

+

*Saint Mark's Church
Sunday School*

**St. Basil the Great
Code: 12/SA/3**

1. General Aims of the unit

To celebrate the life of St. Basil the Great , his saintly life , contribution to the Church in large and his writings .

2. Special aims of the lesson

1. Cover the main features of his life . .
2. Explore his ordination as the Archbishop of Caesarea.
3. Shed light on the style of the monastic life he established.
3. Highlight his efforts to defend of the Orthodox faith and his writings specially the Liturgy which is known after his name .
4. Brief knowledge about the Cappadocian fathers and the church in that time

3. Outcomes:

By the end of this lessons the teens are able to:

1. Remember by heart the factors that affected St Basil and led him to consecrate his life to the Lord
2. Analyse the contribution of St Basil to the whole church.
3. Summarize his writings and compare between his Liturgy in Greek and in Coptic

4. Verses :

5. References :

1.SUS Sunday school program –Yr.8- Lesson 3 -September

2. The life of the three great Hierarchs :Basil the great,
Gregory the Theologian and John Crysostom Russian Orthodox Church
1985

ISBN 0-935889-00-0

3. Internet files-search for Saint Basil the great”

THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS

St. Athanasius' last years were peaceful. Although he did not live to see full official victory for the Nicene cause, there were two major reasons for him to believe that it would triumph. One we have already noted: the *homo-ousios* and the *homoiousios* parties were discovering that their views were very much alike. The second reason was that three young and influential theologians were making full agreement more and more likely. They were St. Basil of Caesarea (in Cappadocia), his friend St. Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil's brother St. Gregory of Nyssa. Since all were from Cappadocia, they came to be known as the Three Great Cappadocians. They represented a post-Nicene orthodoxy.

For St. Athanasius the unity of God had been a certainty and the divine Trinity had been a mystery. His problem had been: how can the one God exist in three persons? The three Cappadocians asked the question the other way around. For them the certainty was the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the mystery was: how can Father, Son, Holy Spirit be one God? St. Athanasius began with the one God and tried to understand how the three persons were related to Him. The Cappadocians began with three Persons and tried to understand how the one God was related to Them. The end result of seventy years of study, discussion, controversy, and political strife was acceptance of Athanasius' one God in three persons and of the Cappadocians' three persons in one God. These were the two sides of the one confession of the Triune God.

Whether one regards the God of the Scripture from the one side or the other, or from both together, mystery will always be an inseparable element in the divine being. St. Athanasius says, "*Man, can perceive only the hem of the garment of the triune God; the cherubim cover the rest with their wings.*"

St. Basil The Great (c.329-379)

St. Basil was born about 329, at Caesarea, the capital of Cappadocia, in the bosom of a wealthy and pious family. The seed of piety had been planted in him by his grandmother, St. Macrina, and his mother, St. Emmelia. He had four brothers and

five sisters, who led a religious life; two of his brothers were bishops, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Peter of Sebasta.

He received his literary education at first from his father, who was a rhetorician. Afterwards at school in Constantinople (347), Basil enjoyed the instruction of the famous pagan Libanius; and later in Athens, he spent several years between 351 and 355, studying rhetoric, mathematics, and philosophy, in the company of his friend Gregory Nazianzen, and at the same time with prince Julian the Apostate. To youth who were not firmly grounded in Christianity, residence in Athens, and occupation with the ancient classics, were full of temptation, and might easily kindle an enthusiasm for heathenism, which, however, had already lost its vitality, and was upheld solely by artificial means of magic and obscure mysticism.

