
The Image of God in Humanity

“If you know not yourself, beautiful one among women, go in the footsteps of the flocks, and feed the kids by the shepherds’ tents.” (Song of Songs 1:8)

In order that you do not suffer misfortune, watch over yourself as the text says. For this is the surest way to protect your own good; realise how much more than the rest of creation you are honoured by the Creator. He did not make the heavens in his image, nor the moon, sun, the stars’ beauty, nor anything else you see in creation.

You alone are made in the likeness of that nature which surpasses all understanding, the image of incorruptible beauty, the impression of true divinity, receptacle of blessed life, seal of true light. You will become what he is by looking at him. By imitating him who shines within you [2 Cor 4:6], his gleam is reflected by your purity. Nothing in creation can compare to your greatness.

All of heaven is contained in the grasp of God’s hand, and the earth and sea fit in the palm of his hand. Although he holds all creation in his palm, you can wholly contain him. God dwells in you, penetrates you, and is not confined in you. He says “I will dwell in them, and walk with them” [2 Cor 6:16].

If you consider this, you will not let your eye rest on any earthly thing, nor will you consider heaven as marvellous. How can you admire the heavens, O man, seeing that you are more enduring? They pass away [Mt 24:35], but you remain for eternity with him who always exists.¹

Sin is like rust or mud spoiling the image

But in the way I have described, the whole procession of sin entered into man’s life for his undoing, and from a tiny source poured out upon mankind an infinite sea of evil. The soul’s divine beauty, that had been an imitation of its archetype, was, like a blade, darkened with the rust of sin; it no longer kept the beauty of the image it once possessed by nature, and was transformed into the ugliness of evil.

Thus man, who was so *great and precious*, as the Scriptures call him, fell from the value he had by nature. It is like people who slip and fall in the mud and get their faces so smeared that even their relatives cannot recognize them. So man fell into the mud of sin, and lost his likeness to the eternal Godhead. And in its stead he has, by his sin, clothed himself in an image that is of clay and mortal; and this is the image we earnestly counsel him to remove and wash away in the purifying waters of the Christian life. Once this earthly covering is removed, the soul’s beauty will once again shine forth.²

¹ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 2* (McCambley, pp.70-1)

² *On Virginity (From Glory to Glory, pp.113-4)*

Rediscover & attend to your image-likeness

Now the removal of what is foreign is a return to what is connatural and fitting; and this we can only achieve by becoming what we once were in the beginning when we were created. Yet to achieve this likeness to God is not within our power nor within any human capacity. It is a gift of God's bounty, for He directly bestowed this divine likeness on our human nature at its creation. By our human efforts we can merely clear away the accumulated filth of sin and thus allow the hidden beauty of the soul to shine forth.

This lesson is taught, I think, in the Gospel, where our Lord speaks to those who have ears for the mysteries that Wisdom teaches us: *The kingdom of God is within you* (Luke 17:21). I think that the text here points out that the gift of God is not separated from our nature nor is it far from those who choose to look for it. It dwells within everyone of us, ignored and forgotten, *choked with the cares and pleasures of life* (Luke 8:14), but is rediscovered when we turn our minds to it.³

“I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine” (Song of Songs 6:3) The transformation of the bride into an image of the archetype’s beauty

The following words come from the pure, unsullied bride: “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine”. Such is the measure and bond of perfection in virtue. We learn here that the purified soul must have God alone and never look at anything except him. Thus it must cleanse itself of every material deed and thought and be transformed into that which is spiritual and immaterial, a splendid image of the archetype’s beauty.

When a person sees a picture upon a board which accurately conforms to its model, he exclaims that one form exists in both: the model’s beauty is in the likeness and the archetype is clearly seen by the imitation. Similarly, the bride says, “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine.” In her conformity to Christ she receives her proper beauty, that primal blessedness of our nature, according to the image and likeness of the original beauty which alone is true and worthy of adoration. This resembles a mirror expertly fashioned by hand which accurately reflects the image of a face.

