Human Nature and "Theognosia" according to St. Gregory of Nyssa

Christina Andreea MIȚARIU

Auteur de plusieurs ouvrages théologiques d'une grande profondeur, Saint Grégoire fut principalement étudié au cours des dernières décennies et il est considéré comme l'un des plus grands penseurs chrétiens de langue grecque. Dans son ouvrage, on retrouve l'éloquence et la précision de la langue de Platon et Plotin, les idées d'Origène et de son école d'Alexandrie, sur le mystère du Logos chrétien et de la vie mystique. Au-delà des responsabilités, de sa haute vocation et des dons extraordinaires, le Saint montre que la vocation humaine définitoire est la communion authentique et la vie éternelle avec Dieu, Celui qui nous a créés à son image et à sa ressemblance. Saint Grégoire se détache de tous les systèmes mystiques païens, en particulier du platonisme et du néo -platonisme, par le fait que, dans sa conception, l'amour ne se manifeste jamais d'une manière inconsciente extatique. La notion de « theognosia » est comprise par Saint Grégoire comme une relation d'amour . Dieu demeure pour l'âme un permanent mystère dans Son être et se révèle autant qu'Il croit que l'âme peut recevoir .

Mots-clés: le Logos chrétien, theognosia, theoria, la littérature patristique.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, recognized today as a pillar of Orthodoxy, is the first Holy Father who, due to his concerns on the human condition, has left us an anthropology treatise.

Author of several theological works of great depth, St. Gregory has been studied mainly in recent decades, and is considered one of the greatest Greek language Christian thinkers. He embodies the eloquence and precision of Plato and Plotinus' language with the ideas of Origen and his Alexandria school on the Christian Logos mystery and mystical life.

Beyond his responsibilities, high calling and extraordinary gifts, the Saint shows that the defining human vocation is the authentic communion and eternal living with God, who created us in His image and likeness.

His entire work is a response and a call to his contemporaries, but especially to posterity, to the call that the Savior Himself addressed us, namely to choose the Way, the Truth and the Life. Guided by the Holy Spirit, St. Gregory of Nyssa was able to approach Scripture, to penetrate and reveal it to others through theological developments taken over under various forms by patristic literature.

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)

His concern for the human condition somewhat anticipates the "struggles" of the disillusioned human being, relentlessly and continuously searching for an identity in the modern and postmodern era. The Saint starts at the core of Christianity, from love, showing that God Himself became what He loves, meaning Man. However, modern man was not willing to show filial love anymore, but hastened to state that, to him, "God is dead". Moreover, man foolishly aspired to occupy himself the "vacant seat" becoming his own god. Only this way can the man stripped of the celestial Providence protection silence his life's source, annihilating his spirit and reducing himself to a simple animated flesh[1].

St. Gregory of Nyssa shows why our bodies and souls need God in order to live fully the condition, a truth reveled by our very soul if we are willing to listen.

The Life and Work of St. Gregory of Nyssa

St. Gregory of Nyssa was born in 335 in Caesarea of Cappadocia in an exemplary Christian family. Three of the ten brothers (Basil, Gregory and Peter) became bishops, and a sister, Macrina, was a model of virtuous life. As a younger brother of St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory was trained intellectually and spiritually under his authority, calling him his "father and teacher". Although at first he had decided to enter the clergy, receiving the appointment of "reader", later he felt interest and attraction to non-Christian philosophical writings, thinking of becoming "a rhetorician rather than a Christian". But both his brother Basil and his sister Macrina led him to discover his true purpose, that of minister of the Church. Gregory of Nyssa's period of alienation to the Church has been called by some patristic authors as "a crisis of conscience". Others argue that this transient errancy is not meaningless but, as in the case of St. Paul or St. Augustine, the alienation does nothing but provide a clear perspective on the phenomenon, subsequently leading to overcoming the alienation and acquiring high emotions.

Even if in his youth the Saint was married to a devout Christian, Theosevia, it seems that the couple had parted long before 385 (the year Theosevia passed away), in good understanding, both embracing monastic life. St. Gregory spent this time at the Iris monastery in Pontus, where, towards the end of 371, St. Basil called him to Caesarea, asking him to accept the high priesthood. Humbly, he initially refused this high ecclesiastical honor, but, at the insistence of his brother, he accepted the seat of bishop of Nyssa, a small town not far from Caesarea, where Basil was archbishop. As bishop, he fulfilled his pastoral and missionary duties with great honor, in a time when the Church was disturbed by the Arian bishops' hostile actions, supported by the political authorities of the empire.

