

# GOD'S MANY-SPLENDORED IMAGE

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Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation

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## Foreword

What does it mean to be human? That is the question Sister Nonna sets out to answer in this present work. It is an all-important question. And, as she emphasizes, it is not a simple question to answer. Who am I? What am I? None of us can easily say. The bounds of human personhood are exceedingly wide ranging, reaching out of space into infinity and out of time to eternity. In the words of the Bible, “The heart is deep” (Ps. 64:6). As Sister Nonna affirms in her conclusion, “Human identity is an unfathomable depth of mystery. . . . There is always more waiting to be discovered and a further mystery that remains beyond our grasp. We are on a journey of discovery that has no end.”

The present book provides us with invaluable guidance on this exploratory journey. Sister Nonna writes as an expert in the early Christian world and its literature, but she presents the fruits of her learning in a form that is readily accessible to every reader. Her style is simple yet profound, vivid yet never overstated. The book is enhanced by many striking quotations, especially from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, but she also draws on more-modern material, on George MacDonald and Martin Luther King as well as St. Gregory of Nyssa, on Kepler and Einstein as well as St. Maximus the Confessor. I was par-

ticularly interested in what she has to say about the status of women and about artistic creativity and in her treatment of our human relationship to the animals. Here she speaks in generous and compassionate terms, yet without sentimentality.

Sister Nonna rightly underlines the uniqueness of each human person. We are all created in the image of God, and yet we each realize that image in our own distinctive way; this is because every human being is endowed with freedom of choice. Personal freedom and uniqueness are two of the master themes of this book, and as I read it I often called to mind two Jewish sayings recorded by Martin Buber in *The Tales of the Hasidim*: God never does the same thing twice, and the world has need of every single human being. Sister Nonna confronts the difficult issue of why, if early Christianity attached such value to freedom, it did not more firmly oppose the institution of slavery. She provides a better answer than I have found elsewhere.

The author sums up the basic message of her work in the words, “This book aims to show readers that all people have value before God.” She has indeed succeeded in achieving this objective. And her message is altogether timely, for we live in an era when—in the Western world, at any rate—among all too many people there is a tragic loss of meaning and hope. As somebody said to me recently, “If I died tomorrow, nobody would notice.” This book is an honest and effective response to such despondency. On reaching the final page, I was led to exclaim with the psalmist, “I will give thanks unto Thee for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). Here truly is a work that I can recommend with all my heart.

+ Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia

## Introduction

As I was growing up, I asked myself many questions about who I was as a human person. During my teenage years I saw a science fiction program on television that questioned the meaning of human existence in a way I found particularly troubling. The story is set some time in the near future when the earth is overpopulated and lacks the resources to support so many people. An “ethical suicide” program is in place to help deal with this problem. Volunteers who want to help reduce the population are invited to come to a quiet, spacious, comfortably furnished room and talk with friendly staff while they are served their favorite meal. After this they are given a lethal injection. The film shows a man who has chosen to go through this process. At the end, as he and the friendly woman staffer with a soothing voice are in conversation, a doctor in a lab coat comes in and gives him the injection. He asks if he can ask one more question. As the woman says yes, the doctor whispers in her ear that she will not have time to answer it. Then the volunteer asks, “What are people for?” Just then his head falls to one side and he dies. After the program ended, I thought to myself that human life must have more meaning and purpose than that, but I was unable to articulate what the meaning and purpose might be.

Today the world is much more overpopulated than it was then, and resources have become even more scarce. We live in

an age of depersonalization that calls into question the value of each person's individual existence. In industrialized countries, government agencies and large corporations use computer databases to keep track of everyone. Most telephone calls lead to machines instead of people. We are treated like arbitrary numbers instead of unique, unrepeatable human beings, and a random keystroke error can ruin someone's life. In developing countries, conditions are far worse for all but the wealthy few. Random acts of terrorism target large groups of civilians in order to attract worldwide publicity. Wars, pandemics, and natural disasters wipe out people a thousand at a time. In parts of Asia and Eastern Europe, young women and children are forced into slavery and used as prostitutes until they die at a young age from AIDS or other causes. Sometimes desperately poor parents will sell a daughter into this kind of involuntary servitude in order to feed several other children. In today's world, people with resources are treated as consumers from whom the powerful can extract money; people with no resources are often treated as disposable commodities to be consumed. It should come as no surprise, then, that now more than ever many wonder what people are really for.

This book starts from my childhood questions about what it is to be human. At age twenty, I became a Christian and discovered that God provides the foundation, meaning, and purpose of life for each individual and community and for humankind as a whole. In adulthood I have studied, taught, and researched early Christian theology and the Eastern Christian theology that has built on its ancient foundations. Over more than a quarter of a century I have continued to ask questions about human identity. I have pursued these questions through research and have found many answers in early Christian writings. Although the fruits of my studies have been published in specialized books and scholarly articles, I am aware that many people beyond the world of academia have the same kinds of questions about being human that I have asked myself. This book invites them to join me in asking these questions and in discovering illuminating answers in the Christian theological heritage.

The difficulty is that folks today frequently see a Christian understanding of human identity as part of the problem. This is because an oversimplified negative vision of humanity is taken for granted in popular culture, and churches often reflect this negative vision without even thinking about it. An example will show how this happens. Let's say there is a big financial scandal in Washington, DC. Solid evidence shows that members of congress and presidents of large corporations have fraudulently stolen public money for personal use. Commentators in the newspapers and on television explain that the fraud occurred because people are greedy, and greed is human nature. Without thinking, folks routinely identify "human nature" as the cause of weakness, error, and ethical lapses and as the source of all the world's troubles. So is it true that weakness, error, and ethical lapses due to greed, envy, and malice are at the core of what we and our neighbors really are as human beings? How then can we still affirm our human dignity or the human dignity of others?