Thus, when the soul has prepared itself and has rejected every material stain, it represents the image of that pure, unstained beauty. The soul, a living mirror possessing free will, says, “when I look at my beloved’s face, the beauty of his form is reflected in me.”⁴

³ *On Virginit*y (From Glory to Glory, p.114)

⁴ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 15* (McCambley, p.264)

The Right Use of Free Will - Self Determination

We are our own parents – we give birth to ourselves by our choices

We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice.¹

Free will acts as the midwife in our birth

When we lay bare the hidden meaning of the history, Scripture is seen to teach that the birth which distresses the tyrant is the beginning of the virtuous life. I am speaking of that kind of birth in which free will serves as the midwife, delivering the child amid great pain. For no one causes grief to his antagonist unless he exhibits in himself those marks which give proof of his victory over the other.²

Each person is the painter of his own life - choice is the craftsman, the virtues are the paints

Just as when we are learning the art of painting, the teacher puts before us on a panel a beautifully executed model, and it is necessary for each student to imitate in every way the beauty of that model on his own panel, so that the panels of all will be adorned in accordance with the example of the beauty set before them; in the same way, since every person is the painter of his own life, and choice is the craftsman of the work, and the virtues are the paints for executing the image, there is no small danger that the imitation may change the Prototype into a hateful and ugly person instead of reproducing the master form if we sketch in the character of evil with muddy colours.

But, since it is possible, one must prepare the pure colours of the virtues, mixing them with each other according to some artistic formula for the imitation of beauty, so that we become an image of the image, having achieved the beauty of the Prototype through activity as a kind of imitation, as did Paul, who became an 'imitator of Christ,'³ through his life of virtue.⁴

¹ *Life of Moses* 2.3 (pp.55-6)

² *Life of Moses* 2.5 (p.56)

³ 1 Corinthians 4:16

⁴ *On Perfection* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), pp.110-1

Imitate the wise bee by moulding within yourself a honeycomb of virtues

Since the book of Proverbs desires wisdom's disciple to go to the bee ... wisdom says to her lovers, "Go to the bee and learn its work" [Prov. 6:8]. The bee's work in procuring honey is noble, for both kings and commoners use its labours for their health. (Proverbs says that the bee is desirable and honoured by everyone; although weak, it esteems wisdom and is given as an example of life for the virtuous. The bee is thus offered to us as honouring wisdom.)

These words counsel us not to abstain from good teachings, but by flying over the fields of divinely inspired words, we are to gather something from each one for the creation of wisdom. We mould within ourselves a honeycomb, so to speak, storing up in our hearts this labour of love as in a hive. The various doctrines create in our memory storehouses like the different cells in wax which are unable to be destroyed. By imitating that wise bee whose honeycomb is sweet and whose sting does not prick, we are always busy about the noble task of acquiring virtues.

A bee engaged in this task has truly exchanged the works of this present life for the blessings of eternity. It metes out the fruit of its own labours for the health of both kings and commoners. In the same way, the soul becomes desirable for her bridegroom; it is honoured by angels and perfects its strength in infirmity by honouring wisdom.⁵

"Behold, you are fair, my companion" (*Song of Songs* 1:15) – The soul is a mirror which takes on the appearance of what we choose to hold up to it

Since our free choice has the capacity to become whatever it desires, the Word rightly says to the bride who has been made beautiful: "You have rejected fellowship with evil and have drawn near to me. By approaching my archetypal beauty, you have yourself become beautiful. Just like a mirror you have taken on my appearance."

Human nature is in fact like a mirror, and it takes on different appearances according to the impressions of free will. If gold is held up to the mirror, the mirror assumes the appearance of gold and reflects the splendour of gold's substance. If anything abominable is held up, its ugliness is impressed on the mirror - for example a frog, toad, centipede, or anything unpleasant to behold.

