

**ANALYSIS OF A CLASSICAL THEOLOGICAL  
TEXT ON GREGORY OF NYSSA'S *SERMON ON  
THE SIXTH BEATITUDE.***

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Date: October 21, 2007

**INTRODUCTION:** The Sermon on the Sixth Beatitude, by St. Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century Turkish writer is perhaps one of the first of its kind dedicated to the Lord's Beatitudes. In his sermon, St. Gregory identifies that by grace, the Sixth Beatitude of the Lord is attainable, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt. 5:8). His argument highlights the mighty hands of the Lord that sustains us just as the Lord himself "sustained Peter. When Peter was in danger of drowning"<sup>1</sup>. Gregory argues that the Lord would not demand from us beyond our human nature or asking for the impossibility beyond our human constraint and therefore the "reward which is offered in this beatitude is not beyond hope;"<sup>2</sup> it however, depends on how well we make our free choice. The study to follow examines the structure, literary devices utilized in the text and particularly explores the symbols of Scripture and Tradition employed in conveying his message as well as the role of faith in his reflections and what it is meant for Christians today.

**STRUCTURAL OUTLINE: Gregory's thesis:** The Sixth Beatitude of the Lord is "attainable" if we fully participate in God by surrendering our will to Christ, with obedience to His teaching in the Beatitudes, and by becoming an integral part in Christ.

The Sermon on the Sixth Beatitude can be outlined as follows: **(1) Introduction** of the Sixth Beatitude of the Lord in paragraph 1 (p.1)<sup>3</sup>. **(2) Negative Arguments**, questioning the leaders of the faith in Scripture and Tradition, Moses, John and Paul in p.2 (paragraph 2). He again questions the possibility of God's promise in the Beatitude in p.6. **(3) Positive Arguments**, response to question in p.2 by affirming "the Lord himself sustains our faltering hope, just as he sustained Peter"<sup>4</sup> in p.4. He went on to respond to the question in p.6 by confirming the intimacy and most blessedness of the key figures in the Scriptures and Traditions, Moses, John and Paul that "purity of heart is not impossible"<sup>5</sup> in p.7 and 8. **(4) The remains of his writing** (p.9-22) **dedicated to preaching** how we can obtain purity of heart to earn the blessing of the Lord.

**(5) Conclusion/ Contemplation** – p. 23 and 24 (last two paragraph: He concluded the Sixth Beatitude of the Lord sermon by exhortation the audience exercising their free will to choose good but renounce evil in order to earn the Lord’s blessedness.

**LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS:** Gregory began his sermon with a metaphor of the sea and the mountain to describe his feeling/impression with the magnificent of the Beatitude and how distant human is in comparing to God’s transcendent; (according to Roger Haight, mountain is a “concrete symbol” that call attention to God’s power...<sup>6</sup>). In p.2, by using the Scriptures and Tradition in Exodus, John and Timothy, he points out the superiority of God and the depth of the Beatitude that seems to be unachievable; then explain “why his soul grows dizzy at the contemplation”<sup>7</sup> of the Lord profound saying. Symbolic language is used here to represent the theology of awe-inspiring Words of God in the Beatitude. As it was windy and stormy when Peter walked on the sea, our pilgrimage also encounters the unpleasant aspects of this world but if we have faith in Christ as Peter did, jumping out of the boat to step on to the unknown and vulnerability, God will sustain us with his divine power to “overcome the waves of death”<sup>8</sup> in our journey. In p.5, he presented true happiness the Lord promised to those keeping their heart pure. In parallel with p.2, Gregory again questions the feasibility of attaining the blessedness of the Lord because it seems beyond human capacity; humans cannot reach heaven to grasp it, a symbolic language to describe the magnificent of the Lord’s Beatitude. He however, argues that the Lord would not demand from us the impossibly, beyond what we are created for, as in his paradox of “wingless creatures to become birds, or creatures fitted for life on dry land to live under water.”<sup>9</sup> He again repeats to stress and provoke reflection, and the aroused reflection in the audience that “the reward which is offered in this beatitude is not beyond hope.”<sup>10</sup> He then reassures the possibility in which the Tradition and Scripture are associated with the pillars of faith, Paul, John, and Moses.

From then on (p.9-22), his argument is detoured to the teaching how we can comprehend God's promise, accept and act on it. God's wisdom and provident love are boundless and beyond human's comprehension yet we know God "by means of concepts that guide our thoughts beyond the best and highest things in every category, so that each of these lofty concepts brings God into our sight."<sup>11</sup> Gregory brings the concept of faith down to earth when using the metaphor of "bodily health" and "being healthy" versus the "knowing God" and "possessing God" to emphasize thoughts or words without deeds yield no fruits as St. James, the Apostle utterly proclaims in his epistle: "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." (James 2:17). Another metaphor of "sculptor" and "sculpture" was employed at the end of p.13 to explain God inscribed in our mind the comprehension of God and in our heart a desire to know Him when He created us and therefore knowing God is not beyond our reach.

**SUMMARY/CONCLUSION:** The extent of Gregory's sermon is enormous that can not be encapsulated within the scope of this paper; therefore, only a few notes are mentioning here. **(1) Gregory's extensive use of symbolic language** does make his sermon dramatic and fascinate the audience, i.e: "cleanse yourself of the filth caked over your heart,"<sup>12</sup> "the sun's rays shimmer on a piece of steel once a whetstone has removed the rust from it and it produces a luster..., rubbed off the unsightly blemish that arises from the mold of evil..., the eyes of the soul"<sup>13</sup> and many more. **(2) The symbols of Sacred Scriptures and Tradition** as well as the central figures of faith are commonly referenced in his sermon: "ladder like Jacob's (Jacob's "dream" is considered a symbol according to Roger Haight<sup>14</sup>), chariot which carried the prophet Elijah up to heaven, Moses, John and Paul."<sup>15</sup> **(3) The characteristic of faith** are evoked through-out his texts: God's gift and Self-revealing promised in the Beatitude, our response and decision to accept with our own free will, trusting and experiencing the true happiness of the Beatitude yet doubts and conflicts arise as in many of his negative arguments questioning the blessedness of God.

## NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Patout J. Burns Ed., *Theological Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 30

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>3</sup> P = Paragraph, i.e. P.2 = Paragraph #2

<sup>4</sup> Burns, *Theological Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 31

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>6</sup> Roger Haight, S.J., *Dynamic of Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 138.

<sup>7</sup> Burns, *Theological Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 29

<sup>8</sup> Richard J. Clifford, S.J. and Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 658

<sup>9</sup> Burns, *Theological Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 31

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 34

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Haight, *Dynamic of Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 130.

<sup>15</sup> Burns, *Theological Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 35