

RECONCILIATION OF BODY AND SOUL: GREGORY OF NYSSA'S DEEPER THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

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SCHOLARS HAVE generally been puzzled, even displeased, by Gregory of Nyssa's views on marriage in his *De virginitate*. He begins his presentation of marriage in chapter 3 by depicting in graphic detail the disillusionment, isolation, and grief which accompanies married life, counseling celibacy as an escape from these problems. He laments that the knowledge of the blessings of celibacy comes too late to be of benefit in his own life. In chapter 4 he attempts to convince us that all vices have their roots in marriage, so that we escape their influence when we renounce marriage. Chapter 12 indicates that just as marriage was the last step away from paradise for Adam, so the renunciation of marriage is the first step on the route of return to paradise. Chapter 14 argues that we conquer death by ceasing to procreate. Chapter 20 claims that, just as one cannot practice two professions at the same time, so one cannot seek both earthly marriage and spiritual union with God at once.

Scholars have responded to this treatment of marriage in various ways. Michel Aubineau laments that Gregory, in focusing on the sorrows and burdens that come with marriage, "gives to consecrated virginity the appearance of an egotistical evasion, inspired by the fear of responsibilities."¹ He explains, however, that "Many of the details which disconcert us or shock us can be explained by a servile obedience to the rules [for composing a panegyric] which do not engage the author very deeply."² Other scholars ascribe his views of marriage to immaturity of thought,³ adherence to the general views of the time and culture,⁴ disappointment in his own marriage,⁵ and an acute sense of anxiety about the passing of time that human generation represents.⁶

¹ Michel Aubineau, *Grégoire de Nysse: Traité de la virginité* (SC 119; Paris: Cerf, 1966) 294-95, n. 2.

² Ibid. 90. See also his general discussion of Gregory's use of rhetoric, 83-96.

³ J. Gribomont, "Le panégyrique de la virginité, oeuvre de jeunesse de Grégoire de Nysse," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 43 (1967) 258.

⁴ J. Kirchmeyer, "Le *De virginitate* de Grégoire de Nysse: Notes de lecture," *Science et esprit* 21 (1969) 143.

⁵ E. Stiglmayr, "Die Schrift des hl. Gregor von Nyssa *Über die Jungfräulichkeit*," *Zeitschrift für Askese und Mystik* 2 (1927) 339.

⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University, 1988) 296-304.

Interpreters of this treatise have failed to recognize, however, the irony with which Gregory writes about marriage and celibacy in this treatise, not always stating directly his full opinion.⁷ To interpret this treatise adequately, one must reconcile his negative comments on marriage with the ideal he also sets forth of combining marriage with a life of contemplation. While, on one level, the treatise attempts to persuade its readers to renounce marriage, on a deeper level it explains how the soul's desire for union with God may in fact be reconciled with the needs of family and community life that arise from the body, once the truer nature of spiritual development is understood. His negative portrayal of marriage, then, is not simply a foil for presenting the advantages of celibacy but constitutes also the foundation for a Christian understanding of marriage based upon the very quality of nonattachment Gregory calls "true virginity." To uncover this theology, this paper will focus on an exposition of chapters 3-9 of *De virginitate*, as they present the core of Gregory's understanding of marriage within the economy of Christian life. At the same time, this exposition will provide a model for reading Gregory with a sensitivity to his irony.

MARRIAGE AS TRAGIC SEARCH FOR GRATIFYING COMPANIONSHIP

At the beginning of chapter 3 Gregory informs us that his intent is to depict marriage "in tragic style," in order to contrast it better with the advantages of virginity.⁸ He very consciously takes *his reader's standard* for comparing celibacy to marriage: "You wish that we begin from the most pleasant things? Well, then, the chief thing which interests one in marriage is the attaining of gratifying companionship."⁹ He thus stresses the unpleasant side of married life and argues that celibacy, which to most people seems a less pleasant and thus less choiceworthy way of life, is in fact an excellent way to avoid a good deal of suffering. Aubineau's accusation is correct: Gregory makes celibacy appear to be inspired by the fear of responsibility and gives egotistical motives for avoiding marriage. Later, however, Gregory states clearly that pleasure is not the proper standard by which one should judge whether something is good or bad.¹⁰ Aware that he writes for "the public," the vast majority of human beings who judge what is good by the standard of pleasure, he

⁷ Writing ironically has been a part of the philosophical tradition since the time of Socrates, and a number of Christians employed this style of teaching as well. See Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.1.1-11, and Ernest Fortin's interpretation of Basil of Caesarea's *Ad adules.*, "Christianity and Hellenism in Saint Basil the Great's Address *Ad adulescentes*," in *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong*, ed. H. J. Blumenthal and R. A. Markus (London: Variorum, 1981) 189-203.

⁸ *De virg.* 3.2.2. All references to chapter, paragraph, and line are taken from the Greek text in Aubineau (n. 1 above).

⁹ *Ibid.* 3.2.6-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 4.4.31-40.

distorts the true character of marriage and celibacy to suit the prejudices of his audience.¹¹ Ironically, then, Gregory is using the passions to inspire in his readers a desire for the freedom from passion that characterizes the life of the saint. From the standpoint of one free from passion, the advantages of celibacy and marriage may appear quite differently from the way he presents them in this treatise.

