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# Suffering Captured by Christ Jesus

Humility as Divine Passion  
and the Passive Condition of Man Saved by Christ  
in the Interpretation of Phil. 3:12  
by St. Basil the Great (*HHum* [20])  
and St. John Chrysostomus  
(*Hom. XI in Epist. ad Philipp.* and *Exp. in Ps. 143*)

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**Abstract:** *Phil. 3:12* is a relatively rarely commented text in Eastern patristic exegesis. If sometimes its interpretation is given very little space (Theodoret of Cyrus), very often he is simply overlooked, to the detriment of the verses before or after him, which are interpreted in an eminently ascetic key. Not so much an exegesis as a moral reflection about him offers St. Basil the Great in *Homily XX* on humility as a theological virtue and human condition restored in Christ. Unlike him, St. John Chrysostom offers an anthropological-epistemological interpretation of the text, which finally leads to a moral reflection on the passivity of this human condition restored by the Savior.

**Keywords:** humility, anthropology, epistemology, justification by faith, *vita passiva*, *Phil. 3:12*, theological virtues, human condition, nobility of man, St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostomus

## Humility as a Theological Virtue in St. Basil's *HHum* [20]

ONE OF THE MOST READ and appreciated works of St. Basil the Great in the Protestant world is *Homily XX on Humility*<sup>1</sup> (*HHum* [20]<sup>2</sup>). Protestant

<sup>1</sup> St. Basil, *Homilia K'. Peri tapeinophrosynēs/ Homilia XX. De humilitate*, PG 31, 525–540.

<sup>2</sup> In what follows, we use the abbreviations consecrated in the vol. Paul Jonathan Fedwick, ed., *Basil of Caesarea: Christian Humanist, Ascetic. A Sixteen-Hundredth Anniversary Symposium* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1981), XIX–XXXVIII (*Abbreviations*), especially XXVII–XXVIII.

theologians believe that they can identify in the great Cappadocian Father's treatment on humility one of the essential leitmotifs of their theological thinking, respectively the theme of justification *sola fide*.

Indeed, St. Basil expressly refers to the justification by faith in HHum [20] §3, where quoting Philip. 3,9-11, he shows that man should not boast of his own justification, but to know that he is devoid of any true justification and that his real justification is accomplished only through faith in Christ (gr. *pistei de monē tē eis Christon dedikaiōmenon* / lat. *verum sola in Christum fide justificatum esse*)<sup>3</sup>. According to him, Paul sought justification in Christ, obtained from God on the basis of faith (gr. *zētein de tēn dia Christou, tēn ek Theou dikaiosynēn epi tē pistei* / lat. *quaerat vero eam, quae per Christum est, quae ex Deo est, justitiam in fide*): he sought it in the knowledge of Christ, in the power of His resurrection (*tēn dynamin tēs anastaseōs autou* / *virtutem resurrectionis ejus*), in the participation in His passions (*tēn koinōnian tōn pathēmatōn autou* / *communione afflictionum ipsius*), in the resemblance to His death, in order to reach the resurrection from the dead<sup>4</sup>.

But although St. Basil resorts to the Pauline theme of justification by faith, it should not be overlooked that the main theme of HHum [20] is neither justification nor faith, but humility. Both justification and faith (or simply: justification by faith in Christ) lead ultimately to *tapeinophrosynē* or *atyphia* as something deeper and more fundamental, that he designates at the beginning of his homily as being man's "biggest salvation" (gr. *megistē sōtēria autō*, lat. *maxima salus*), "healing of illness" (gr. *tēs nosou therapeia* / lat. *morbi que medela*), "way of return to the beginning" (gr. *pros to ex archēs epanodos* / lat. *reditus ad primum statum*)<sup>5</sup>. Now, the reason why humility is all these: salvation (*sōtēria* / *salus*), therapy (*therapeia*), medicine (*medela*), restauration (and recapitulation – *epanodos*) by returning (*reditus*) to the state of inception (*archē*; *primus status*), i.e. to the holy commendment (gr. *pros tēn hieran entolēn* / lat. *ad praeceptum sacrum*) of God has with the fact to do, that it places man in an intimate relationship with God as the Source of all and of grace, making himself available to Him. In this way, man's life energy no longer comes from the smallness of his being, but from the discreet infinity of divine (active) omnipotence.

