
Wealth, Love, Generosity and Reward

Basil's exegesis of the encounter of Jesus with the rich young man

Then someone came to Jesus and said "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him ... "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" ... the young man said to him, "I have kept all these from my youth." (Matt. 19:16-22)

If your claims were true, namely that you observed from your youth the commandment of love, according to each an equal portion with yourself, from where do you derive this abundance? The care of the needy is an expensive undertaking. Even if each receives only the little his need requires, nevertheless all distribute these goods even as they provide for themselves. Consequently, the one who loves his neighbour as himself possesses nothing in excess of his neighbour's. However, you obviously have many possessions ... Clearly your wealth and superabundance indicates a lack of charity ... If you had clothed the naked, if you had shared your bread with the hungry and opened the doors to strangers, if you had become a father for orphans, if you commiserated with all those in dire straits, what regrets would you have had about money in handing over what you have left, if you had long been concerned about distributing to the needy?¹

On planning to leave a generous will

You wait until you are no longer among men to become their friend? ... Great thanks for your generosity! And in fact, what can a dead person do? ... There is no place for piety once life is over ... You promise benefits with paper and ink, but who will announce your death? Who will pay for your funeral? ... The one who guards your hoard will dispose all according to his own interests, thwarting your wishes ... Even when [the will] is clearly co-signed and you have declared it in a clear voice, only one added letter is enough to undo all your wishes: one altered seal, two or three false witnesses, and, lo and behold, your whole estate is in other hands.²

On generosity

The glory that is born of good works you carry back to the Lord where, standing before our common Judge all the people shall call you their nourisher and their benefactor ... Do you not see those at the theatre, at the public contests, at the fights with beasts, those who scatter their wealth for the sake of applause from the common people around them, of those whose very appearance is abhorrent? And you are mean and grasping in spending the little by which you may attain to such endless glory?³

¹ Hom. 7.1 in S.R Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p.105

² Hom.7.8 in S.R Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p.105

³ Hom. 6.3 in S.R Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p.107

“Why are you rich, this other man poor?”

When [wells] are in disuse they grow foul. And so do riches grow useless, left idle and unused in any place; but moved about and passing from one person to another, they serve the common advantage and bear fruit ... [Your grain] is not your own - but for common use of all. You were born naked. Why are you rich, this other man poor? Is it not solely that you may earn the rewards of compassion, of good and faithful administration, and that [the poor person] may be honoured with the glorious rewards of patience?⁴

On losing & finding wealth

When you make renouncement of the goods you possess, be adamant in your resolve, convinced that you are merely dispatching these goods to heaven in advance; for, although you are hiding them in the bosom of the lowly, you will find them again with God, greatly increased.⁵

⁴ *Hom. 6.5 & 6.7 in S.R Holman, The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p.107

⁵ *On Renunciation of the World* (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, p.18)

St Basil and the Prepositional Problem

The prepositional problem – Basil’s reason for writing *On the Holy Spirit*

Lately while I pray with the people, we sometimes finish the doxology to God the Father with the form “Glory to the Father *with* the Son, *together with* the Holy Spirit,” and at other times we use “Glory to the Father *through* the Son *in* the Holy Spirit.” Some of those present accused us of using strange and mutually contradictory terms.⁶

The use of “with” and “through” when speaking of the Son

Whenever we reflect on the majesty of the nature of the Only-Begotten (Son), and the excellence of His dignity, we ascribe glory to Him *with* the Father. On the other hand, when we consider the abundant blessings He has given us, and how He has admitted us as co-heirs into God’s household, we acknowledge that this grace works for us *through* Him and *in* Him. Therefore the best phrase when giving Him glory is *with whom* and the most appropriate for giving thanks is *through whom*.⁷

The use of “with” and “in” when speaking of the Holy Spirit

The preposition *in* expresses the relationship between ourselves and the Spirit, while *with* proclaims the communion of the Spirit with God. Therefore we use both words: the latter expresses the Spirit’s dignity, while the former describes the grace we have been given.