To contrast marriage and celibacy, Gregory begins by describing an imaginary marriage that contains all the conditions most people desire in marriage: prominent birth, wealth, the flower of youth, great affection, good reputation, power, and notoriety. In doing so, he proposes to show how each of the reckoned benefits of marriage "brings with it necessarily an underlying, smoldering pain."¹² Gregory emphasizes that death and loss inevitably come with the sweet things of life:

This very same thing, I say, which sweetens everything in life for them [the couple in the imaginary, ideal marriage] is the fuel of sorrow. For as long as they are human beings—this mortal and perishable condition—and they look upon the graves of those from whom they were born, they have sorrow inseparably yoked together with life, if they partake also of a glimmer of reasoning. For the continuous expectation of death, which is not known by any set signals but feared constantly as something threatening because of the uncertainty of its arrival, confounds at every moment their good cheer and troubles their good spirits with the fear of what is to be expected.¹³

If we were sufficiently aware of the pain of loss ahead of time, "how great would be the running of the deserters from marriage toward virginity."¹⁴ For we would then perceive clearly the mixed character of marriage's "blessing":

For you would see . . . the great intermingling of opposites—laughter melting into tears, sorrow mixed together with good cheer, and death present everywhere and in everything that occurs through anticipation of what will happen and joined to each of these things which are thought of as pleasant. Whenever the bridegroom sees the beloved's face, at once fear of separation also enters with it, and if he listens to her most pleasant voice, he will conceive also the prospect of not ever hearing it again. Whenever he makes merry in the contemplation of the beautiful, he shudders especially at the expectation of grief.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid. 2.3.20–22. Gregory also indicates that he is writing for the young (23.2.27–3.6; 5.1–2; 6.13–29), a group that is also easily persuaded by pleasure. In speaking "in tragic style," Gregory admits that he is appealing to something less than the noblest motivations of his readers, i.e. their pity and fear, for, according to Platonic philosophy, tragedy appeals not to reason but to the lower parts of the soul (*Rep.* 602c–605b).

¹² Ibid. 3.2.10–17.

¹⁴ Ibid. 3.3.15–16.

¹³ Ibid. 3.3.2–8.

¹⁵ Ibid. 3.3.20–29.

All these blessings are impermanent. Gregory believes that, to the extent we become aware of this, to the extent we have "any observation of realities," we cannot enjoy any of the things appearing in life without anxiety. "Being always troubled with fear of change, does one not hold unperceived the enjoyment of things present?" Only by following our "deceitful imagination" can we make these things seem permanent—until a sudden change lays bare this delusion "that is innate to the unthinking."¹⁶

Gregory then demonstrates how these principles apply to the hypothetically ideal marriage. Along with the hope of having a child, the young pregnant mother must also consider the possibility of her own death in childbirth. Gregory portrays the anguish of the suddenly widowed father: "Still seething with affection, now climaxing with longing, not yet taking the perception of the most pleasant things of life, they are suddenly separated as by the phantasm of a dream from all which they had in their hands." The husband reproaches in anger those who had advised marriage, his friends and parents, indeed all of human life, condemning nature, the divine economy, and even himself. Passion swallows reason in pain, and finally "the one surviving cannot survive the disaster." Even if the couple succeeds in having a child, their fears do not decrease. They still fear lest something evil happen to it. Gregory describes in this context the situation of the mother who "splits off her heart with the child, and if she becomes the mother of many, her soul is cut into as many parts as the number of her children, so as to feel in herself whatever happens to them."¹⁷

Gregory then portrays the wife's fear of separation from her husband when he goes away on a trip. Unable to bear "the isolation, taking the brief separation from her husband as a meditation on her life in widowhood," she fears in her "sense of abandonment" that each knock on the door heralds the news of his death.¹⁸ Gregory then depicts her actual widowhood:

For often this woman—still young of body, still glistening with the nuptial adornment, still perhaps blushing from the entrance of the spouse and looking down with modesty when her yearnings become all the more intense because they are prevented by shame from being shown outwardly—suddenly adopts the names "widow," "wretched," "desolate," and all the names one seeks to avoid.¹⁹

She hates those who try to comfort her and desires death even to the point of death. If there are children, she pities them as orphans; if there

¹⁶ Ibid. 3.4.1–18.

¹⁸ Ibid. 3.6.18–34.

¹⁷ Ibid. 3.5.10–6.17.

¹⁹ Ibid. 3.7.2–7.

are none, she cannot be consoled because there is nothing to carry on the memory of her deceased husband. Facing the enemies, relatives, and servants who gloat at her desolation and take bitter pleasure in her fallen home is too much for her, and she risks a second marriage.²⁰

Gregory interrupts this litany of sorrow to tell the advantages of virginity for avoiding suffering and loss:

And if you wish to learn about the hindrances of the common life, listen to those who know this life from experience, how they pronounce blessed the life of those who chose from the beginning the life in virginity and did not through disaster learn better about what is more beautiful but recognized that virginity is insusceptible to all such evils. She laments no orphan state, she bewails no widowhood. She is always with the incorruptible spouse, she always exults in the things born of piety, she sees the home which is truly her own with all the most beautiful things, cheered continuously because the master of the house is always present and indwelling, from whom death causes not separation but union with that for which she longs. For whenever "one departs," one comes to be "with Christ," as the Apostle says.²¹

According to Gregory, in all disasters and adversities one "living according to oneself" is better off.

[He] either escapes the experience or more easily endures the disaster, holding his thought well trained around himself and not being dragged about by worries concerning anything else, while he who cares for a wife and children often has no leisure for bemoaning his own evils, since the worry of his loved ones envelops his heart.²²

Gregory claims that marriage furnishes us with the material for tragedies. If one examines ancient narratives and the themes of drama, full of child murders and eatings, illicit unions and every sort of violation of nature, they all "begin their narration from marriage." Marriage is the *chorêgos* for life, the financier for tragic plays, paying with the cost of its sufferings so that others may be entertained.²³

The impression that Gregory distorts married life in this chapter comes, I believe, when we read his account of it as if he were speaking of marriage per se—an impression that Gregory, at least superficially, does little to correct. But in chapter 4 he tells us that the standards according to which he constructs the "ideal" marriage are not the true standard for determining what is good or bad in human experience.

Riches, well-being, poverty, lack of means, and all the irregularities of life seem to differ greatly to those who are uneducated, whenever they make pleasure a

²⁰ Ibid. 3.7.11–8.13.

