

Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople, 389: Mass January 27, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Wisdom 7:7–14, Psalm 19:7–11, John 8:25–32

There were three philosopher theologians in the latter half of the fourth century that were mostly responsible for defeating the heresy of Arianism. This heresy denied the true divinity of Jesus Christ by subordinating the Son to the Father. They are Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia—in the middle of modern Turkey, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, bishop of Nyssa, also in Cappadocia, and Gregory, bishop of Nazianzus, also Cappadocia, who would become bishop of Constantinople.

Arius latched on to this teaching in the course of his life.¹ For Arius, Jesus was not the Word who was in the beginning with God, the Word who was God. Arius was North African, born *c.* 250 and died *c.* 336.² But the heresy did not die with him.

After the death of Constantine the Great in the year 337, his son Constantius became ruler in the East, his younger brother Constans in the West. Constans was a Catholic, Constantius, an Arian. Since the legalization of Christianity in the year 312, bishops increasingly played political roles, especially in the empire's great cities. Theodosius I was emperor in the year 381 when Arianism was defeated at the Council of Constantinople. Arianism would continue to be held in some areas, notably Gaul—France. The baptism of Clovis by the Catholics marks the end of any significant threat to the Catholic faith in the early centuries of the Church.

In the year 380, Theodosius I and the two other emperors were Catholic. They made the decrees of the First Council of Nicaea, the state religion. Paganism was suppressed. Intermarriage between Jews and Christians

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Arianism," 83–84.

² *Ibid.*, s.v. "Arius," 87.

became illegal.³ It was Theodosius who brought him to Constantinople as bishop in 379. The biographical sketch for Gregory in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* states, “His fame as a theologian rests on five sermons he delivered during this period on the doctrine of the Trinity. They are marked by clarity, strength, and a charming gaiety.”⁴ It also says, “Among the [early theologians] of the Church, he alone is known as “The Divine,” “The Theologian.”⁵

He was presiding over the council of Eastern bishops called in the spring of 381. Things were not going well. I hope it’s true that he said to the council, in the hearing of the emperor, “Let me be as the Prophet Jonah! I was responsible for the storm, but I would sacrifice myself for the salvation of the ship. Seize me and throw me [overboard] . . . I was not happy when I ascended the throne, and gladly would I descend it.”⁶ He retired to Nazianzus and then to his estate. He died on January 25, in the year 389.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius_I, (accessed 27 January 2021).

⁴ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 254.

⁵ Ibid.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregory_of_Nazianzus#Episcopate_in_Sasima_and_Nazianzus, (accessed 27 January 2021).