

MACRINA: VIRGIN AND TEACHER

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Gregory of Nyssa lauded his older sister Macrina as “the common glory of our family” and acclaimed her as “the great Macrina” who had achieved the highest summit of human virtue. Indeed, in two works, the *Life of Macrina* and *The Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection*, he portrayed her as the ideal Christian teacher and philosopher, seeking God with her whole heart and mind.¹

In these two works, Gregory models her portrait on two major figures: Socrates of pagan antiquity; and Thecla, who according to popular legend was a disciple of the apostle Paul. As he develops the character of Macrina as equal to and even surpassing Socrates, Gregory shows her as the true lover of a life of wisdom, a philosopher greater than the best that classical antiquity can offer. In his exposition of Macrina as a second Thecla, Gregory presents her as a teacher, evangelist, and leader following a pattern validated by apostolic authority. Although Gregory is careful to delineate his sister’s individuality, Socrates and Thecla serve as models through whom her own character and life are interpreted and modeled into a literary form.

By writing about Macrina in the *Life* and *Dialogue*—the first of which is, as Pierre Maraval notes, hagiography of the type of the philosophical biography,² and the other a philosophical dialogue—Gregory weaves together the traits of the ideal Christian sage, one who leads and teaches and is the fulfillment of the best in pagan and Christian hopes. The two works are interdependent: The *Life* gives the story of

¹Grégoire de Nysse, *Vie de Sainte Macrine* (hereinafter cited as *VSM*), ed. Pierre Maraval (Paris, 1971); and *De anima et resurrectione* (hereinafter cited as *AR*), in *PG*, vol. 46, cols 11-160 (only *PG* column references will be given herein; Eng. trans. is that of NPNF, 2d series, 5: 430-468). Maraval’s n. 2 on pp. 146-147 contains an excellent guide to major scholarship on the question of Thecla, as well as to devotion to her in Christian antiquity. Useful introductory articles on Macrina are those of Edmond Bouvy, “Sainte Macrine,” *Revue Augustinienne* 1 (1902): 265-288; and Makrina Kloppel, “Makrina de Jungene, Eine altchristliche Frauengestalt,” in Th. Bolger, ed., *Frauen in Bannkreis Christi* (Maria-Laach, 1964), pp. 80-94.

²*VSM*, p. 26.

Macrina's whole life and its effect on others, placing in context the events which are expounded in great detail in the dialogue; the *Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection* refers back to the *Life* and assumes the knowledge of it as a frame within which the teaching of the *Dialogue* is embodied.

Within the brief scope of this article I will first quickly survey the *Life*, with its portrait of Macrina as a second Thecla, and then the *Dialogue*, within which she is presented as a Christian Socrates. Next I will attempt to examine in somewhat more detail the way Gregory makes his theological statements about Macrina. In doing this I will draw comparisons and contrasts with Socrates. Finally, as a conclusion I will note the theological rationale underlying Gregory's portrayal of a most unusual figure in patristic writings—a woman sage who teaches and evangelizes.

1. *The Life: Macrina as a Second Thecla*

Gregory introduces the theme of Macrina as a second Thecla near the beginning of the *Life*. In fourth-century Cappadocia, as was true throughout the Greek-speaking Christian world, the name and legend of Thecla were well known.³ Gregory was familiar with the story and almost certainly with the Greek text of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and with the *Symposion* of Methodius of Olympus, as well as with oral hagiography. Gregory and his brother Basil, as well as Gregory Nazianzen, referred on many occasions to Thecla and her virtues.

In the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*⁴ Gregory found a vivid second-century romance image of Thecla in which she is presented as a disciple of Paul who eventually is given by him the same commission to preach which he received. She is presented therein as an evangelist, a confessor who faced martyrdom, and a model and teacher in the virginal life. Without trying to recapitulate the life of Thecla in the *Acts*, I will note certain aspects that are essential for understanding Gregory's image of Macrina.

³For a full treatment of the legend of Thecla, see "Thecla" in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, ed. William Smith and Henry Wace (London, 1887), 4: 882-896. The article also indicates some of the many references to Thecla in the writings of the Greek Fathers, as well as some of those of more recent scholarship on the question.

⁴Πράξεις Παύλου και Θεέκλης (hereinafter cited as *Acts*) in R. A. Lipsius, *Acta apostolorum apocrypha*, 1 (Leipzig, 1891): 235-272; Eng. trans. in Edgar Hennecke's *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, and trans. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia, 1965) 2: 353-364.