We glorify God both in the Spirit and with the Spirit; we have not invented this word, but we follow the teaching of the Lord as our rule, and transfer this word to things which are logically related, sharing a common mystery: He is numbered *with* them in the baptismal formula, and we consider it necessary to combine Their Names in the same way when we profess our faith, and we treat the profession of faith as the origin and mother of the doxology.

What can they do now? Either they must teach us not to baptise in the manner we have been taught, or else not to believe as we were baptised, or not to glorify as we believe.⁸

⁶ *On the Holy Spirit* 1.3 (SVS Press, p.17)

⁷ *On the Holy Spirit* 7.16 (SVS Press, p.33)

⁸ *On the Holy Spirit* 27.68 (SVS Press, p.102)

Understanding the Son's work & His relationship with the Father

Incarnation/ salvation by the Son is not a "lowly and subordinate ministry"

No heaven, or earth, or the great oceans, or all creatures living in the waters and on dry land, or plants, stars, air, and seasons, or the vast expanse of the universe, can illustrate the surpassing greatness of God's might so well as He has Himself. The infinite God, remaining changeless, assumed flesh and fought with death, freeing us from suffering by His own suffering! Even when the Apostle says that "in all these things (tribulations and sufferings) we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us,"⁹ in a phrase of this kind there is no suggestion of any lowly and subordinate ministry, but rather it speaks of the good He has accomplished "in the strength of His might."¹⁰

He Himself has bound the strong man and plundered His goods¹¹ - that is, us, who had been abased in every manner of evil - and made us into vessels fit for the Master's use, the use of our free will being made ready for any good work.¹² Thus through Him we have our approach to the Father, Who has transferred us from the dominion of darkness to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.¹³ We must not think that the salvation the Son has won for us is the result of a slave's compulsory and subordinate service. No, He voluntarily accomplishes His plan out of goodness and compassion for His creation, fulfilling the Father's will.¹⁴

The work of the Father is not separate or distinct from the work of the Son

On the other hand, we must not be so dazzled by the greatness of the Lord's works that we imagine that He has no origin. What does the self-existent One say about this? "I live through the Father,"¹⁵ and concerning divine power He says that "the Son can do nothing of His own accord."¹⁶ Where is the source of His perfect wisdom? "The Father ... has Himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak."¹⁷ Through all these words He guides us to the knowledge of the Father; He directs our amazement at everything He has made so that we may know the Father through Him. The work of the Father is not separate or distinct from the work of the Son; whatever the Son "sees the Father doing... that the Son does likewise."¹⁸ The Father enjoys our awe at everything which proceeds from the glory of the Only-begotten; He rejoices both in His Son who accomplishes such deeds, and in the deeds themselves, and exults in being known as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, "for whom and through whom all things exist."¹⁹ ²⁰

⁹ Rom. 8:37

¹⁰ Eph. 6:10

¹¹ Mt. 12:21

¹² Cf. 2 Tim. 2:21

¹³ Cf. Col. 1:12-13

¹⁴ *On the Holy Spirit* 8.18 (SVS Press, pp.36-7)

¹⁵ Jn. 6:57

¹⁶ Jn. 5:19

¹⁷ Jn. 12:49

¹⁸ Jn. 5:19

¹⁹ Heb. 2:10

²⁰ *On the Holy Spirit* 8.19 (SVS Press, pp.38-9)

The Father does not issue imperious orders to the Son as to a subordinate

When He says, “I have not spoken on my own authority,”²¹ and “As the Father has said unto me, so I speak,”²² and “the word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me”²³ and “I do as the Father has commanded me,”²⁴ He does not use language of this kind because He is incapable of His own choice, or is lawless, or has to wait for a prearranged signal. He wants to make it clear that His will is indissolubly united to the Father.

