Introduction

The task of describing a writer's thought, as well as that of interpreting past events, belongs to a disciplined imagination. The discipline, of course, involves assembling and assessing what can be regarded as evidence no matter whether we are thinking of texts or of surviving material artifacts of various kinds. The imagination seeks to put in order what discipline has assembled into a framework for interpretation. Needless to say, the same or nearly the same body of evidence can result in widely differing interpretations, sometimes complementary but sometimes contradictory. It is somewhat like joining the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle so as to complete the picture found on the puzzle box. Yet the analogy breaks down because there is no picture to guide the process of assembling the pieces, as well as because the pieces can be arranged in several different ways. It might also be argued that in much modern historical writing the problem is that there are too many pieces of evidence, some of which must be either ignored or discarded. But in the study of late antiquity the problem is that so very many of the pieces have been lost, and only imagination can supply the contexts in which those that survive may be placed.

With respect to Gregory of Nyssa the difficulty is first of all that only educated guesses can establish the broad outline of his life and work, as well as a reasonable chronological order in which to place his writings. While there appears to be broad agreement at a general level, coming to terms with matters of detail engenders ongoing scholarly debate. For example, Pierre Maraval's 1971 edition of the *Life of Macrina* (SC 178) provides a careful and persuasive treatment of the chronology of Gregory's life surrounding the time of his sister's death; but in his 1990 edition of Gregory's letters (SC 363) further reflection has led him to quite significant revisions. Neither my competence nor my purpose allow me the possibility of entering the debates regarding the reconstruction of Gregory's life and the dating of his writings. My interest is to examine his thought and to supply one perspective

by which it can be interpreted. Yet even here there are perplexities. Gregory is not a systematic thinker, and he is well aware that what he has to say about God and about the destiny of humanity and this world must remain speculative and must recognize the limitations imposed upon our capacity for knowledge not only by our fallen condition but also by the fact that we are creatures.

It is my conviction that the framework binding together Gregory's rather kaleidoscopic thought is not so much his use of Greek philosophy or even his commitment to the dogmatic development represented primarily by the Trinitarian conclusions of the Council of Constantinople in 381, as by a Christian piety focused upon God's saving work in Christ as articulated in scripture. With this is mind, I should suggest that this framework for his thought may be located in the liturgy. This is the setting not only for prayer and rite, but also for the reading of scripture and its interpretation in preaching. The lectionary use of scripture meant that Christians encountered it not merely by reading it, as we should, but by hearing it in the sometimes strange and perplexing ways different passages were juxtaposed in the liturgy. Moreover, the architectural and iconographic setting for worship, so far as they can be recovered, supply another dimension of this basic liturgical framework. Even though there is no direct relationship between Gregory's piety and the iconographic program of, say, San Vitale in Ravenna, the apse mosaic in that sixth-century basilica has long seemed to me to encapsulate Gregory's thought. A youthful Christ, clad in purple, is seated on the blue globe of the universe, beneath which the four rivers of paradise flow forth. He is flanked by two angels, who present to him St. Vitalis on his right and Bishop Ecclesius on his left. Christ offers the crown of martyrdom to Vitalis, while in his left hand he holds the scroll with seven seals described in Revelation. All this can be associated with Gregory's visionary hope of the new creation, which though initiated by the incarnate Christ, is yet to come in its fullness as the destiny not only of humanity but of the whole of creation.

The apse mosaic just described is, moreover, the focal point of the two mosaic programs on either side of the nave of San Vitale. Both depict processions; in one we find the emperor Justinian and in the other the empress Theodosia. But the male and female processions in which the imperial figures are placed include other figures, and it is also possible to correlate the entire program with a moment in the liturgy, possibly the Great Entrance.[1]

1. See Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 171: "Yet for all the attention that art historians have given the emperor and empress, it must be pointed out that royalty are doubly out-ranked by clergy in the mosaic program at Saint Vitalis. . . . In Justinian's panel the Gospel, the Word of God, accompanied by incense, occupies first place. In second place

