

## The Theology of Gender - 9. St. Basil the Great (Sofia Matzarioti-Kostara)

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St. Basil the Great was indeed a great figure in the history of Christianity, a charismatic hierarch with significant contribution in various areas. With concern to our topic, we will examine the pastoral and canonical aspects of his multifarious work. The most important characteristic of his personality is that he had a tremendous education, rare for his time, and was an eloquent speaker. He was a master of oratory and law. His broad education makes his views on issues of law authoritative. Given, however, that St. Basil never wrote in order to satisfy his personal needs<sup>[1]</sup> or to express abstract theories, but to offer pastoral guidance to his Christian flock and help it progress spiritually, his canons should not be evaluated apart from the rest of his work.



*Basil the Great, byzantine Psalter, 11th Century*

Throughout his writings it is clear that St. Basil does not support the devaluation of women. He does not exclude women from chanting or from full participation in the liturgical life of the Church<sup>[2]</sup>, and stresses the women's gift for fasting which he considers to be as natural to them as breathing.<sup>[3]</sup> He also teaches that obedience to the commandments is an obligation for all Christians.<sup>[4]</sup> According to St. Basil, the Creator balanced the physical weakness of female nature with the sexual power women have over men.<sup>[5]</sup> This anthropological observation is the key to understanding St. Basil's views on issues of ethical misdemeanors of women. Since women have a greater influence on men in physical relationships, they are more accountable for their sexual transgressions. Thus, although St. Basil praises the virtues of women as being the same as those of men, on the issue of sexual transgression he is harsher toward females, possibly because the immorality of women can push men to carnal sin.<sup>[6]</sup>

On the issue of marriage, St. Basil believes that it is honorable and was given to humans in the act of creation as a way for achieving immortality through their offspring, as well as for companionship and for assisting each other in spiritual growth.<sup>[7]</sup> Therefore, he condemns any irrational passion that destroys the matrimonial union and is contrary to the purpose of marriage. St. Basil is very

negative about divorce<sup>[8]</sup> and believes that the man who divorces his wife should not be allowed to marry again, just as any woman divorced by her husband should remain single.<sup>[9]</sup> This ascetic approach to marriage is characteristic of St. Basil's views on Christian life. His great asceticism permeates all his work, as he tries to inspire Christians to adopt higher standards of life. In view of that, second marriage is seen by St. Basil only as a medication for human weakness, and not as a means for sensual pleasures.<sup>[10]</sup> Nevertheless, he does not disregard the physical satisfaction of matrimonial life and acknowledges that a good wife is a great blessing for a man.<sup>[11]</sup> The pastoral care for his flock is obvious in all his writings, including his exegetical work on creation, where he mentions the devastating consequences that a second marriage has on children.<sup>[12]</sup>

St. Basil's canonical letters, like all his writings, express his pastoral care, and convey the ethos of asceticism for the spiritual advancement of all Christians. At the same time, however, they are significant legal documents with a lasting influence on the Church throughout her history. These letters became the basis for many canons of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, where St. Basil's legislation attained canonical authority for the Church.

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[1] E. Moutsoulas, "Ο Μέγας Βασίλειος ως Παιδαγωγός", Μυριόβιβλος, [http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/greek/moutsoulas\\_basil.html](http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/greek/moutsoulas_basil.html) (accessed February 10, 2010).

[2] P. Christou, *Ο Μέγας Βασίλειος-Βίος και Πολιτεία, Συγγράμματα, Θεολογική Σκέψις*, (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1978), 82.

[3] «Γυναίξι ὥσπερ τό ἀναπνεῖν, οὕτω καί τό νηστεύειν οἰκεῖον ἐστι καί κατὰ φύσιν», "Περί νηστείας Β΄," PG 31, 188B.

[4] «Πάντες ἄνθρωποι ἀπαιτηθησόμεθα τήν πρός τό Εὐαγγέλιον ὑπακοήν, μοναχοί τε καί οἱ ἐν συζυγίαις» PG 31, 628A.

