

*Insights on hatred, envy and hypocrisy in Gregory of Nyssa's homilies*

Jonathan Farrugia

---

The Nyssen's corpus of homilies offers very concrete reflections on a number of transgressions that were (and still are) popular in human actions. Three of these are hatred, envy and hypocrisy; they may be analysed together because all three stop man from being happy with what he possesses. They are mostly discussed quite early in the bishop of Nyssa's career, in the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, but they are revisited in some of his later homilies and works as well, implying that his reflection on these three sins was spread throughout most of his career as a preacher and a bishop. Gregory, however, does not stop at discussing the causes and the effects of these transgressions; he also offers a solution regarding how they may be healed.

Sin brings disorder in that which God created in perfect order, so the greatest fault in sin is that it disfigures man, God's most noble creature. Gregory implies that this disfigurement comes from the fact that all sin is a form of idolatry: man was created to adore God alone, so any idol he accepts goes against his nature. Worse still, through sin man creates his own idols and this is the highest form of disorder that may affect man:

[...] whatever a person submits his reason to, making it slave and subject, he has in his sickness made that into a god, and he would not be in this state if he had not attached himself to evil by love. (*Eccl VIII, 428, 6-19*)

It is in this light that one needs to read Gregory's comments on sin in general and sins in particular. Healing oneself, through the grace of God, from these disorders brings human nature back to its pristine condition.

## Three disorders

While discussing who the peacemakers are in his *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, Gregory focuses first on hatred and its effects on the hater:

Each one of you is capable of working out for himself what life is like for those who hold each other in suspicion and hatred, whose meetings with each other are disagreeable, who find everything about each other horrible; their mouths have no words, their eyes are averted, their ears are barricaded against the voice of the hated hater. Everything which is disliked by one is liked by the other, and conversely everything which his adversary's heart is set upon is hostile and offensive. (*Beat VII*, 154, 19-26)

This sin, therefore, turns a person into the direct opposite of the other whom he hates. Man is no longer free to choose what he likes, but necessarily starts liking what the other repulses and starts abhorring the things his opponent likes, even if formerly he enjoyed them. As Gregory states some years later in his *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* hate harms all kinds of love, be it that for others as well as that for oneself.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Translated editions cited in this paper:

- Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Beatitudes*. An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn, 14-18 September 1998), ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Vinciano, trans. Stuart G. Hall, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).
- Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*. An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (St Andrews 5-10 September 1990), ed. Stuart G. Hall, trans. Stuart G. Hall and Rachel Moriarty (Berlin :De Gruyter, 1992).
- Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

Plato, *Euthyphro – Apology – Crito – Phaedo – Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Michigan: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Details found in the brackets refer to the critical edition of Gregory of Nyssa's works, indicating the text in question, the number of the homily, the pages and the lines.

- *De Oratione Dominica - De Beatitudinibus*, ed. Johannes F. Callahan, Gregorii Nysseni Opera 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1992).
- *In Inscriptiones Psalmorum – In Sextum Psalmum – In Ecclesiasten Homiliae*, ed. Jacobus McDonough and Paulus Alexander, Gregorii Nysseni Opera 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1962).

“If we do not kill hostility, we shall not heal the loving inclination in us which has become ill through hatred.”(*Eccl VI*, 383, 17-19)

The other two (i.e. envy and hypocrisy) are presented as dangerous evils because they are hidden inside the person's heart, are not necessarily perceivable in his words or actions, therefore are more to be feared. The relation between these two and hatred is that hatred fuels them. Envy and hypocrisy develop "when on the inside people have hatred like a fire smouldering secretly in the depth of their heart, while their outward appearance is disguised by hypocrisy as friendship."<sup>2</sup> There comes a time, however, when these can no longer be hidden and the outburst will put on display the evil person's true nature:

[...] envy devours the heart within like a fire, as if it were a heaped-up pile of chaff: it may hide the disease out of shame, yet it is not able to conceal itself indefinitely, but like a pungent smoke the bitterness of envy shows through in the features of the outward appearance; and should some misfortune fall upon the object of envy, then it makes the disease apparent, and takes the injury to him as a cause of rejoicing and pleasure. The secret sickness is evidenced, even while it appears hidden, by manifest signs about the face. The deadly effects of the things denied often become the marks of one shrivelled up by reason of envy: eyes withered, sunk in the hollow of shrunken eyelids, knitted eyebrows, the shape of bones showing through the flesh. And what causes this disease? – the prosperity of a brother, relative or neighbour! (*Beat VII*, 157, 16-158, 6)

These three sins, as we said, stop a person from appreciating the good he possesses because in his eyes it seems inferior to what others have. This leads the person to lose many of his gifts such as tranquillity and taste, becoming selective in what he hears and, worse, presenting himself as a friend when in truth he curses the one he is envious of. The vivid description of the reactions caused by them demonstrates this clearly:

You slap your hands together, you knot your fingers, your thoughts are in turmoil, you utter deep groans of pain, you get no pleasure from enjoying the things you presently have, meals are sour, home and hearth a misery, the ear always open to slander against the one who has done well; and if some one says something favourable, your ear is deaf to his words. [...] How can you disguise yourself with the mask of friendship by your outward show of good will? Why do you use kind words of greeting, wishing joy and health, when secretly the curses in your heart mean the opposite? (*Beat VII*, 158, 20-159, 3)

---

<sup>2</sup>*Beat VII*, 157, 8-12.