As such, humility means killing all of our own to make room for Christ to live in us. In this sense St. Basil quotes Philippians again, this time Phil. 2,13<sup>6</sup>: "for it is God who works in you (*Theos gar estin ho energōn en hymin*) both to will and to do (*kai to telein kai to energein*) for His good pleasure

<sup>3</sup> PG 31, 529: "Autē gar dē hē teleia kai holoklēros kauchēsis en Theō, hote mēte epi dikaiosynē tis epairetai tē eautou, all'egnō men endēē onta heauton dikaiosynēs alēthous, pistei de monē tē eis Christon dedikaiōmenon" (lat. col. 530: "Haec est enim perfecta ac integra in Deo gloriatio, cum quis non ob suam justitiam extollitur, sed novit destitui se quidem vera justitia, verum sola in Christum fide justificatum esse").

<sup>4</sup> PG 31, 529–530.

<sup>5</sup> PG 31, 525–526.

<sup>6</sup> PG 31, 531.

(*hyper tēs eudokias*)". Therefore, St. Basil understands humility as being directly dependent on the active (*energein*) and intentional (*telein*) presence of God in man through His grace. As such he conceives it in the manner in which St. Paul understands faith, hope and charity (love), that is, what will later be called 'the theological virtues' (1Cor. 13; 1Thes. 1:3; 5:8).

It is a way of saying that humility itself is a kind of theological virtue, which springs directly from God's grace. Actually, in order to be able to talk about the soteriological value of moral virtues, they must necessarily be placed in relation to God's grace, because, in the Pauline theological logic (Eph. 2:8-9)<sup>7</sup>, salvation (*sōtēria*) cannot come from one's own works (or: from the works of the law), but from grace (*chariti*) through faith (*dia pisteōs*).

This means that, in fact, the theological virtues are not limited to this number of three, but that they are definitely more, among which virtues such as humility can also be counted. From the same category can also be listed other virtues such as prayer (which, also according to St. Paul, is the Holy Spirit's crying out in the human heart<sup>8</sup>) or patience - in particular, the patience of the holy martyrs in enduring in a superhuman manner what normally a simple man cannot bear. St. Basil pays special attention to this true theological virtue of patience in his homilies dedicated to martyrs such as Julitta<sup>9</sup>, Barlaam<sup>10</sup>, Gordius<sup>11</sup> and especially to the forty martyrs of Sebasteia<sup>12</sup>, the last three immediately preceding HHum [20].

Furthermore, the understanding in a Pauline key of the Christian teaching about virtues led some Church Fathers to put in relation to God's grace not only the three Pauline theological virtues or similar Christian virtues such as humility, prayer or patience, but even the main virtues of classical Greek philosophy. In this sense, St. Ambrose of Milan, taking an idea from the Jewish Neoplatonic philosopher Philo of Alexandria<sup>13</sup>,

<sup>7</sup> Although *Ephesians* is an epistle considered by today's exegesis to be deuteropauline, Eph. 2, 8-9 formulates a fundamental theological idea of St. Paul, present in various forms in the entire Pauline corpus. See Eph. 2,8-9: "For by grace you have been saved (*tē gar chariti este sesōmenoi*) through faith (*dia pisteōs*), and not of yourselves (*kai touto ouk ex hymōn*); it is the gift of God (*Theou to dōron*), not of works (*ouk ex ergōn*), lest anyone should boast (*hina mē tis kauchēsētai*)".

<sup>8</sup> Gal. 4,6: "And because you are sons, God has sent forth (*exapeteilen*) the Spirit of His Son (*to Pneuma tou Hyiou autou*) into your hearts (*eis tas kardia hēmōn*), crying out (*krazon*), 'Abba, Father'".

<sup>9</sup> HHul [5], PG 31, 257-262.