This negative attitude toward human nature is often unconscious, but it pervades our culture. Combined with the ever-present pressures of depersonalization, it is enough to drive people to cynicism and despair. It leaves many in deep emotional and spiritual pain. When young people cannot find value and hope in their lives, they may turn to drugs, high risk relationships, violence, or other self-destructive activities.

When those troubled by questions about who they are step into a church, where they can reasonably expect to find healing, the same negative message is often repeated. For example, the preacher may talk about the financial scandal from the pulpit and conclude that since greed is human nature, we are all greedy and need to ask God for forgiveness. We have to condemn ourselves and turn to God. The negative message of secular pop culture is repeated in Christian pop culture, but now it is presented in the name of God and supposedly with divine authority. Such a message cannot heal the pain of depersonalization and the lost sense of human dignity; it only makes the person seeking Christ's healing word feel misunderstood and even more hurt.

Are Christians echoing the toxic messages of today's ailing culture without realizing it? Is the medicine churches offer to heal the wounds actually making them worse? The message that takes aim at corrupt "human nature" from the pulpit may actually derive from a toxic assumption of secular culture that has seeped imperceptibly into the community of faith. Such negative preaching may also reflect a narrow, oversimplified vision of humanity that has long been familiar in both Protestant and Catholic theologies. Yet regardless of where in history the negative view of human nature originated, today many Christians as well as non-Christians find it unacceptable. Many outside the church think Christianity teaches that human beings are inherently bad and guilty and that human freedom is dangerous and gets us into trouble. Many inside the church fear they might be right.

One of my students at Saint Paul School of Theology wrote in a paper, "The problem with human beings is that they are just too human," and, "Humans have become too human, i.e., fallen short of the image of God." Another student wrote that sanctification is "the struggle between human nature and the image of God within the individual." My students probably did not stop to think about what these statements imply. They raise hard questions. Is what I am as a human being fundamentally bad? Do I have to reject my own inherent identity in order to become acceptable to God? Is God opposed to me because of who I am? If God created me in his own image, how can what I am be opposed to God? Is it even possible to love such a God?

Because of the psychological, social, and cultural pressures that beset people today, many secretly fear they are so evil inside that they can never do good for others or become the good persons they long to be. How can they hear the good news of the gospel if Christianity only confirms their worst fears about who they are? And how can pastors explain what we are as human beings in a way that can free them from this fear? Surely the good news is that God created us with an inherent capacity for goodness, and Christ can help us, little by little, to learn to do



good for others so that over time and with the help of divine grace we can become good.

The popular idea that Christianity says “human nature” is inherently bad is actually the opposite of what the earliest Christian theologians believed. This book challenges the popularized negative view by proposing a prophetic alternative grounded in early Greek Christian sources. It draws on the wealth of early theological reflection, the wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers, and the heritage of Eastern Christianity to discover what God has made us to be.

Throughout the ages, Christians have believed that the image of God in which we are created (Gen. 1:26–27) is at the core of who we are and defines us as human. Theologians and spiritual writers have found the divine image in many different aspects of what we are, what we can and should do, and what we are called to become. These aspects include freedom, spiritual perception, connectedness to God, virtues, royal dignity, a vital connection to the natural world, reason, creativity, personal uniqueness, community, mystery, and life. This book will make the case that the divine image is present not simply in one or two of these aspects of human identity but in all of them. They are many facets of the splendid jewel that each human person can become. God invites us to remove the dirt hiding these facets and polish them until they shine with the beauty God bestows on each of us.

Throughout the book we will listen to the prophetic voices of the early and Eastern Christian traditions that proclaim the true value and dignity of every human person and call us back to our authentic identity and purpose. Each chapter of this book explores a different facet of the divine image and likeness and maps out a path that can lead toward wholeness and holiness. We will begin each chapter with one of my childhood questions about human identity and a story that illustrates the question and begins to point toward an answer. Then we will explore early Christian writers, ideas, and stories that flesh out the answer. Each chapter describes a set of gifts included in the divine image and likeness and shows both how they can be used and

developed rightly and how they can be misused. Each chapter includes practical suggestions about how we can learn to turn away from past mistakes, become as God really intends us to be, and participate in God's loving work in the world.

We will see how our Creator has shared with us many gifts and powers so we can take part in God's creative work and collaborate in furthering his loving purposes for the world. Yet we will also see how our human gifts and powers are often distorted and misused when we separate ourselves from God and pursue goals that conflict with the harmony and flourishing of our neighbors, ourselves, and the whole of creation. Misuse of the gifts God has given us in the divine image has had devastating consequences. The resulting damage, however, does not express our authentic human nature. Rather, it reflects the ways that wrong choices by ourselves, others, and society as a whole have buried, wounded, or distorted our true nature. Nevertheless, the image of God remains present in us as a foundation and a potential that awaits our discovery and can transform our lives.