The life and work of the Saint were put in the service of love and kindness, even though he quite often faced the opposite from his contemporaries. For example, at one time he was denounced by the governor, and a council of bishops, held at Nyssa in his absence, deposed him of his Bishop seat, although the community of

[1] P. Evdokimov, *Taina iubirii – Sfinţenia iubirii conjugale în lumina tradiţiei ortodoxe*, Asociaţia medicală creştină Christiana, Bucureşti, 1944, p. 66.

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)

believers remained faithful to him. After the death of Aryan Emperor Valens (364-378), St. Gregory returned to his hometown, the faithful receiving him triumphantly. As an active participant in the life of the Church, St. Gregory of Nyssa has helped to crystallize the teachings of faith. Thus, in October 379, he took part in a synod in Antioch, which mainly dealt with the Apollinarist heresy. With a decree of the council, he made a canonical visit to the dioceses of Pontus, on which occasion, in April 380, he presided over the election of the metropolitan for the city of Sebasteia in Armenia Minor. To his surprise, the bishops appointed himself as metropolitan, and, despite his protests, he had to remain in that diocese for several months, after which he returned to Nyssa.

His talent, erudition and reputation also recommended him as a participant at the Second Ecumenical Synod held in Constantinople in 381, where he stood out among high authoritative theologians. Emperor Theodosius (379-395) praised him so much that, on July 30, 381, he ordered by decree that all the bishops of the dioceses of Pontus who were not in communion with the bishop Gregory of Nyssa to be expelled[2]. He would return to Constantinople only about 4 to 5 years after, in July 385 or 386, when he held two funeral sermons at the death of Princess Pulcheria, the only daughter, aged 6, of the Emperor Theodosius, and at the death of her mother, Empress Flacilla.

In the year 394, he participated in a synod held once again in Constantinople, after which his name is no longer mentioned in the historical sources, which probably indicates that he passed away that very year, in 394. Being a hesychast, inclined more towards prayer and theological reflection rather than practical activities and the organization of ecclesial life, St. Gregory of Nyssa stood out especially in the study and spiritual interpretation of the Scripture through theological works of a certain value to defend the true faith, whose depth of thought places him among the great Fathers and ecclesiastical writers of the patristic history. His abundant work as a writer includes exegetical works and homilies, dogmatic writings, ascetic writings, speeches and letters. But almost all his writings have a pronounced ascetic and spiritual character because he does not simply make an exegesis of books or some places in the Scripture, nor just a purely theoretical exposure of dogmatic teachings, but explaining the texts in Scripture always gives him the opportunity to describe the conditions and the manners in which believers can advance in spiritual life, and dogmatic exposures are presented as grounds for this kind of Christian living.

Of the treaties or homilies which deal, for dogmatic or spiritual purposes, with the texts of Scripture, we would like to mention: *On human creation*, *An Apology for the Hexaemeron, The life of Moses, Homilies on the Ecclesiastes* and *the Song of Songs, Spiritual interpretation of the Benedictions and On the Prayer*. The most important dogmatic writings are: *Against Eunomius* (here he refutes the erroneous teachings of the Arian bishop who denied the divinity of the Son), *Against*

[2] I. Buga, *Preliminarii la teologia Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa*, în *Despre viaţa lui Moise*, Editura Sf. Gheorghe-Vechi, 1995, p. 6.

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)

Apollinaris (to the Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria), *On the Holy Spirit, The Catechetical Lectures*.

Of the writings containing an actual ascetic or spiritual content, we would like to mention: *On Virginity*, *On what it means to call oneself a Christian*, *On Christian perfection*, *The life of St. Macrina,* and *The life of St. Gregory the Wonderworker*.

Also outstanding in content are St. Gregory's speeches uttered either occasionally, or at Great Feasts or celebrations of Saints: *On the love of the poor*, *Against those who postpone baptism, We should not mourn for those who have fallen asleep in faith*, *On the deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, *On the day of lights or at Baptism of Christ, At Easter or At the resurrection of Christ, At the Ascension of Christ, On the Holy Spirit or the Pentecost, At the birth of Christ, On the protomartyr Stephen, At the 40 martyrs, At the Holy Martyr Theodore,* and *In honor of Saint Basil the Great.*

His entire work echoes with the immense love he has towards God and His most important creature – man, hence the constant concern for the fears, aspirations, and chances of man for salvation.

