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The “Schooling of the Lord” in the Life of the Three Hierarchs

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Abstract: The main aim of this article is to bolster the deeper meaning of St. Paul’s saying: “with correction and advice, inspired by the Lord”. The “correction by the Lord” is everything we do in life that works-out the shaping of Christ in us and renders us “children of God” by grace. The seal of our adoption can be affirmed by our perfection and sanctity according to the Lord’s word “Be perfect and saintly”. Beginning from the Holy Bible, firstly from the New Testament and further on with the support of the Old Testament, this article describes the Lord’s Schooling and how this is extended towards all the Saints. As an example, the article projects the Three Hierarchs who are excellent personalities and their teaching remains timeless. Their contribution towards “all-round” education as well as to moralistic education is unique and the Lord’s education is purely demonstrated in their life. In practice, this article shows the way people of now-a-days and of the future can utilize even the slightest details of their every-day life for their communion with God, thus having God as their Father according to “Our Father...” This adoption can only be substantiated through this schooling, thus having God as our father not theoretically but by his grace, practically. From the above it follows that general education should be harmonized with the Lord’s schooling which aims to cultivate people turning them on to perfection and sanctification.

Keywords: Lord’s schooling, Ethos, General/All-round Education, The Three Hierarchs.

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Considering the time that the Three Hierarchs lived, the volume of the education they have received, is really admirable! Even more admirable, is their progress and the distinctions granted to them by their teachers. But, of course, the most admirable fact is their distinguished qualification in staying, perpetually, in the fore-stage of holiness and theology, their pastoral, psych pathogenic, interpretative and sociological works are their left-over heritage.

So, the main issue that is going to preoccupy us during this paper, is the reason why our Three Hierarchs Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom have remained, perpetually, as the focal point of the spiritual firmament of the heavenly brigade. Because, if we look at the ecclesiastical writings and the synaxarion hagiology, a multitude of known and redeemed saints were influenced positively either by their writings (to which we refer) or by their life itself.

The concurrence of the basic biographical elements of the Three Hierarchs is apparent. In parallel, the frame-work of all this, can be registered in simple lines: they were all born in a pious family and were brought-up “with correction and advice inspired by the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). The width, length, depth and height hidden behind these words is indescribable, and for this reason, we shall persist in scrutinizing them, because hidden behind them, lies the great secret of their perpetual gleam.

Next to their names lie the names of their holy mothers. Being virtuous women before their wedding and thereafter, they brought-up holy children to the world. Their saintly life, their saintly pregnancy, brought out saintly crops! Bringing-up their child, how many prayers they must have said, holding it, cradling it before sleep. How many times they must have tried to teach them how to pray, to fast, to go to confession, to go to church and to receive Holy Communion! How many times they must have talked to them about God and His love for people! And if they saw it doing something bad, how tenderly and lovingly they must have admonished it to do what is good.

These lines describe only in part some of the mother’s or the father’s actions. The effectiveness of admonition and the power of deeds differs greatly from a simple reference to them! In any case, this reference of ours can be summed up in Saint Paul’s apostolic saying: “with correction and advice, inspired by the Lord” (they were nurtured). So, it is essential to make clear that our interpretation of “with correction and advice, inspired by the Lord” must be right, so that when we enter into the biography of the Saints, we shall be able to bring out the pearl of their perfection and sanctity.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer and God, teaching about perfection and sanctity, says in the Gospel: “If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mat. 19:21) and elsewhere “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16 and Lev. 20:7). So, perfection and holiness is offered by God, by calling us to attain it and it’s up to our disposition and will to appropriate it.

It is significant to know that the Lord says: “cut-off from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). That’s why he instructs us: “Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Mt. 7:7). So, it is essential for us to wish, to yearn and look for it in faith and in time due the Lord will grant it. Because God knows in advance that we are His children and He asks us, when we wish to talk to Him, to address Him as “Our Father” (Mat. 6:14, 26; 23:9; Luke 11:2, 15:11–32. Rom. 8:15). It’s up to us, if we want, to be His children.

Apostle Paul, reminding us of this word, says that God addressing us as sons, says: “My son, do not scorn correction from the Lord, do not resent his training, for the Lord trains those he loves and chastises every son he accepts. Perseverance is part of your training; God is treating you as his sons. Has there ever been any son whose father did not train him? If you were not getting this training, as all of you are, then you would be not sons but bastards. Besides, we have all had our human fathers who punished us and we respected them for it; all the more readily ought we to submit to the Father of the spirits and so earn life. Our human fathers were training us for a short life and according to their own lights; by the does it all for our own good, so that we may share His own holiness. Of course, any discipline is

at the time a matter of grief, not joy; but later, in those who have undergone it, it bears fruit in peace and uprightness (Heb. 12:5–11); “And elsewhere the Lord says: I reprove and train those whom I love” (Rev. 3:19).

God censures those that He recognizes as His children, He examines them, evaluates and trains them, allowing them to encounter various “whippings”, so as to become perfect! We, instead, as a result of our “fallen state”, forsake God and slide-away to a sinful life. That’s why, God, pedagogically allows that we go through various tribulations. For our part, together with prophet Isaiah, we exclaim: In distress we had recourse to you” (Is. 26:16), and with prophet-king David, “though God punished me sternly, he has not abandoned me to death” (Ps. 117:18), and because “we must all experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). God, in a fatherly manner, by His grace, moulds the statue of our soul in a Christ-centered manner. That’s why, “God’s grace has been revealed to save the whole human race; it has taught us that we should give up every everything that is contrary to true religion and all our worldly passions; we must be self-restrained and live upright and religious lives in this present world” (Tit. 2:11–12). Our Christ appeared and in order to urge us on the WAY (He is the WAY), He took up our human nature (without sin), something that we ourselves ought to have done (in Eden). He personally became the WAY, calling us to follow Him. And His WAY is a way of martyrdom, a promise of crucifixion and death so as to receive “forgiveness of their sins and a share in the inheritance of the sanctified” (Acts 26:18). All who accepted this share, enjoyed the Lord’s training.