According to the *Acts*, Thecla was a young virgin engaged to Thamyris in Iconium. As soon as she heard Paul preaching about the virginal life, she wanted to be "counted worthy herself to stand in Paul's presence and hear the word of Christ."⁵ One of the major motifs is of Thecla as a follower of Paul whose career takes shape on the model of his own. Thecla follows Paul to the prison at the peril of her own safety, and is condemned to death, while Paul is only scourged and banished. From that point on, Thecla is the disciple growing up to take the place of the master. After the pagans unsuccessfully try to martyr her, Paul praises her but will not yet baptize her. Thecla, traveling with Paul, again is arrested and condemned to martyrdom, prays over the beasts to tame them, and baptizes herself in a pit of water where the seals are kept. Finally Thecla is freed "lest the city also perish with her," as the Roman governor finally exclaims in amazement. She confesses her faith before the governor, evangelizes the household of her patron Tryphaena, kinswoman of Caesar, and eventually finds Paul at Myrna. There she tells him of her baptism, and he commissions her to do the same work he is doing: "Go and teach the word of God." She returns to Iconium where she preaches to her mother, and journeys on to Seleucia. There she dies "after enlightening many with the word of God."⁶

In addition to many specific acts in her life which parallel or even exceed Paul's exploits, Thecla is finally acclaimed as Paul's counterpart by Paul himself. Paul, on the contrary, assumes in the story an increasingly less important and less heroic role; in the end he exists only to be Thecla's inspiration and the apostolic validator of her mission.

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* portray Thecla as finding virginity to be the most perfect evangelical life style, and the way in which one lives out the Gospel most securely. Paul's preaching to her centered on virginity as the way for the Christian to become a "temple of God," to be pleasing to him, and to be rewarded by him in the "day of his Son." For this reason Thecla rejected her own fiancé and was first sent to execution; and in Alexandria she also rejected a suitor, who became the cause of her trial in the arena. Directly or indirectly, Thecla's adherence to virginity was a cause of her near martyrdom, and was almost identical with her Christian life.

⁵ *Acts*, 7 (Schneemelcher ed., 2: 355).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-43 (Schneemelcher ed., 2: 364).

The *Symposion* of Methodius of Olympus, written sometime in the second half of the third century, is the only other literary work to treat the figure of Thecla which Gregory would have known.⁷ Although much could be said about the work itself, I can here, as with the *Acts*, only indicate certain points which are relevant to Gregory's portrait of Macrina.

In the *Symposion* the same sort of literary frame is used as in Plato's work of the same name, and we are told in a secondary way about a banquet in which a group of ten women discusses the theme of virginity (not *eros*, as in Plato's dialogue). Thecla is presented to us as the intellectual leader of the virgins.⁸

Not only is Thecla acclaimed as leader, and acts as such, but she demonstrates her skills in the most sophisticated and cogent of the discourses. In it, she examines the nature and definition of virginity, expounds significant Scriptural passages, engages in some highly complex allegorical exegesis, responds to objectors, defends human free will against astrological determinism, and concludes with an exhortation to follow the way of virtue rather than vice. In her teaching, Thecla illustrates two characteristics which Gregory insists upon in his portrait of Macrina: (1) Thecla is master of Scripture, not just acquainted with it in a pious way; and (2) she knows enough about pagan philosophy to refute it in order that Christian truth may shine forth.

In the *Symposion* a much more orthodox attitude toward virginity is presented than that in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The idea that marriage and pleasure are bad and that virginity is good is put forward by one of the characters and is vigorously refuted by another, who asserts that marriage is good but virginity is better because it frees one for the Kingdom of God.⁹

The *Life of Macrina* was written sometime between A.D. 380 and 383 by Gregory, shortly after Macrina's death in 379. It takes the form of a lengthy letter in response to a person whom Gregory had met on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He explains his reason for writing as an effort to prevent the story of his sister's life from being lost, because she "lifted herself, thanks to philosophy, to the highest summit of human

⁷Greek text in G. N. Bonwetsch, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig, 1917) 27: 1-141; Eng. trans. in ANF, 6: 309-355 and in ACW, 27: 38-162. Hereinafter cited as *Symposion*.

⁸Cf. *Symposion*, log. 8, 11.