Thus, the mirror represents in its own being whatever is placed before it. So too the soul, when cleansed by the Word from vice, it receives within itself the sun's orb and shines with this reflected light. Therefore, the Word says to his bride: "You have become beautiful by approaching my light; by drawing near to me, you have attained communion with my beauty." "Behold, you are fair, my companion".⁶

⁵ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 9* (McCambley, p.174)

⁶ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 4* (McCambley, pp.92-3)

The Misuse of Free Will - The Cause of Sin & Evil

Sin & evil are a human invention not a Divine creation

Man was, as we have said, the *image and likeness* of the power that rules all creation; and this likeness to the ruler of all things also extended to man's power of self-determination: man could choose whatever pleased him and was not enslaved to any external necessity. But man was led astray by deception and deliberately drew upon himself that catastrophe which all mortals now share. Man himself invented evil: he did not find it in God. Nor did God make death; it was man himself who, as it were, was the creator of all that is evil.

All who have eyes can enjoy the sunshine, and anyone, if he likes, may deny himself this pleasure simply by closing his eyes. In such a case it is not the sun that withdraws or produces the darkness; rather, man himself puts an obstacle between himself and the sun by closing his eyes. And yet even when the eyes are closed, they cannot cease to function; hence it is the activity of the eyes which bring about the appearance of darkness in man because he deliberately shuts off his vision.

Again, it is like a man who builds a house and does not make any provision for the light to come in. Hence he will obviously be in darkness, since he has deliberately cut himself off from the light.

... sin does not exist in nature apart from free will; it is not a substance in its own right. All of God's creatures are good, and nothing He has made may despised: He made all things *very good* (Gen. 1:31).¹

Each man "makes his own plagues" through his misuse of free will

The Egyptians' free will caused all [the plagues on Egypt] and the impartial justice of God followed their free choices and brought upon them what they deserved. As we follow closely the reading of the text at hand, let us not draw the conclusion that these distresses upon those who deserved them came directly from God, but rather let us observe that each man makes his own plagues when through his own free will he inclines toward these painful experiences. The Apostle says the same thing when talking to such a person: *Your stubborn refusal to repent is only adding to the anger God will have toward you on that day of anger when his just judgments will be made known. He will repay each one as his works deserve.*²

What we are describing is like some destructive and bilious humor which arises in the intestines because of a dissipated life. When the physician induces vomiting by medicines, he does not become the cause of the sickness in the body, but on the contrary it is disorderly eating habits which bring it about; medical knowledge only brought it into the open. In the same way, even if one says that painful retribution comes directly from God upon those who abuse their free will, it would only be reasonable to note that such sufferings have their origin and cause in ourselves.³

¹ *On Virginit* (From Glory to Glory, pp.112-3)

² Romans 2:5ff

³ *Life of Moses* 2.86-7 (p.74)

The frog-like lifestyle of living according to “the passions”

See Exodus 8:1-15 (the plague of frogs)

The breed of frogs is obviously the destructive offspring of the evil which is brought to life from the sordid heart of men as though from some slimy mire. These frogs overrun the houses of those who choose to live the Egyptian life, appearing on the tables, not even sparing the beds, and entering the very storerooms.

One sees in the sordid and licentious life that which is indeed born out of clay and mire and that which, through imitation of the irrational, remains in a form of life neither altogether human nor frog. Being a man by nature and becoming a beast by passion, this kind of person exhibits an amphibious form of life ambiguous in nature. In addition, one will also find the evidences of such an illness, not only on the bed, but also on the table and in the storeroom and throughout the house.⁴

The endless unsatisfying slavery of Egyptian brick making

For this demon who does men harm and corrupts them is intensely concerned that his subjects not look to heaven but that they stoop to earth and make bricks within themselves out of the clay. It is clear to everyone that whatever belongs to material pleasure consists assuredly of earth or water, whether one is concerned with the pleasures of the stomach and the table or with the pleasures of wealth.