²¹ Ibid. 3.8.13–25, quoting Phil 1:23.

²² Ibid. 3.9.6–12.

²³ Ibid. 3.10.1–25.

criterion of such things, while to the lofty all things appear of equal value for the mind and no one thing is more preferable than the other. . . .²⁴

This passage reveals rather subtly that the true object of his rhetorical venom is not marriage per se but the desire for pleasure and misguided expectations of happiness which are the basis of most marriages.

Gregory does not view pleasure itself as bad but sees as bad the tendency to use pleasure as the standard for determining what is good or bad. The pleasure he sees to be the primary obstacle in marriage for our judgment of the good is not sexual pleasure. For a treatise on virginity, Gregory's *De virginitate* has remarkably little to say about sexual lust. He reveals no disgust as he describes the husband "still seething with affection, even now climaxing with longing," or the wife "still blushing from the entrance of the spouse." They are depicted with the fond sadness of one who sees this joy yoked with grief.²⁵

The pleasure in marriage which Gregory sees instead to be of greatest danger for the health of the soul is that bittersweet pleasure of companionship (*sympiōsis*). *Sympiōsis* is seen in the mother who feels her children's injuries as her own. The desire for it leads some people to find life intolerable and to commit suicide upon the death of a spouse. In these cases we are dealing with more than the simple desire for companionship, and instead are dealing with a certain tendency of human beings to join their very life and soul with another, particular human being so that they not only suffer with the other but even "die" in spirit when the other dies. The extremes to which the desire for *sympiōsis* can lead reveal in turn the element of delusion in this desire which Gregory says is "innate to the unthinking." The delusion lies in believing that one can "live" in the minds and bodies of others and find therein a certain permanence, security, and even immortality.²⁶

Where the desire for security and permanence controls our minds and

²⁴ Ibid. 4.4.31-36.

²⁵ Compare his treatment, e.g., with that of John Chrysostom in his *De virginitate*, where the shame of desiring sexual activity is stressed (27.4; 34.6).

²⁶ The term "symbiosis" is used by Freud and others to refer to the attachment of an infant for its mother and is used to explain certain behavior later in life in which one is seeking neurotically to make up for an unsatisfactory symbiosis in early childhood. Gregory is not a forerunner of modern psychoanalytic theory. He had no interest in early childhood as far as we know, nor does he explain inordinate attachment in terms of repressed memories of trauma or infantile desires. The search for *sympiōsis* which he describes here, on the other hand, involves the same *symptoms* which modern psychology would call "neurotic," i.e. inordinate fears and attachments. Gregory, however, gives a different etiology to these symptoms. In agreement with most ancient thinkers, he attributes these inordinate fears and attachments to the delusions to which the human condition is subject as such, not to specific experiences of childhood.

obscures our judgment, i.e. our ability to understand and accept what is, passion and disaster result. The permanence, security, and immortality one finds in such a fashion exist only in the mistaken judgment of what human relationships are and what they can be legitimately expected to bring. This mistaken judgment forms in turn the basis for human concern for reputation, fame, survival of one's *own* children or political group, and compassion as a *passion*.²⁷ The opposite of those "sympiotic" people who respond to their frailty and vulnerability in life by joining their very beings with others is "one who lives according to himself." Living according to oneself does not necessarily mean withdrawal from human relationships and affection or avoiding all dependence upon others; it means, rather, that one sees clearly that relationships with others offer no solution to one's frailty and mortality and thus one is not "passionately attached" to others out of fear. We can thus understand why Gregory adopts a different tone and considers marriage in a more favorable light in chapters 7-9. There he considers marriage under the aspect of *leitourgia*, public service, rather than the search for gratifying companionship. To the extent that marriage is free of attachment due to inordinate pity and fear, it can be less selfish and defensive and the couple can be more available for the service of others. Gregory uses the terms *philanthrōpia* and *leitourgia* in this treatise to refer to this sort of involvement with others which is not motivated by passion but is more properly called an "action," a rationally determined choice.

What he portrays in chapter 3 is a particular *experience* of married life that inevitably occurs to the extent that one seeks in married life "gratifying symbiosis." In that respect his account of marriage is no rhetorical exaggeration but an account that is all too true. People do curse God and friends upon the death of a spouse. They do become despondent and commit suicide. They do feel in their gut what happens to their children. They are sometimes paralyzed with fear while a spouse is absent lest some accident occur. Yet for most people the spectre of death does not obscure their every joy, nor are their lives ruled by fear. Most people do not consider loss as such an extreme problem that they will run from all bonds of human affection. Perhaps they are free of fear because they are simply "unthinking." On the other hand, there may be another factor to their equanimity which Gregory has not mentioned. The solution to the problem of one's own death and the loss of loved ones is perhaps not celibacy but that virtue which we have in the face of death—courage. The desire for companionship turns into such overpowering feelings and irrational behavior under the influence of the fear

²⁷ For an explanation of compassion as a passion, see *Rep.* 606 a-b.

of death. However, an irrational celibacy is also possible in which one flees marriage out of fear of loss and a hatred of the world in which loss is inevitable and natural, a part of the divine "economy."²⁸

The consequence of seeing the impermanence of life and everything in it is not necessarily, as Gregory seems to suggest, to be unable to enjoy life or anything in it. "Being always troubled with fear of change, does one not hold unperceived the enjoyment of the things present?"²⁹ Gregory does not say that the enjoyment of what is present is bad,³⁰ nor does he say that the enjoyment of them belongs only to "the unthinking." Rather, he tells us that the condition for the proper enjoyment of anything impermanent is the full, conscious acceptance of its impermanence.

