

January 1 *St Basil the Great*



A Bishop for the World

JANUARY 1 MARKS A DOUBLE FEAST in the Byzantine Churches. First of all, it celebrates the circumcision of Christ, which took place eight days after His birth. It is also the commemoration of St Basil the Great who died on this date in AD 379.

There are several saints given this title, “the Great,” in our tradition such as St Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373), and St Leo the Pope of Rome in the fifth century. But who decides that a particular individual merits this designation? Was papal or imperial authority the deciding factor or was popular acclamation responsible?

Why is Basil Called “Great?”

In the case of St Basil, it was during his lifetime that people were describing him this way. His life-long friend, St Gregory the Theologian popularized the term in the eulogy he wrote in Basil’s memory and the entire Christian world adopted it.

Basil was what would centuries later be called a “Renaissance man,” a person excelling in so many areas of thought and action. St Gregory the Theologian described him as well advanced in rhetoric, grammar, philosophy, geometry, astronomy, and medicine. His writings on a wide range of subjects over his lifetime bear witness to the breadth of his knowledge.

Basil was born into an old and wealthy Christian family in Asia Minor. His grandparents were Confessors for the faith, hiding for seven year in the forest of Pontus during the Great Persecution of Diocletian. Basil’s father was a prominent rhetorician in Caesarea, the administrative center of Cappadocia (Kayseri, in central Turkey, today) and it is there that Basil began his education. He was further schooled in Constantinople and Athens among the sons of other aristocrats. As St Gregory described it, “He studied everything, more than others are accustomed to study a single subject. He studied each science in its very totality, as though he would study nothing else...He was a ship fully laden with learning, as much as is humanly possible.”

A year after completing his studies Basil had what we might call a conversion experience. As he described it is a letter, “Suddenly I awoke as out of a deep sleep. I beheld the wonderful light of the Gospel truth, and I recognized the nothingness of the wisdom of the princes of this world” and devoted all his energies to the Christian life.

After a brief stab at the life of a solitary, Basil established a community on his grandmother’s estate along the Iris River, gathering family members and friends in a community of prayer and good works.

After about four years Basil was ordained a deacon (362) and a priest (365) for the service of the Church in Caesarea, the second see (protothrone) in the patriarchate of Constantinople. In 370 he was elected its bishop, a position he held until his death in 379.

We recall some of St Basil's endeavors in the following troparion sung on his feast: "Your voice has sounded all over the earth that accepted your preaching. You gave a divine explanation of doctrine and made clear the nature of creatures and set a rule of life for men. Holy father, kingly priest, intercede with Christ God to grant us great mercy."

A Rule of Life for Men

During Basil's years in the community he had established and for years after, he compiled and revised a number of principles to order their life together. These principles, the *Asketikon*, came to be known as the Rule of St Basil, and became the foundation of communal monasticism in Byzantine Churches. Most Byzantine monastic and religious communities to this day claim St Basil as their patron. Soon translated into Latin and Syriac, St Basil's Rule influenced monastic life in these Churches as well.

While his *Asketikon* set forth a way of life for monastics, St Basil's *Ethics* set forth the principles of the Gospel as applied to the clergy and catechists working in the Church. These eighty "rules of life" became the Church's guide to leadership for centuries.

Making Clear the Nature of Creatures

While St Basil had a background in the physical sciences of his day, he did not rely on them to "explain the nature of creatures." In his work, the *Hexameron*, he saw that the accounts in Genesis provided an insight into the origin of things which the theories of the ancient Greeks could not. "The philosophers of Greece have made much ado to explain nature, and not one of their systems has remained firm and unshaken, each being overturned by its successor. It is vain to refute them; they are sufficient in them-selves to destroy one another."

St Basil insisted that the Bible does not try to explain the material dimensions of creation; those things which are the province of the physical sciences are "passed over in silence, as useless." Rather, he says, Scripture stresses "that which edifies and perfects the soul:" the truth that God is the author of all things and that it is He who holds all things in being.

Explanation of Doctrine

During his days on the River Iris St Basil had begun editing and commenting on theological and Scriptural themes. His most important work was in defending the teachings on Christ and the Holy Spirit upheld at the first two ecumenical councils.

Despite these councils, these issues were not settled in the minds of many. The election of a pro-Arian emperor in 364 provided a major boost to those who rejected the councils in Cappadocia. St Basil spent his remaining years defending the Nicene faith in writings, such as his treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, sermons (as bishop he preached twice daily) and even political maneuvering. He divided his diocese and promoted anti-Arians to these new bishoprics so that the conciliar position would be strengthened. Basil's determination went a long way toward eliminating Arianism in his province.

Kingly Priest

As bishop, St Basil did much to reform the liturgical life of his Church. He served the Liturgy daily and encouraged frequent Communion. His arrangement of the Liturgy influenced the imperial capital as well, and did much to give the Byzantine rite its particular character.

The "Divine Liturgy of St Basil" became the normative Eucharistic rite in Constantinople until the shorter Liturgy of St John Chrysostom all but replaced it. Byzantine Churches still serve this Liturgy ten times each year, including on St Basil's feast.

A Father to the Poor

Perhaps St Basil's most appreciated accomplishment in Cappadocia was the creation of the *Basiliad*, a complex facing the gates of Caesarea which included a hospital, a hospice for travelers and a shelter for the homeless, regarded at the time as a wonder of the world. It enjoyed the patronage of the emperor and inspired similar complexes throughout the East.

Basil's concern for those in need has touched the hearts of believers ever since. Many have been inspired to works of charity by his words: "The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of him who is naked; the shoes that you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money that you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity that you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit" (Homily on Lk 12:13-21). No wonder Basil became one of the first non-martyrs widely venerated as a saint.