In any case, one way of interpreting the iconography is to see the processions as a movement toward Christ as the agent of the new creation. The convention of converging processions has a long life in early Christian art, and the point I am making could be illustrated by many other examples.[2] That point revolves around the centrality of the incarnate Christ and the idea that the entire plenitude of humanity is to be located on a processional path leading to Christ and to its destiny in him. It is possible to argue that Gregory's insistence upon the humanity of Christ and upon the metaphor of a journey forward rather than an ascent is more evident in what appear to be his later works and following his ordination as a bishop.[3] Though I prefer to suppose that what Gregory emphasizes in his mature works is already implicit in the earlier writings, my concern will be to argue that he ends by insisting upon the fact that all Christians are walking on the same path leading to the new creation, however much their progress may differ. It is this thesis that will dominate the interpretive essays following the texts translated in the first part of what follows.

Two points can elaborate the basic perspective from which I have chosen to interpret Gregory's thought. First, I take as granted that Gregory treats with utter seriousness Paul's conviction in Gal 3:28 that in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In particular, Gregory and the other Cappadocians, despite residual attitudes that can be regarded as springing from a culture labeled misogynist, see no inequality between the sexes in terms of a common Christian vocation.[4] In his seventh homily on Song of Songs, Gregory identifies the "mother" who crowns the bridegroom, Christ (Song 3:11), with the Father on the grounds that, if in Christ there is neither male nor female at a human level, we must certainly

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it is Bishop Maximianus, carrying his cross, for in church the bishop always preceded the emperor. Then comes Justinian."

2. Ibid., 150: "The target of convergence, the omega point that is Christ, can be expressed in a wide variety of ways. Christ can appear in any number of his chameleon guises. He can assume the moments of glory of his historical life—his Baptism, Transfiguration, or Ascension . . . —or he can fast-forward history to its end. . . . Moreover, the processions themselves potentially include the whole world of the saved, the hierarchically ordered communion of saints. Male and female saints are represented, the Apostles and martyrs, the clergy and members of the imperial court, and, under the symbol of a file of sheep, the common herd of the faithful."

3. See Mosshammer, "Gregory's Intellectual Development," 359–87, esp. 360: "In the interim between these two works the Bishop of Nyssa seems to have discovered—or at least learned how to articulate—what it means to affirm that the church is the living Body of Christ."

4. See Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," 441–71.

exclude that distinction from any account of the divine.[5] He honors this conviction by treating his sister, Macrina, as his teacher; and the point can easily be made more broadly. My concern, however, is not so much with human distinctions that often prove divisive, as with the question whether Gregory wishes to distinguish a Christian elite from simple believers. My conclusion will be that, while Gregory clearly recognizes differences with respect to the progress different people have made in the Christian life, he rejects the idea that these differences represent any division within the body of Christ. All Christians are on the single path; and at least once this path goes beyond the confines of this life, all humans will journey on it.

The second point is merely a disclaimer that the perspective I propose is one completely novel or one that is meant to call into question other perspectives from which to examine Gregory's thought. Cardinal Daniélou's book, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, by its title points to what first preoccupied the study of Gregory's writings. The debt of his thought to Platonism and to the Christian Platonist Origen, his contribution to the development of erudite theology, and his mystical ideas—all are, of course, important. More recent study has approached Gregory as one of the architects of the dogma of the Trinity established at the Council of Constantinople in 382, as well as examining the way he assesses the person and work of Christ. Attention has also been directed toward aspects of his thought that seem to echo our own concerns whether positively or negatively. These differing facets clearly have the possibility of informing one another.[6]

There is another preliminary observation that occurs to me. I suppose it unlikely that any historians or critics are finally able to discard their own concerns and presuppositions in attempting to interpret past events and writings. My own preoccupation, or better, my own question, concerns the meaning of "community." People always seem to speak at greater length and to worry more with what they find missing in their own experience. In our time there is considerable reflection regarding what "community" might mean at both a local and a global level. We seem to have lost any real sense that communities are more than associations of the like-minded. If it is only individuals that in this sense constitute a community, the path to what could be termed a collective solipsism lies open. Thus, whenever like-mindedness is compromised, the community breaks apart. What I am suggesting is that

5. *GNO* 6:212–13.