Early Christian reflection on the image of God shows what we have always been, what we can and should do now, and what we are called to become in the future. Some features of the divine image are already given to us at our creation, such as rationality, freedom, and the capacity for growth in virtue and communion with God. By freely collaborating with God's grace, we are to grow little by little throughout our lifetime into other features of the divine image, such as the practice of virtue, spiritual perception, and loving communion with God. Yet we hope for perfection in virtue, immortality, eternal growth in communion with God, and fuller participation in divine life as gifts that will be actualized only in the age to come. Life according to God's image thus combines a stable foundation with a dynamic movement that begins here and now but will continue beyond this life. As human beings we are called to an unending process of becoming more and more like God, especially by sharing God's character and God's love. Some early Christian and Eastern Christian theologians have described this process in

terms of a distinction between the divine image and the divine likeness in Genesis 1:26. The “image” names the stable foundation in human nature that provides the potential for growth in likeness to God, communion with God, and collaboration in God’s creative and loving activities. The dynamic movement into greater and greater actualization of this potential is called the divine “likeness.” This distinction is a helpful shorthand, and though not all the theologians we will be studying use it, we will employ it in this book.

Although the fundamental purpose God has given to humankind is common to every human being, each is called to live out that purpose in a unique way. We can start from many diverse places and pursue different vocations and spiritual practices as we move toward a common goal in God’s kingdom. We can start by pursuing a facet of the divine likeness that comes most naturally to us, with God’s grace and calling, and in the process of pursuing it we will acquire other facets as well.

Each chapter of this book will focus on a different facet of God’s image and likeness. Chapter 1 explores human freedom and responsibility. God has created us with freedom similar to God’s own freedom so that we can spontaneously choose to love our Creator, who has first loved us. We can choose freely what we will become and what we will do. So we can choose either good or evil, and our choices have enormous consequences.

Chapter 2 explains how God, or Christ, is the model and we are the images. So as humans we have a connection to God at the very core of our being. When we separated ourselves from God through sin, Christ came to restore that connection, that is, to remake us in God’s image and likeness. So now Christ incarnate is the model to follow, and he gives us the strength to come with him and finally reach eternal communion with God.

Chapter 3 is about the human capacity for spiritual perception, which is often hidden in our fallen world. It enables us to truly know, and therefore love, God and our fellow humans.

Chapter 4 is about the moral excellence of God, which also becomes the core of human likeness to God. There are many forms of moral excellence, or many virtues, and we can begin

by pursuing the one that appeals to us, but we can hope, with God's help, eventually to acquire all of them. In order to do so, we have to learn humility along the way, as a foundation for working with God to do great things.

Chapters 5 through 9 address the great tasks that being God's image both enables and calls us to undertake in cooperation with God. Chapter 5 is about the royal dignity that all humans possess as images of God and about our task of treating others with genuine respect, especially those that society perceives as least valuable. Chapter 6 is concerned with the human body, which God made to work together with the soul to show forth his likeness here and now. Chapter 7 explores our divine calling to mediate God's presence in and care for the ecosystem in which we live, and for the whole of creation. Chapter 8 is about how God invites people to disclose divine beauty, wisdom, and providence through the arts and sciences. Chapter 9 examines how humankind, as a community, can come to participate in the divine community of the Holy Trinity and share with one another the same kind of mutual love the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share.

Finally, in the conclusion, as we draw together our discussion of the different facets of the divine image, we will consider that there is far more than can be said in this book. The divine image is also an image of God's incomprehensibility. There is always more about humans—about our neighbors and ourselves—that is yet to be discovered.

# 1

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## Freedom

In the world today, we all value our freedom, and we declare to the world that we are free. Yet we also find we need to struggle for our freedom. Beneath our declarations, we may have anxious questions that we hesitate to reveal: Am I really free? What real choices do I have? Are there limits to my freedom? Freedom seems to be an end in itself, but, even if I have a million choices, what is the purpose of being free?

Basil of Caesarea, a fourth-century bishop in Cappadocia, or in what is now central Turkey, asked himself questions like these. He wondered about how much freedom people really have and how best to use that freedom. He came from a wealthy, aristocratic family in a world where many people were slaves and slavery was taken for granted as part of the social and economic system. Slavery was part of the only world people in Basil's time knew. In light of this, he tells the following story: Suppose there is an upright man who lives a good and disciplined life but is a slave. This man sees that his master is enslaved to the pleasures of a prostitute, though he himself dismisses her from his mind. Basil tells us he would say to that good man, "Know that you

are a slave in name only. He,” that is, the owner, “has the name of master, but he has established his slavery by deed.”<sup>1</sup>

My house in Kansas City is more than one hundred years old. There is a small room that opens into my bedroom with no door in between. I keep bookshelves and an exercise bike in it, but I am told that in the old days a servant would have lived there. From there he or she could see everything that went on in the master bedroom. In the ancient Mediterranean world, most people were poor, and a whole family would live in one room; but the rich lived in large houses surrounded by their servants. It is no wonder, then, that people went out into the desert to become monks or nuns; there they found the privacy they needed to live a life of prayer. The master in Basil's story would probably have slept on a bed, while his slave slept on the floor beside him. The slave could very easily have seen what Basil describes.

So Basil asks, which one is more free? The master's mind is filled with obsessive thoughts and fantasies about the prostitute. These thoughts, and the feelings that accompany them, drive his actions. He does not consider his wife and family, nor does he consider his reputation, which would have been very important to an aristocrat in the ancient world. He may be locked into the routine of a long-standing habit. So he is not free to use his reason to weigh the alternatives and make a sensible choice. He is addicted, or, in Basil's language, enslaved.