Moreover, the condition for this acceptance must be the discovery of and reliance upon that which is in truth secure and not subject to death and corruption. The desire for "satisfying companionship" is not bad, not something to be rooted out, but it can be satisfied only in fellowship with God. As he tells us in chapter 2, the "virgin," by understanding and actualizing the indwelling of God, transcends attachment to family and nation through participation in a heavenly and incorruptible community.³¹ The "married," desiring something incorruptible yet having no knowledge of where to find it, live in the half-light where they are attached to things impermanent yet must hide this from themselves. "How might someone bring to our attention the common evils of life, which all humans know by experience, but which, through some unknown contrivance of nature, humans overlook, remaining willingly ignorant of the way things are?"³² Passionate attachment lives in this half-light, and its pleasantness, like the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil,

²⁸ In *De virg.* 2.2.21 Gregory states that those who imitate the passionless entrance of God into the world through Mary are "virgins according to reason." Aubineau has given convincing reasons, I believe, for translating *kata logon* as "according to reason" (566–71). He interprets "according to reason," however, as in contrast to being a virgin only bodily. Thus, according to Aubineau, Gregory uses this phrase to emphasize that celibacy requires an interior purity of heart to accompany its physical purity. *De virg.* 2.2.14–18 indicates, however, that to be a virgin according to reason is to have freed the mind from the fetters of passion. Thus, to be a virgin according to reason is something opposed to being a virgin according to passion, i.e. to be engaged in an irrational practice of virginity. Gregory's distinction is thus similar to that of Clement of Alexandria between irrational continence (*Strom.* 3.7.60 [PG 8, 1164A]) and continence according to reason (*Strom.* 3.11.71 [PG 8, 1172C]). Clement also speaks of "marriage according to reason" (*Strom.* 2.9.67 [PG 8, 1168C]).

²⁹ *De virg.* 3.4.16–18.

³⁰ In *De hom. op.* 1 (PG 44, 128C–132C) Gregory explains that the wealth of the earth exists so that we may by its enjoyment know its giver. We are disposed by the two parts of our nature, the sensual and the intellectual, to enjoy creation and the divine nature.

³¹ *De virg.* 2.1.

³² *Ibid.* 3.2.2–6.

presents evil under the aspect of good, death under the aspect of life, by presenting what is corruptible under the guise of incorruptibility.³³

THE ORIGIN OF THE VICES

Once we recognize the danger of attachment and the desire for symbiosis in marriage, we can appreciate the truth of many of Gregory's otherwise distorted statements about marriage and celibacy in chapter 4. We must understand them, as Gregory tells us, "by more lofty and truer argument." In moving from chapter 3 to chapter 4, the argument shifts and becomes "truer and loftier" inasmuch as "evils" now refers primarily to vice and not merely to suffering. He does not explicitly state this distinction but for rhetorical purposes allows the two meanings to blend, leaving it to those who think about what they read to notice the change in meaning and grasp the significance of the shift. Gregory claims that one who "observes well the delusion of this life with the pure eye of the soul" and "banishes himself in a certain way from life as a whole through the retreat from marriage has no community with human vices—I mean greed and envy, anger and hatred, desire of vainglory and the other things as much as they are of this family."³⁴

Such a claim would be specious if Gregory meant to imply that merely not marrying frees one from vice. The term "marriage," like the term "virginity," has two levels of meaning in this treatise. In addition to its conventional meaning, marriage comes to be a metaphor for passionate attachment in general, just as virginity, in addition to its conventional meaning of celibacy, refers also to a general attitude of nonattachment possible also in marriage. If one ceases to cling to that which is impermanent, one can thus be said to "retreat from marriage." Only then can one "have immunity (*ateleian*)"³⁵ from vice and not merely from the burdens of a household and public life. Once we recognize this second level of meaning, we can understand in what sense it is true that marriage is the source of vice. If "true virginity" or nonattachment is considered true virtue, then "marriage" or attachment can be spoken of as vice itself.³⁶

We must not be confused when Gregory speaks disparagingly of

³³ Gregory's treatment of marriage in *De virginitate* thus provides a concrete example of what he means in chapter 20 of *De hominis opificio*, where he discusses the sin of Adam.

³⁴ *De virg.* 4.1.8–17.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 4.1.18.

³⁶ Aubineau notes (148) the two levels of meaning for "virginity" but not two levels for "marriage." Moreover, he believes that Gregory "slides" between various meanings "unconsciously." Gregory's ambiguity here, however, is quite deliberate, for he is using in his own writing the pedagogical style he attributes to the Scriptures: "Scripture tells the story rather bodily, while sowing many starting points by which it calls forth one questioning them closely to go on to more subtle contemplation" (*De an. et res.* [PG 46.80B]).

"stooping with the soul toward the pleasures of the body like fatted beasts toward the fodder, living only for the belly and the things after the belly, . . . reckoning nothing to be good but taking pleasure through the body."³⁷ The diatribe of Platonic philosophy against the body is perhaps one of the most often misunderstood and misrepresented aspects of ancient thought. What we might consider the most obvious "pleasures of the body," eating and sex, are not the primary object of the diatribe, though the rhetor might begin with these as the pleasures obvious to most people. "To take pleasure through the body" has a far broader meaning than merely "to receive pleasant sensations." In the list of passions which constitute "taking pleasure through the body" Gregory includes "love of ruling" and "desire of empty glory." "Body" includes the sense, then, of "body politic," as it does in Platonic thought and in the thought of St. Paul. Indeed, the focus of chapter 4 is not at all upon the vices of sensuality, i.e. gluttony and lust, which would be perhaps those vices most closely connected with pleasure, but on the more social vices of envy, love of honor, and greed.