⁹*Ibid.*, log. 2.

virtue.”¹⁰ The first account is of her birth, in which her mother’s dream and the importance of the name Macrina is insisted on. Gregory then speaks of her education, her projected marriage and the death of her fiancé, her decision to lead the virginal life, her conversion of her mother and of her brother Basil to this life style, and the transformation of the family estate into a monastery. The story of their brother Naucratiós’ life and death is told as an example of her love and courage. Much time is spent detailing life in the women’s community at Annisa, with attention to Macrina’s leadership. Her nurture of her brother Peter and the deaths of her mother Emmelia and brother Basil are discussed, and Gregory then tells at length of his last visit to Macrina and of her death. The final part of the *Life* relates to Gregory’s further discoveries of Macrina’s holiness from her companions, to her funeral, and to miracles connected with her life and death.

In the *Life*, just as with Thecla, Macrina is the model of the virginal life. She is introduced to us as “the virgin,” persuading her mother and her brother Basil to take up the virginal-philosophical life, and joining together others on the family estate to lead the virginal life in a community characterized by a common life and shared goods. Her virginal life in this community was “for her mother a guide to the immaterial and philosophical life,” and the power of her example was such that the whole community rose towards the heights of this sort of life.¹¹ The virginity which Macrina espoused and promoted was that of the *Symposium*, a freedom for Christ, not the primarily flesh-rejecting type of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

Indeed, Macrina was the teacher who guided others to the “angelic life,” instructing them as “if inspired by the Holy Spirit,” but also with “clarity and logic . . . with verbal facility.”¹² As a second Thecla, Macrina was an exemplary teacher of the Word, respected by men and women, and by lay people and clergy alike. While as one would expect in a fourth-century work written by an orthodox bishop, Macrina exercises no sacramental function, but no one questions that she must be accepted as an authoritative guide in the philosophic life. So authoritative is she as a teacher that Gregory the bishop portrays himself as an admirer of, and learner from, this woman who was the “common boast

¹⁰*VSM*, 1 (p. 142).

¹¹*Ibid.*, esp. 5-7 (pp. 154-164).

¹²*Ibid.*, 18 (p. 200).

of our family.”¹³ In his last conversations with her in the *Life*, Gregory appears as the one who is in need of comfort and instruction, and these he receives from Macrina.

Within this context, note should be made that Macrina is explicitly a teacher of *the Word*; that is, Gregory presents her as an expert in expounding Scripture. Just as with the Thecla of the *Symposion*, Macrina’s teaching has Scripture as its basis and is oriented towards the nurturing of others in the evangelical life.

These various aspects of the figure of Macrina as the second Thecla point to one clear conclusion: Unquestionably, Gregory does model the life of his sister Macrina on the Thecla figure, even more so on the portrait in the *Symposion* than that in the *Acts*. In doing so, he is able to present his sister in a very strong characterization as a virgin teacher, philosopher, and leader, within a context familiar to his readers. He is also enabled to blend skillfully the Socrates model with the Christian saint, at least partly because of the antecedent in Methodius’ Thecla, the virgin teacher, learned in all wisdom.

2. *On the Soul and Resurrection: Macrina as a Christian Socrates*

In order to understand the breadth of Macrina’s stature, we must now consider the complement of the Thecla figure, that of Macrina as the Christian Socrates. In order to do so we shall examine Gregory’s *Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection*, which he wrote as a direct parallel to Plato’s *Phaedo*.¹⁴ In general, the main lines of movement and structure in both works are the same. In the *Phaedo*, Phaedo exposes his intention to recount to Echecrates the last day of Socrates. In this account, Socrates explores the fate of the soul after death and expounds a myth of life after death. Adducing several proofs to dispel the fear that the soul will vanish after death and refuting some serious attacks on his own views about the soul—attacks brought forward by Simon and Cretes—Socrates demonstrates to everyone’s satisfaction that the soul must be indestructible. Then follows the myth of the soul’s fate after death; and finally, Socrates prepares himself for death, for which he regards his whole life to have been a preparation. His last words to Crito are an instruction to pay the debt of the cock owed to Asklepios.

¹³Ibid., 22 (pp. 212-216).

¹⁴*Plato’s Phaedo*, trans. Reginald Hackforth (Indianapolis, 1955); *Plato*, trans. H. N. Fowler, in LCL, 1: 200-403. Hereinafter cited as *Plato*, from the Greek text of LCL ed.