This training introduces and secures us in repentance. And repentance is a change of our being, a transformation of our mind and heart, a shifting from the worldly to an evangelical state of life, from an earthly meanness to a heavenly handling. It is a shifting of the central weight of our life – from human-centered to Christ-centered.

This training is not effected on “illegitimate children,” to those that He does not recognize as His children. Besides, all fathers, in many ways, train their children so as to install them as perfect human beings. But the same father does not train his neighbour’s children at all and much more, he does not behave towards them as he behaves towards his own children.

But, in reality, God recognizes everyone as His own child. He is not partial; He does not abhor anyone. That’s why He offers His training to every soul. The psalmist ascertains this by saying “many are the tribulations of the rightful” (Ps. 33:20) and elsewhere “countless troubles are in store for the wicked” (Ps. 31:10). The Lord offers His training to everyone, without exception, to both the just as well as the wicked. The difference lies in its acceptance – by us. The rightful, after the Lord’s training (like a fertile field), grow and bear fruit one hundred fold in virtue and are rendered righteous-thanking God for it. But the others, also being trained by the Lord (like a sly field), add-up to their vileness, rendering themselves sinners, grudging against God.

The training offered by a father to his children is (for this present deceitful age) given according to his own perception, his capability, his personality, his experience in life. No one can be certain of the outcome (or the way until this outcome) and perhaps it remains partly or plentifully, within the human proportions, and an earthly barometric atmosphere, i.e. “he can become a good person”. These are the lessons offered to him, by the father himself, or by the close environment of the father, or by some teacher in order to “live well”. In contrast, God’s training that is also connected with a multitude of lessons (of a different nature), aims at a great and significant profit for people, much greater than a “good life”. It aims at rendering someone capable of communing with, and adopting the sanctity of God¹. Surely, when individuals are under trial they are sad, afflicted, he suffers, but being patient – “perseverance must complete its work so that you will become fully developed, complete, not deficient in any way” (Jas. 1:4), – he is led to peace. Peace is then followed by the justice of faith and justice is the crop of the Holy Spirit in its fulness; “On the other hand,

¹ Professor father George Metallinos writes: “Christian pedagogy breeds people on an educational model, not just to be a good and simple individual, but to imitate the God-human” [Metallinos, 2008, 38].

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23).

Being humans and as human beings we are liable to falls “because their heart contrives evil from their infancy” (Gen. 8:21), and because God has dressed us up with Christ through Baptism and He has anointed and sealed us with the Holy Spirit, thus granting us His adoption, and because He does not want our eternal perdition (and thus split-up from Him), and because we do not judge ourselves so as to be reformed, God judges us; “but when we are judged by the Lord, we are corrected by the Lord to save us from being condemned along with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32). “Dying, and yet here we are, alive” (2 Cor. 6:9), we carry on with our everyday life “keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection” (Heb. 12:2), sanctified day by day, trained by the Lord. Our target is, “so that we should be forced to trust not ourselves but in God, who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9).

Trust in God opens up our communion with Him and this is followed by the seal of adoption, “until Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). The education of Christ in us is the most important event. Through the outburst of his heart, Apostle Paul, strongly outlines: “I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). And elsewhere he exhortingly declares: “Take me as your pattern, just as I take Christ for mine” (1 Cor. 11:1). The assimilation takes place in the heart. Our heart has to (according to our spiritual standard), be like the heart of Christ. And our heart’s necessity was revealed by our Lord Himself: “learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Mat. 11:29). So, our own heart must become gentle and humble.

The Lord’s training seeks after the culture, of the “deep heart”. The heart is the centre, the control tower of the whole psychosomatic being. The individual’s behavior is relevant to the thought that the heart can accept. This mathematical axiom of spiritual life is dogma and temper². It is the “dogmatic conscience” of people, according to the venerable elder Sophrony of Essex³. In this formation of the dogmatic conscience “all scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be upright” (2 Tim. 3:16). The study of the Holy Bible and the writings of the Holy Fathers (who recorded their divine experience – of the Holy Spirit), nourishes the mind and the mind in its turn, nourishes the heart. So, man can select (and he can, if he wishes to select the good instead of the evil), always with the grace of Christ. Having being transformed (our heart) like the heart of the Lord Jesus, it acquires the seal of adoption – in authority. “But those who did accept Him He gave power to become children of God, to those who believed in His name” (John 1:12). “All who are guided by the Spirit of God are sons of God; for what you received was not the spirit of slavery to bring back into fear; you received the spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out, “Abba, Father!”. The Spirit Himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:14–16).

In conclusion, the Lord’s culture is the Cross of the Lord, about whom Saint Paul is boasting: “But as for me, it is out of the question that I should boast at all, except of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). The Cross of the Lord is nothing else but deep humility and high love, “through a dive our elevation towards God is achieved” (Gal. 6:14).

That’s why, the children of God go through various difficult tribulations, so as to be able to say “so as to be perfect in unity with God through Jesus Christ” (Praises of Holy Theophany holiday, 4th idiomelon), fulfilling the first and main commandment; you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind”. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: “You must love your neighbour as yourself” (John 17:23).