When Gregory sets about the task of outlining the "sequence"³⁸ of the passions, vainglory comes at the head of his list. He compares the passions to a chain. If one pulls the first link in the chain, the other links necessarily follow. Similarly, if one vice is present, "the rest, following as it were a natural necessity, also enter [the soul], inasmuch as they occur in a chain, having been drawn from the origin." If one yields to the pleasure of vainglory, "the appetite of covetousness follows along with it. For one cannot become someone who always wants more unless that [vainglory] leads by the hand to the passion." The simplest translation for *pleonexia* would perhaps be "greed," but the word "greed" in English does not seem to impart the range of meaning that *pleonexia* has for the Platonist. Those who "desire more" want ever more money, power, honors, and status. "Greed" is more narrowly associated with attachment to money and lacks the dimension of ambition that *pleonexia* implies. One wants *more than others*, not simply more as such. We can see, then, why greed follows vainglory for Gregory. Wanting more arises from a state of mind in which one compares oneself with others. Along with *pleonexia* comes the desire to be superior, which in turn leads to anger against those equally honored, arrogance or pride toward inferiors, and envy toward superiors. Envy in turn leads to hypocrisy, bitterness, and misanthropy, ending in a "condemnation in gehenna and darkness and

³⁷ *De virg.* 4.5.2-7.

³⁸ This is one of Gregory's favorite words (*akolouthia*). See J. Daniélou, "Akolouthia chez Grégoire de Nysse," *RSR* 27 (1953) 219-47 (= *L'Etre et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970] 18-51).

fire." Bringing home the point, Gregory asks: "Do you see the confusion of vices, how all are extensions of the passion according to pleasure?"³⁹

The pleasure of vainglory lies precisely in the comfort it offers against one's own mortality. Gregory minces no words in laying bare the illusion behind this comfort: "For the mortal remains mortal, whether one is honored or not." Greed is similarly not far removed from the problem of death in Gregory's mind. The unthinking, in wishing to expand their landholdings, seek to possess that which is proper to no one, since "the earth and the fulness of it is truly the Lord's." They seek to make "their own" that which "abides forever." This attitude reflects on a deeper level the delusion that they are "lords of themselves" and their denial of the fact that they enter life without consent and may be withdrawn from it against their will. The earth, but not their claim on it, always remains.⁴⁰ By calling the earth "the mother of children," Gregory implies that children, like land and our living bodies, are not our own. Nor do they, any better than honor or property, help us to live forever. Having a body becomes the occasion whereby one tries to make one's "self," something which exists as a part by the grace of the whole, into the whole in reference to which everything else derives its meaning and becomes a part. Death of "my" children deprives "me." Their life is meant to serve "me" and not the survival of the race. "The honorable" is not to act for the benefit of the greater community but what I need to do to have the community honor "me."⁴¹

Gregory contrasts this attitude with the sharing in common which characterizes virtue:

For the possession of virtue . . . is always abundant for those who desire it, not like the possession of the earth, in which those who divide it off into pieces for themselves must take their share from that of the other, and the gain of the one is the neighbor's loss. From this, because of hatred of loss, arise fights concerning wealth. But the wealth of that possession [virtue] is unenvied, and he who joins to himself more brings no penalty to him who is worthy of also participating equally in it. . . .⁴²

We now come to see why Gregory connects all vices, even vainglory, to

³⁹ *De virg.* 4.5.12-35.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 4.3.24-41.

⁴¹ In the allegorical system of Philo, this attitude is represented by the figure of Cain. According to Philo, "Cain" means "possession," and Cain is "the possessing of what is no possession" (*De cher.* 15.52 [LCL 227]). The mind (Adam) thinks that the things of the senses which Eve (sense) brings to him are his own possession and conceives "the greatest evil of the mind, vanity" (*De cher.* 17.57 [LCL 227]). "For instead of reckoning all things to be God's possession, the mind claims them as its own, though it cannot even possess itself securely or know what its essence is" (*De cher.* 20.65 [LCL 227]).

⁴² *De virg.* 4.1.25-35.

"taking pleasure through the body." As long as the good is in reference to oneself, localized as it were by the body, it is locked into competition with others. One loves not "the honorable" but "*my* honor." Furthermore, these vices are meant to compensate in some way for the mortality of one's own body. The "pleasure" of these vices is that of participation in the "permanence" of things, people, and nations. The permanence of these things, however, is more apparent than real. The sweet delusion of security and immortality that the many pursue in marriage is one expression of the energy which drives all of the passions.

Gregory thus calls marriage "the common starting point of error" concerning what is truly valuable. "Marriage" now has become a metaphor for *the wrong way of joining oneself to what is*. Gregory therefore distinguishes the participation proper to virtue from the attachment proper to vice. One who loves "the beautiful in purity" is indifferent as to whether the beautiful is contemplated in oneself or in another. Ultimately one loves only that beauty in which all human beauty participates—God. As Gregory puts it, one who has virtue "raises his soul above all the world" and "becomes more lofty than the concerns there."⁴³ If one "thinks about the things above and ascends with them to God, one is altogether more lofty than such things [earthly wealth and human power], not having the common starting point about such things—I am speaking of marriage."⁴⁴ The error of vice is to seek in the impermanent and insubstantial the gratifying communion and immortality that can only be found in the grace and indwelling of God.