St. Basil and St. Gregory remained steadfast, and no poetical or rhetorical glitter could fade their impressions of a pious training. St. Gregory says of their studies in Athens, *"We knew only two streets of the city, the first and the more excellent one to the churches, and to the ministers of the altar; the other, which however, we did not so highly esteem, to the public schools and to the teachers of the sciences. The streets to the theatres, games, and places of unholy amusements, we left to others. Our holiness was our great concern; our sole aim was to be called and to be Christians. In this we placed our whole glory."*

In a later oration on classic studies St. Basil encourages them, but admonishes that they should be pursued with caution, and with constant regard to the great Christian purpose of eternal life, to which all earthly objects and attainments are as shadows and dreams to reality. He writes *"In plucking the rose one should beware of the thorns, and, like the bee, should not only delight himself with the colour and fragrance, but also gain useful honey from the flower."*

The intimate friendship of St. Basil and St. Gregory, lasting from fresh, enthusiastic youth till death, resting on an identity of spiritual and moral aims, and sanctified by Christian piety, is a lovely and engaging chapter in the history of the fathers.

After Basil finished his studies in Athens he appeared in his native city of Caesarea as a rhetorician. But soon after (c.360) he took a journey to Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, to become acquainted with the monastic life, and he became more and more enthusiastic for it. He distributed his property to the poor, and withdrew to a lonely district in Pontus, near the cloister in which his mother, his sister, and other pious

women were living. "God has shown me," he wrote to his friend Gregory, "a region which exactly suits my mode of life; it is, in truth, what in our happy jesting we often wished. What imagination showed us in the distance, that I now see before me".

He succeeded in drawing his friend Gregory to the monastic life. Together they practised their prayer, studies, and manual labour; made extracts from the works of Origen, which we possess, under the name of Philocalia, as the joint work of the two friends; and wrote monastic rules which contributed largely to extend and regulate the coenobite life.

In 364 Basil was made presbyter against his will. His pastoral heart and administrative skills came to the fore in 368, when famine overtook Cappadocia. By selling some of his own inheritance, dissuading many merchants who sought to make profit from the opportunity, and getting funds from the wealthy, he helped avert a serious disaster in Cappadocia. In his Homily for a Time of Famine he wrote:

[The torments of the famished, the pangs of hunger, are indeed an evil to be pitied. Of human ills hunger is the chief, and of deaths it is the most painful...Hunger is slow to torture, prolonged pain, an evil hovering and ever-present, a death which is always there and yet always delayed...The body becomes livid as a result of the pallor and blackness which accompany this affliction... The eyes become withdrawn into the head, loose in their sockets like dried nuts in their shells. The belly is empty, contracted, formless, without substance; the intestines no longer have their normal tension, and the bones are struck to the back.

What punishment is too much for anyone who passes by such a body with indifference? Can he rise to any greater cruelty? Is he not worthy to be counted among the most inhuman of beasts, of being regarded as a criminal and a homicide? Yes, anyone who has the power to succour this evil and deliberately, through avarice, postpones doing so, is fully worthy of being condemned as a murderer.

Are you poor? There are others poorer than you are. Have you two days provisions? They have only one. Be good and gracious, and share what you have with the needy. Do not hesitate to give away the little that you have; do not put your personal interest above the common danger. Even if your food is reduced to one loaf, if there is a beggar at the door, take this loaf out of your larder, hold it up to heaven in your hands and say these sad but generous words. 'Lord, the loaf which you see is my last and danger is imminent; but I am giving of the little I have to my brother who is hungry. Do you give also to your servant who is in peril? I know your goodness, and I trust in

your power. Do not delay your goodness for long, but if it seems good to you, bestow on us your gifts.

If you speak and act like this, this bread which you have given in your need will be the seed of a harvest: it will produce abundant fruit and will be the pledge of your food, having been the ambassador of mercy.]