6. Moreover, let me call attention to Reinhard Jacob Kees, *Die Lehre von der Oikonomia Gottes in der Oratio Catechetica Gregors von Nyssa.* His careful study of the *Catechetical Oration* treats it as a summary of the whole of Gregory's mature thought, however much the themes involved have been adapted to the purpose of the work, that is, to advise catechists and to prepare them for their teaching.

a viable community must take precedence over individuals, not by disabling their flourishing, but by enabling it. For that to happen the community—within limits—must embrace and foster diverse ways in which individuals can bring honor to their society. In other words, the ideal community will be one that seeks to establish a diversified unity, a unity in diversity. The ideal may finally be paradoxical, but it can be thought an attempt to find a middle ground between imposing a sameness upon all the constituencies of a community and leaving open the possibility that individual differences may become so divisive as to destroy community.

My thought, then, is that we can find this paradoxical middle way in Paul's accounts of the body of Christ in Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12. In these passages he is arguing for diversity, but for a diversity that will not compromise unity provided the differing gifts granted to individual Christians are employed to contribute their part to building up in love the body of Christ. Gregory, I think, honors this view. He clearly recognizes the diverse ways in which the Christian life appears, and he knows that this can often lead to conflict and division. In one sense he realizes that the ideal he embraces can never be fully realized in this life, but instead must await its completion in the world to come and at the final end, the *apokatastasis*. But he can also discern the ideal at work in this world. In this sense his thought is eschatological; his vision of human destiny, based largely upon what he finds in scripture, constantly informs what he says about our present life. At least these are the conclusions for which I wish to argue in the essays following the select translations of part one. Gregory refuses to allow his ideal to shatter in the face of the realities of Christian controversy and of the failure of Christians to embody that ideal.

GREGORY'S LIFE AND WORK: THE TENSION BETWEEN THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUAL

Gregory is well aware of the gap between the ideal of the new creation in the body of Christ not only as it is reflected in the life of the church, but also as he finds it in his own failures to embody that ideal in his own life. Yet this sensibility by no means hinders him in his articulation of the marvelous harmony of all things in Christ. For him and for all Christians the path that leads from baptism and the confession of faith made at that time involves a procession and a journey, but it must also be seen as a struggle and a battle. The details of Gregory's life, like those of most ancient figures, are obscure; and what we can know is difficult to locate precisely in time both because of scant and sometimes conflicting evidence and the necessity

of drawing inferences from it. We do not even know when Gregory was baptized. Nor do we have anything like Augustine's *Confessions* that would assist us in trying to imagine his personality. Nevertheless, in his second homily in praise of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, Gregory does recount a dream that he presents as decisive for his own commitment to the Christian path (*FM. 2* 167–68). In the dream the forty soldiers threaten him, preventing his entrance into the service being conducted for the deposition of their relics; and Gregory understands this as a rebuke for his reluctance to accept his mother's invitation to the feast at Annisa on the family estate in Pontus. Since Emmelia, Gregory's mother, probably died in 370, the experience he describes must have been before that time. Born probably about 335, we can be reasonably sure that as a young man he was his brother's pupil, when Basil returned from Athens in 355 in order to teach rhetoric at Caesarea in Cappadocia. Gregory apparently began a career as a teacher of rhetoric, married, and possibly fathered a child. Nothing else is known as certain, though Gregory does refer to his marriage in his earliest work, *On Virginity*, written perhaps as early as 370.[7]

It is, however, likely enough that we can date Gregory's decision to follow the Christian path to some time in the 360s, when he was, say, about thirty years old. In any case we have several glimpses of the struggles and difficulties he encountered from the time of Basil's ordination as the metropolitan bishop of Caesarea in 369 or 370, a year or two before Gregory became the bishop of Nyssa as part of his brother's campaign to secure the boundaries of his diocese despite civil changes that threatened them. The earliest setback for Gregory occurred as a result of Basil's election as bishop. Those who had contested his candidacy included another Gregory, who was a bishop and the uncle of Basil and of our Gregory, who took it upon himself to bring about a reconciliation between Basil and their uncle Gregory. Our Gregory tried to do this by forging conciliatory letters from