It is in this context of speaking of virtue as "higher" and "looking down" that Gregory mentions "the wish to be above others, this difficult passion, pride," which is "a seed or root of every thorn of sin." This, too, he says, "has its origin especially from the cause of marriage."⁴⁵ Gregory says very little about pride here, going on in the next paragraph to lump it in with greed and love of honor, saying that it is the result of wanting not to appear less than one's forebears and wanting to appear great to one's descendants. Pride, love of honor, and love of gain are all related inasmuch as all three represent differing aspects of *pleonexia*, wanting more. Yet pride is that vice which is most characteristic of those who *renounce* marriage. Those who renounce the world, possessions, and family may cling nonetheless to this "possession" of their imagination. Pride is the sin characteristic of angelic beings "who are neither given nor taken in marriage" on the one hand, and of the ascetic "imitation of the life of angels" on the other. Gregory's association of pride with marriage is therefore ironic, and here he strains the connection between

⁴³ Ibid. 4.1.22–23; 4.1.10–11.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 4.2.10.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 4.2.11–15.

vice and marriage to the limit.⁴⁶

Just as *De virginitate* 3 is written ignoring the virtue of courage, so the analysis of vice in *De virginitate* 4 is written without an adequate consideration of pride.⁴⁷ Though Gregory can clearly distinguish true virtue from that attitude which arises from pride, his rhetoric about virtue in fact appeals to the desire to be superior by its very use of the metaphor "higher and lower." He depicts the life of virtue as that of being "in a lofty tower overlooking the human passions, pitying their slavery and mocking their ignorance."⁴⁸ As a rhetor, Gregory is persuading us to follow a particular course by appealing to our passions: in chapter 3, pity and fear; in chapter 4, love of distinction and superiority. In doing so, however, he indicates "silently" what are in fact the dangers of the practice of celibacy for developing the true wholeness of human character which constitutes the perfection of virtue.

VIRGINITY AS SEPARATION OF BODY AND SOUL

The recognition that the distinction between possession and participation, attachment and nonattachment, is the deeper foundation for Gregory's discussion of virginity and marriage is important as well for an understanding of what Gregory means in his description of vice as a certain "confusion" of body and soul. He presents the task of virtue as that of "separating" the soul from the body.

For it is the concern of such a life how not to have the lofty part of the soul be debased through the insurrection of the pleasures and, instead of being carried upward and looking to what is above, have our thought fall, carried down toward the passions of flesh and blood. For how can what is nailed below by the pleasure

⁴⁶ In his treatment of the priesthood in *V. Moysis* 2.279-85, Gregory speaks more directly of the danger of pride. There he notes the tendency of priests to be motivated by an all-too-human ambition for honor and to replace their lust with pride. In pride one attempts to possess one's goodness as one's own rather than as a participation in the goodness of God. To annex to oneself one's goodness does not significantly differ from annexing the land, one's spouse and children, or the opinion of the community. Participation is that type of joining proper to the soul. In pride the soul imitates that type of joining proper to the body and spaciality in which one tries to hold goodness "near" to oneself and "away" from others. Brooks Otis, "Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 11 (1958) 110-14, thinks that Gregory's understanding of evil and the role of the body as the occasion for evil leaves him unable to account for angelic evil. Pride would seem to require the localization of a body.

⁴⁷ The style of writing in abstraction from a certain vital component of a problem is probably in imitation of the dialogues of Plato. The *Republic*, e.g., is written in abstraction from the body. For a discussion of this aspect of Plato's writing, see Allan Bloom's interpretative essay in *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968) 307-436. Thomas More imitates Plato's *Republic* in a fuller way in his *Utopia*, where he gives due consideration to the body in his ideal city while neglecting human pride or spiritedness.

⁴⁸ *De virg.* 4.3.1-19.

of the flesh and preoccupying desire with human passions look up toward the kindred and intelligible light with a free eye, whenever it has the inclination toward the material from a miserable and uneducated preconception? Just as the eyes of swine, turning by nature to what is below, have no experience of heavenly wonders, so the soul, being pulled down by the body, will no longer be able to look toward heaven and the beauties above and will stoop toward the lower and the bestial aspects of its nature.⁴⁹

When Gregory speaks of "the lofty part of the soul" being "debased" by its involvement with flesh and blood, he does not mean that flesh and blood is evil or debased in and of itself. Nor does he mean that one must never exert energy toward the satisfaction of one's needs as an animal. Rather, what is evil or base lies in the attempt by what is most divine and highest in the soul to satisfy itself in the animal side of our nature. In this movement of the soul, the body and the soul become "mixed" or "confused." When Gregory speaks in this paragraph of the soul "being pulled down by the body," he seems to be saying that the body actively leads the soul toward vice and is responsible for this confusion. We must note, however, that he explicitly states that the inclination toward the material is from a prejudgment and not from the body itself. The body can only pull the soul down if the soul allies itself with the body through a misunderstanding of its own nature and the nature of the body. Thus the key to the liberation of the soul from the body lies not in fighting the desires of the body as such but in correcting this misunderstanding in the soul. The soul becomes mixed with the body whenever it seeks immortality through the body.

For this reason Gregory can quote Rom 1:30, that the human being is "an inventor of evil," at the same time he is speaking of pleasure and the body.⁵⁰ Humanity is obviously not the inventor of the body, nor is the body itself evil. Nevertheless, the body becomes the *occasion* for vice inasmuch as desiring more or craving attaches itself to the body and appearances.⁵¹ The soul naturally desires the incorruptible and begins to be free from vice once one sees the impermanence of all which is connected with the body. Neither human things nor the world itself have any "solidity" or "remain at rest." All is thus perceived to be "an alien and passing thing." One who understands this "has love (*erôta*) only for divine life."⁵² Gregory thus introduces the notion of *erôs*, the desire in us which is directed toward that which we perceive to be immortal. One who participates in the divine life despises human things inasmuch as

⁴⁹ Ibid. 5.1-15.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 4.5.7-12.

⁵¹ See also *De or. dom.* 3 (PG 44, 1157B), where Gregory interprets the prayer "Thy kingdom come" thus: "Bring to an end the war of the flesh against the spirit, and let the body not be a base of operations for the war on the soul."

⁵² *De virg.* 4.4.1-16.

they cannot satisfy this desire of the soul.

In speaking of this life as an "exile," we should not presume that Gregory thinks that the only hope is to leave this world for another.⁵³ Attachment and vice create our experience of exile in this life. Gregory explains that those things reckoned valuable according to this life of attachment "have support only in the hasty judgment of the unthinking."