In 370, with the cooperation of St. Gregory and his father, St. Basil was elected bishop of Caesarea and metropolitan of all Cappadocia. In this capacity he had fifty country bishops (choriepispos) under him, and devoted himself from that time to the direction of the church and the fighting of Arianism, which again came into power through the emperor Valens in the East. The emperor wished to reduce Cappadocia to the Arian heresy, and threatened the bishop with confiscation, banishment, and death. St. Basil replied: *"Nothing more? Not one of these things touches me. His property cannot be fortified, who has none; banishment I know not, for I am restricted to no place, and am the guest of God, to whom the whole earth belongs; for martyrdom I am unfit, but death is a benefactor to me, for it sends me more quickly to God, to whom I live and move; I am also in great part already dead, and have been for a long time hastening to the grave."*

The emperor was about to banish him when his six-year-old son was suddenly taken ill, and the physicians gave up all hope. He sent for St. Basil, and the boy recovered (only to die later while being baptised by an Arian bishop). The imperial prefect also recovered from a sickness, and ascribed his recovery to the prayers of the bishop, towards whom he had previously behaved haughtily. Thus this danger was averted by special divine assistance.

St. Basil was poor, and almost always sickly; he had only a single worn-out garment, and ate almost nothing but bread, salt, and herbs. The care of the poor and sick he took largely upon himself. He founded in the vicinity of Caesarea a magnificent hospital, chiefly for lepers, who were often entirely abandoned in those regions, and left to the saddest fate; he himself took the sufferers, treated them as brethren, and, in spite of their revolting condition, was not afraid to kiss them.

But other difficulties, perplexities, and divisions continually met him, to obstruct the attainment of his desire, the restoration of the peace of the church. These storms, and all sorts of hostilities, early wasted his body. He died in 379, two years before the final victory of the Nicene orthodoxy, with the words: "Into thy hands, O Lord I commit

my spirit; You redeemed me, O Lord, God of Truth." He was carried to the grave by a deeply sorrowing multitude.

St. Basil is distinguished as a pulpit orator and as a theologian, and still more as a shepherd of souls and a church ruler; and in the history of monasticism he holds a high place.

Of his works, his five books against Eunomius (an Arian), written in 361, in defence of the deity of Christ, and his work on the Holy Spirit (375), are important to the history of doctrine. St. Basil's contributions to theology are numerous. With the other Cappadocian fathers, he worked out a sense of the Trinity that allowed for both unity and individuality. By employing various models, he helped form that doctrine in a way that is still basic to many eastern and western Christian communities. Of importance in the East is the Liturgy ascribed to him, which is used in our church till the present time. His homilies on the Psalms, the history of creation, asceticism and various other subjects furnish wealth of information concerning his life and times.

St. Gregory Nazianzen (329-390)

St. Gregory was born into an upper class, land holding family in Nazianzus, Cappadocia. His father, also a Gregory, initially belonged to a hellenised Jewish sect, but became a Christian (and then a bishop) by the influence of his Christian wife Nonna. The elder St. Gregory describes her, "a wife according to the mind of Solomon; in all things subject to her husband according to the laws of marriage, not ashamed to be his teacher and his leader in true religion. She solved the difficult problem of uniting a higher culture, especially in knowledge of divine things and strict exercise of devotion, with the practical care of her household. If she was active in her house, she seemed to know nothing of the exercises of religion; if she occupied herself with God and His worship, she seemed to be a stranger to every earthly occupation: she was whole in everything. Experiences had instilled into her unbounded confidence in the effects of believing prayer; therefore she was most diligent in supplications, and by prayer overcame even the deepest feelings of grief over her own and other's sufferings. She had by this means attained such control over her spirit, that in every sorrow encountered, she never uttered a plaintive tone before she had thanked God."

In the formation of Gregory's religious character, his mother exerted a deep and wholesome influence, consecrating him to the service of God even before his birth. Gregory received the benefits of an excellent education. His family had the financial resources and the sense of what such an education could provide. He was early instructed in the Holy Scriptures and the rudiments of science. He soon found a preference for the study of oratory, and early on determined on the celibate life. He studied at Nazianzus, Caesarea in Cappadocia (where he first met St. Basil), Caesarea in Palestine, Alexandria, and finally Athens which still maintained its ancient renown as the seat of Grecian science and art.