The mixture of these elements becomes clay and is so called. Those who yearn after the pleasures of clay and keep on filling themselves with them never keep the space which receives them full; for although it becomes empty again before the next pouring. In the same way the brick maker keeps on throwing yet more clay into the mould while it is constantly being emptied. I think that anyone can easily perceive the meaning of this figure by looking at the appetitive part of the soul.

For if he who fills his desire in one of the things which he pursues should then incline his desire to something else, he finds himself empty again in that regard. And if he should fill himself on this, he becomes empty and a vacant container once more for something else. And we never stop doing this until we depart from this material life.⁵

⁴ *Life of Moses* 2.69-70 (p.70)

⁵ *Life of Moses* 2.59-61 (pp.67-8)

The Synergy of Ascetic Effort & Grace

Synergy

For the grace of the Spirit gives eternal life and unspeakable joy in heaven, but it is the love of the toils because of the faith that makes the soul worthy of receiving the gifts and enjoying the grace. When a just act and grace of the Spirit coincide, they fill the soul into which they come with a blessed life; but, separated from each other, they provide no gain for the soul.

For the grace of God does not naturally frequent souls which are fleeing from salvation, and the power of human virtue is not sufficient in itself to cause the souls not sharing in grace to ascend to the beauty of life. For it says: 'Unless the Lord build the house and keep the city, he labours in vain that builds it and watches in vain who keeps it.'¹ And again: 'For not with their own sword did they conquer the land; nor did their own arm make them victorious (although they used their swords and arms in their struggles), but it was your right hand and your arm, and the light of your countenance.'²

What does this mean? It means that the Lord from on high enters into an alliance with the doers, and, at the same time, it means that it is not necessary for men considering human efforts to think that the entire crown rests upon their struggles, but it is necessary for them to refer their hopes for their goal to the will of God.³

The insufficiency of human effort alone

So wicked and hard to cure and strong are those things possessed in the depths of our souls that it is not possible to rub them out and to remove them through human efforts and virtue alone unless through prayer we take the power of the Spirit as an ally and, in this way, conquer the evil which is playing the tyrant within us, as the Spirit teaches us through the voice of David: 'Cleanse me from my unknown faults, and from wanton sin spare your servant.'^{4 5}

¹ Cf. Psalm 126:1

² Psalm 43:4

³ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), pp.131-2

⁴ Psalm 18:13,14

⁵ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p.137

Ascetic efforts are “the flowers of labours and the fruits of the Spirit” and not to be credited solely to the individual

It is necessary to endure the toils of prayer and fasting and the other works with much pleasure and love and hope, and to believe that activities are the flowers of labours and the fruits of the Spirit. If anyone imputes these things to himself and gives himself entire credit for them, in the place of the undefiled fruits, there grows up in such a person false pretension and pride, and these passions, like some blight growing in the souls of those easily satisfied, destroy and nullify the labours.⁶

Despite his ceaseless effort, the ascetic never thinks for a minute that he has made himself worthy of God

For the person who desires [the perfect love of Christ] and looks to the promise above does not stand elated because things have been set right by fasting or by keeping watch or by zealously pursuing any of the other virtues. Being full of divine longing and looking anxiously toward the One who is calling, he considers all that he suffers in attaining Him small and unworthy of the prize. He struggles valiantly to the end of his life, matching toil with toil and virtue with virtue, until he establishes himself as an honour to God because of his deeds, not thinking for a minute that he has made himself worthy of God.⁷

“Love of God does not come to us simply or automatically”

It is necessary, indeed, for each of you to put into your souls fear and love as a kind of strong and firm foundation, and to refresh it with good deeds and sufficient prayer. Love of God does not come to us simply or automatically, but through many sufferings and great concern in cooperation with Christ, as Wisdom has said: ‘If you shall seek her like silver and like hidden treasures search her out: then will you understand the fear of the Lord: the knowledge of God you will find.’^{8 9}

⁶ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p.155

⁷ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p.144

⁸ Proverbs 2:4,5

⁹ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p.148

The Divine Infinity & Incomprehensibility

God's nature is incomprehensible. Our various concepts, terms and names for Him are like trying to define the essence of perfume from the smell

“Your name is ointment poured forth” [Song of Songs 1:3]. To me something like the following is signified through this verse: the unlimited [divine] nature cannot be accurately contained by a name; rather, every capacity for concepts and every form of words and names, even if they seem to contain something great and befitting God's glory, are unable to grasp his reality. But starting from certain traces and sparks, as it were, our words aim at the unknown, and from what we can grasp we make conjectures by a kind of analogy about the ungraspable.