God does not stay silent but answers back: “I shall fix my home among them and live among them; I will be their God and they will be my people. Get away from them, purify yourselves, says the Lord. Do not touch anything unclean and then I shall welcome you.

² About the relation between dogma and ethos, see [Mantzarides, 2015, 28, 87–8, 213–4, 219, 226].

³ See [Sakharov, 1995, 237–247] (about dogmatic conscience see p. 247). Also see [Sakharov, 2004, 296–307].

I shall be father to you and you will be sons and daughters to me, says the Almighty Lord. Since these promises have been made to us, my dear friends, we should wash ourselves clean of everything that pollutes either body or spirit, bringing our sanctification to completion in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 6:16, 7:1).

Then people, vividly realizes that everything that God had allowed to happen to him “ended up in good” (Rom. 8:18), that in the ocean of His ineffable and unfathomable love, the Lord schooling him, pulled him out of the darkness and the shadow of death, driving him to the never-failing light of the Three-Sun glory, because He so much loves him, that His love is immeasurable, indescribable and inexpressible in words.

This spherical education cultivates people totally in devoutness; “But the usefulness of religion is unlimited, since it holds-out a promise both for life here, and now, and for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:8); in contrast “to do with godless myths and old wives” tales” (1 Tim. 4:7), are actions that are contrary to culture and from them, apostle Paul urges us to abstain (1 Tim. 4:7). Because “the external” culture ... sends away her pupils with empty hands ... but the grace of the Spirit is not like that, but on the contrary, He endows plentifully through short verbs to all that are attentive His philosophy” [St. John Chrysostom, 1979b, 568]. And elsewhere Saint Chrysostom continues: “You must train someone, not only in words, but also by deeds” [St. John Chrysostom, 1979a, 554], and “the training by the heavenly dogmas makes the soul large and high” [St. John Chrysostom, 1979a, 456].

The “outside” education has a duty: to help in the purification of the heart. The ministration of the “outside” education must be a mean to the knowledge of God. The knowledge of God is our target. The “outside” education must be the maid servant to the knowledge of God. If the “outside” education becomes isolated and autonomous, then it is probable that it can destroy people, completely, both in soul and body. Numerous people had the same or similar or even longer than the “general” education of the Three Hierarchs. Furthermore, numerous people had been gifted by God with the same merits as the Three Hierarchs; sharp mind, memory, the analytical as well as the synthetical thought, oratory, eloquence, programming, systematization (in life), devoutness (by their family) and many other virtues. But, unhappily for them, these virtues were either forgotten by them, as time passed, or they were lost in the chaos of the heretical distortions of the faith and they were eventually damned.

What was in the possession of the Three Hierarchs that the above-mentioned unfortunate people lacked? Culture and admonition by the Lord. But it was not only this. Together with this, something else is necessary. The second ingredient that is necessary is a simple heart. The seeds of the Lord’s culture need a good and virtuous earth-heart⁴, that will accept them and give back one hundredfold produce.

That’s why we see in the life of Saint Basil the Great⁵, that the first Lord’s schooling he had was from his grandmother and his mother, at the model of apostle Timothy. His grandmother was a pupil of Saint Gregory of Neocaesaria, a devout and virtuous off-spring nurtured with the milk of the knowledge of God and trained in the divine Word and the Holy Scriptures by a great saint. Along with her, in the bringing up of Basil was his mother, who was herself, a holy off-spring. But, we should not omit the fact that his grandfather, the husband of his mother’s mother, was one of the martyrs of Christ. So, this was the root and the source that granted a holy off-spring to the Church, who was irrigated from the divine spring – Basil the Great, as he himself acknowledges⁶. In parallel with the above, his father, also called Basil, had provided him with his first all-round education and because of the economic comfort that they possessed took care for his higher all-round education, sending him to famous schools, with distinguished teachers, even as far as Athens, the centre of civilization and knowledge of those days.

⁴ Compare Mat. 13:4–23, Mark 4:3–20, Luke 8:5–15.

⁵ The references to the life of Basil the Great are taken from the following books: [Bonis, 1975, 13–71], [Christou, 1978, 11–132], [Laggis, 2001, 26–51].

⁶ Saint Basil writes: “But the concept about God that I have received from my late mother and my grand-mother Makrina, grew in me. I did not add to theirs anything, suggested by others (so as to fulfill their concept of God), but I perfected on what they has told me” [St. Basil the Great, 1999, 825].

In Athens, the character of Basil was already known – his psychological make-up, forged with devoutness by his grandmother and his mother was pre-announced by Saint Gregory the theologian – who had already been in the famous city for two years and had prepared his welcome. His arrival and personal presence there, imposed him upon the world of the students, the professors and all the people, mainly on the literary people.

His stay in Athens brought about a tightening of his friendly ties with Gregory. In their case, the scripture writings were fulfilled: “How good, how delightful it is to live as brothers all together” (Ps. 132:1) and “a brother being helped by his brother is like a fortified and high city” (Prov. 18:19). They had, in reality become one soul in two bodies according to the pattern of the Holy Trinity and the word of the Lord in His great liturgical prayer, “that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:22). As a result of being wary and wise, they were not following the habitual undergraduates’ life, nor were they “infants in mind” (1 Cor. 14:20), but as old boys, children in body and age but grown-ups in mind, they knew only two ways, as best, two education ways. They knew the Lord’s culture, that is, devoutness and the way of all-round education and the world of learning.