We must not think that what He calls a “commandment” is an imperious order delivered by word of mouth by which the Father gives orders to His Son, as He would to a subordinate, telling Him what He should do. Instead, let us think in terms worthy of the Godhead, and realise that there is a transmission of will, like the reflection of an object in a mirror, which reaches from Father to Son without passage of time. “The Father loves the Son, and shows Him all that He Himself is doing.”^{25 26}

The eternal Son with the eternal Father

First let us ask [the Arians] this question: In what way do they say that the Son is after the Father? Is He later in time, or in rank, or in dignity? As far as time is concerned, no one is so senseless as to claim that the Maker of the ages holds a second place; no interval could possibly divide the natural union of Father and Son. Even limited human thought demonstrates that it is impossible for the Son to be younger than the Father ... we cannot conceive of either apart from their relationship with each other...

... Now in addition to being impious, is it really not the height of folly to measure the life of Him who transcends all times and ages, whose existence is incalculably remote from the present? Things subject to birth and corruption are described as prior to one another; are we therefore to compare God the Father as superior to God the Son, who exists before the ages? The supreme eminence of the Father is inconceivable; thought and reflection are utterly unable to penetrate the begetting of the Lord.

By means of two words St. John has admirably contained the concept within tangible boundaries: he says “In the *beginning* was the Word.”²⁷ Thought cannot reach beyond *was*, or the imagination *beginning*. No matter how far your thoughts travel backward, you cannot get beyond the *was*. No matter how hard you strain to see what is beyond the Son, you will find it impossible to pass outside the confines of the *beginning*. Therefore, true religion teaches us to think of the Son with the Father.²⁸

²¹ Jn. 12:49

²² Jn. 12:50

²³ Jn. 14:24

²⁴ Jn. 14:31

²⁵ Jn. 5:20

²⁶ *On the Holy Spirit* 8.20 (SVS Press, p.40)

²⁷ Jn. 1:1

²⁸ *On the Holy Spirit* 6.14 (SVS Press, pp.29-30)

The Holy Spirit

The work of the Holy Spirit

[The Holy Spirit] shines upon those who are cleansed from every spot, and makes then spiritual men through fellowship with Himself. When a sunbeam falls on a transparent substance, the substance itself becomes brilliant, and radiates light from itself. So too Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by Him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others. From this comes knowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of hidden things, distribution of wonderful gifts, heavenly citizenship, a place in the choir of angels, endless joy in the presence of God, becoming like God, and, the highest of all desires, becoming God.²⁹

The Holy Spirit must be glorified with the Father and the Son

Now it is true that some of them³⁰ are willing to glorify the Spirit, but not with the Father and the Son. But the Lord has assigned the Spirit His proper place;³¹ why should we forsake it to invent another place? He is always described as united with the Godhead; why should He be deprived of His glory? We hear His name in the creed, at saving baptism, in the working of miracles. He takes up His abode in the saints; He bestows grace on the obedient. No gift can be bestowed on creation unless the Holy Spirit gives it; not even a single word can be spoken in defence of Christ unless the Holy Spirit inspires it - as we have learned in the Gospels from our Lord and Saviour.³²

How could anyone who has partaken of the Holy Spirit be willing to forget or disregard that He is united to the Father and the Son in every way and try to tear Him away from them? Where will you take Him to be ranked? Among creatures? But all creation is in bondage and the Spirit frees it; “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”³³ There are many other arguments why the Holy Spirit cannot be counted as a created nature, but for the moment I will not speak of them ... such an enormous treatise would result that my readers would be exhausted by its length.³⁴

²⁹ *On the Holy Spirit* 9.23 (SVS Press, p.43)

³⁰ Basil’s opponents, the *Pneumatomachoi* (“spirit fighters”)

³¹ An oblique reference to Matt. 28:19

³² Matt. 10:19-20

³³ 2 Cor. 3:17

³⁴ *On the Holy Spirit* 24.55 (SVS Press, p.87)

The Tradition of the Church

The teaching/ tradition of the Church is both written and unwritten

Concerning the teachings of the Church, whether publicly proclaimed (*kerygma*) or reserved to members of the household of faith (*dogmata*), we have received some from written sources, while others have been given to us secretly, through apostolic tradition. Both sources have equal force in true religion. No one would deny either source - no one, at any rate, who is even slightly familiar with the ordinances of the Church. If we attacked unwritten customs, claiming them to be of little importance, we would fatally mutilate the Gospel, no matter what our intentions - or rather, we would reduce the Gospel teachings to bare words.