Whatever name we may adopt to signify the perfume of divinity, it is not the perfume itself which we signify by our expressions; rather, we reveal just the slightest trace of the divine odour by means of our theological terms. As in the case of jars from which perfume has been poured out, the perfume's own nature is not known. But from the slight traces left from the vapours in the jar we get some idea about the perfume that has been emptied out.

Hence we learn that the perfume of divinity, whatever it is in its essence, transcends every name and thought. However, the wonders visible in the universe give material for the theological terms by which we call God wise, powerful, good, holy, blessed, eternal, judge, saviour, and so forth. All these give some small indication of the divine perfume's quality. Creation retains the traces of this divine perfume through its visible wonders as in the example of a perfume jar.¹

The bubbling spring – a metaphor for the infinity of God

It is just as if you could see that spring which Scripture tells us rose from the earth at the beginning in such quantities that it watered the entire face of the earth (Gen. 2:10 ff.). As you came near the spring you would marvel, seeing that the water was endless, as it constantly gushed up and poured forth. Yet you could never say that you had seen all the water. How could you see what was still hidden in the bosom of the earth? Hence no matter how long you might stay at the spring, you would always be beginning to see the water. For the water never stops flowing, and it is always beginning to bubble up again.

It is the same with one who fixes his gaze on the infinite beauty of God. It is constantly being discovered anew, and it is always seen as something new and strange in comparison with what the mind has already understood. And as God continues to reveal Himself, man continues to wonder; and he never exhausts his desire to see more, since what he is waiting for is always more magnificent, more divine, than all that he has already seen.²

¹ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 1* (McCambley, p.53)

² *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 11 (From Glory to Glory, p.246)*

“Seeing” God in the darkness

What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it [Exodus 20:21]? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany [the burning bush], for then the Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness ... Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated.

For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, *No one has ever seen God*,³ thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature...

... The divine word at the beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men, since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.⁴

³ John 1:18

⁴ *Life of Moses* 2.162-5 (pp.94-6)

***Epektasis* – The Perpetual Ascent of the Soul**

Philippians 3:12-14

It is not that I have already achieved this. I have not yet reached perfection, but I press on, hoping to take hold of that for which Christ once took hold of me. My friends, I do not claim to have hold of it yet. What I do say is this: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what lies ahead, I press towards the finishing line, to win the heavenly prize to which God has called me in Christ Jesus.¹

The perpetual ascent of the soul

If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward thrust (for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it), the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher - by its desire of the heavenly things *straining ahead for what is still to come*,² as the Apostle says.

Made to desire and not to abandon the transcendent height by the things already attained, it makes its way upward without ceasing, ever through its prior accomplishments renewing its intensity for the flight. Activity directed towards virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion; this kind of activity alone does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it.

For this reason we also say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater, at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course. Once having set foot on the ladder which God set up (as Jacob says),³ he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained.

He denied the specious kinship with the Egyptian queen ... avenged the Hebrew... chose the desert way of life ... saw the brilliance of the light ... made his approach to the light ... brought his kinsmen and countrymen out to freedom ... saw the enemy drowning in the sea ... made camps under the cloud ... quenched thirst with the rock ... produced bread from heaven .. entered the darkness ... slipped into the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle not made with hands ... learned the secrets of the divine priesthood ... destroyed the idol ... supplicated the divine Being.