By contrast, the slave who witnesses his master's situation is free in mind and heart. He can dismiss from his mind the thought of the prostitute and any fantasies of pleasure that come with it. He has work to do, and since he cannot change his situation, he strives to do it out of love for his master and without resentment. In the ancient world, people did not know about different societies with different social structures, as they do today, so they did not envision the possibility of abolishing slavery, as Christian abolitionists did in the nineteenth century. Fourth-century Christians made use of the circumstances in

1. *On the Origin of Humanity* 1.8; trans. Harrison, *St. Basil*, 37.

which they found themselves to discover ways to love and serve God and their neighbors. While the slave's life was hard, it was simple; he had no alternative. He probably worked with his hands, leaving his mind free to pray.

Basil's brother, the mystic and theologian Gregory of Nyssa, uses the concept of the divine image found in Genesis 1:26–27 to critique the whole idea of slavery. We will see what he says when we discuss the issue further in chapter 5. Social justice is important but so is inner freedom, the concern of this chapter. Inner freedom is the freedom of mind and heart. It is the ability to reason and make choices without constraint, including choices about the thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and drives that fill the inner landscape of oneself. Regardless of outward circumstances, everyone can work on developing this inner freedom. It is an important aspect of being human, and no oppressor can take it away. So the slave in Basil's story could cultivate it, while his undisciplined master chose not to do so.

## The Importance of Freedom

Like people today, those in ancient times wondered whether they had real freedom of choice. Some believed that what people do is determined not by themselves but by chance, by fate, or by the stars. Some believed that things happen through the random collisions of atoms. Some held that fate, or the will of God, determines what will happen before people have an opportunity to choose. And, as happens today, some believed in astrology, which says that the movements of the stars govern how people will act and what will become of them. Yet for centuries many Greek philosophers affirmed human freedom. This is because philosophers greatly valued human reason and virtue, and they understood that without freedom, human reason would be powerless and ethical judgments would be senseless. After all, how could we praise good actions and blame evil ones if people were robots or puppets or if what they did happened simply by chance? The same question arises in today's American

judicial system. Defendants who are considered insane, that is, incapable of making a free choice about their actions, are not considered guilty. But these are exceptional cases; everyone else is considered to be responsible for what he or she does.

Like the philosophers, ancient Christians found it very important to affirm human freedom of choice. Origen, a third-century student of Platonic philosophy who was also a great biblical scholar, affirms free choice as follows: “The teaching of the church includes the doctrine of the righteous judgment of God, a doctrine which, if believed to be true, summons its hearers to live a good life and by every means to avoid sin—for it assumes that they acknowledge that deeds worthy of praise or of blame lie within our own power.”<sup>2</sup>

As Origen acknowledges, from the beginning the church taught that people are free. He suggests two important reasons for this teaching. First, God is just. If people were not free and God created them, God would be responsible for their sins and for all the evils of the fallen world. So Christians have to believe in human freedom in order to affirm God’s goodness and justice. Second, God will judge people for their good or evil conduct, granting them eternal life in heaven or eternal punishment in hell based on how they have chosen to live on earth. If people were not inherently responsible for their actions, such a judgment would be unjust and make no sense. And in this world, the church could not make ethical judgments. If people could not make choices, pastors could not exhort them to do good or counsel them not to do evil. Thus the whole present life of the church presupposes human freedom, as does Christian hope for the age to come.

Indeed, the whole biblical story of the relationship of God with God’s people presupposes human freedom. Through Moses and the prophets and in Jesus himself, God exhorts people to do good and warns them not to do evil. Origen quotes the following texts, among others, in support of human freedom:<sup>3</sup>

2. *On First Principles* 3.1.1; trans. Butterworth, *Origen*, 157.

3. *On First Principles* 3.1.6; trans. Butterworth, *Origen*, 164–65.



And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:8)

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. . . . Therefore choose life. (Deut. 30:15, 19)

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock. (Matt. 7:24)

Such words can only benefit people because they are free to choose how to live. When people today hear Scriptures like these and take them to heart, the concrete choices they make about how to treat their neighbors or how to spend their time will be different from what they would otherwise have been.

## Freedom and the Image of God

Freedom is so important to living a Christian life, and so central to who we are as human beings, that the fourth-century Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa considered it an important facet of the divine image that defines us as human. Gregory spent most of his life in the little town of Nyssa, where he had been sent as bishop. He served as pastor there but also wrote. His profound writings, which are of great interest today, reveal that he was an original theologian interested in philosophy. He was also a contemplative, that is, a teacher of the spiritual life, so he had a lifelong interest in what it is to be human. We will return to him again and again in this book.

Theologically, Gregory agrees with his older brother Basil but goes beyond what he had taught. Basil makes a distinction between the divine image and the divine likeness and says our freedom makes it possible to acquire the likeness of God. In creating us, Basil says, God gives us the image, so we are born with it. The likeness is something greater than the image, and God gives us the responsibility of acquiring it. As Basil explains:

“Let us make the human being according to our image and according to our likeness” [Gen. 1:26]. By our creation we have the first, and by our free choice we build the second. In our initial structure co-originate and exists our coming into being according to the image of God. By free choice we are conformed to that which is according to the likeness of God. . . . Now he has made us with the power to become like God. And in giving us the power to become like God, he let us be artisans of the likeness of God, so that the reward for the work would be ours. . . . For I have that which is according to the image in being a rational being, but I become according to the likeness in becoming Christian.<sup>4</sup>

When Basil speaks of “becoming Christian,” he means truly living a Christian lifestyle, avoiding sin, practicing spiritual disciplines and all the virtues, and becoming like Christ, that is, like God. Basil says that human freedom can become the artisan, the fashioner, of God’s likeness. In his love, God gives us this extraordinary power—to make ourselves like God—in order to give us credit for doing so and reward us for it. Basil compares this process of self-fashioning to the work of a painter. If the artist paints a beautiful canvas, the work receives the attention and admiration; but if an artist adorns himself with beauty, he is the one who is admired.