For instance (to take the first and most common example), where is the written teaching that we should sign with the sign of the Cross those who, trusting in the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, are to be enrolled as catechumens? Which book teaches us to pray facing the East? Have any saints left for us in writing the words to be used in the invocation over the Eucharistic bread and the cup of blessing? As everyone knows, we are not content in the liturgy simply to recite the words recorded by St. Paul or the Gospels, but we add other words both before and after, words of great importance for this mystery. We have received these words from unwritten teaching.

We bless baptismal water and the oil for chrismation as well as the candidate approaching the font. By what written authority do we do this, if not from secret and mystical tradition? Even beyond blessing the oil, what written command do we have to anoint with it? What about baptising a man with three immersions, or other baptismal rites, such as the renunciation of Satan and his angels? Are not all these things found in unpublished and unwritten teachings, which our fathers guarded in silence, safe from meddling and petty curiosity?³⁵

Basil's explanations for three traditions

For instance, we all pray facing East, but few realise that we do this because we are seeking Paradise, our old fatherland, which God planted in the East in Eden...

We all stand for prayer on Sunday, but not everyone knows why. We stand for prayer on the day of the Resurrection to remind ourselves of the graces we have been given: not only because we have been raised with Christ and are obliged to seek the things that are above, but also because Sunday seems to be an image of the age to come...

Also, every time we bend our knees for prayer and then rise again, we show by this action that through sin we fell down to earth, but our Creator, the Lover of Mankind, has called us back to heaven.³⁶

³⁵ *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66 (SVSPress pp.98-9)

³⁶ *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66 (SVSPress pp.100-1)

The Advantages of Community compared to the Solitary Life³⁷

The dangers of the solitary life

The solitary life is fraught with [many] other perils. The first and greatest is that of self-satisfaction. Since the solitary has no one to appraise his conduct, he will think he has achieved the perfection of the precept. Secondly, because he never tests his state of soul by exercise, he will not recognise his own deficiencies nor will he discover the advance he may have made in his manner of acting, since he will have removed all practical occasion for the observance of the commandments.

How will he show his humility, if there is no one with whom he may compare and so confirm his own greater humility? How will he give evidence of his compassion, if he has cut himself off from association with other persons? And how will he exercise himself in long-suffering, if no one contradicts his wishes? If anyone says that the teaching of the Holy Scripture is sufficient for the amendment of his ways, he resembles a man who learns carpentry without ever actually doing a carpenter's work or a man who is instructed in metal-working but will not reduce theory to practice. To such a one the Apostle [Paul] would say: 'Not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the justified.'³⁸

Consider, further, that the Lord by reason of His excessive love for man was not content with merely teaching the word, but, so as to transmit to us clearly and exactly the example of humility in the perfection of charity, girded Himself and washed the feet of the disciples.³⁹ Whom, therefore, will you wash? To whom will you minister? In comparison with whom will you be the lowest, if you live alone? How, moreover, in a solitude, will that good and pleasant thing be accomplished, the dwelling of brethren together in one habitation which the Holy Spirit likens to ointment emitting its fragrance from the head of the high priest?⁴⁰ So it is an arena for the combat, a good path of progress, continual discipline, and a practicing of the Lord's commandments, when brethren dwell together in community.

In Community, each supplies the needs of the others

I consider that life passed in company with a number of persons in the same habitation is more advantageous in many respects. My reasons are, first, that no one of us is self-sufficient as regards corporeal necessities, but we require one another's aid in supplying our needs. The foot, to cite an analogy, possesses one kind of power and lacks another, and without the co-operation of the other members of the body it finds itself incapable of carrying on its activity independently for any length of time, nor does it have wherewithal to supply what is lacking.

³⁷ All extracts in this section are from *The Long Rules*, 7 (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, pp.248-252), except where indicated.