In appreciation for his valuable theological activity, the Seventh Ecumenical Synod named him "Father of Fathers", and modern theologians recognize him as "the greatest patristic mind of the East"[3].

The purpose of man as a dual being candidate for deification

In the Saint's vision, man must free himself of all that is wrong by asceticism and rediscover the unity with God which "*is one, uncompounded and faceless, and humanity will escape through this work of reconciliation of this composition of two, and will come again fully to good, simplicity and lack of image [...] so that the seen part be the same as the hidden one, and hidden to be the same as the seen one"* when he becomes *"on his own, a son of God"*.[4]

The first experience of the soul in knowing the divine is that of the essential inaccessibility and infinity of God. His being is transcendent and therefore "*passeth all comprehensive understanding, unable to approach or be reached by thoughts based on assumptions"*[5]. To know God the unknowable, we have but on one way: faith[6]. Moreover, because faith is manifested through love, knowledge becomes love.

St. Gregory breaks away from all pagan mystical systems, especially from Platonism and neo-Platonism, by the fact that, in his conception, love is never manifested in the unconscious ecstatic form. "Theologisation" is understood by Gregory as a relation of love. God remains for the soul a constant mystery in His

[3] Ierom. Corbu Ag., *Sfânta Scriptură şi tâlcuirea ei în opera Sfântului Grigorie de Nyssa*, Editura Teofania, Sibiu, 2002, p. 14.

[4] *Despre Fericiri*, traducere de Preot Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, în PSB, vol. 29, p. 394.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 380.

[6] *Despre Viaţa lui Moise*, traducere de Pr. Ioan Buga, PSB vol. 29, p. 74-75.

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)

being and reveals Himself as much as He believes that the soul can receive. Therefore, the movement of the soul toward God is not seen as a movement toward the light, but for the darkness, the unknown; the soul "enters" the cloud, like Moses, and sees only the "back of God". Consequently, the ideal is *theoria*, vision of God, or more than that, *theognosia*, the knowledge and contemplation of God as the Unknown, the marital union of the soul with God, allegorically described in the Song of Songs[7].

The difference between created and uncreated is so great at St. Gregory, that there is no way for the soul to overcome it, there is no rapture in which the soul leaves the being created and enters the uncreated.

The mystic effort is likened to a man who tries to climb the mountain, but slips because of sand, and makes no real progress. The image of St. Gregory on the endless spiritual progress is rooted in the apophatic theology developed by Dionysius the Areopagite. The teaching on epektasis (based on the text of Philippians 3.13-14) is that the end or purpose of Christian life, here and hereafter, does not exist as a place or time, but resides in an endless progress of the soul in (mis)understand and (non)communion of the divine being.

This theme, preferred in *The life of Moses*, is also repeated in the *Homilies* on the *Song of Songs*, where the meeting of the soul with the One sought is never satisfactory and complete:

"*[The bride] after sharing the goodness as much as she could, is again attracted by a new beginning, as if she would have never shared the goodness, so, as she advances towards that which appears before her, her desire also increases, and, because of the overwhelming majesty of the goodness which are always above, she seems to start the ascent for the first time*"[8].

The soul is conscious that all its quest is to admit failure "to be understood and that understanding Him becomes an obstacle in finding Him for those who seek Him"[9].

The experience of the soul manifests itself in three forms: the mirror of the soul, the spiritual senses and the Logos that dwells.

In the *6th Homily to Beatitudes*, St. Gregory emphasizes that knowing God means to have Him, and not be informed about Him, because God does not say "[...] *Blessed are those who know something about God, but those who have God in themselves"*.[10] Moreover, to have Him means to transmit Him, i.e. to reflect the image of God in the soul. Hence the importance of the purity of the soul, which, without it, would be unable to properly play this perfect image.

---

[7] J. Danielou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, Paris, 1953, p. 199-208.

[8] *Tâlcuire amănunţită la Cântarea Cântărilor*, traducere de Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, PSB, vol. 29, p. 185.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 196.

[10] *Despre Fericiri*…, p. 378-379.

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)

Basically, the progress of the soul resembles Christ's progress as man, in wisdom and grace. He comes to some people's soul as a child, to others as a teen, and to others in full maturity[11].

Finally, his conception of knowledge is experiential: although he uses the specific technical language of Platonism and Origen, St. Gregory excludes without reservation intellectualism from the soul's search for God. If there is true experience, it is only in love, in which the soul seeks God and rises to what might be considered impossible: the union with God the unknown.