Describing the above in detail and poetically, the sharp-writing pen of the hymnographer abbreviates their ideas in the following verses: “Having been filled-up with abundant culture, not only the low and common but mostly that of heaven” (Minaeon of January 1st; (Canon of Saint Basil, Ode 3)). This education was attained not only by Basil the Great but also by the other two Hierarchs, who constitute the trinity of the great, select and ecumenical teachers.

Despite the fact that they were not yet baptized – because at that time it was customary to do that around the age of thirty, in imitation of the Saviour Christ, yet they were living not only like the baptized and the pure from evil, not only as having being illuminated both in mind and heart, but as being sanctified, day by day, as earthy angels, as saints. Not a hint of a sin or malice was expressed neither in words nor in their mind. They were progressing in virtue along with their education. They were progressing in their studies along with knowledge. They were progressing in the wisdom of God, along with the wisdom of the world. And they were wise in Christ as well as wise laymen, thus justifying God. Proving that, by the wisdom of the world they came to know about God. They also proved that there exists a wisdom and a wisdom of the world and its distinctive difference lies in the heart of people. According to the substance of the heart, the wisdom of the world is percolated and it either produced chalices, icons, holy utensils, churches or it produces bullets, bombs, guns, knives, graves and by extension, it either promotes peace, love and sanctity or enmity, hatred and death (bodily or spiritual).

In the above-mentioned, the word of our holy father Saint John of Sinai – the writer of “The Ladder”, who confides it – out of his personal experience, that “in the hearts of the meek the Lord shall rest; but an unruly soul, is the devil’s residence” [St. John of Sinai, 1997, 259]. That’s why God made foolish the wisdom of the world by exhibiting the “foolishness of the Cross”. “While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, we are preaching a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles foolishness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is both the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22–24). This Christ was selected and chosen by Basil and Gregory. In all their life and after their death, they glorified Him by their speeches.

When Basil had finished his studies in Athens and returned to his paternal home in Cappadocia, bringing along with him the Athens’ haughty egoistic spirit, his sister Makrina rebuked him. He did not resist to this nor did he behave insolently towards her, but bowing his neck, he accepted the rebuke. Bowing his neck he was humiliated and accepting the rebuke, he was extremely debased. The Spirit of God rests on humble people.

Later, he withdrew to the desert. Life in the desert is hardship; but in hardship, the Cross of the Lord is manifest. When people resume the Cross of the Lord insightfully, either willingly or unwillingly, then they declare their love towards God. Because the Lord says: “Whoever holds to my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me” (John 14:21). Through

the Cross came the Resurrection and joy in the whole world and through hardship comes the apathy and the unity of the whole inner person. And isolation is a presentation of people before God, face to face. In the height of Crucifixion, perfection resounds. Having been perfected, with the grace of God, Basil returned to the world and was elected hierarch. As such, he was not only perfected, but even more, he was adorned with the grace of the Holy Spirit. In the eyes of humans, not only those who revered him, but even more, of those who were plating against him (his declared enemies), he appeared as Christ on earth. This was testified by Modestus, the district prefect and by Valens the emperor.

The same was the case with the other two hierarchs. Gregory⁷ was also an off-spring of a holy mother, pious and virtuous. Through her prayers, by fasting and by other spiritual work (over a period of some decades), by the grace and the cooperation of the Almighty God, she managed to bring back her husband (also named Gregory), from the disillusion of the “Hypsistarian” sect, to the godly Orthodoxy. As he was a married and well-disposed man, with a good prospect, he was elected (after his accession in the bosom of the Church), to minister the people of Nazianzus. After his assumption of the bishop’s throne and the fiery prayers of his wife Nonna, like a second prophetess Anna (and with her vow to God that, if she conceived a son he will be offered to Him), he attained his desire, having like a second Samuel his own son, Gregory.

Nursing him and implanting sound principles in him, “preaching her God-sent son”, Nonna had as her co-preacher her husband Gregory, who was teaching him a general education. As they were economically well-off, they sent Gregory for further, higher study to various centres, famous for their education schools. Travelling about, he ended up in the “renowned city” Athens, being the centre of learning and philosophy of those days and was attracting from everywhere the flourishing youth to its schools. Gregory could not escape from its magnetic attraction. So, together with Basil, having been captivated at first by its glamour, eventually they themselves captivated it through the brilliant beauty of their multi-dimensional virtue and success.

The component elements of their success, as mentioned above (describing Basil the Great’s life), in combination with his personal character, his own psychological hypostasis, was that basic tool, the shepherd’s flute that the divine grace had used, so that Gregory would trumpet forth, all over the world, the divine-inspired words, the dogmas of the faith and the theology of the Church. With his gentle voice, he thundered The Word “the mighty, the living” (Ps. 41:3), thus shutting-up the mouths of the orators who were chattering their magniloquent but empty speeches, “the insignificant”. His delicate soul, “like the dew of Hermon” (Ps. 132:3), was receiving the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and his virtuous heart, possessing the seeds of the knowledge of God as an inheritance from his ancestors, was growing hundredfold. His clear mind having been sharpened through his general education urged him to write, very clearly, about the depth, the width, length and height of the divine concepts. That’s why, he is now known as “the Theologian”.

