

Foreword

EVERY STUDENT OF CHRISTIAN theology, even if only a dilettante, has heard of the Cappadocian Fathers. But who were the Cappadocian Mothers?

The “Fathers” of the church were those bishops and teachers of the first six centuries who formulated the doctrines of the faith summarized in the creeds. And the Cappadocian Fathers were those three great bishops of the province of Cappadocia in the fourth century, two brothers and their friend, who played a key role in shaping the final form of the “Nicene” Creed. Basil was archbishop of Caesarea, the capital of the province of Cappadocia in the Greek-speaking Eastern Roman Empire (found today in central Turkey). As a student in Athens, he had become a close friend of Gregory from Nazianzus, who eventually was to become the archbishop of Constantinople, the eastern imperial capital. Nazianzen was the great poet and orator who went to the city to win it over to the orthodox Christian faith in the full deity of Christ. He is famous for his great Theological Orations on the Holy Trinity and was given the title of “The Divine” or “The Theologian” along with the Apostle John. The other Gregory was the younger brother of Basil, educated at home on the family estate, appointed bishop of Nyssa by his older brother as part of an ecclesiastical power struggle. He outshone both his elders as the great Christian philosophical theologian of his day.

But who were the Cappadocian Mothers?

Dr. Carla Sunberg, in this book, rich in theology, spirituality, and patristic scholarship, provides an introduction to these influential women. In brief, they were the mothers and sisters of these three great doctors of the church. And what the book demonstrates is that, although the “Fathers” have had all the fame, it was these “Mothers” who shaped their character. Basil’s grandmother, Macrina, his mother, Emelia, and his older sister, Macrina, were the strong influences on his life and that of his younger brother, Gregory. They called the younger Macrina their teacher. It was Gregory Nazianzen’s

mother, Nonna, who won his father to the Christian faith and gave her son a Christian upbringing, and it was his sister, Gorgonia, who exemplified for him in her suffering the holy life. In addition there were Basil's two younger sisters, Theosebia and one whose name we do not know who went back on her vows of virginity to be married.

Patristics has become a passionate interest among many Western evangelicals over the past few decades. Many self-styled "conservatives" have come to see that learning from our Christian past cannot stop at the Reformation. And many who would never think of themselves as "conservative" have discovered the rich seam of spirituality in the ancient church. To inform our Christian living in this post-Christian age, many have come to see that it is of inestimable benefit to learn from the great preachers and thinkers who wrestled with the questions of Christian doctrine and ethics in ancient multicultural society. While Augustine has influenced us all in the West, the great doctors of the Eastern Church have often been ignored. But living and working in Russia for thirteen years, Dr. Sunberg came to love the Orthodox Church, whose life, liturgy and spirituality are shaped by the Eastern Fathers and Mothers. This book is therefore a feast of patristic scholarship.

But feminism is also a lively area of fresh thinking in our generation, challenging the church to rethink many of its cultural assumptions about the role of women. Dr. Sunberg is an ordained elder in the Wesleyan "holiness" tradition, which has recognized the call of women to preach and minister since the pioneering ministry of the Methodist Phoebe Palmer in the mid-nineteenth century, foreshadowed by John Wesley himself. Another of the contributions of this book therefore is to help us learn from these strong Christian women of a distant age and culture who, while they did not preach or publish, shaped and formed the character and outlook of their close male relatives who did. They were the exemplars of holy living—powerfully compassionate, faith-full, disciplined living.

That points to a third area of interest and concern. This is a book about Christian holiness. Far from being an abstract treatise of doctrinal ideas, it helps us to understand that, as Stanley Hauerwas and others have emphasized, Christian holiness is a matter of *character*. It is of course rooted in the spiritual life with its deep emotional undercurrent, its passionate love for God and for others, but it not mere emotionalism. It shows itself in disciplined living, in careful stewardship of resources, in generous giving, in compassionate caring, in the living fellowship of Christian community. In all of these it is "deification," reflecting the image of God. That word is, of course, easily misunderstood by Western Christians. But Dr. Sunberg helps

us to see from the study of the lives of these women what it does, and what it does not, mean.

This is a book which will bring alive the practical daily circumstances in which these women lived and truly loved. It was in a culture and a time far distant from our own. But here we can find a fresh vision not only of the powerful influence of the Christian family and home, but of the way in which Christian women—even with all the restrictions they faced in a patriarchal society—influenced and shaped the world of their day. It will help us to see what Christian holiness looks like, lived out in real life.

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