In this text, Basil does not say freedom is God’s likeness, although it makes the likeness possible. He does, however, identify the divine image with reason. As we have seen, in Greek thought reason and freedom go together; without freedom, reason cannot do what it sees is right, and without reason, freedom acts blindly, impulsively, and erratically. So if reason is in God’s image, freedom must be in God’s image too, as Gregory emphasizes. Gregory says a great deal about the role of freedom in human existence.<sup>5</sup>

Gregory states that God, who is good and indeed transcends all good, created the human being in order to manifest his good-

4. *On the Origin of Humanity* 1.16; trans. Harrison, *St. Basil*, 43–44.

5. Unlike Basil, Gregory of Nyssa does not make a distinction between the image and likeness in Gen. 1:26. In the end, this difference is largely a matter of vocabulary, not the substance of his thought.

ness. God would not give humankind certain parts of his goodness while jealously withholding others; that would not be in line with God's character. So God has given humans the fullness of divine excellence. This gift includes all the virtues, which are, in the first place, divine attributes, such as wisdom, compassion, and love. And this divine excellence is what constitutes the image of God in the human person. It follows, then, that since freedom is included in God's excellence, humans are free too. Following the Greek philosophical tradition, Gregory adds that if humans were not free, neither could they practice any of the virtues, all of which are included in the divine image.<sup>6</sup>

Gregory even says that human "self-determination is equal to God."<sup>7</sup> He means that like the freedom of God, human freedom is self-initiated; its actions are not determined by any external force, not even by God's will. For example, if I choose to smell a rose, it is because I have decided to do so. I have not been made to do it against my will by some force outside myself. In fact, Gregory says that people are able to give birth to themselves, to create themselves as the kind of people they choose to become:

What is subject to change is in a sense always coming to birth. In mutable nature nothing can be observed which is always the same. Being born, in the sense of constantly experiencing change, does not come about as a result of external initiative, as is the case with the birth of the body. . . . Such a birth occurs by free choice in accordance with whatever form we wish to have, . . . molding ourselves to the principle of either virtue or vice.<sup>8</sup>

For example, a medical student chooses, step by step, to become a doctor. He or she not only studies the physiology of the human body and learns medical skills but also learns a doctor's character, demeanor, and professional ethics. Through many

6. *On the Creation of Humanity* 16.10–11; trans. Moore and Wilson, *Gregory*, 405, alt.

7. *On Those Who Have Fallen Asleep*; GNO 9:54.

8. *Life of Moses* 2.3; trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 55.

choices over time, the mature medical practitioner comes to birth and grows within that person.

Interestingly, the reason our freedom has such power, according to Gregory, is that we are extremely malleable as human beings. We continually undergo change; we are constantly moving, so we can choose which direction we take. God, however, always remains the same, so clearly not everything about us is like God. Yet our changeableness allows us to choose to become more and more like the divine. The possibilities are wide open, though ultimately, Gregory says, we have two alternatives: virtue or vice, good or evil, the image of God or the image of the devil. We make a lot of complicated decisions in life, and sometimes the moral issues are unclear to us, but in the end our choices make us the kind of people who would be at home in God's Kingdom or in the outer darkness.

God creates everything out of nothing, and Gregory does not believe that human freedom can do that. He says that when we fashion ourselves, we are not absolute creators but are like artisans working with preexisting materials. He compares the human person to a jar that can hold a variety of things. We choose among things outside us and take them into ourselves, using them to fashion what we will become. When we choose wisely, we receive God into ourselves. Since God is infinite and we are finite, we can only receive a limited amount of divine life. The life we receive fills us to capacity and at the same time increases the size of the jar. So we can reach out to God and receive still more, again and again. Thus, when we unceasingly long for God, we are always satisfied yet always strive for more. In this process, our freedom cooperates continually with God's grace.<sup>9</sup> Gregory cites Paul's description of what happens: "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13–14).<sup>10</sup> Thus we can un-

9. Gregory describes the jar's unending expansion in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*; trans. Roth, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 87–88.

10. See *Life of Moses* 2.225, 242; trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 113, 117.

endingly receive more and more divine life. In other words, we are called to eternal growth in God. In the twentieth century, Gregory has become famous for his concept of eternal growth. It is his answer to the question of what our freedom is for.

We remain free, however, to choose the other alternative, to try to fill the jar of ourselves with things that are not God, with things that lack ultimate value, with things that leave our longings unsatisfied. Gregory compares this kind of effort to pouring water into a leaky jar.<sup>11</sup> Whatever we pour in leaks out the hole at the bottom, and though we work hard, we remain empty. Gregory says we are also like the Hebrew slaves toiling in Egypt to make bricks. They filled the brick mold with clay, then took the clay out, then refilled it and emptied it, again and again, working endlessly without pay.<sup>12</sup> Gregory's point is that the human person is like a jar created to receive and hold God. We function well when we use our jars for this purpose, but when we try to use them for other purposes, we find they are broken and lead us only to frustration.

