

Episode 2: St. Basil the Great

His Life

Can religious life save the Church and the world? St. Basil thought so. He was a huge personality in the Eastern Church in the fourth century. He fought against the Arian heresy, he reformed the Church in Asia-Minor, and he wrote the monastic rule that Eastern monks and nuns follow even today.

He was born in Caesarea of Cappadocia in Asia Minor in 330 A.D. into a saintly family. So saintly that his father, Basil the Elder, is also a saint along with his sister Macrina and his two brothers Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebasteia.

Despite all that saintly blood flowing in his veins he was very worldly and wasn't baptized. He was very intelligent and he knew it. He was given a classical Greek education and excelled at rhetoric, grammar, philosophy, astronomy, geometry, and medicine.

He was brilliant and serious and easily excelled his fellow students. At school in Athens he became lifelong friends with Saint Gregory Nazianzen.

In 355 he went home to Caesarea and opened a school of rhetoric. After two years he realized that he pretty much had all the world had to offer but he still lacked spiritual perfection. He was baptized in 357 and spent the next year visiting the monks in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. He was blown away at how truly they lived their vocations, denying themselves and living for God alone. He was amazed at their fasting, their work, how faithfully they got up every night to pray, and the serenity they had in doing these things. When Basil got home - he was fired up!

Historical Background

Now let's get some background and talk about what was going on in the Church at the time. The battle against the Arian heresy was raging. The Arians basically said the Father was the only One who was God while the Son and the Holy Spirit were created beings. St. Basil, along with other great Catholic luminaries, fought against the heresy, but it didn't look like they were winning. The Roman emperor was Arian and so were most bishops - and on top of that the Roman empire was disintegrating.

Things in the Church and the world looked really grim. They were so bad that when St. Basil was baptized, he was very depressed over what was going on in the world.

He believed in the grace-filled life of the hermits in the desert but was convinced the world needed something else - a religious example that would mimic the structure of the world yet still be outside of it as an example.

He firmly believed that true doctrine needed to be accompanied by true practice and true practice needed true doctrine. Without that, Christian life would fail.

He thought the cenobite monks were more ideal and at the service of the Church. Basil rhetorically asked the solitary monastics “Whose feet will you wash? For whom will you perform the duties of care?” St. Basil didn’t mean that hermits weren’t properly fulfilling their vocation, but he meant that where he was at that particular time and in those particular historical circumstances, the world needed the example of something like a Catholic utopia to revitalize the Church.

When he got home he went into the country with his family and established his first monastic community. They woke up at dawn, chanted the Psalms and worked on the property planting and harvesting grain and vegetables. They ate one meal at midday which was bread, vegetables, and water. They gathered together to read the scriptures with commentary. They went to bed at sundown so they could rise at midnight to chant the Psalms. They wore one tunic and a cloak and slept on the ground. He organized the monk’s whole life into a system - one that is still followed to this very day by Eastern Catholic and Orthodox monks and nuns.

But he didn’t found an actual religious order. The idea of different orders of monks and nuns is a western idea. In the East, it’s just monks and nuns.

Through the 370’s Basil worked to reform the aesthetic movement in Asia Minor and dedicated much of his time giving conferences. They were gathered together and called the Rule of St. Basil. It cited sacred scripture as the basis of all monastic legislation and is known for its great prudence and wisdom. St. Basil made poverty, obedience, renunciation, and self-abnegation the foundation of monastic life.

In a letter to his brother St. Gregory described how the monastic life helps to put things in perspective.

“He who is not yet yoked in the bonds of matrimony is harassed by frenzied cravings and rebellious impulses and hopeless attachments. He who has found his mate is encompassed with his own tumult of cares. If he is childless there is desire for children. Has he children? Anxiety about their education, attention to his wife, care of his house, oversight of his servants, misfortunes in trade, quarrels with his neighbors, lawsuits, the risks of the merchant, the toil of the farmer.

Each day, as it comes, darkens the soul in its own way and night after night takes up the day’s anxieties and cheats the mind with illusions in accordance.”

Today, St. Basil’s idea of true doctrine accompanied by true practice is critical to Christian life. We’re on the brink of destruction even more now than the Roman empire was in the fourth century because we’re not just talking about one country or an empire, but the Christian life of the whole planet.

St. Basil, pray for us.

Episode Preview

St. Basil thought that religious life could save the Church and the world. Was he right?

He wasn’t able to do much to save the Roman empire but he helped many thousands of people to follow the call God gave them to leave the world and follow him.

The Rule of St. Basil is different from earlier monastic traditions because it allowed both men and women to live in the same religious community. They lived in separate buildings but everybody prayed in a common church. He wanted to use monasticism to show the world that people can live according to the Gospel, that people could live for God alone.

Even now most of the monks and nuns in the Eastern Catholic Church and Orthodox church follow the rule of St. Basil.

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