[5] «...διά τῆς μίξεως τό οἰκεῖον μέλος ἀναλαμβάνειν ταῖς τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκαις μηχανησάμενος· τοῦτον δέ τόν τρόπον, ἐξ ἑνός δύο, καί ἐκ δύο πάλιν ἓν, τό τε ἄρρην καί τό θῆλυ σαφῶς ἀναδείξας· καί οὐ τήν πρός ἄλληλα συμπλοκήν μόνον, διά τῶν προειρημένων τρόπων, ἡδεῖαν τοῖς σώμασιν αὐτῶν ἐργασάμενος, ἀλλά καί πρός τό ἐκ τῆς συμπλοκῆς ταῖς τοῦ ἔρωτος λαμπάσι διαδουχούμενον γένος, πολὺ τό φίλτρον ἐγκατασπείρας... ἡδονῆς ὅλον φάρμακον τῷ ἄρρени τό θῆλυ κατασκευάσας, βιαίοις ὀλκαῖς, καί ἐπὶ τήν καταβολήν τῆς γονῆς, πρός αὐτό ἄγει τό ἄρρην· οὐχί πρός τό ἄρρην ἄγει τό θῆλυ, ἀλλά τῇ τοῦ θήλεως ἡδονῇ τό ἄρρην πρός αὐτό αἰχμάλωτον ἄγων... Οὕτω τῷ ἀσθενεστέρῳ ζῶν τοῦ Δημιουργοῦ

βοηθῆσαι θελήσαντος, ἵνα τῇ ἐνούσῃ αὐτῷ ἡδονῇ, μαγγανεῦσαι τό ἄρῶν, οὐ διὰ τὴν παιδοποιίαν μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ δι' αὐτόν τόν τῆς μίξεως οἶστον, ὑπερμαχοῦν αὐτῷ ἔχη τό ἄρῶν», “Περὶ τῆς ἐν παρθενίᾳ ἀληθοῦς ἀφθορίας,” *PG* 30,676A-C.

[6] «...καὶ ὥσπερ τὰ φάρμακα τὰ διδόμενα πρὸς ἀναίρεσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, σκοτοῖ τὴν σύνεσιν καὶ ὄλον τόν ἄνθρωπον εἰς ἀναισθησίαν παρασύρει τῇ τοῦ δηλητηρίου ἀποτομία, τῷ αὐτῷ λόγῳ καὶ ἡ γυνὴ διὰ τοῦ φιλήματος καταβλάπτει τόν λογικόν ἄνθρωπον ἀλόγῳ ὁρμῇ ὑπαχθέντα...καί...ὥσπερ τι ἄψυχον ὄργανον τῇδε κάκεῖσε ὅπου βούλεται περιφέρει καὶ ὥσπερ θάλασσα κυμαίνουσα, ὄλον τό σῶμα ταῖς αὐτῆς ὁρμαῖς παρασύρει. Καί ἐστιν ἰδεῖν...τόν παντοίων ἐμπειρον γραμμάτων ἢ καὶ τῶν θείων λόγων ἀναγνώσει ἑαυτόν ἐπιδεδωκότα καὶ τόν μονήρη βίον πολλάκις ἐπανελόμενον καὶ Ἐκκλησίας προὔχοντα, ὥσπερ τι ζῶον εὐτελές σχοινίῳ δεδεμένον, καὶ ὧδε κάκεῖ ριπιζόμενον...», *PG* 30,817A-C.