In Athens, he studied under Prohaeresius, a fellow Cappadocian Christian, who was noted for his memory and rhetorical power. Although we have none of his works, Prohaeresius may well have been one of the most significant figures in helping St. Gregory see the relationship between education and theology. At least, he was an impressive teacher of rhetoric; the emperor Julian allowed him to teach when he had banned all other Christians from teaching in the normal schools.

During the stay in Athens, St. Gregory became re-acquainted with St. Basil. They strengthened the bond of their beautiful Christian friendship even though their temperaments were quite different. They planned a life of monastic contemplation together, but St. Basil left Athens early to travel to monasteries in Palestine and Egypt.

St. Gregory was asked to stay and teach rhetoric in Athens, but he declined and made his way back home where he was baptised. With his whole soul he now threw himself into an ascetic life. His food was bread and salt, his drink was water, his bed the bare ground, his garments of coarse cloth. Labour filled his day, praying, singing and holy contemplation fill most of the night. However, his love to his parents stood in the way to his total seclusion. He spent some time with Basil in a small retreat at Pontus. But returned home regularly to assist his father in the management of his household and his property.

The tension between ascetic withdrawal and public performance would plague him all his life. He had the theological and preaching gifts to be a bishop, but the details of public administration found no resonance in his person. He more than once fled into monastic retreat after periods of difficult community demands.

On a visit to his parents' house Gregory against his will, and even without his previous knowledge, was ordained presbyter by his father before the assembled congregation on a feast day of the year 361. Such forced elections and ordinations, though very offensive to our taste, were at that time frequent, especially upon the urgent wish of the people, whose voice in many instances proved to be indeed the voice of God.

Gregory fled soon after, to his friend in Pontus, but out of regard to his aged parents and the pressing call of the church, he returned to Nazianzus towards Easter in 362, and delivered his first pulpit discourse, in which he justified himself in his conduct, and said: "*It has its advantage to hold back a little from the call of God, as Moses, and after him Jeremiah, did on account of their age; but it has also its advantage to come forward readily, when God calls, like Aaron and Isaiah; provided both be done with devout spirit, the one on account of inherent weakness, the other in reliance upon the strength of Him who calls.*" His enemies accused him of haughty contempt of the priestly office; but he gave as the most important reason of his flight, that he did not consider himself worthy to preside over a flock, and to undertake the care of immortal souls, especially in such stormy times.

In 371, St. Basil, now metropolitan, tried to appoint St. Gregory bishop of Sasima, a tiny town of no significance, as part of his effort to mute Arian influence in the region. St. Gregory was hurt, but at the request of his friend and his aged father he was consecrated to this new office but it is doubtful that he ever visited the town.

In 374, both of St. Gregory's parents passed away. He was now free from familial demands for a life of public service, but the bishops of the region and the people of Nazianzus wanted him to follow his father as bishop. A short time after he had been invested with the vacant bishopric, Gregory fled to the convent of St. Thecla in Seleucia, where he stayed for four years. There he received the painful news of the death of his beloved Basil in 379.

Finally, a call came that caught his attention: to become the preacher for the small orthodox congregation in Constantinople, which under the oppressive hand of Arianism had been reduced to a feeble handful. St. Gregory had been in a period of seclusion and probably was not averse to return to life in a metropolis, at least to its cultural aspects. He at first entirely disappointed the splendour-loving people of the capital, and was much mocked and persecuted by the Arian populace. But in spite of all he succeeded, by his powerful eloquence and faithful labour, in building up the

little church in faith and in Christian life, and helped the Nicene doctrine again to victory. In memory of this success his little domestic chapel was afterwards changed into a magnificent church, and named *Anastasia*, the church of the Resurrection.

People of all classes crowded to his discourses, which were mainly devoted to the vindication of the Godhead of Christ and to the Trinity, and at the same time earnestly enforced a holy walk befitting the true faith. Even the famous St. Jerome, at that time already fifty years old, came from Syria to Constantinople to hear the discourses and took private instruction of St. Gregory in the interpretation of Scriptures. He gratefully calls him his preceptor and catechist.