Having finished his studies, and mainly because of his exceptional personality (as mentioned above), he was urged by the students” and teachers” world to stay in Athens, to assume a teaching post. Having succumbed temporarily, he did not stay there for long because, being “great”, he desired the great and the wonderful, “what no eye has seen and no ear has heard, what the mind of people cannot visualize; all that God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9). For that reason, at his return home from Athens, he first went to Pontus (after an inner impulsion) to the hermitage of Saint Basil, out of a desire to rest and of divine love. Nevertheless, his father called him home again to Nazianzus and, fulfilling the word of the Lord “the honor of thy father...”,⁸ despite his refusal, he ordained him as a priest. Without his will, he obeyed to his father’s call, despite the fact that he preferred to be a hermit. Involuntary obedience is a sequel of a deep humility. That was followed by

⁷ The references on the life of Saint Gregory the Theologian are made according to the following books: [Garnavou, 2000, 15–52], [Christou, 1990, 9–115], [Papadopoulos, 1991, 23–203].

⁸ Compare Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Mat. 15:4, 19:19; Mark 7:10, 10:19; Luke 18:20; Eph. 6:2.

his second exit to the desert, with everything that followed, as mentioned above, in the life of Basil the Great.

We can mention now that, for a while they were co-ascetics, co-hermits, co-hesychasts. Their study was the word of God in all its aspects. Unceasingly praying or studying the Holy Bible, they were crying-out along with prophet-king David, “day to day discourses of it, night to night hands on the knowledge” (Ps. 18:3). This happened because having been enlightened by the uncreated holy light, they were deeply touched. Having been deeply touched, they were informed and having been informed, they taught the divine secrets. By the grace of the Holy Spirit they searched and they found and they were initiated into the sanctuary of the all-bright holy mysteries.

After having extracted the divine knowledge, Gregory was called back home by his father and he marked out as a peacemaker and a unifier of the people, unifying the scattered “by the peace that binds you together” (Eph. 4:3) and by love – that is God. Possessing God in his inner self, actively and permanently, he offers and conveys Him to his fellows. Astounded, his fellows, as a result of his attachment to God, they acknowledge him consciously, everywhere. So, his word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is accepted by all the social classes of the people. He influences significant decisions of high-standing, civil and church people, he gives a solution to important matters, he has an answer to any dilemma, he “draws a line” to ecclesiastical doings and to theology – and through all these, his excellence is shown.

That’s why, when the Church was in need, having being prejudged as worthy of prelacy, he was consecrated as a bishop by Basil the Great to undertake a difficult task – to secure and protect Orthodoxy in a border district. In his case, the decoration of virtues by the All-Holy and ceremonial Spirit is repeated, and thus, the lamp is placed upon the lamp-stand of the Church. So, in one of the trials that had happened in his church-flock and while he was preparing to go away from them, at the same time, quitting his throne (for the sake of peace in his church), he heard a voice coming from amidst the crowd saying: “You are leaving us father, but along with you, you are also taking the Holy Trinity”⁹. The person of God, having honoured God by his way of life as well as through his preaching, is honoured by God and people.

As for John¹⁰, being the only son in his family, after his father’s death he asked his mother for permission to go to the desert. She pleaded with him to stay with her until her death and after that, he could go wherever he wished. The narrative description of his mother’s words (that made him stay with her) is really soul-stirring. That’s why it is inserted now as follows:

“But the perpetual representations of my mother were a hindrance to accept his call (his friend’s Basil) and could not receive his offering. My mother had anticipated my plans and grasping my right hand she led me to her private quarters and we sat close to the bed on which she had given birth to me. There, out-pouring rivers of tears, she addressed me in the following words which were more painful than her tears; ‘I, my child,’ she said, ‘did not enjoy for long the virtue of your father because that was the will of God. The throes that I felt at your birth were succeeded by his death, leaving you an orphan, and me, a young widow. Only the women to whom that happened know well what that means. Not a ray of relief was appearing in the horizon of a heavy winter and the tempest that a girl lives who, having recently abandoned her parents’ home and is completely inexperienced, she suddenly finds herself in heavy mourning and she is forced to undertake cares which are much greater than those that her age and nature can endure. Because, I think, she must be able to re-erect the negligence of the servants and look-out carefully for their ill-doings and to repel the conspiracies of her relatives and the insults and the harshness of the public revenue collectors. During the tax-collections, she has to be patient and courageous. If the deceased individual leaves behind a child then the mother has to shoulder the burden of various cares, even if the child is a girl (in which case the expenses and cares are less). But,

⁹ See [Laggis, 2001, 645], [Carnavou, 2005, 312].

¹⁰ The references on the life of Saint John the Chrysostom are taken from the following books: [Gregory, 2017, 15–188], [Thierry, 2003, 20–444].

many more difficulties she has to face if she has a boy, who will charge her daily with many fears and more cares. Not to mention the expenses she has to undertake if she wants to educate him as a free citizen. Nevertheless, none of all these had managed me to persuade me to proceed to a second wedding and bring a bride-groom in the home of your father. On the contrary, I preferred to rather stay in the discomfort and confusion and the iron furnace of widowhood. In this struggle of mine I was, firstly, reinforced by divine help but I was also comforted by the fact that by the continuous view of your face, the living image of your father would be preserved inside me. That's why, when you were an infant and before you had learned how to talk – when the children are in the age that they thank their parents for everything, I was receiving great comfort. So, you can not blame me that I did not face my widowhood courageously or that I decreased the property that your father had left for you (so as to meet the different needs of our life, as a result of my widowhood). As I know, this happened to many people who had the misfortune to be orphans. On the contrary, I kept this property intact and to all the expenses required for your progress I was punctual, always drawing the needed money from my dowry property. Do not think that by what I am saying now I am trying to blame you; what I am asking from you, as a favour, in place of all these is this: Don't, please, envelop me with a second widowhood and don't rekindle the already subsided pain of my mourning, but be patient until I die – since it is rather probable that I am going to die soon. Young people, of course, are hoping to reach a deep old age but as for us, we are not expecting anything else but death. So, once you have delivered me to the earth, mixing my bones with those of your father, then prepare yourself for long journeys, sailing in whichever sea you wish. Then, no one going to hinder you. But as long as I am alive, carry on staying with me and don't envelop me with such a misfortune, thus contradicting the will of God. After all, I was never unfair to you. But, of course, if you charge me that I am pulling you into the troubles of life, forcing you to undertake the management of your property, then without taking into account the laws of nature nor your bringing-up (nor the prevailing morals – in the other words) do not take anything into account and go away from me – as if I am plotting against you as an enemy. But, if I am doing everything I can to accommodate your life, if nothing else, let this bond hold you close to me. As much as you say that thousands of people love you, the fact is that not one of them will provide you with capability to enjoy such a freedom, because there is no one who desires your well-being more than me” [St. John Chrysostom, 1978, 17–19].

