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Saints Alive!

(or “The Bits the Hagiographers Left Out”)

Ss. Basil and Gregory: Survivors of a Miserable Wreck

There are only a few Orthodox saints to whom the church has granted the title, “the Great”: Athanasius of Alexandria, Anthony, Macarius and Euthymius of the Egyptian Thebaid, and Basil of Cappadocia. As both the founder of organized cenobitic monasticism in the West, and the ascetic warrior-bishop who threw his tempered intellect into battle against the Arians, Basil’s title fits him well. His name fits him even better. He stands in Orthodox tradition as a king: noble, principled and imperious.

It was in his retreat at Iborra, near Cappadocia (in modern-day Turkey) that the young Basil forged his famous monastic rule. Even today there are distinct traces of the Basilian rule threaded through Greek and Slavic monasticism, and Basil inscribed his legacy in two versions: the Shorter Rule, and the Longer. Iborra was a wild and mountainous spot on the edge of Asia Minor and Basil lived there, first with Gregory Nazianzen (St. Gregory the Theologian) and then with a growing number of disciples, including, for a time, his own brothers Peter and Gregory (of Nyssa). In the Rule he recommended nothing he had not done himself. Physical labor included hauling manure, chopping firewood, and dressing the rough stones to be used for building. Worship services were long and fervent, food was poor, discipline exact—and Basil, with his iron temperament, gloried in it.

Years later, in a letter warm with affection and good humor, Gregory Nazianzen reminded Basil of their sojourn at Iborra, and we read with delight his account of an early rescue of the young ascetics:

Your roofless and doorless hut, your fireless and smokeless hearth, your walls dried by fire, that we may not be hit by the drops of mud, condemned like Tantalus thirsting in the midst of waters, and that pitiable feast with nothing to eat, to which we were invited from Cappadocia, not as to a Lotus-eater’s poverty, but to a table of Alcinoüs—we young and miserable survivors of a wreck. For I remember those loaves and the broth (so it was called), yes, and I shall remember them too, and my poor teeth that slipped on your hunks of bread, and then braced themselves up, and pulled themselves as it were out of mud. You yourself will raise these things to a higher strain of tragedy, having learnt to talk big through your own sufferings...for if we had not been quickly

*delivered by that great supporter of the poor—I mean your mother—who appeared opportunely like a harbour to men tossed by a storm, we should long ago have been dead, rather pitied than admired for our faith in Pontus...**

* Letters of St. Gregory Nazianzen, Division II, Letter 5, Eerdman's Post-Nicene Fathers.