7. See Pierre Maraval's two reconstructions of the events in Gregory's life immediately following the death of his brother Basil. In his edition of the *Life of Macrina* (SC 178) Maraval dates Basil's death 1 January, 379. He places Gregory at a council in Antioch in the fall or early winter of that year, arguing that the council sent Gregory to Jerusalem in 380. From there Gregory returned to Cappadocia and in a short time went to Annisa to visit Macrina, who died 19 July, 380. Following her death Gregory went to Nyssa, then to Ibora, spent October and November in Sebaste. The first day of 381 he preached his encomium of Basil in Caesarea. In his later edition of Gregory's letters (SC 363) Maraval dates Basil's death in 377, probably in August and after Gregory's return to Nyssa from exile. The council of Antioch is dated in the spring of 378, after which Gregory returned to Cappadocia. By July of that year, learning that Macrina was dying, he was present for her death and funeral. His trips to Ibora and Sebaste follow Macrina's death, but his embassy to Jerusalem was commissioned by the Council of Constantinople in 381.

the uncle to Basil, presumably assuming that medicinal lies in a good cause were permissible. Needless to say, Basil discovered from his uncle that at least the first letter had been forged by Gregory.[8] Basil's letter 58 delivers a strong rebuke to his younger brother: "Would that I could upbraid your utter simplicity as it deserves!"[9] Basil concludes his letter by saying that he is willing to meet with the recalcitrant bishops at a time and place of their own choosing, with the proviso that the invitation must come "through their own agents" and "with due formality." Clearly brother Gregory has little skill in managing church politics.

Gregory enters the stage once more in Basil's letter 215, probably written in the autumn of 375 to Dorotheus, who was a deacon and later a presbyter of Meletius, the new-Nicene bishop of Antioch. Basil's aim was to heal the schism in Antioch between the "old Nicenes" led by Paulinus and the "new Nicenes" led by Bishop Meletius, whom the Paulinians refused to recognize, supported as they were by Western recognition of their legitimacy. Basil, supporting Meletius, hoped to persuade Rome and the West to shift their support to the new Nicene cause. Dorotheus had already been sent as a legate to the West, and was destined to travel there again in 376.[10] Plans for this legation were already being made in 375, and Basil had also written to Terentius, a *comes* and *dux* of the emperor Valens (*Ep.* 214). He points out to Dorotheus the difficulty of traveling by land in the winter because the road from Caesarea to Constantinople is "full of enemies." Should a journey by sea be necessary, "it will be only opportune provided that our God-beloved bishop, brother Gregory, consents to both the voyage and the official mission in such important matters." Basil apparently can think of no one else to accompany Dorotheus, and he obviously has doubts about Gregory's competence:[11]

> I know that he is quite inexperienced in ecclesiastical matters; and that although his dealings would inspire respect with a kindly man and be worth much, yet with a high and elevated

8. Basil's letters 59 and 60 are addressed to uncle Gregory. The first letter is a plea for reconciliation, as is the second, which includes at its ending: "As to our most venerable brother, we have not constrained him to tell us anything by word of mouth; the reason is that his words on a former occasion were not attested by the facts."

9. Basil, *Ep.* 58 (LCL 1:357). "Simplicity" translates χρηστότητος, which Deferrari later translates as "fatuity." The word can, of course, mean "kindness"; but here some pejorative meaning must be found.

10. See Field, *Communion of Damasus and Meletius,* 119 nn. 6–7. For Dorotheus's legation to the West in 376, see 123–24, especially n. 22, and see 243 on the dating of Basil's letter.

11. *Ep.* 215 (LCL 3:237–39).

> personage, one occupying a lofty seat, and therefore unable to listen to men who from a lowly position on the ground would tell him the truth—what advantage could accrue to our common interests from the converse of such a man as Gregory, who has a character foreign to servile flattery?