The envious are compared to Cain, who murdered his brother because he was more esteemed in God's eyes. His hypocrisy made him an executioner because as a friend he led him away from his family and then murdered him.<sup>3</sup>

Envy is mentioned again in the *Homilies on the Our Father* and it is presented as one of the stains that blemish the divine beauty placed in man: "the divine is pure from envy and from all stain of passion. Therefore let no such passions defile you, neither envy, nor vanity nor any of those things that would pollute the divine beauty."<sup>4</sup>

Louth<sup>5</sup> mentions a further treatment on envy by Gregory found in *Vita Moysis*, which is worth mentioning for clarification purposes, even though this is not a homily. The discussion the Nyssen makes on this sin in this late work follows what he had previously said in his homilies, but he goes a step further. In this treatise envy is presented as τὸ ρχέκακον πάθος, a definition he does not give in the homilies. The denunciation of this sin is notorious:

Envy is the passion which causes evil, the father of death, the first entrance of sin, the root of wickedness, the birth of sorrow, the mother of misfortune, the basis of disobedience, the beginning of shame. Envy banished us from Paradise, having become a serpent to oppose Eve. Envy walled us off from the tree of life, divested us of holy garments, and in shame led us away clothed with fig leaves. Envy armed Cain contrary to nature and instituted the death which is vindicated seven times. Envy made Joseph a slave. Envy is the death-dealing sting, the hidden weapon, the sickness of nature, the bitter poison, the self-willed emaciation, the bitter dart, the nail of the soul, the fire in the heart, the flame burning on the inside. For envy, it is not its own misfortune but another's good fortune that is unfortunate. Again, inversely, success is not one's own good fortune but the neighbour's misfortune. Envy is grieved at the good deeds of men and takes advantage of their misfortunes. It is said that the vultures which devour corpses are destroyed by perfume. Their nature is akin to the foul and corrupt. Anyone who is in the power of this sickness is destroyed by the happiness of his neighbours as by the application of some perfume; but if he should see any unfortunate

---

<sup>3</sup>"Cain was like that when he was furious at the favour shewn to Abel: envy within was urging him to murder, while hypocrisy is becoming a public executioner. He slipped into the guise of friend and companion, and led him out beyond reach of his parents' support, and then brought envy into the open by murder." (*Beat VII*, 159, 3-7); Claudio Moreschini, "Gregorio di Nissa, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio VII: 'Beati gli operatori di pce, perché saranno Chiamati Figli di Dio' (Mt 5, 9)," in *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, ed. Hubertus Drobner (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 239-240.

<sup>4</sup>*Or dom II*, 30, 14-16.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew Louth, "Envy as chief sin in Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa," *Studia Patristica* 15 (1984): 459.

experience he flies to it, sets his crooked beak to it, and draws forth the hidden misfortunes. (*Vit Moys*, 122, 6-123, 4)

This long text helps us appreciate better why the bishop considered envy to be such a dangerous sin, and therefore why he included it in some of his homilies. It is as if he is saying here that envy is the very reason man defected from God. Envy therefore, is that vice which is completely alien to God, since God has no need to be envious of anything or anyone, being Himself the creator of all.<sup>6</sup>

## One remedy

These maladies can be healed only by a commitment to peace, because peace promotes goodwill which neutralises hatred, envy and hypocrisy. Ridding oneself of these and helping others keep them at bay is truly working on behalf of God Himself:

Anyone therefore who removes a disease like this from human life, who binds the family together in goodwill and peace, and who brings human beings into friendly harmony, does he not perform a work of godly power, banishing evils from the human race, and introducing instead a sharing of good things? The reason why he calls the peace maker a son of God, is that he becomes an imitator of the true Son who has bestowed these things on human life. (*Beat VII*, 159, 8-15)

Some years later, in his *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* the Bishop of Nyssa reformulates the same suggestion, this time encouraging people to adopt virtues that do directly against these vices, for:

Everyone by participation in what is superior loses all trace of its contrary. Thus the self-controlled person loses intemperance, the just person injustice, the modest person pride, the generous-hearted person envy, the loving person hatred. (*Eccl VII*, 402, 18-21)

Concluding, from Gregory's words we understand that he believes that bringing such vices to an end is truly God's will for mankind. Just as light fills a place when darkness is withdrawn, so do the opposite virtues of these sins fill up their place when they are evacuated from the soul:

---

<sup>6</sup>Among Greek authors Plato seems to have been the first who said that envy does not exist in the divine realm: "There are many blessed sights and many ways hither and thither within the heaven, along which the blessed gods go to and fro attending each to his own duties; and whoever wishes, and is able, follows, for jealousy is excluded from the celestial band" (*Phaedrus*, 247 A). However, according to Greek myths the gods were envious of human beings: Hera was notoriously jealous of numerous mortals (Semele, Io, Callisto, Leto, Lamia...) who were seduced by her husband Zeus.

This is the work he decrees for you, to expel hatred, to resolve conflict, to get rid of envy, to banish fighting, to destroy hypocrisy, to quench the grudge within which smoulders in the heart, and to replace these with what arises in their stead when their contraries are removed. Just as with the withdrawal of darkness light supervenes, so also in place of each of these evils the fruit of the Spirit comes in instead: love, joy, peace, goodness, patience, and all the list of good things which the Apostle compiled. (*Beat VII*, 159, 21-160, 7)