From these words of his mother, one can see clearly the great virtue of his mother which were corroborated by the word of his teacher Lebanious (a fanatic idolater), who hearing from Saint John that his mother, who was then forty years old, had lived for twenty years as a widow, said astounded at present: “Oh! Oh! What women the Christians have!” [St. John Chrysostom, 1987, 18–19].

So, in obedience to his mother, even without his will, in order to keep the word of the Lord “honour ... your mother”, he retired to the desert, a few years later after her death. The cutting-off of one's will constitutes an imitation of Christ, who did obedience to His Father “...even to accepting death, death on across” (Phil. 2:8). A fertile earth, as was that of his ancestors, following after their traces, it was not long before he bore fruit one hundredfold. Resuming the Cross of the Lord through the varied ascetic life and studying day and night the word of God, it was not long before he was placed as a lamp on the lamp-stand of the Church.

The words and deeds of Arsenious the Great are characteristic. Possessing a very high measure of general education and being extremely charismatic, he was the educator of the sons of Theodosius the Great, the princes Arcadius and Honorius. In the meantime, having abandoned temporal vanity of this world, he went to the desert of Nitria, humbly subjecting himself to illiterate monks, much more uneducated than himself. When one of his co-ascetics saw him asking an Egyptian elder about his thoughts, he said to him: “Abba Arsenious, you, fully possessing the Greek and Roman education, are asking this uncouth fellow about your thoughts?” To this he answered: “I have in my possession the Greek

and Roman education but I haven't yet learned the alphabet of this uncouth fellow" [Sayings, 1978, 68]. By this, he meant the monastic life.

In this spirit of wisdom and humility, our three Hierarchs exchanged the university of the world with the university of the desert. Only the possession of one degree was not enough for them. That's why they were successful. They excelled in the one as well as the other. Of course, the university of the desert is not suitable for everyone. But what can the majority do then? They can be educated in the university of the Church. Through the holy mysteries and by the direction of their spiritual fathers, everyone can excel and this excellence can be in thirty, sixty or one hundredfold, according to the measures of each one of us. Besides, the desert university is incorporated in the university of the Church. It simply happens to belong to another "school" (that of the monks), in parallel with the "school" of the married.

Having been placed on the lamp-stand of the Church, the sacred Three Hierarchs had to start a new education. The Lord's culture in their family, first, and then in the desert, showed them how the devil fights people. Now, with their installation amidst the people and their ascending on the throne of their metropolis, they would be taught how the devil fights the Church, how he fights the work of God (for the salvation of humanity). All this education they had by the Lord in the desert, did not in the case of the Three Hierarchs remain stagnant or inoperative as their ensuing life discloses. But on the contrary, progressing in virtue, they bore a bigger cross; threats, slanders, exiles, persecutions and in the end death itself, as we shall see further down.

To start with, Basil the Great, observing in exactness his conscience, would not bear the slightest "economy" in the dogmas of faith. Even the slightest concession was unbearable to him. Being a non-partitionist and a non-disputatious individual, when the dispute was with Orthodox bishops, he would choose a quiet withdrawal from the location of ecclesiastical matters. On the contrary, when he saw "fierce wolves" (Acts 20:29) approaching the folk of Christ and attacking the flock, then he would be transformed to a "roaring lion" (1 Pet. 5:8) against the rivals and like a "good shepherd" (John 10:11), imitating his Lord, who using His rod strangled the bears and killed the lions and using his stick He supported all who stumbled, lifting up those who were bowed down (Ps. 144:14).

Having adored the Lord, Basil was transmitting his love to the image of his Lord, his fellows. For the poor, he would be their wealth, for those starving the food, for the thirsty "the living water" (John 4:11), for the sick the doctor, for the widows the protector, for the orphans the father, for the divided the connecting bond, for the deluded the right way, for the orthodox the glory, for the bishops the model, for the faith the pillar, for the Church the saint. "I accommodated myself to people in all kinds of different situations, so that by all possible means I must bring some to salvation" (1 Cor. 9:22), in imitation of apostle Paul and applying to himself his exhortation: "Take me as your pattern, just as I take Christ for mine" (1 Cor. 11:1). And very nicely and the same time successfully, the hymn-writer's lyre chants: "Father Basil, you have collected from all the saints their virtues – from Moses his calmness, from Elijah his zeal, from Peter his profession, from John his theology and like Paul you kept repeating in clamour, who is sick and I am not sick? who is scandalized and I am not set on fire? Thence complying with them, implore the Lord to save our souls" (Minaeon, January 1st, Apostiha of Vespers of Saint Basil, 2nd hymn).