<sup>10</sup> HBar [17], PG 31, 483-489. Modern exegesis places this homily in the *Dubia* category. See Paul Jonathan Fedwick, ed., *Basil of Caesarea: Christian Humanist, Ascetic*, p. XXXI.

<sup>11</sup> HGord [18], PG 31, 489-508.

<sup>12</sup> HMart [19], PG 31, 508-525.

<sup>13</sup> *Legum allegoriae* I, 19.63-27.87, in: Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis II, III (Legum Allegoria)*, in *Philo in ten volumes (and two supplementary volumes)*, with an english translation by F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, (Cambridge, Massachusetts-London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd, 1981), 140-474 (here: 186-205). See also: Carl Joachim Classen, "Der platonisch-stoische Kanon der Kardinaltugenden bei Philon,

argues in his treatises *De paradiso*<sup>14</sup> and *De officiis ministrorum*<sup>15</sup> that the four rivers that flow from the garden of Eden are, in fact, the four virtues of the classical Greek culture called by him for the first time in the history “cardinal virtues”. But unlike Philo, St. Ambrose asserts that the common source of the four Edenic rivers which he identifies with the four cardinal virtues are Christ himself, the Savior and the Hypostatic Wisdom of God, and equally God the Father. He thus inaugurates, in a specific manner, but related to the approach of St. Basil from HHum [20], an entire aretiological tradition, received and amplified in the 14th century by the hesychast authors such as St. Callistus II., the Patriarch of Constantinople (1397)<sup>16</sup>, who still resorts to the gracious interpretation concerning the four Edenic rivers<sup>17</sup>.

### *Parousia vs. Aretē.*

## **Humility as Passion of Divine Captivity in Phil. 3,12 according St. Basil’s HHum [20] §3-4**

Actually St. Basil does not quote expressly Eph. 2,8-9 in HHum [20], but its main idea is present in the background of the entire homily. Instead, St. Basil continues his argumentation along the ideational thread of the Epistle to the Philippians, supported by references to texts with similar meaning from the two epistles to the Corinthians.

Thus, at the end of HHum [20] §3, he quotes 1Cor. 15:10<sup>18</sup> to claim that, strictly speaking, not the personal efforts of the Apostle Paul, but the divine grace (*hē charis tou Theou*) present in him bore fruit in his apostolic activity

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Clemens Alexandrinus und Origenes,” in *Aretai und Virtutes: Untersuchungen zu den Wertvorstellungen der Griechen und Römer*, ed. Adolf Martin Ritter (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 107-138; Roberto Radice, “Philo and Stoic Ethics. Reflections on the Idea of Freedom,” in *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy*, ed. Francesca Alesse (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 141-168.

<sup>14</sup> *De paradiso* II,13-14; English ed.: Saint Ambrose, *Hexaemeron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961), 294-296.

<sup>15</sup> *De officiis ministrorum* I,25-50; II,1-14; see *Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis de officiis*, cura et studio M Testard, in: *Ambrosii Mediolanensis opera* V [=CCL 15], (Turnhout, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> *Tou Agiōtatos kai Aoidymou Kallistou Patriarchou ta elliponta kephalaia oti ho eirēmenos paradeisos eikōn tou anthrōpou*, in der griechischen *Philokalia*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Vol. 4 (Athēnai, 1961), 299-367, here: §15; §17, 18. Romanian translation by Dumitru Stăniloae, in *Filocalia*, Bd. 8, 2. Auflage (București: Humanitas, 2002), 220-348.

<sup>17</sup> See Picu Ocoleanu, “Începuturile divine ale virtuții. Virtuțile cardinale ca virtuți teologice secundare în cap. §15 din Capetele despre rugăciune (care au lipsit) ale Sf. Calist Patriarhul (sec. XIV),” in *Credință și viață bisericească – repere existențiale. Studii și evocări întru cinstirea părintelui prof. univ. dr. Constantin Pătuleanu la împlinirea vârstei de 60 de ani*, (București: Cuvântul Vieții, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> 1Cor. 15,10: “... I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me (*ouk egō de hē charis tou Theou [hē] syn emoi*)”.