In the event, Gregory did not accompany the legation in 376, perhaps because of Basil's lack of confidence in him. Basil gives the impression that Gregory is both "kindly" in a somewhat simple-minded way and honest, qualities that hinder his effectiveness as an ecclesiastical politician. Gregory apparently finds it difficult to adjust his ideal of the Christian path to the rough-and-tumble of the church's actual circumstances.

One other note of dissatisfaction with Gregory appears in Basil's letter 100, addressed to Eusebius of Samosata. He is answering Eusebius's letter and begins by complaining of his ill health. He asks Eusebius to attend the usual synod at the festival "in memory of the blessed Eupsychicus." The letter ends with a plea for Eusebius's help in establishing bishops and in "the matter of investigating and deliberating about the actions meditated against us by Gregory of Nyssa in his simplicity, who convenes synods at Ancyra, and in no way ceases to plot against us." According to Loofs letter 100 was written from Armenia in July or August 372.[12] But it is impossible to find any evidence for Gregory's activity that would fit this date. Maraval suggests that Gregory's work in Ancyra could possibly be understood against the background of the council of Antioch that took place in the spring of 378 and before Macrina's death in July of that year.[13] The council of Antioch was probably concerned to deal with the schism between Melitius and Paulinus, but its larger purpose was to reconcile the old and the new Nicenes. Marcellus of Ancyra belonged to the older group, dominated by Athanasius of Alexandria. His views were widely regarded in the East as an explicit articulation of the supposed Sabellian tendencies of the old Nicene theology. But it is certainly possible that Gregory at some time made attempts to reconcile the old Nicenes in Ancyra to the new Nicene party, dominated by Basil. With what we might assume to be the best will in the world Gregory seems to have failed in the enterprise and to have further alienated Basil.[14]

12. Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea,* 7; he dates letter 100 to 373.

13. Maraval, *Lettres* (SC 363), 24, especially n. 4. On this conjectural reconstruction Basil must have written letter 100 shortly before his death; and it should be correlated with letter 243 addressed to the bishops of Italy and Gaul and meant to accompany Dorotheus on his legation to the West in 376. For this mission and its relation to the council of Antioch, see also Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, 294–317.

14. For the council of Antioch in 379 or 378 and its subscription to Roman formulae, see Field, *Communion of Damasus and Meletius*, 121.

Yet it is obvious from Gregory's writings that he betrays no sense of any rift with his older brother. It is impossible to draw full conclusions. Perhaps there were also resentments on Gregory's part, but ones that were eclipsed by a recognition of his own limitations. As well, it is probable that family ties remained strong despite the stresses caused by ecclesiastical controversy.[15]

Despite the fact that reconstructing the historical background and dating of Basil's letters must remain conjectural, there can be little doubt that the evidence they supply for Gregory's interventions in ecclesiastical affairs show that they were more often attended by failure than success.[16] One of Gregory's letters (*Ep.* 1), addressed to a Flavian who was possibly Melitius's successor as bishop of Antioch, supplies his own account of one of his failures. It is not entirely clear why, but Gregory finds himself at odds with Helladius, the metropolitan bishop of Caesarea and, therefore, his ecclesiastical superior. Gregory tells Flavian that his earlier letter to him, as well as letters to many others, were all designed to enlist help in the matter of which, presumably, Flavian is aware. Gregory then tells the story of an unfortunate meeting with Helladius. Intending to leave Sebaste after the festival held there and to return to Nyssa, he then receives word that Helladius was holding services in a neighboring mountainous district. Deciding to see him, Gregory leaves his carriage and takes a long and arduous detour on horseback to find Helladius. Traveling with great difficulty and through the night he arrives at dawn in time to see the open air assembly, but also Helladius retiring to his own dwelling. Gregory is kept waiting until midday, and when ushered into Helladius's presence is not even asked to be seated. There is not a word from Helladius, but "a silence as profound as night." Gregory is deeply offended by the discourtesy he receives, partly because he regards himself as Helladius's social equal and partly because of their equality in Christ. Moreover, even the disparity of their ecclesiastical rank ought not to overturn their equality, since the Council had given them both the same privilege and commission for ordering the common life of the churches.