They of themselves are nothing anywhere. There is no being lowborn or wellborn, no glory, no being admired, no ancient narratives, no conceit in present things, no ruling others, and no servitude. Riches, well-being, poverty, lack of means, and all the irregularities of life seem to differ greatly to those who are uneducated, whenever they make pleasure a criterion of such things, while to the lofty all things appear of equal value in their reckoning and no one thing is preferable to another, since the course of life finishes in the same way through either of the opposite conditions and one has an equal chance to live well or badly in each of the portions allotted. . . .⁵⁴

We must probe the meaning of the "nonbeing" of these things. None of these things is permanent and thus none of them is the proper object of *erôs*. They are all of equal value *with regard to the satisfaction of the soul*, which seeks the immortal. To the extent that one does not seek to satisfy the soul through such things, to the extent to which one has "purified the mind and observed rightly the truth of the things which are," one can experience the vicissitudes of life with great equanimity.⁵⁵ The couple portrayed in chapter 3, seeking to escape death and separation through marriage, cannot maintain any balance in the midst of their troubles. Knowing no immortality except that offered through the body, the impermanence of all things and the death of family members seem for them a threat to their very life and being.

Gregory thus counsels that we separate ourselves from such a life which guarantees our suffering. The diatribe of chapter 3 seems to imply that we are to avoid hardship and unpleasantness by avoiding marriage. Chapter 4 makes it clear, however, that to lead a life of virtue means that we are to stop seeking the pleasant and avoiding the painful. The greater part of suffering would seem to lie not in what is painful to the body but what is painful to any soul which has bound itself through its *erôs* to things which are impermanent. The solution Gregory proposes is "not to hand over the soul to any of the things which change." In that respect we must "live by the soul alone and imitate to the extent possible the way of life of incorporeal powers, who 'neither marry nor are given

⁵³ See *De prof.* (PG 46, 248B), where he speaks of heaven being on earth for those who separate themselves from vice.

⁵⁴ *De virg.* 4.4.16-38.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 4.4.40-55.

in marriage.'"⁵⁶ This separation does not mean literal withdrawal from marriage and the world, as it seems to have meant for Gregory's brother Basil, but is an intrapsychic separation. For those who are able to attend to their experience and learn from it, the lessons of separation and detachment which characterize a life in retirement from the world are in fact present in marriage as well. Thus in chapter 3 Gregory uses again and again the terms "separation," "desolation," and "alone" to describe the suffering of the married in the face of the mortality of their spouse.

THE VALUE OF CELIBACY

Gregory tells us that, for this process of becoming "outside of sympathy for the body" and in order to avoid handing over the soul to the things which change, virginity has been given to humanity "as a coworker and aid." Virginity is a "profession" that teaches "those living in the flesh to become similar to incorporeal nature."⁵⁷ It "does not take part in the concessions to pleasure permitted to the common life but changes the direction of its erotic power from bodily things to the intellectual and immaterial contemplation of the beautiful."⁵⁸ The skill of virginity, then, is to shift our quest for immortality from possession of material things to participation in the immaterial and intellectual.

In the context of this shift, Gregory for the first time in this treatise speaks directly and unequivocally of the value of virginity of the body:

Well, then, toward such a disposition of the soul virginity of the body has been contrived for us, in order especially to inspire a forgetfulness and amnesia for the soul from the impassioned movement of nature, since one is induced by no necessity to be condemned to the lower liabilities of nature. For, once one is free from such necessities, one is no longer in danger of turning away little by little through becoming habituated to that which appears to have been conceded by a law of nature and thereby also becoming ignorant of the divine and unmixed pleasure which only purity of heart, when it holds sway in us, hunts after by nature.⁵⁹

According to Gregory, a heart that is pure seeks unmixed and pure pleasure by nature. The habit of indulging in mixed pleasures can obscure this in the soul. Mixed pleasures are those in which pleasure depends in part upon pain. The pleasure of eating is mixed with the pain of hunger; the pleasure of sex is mixed with the pain of longing. These needs of the body and the pleasure incumbent upon satisfying them are natural. The problem comes, however, when by habit we cease to view these needs as a liability and a necessity of nature and instead seek the pleasure of

⁵⁶ Ibid. 4.8, quoting Mt 22:30, Mk 12:25, and Lk 20:34-35.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 4.9.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 5.15-21.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 5.21-31.

satisfying them for the sake of pleasure itself. They thus cease to be finite and take on the infinite character of our erotic desire. The longing of one sex for another becomes the arena in which we seek our ultimate fulfilment, and our recognition on some level of the impermanence of these relationships only gives fuel to our efforts to possess the other as our own. This desire "*seems* to have been conceded by a law of nature" but is in fact an *addition* to nature. Our hearts seek by nature to be pure, to participate in all things but to own none of them, and this state of nonattachment is naturally pleasant. Nevertheless, the more obvious pleasures of the body can easily obscure the subtle and sublime pleasure of purity of heart. Amid the impermanence of the world, the pure of heart rest in the permanence of God. Basing our judgment about what is good and choiceworthy upon the tendencies of our sensual nature alone, we may instead seek that permanence through attachment to another human. In that movement we are inevitably caught in the anxious position of preserving our link with the image of God through a body separate from us and subject to death.

The advantage of virginity of the body, therefore, is to allow one to let go of those anxieties and experience the "pleasure" of purity of heart. The reduction of bodily and material needs which a celibate or monastic life involves is not designed to make life easier for its own sake but to make easier an experience which will in turn alter our relationship to these very needs of animal and social life. In chapters 5 and 6 Gregory presents an argument for virginity very similar to that which Basil gives for monasticism in *Epistle 2* to Gregory of Nazianzus. According to both Basil and Gregory, virginity of the body can provide the calm and focus necessary for the soul to return to itself and through itself rise toward the apprehension of God.