### The Struggle for Inner Freedom

Gregory of Nyssa's example of the jar shows that when we choose to collaborate with God, our freedom becomes greater, but when we turn away from God, our freedom is far less effective, though we never lose it entirely. Early Christians had learned from Genesis 3 that humankind has chosen to turn away from God and misuse freedom. So Gregory acknowledges that because we are fallen creatures, we do not ordinarily experience the godlike potential of our freedom that he describes. The questions remain: How free are we in daily life? And how can we become more free? How can we come to collaborate in the work of God?

We have to struggle with our freedom, to discover how we can still use it in spite of the constraints of obsessive

11. *On the Beatitudes* 4.6; trans. Hall, "Gregory of Nyssa," 53–55.

12. *Life of Moses* 2.60–62; trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 68.

thoughts, unruly emotions, and bad habits. When we first start going to the gym, we may find it hard to do anything because our muscles are weak. But by using them little by little, we can in time grow strong and have much greater freedom of movement. In the same way, with God's help we can train our freedom.

In the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, the fathers and mothers of the Egyptian desert were monks and nuns who learned practical wisdom about Christian life from their experience of attempting seriously to live it. The younger ones wrote down the wisdom sayings and stories they learned from their elders, who were good coaches and trainers. Their sayings and stories will help us throughout this book to make concrete and practical for today the early Christian ideas of what it is to be human. The people of the desert can show us how to find the small ways in which we remain free so that by following these ways we can grow in freedom, just as a newcomer to the gym can start with small exercises and in time learn to do more strenuous ones.

Although Gregory of Nyssa presents human choice as facing two alternatives—good and evil—in practice it is much more complicated. There may be two choices at the end—heaven and hell—but along the way there are a wide variety of options. As we seek good, we are free to choose from many good ways to spend our lives, and we can focus on the one that appeals to us, the place where we have a particular talent. Abba Poemen<sup>13</sup> was a wise and compassionate abbot in ancient Egypt and the leader of a large monastic community. Many of his sayings are preserved among the words of the desert fathers. He uses examples to explain the point about different talents and inclinations: “Suppose there are three men living together. One lives a good life in silence, the second is ill but gives thanks to God, the third serves the needs of others with

13. In the Egyptian desert, the monks called older monks who had grown wise through experience “Abba,” which means “Father.” It is a term expressing affection and respect, and our word “abbot” is derived from it. Wise, older nuns were called “Amma,” which means “Mother.”

sincerity. These three men are alike, it is as if they were all doing the same work.”<sup>14</sup>

In the Egyptian desert, where early Christian monasticism was born, men and women experimented with various ways of life as they strove to come close to God. The desert sayings that have come down to us preserve many voices that show what they learned from their experiments. They talked to each other about which way of life is best, that is, which way is most pleasing to God and most effective in bringing a person to the ultimate goal of salvation.

In the words quoted above, Poemen says there are many ways that lead to the goal. He gives the example of three monks living together in a community, and each one is different. One lives a life of silent prayer. He remains alone in order to pray and may not actively serve his neighbors at all, though he loves them and prays for them. The second does not really have a choice of how to live because he is ill. In the ancient desert there was no anesthesia, so he was probably in pain. He has made it his task to give thanks to God even in this situation, a difficult thing to do. The third monk serves other people, but he too works on his inner thoughts and attitudes; he is sincere in his desire to help, not resentful or begrudging. Poemen tells us that all of them are alike. Each spends his lifetime pursuing virtue—that is, excellence of character—in a disciplined way, both inwardly in the heart and outwardly in action.

Another desert story makes a similar point. As often happened, a young monk asks an older one for guidance about how best to live. The older monk responds by passing on wisdom that has been passed down to him from the most reliable sources. He recounts what he has learned from another wise old man, who in turn learned it from a friend of Anthony the Great, the first and most renowned monk of the Egyptian desert:

A brother asked a hermit, “Tell me something good that I may do it and live by it.” The hermit said, “God alone knows what

14. Translated in Ward, *Desert Fathers*, 101, alt.

is good. But I have heard that one of the hermits asked the great Nesteros, who was a friend of Anthony, 'What good work shall I do?' and he replied, 'Surely all works please God equally? Scripture says, Abraham was hospitable and God was with him; Elijah loved quiet and God was with him; David was humble and God was with him.' So whatever you find you are drawn to in following God's will, do it and let your heart be at peace."<sup>15</sup>

The brother may have been anxious, thinking he might make a mistake, miss the target of God's will, and then God would abandon him. The hermit, like Poemen, reassures him that there are many good paths and that God is with those who follow each of them. Thus there are many virtues, so human freedom has a lot of space in which to move. In fact, he says, this multiplicity is already present in the Bible. The Old Testament heroes Abraham, Elijah, and David each had a different way of life, and each pursued a different virtue: hospitality, quiet prayer, and humility. Each one found God in the life he had chosen. Early Christians, especially monks, sought to follow the examples of biblical heroes. So the brother in our story had many examples to choose from.