The victory of the Nicene faith, which St. Gregory had thus inwardly promoted in the imperial city, was outwardly completed by the celebrated edict of the new emperor Theodosius, in February, 380. When the emperor, on the 24th of December of that year, entered Constantinople, he deposed the Arian bishop, Demophilus, with all his clergy, and transferred the cathedral church to St. Gregory. The people strongly demanded him for bishop, but he decidedly refused. And in fact he was not yet released from his bishopric of Nazianzus or Sasima; he could be released only by a synod.

When Theodosius, for the formal settlement of the theological controversies, called the renowned ecumenical council in May, 381, Gregory was elected as bishop of Constantinople, and, amidst great festivities, was inducted into the office. In virtue of this dignity he held for a time the presidency of the council.

When the Egyptian and Macedonian bishops arrived, they disputed the validity of his election, because, according to the fifteenth canon of the council of Nicea, he could not be transferred from his bishopric of Sasima to another. This deeply wounded him. He was disenchanted with the operations of party passions in the council, and resigned with the following remarkable declaration:

"Whatever this assembly may hereafter determine concerning me, I would finally raise your mind beforehand to something far higher: I pray you now, be one, and join yourselves in love! Must we always be only derided as infallible, and be animated only by one thing, the spirit of strife? Give each other the hand fraternally. But I will be a second Jonah. I will give myself for the salvation of our ship (the church), though I am innocent of the storm. Let the lot fall upon me, and cast me into the sea. A hospitable fish of the deep will receive me. This shall be the beginning of your harmony. I reluctantly ascended the episcopal chair, and gladly I now come down.

Even my weak body advise me this. One debt only have I to pay: death; this I owe to God. But, O my Trinity! For Thy sake only am I sad. Shall Thou have an able man, bold and zealous to vindicate Thee? Farewell, and remember my labours and my pains."

He left Constantinople in June, 381, and spent the remaining years of his life in solitude on his parental estate in the vicinity of Nazianzus, in religious exercises and literary pursuits. Yet he continued to operate through numerous epistles upon the affairs of the church, and took active interest in the welfare and sufferings of the men around him. He died in 390; the particular circumstances of his death being unknown. His bones were afterwards brought to Constantinople; and they are now shown at Rome and Venice. Though Gregory was inferior to his bosom friend Basil as a church ruler, and to his namesake of Nyssa as a speculative thinker, he was superior to both as an orator who laboured powerfully for the victory of orthodoxy.

Among the works of St. Gregory stand pre-eminent his five Theological Orations in defence of the Nicene doctrine against the Eunomians and Macedonians, which he delivered in Constantinople and which won for him the honorary title of **“the Theologian”** (shared only with the Apostle John). His other orations (forty-five in all) are devoted to the memory of distinguished martyrs, friends, and kindred, to the ecclesiastical festivals, and to public events or his own fortunes. Finally there are, two hundred and forty-two Epistles from St. Gregory, which are important to the history of the time, and in some cases very graceful and interesting.

St. Gregory of Nyssa (c.331-c.395)

St. Gregory of Nyssa was a younger brother of St. Basil, and the third son of his parents. Of his honourable descent he made no account. Blood, wealth, and splendour, says he, we should leave to the friends of the world; the Christian's lineage is his affinity with the divine, his fatherland is virtue, his freedom is the sonship of God. He was weakly and timid, and born not so much for practical life, as for study and speculation. His education seems to have been influenced especially by his oldest sister, Macrina ('the younger'), and later in both rhetoric and theology by St. Basil. Unlike St. Basil and St. Gregory of Nazianzen, he did not study at the great

centres of higher learning, but on his own he absorbed, remarkably well, the rhetorical and philosophical culture of his time, including much of what we would call "natural sciences." He formed his mind chiefly upon the writings of Origen, and under the direction of his brother, whom he calls his father and instructor.