The will of the Lord, permitting a last trial for him, so as to perfect him and add precious jewels to the crown of his exploits, He let him go through a final tribulation so that he might glitter "like gold in a furnace" (Wis. 3:6). We can let the pen of Basil the Great make an exact formulation as to how this, exactly took place. It is about the dialogue of the Saint with prefect Modestus, who tried to convince him to follow the Arian sect which was followed by emperor Valens:

Prefect Modestus (PM): "How did it pass through your mind, Basil, to dare oppose authority and to behave, all alone, with such audacity"?

Saint Basil (SB): "Why are you asking me this? Which is my disobedience and my haughtiness? Because I have not yet understood what you mean".

PM: Why don't you follow the emperor's faith while all the others have been submitted and defeated?

GB: But this does not please my own King. And I do not even tolerate to worship Christ as if He is a creation, as you, heretics are taking Him to be. Besides, I am a creation of God.

PM: And what do you think of us? That we are nothing, we who are ordering these? Tell me now. Don't you consider it to be something great and honourable to enroll in our ranks and thus have us as friends and comrades?

GB: I accept and I do not refuse that you are prefects and distinguished people but you are not at all higher than God and I consider your friendship to be significant and also equivalent to the friendship of the people who are believers. This is because Christianity is not authentic according to the importance of the people that belong to it but according to their faith”.

At this point the prefect was annoyed. He flared up in anger. He got up from his bench and retorted,

PM: “Why then don't you fear my authority?

GB: What will happen to me? What misfortune can I expect?

PM: What's going to happen to you? One of the many that are under my authority.

GB: Which are these? Let me know then.

PM: Confiscation, exile, torments, death.

GB: Threaten me with something else, if you know, because none of what you have just mentioned can offend or harm me.

PM: How is it possible for you to manage to overcome all these?

GB: Because confiscation of property cannot affect someone who owns nothing, except if you prefer to take these poor clothes, made of hairs, and a few books that constitute my whole property. As for exile, I don't know because I am an inhabitant of nowhere, and even this city in which I am now living I do not consider to be mine. I shall consider as my country any place they are going to drop me in. And rather, every place belongs to God because here I am an alien. As for the torments, how can they harm an individual who does not have a body, except if you consider as a torment the first wound after which this body will fall down. You are the master of only this one wound. And death will be a benefaction for me because it's going to send me sooner to God, for Whom I am living and I am acquitting myself and towards Whom I am hastening to go for a long time now.

PM: Nobody up to now has talked to me, the Prefect, in such a way and so frankly.

GB: Perhaps you have never met a bishop, because if you had met a true hierarch, who is struggling for the true faith, he would have given you a similar answer. In all other matters we are lenient and more humble than any other person, because we have such a prescription from the Lord. And not only towards such a great authority as yours, but not even to any person, do we lift our eyes up. But in matters that are connected with God and our faith is in danger, we have only Him in view. Fire and sword and wild beasts with claws that tear our flesh are for us more a pleasure than a threatening and an amazement. So you can abuse, threaten or do whatever pleases you. Use your authority against us. Let the king also hear the answer of ours. You cannot subjugate me, nor can you force me to side with this heretical impiety, even if you threaten me with more ghastly punishments. Prefect Modestus, seeing the fearlessness and unbeatability of the pious undivided, ordered Basil to go, not this time with the same threats but with a certain constraint and compliance. In the meantime, the emperor had arrived with his suite. Drawing close to him the prefect said,

PM: We have been defeated, my king, by him that the Church projects as its leader. This person, stands above threats, he is firmer than our own words and stronger than the power of our persuasion [St. Gregory the Theologian, 1980, 210–213].

“Spotted with bruises” (Canon of the Holy Saturday, 4th Ode) because of his ailing body, being depressed in mind due to the inter-church conflicts and troubles and due to what was going on in that form of government, due to the lack of funds, to help the poor (nor support his public welfare institution “Vasiliada”), but mainly, for the sake of the Lord

of mercy Who was so impoverished that he looked like a slave, at the same time, Basil the Great was all-spirited in signs and miracles, in deeds and preaching, in place and way of the Lord Jesus Christ, as anointed by the Lord and having fulfilled in his human nature the final decree of his Creator, leaving his sanctified and graceful body on the earth, his soul went up, joyfully, to its heavenly glory. Furthermore, he anticipated the rising and the glory of Orthodoxy, with the ascent of Theodosius the Great on the throne of Constantinople, only just a few months before his death.

Saint Gregory, though unwillingly, undertook to help his father in his pastoral ministration of Nazianzus. After tremendous efforts he managed to make spiritually healthy his entrusted rational folk, in Christ. He managed to bring together the divided and connect them in love. He managed to clear the field of the Lords from the weeds, to cultivate the hearts of his people and to strengthen the way of the Lord in the ears and hearts of the faithful. He then sowed the “good seed”, gifting the Word of God to his flock. What he himself possessed, he delivered to the people.

How patient he was with people and their doings. How much trouble did he not get into for the benefit of each one of his people and for all the members of the Church! How much effort did it not take to straighten the word of truth to his own people, as well as to his enemies! What forbearance did he not show towards his adversaries! What a great forgiveness did he not grant in that case! What a great tolerance and forbearance did he not show when he was stabbed in the back by his own Brutus! And, later, how gentle and forgiving was he not towards his spiritual child Maximus! The height of his virtue is really admirable. It was an imitation of the Lord’s forgiveness towards his crucifiers, while He was on the cross!