In *On the Soul and Resurrection* essentially the same order is followed. Gregory, in a first-person narrative, tells of coming to Macrina to mourn together over the death of Basil. She, herself on her deathbed, helps him overcome his grief as they talk about the soul and the resurrection. She refutes his fear of death by showing that the soul is one and cannot be destroyed. This leads to a discussion on the resurrection, which is the true answer to the problem of the soul's fate after death. Gregory, in a parallel action to the questioning by Simon and Cretes, questions her about the individual resurrection and the final resurrection. Macrina responds by refuting Gregory's arguments against the resurrection and describes what can be known of the final restoration, the *apokatastasis*. On this note of the ultimate healing of the cosmos the dialogue ends.

Thus, both works begin with the impending death of the teacher, and cover the same topics: virtue, the life of philosophy, and the fate of the soul after death. Of course, some major differences are found, because Socrates asserts the immortality of a disembodied soul whereas Macrina bases her faith on the resurrection of the body and the restoration of the cosmos to harmony with God. Both works end, as well, with a final healing of the disordered human state. Socrates dies, asking that a cock to Asklepios be sacrificed so that his debt be paid; but Macrina does not die at the end of her dialogue. In her doctrine, the *apokatastasis* is healing; therefore it is found at the end, as the conclusion and *telos* in the discourse.

Both dialogues have, moreover, a similar focus. Neither are simply about death and life after death; rather, both are concerned with the leading of the virtuous life, in which death is a "boundary situation" which forces one to ask why one lives as one does.¹⁵ Death is not important in and of itself, nor is "life after death" an abstract concern. In both cases the question is raised about the way in which one lives as this relates to what one can hope for after death. The perception of the relationship and what is to be hoped for is quite different for the two, but the concern is the same.

The two dialogues do, however, have some significant divergences in structure. One of them relates to the immediacy of narration. In the *Phaedo*, Phaedo recounts the death of Socrates to Echecrates, who has

¹⁵Hackforth, in his introduction to the *Phaedo*, p. 3, treats the fundamental theme of the dialogue as the furthering of the philosophical life. Gregory introduces this same notion into *AR* (e.g., cols. 17, 119).

been seeking an eyewitness account. The narrator is himself a bystander, peripheral to the events; and the whole episode takes on the timeless aura of a tale told within another story. Such a telling was most appropriate for a philosopher who denied the meaning of history and the propriety of human emotion, and who was seeking to escape this body and life in the world. Gregory, by way of contrast, is himself both narrator and participant in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. He expresses his own grief, admiration, and consolation. He himself goes through the process of seeking the truth with Macrina, and he takes us on the same journey. I think that it would not be too much to see in this literary style an affirmation of a central theological truth for Gregory and Macrina: The whole cosmos is in search of reunion with God. None of us is, or even ever aspires to be, an isolated sage, as in the Socratic ideal; but we are now and always will be all on a common journey together to a common goal. Therefore, timelessness is inappropriate as a narrative technique, because the life and death of Macrina is part of the temporal progress of the world towards God.

As was observed above, both the *Phaedo* and *On the Soul and Resurrection* have congruous endings, dealing with the healing of the soul. But reasons must be sought as to why they do not both also end with death of the central character. Could not Gregory have compressed the last two days of Macrina's life into one? Would this not thereby have provided a more precise and more telling parallel with Socrates? One could, of course, argue from verisimilitude. Socrates did die on the day when he had a discussion about the soul with his pupils, but Macrina died the day after a similar sort of dialogue with Gregory.

There is, however, another equally important literary reason for the different endings of the two dialogues. Socrates had to die at the end of the *Phaedo*, for the final reward of virtue, the necessary final liberation of the philosopher, is death. Philosophy is the study of "nothing but dying and being dead."¹⁶ Thus it is not only historical but also literary and philosophical necessity that demands that Socrates die at the end of his dialogue. Only death will give him the freedom to seek the reward he hopes for behind the myths he recounts.¹⁷ But Macrina does not expound this sort of understanding of death or of human nature. The human being is a microcosm, a spiritual being in a body.

¹⁶ *Plato*, 1: 222.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 370-376.

Both components are necessary, the soul linking human beings to God, and the body to visible creation. The soul itself works and acts through the body.¹⁸ The soul is and always will be united to the body; death is, in our present economy of salvation, a necessary stage between this present life and our restoration in the resurrection.¹⁹ The moment of death is not a farewell to the body, but an entrance into a new stage of relationship to it. Therefore, not only was it unnecessary to show Macrina's death, but to have done so would have blunted the point. Pagan philosophers saw the flesh as a detriment, and viewed the ideal human state as being that of a disembodied spirit; true philosophy, on the other hand, knew that the body is part of the human person which will always interrelate with the soul. Macrina's death as the climax of the *Dialogue* would have lessened the impact of the very doctrine she was propounding—the resurrection of the body.