³⁸ Rom. 2:13

³⁹ John 13:5

⁴⁰ Ps. 132:1-2

Love is not self-seeking

Again, apart from this consideration, the doctrine of the charity of Christ does not permit the individual to be concerned solely with his own private interests. 'Charity,' says the Apostle, 'seeketh not her own.'⁴¹ But a life passed in solitude is concerned only with the private service of individual needs. This is openly opposed to the law of love which the Apostle [Paul] fulfilled, who sought not what was profitable to himself but to many that they might be saved.⁴²

Community life is good for correction

Furthermore, a person living in solitary retirement will not readily discern his own defects, since he has no one to admonish and correct him with mildness and compassion. In fact, admonition even from an enemy often produces in a prudent man the desire for amendment.

The multi-tasking love of Community

Moreover, the majority of the commandments are easily observed by several persons living together, but not so in the case of one living alone; for, while he is obeying one commandment, the practice of another is being interfered with. For example, when he is visiting the sick, he cannot show hospitality to the stranger and, in the imparting and sharing of necessities (especially when the ministrations are prolonged), he is prevented from giving zealous attention to [other] tasks.

The harmony of Community

Besides, if all we who are united in the one hope of our calling⁴³ are one body with Christ as our Head, we are also members, one of another.⁴⁴ If we are not joined together by union in the Holy Spirit in the harmony of one body, but each of us should choose to live in solitude, we would not serve the common good in the ministry according to God's good pleasure, but would be satisfying our own passion for self-gratification. How could we, divided and separated, preserve the status and the mutual service of members or our subordinate relationship to our Head which is Christ? It is impossible, indeed, to rejoice with him who receives an honour or to sympathise with him who suffers⁴⁵ when, by reason of their being separated from one another, each person cannot, in all likelihood, be kept informed about the affairs of his neighbour.

⁴¹ 1 Cor. 13:5

⁴² 1 Cor. 10:33

⁴³ Eph. 4:4

⁴⁴ 1 Cor. 12:12

⁴⁵ 1 Cor. 12:26

In Community, a private grace becomes a common possession

In addition, since no one has the capacity to receive all spiritual gifts, but the grace of the Spirit is given proportionately to the faith of each,⁴⁶ when one is living in association with others, the grace privately bestowed on each individual becomes the common possession of his fellows. 'To one, indeed, is given the word of wisdom; and to another, the word of knowledge; to another, faith, to another, prophecy, to another, the grace of healing,'⁴⁷ and so on. He who receives any of these gifts does not possess it for his own sake but rather for the sake of others, so that, in the life passed in community, the operation of the Holy Spirit in the individual is at the same time necessarily transmitted to all. He who lives alone, consequently, and has, perhaps, one gift renders it ineffectual by leaving it in disuse, since it lies buried within him.

The ascetic life is for both male and female alike

But our discourse is not addressed to men only; for members of the female sex are not rejected because of physical weakness, but, chosen for the army of Christ by reason of their virility of spirit, they also battle on the side of Christ and fight no less valiantly than men. Some even win a greater renown. Of the number of these are they who compose the virgin throng. Of these are they who are pre-eminent in the combat for the confession of the faith and in the triumphs of martyrdom. Indeed, women as well as men followed after the Lord during His life on earth and both sexes ministered to our Saviour.⁴⁸

Female ascetics should outdo men

Since there are convents not only for men but for women who also profess virginity, all that has been said applies to both sexes alike. It is necessary to keep one thing in mind, however: This way of life demands on the part of women a greater and a more signal decorum in the observance of poverty, silence, obedience, and fraternal charity, a greater strictness with regard to going about in public, more caution in the matter of acquaintances, greater care in preserving mutual affection and avoiding factional groups; for in all these respects the lives of women who profess virginity should exhibit a more excellent zeal.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Rom. 12:6

⁴⁷ 1 Cor. 12:8,9

⁴⁸ *An Introduction to the Ascetical Life* (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, p.12)

⁴⁹ *An Ascetical Discourse* (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, p.221)

Living the divine life

Return to the original grace of being made “in the image”

Man was made after the image and likeness of God; but sin marred the beauty of the image by dragging the soul down to passionate desires. Now, God, who made man, is the true life. Therefore, when man lost his likeness to God, he lost his participation in the true life; separated and estranged from God as he is, it is impossible for him to enjoy the blessedness of the divine life.