He shone with glory. And although lifted up through such lofty experiences, he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being.⁴

¹ Philippians 3:12-14

² Philippians 3:13

³ Genesis 28:12

⁴ *Life of Moses* 2.225-30 (pp.113-4)

“Arise, come, my companion, my fair one, my dove” (Song of Songs 2:10)

[In the Song of Songs] we now see the bride being led by the Word up a rising staircase by the steps of virtue to the heights of perfection. First the Word sends her a ray of light through the windows of the prophets and the lattices of the Law. He exhorts her to draw near to the light and to become beautiful by being transformed into a dove’s image in the light. The bride at this point partakes in the good as much as she can. Then he starts again to draw her to participate in a higher beauty, as if she had never tasted it. Thus, as she progresses, her desire grows with each step. And, because there is always an unlimited good beyond what the bride has attained, she always seems to be just beginning her ascent.

Therefore the Word says once again to the bride whom he has awakened; “Arise.” And when she has come to him, he says, “Come.” For one who has been called to rise in this way can always rise further, and one who runs to the Lord will always have wide open spaces before him. And so we must constantly rise and never cease drawing closer. As often as the bridegroom says “Arise” and “Come,” he gives the power to ascend to what is better. Thus you must understand what follows in the text.

When the bridegroom exhorts the bride who is already beautiful to become beautiful, he clearly recalls the words of the Apostle who bids the same image to be transformed “from glory to glory” [2 Cor 3:18]. By glory he means what we have grasped and found at any given moment. No matter how great and exalted that glory may be, we believe that it is less than that for which we still hope. Although she is a dove by what she had achieved, nevertheless, the bride is bidden to become a dove once again by being transformed into something better.⁵

The infinity of God and the journey (Rowan Williams)

If the Christian life is a journey into God, it is a journey into infinity – not an abstract ‘absoluteness’ but an infinity of what Gregory simply calls ‘goodness’, an infinite resource of mercy, help and delight. And because of its limitless nature, this journey is always marked by *desire*, by hope and longing, never coming to possess or control its object. This is perhaps Gregory’s most vivid way of expressing the Christian conviction of God’s transcendent freedom and objectivity: faith is *always*, not only in this life, a longing and trust directed away from itself towards an object to which it will never be adequate, which it will never comprehend. God is what we have not yet understood, the sign of a strange and unpredictable future.⁶

⁵ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 5* (McCambley, pp.119-20)

⁶ R. Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990)², pp.57-8

The Vision of God

God granted Moses' request by denying it

And the bold request which goes up the mountains of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face. The divine voice granted what was requested in what was denied, showing in a few words an immeasurable depth of thought. The munificence of God assented to the fulfilment of his desire, but did not promise any cessation or satiety of the desire.¹

The vision of God is never to be satisfied in the desire

This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied.²

To see God means to follow Him

So Moses, who eagerly seeks to behold God, is now taught how he can behold Him: to follow God wherever he might lead is to behold God. His passing by signifies his guiding the one who follows, for someone who does not know the way cannot complete his journey safely in any other way than by following behind his guide. He who leads, then, by his guidance shows the way to the one following. He who follows will not turn aside from the right way if he always keeps the back of his leader in view.

For he who moves to one side or brings to face his guide assumes another direction for himself than the one his guide shows him. Therefore, he says to the one who is led, *My face is not to be seen*,³ that is, "Do not face your guide." If he does so, his course will certainly be in the opposite direction, for good does not look good in the face, but follows it.

What is perceived to be its opposite is face to face with the good, for what looks virtue in the face is evil. But virtue is not perceived in contrast to virtue. Therefore, Moses does not look God in the face, but looks at his back; for whoever looks at him face to face shall not live, as the divine voice testifies, *man cannot see the face of the Lord and live*.^{4 5}

¹ *Life of Moses* 2.232 (p.114)

² *Life of Moses* 2.239 (p.116)

³ Exodus 33:23

⁴ Exodus 33:20

⁵ *Life of Moses* 2.252-4 (pp.119-20)

Perfection

Continual growth

Although on the whole my argument has shown that what is sought for is unattainable, one should not disregard the commandment of the Lord which says, *Therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect.*¹ For in the case of those things which are good by nature, even if men of understanding were not able to attain to everything, by attaining even a part they could yet gain a great deal.