Gregory's last point must refer to the decision of the Council of Constantinople in 381, sanctioned by the emperor Theodosius, to designate those who were to be guarantors of orthodoxy. Gregory and Helladius were

15. Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, 6–8, takes a dimmer view of Gregory's true attitude toward Basil. See also his discussion of the *Life of Macrina*, ibid., 9–11. See, however, Maraval's notes in his edition of the life (SC 178), 162.

16. Following Macrina's death Gregory was successful in restoring order to the church in Ibora; but success there was followed by failure at Sebaste (Gregory's letters 28–31). While the evidence of Gregory's letters is obscure, he seems also to have failed in his missions to Arabia and Jerusalem (letters 33–38). See Maraval's introduction in *Lettres* (SC 363).

two of the three bishops selected to perform this task in the civil diocese of Pontus.[17] It is likely that Gregory's attempts to fulfill this trust and mission were regarded as an infringement upon Helladius's rights as metropolitan. Gregory's letter 17 supplies a probable example of what was involved. The letter is addressed to the priests of Nicomedia and concerns the election of a new bishop to succeed the recently deceased Patricius. It merely alludes to Gregory's commission by the Council of Constantinople, and it seeks to persuade the Nicomedians that Gregory's intervention springs from the "debt of love" owing from one church to another. He recognizes that the church at Nicomedia remains divided, though we cannot be certain what the causes of conflict were. But, says Gregory, the situation requires the election of a good bishop. The rest of the letter describes such a candidate. Some wise and strong administrator is necessary in order to restore the "stream" of the church to its right banks and course. This must be someone who, like the Levites, has no earthly heritage and no attraction to worldly things. Birth, wealth, and worldly glory, even though they need not necessarily exclude a candidate, are not part of the apostolic definition of a bishop. Gregory cites the examples of Amos the goatherd, the fishermen Peter, Andrew, and John, Paul the tentmaker, and Matthew the tax collector. And he clinches his point by citing Paul's recognition that there are in the eyes of the world few wise, powerful, or well born in the church (1 Cor 1:26–27). The argument continues in this vein. A bishop must also be skilled in guiding the church into God's harbor by the cure of souls, and to this end his life must be "without reproach" (1 Tim 3:2). If "every disciple fully qualified will be like his master" (cf. Luke 6:40), then both disciple and master must be "humble, settled in character, moderate, superior to love of gain, wise in godly things, trained in virtue and gentleness in his manner of life."

Gregory's description of the ideal bishop spends as much time saying what he is not as describing what he is. He may well be contrasting his candidate with a rival one. As Maraval suggests, the rival candidate is probably a certain Gerontius. The only evidence is to be found in Sozomen's account of John Chrysostom's deposition of Gerontius, bishop of Nicomedia, in March of 402.[18] According to Sozomen, Gerontius had been a deacon under Ambrose in Milan. His public account of a dream in which he decapitated a demonic phantom or some other cause obliged Ambrose to order Gerontius's seclusion. Instead, Gerontius fled to Constantinople, where "in a

17. See Maraval, *Lettres* (SC 363), 103, n. 3; introduction, 38–41. The civil diocese of Pontus included the provinces of Galatia, Bythynia, Cappadocia I and II, Armenia I and II, Helenopontus, Pontus Polemonicus.

18. See Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 177.

short time he obtained the friendship of the most powerful men at court."[19] Soon after he was ordained bishop of Nicomedia "by Helladius, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, who performed this office the more readily for him because he had been instrumental, through his interest at court, in obtaining a high appointment in the army for that functionary's son." This must have happened in the 380s, and it is reasonably certain that Gerontius, rather than Gregory's candidate, succeeded Patricius at Nicomedia. The rest of the story, as Sozomen tells it, includes unsuccessful attempts by Ambrose and Nectarius (bishop of Constantinople, 381–397) to oust Gerontius, who was defended by the people of Nicomedia. After Chrysostom deposed him Gerontius joined those openly opposed to Chrysostom. Granted this reconstruction, once again Gregory failed because his ideal foundered upon the rock of worldly importance and power.