Yet the desert Christians found that while there are lots of good options to choose from, people in this fallen world have trouble choosing what is good and following through by putting their good choices into practice. Choices begin in the mind, where persistent tempting thoughts, unruly emotions, and bad habits become obstacles that can easily turn us away from our good intentions. So the Egyptian monks devoted a great deal of effort to understanding and struggling with their tempting thoughts. A young monk had a question about this struggle:

A brother came to Abba Poemen and said to him, "Abba, I have many thoughts and they put me in danger." The old man led him outside and said to him, "Expand your chest but do not breathe in." He said, "I cannot do that." The old man said to

15. Translated in Ward, *Desert Fathers*, 5, alt.



him, “If you cannot do that, no more can you prevent thoughts from arising, but you can resist them.”<sup>16</sup>

The young man was new to monastic struggle and was probably overwhelmed by observing all the thoughts in his mind, a discipline that was new to him. Whenever we are awake, thoughts continually arise in our minds. The brother found that his thoughts pulled him in different directions, often away from God. Poemen reassured him that this happens to everybody, just as all people breathe and draw air into their lungs. He need not fear that he will lose his salvation because he cannot stop thoughts from coming, because no one can do that. But he can choose to resist distracting or sinful thoughts and follow good ones.

This kind of mental choice is where human freedom begins its work, for good or ill. “A hermit” in the Egyptian desert “said, ‘We are not condemned if bad thoughts enter our minds, but only if we use them badly. Because of our thoughts we may suffer shipwreck, but because of our thoughts we may also earn a crown,’”<sup>17</sup> that is, a reward from God. Another experienced hermit was asked if evil thoughts defile a person. He replied that when a monk immediately pushes away a sinful thought he is undefiled, and when a less-disciplined monk is moved by the thought but struggles and does not act on it, he too is undefiled.<sup>18</sup> So, for example, if one person thinks of stealing a library book and immediately pushes the thought aside while another has the same thought, fantasizes about taking the book home and owning it, but then with greater effort also pushes that thought aside, the book is still in the library. Neither one is a thief, and neither actually made a decision to steal. As Abba Poemen said, a thought is like an axe; if nobody uses it to cut anything, it has no effect.<sup>19</sup>

So what can we do to put sinful thoughts aside? Poemen suggests ignoring them, that is, refusing to engage with them.

16. Poemen 28; trans. Ward, *Sayings*, 171, alt.

17. Translated in Ward, *Desert Fathers*, 110.

18. See Ward, *Desert Fathers*, 108–9.

19. Poemen 15; trans. Ward, *Sayings*, 169.

He says that in time they disintegrate like clothes that are shut carelessly in a chest until they rot, or they are destroyed like a snake or a scorpion that is shut in a bottle and kept there indefinitely.<sup>20</sup> Yet ignoring them may not be enough; when we try to shut them out, they may come back with a vengeance. For a dieter, the thought of eating chocolate may come back every day and occupy the mind more and more insistently. The desert Christians were well aware that more is needed to win the battle with evil thoughts than simply putting them out of one's mind, although that can be a start. Poemen offered another suggestion to a monk engaged in this struggle:

A brother asked Abba Poemen about the harm which he was suffering through his thoughts. The old man said to him, "In this matter it is like a man who has fire on his left and a cup of water on his right. If the fire kindles, he must take water from the cup and extinguish it. The fire is the enemy's seed, and the water is the act of throwing oneself before God."<sup>21</sup>

The desert monks believed that evil thoughts often come from the devil, the enemy of Christians. In this text, the brother is encouraged to pray fervently to God for help every time he is afflicted with sinful thoughts. God is gracious and is able to either make those thoughts disappear or transform them creatively into a source of new insight or into a motivation for good deeds. A woman angry at aggressive panhandlers on the street may pray for them and then realize how hard it is to be homeless and how vulnerable such people are. She may then be moved to donate her money to a homeless shelter instead of giving it to the panhandlers, who might use it for drugs. The important point is that the monk is not expected to overcome evil thoughts by his own strength or willpower. Yet he still has a choice: he can ask God for help.

The desert fathers and mothers were also aware of the large role that habit plays in this struggle for inner transformation.

20. Poemen 20–21; trans. Ward, *Sayings*, 169–70.

21. Poemen 146; trans. Ward, *Sayings*, 187.

When sinful thoughts are part of a long-standing pattern in one's life, it becomes much more difficult to change them. For example, if the master referred to at the beginning of this chapter has been seeing prostitutes for a long time, his habit would make it very difficult for him to turn his mind away from sexual fantasies and desires. A trained and disciplined monk who was encountering a similar temptation for the first time would find it much easier to turn his mind to other things. So even when we are trapped in bad habits, we are still free to do something about them provided we know how to approach the problem. We need to work at it gradually by beginning to change our habits one step at a time. We are free to take a tiny step, and doing so brings us the freedom to take another tiny step, then another, so that slowly we become more free. Even the master could decide not to see a prostitute today and instead pursue a hobby he loves, such as reading and writing poetry. The next day he could make the same decision, and it would be a little easier. When renewed temptations arise, he could find people to encourage him in the change he is making. So, one day at a time, he could persevere in the change he has started. In a similar way, we can eventually break a bad pattern or acquire a new skill with God's help.