Search and desire are alike, satisfied and never satisfied, because the satisfaction of one desire leads to a greater desire. The experience of the soul in the night of ignorance is not and cannot be only *theoria*, but feeling and its acceptance by the soul "wounded by love!"[12].

In order to define the essence of man, St. Gregory starts from God as prototype. As a being both sensible and intelligible, man has a special place in creation, a place called by Gregory *μεταξυ* – border – between the spirituality of God and the materiality of the world. As a border reality between the two worlds ontologically separate, man represents the place of communication and interpenetration of the sensible and the intelligible. Therein lies, in the Saints' opinion, man's responsibility, but also his greatness, who can either spiritualize his body, or just reduce it to the material dimension. Thus man appears as a collaborator of God, a "co-creator" of his destiny.

In the work *On human creation*, the bishop of Nyssa describes human constitution, saying that man is in solidarity with animals by the material which makes them all up, but, as the image of God, man has gained dominion over the creatures of heaven, sea and earth. In Chapter IV of the work, he addresses the problem of double creation, and stresses that man was created to participate simultaneously in both natures, the divine and the material. St. Gregory is a supporter of the idea that Genesis I, 27 does not report the creation of man – the prototype, but the pleroma of human nature. Thus the quality of the image of God belongs to any man, whether he lived during the first creation of the world or he lives now[13].

Man is seen in constant synergy. Even ancient philosophers saw him in constant motion, in constant transformation. The natural sense of human movement is towards God, but it can be perverted. By this change of original direction, man loses the correct path, and, moreover, can turn to God's adversary[14].

---

[11] *Tîlcuire amănunţită la Cîntarea Cîntărilor*, traducere de Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, PSB, vol. 29, p. 156.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 291.

[13] *Despre facerea omului* XVI, 44, 185 D; S.C. 6, 161, apud Preot Vasile Răducă, *Antropologia Sfântului Grigorie de Nyssa*, IBMOR; Bucureşti, 1996, p. 76.

[14] Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, trad. Rom. Grigorie Teodorescu, Ed. Sophia, Bucureşti, 1998, p. 48.

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)

As the image of God, man is a rational being, free and able to enjoy the goodness of God. The bishop of Nyssa does not define the image of God starting from man, as these qualities of the image are only externalizations, and not the image itself. In a logical sense, to say what the image is involves knowing the prototype, i. e. God.

The likeness to God can grow through the practice of virtues. Depending on the choices that man makes fully free, the "mirror" takes the form of the prototype.

By the imprinting of His image, "*God dwells in man through a personal communion from God to which man responds freely*"[15]. By the indwelling of God in the soul of man, St.

Gregory does not confuse, as Plato had, human kinship with God by identifying the nature of the human soul with the divine nature.

In the work *On the distinction between essence and hypostasis*, long attributed to St. Basil the Great, and later discovered to belong to St. Gregory of Nyssa, he deals with the theme of mirroring to show how the person of the Son can be the image of the Father's person: "*Just as when we look in a clean mirror, to the form that took shape in the reflection in the mirror, and we have a precise knowledge of the image reproduced here, similarly, if you know the Son, your heart receives the expression of the Father's person by knowing the Son. Indeed, all that is contemplated in the Father will be contemplated in the Son, and everything belonging to the Son belongs to the Father, for the Son remains whole in the Father, and, in turn, He has the Father whole in Himself*"[16].

The Saint prefers the theme of mirroring, which he resumes in different contexts, marking the reduction of the infinite in the finite or of the immaterial in the material: "*... as often in a small piece of glass, after sunshine falls over it, there will be a mirror of the disk of the sun (of course, not in its true size, but as far as the image fits the smallness of the piece of glass), so in the lower limits of human nature there shine the ineffable properties of divinity, so that reason, being led by it and cleaned in its approach to examine the properties of the flesh, does not fall from the understanding of the nature of the soul, or the small and easily corruptible nature does not act as it would be equal to the unsullied nature, but to have an idea about the intelligible nature and, of course, not say that the image is the same as the archetype*"[17].

It is not the biological existence as body that defines human being, but its theocentric constitution and the attraction for the One whose image it resembles.

Because of the Saint's high education, he was able to synthesize his illustrious forebears' views on the relationship between the soul and the body, including that of Plato who saw the body as a prison of the soul. The Saint argued that "*the union*

[15] Preot Dr. Nicolae Moşoiu, *Taina prezenţei lui Dumnezeu în viaţa umană*, Ed. Paralela 45, 2000, p. 158.