3. *Details of Macrina's Characterization*

The foregoing are some of the structural similarities and differences between the *Phaedo* and *On the Soul and Resurrection*. In order to gain fuller insight into Macrina as Gregory presents her to us, one also needs to look at some of the details of her characterization. We will here consider several of the more prominent traits that Gregory attributes to her.

In his first paragraph, Gregory establishes the notion of Macrina's skill as a teacher. He relates that after Basil had died, he journeyed to his sister, seeking "for one who could share as an equal my sorrow, with many tears together." Then he continues:

But when we saw each other, the sight of the teacher awakened all my sorrow, because she also was lying in a state of decline, near to death. Like a skillful driver of horses, she allowed me to give way to the force of my grief; and afterwards she tried to check me with words, and to curb the disorder of my soul.²⁰

The point here is that Gregory had come to Macrina as an equal, a sister who would share his grief. Instead, he found in her one who exercised the traditional role of a teacher to a pupil. It was he who gave way to his emotions; it was she who must lift him up and console him. This introduction not only establishes her as a teacher, but as a skilled

¹⁸AR, col. 29.

¹⁹Ibid., cols. 121-127, 153-155.

²⁰Ibid., cols. 11-13.

and psychologically insightful one. In contrast to Socrates, who had Xanthippe ejected when she lamented his coming death, and who rebuked his disciples whenever they mourned his imminent execution,²¹ Macrina accepts Gregory's grief and allows him to express it. Only after he has had some time to grieve does she help him to see the issues involved. She then can move to help him identify the problem of his belief in the soul and resurrection.

Why is there this difference of attitude between Socrates and Macrina towards the grieving ones? The difference, I think, is not so much in attitudes towards the passion of grief, which both would agree is detrimental, but in their exercise of compassion. In Socrates' view, compassion is not a virtue; from Macrina's Christian perspective, it is. Macrina is not simply a midwife of the soul, but a follower of the Jesus who wept when his friend Lazarus had died.

In further contrast to Socrates, who referred quite specifically to his death several times in the course of the *Phaedo*,²² Macrina only once and indirectly refers to hers.²³ Aside from the relative importance and function of death for Socrates and Macrina, already mentioned, a further reason for the difference has to do with the character of the Christian sage in contrast to the pagan philosopher. The former does not have his or her own soul as a focus of concern, but is preoccupied with the praise of God and the union of all in God. Thus the Christian sage is not constantly absorbed with his or her own death, but with the testimony of God's grace and love to us.

A methodological contrast between Socrates and Macrina should also be noted. During his discussion of life after death Socrates often refers to stories and myths which he regards as probable and worthy of belief because they affirm the immortality of the soul. Macrina, on the other hand, explicitly excludes myths and stories to assert the truth of the resurrection. Sometimes she simply deabsolutizes myths — e.g., cosmology.²⁴ She refutes pagan philosophy, and calls the platonic myths of the soul's fate after death and the transmigration of souls "incoherent doctrine."²⁵

²¹ *Plato*, 1: 208-210, 400.

²² E.g., *ibid.*, pp. 212, 218-222, 240, 294.

²³ *AR*, col. 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, col. 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, cols. 109-113.

In the place where Socrates presents his final great myth of the soul in the underworld, Macrina places her exposition of Scriptural passages discussing the *apokatastasis*. While Socrates ends with myth and probable expectation, Macrina ends with Scripture and certain truth.

Socrates is shown as attacking the Sophists and transcending the notions of his inadequate philosophical predecessors.²⁶ Macrina is presented as possessing all the philosophical insight necessary to reject these "outside" philosophers and demonstrate what the Christian wisdom is.²⁷ Her mode of operation is not to try to discredit those other philosophies by mere pious affirmation. Rather, she demonstrates an acute mind with enough grasp of the pagan arguments to refute them or correct them. She does not claim an extensive knowledge of the written sources; she has only "heard" them.²⁸ But because she is intelligent and knows the truth, she is able to present aptly the "certain philosophy" of the Scriptures in opposition to pagan arguments.²⁹ Her assertions are reasonable, Gregory insists, and she rejoices in refuting clearly and precisely the diverse positions of "foreign philosophy."³⁰ Rather than proclaiming Scripture as an arbitrary authority, she shows how it must be interpreted reasonably and why it can overcome all the objections of the adversary.³¹ From this perspective, Macrina does not represent a triumph of Christian asceticism over philosophy, but the triumph of true philosophy over false.