Consider the ability to turn the other cheek and to resist returning evil for evil. Christ requires such conduct of his disciples, but in practice it is often very difficult to do. The desert fathers and mothers took this commandment seriously and worked on learning to fulfill it. It is the subject of a conversation between Anthony the Great and fellow monks:

The brethren came to the Abba Anthony and said to him, "Speak a word; how are we to be saved?" The old man said to them, "You have heard the Scriptures. That should teach you how." But they said, "We want to hear from you too, Father." Then the old man said to them, "The Gospel says, 'If anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also' [Matt. 5:39]. They said, "We cannot do that." The old man said, "If you cannot offer the other cheek, at least allow one cheek to be struck." "We cannot do that either," they said. So he said, "If you are not able to do

that, do not return evil for evil,” and they said, “We cannot do that either.” Then the old man said to his disciple, “Prepare a little brew of corn for these invalids. If you cannot do this, or that, what can I do for you? What you need is prayers.”<sup>22</sup>

Anthony has broken down the task of learning to turn the other cheek into a series of smaller steps, since the brothers cannot do it all at once. If they could learn not to return evil for evil, or even if they found a way to do part of that or struggle toward it, that would be a beginning. Once they learned that, they could work on allowing one cheek to be struck and finally offer the other. It would be like climbing a ladder, one rung at a time. Since they say they cannot do any of what Anthony suggests, they need help from God. As Anthony says, they need prayers.

Another brother was working on the same issue, but he pursued it farther than Anthony's brothers. This monk asked Poemen about not returning evil for evil. What would it mean in practice? What would he have to do to accomplish it? The abbot explains, again breaking the task down into a series of steps, so it can be learned a little at a time.

Another brother questioned [Abba Poemen] in these words: “What does ‘See that none of you repays evil for evil’ [1 Thess. 5:15 RSV] mean?” The old man said to him, “Passions work in four stages—first, in the heart; secondly, in the face; thirdly, in words; and fourthly, it is essential not to render evil for evil in deeds. If you can purify your heart, passion will not come into your expression; but if it comes into your face, take care not to speak; but if you do speak, cut the conversation short in case you render evil for evil.”<sup>23</sup>

In the language of the desert fathers and mothers, “passions” are unruly emotions, in this case probably anger, bitterness, or resentment. In explaining that one learns to follow Christ's difficult commandment step by step, Anthony and Poemen provide

22. Anthony 19; trans. Ward, *Sayings*, 5.

23. Poemen 34; trans. Ward, *Sayings*, 172.

a good example of how to use the freedom we have, though it may seem very small at first, to break down bad habits and build good ones. One can break down the bad habit of obsessive resentful thoughts and build the good habit of treating the difficult neighbor graciously.

Clearly we need God's help throughout this struggle. We need God's help to find the kind of goodness best for us to pursue, to put aside evil thoughts, to plead with God for help against temptations, to overcome bad habits, and to cultivate good habits. Prayer was always the heart of the desert life. The monks and nuns prayed in many ways to be receptive to God's word and to cultivate closeness with God, but they also begged for help in their struggles and gave thanks for their good deeds. The work of monks is prayer, and it can and must be chosen. While other people can pray for us, and their prayers certainly help, the desert Christians insisted that each person must pray too. Otherwise, even the prayers of Anthony are not enough. Once a brother who relied on this great monk's prayers but was too lazy to pray himself said to Anthony, "Pray for me." The compassionate old man perceived his attitude and responded with hard words: "I will have no mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God."<sup>24</sup>

Part of desert prayer was opening oneself to hear God's word in Scripture. How is this accomplished? Again, Poemen explains, it is a question of freely chosen action repeated over time. Hearing comes through listening over and over: "The nature of water is soft, that of stone is hard; but if a bottle is hung above the stone, allowing the water to fall drop by drop, it wears away the stone. So it is with the word of God; it is soft and our heart is hard, but the [person] who hears the word of God often, opens his heart to the fear of God."<sup>25</sup> By fear, Poemen does not mean terror; he surely means reverence, attentiveness, and willingness to do God's will.

24. Anthony 16; trans. Ward, *Sayings*, 4.

25. Poemen 183; trans. Ward, *Sayings*, 192–93.

The message of the desert fathers and mothers is that though we are sinners, and though the world may tell us we are worthless, it is possible for us to learn, little by little, to become good people and to do good for others and thus to make a real contribution to society. In the church community, wise and experienced people can coach us, and with practice we can learn. So ultimately we *can* choose to be transformed for the better, though it takes work and persistence. In my opinion, this is an essential part of the good news of Jesus Christ.

### Grace and Human Freedom

In the Eastern churches, both in ancient times and today, grace and human freedom go together. Grace does not conflict with our capacity to choose but brings our freedom to fullness of life, creativity, and activity. God, who loves us, wants to work with us and allows us to share in his work. Origen explains this collaboration through the example of a sailing ship.

To what extent should we say that the [sea captain's] skill helps in bringing the ship back to the harbor, when compared with the force of the winds and the favorable state of the atmosphere and the shining of the stars, all of which cooperate to preserve those who sail? Why, even the sailors themselves from feelings of reverence do not often venture to claim that they have saved the ship but attribute it all to God; not that they have performed nothing, but that the efforts of God's providence are very much greater than the effects of their skill.<sup>26</sup>

The wind filled the sails and enabled the ship to move, the good weather preserved it from dangerous storms, and the positions of the stars guided the navigator in bringing the ship to harbor. The sailors were thankful to God for the collaboration of wind, weather, and stars on their journey. They were well aware that they could not control the weather or the natural

26. *On First Principles* 3.1.19; trans. Butterworth, *Origen*, 199, alt.

world on which they depended, yet their own work was also necessary to their safe arrival at their destination. Though the contribution of their free choice and work was small in comparison to the natural forces, it was essential. Ancient sailors and desert monks modestly ascribed all their achievements to God, but their work resulted from a happy synergy between God's grace and their own freely chosen actions.