[16] Cf. C. Schönborn, *Icoana lui Hristos*, trad. rom. Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă, Ed. Anastasia, 1996, p. 22; 30-31.

[17] *De anima et resurrectione*, 46, 42 CD.

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)

of the soul and the bodily nature is an ineffable connection beyond thinking"[18], without this union involving the incarceration of the soul in the body or the soul violating the body. Both the body and the soul are parts of a whole that are interrelated. The Holy Father believes that, being related to God, and with all creation, the soul is not in contrast with the body. These two elements, though different, are not antithetic, as they share the One who created them.

Both the body and all matter are composed of a series of spiritual qualities existing and structured by the will of God, and the purpose of both natures is to evolve to perfection without losing identity.

St. Gregory of Nyssa tries to determine man to ponder with spiritual maturity on the model of reporting to divinity proposed by Moses. The Holy Father stresses the importance of assuming this goal, using the full liberty enjoyed by man *a priori*. Therefore, he notes that Moses met God only after his own will decided he wanted this meeting. Therefore, it is about choice: of good at the expense of evil, of freedom against slavery, and of knowledge in contrast to ignorance. This choice proves the quality of freedom, born of the determination to be with God and to be God's[19].

Choosing to follow the path of perfection belongs exclusively to man, who is free to use all the gifts with which God has endowed him. St. Gregory of Nyssa put high value on human freedom, considering that "if he is free, man affirms his dignity and specificity to God and to the sensible world, of which he is a part". In his conception, freedom cannot be confused with free will, but it represents the manner of acting untrammeled of harm or passion, the effusion moving towards the Good, without limitations, complaints or questions. "The freedom in which man is equal to God is not suffering, i.e. the condition of the man free from all sin and stranger to any experience of evil."

Conclusion

Freedom of man will remains alive even after the fall, manifesting itself in the possibility of seeking and loving God or not. It is true that the corruption of the image altered the weakening of the will, but it did not lead to its total loss. Free human will enables knowledge and freedom, and thereby its cultivation is a condition of the actual returning to God. In the Saint's vision, St. Moses is that exemplary hero who embodies the mystic, the one initiated that passes the primary stage of knowing God to living with Him, directly communicating, and even having the opportunity to serve Him. These steps should be the marks of a life dedicated to deification, responsibly employed in the climb on that ladder that the Saint sees as not supported from the ground – so from the material world – but

[18]Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre Facerea omului*, P.G.; XV, 44, 177 OC, apud. Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

[19] V. Răducă, *Voinţa şi libertatea în gândirea Sf. Grigorie de Nyssai*, Studii Teologice, nr. 1-2, 1983, p. 57.

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)

from above, in the purely spiritual and transcendental dimension – the Kingdom of Heaven.

References

Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa 1998: *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, trad. rom. G. Teodorescu, Bucureşti, Editura Sophia

Despre facerea omului XVI, 44, 185 D; S.C. 6, 161, apud Preot Vasile Răducă, *Antropologia Sfântului Grigorie de Nyssa*: 1996, Bucureşti, IBMOR

Despre Viaţa lui Moise, traducere de Pr. Ioan Buga, PSB vol. 29

Tâlcuire amănunţită la Cântarea Cântărilor, traducere de Pr. D. Stăniloae, PSB, vol 29

Buga, I. 1995: *Preliminarii la teologia Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa*, in *Despre viaţa lui Moise*, Ed. Sf. Gheorghe-Vechi

Corbu, Ag. 2002: *Sfânta Scriptură şi tâlcuirea ei în opera Sfântului Grigorie de Nyssa*, Sibiu, Ed. Teofania

Danielou, J. 1953: *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, Paris

Evdokimov, P. 1944: *Taina iubirii – Sfinţenia iubirii conjugale în lumina tradiţiei ortodoxe*, Bucureşti, Ed. Asociaţia medicală creştină Christiana

Mosoiu, N. 2000 : *Taina prezenţei lui Dumnezeu în viaţa umană*, Piteşti, Editura Paralela 45

Raduca, V. 1983: *Voinţa şi libertatea în gândirea Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, in Studii Teologice*, nr. 1-2

Schönborn, C. 1996: *Icoana lui Hristos*, trad. rom. Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă, Bucureşti, Editura Anastasia

Voinea, D. 2009: *Omul în învăţătura Sfântului Grigorie de Nyssa*, Brăila; http://www.bibliotecadigitala.ro/

BDD-A3939 © 2014 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:15:52 UTC)