We should show great diligence not to fall away from the perfection which is attainable but to acquire as much as is possible: To that extent let us make progress within the realm of what we seek. For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness.²

Servanthood

Having come to the very top of the mountain, [Moses], like a good sculptor who has fashioned well the whole statue of his own life, did not simply bring his creation to an end but he placed the finishing touch on his work.

What does the history say about this? That *Moses the servant of Yahweh died as Yahweh decreed, and no one has ever found his grave, his eyes were undimmed, and his face unimpaired.*³ From this we learn that, when one has accomplished such noble actions, he is considered worthy of this sublime name, to be called servant of Yahweh ... This for him is the end of the virtuous life, an end wrought by the word of God. History speaks of “death,” a living death, which is not followed by the grave, or fills the tomb, or brings dimness to the eyes and aging to the person.

What then are we taught through what has been said? To have but one purpose in life: to be called servants of God by virtue of the lives we live.⁴

The complete recovery of image-likeness

The person who by every means achieves incorruption in his whole life admits no corruption in himself. For he who has truly come to be in the image of God and who has in no way turned aside from the divine character bears in himself its distinguishing marks and shows in all things his conformity to the archetype; he beautifies his own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable, and shares in no evil at all.⁵

¹ Matthew 5:48

² *Life of Moses* 1.9-10 (p.31)

³ Deuteronomy 34:5-7 (modified)

⁴ *Life of Moses* 2.313-5 (pp.134-5)

⁵ *Life of Moses* 2.318 (p.136)

Becoming God's friend

These things concerning the perfection of the virtuous life, O Caesarius, man of God, we have briefly written for you, tracing in outline like a pattern of beauty the life of the great Moses so that each one of us might copy the image of the beauty which has been shown to us by imitating his way of life. What more trustworthy witness of the fact that Moses did attain the perfection which was possible would be found than the divine voice which said to him: *I have known you more than all others?*⁶ It is also shown in the fact that he is named the "friend of God"⁷ by God himself, and by preferring to perish with all the rest if the Divine One did not through his good will forgive their errors, he stayed God's wrath against the Israelites. God averted judgment so as not to grieve his friend. All such things are a clear testimony and demonstration of the fact that the life of Moses did ascend the highest mount of perfection.

Since the goal of the virtuous way of life was the very thing we have been seeking, and this goal has been found in what we have said, it is time for you, noble friend, to look to that example and, by transferring to your own life what is contemplated through spiritual interpretation of the things spoken literally, to be known by God and to become his friend. This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like and contractual arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing worthy of honour and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life.⁸

⁶ Exodus 33:17,12 (in the Septuagint version)

⁷ Exodus 33:11

⁸ *Life of Moses* 2.319-20 (pp.136-7)

“The Last Things”

God’s intention is not our annihilation - God is not like a child who quickly builds & then destroys

The fabricator of the universe wanted to create man, not as a contemptible animal but as more honourable than all; so he brought him into being and appointed him king of the creation under heaven. Having decided this, and having endowed such a being with wise and godlike qualities and adorned him with much beauty, did he bring him into existence merely with the intention that once born he would perish and suffer complete annihilation?

That would surely be an idle goal, and it would be extremely improper to attribute such thinking to God. He then resembles small children who build enthusiastically and destroy as quickly their construction, which serves no useful purpose since their thought does not arrive at any useful achievement.