After spending a short time as a rhetorician he broke away from the world, retired into solitude in Pontus, and became fond of the ascetic life. Though he was married, he commends virginity in a special work, as a higher grade of perfection. He says "*From all the evils of marriage, virginity is free; it has no lost children, no lost husband to bemoan; it is always with its Bridegroom, and delights in its devout exercises, and, when death comes, it is not separated from him, but united with him forever*". In St. Gregory of Nazianzus's short eulogy of Theosebia, Gregory of Nyssa's wife, he says that she rivalled her brothers-in-law (Basil and Peter) who were in the priesthood.

His brother St. Basil, in 372, called him against his will from his learned ease into his own vicinity as bishop of Nyssa, an inconsiderable town of Cappadocia. He thought it better that the place should receive its honour from his brother, than that his brother should receive his honour from his place. And so it turned out. As St. Gregory laboured zealously for the Nicene faith, he drew the hatred of the Arians, who succeeded in deposing him at a synod in 376, and driving him into exile. But two years later, when the emperor Valens died and Gratian revoked the sentences of banishment, St. Gregory recovered his bishopric.

Now other trials came upon him. His brothers and sisters died in rapid succession. He delivered a eulogy upon St. Basil, whom he greatly venerated, and he described the life and death of his beautiful and noble sister Macrina, who, after the death of her betrothed, chose single life, and afterwards retired with her mother into seclusion, and exerted great influence over her brothers.

After St. Basil's death in 379, St. Gregory became his recognised heir in the struggle against extreme Arianism, as represented by Eunomius, and thus began the most fruitful period of his life. In 379, he took part in the synod of the Nicene party held in Antioch. Soon afterward, he travelled to Sebaste in order to supervise the election of a new bishop, but he managed to disengage himself from the troubles there. Afterward his youngest brother, Peter, became bishop there.

St. Gregory attended the ecumenical council of Constantinople, and undoubtedly, since he was one of the most eminent theologians of the time, exerted a powerful

influence there. The council entrusted to him as one of the pillars of orthodoxy, a tour of visitation to Arabia and Jerusalem, where disturbances had broken out which threatened a schism. He found Palestine in a sad condition, and therefore dissuaded a Cappadocian abbot, who asked his advice about pilgrimage of his monks to Jerusalem. "*Change of place,*" says he, "*brings us no nearer God, but where you are, God can come to you, if only the inn of your soul is ready.... It is better to go out of the body and raise one's self to the Lord, than to leave Cappadocia to journey to Palestine.*" He did not succeed in making peace, and he returned to Cappadocia lamenting that there were in Jerusalem men "*who showed a hatred towards their brethren, such as they ought to have only towards the devil, towards sin, and towards the enemies of the Saviour.*"

Of his later life we know very little. His presence at the Constantinople synod of 383 is attested by a sermon. He delivered sermons in the capital on the occasions of the death of the young princess Plucharia and the empress Flacilla. After 385, the sources are silent, although his literary activity continued, especially in the area of theology of Christian perfection. We know that he was present at the synod of Constantinople in 394; he probably died soon afterward.

The wealth of his intellectual life he deposited in his numerous writings, above all in his controversial doctrinal works: Against Eunomius; Against Apollinarius; On the Deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit; On the difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis* in God; and in catechetical summary of the Christian faith. Besides these he wrote many Homilies, especially on the creation of the world, and of man, on the life of Moses, on the Psalms, on Ecclesiastics, on the Song of Solomon, on the Lord's Prayer, on the Beatitudes; Eulogies on eminent martyrs and saints (St. Stephen, the Forty Martyrs, St. Gregory Thaumaturges, Ephraem, Meletius, his brother St. Basil); various valuable ascetic tracts; and a biography of his sister St. Macrina, addressed to the monk Olympios.

Gregory was more a man of thought than a man of action. He had a fine metaphysical head, and did lasting service in the vindication of the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and in the accurate distinction between *essence* and *hypostasis*.