All the characteristics of Macrina which Gregory has chosen to portray in the *Dialogue* point to her as the exemplar of the Christian sage, the true philosopher. She is the virgin-philosopher *par excellence*.³² Having freely chosen the philosophical life, she is therefore enabled to know the higher truth through her living of it. Aware of the subtleties of truth, she is capable of leading others along the way. Master of "other philosophies," she is the teacher of the true philosophy of Scripture who is irrefutable because of her logic and her life.

²⁶ *Plato*, 1: 330-342.

²⁷ *AR*, cols. 25, 49, 63, 79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, col. 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, cols. 49-51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, cols. 107-109.

³¹ *Ibid.*, cols. 49-51, 79-81, 129, 149.

³² This theme is treated by Maraval in *VSM*, pp. 90-103.

4. Conclusion

In the figure of the virgin-sage we find the unifying theme which pulls together the Thecla and Socrates motifs. Thecla is the virgin teacher *par excellence*; Socrates' search for wisdom is fulfilled in the virginal philosophical life as embodied in the idealized figure of Macrina. Macrina in both the *Life* and the *Dialogue* is the virgin-philosopher, thus showing in her person how the Christian and pagan search for wisdom is fulfilled in the virginal-philosophic life. One should also note that the teaching office is an integral part of this life for both Thecla and Socrates. Thus it is not enough for Macrina to be the virgin-philosopher; she must articulate her wisdom and communicate it to others. The *Life* and the *Dialogue* are therefore necessary complements of each other. They are not two disparate works, but are a necessary unity.

But what does Gregory provide in his whole theological system as a theoretical justification for his presentation of Macrina in this role? Is she simply a fluke, an aberration? Basil or Gregory Thaumaturgos would be explicable as major heroes, but why is Gregory able to present a figure unique in patristic literature—a woman Christian sage who surpasses Socrates?

To understand this, it is first necessary to investigate briefly Gregory's anthropology. As expressed in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, the human being is both body and soul: The body through the soul knows the external world; the soul as the created intellectual essence animates the body and gives it the power of knowing. Between the spiritual and corporal world—good in both body and soul, and indeed created by God and destined to be purified and restored by God—the human being will always remain as body and soul, and will be so renewed on the last day. But it is the soul which is in the image of God, knowing and judging, and imparting the divine goodness to the material element. It is the soul which progresses in virtue during this life and will purify itself in assimilation to God as it eternally moves toward him.³³ Thus, in Gregory's view, the soul is in the divine image; the body is the way we relate to the world. Only the soul's free choice and virtue, or lack of such, determine the human being's value as philosopher or Christian relating to God. Thus, a teacher-philosopher's ability is

³³AR, cols. 27-29, 89-93, 97-101, 105; there are parallels in *On the Making of Man*, 16 (Eng. trans. in NPNF, 2d series, 5: 404-406).

judged by the capacity of the soul, not by the body.

One of the major consequences of this view is that there is no distinction of sex in the virtuous life. Male and female are equal in striving for virtue and a relationship with God. Virginitiy, in both its physical and spiritual manifestations, its most perfect form, is the highest form of the deifying life; and both men and women can engage in this kind of life. It is, in fact, particularly freeing for women who are oppressed and fettered because of their social status in marriage.³⁴ Distinctions of sex, Gregory further insists, are related to the irrational, and not to the rational life of virginitiy. Therefore, the question of whether or not one is male or female is irrelevant to the question of who can be virgin, teacher, philosopher. There is no inherent difference in relating to God between male or female.

In terms of Gregory's theology, Macrina is a human being who has made progress in the virginal or philosophical life. She is judged as an individual human being recreated by Christ; she is one who has gained mastery of spirituality, i.e., of reality. Therefore, she can teach and lead others on that same quest.

On an individual level, Macrina has been presented by her brother Gregory, in an historically plausible portrait, as a Christian philosopher equal to, and even superior to, Socrates. On a more general level, Gregory's portrait of Macrina is a strong and sensitive statement, with no exact parallel in patristic literature. It declares that in Christ there is neither male nor female, but that in him all are one.

³⁴ *On Virginitiy*, 2-3 (Eng. trans. in NPNF, 2d series, 5: 344-348).