The doctrine we have received is quite the reverse. He created the firstformed man immortal, but when transgression and sin intruded he deprived him of immortality as a penalty for his fault. Then the fountain of goodness overflowed with kindness and turned in pity to the work of his own hands which he had adorned with wisdom and knowledge, and he was pleased to restore us to our ancient state.¹

The resurrection is ultimately a mystery – those who speculate on it are like those at night speculating on the light of the sun

The truth about this is stored up in the hidden treasury of wisdom and will be disclosed at the time when we are taught the mystery of the resurrection in deed, when we will no longer need words to reveal what we hope for. If at night wakeful people discuss at length what the light of the sun is like, the grace of the rays by its appearance makes vain the verbal description; in the same way every reasoning which conjectures about the future restoration will be proved worthless when what we expect comes to us in experience.²

Ultimately, God will be all in all

A way lies open to all souls from every rank to that blessedness ... all will look to the same goal, and every evil will be destroyed. God will be all in all, and all persons will be united together in fellowship of the Good, Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.³

¹ *In sanctum Pascha* in A. Spira and C. Klock (eds), *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa* (Cambridge MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1981), p.11

² C. Roth (trans), *On the Soul and the Resurrection: St Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: SVS Press, 2002), p.113

³ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 15* (McCambley, p.276)

Pain is a side-effect of the purification process, not divine punishment

[Macrina said] “It is not out of hatred or vengeance for an evil life (in my opinion) that God brings painful conditions upon sinners, when He seeks after and draws to Himself whatever has come to birth for His sake; but for a better purpose He draws the soul to Himself, who is the fountain of all blessedness. The painful condition necessarily happens as an incidental consequence to the one who is drawn.

When goldsmiths purify gold by fire from the matter which is mixed with it, they do not only melt the adulterant in the fire, but inevitably the pure metal is melted along with the base admixture. When the latter is consumed the former remains. In the same way when evil is consumed by the purifying fire, the soul which is united to evil must necessarily also be in the fire until the base adulterant material is removed, consumed by the fire.

Or if particularly sticky mud is plastered thickly around a rope, then the end of the rope is led through some small space, and some one pulls forcibly on the end of the rope towards the inside, necessarily the rope must follow the one who pulls, but the plastered mud must remain outside of the hole scraped off the rope by the forcible pulling. Because of the mud the rope does not move forward easily, but has to be pulled hard.

Something like this I think we should imagine for the state of the soul. Wrapped up as it is in material and earthly attachments, it struggles and is stretched, as God draws His own to Himself. What is alien to God has to be scraped off forcibly because it has somehow grown onto the soul. This is the cause of the sharp and unbearable pains which the soul must endure.”

“So the divine judgment,” [Gregory said], “as it seems, does not primarily bring punishment on sinners. As our discourse has just shown, it operates only by separating good from evil and pulling the soul towards the fellowship of blessedness. It is the tearing apart of what has grown together which brings pain to the one who is being pulled.”

“This is my opinion too,” said my teacher (Macrina). “I also think that the measure of pain is proportional to the quantity of evil in each person. For it is not likely that the one who has gone far in forbidden evils and the one who has fallen into moderate transgressions will be distressed equally as they are purified from their wretched condition. Probably that painful fire is kindled more or less hotly depending on the quantity of matter, and it burns as long as it has fuel. So if a person’s material burden is great, the consuming flame must also become great and long-lasting; but if someone is exposed to the consuming fire more briefly, the punishment relaxes its severe and piercing operation in proportion to the smaller measure of evil in the subject.

For evil must be altogether removed in every way from being, and, as we have said before, that which does not really exist must cease to exist at all. Since evil does not exist by its nature outside of free choice, when all choice is in God, evil will suffer a complete annihilation because no receptacle remains for it.”⁴

⁴ C. Roth (trans), *On the Soul and the Resurrection: St Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: SVS Press, 2002), pp.83-5

Bibliography

V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967)

J. Daniélou & H. Musurillo (translator), *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (New York: SVS Press, 2001)

E. Ferguson and A. J. Malherbe (translators), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978)

C. McCambley (translator), *Gregory of Nyssa: Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987)

C. Roth (translator), *On the Soul and the Resurrection: St Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: SVS Press, 2002)

A. Spira and C. Klock (editors), *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa* (Cambridge MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1981)

R. Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990)²