Let us return, then, to the grace [which was ours] in the beginning and from which we have alienated ourselves by sin, and let us again adorn ourselves with the beauty of God’s image, being made like our Creator through the quieting of our passions. He who, to the best of his ability, copies within himself the tranquillity of the divine nature attains to a likeness with the very soul of God; and, being made like God in this manner, he also achieves in full a semblance to the divine life and abides continually in unending blessedness.⁵⁰

Becoming a companion of the angels

Examine the actions of each day, compare them with those of the previous day and press on toward improvement. Advance in virtue, that you may become a companion of the angels. Spend your time in retirement, not for days nor months, but throughout many years, praising your Lord in song, night and day, in imitation of the Cherubim. If thus you begin and thus make an end, travelling the straight road for the short time of your probation, you will, by the grace of God, enter into paradise with the lamp of your soul brilliantly alight, to rejoice with Christ for ever and ever. Amen.⁵¹

The qualities of a spiritual director

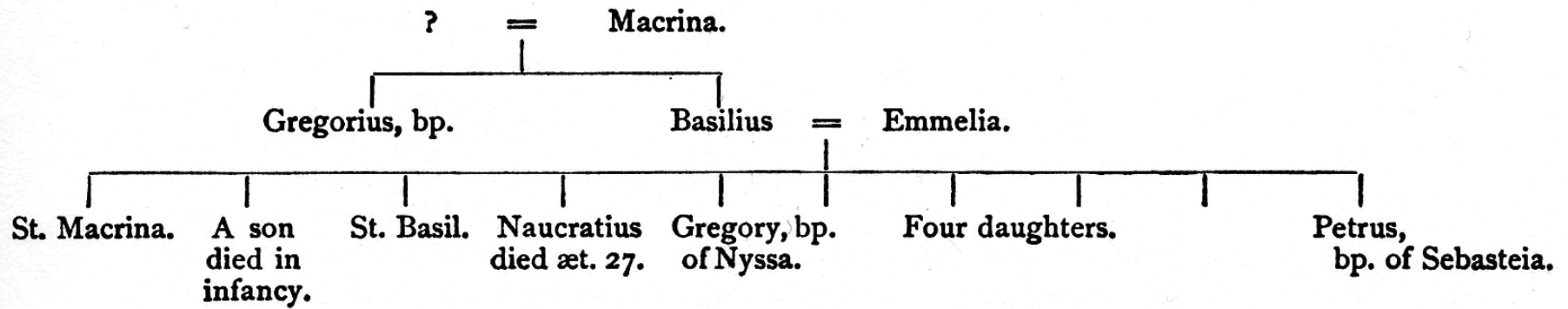
With much care and forethought set about finding a man skilled in guiding those who are making their way toward God who will be an unerring director of your life. He should be adorned with virtues, bearing witness by his own works to his love for God, conversant with the Holy Scripture, recollected, free from avarice, a good, quiet man, tranquil, pleasing to God, a lover of the poor, mild, forgiving, labouring hard for the spiritual advancement of his clients, without vainglory or arrogance, impervious to flattery, not given to vacillation, and preferring God to all things else. If you should find such a one, surrender yourself to him, completely renouncing and casting aside your own will, that you may be found a clean vessel, preserving unto your praise and glory the good qualities deposited in you.⁵²

⁵⁰ *An Ascetical Discourse* (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, p.207)

⁵¹ *On Renunciation of the World* (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, p.31)

⁵² *On Renunciation of the World* (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, p.19)

THE FAMILY OF St. BASIL.



Family tree taken from NPNF², Vol. 8, p.ix

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The following texts:

- *An Introduction to the Ascetical Life*
- *On Renunciation of the World*
- *An Ascetical Discourse*
- *The Long Rules*

are all found in Sister M. Monica Wagner (trans.), *St. Basil Ascetical Works* (Fathers of the Church Vol. 9) (Washington D.C: CUA Press, 1962)