[7] «Καὶ γάρ καὶ ὁ γάμος αὐτός τοῦ ἀποθνήσκειν ἐστίν παραμυθία» *PG* 32, 1049A, and «...τοῖς δέ ἐξ ἀθανάτων θνητοῖς γενομένοις τὴν διαδοχὴν τοῦ γένους ἐπισκευάσας, τὴν ὡς εἴρηται ποῦ ἀθανασίαν εὐράμενος, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο “Αὐξάνεσθε καὶ πληθύνεσθε” εἰρηκῶς...», “Περὶ τῆς ἐν παρθενίᾳ ἀληθοῦς ἀφθορίας,” *PG* 30, 780A, and «Τότε γάρ νόμιμος καὶ κατὰ τὰς θείας Γραφάς συνίσταται γάμος, ὅταν μὴ πάθος ἡδονῆς προκαταλάβῃ τοῦ νόμου τὴν χρεῖαν, λογισμός δέ τοῦ τε εἰς βοήθειαν ἀναγκαίου καὶ τῆς τῶν παίδων διαδοχῆς τοῦ γάμου προσθεῖς τόν σκοπόν, τίμιον ὄντως μνηστεύῃ τόν γάμον», “Περὶ τῆς ἐν παρθενίᾳ ἀληθοῦς ἀφθορίας,” *PG* 30, 745C, and «Τί ἐστι τό ἐν Κυρίῳ τόν γάμον συστήναι; Τό μὴ προὔποσυρῆναι ὑπὸ τῶν σαρκὸς ἡδονῶν πρὸς τὴν μίξιν, ἀλλὰ κρίσει τοῦ λυσιτελοῦντος πρὸς τόν βίον, ἐλέσθαι τόν γάμον. Διό καὶ τό ἀναγκαῖον τοῦ γάμου ὁ Ποιητὴς ἐν τῇ φύσει διετάξατο», “Περὶ τῆς ἐν παρθενίᾳ ἀληθοῦς ἀφθορίας,” *PG* 30, 748A.

[8] «...Γυνὴ συνεκληρώθει σοι κατὰ τὴν κοινωνίαν τοῦ βίου,...ἀναρπασθεῖσα οἴχεται...Μὴ ἐκπέσης τῶν ὁρῶν τῆς εὐσεβείας...Εὐγνώμονος οὖν διανοίας οὐκ ἐπὶ τῷ χωρισμῷ δυσφόρως ἔχειν, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τῇ ἐξ ἀρχῆς συναφείᾳ χάριν τῷ συγκληρώσαντι...» *PG* 31, 248C-252A.

[9] «Οὐκ ἔξεστι τῷ ἀπολύσαντι τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα γαμεῖν ἄλλην, οὔτε τὴν ἀπολελυμένην ἀπὸ ἀνδρός ἐτέρῳ γαμεῖσθαι», “Ἠθικά,” *PG* 31,852B.

[10] «Πορνείας παραμυθία ὁ δεύτερος γάμος, οὐχὶ ἐφόδιον εἰς ἀσέλγειαν», “Ἐπιστ. 160, Διοδώρῳ,” *PG* 32, 628.

[11] «Γυνὴ συνεκληρώθη σοι κατὰ τὴν κοινωνίαν τοῦ βίου, πᾶσαν ἡδονὴν σοι κατὰ τόν βίον παρεχομένη, εὐθυμίας δημιουργός, θυμηδιῶν πρόξενος, τὰ χρηστά συναύξουσα, ἐν ταῖς λύπαις τό πλεῖστον μέρος τῶν ἀνιαρῶν ἀφαιρουμένη», “Εἰς

τήν μάρτυρα Ἰουλίτταν,” *PG* 31,248.

[12] «Εἰ ἡ λέαινα στέργει τά ἐξ αὐτῆς, καί λύκος ὑπέρ σκυλάκων μάχεται, τί εἶπῃ ἄνθρωπος καί τῆς ἐντολῆς παρακούων καί τήν φύσιν παραχαράσων, ὅταν ἡ παῖς ἀτιμάζῃ γῆρας πατρός, ἡ πατήρ διά δευτέρων γάμων τῶν προτέρων παίδων ἐπιλανθάνηται;», “Εἰς Ἑξαήμερον, ὁμιλ. Θ’,” *PG* 29,196-197.

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