for this very reason I ought to have come to see you, and to have told you my mind, or rather to implore you to bethink you of some strong measure worthy of your wisdom; not to turn aside from my country falling on her knees, but to betake yourself to the Court, and, with the boldness which is all your own, not to let them suppose that they own two provinces instead of one. They have not imported the second from some other part of the world, but have acted somewhat in the same way in which some owner of horse or ox might act, who should cut it in two, and then think that he had two instead of one, instead of failing to make two and destroying the one he had. Tell the Emperor and his ministers that they are not after this fashion increasing the empire, for power lies not in number but in condition. I am sure that now men are neglecting the course of events, some, possibly, from ignorance of the truth, some from their being unwilling to say anything offensive, some because it does not immediately concern them. The course likely to be most beneficial, and worthy of your high principles, would be for you, if possible, to approach the Emperor in person. If this is difficult both on account of the season of the year anti of your age, of which, as you say, inactivity is the foster brother, at all events you need have no difficulty in writing..." [16].

Obviously here, Saint Basil professes his fondness and support for the Caesarean aristocrats, since he was actually one of them, and also describes all the hardships that class would have to go through because of the unjust division of Cappadocia. The knowledgeable high priest did more than condemn those who had chosen to flee the town in the direction of their countryside estates rather than move to Podandus, which was the new capital of the Caesarea II province. That was a place he spoke ironically of, and compared with the Spartan Ceadas or the Charonian hell, but also a place that allowed him to proudly declare once more his attachment to his motherland and to the town

wherein he grew up and studied.

This beautiful and impressive letter, flourishing in patriotic tributes, while bearing the aura of an ancient elegy, was composed by a bishop and monastic - Saint Basil the Great who, in spite of being known from his other writings as a fierce defender of the imperative of seeking the kingdom of heaven first, in the quoted letter he showed but a deep patriotic devotion that was characteristic for the social class he rose from. Similar to Saint Gregory the Theologian's message, Saint Basil's also seems to be purely civic and patriotic, and only a little if at all Christianized. This denotes a spiritual finesse and an acute sense of perception with regards to the realities that had him adapt his argumentation to the needs of the moment and particularly to the level of instruction of the addressee, as well as to the latter's political and social affiliations.

It is hard to imagine an Episcopal authority that was more dynamic and socio-politically involved than that of Saint Basil's in Cappadocia. Undoubtedly, everything the great hierarch did, he did for his country, yet also for regaining his jurisdiction.

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion to this brief analysis regarding the way the Cappadocian saints knew how to manifest their civic patriotism, it can be stated that their involvement in the political and social context of the age was primarily determined by the aristocratic education and tradition they were bequeathed, to which they later grafted the values and imperatives of the Gospel. The phenomenon happened frequently in the Roman Empire during the 4th century, when more and more curiales were replaced by bishops and clergy stemming from this particular social class. In the 6th century, the bishops became the official representatives of towns, and replaced the curial delegates in all regional assemblies.

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