That’s where the greatness of his heart lies! It was made manifest when, defamed and persecuted like a scapegoat for the sins of the people and the nation, he in silence, for the peace in the Church and his co-bishops (his slanderers and persecutors), left Constantinople. But he did not leave his spiritual bastion, the life of struggle, for the sake of Orthodoxy and the Church.

Despite the suffering he had to endure (from his “false brothers”¹¹ – mentally) (and from his sickness – bodily), wound-spotted, he retained a prudent mind and his “fixed-bayonet” writing, sharp and more slashing “than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12), was all-powerful. Living in his much-desired rest, he died peacefully, after having decorated his crown, especially by his forbearance, his forgiveness, his precision on matters of faith, his fullness of love of God and people and his sky-high theology.

Saint John Chrysostom emulating the fore-mentioned (but they were prior to him) holy Hierarchs, did not stay behind in the same struggles and pains and, naturally, he won the same glory as they did. A gold-mouth preacher, he also wrote golden volumes in the Holy Spirit. His indulgence in the study of the Holy Bible and his prayers in the quiet of his cell, and the peace of the desert, had as a produce later on, the fruits of his fluent tongue and his charismatic oratory.

Nevertheless, jealousy “does not know how to give preference to its own benefit” (Idiomelon of the “Praises” – Matins of Holy Wednesday). Slandered and persecuted by “false-brother” bishops, he forgives them on the one hand and on the other, he restrains his flock, teaching them how to forgive their enemies. He teaches the perfection of virtue – in love (with his speeches as well as the way of his life) to his close spiritual brothers. To those who are far from God, he organizes holy missions for their catechism and preparation to accept the faith, aiming in the end to ingraft them by their baptizing in the all-merciful¹² Church.

Being precise in God’s law, he did not hesitate to castigate the diverse misdeeds of the gentry, even those of the kings, like another prophet Elijah. Gifted with a fiery divine zeal and a sharp and gleaming tongue, some of them he crushed down, on others he performed an operation and he reformed others using other means, in his desire for the salvation and the sanctity of each one of them.

¹¹ Compare 2 Cor. 11:16; Gal. 2:4.

¹² Compare Rom. 11:17–24.

Nevertheless, he was not content with only the spiritual therapy of his flock. With the help of his close collaborators, both men and women, he cared for their material well-being as well. He dressed up the naked, he fed the starving, he watered the thirsty, he cured the sick, he brought the wicked to their senses, he shared out the treasures of the wealthy, he enriched the poor, the disillusioned he led to the right way, he delighted the Orthodox, he brightened theology and decorated the Church with himself. Enriched with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and adorned with virtues, he is now wearing the crown of glory which he had received from the Lord. It is adorned with the titles of honour which he had won as a monk and hermit, as a gold-mouthed preacher, as a martyr for Jesus Christ, as a comforter of the persecuted, as a defender of the unprivileged, as a great missionary, as a spiritual father and a worldwide teacher, as a worshipper of the Holy Trinity, as a friend of the Virgin Mary, as an earthly angel and as a great martyr after persecutions.

The Holy Three Hierarchs having won the unfading crown of glory, were saying with Saint Paul: "I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith; all there is to come for me now is the crown of uprightness which the Lord will give me" (2 Tim. 4:7–8). This empirical seal of theirs is also imprinted in their writings, inspiring the faithful and urging them to endure the Lord's correction, so that each one of them, at his own capability, can attain his spiritual perfection and to be gracefully sanctified, and to render himself worthy to accept, by the hand of the Lord, his personal crown of the glory of God.

So, the "Lord's correction" is indispensable and we should thank God for offering it to us. Nevertheless, a "good and simple earth" is necessary, that is, the disposition of our heart must be firmly and unshakably devoted to the acceptance of virtue and the rejection of evil. It's up to us to deliver ourselves to the Lord's correction. Good and holy, is a general education. But isolated and cut-off and independent, it could come out harmful, or even devastating to the soul. That's why apostle Paul says, "knowledge puffs you up" (1 Cor. 8:2). But cultivated together with the Lord's culture¹³ (the spiritual therapy of the deep heart of people), it can produce, even in our days, new Great Basils, new Gregory Theologians, new John Chrysostoms – something that I wish to be achieved by you, as well as by everyone upon the earth personally.

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¹³ About this major issue of the relation between the "general education" and the "education in the Lord", we quote certain relative works of the Fathers: a) Saint John Chrysostom commenting on Heb. 12:4–7, says: "Because this is the sincere love, the real love, when being useless to Him, He still loves us. He loves us not expecting anything from us, but in order to give something to us. He trains, He does everything, He always cares, so that we may become receptive to His wealth ... So, "nutrition" is an advantageous condition, so 'nutrition' is a communion of sanctity" [St. John Chrysostom, 1997b, 205]; b) He, himself, in his commentary on "knowledge makes you worldly, whilst love builds you up" (1 Cor. 8:2), thinks as follows: "They, who possess something important and nice, if nobody else has it, they take pride in it. But if it is possessed by others also, they don't suffer any more. For this reason, he (Saint Paul), does not project himself but he projects all the others. Because he did not say 'I am a knowledgeable person too', but he said, 'we all know that we possess knowledge'. 'So', he says, 'I am not against the possession of a perfect knowledge, but to do it in love, please'" [St. John Chrysostom, 1997a, 161]; c) Theodoritos Kyrou commenting on the same passage points out: "Love is more significant than knowledge" [Theodoritos, 1992, 285]. Note: All the above-mentioned books in the essay itself as well as in the references, are in Greek.

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