What seems to me of special interest is a section of letter 1 that describes Gregory's interview with Helladius and his own discovery of a conflict in his heart between his ideal and his ecclesiastical ambitions and social prejudices. Gregory finds himself so overwhelmed by his emotional reaction to Helladius's arrogance that "I was not in a condition to admonish myself to be unmoved, since my heart within me swelled up at the absurdity of what was happening and spat upon thoughts about putting up with it."[20] Immediately he remembers with admiration Paul's vivid description of the civil war within us between the law of sin and the law of the mind (cf. Rom 7:23). By God's grace his better inclination prevailed, and he broke the silence by speaking soft words to Helladius, asking whether his own presence interfered with measures being taken for Helladius's health. The conversation stumbles on for a short while, but to no purpose; and Helladius dismisses Gregory without even inviting him to the banquet about to take place. This small interchange between the two opponents, together with Gregory's admission of the civil war in his heart, suggests that Gregory well understands that he is far from reaching the goal toward which he aspires on the Christian path. The same recognition informs the opening of *On Perfection*. Gregory wishes that he could produce "instances to be found in my life for you to study so as to offer you the instruction you ask by deeds instead of words." But this is not possible, since "I am continuing to pray that this may one day come to be" (*Perf.* 173). Gregory, I wish to conclude, is well aware of the gap between the ideal of the new creation in the body of Christ and the realities found not only in the church but also in his own failure to embody that ideal in his own life. Yet he seeks to articulate that

19. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.6 (*NPNF*² 2:403).

20. *Ep.* 1.19 (SC 363:96).

ideal in his writings as one toward which he and all Christians, indeed all people, are moving.

THE TRANSLATIONS AND ESSAYS THAT FOLLOW

The translations that follow are of a number of Gregory's shorter writings; yet what he says in them, at least in my view, accords in broad terms with what may be found in the larger works more often consulted by those studying Gregory's thought. To be sure, the selection of writings to include is arbitrary, but they do reflect his ascetical ideals, his popular preaching and interest in ordinary Christians, as well as his theological concerns and his speculations on human destiny. In this way they cohere with themes in his larger works, even though they are not meant to be a basis for my general thesis. In the essays that follow my attempt in part is to show this by appealing also to the larger works. The first essay focuses upon *On the Christian's Profession* and *On Perfection*, and seeks to suggest that baptism is paradigmatic of the Christian life. The next essay is meant to assemble the various principal aspects of that life and employs *On the Dead* as a basis for describing how Gregory understands the Christian contest against Satan and the passions in order to gain the union with Christ that represents victory in the struggle. The third essay explores the way Gregory envisages the relationship between those who have made considerable progress on the Christian path and those who have not traveled as far. As well, the martyrs play a role in the lives of Christians, and I shall call attention to Gregory's homilies in their praise. The final essay argues for the importance of *On the Making of Man* for Gregory's view of the last things, and it ends by appealing to Gregory's universalism, particularly as found in *On Christ's Subjection.*

These short essays are not meant to deny the complexity and ambiguity found in Gregory's thought.[21] At the same time, they presuppose that, while his works function at various levels—polemical, homiletical, exegetical, theological—there is an underlying form of thought that is not quite as elusive as might be supposed. The tensions are creative ones, and since much of what he says is speculative, we should not expect a system of any kind. Instead, the various themes he pursues constantly interact with one another and invite the reader to supply some sort of coherent overview. The one I suggest represents, as it were, a bird's eye view of the landscape, a framework that might easily be filled out in detail and in such a way as to raise further questions. As Origen said, the answers we find have a way of

21. See Ludlow, "Introduction: The Elusive Gregory," in *Gregory of Nyssa*, 1–10.

becoming questions, and the pattern continues without any limit.[22] The idea is obviously related to Gregory's notion of perpetual progress in the good, or *epectasy*.

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22. See *De princ.* 4.3.14, where he cites Rom 11:33 and Phil 3:14.