



Basilian Fathers

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SAINT BASIL

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The Congregation of St. Basil was founded by ten teacher-priests in the town of Annonay, France, on Nov. 21, 1822, and they chose St. Basil of Caesarea, also known as St. Basil the Great (329 - 379 A.D.), as their patron saint. But what does this fourth century Cappadocian saint have that would inspire the Congregation that arose in France in the 19th century and lives on with the educators and pastors of North and South America in the 21st century?

Born to a wealthy family with ten siblings, St. Basil was afforded the best education of the time. His father, Basil the Elder, was a lawyer and rhetorician, and his mother, Emmelia, was the daughter of a martyred Christian in the persecutions of Emperor Maximin Daia (320 A.D.). St. Basil first received his education under his father, then in Caesarea when he was 14 years old. This was followed by a short period of studies in Constantinople, then Athens, where he first met the person who would become one of his closest friends, St. Gregory the Theologian (who later became bishop of Nazianzus). While they studied secular and pagan philosophy, the two friends encouraged one another as they pursued the way of “true philosophy,” that is, Christianity, in Athens. St. Basil then returned to Caesarea to work as a teacher of rhetoric.

It is worthy to note that St. Basil made use of secular learning, and even later as a Christian bishop, encouraged the young to learn from secular and pagan Greek philosophy. In a treatise “For the Young on How They Might Derive Profit from Hellenic Literature” (written 364 A.D.), St. Basil taught his young Christian students to discern wisdom and virtue in the writings of Greek philosophers and poets, and to have the bees as models of this discernment, because they “don’t go to all the flowers indiscriminately. And when they do fly to certain ones, they don’t try to carry them off whole. They take only what is useful for their work and leave the rest without a backward glance. In the same way, we, if we are wise, will gather what suits our needs and conforms to the truth, and pass over the rest” (James Hanrahan, 58). As educators and pastors, we can encourage our young to study the secular arts and sciences, as well as help them discern, like bees, through the multitude of information they come across through the various media sources. St. Basil’s treatise is also historically significant for the Basilian Fathers, as it was one of the Greek texts studied in the College of Annonay and may have inspired the first Basilians to choose St. Basil as their patron (Ibid., 55).

A turning point in St. Basil’s life was his choice to be baptized a Christian. He left home and travelled through Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, where he learnt and experienced the cenobitic form of monasticism. St. Basil returned to his family estate at Annisa, and inspired by his eldest sister Macrina, decided to turn this estate to a monastic community. Eventually, he was ordained a priest, and later bishop of Caesarea, completely involved in the affairs of church politics and theological divisions. He was thus a person who had a monastic vocation yet who used the cenobitic monastic vision to the service of the church and the world, all the while carrying his rhetorical and teaching skills into his pastoral vocation.

The life of community in cenobitic monasticism was favoured by St. Basil over solitary retirement as a form of religious life. Among the reasons that St. Basil gave in support of communal life was the fact that there would be many living together and serving each other’s needs, using their gifts together in a common vision of life, and living out the law of love. In fact, St. Basil warns against the ineffectual use of the Holy Spirit’s gifts by a Christian who lives in solitude: “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 Long Rules*, in M. Monica Wagner, 250). Solitary living could thus be selfish, whereas communal life is centred on the common good: “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” (Ibid., 249). Although St. Basil wrote rules that guide Eastern Christian cenobitic monasticism to the present day, those rules do not direct the Basilians. Instead, the Congregation of St. Basil follow their own Basilian Way of Life that is based on a life of community and Eucharist-centred prayer, while dedicated to the mission of education and evangelization. Yet, what St. Basil says about the benefits of community life, and his warning against a solitary life, is a model for Basilian priests who continue to live and support one another in a life of community that has a multitude of gifts and charisms working towards the common goal of Christian education.

Thus, the Eastern Church Father St. Basil the Great, who thought of communal life as the ideal Christian philosophy, serves as a patron saint and model to our Congregation of teacher-priests living in community today. Even though Saint Basil was not the founder of our congregation, his life as a scholar, a teacher, a cenobitic monk, and a pastor inspires us to a life of community that is focused on the mission of education and evangelization, both in the Church and the wider culture.

Bibliography:

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