Gregory explains virginity of the body by an analogy with water flowing from a spring. The common life is similar to what happens when the water from a spring spreads out into many small and slow-moving streams and becomes diffused over a broad area. In this relaxed condition it is of little use for farming. The practice of celibacy, on the other hand, is similar to constructing a channel to collect all the disorderly streams for better use. The mind which spreads out everywhere toward whatever pleases it lacks the ability to reach "the truly good." "But if, being called back from everywhere and gathered around itself, it would move, brought together and undiffused, toward the energy proper to itself and in accordance with its nature, there will be no obstacle for it to be carried towards the things above and touch the truth of beings."⁶⁰ Gregory then goes on to alter and intensify the analogy. A pipe can cause water to flow

⁶⁰ Ibid. 6.2.15-19.

straight upward against its natural tendency downward by allowing it no other direction in which to flow.

So also the human mind, inasmuch as a narrow channel of self-control braces it tightly from everywhere, will be taken up somehow by the nature of its motion toward the desire of lofty things, not having anywhere else to flow. For its character, received at the hand of the one who has made its nature, is to be ever-moving, and it can never stand still. Being prevented from using empty things, it is impossible for its motion not to travel entirely straight ahead toward the truth, being barred on all sides from traveling toward absurd things.⁶¹

If the erotic power of the soul has become dispersed, seeking satisfaction among bodily things, then to deny the soul access to these things will force it eventually to turn its energies toward itself for its satisfaction. Its *artificial* restriction will help toward the discovery of purity of heart, the true and *natural* good of the soul.

With this reasoning Gregory explains and justifies the lives of Elias and John the Baptist, two unmarried saints. They separated themselves "from the sequence (*akolouthias*) of human life" in order to avoid the deception about "the discernment of the truly good" which occurs through the senses and in order not to become accustomed to "mixture" in the good.⁶² Gregory admits that the austere lives of these men is something unnatural. "For both had been alienated from their youth onward from human life and . . . established themselves outside of nature by their neglect of customary and normal nourishment of food and drink and by their way of life in the desert. . . ."⁶³

Being "outside of nature" and living "the way of life of the desert" go together. One has no children, wives, or anything merely human with which to be preoccupied. By this practice one achieves a life free of outside disturbances to contemplation. Gregory mentions that Elias received the power from God to control the rain and the dew, to close the heavens to sinners and open them to the repentant. The art of celibate life is for Gregory the ability to direct one's energy and erotic power, symbolized as water, in order to dry up and deny life to what is sin and nourish the pure and unmixed pleasure of the soul. Gregory speculates that these men would not have achieved the level of their freedom from concern for food and clothing "if they had been made soft to the pleasure passions of the body by marriage."⁶⁴

Gregory tells us that the Scriptures have written of these men "for our instruction," so we may head our lives straight toward theirs. We are to learn from them that those who wish to join their thought to God should

⁶¹ Ibid. 6.2.22-31.

⁶³ Ibid. 6.1.10-17.

⁶² Ibid. 6.1.1-10.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 6.1.21-38.

"engage in none of the matters of living" and that "it is not possible for one dissipated by thought for many things to go straight forward toward the comprehension and desire of God."⁶⁵ It would appear, then, that Gregory is insisting on the necessity of renunciation and ascetic withdrawal for spiritual progress. In light of what he will say about marriage in chapters 7-9, however, we cannot take this to be his final word in the matter. Gregory here only establishes the value of renunciation, not its absolute necessity. In chapter 9 he will return to the analogy of the water channel, altering it in light of what he considers to be a more balanced and natural view of the Christian life than what one might derive from the examples of Elias and John.⁶⁶ Their manner of being "outside of nature" is not the conformity with the divine nature Gregory has in mind. He does not, however, dismiss the importance of their example. Indeed, it highlights the value of celibacy and ascetic withdrawal for providing both the focus or concentration of mind and the "drying out" of the passions necessary for the experience of purity of heart.

THE IDEAL OF MARRIAGE AS PUBLIC SERVICE

Christian writers have often defended the value of marriage against those who would consider it sinful as such.⁶⁷ Gregory begins his treatment of marriage in chapter 7 very much within that tradition, opposing those heresies which would eliminate marriage entirely from the Christian life. Gregory tells us that those who deny marriage "falsify the teachings of the Church," "desert the guidance of the Holy Spirit," and "hate God's creatures as defilements, as things carrying evil and responsible for evils." These people Gregory says are "outside of the courtyard of the meaning of the mysteries . . . in the stable of the wicked one. . . ."⁶⁸ We must not allow this obvious consistency with patristic teaching as a whole to blind us to what is unusual in these three chapters on marriage, for Gregory takes an unusual position not only in his argument concerning why marriage has a legitimate place in Christian life but also concerning what that position ought to be.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Ibid. 6.1.38-46.

⁶⁶ Gregory associates the way of life of his brother Basil with the lives of Elias and John the Baptist in the prologue and in the funeral oration on Basil (*In laud. Bas.* 10.13.15 [Stein, *Patristic Studies* 17 (1928) 16, 26-30, 32-34]). Thus, in the way chapters 7-9 modify the theology of renunciation of chapters 5-6, we can perceive the way in which Gregory modifies the position of his brother Basil on these matters.

⁶⁷ See the history of this defense given by Paulo Pisi, *Genesis e phthora: Le motivazioni protologiche della verginità in Gregorio di Nissa e nella tradizione dell'enkrateia* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1981) 103-94.

⁶⁸ *De virg.* 7.1.10-22.

⁶⁹ Pisi, by focusing too narrowly on how Gregory justifies the life of virginity protologically, misses the unusual character of Gregory's teaching on marriage and the provisional character of his endorsement of celibate life.

To explain why marriage is legitimate, Gregory turns to two arguments. He claims, first, that the heretics depart from "church doctrine" because they do not understand that virtue is a mean between two vices. Those who despise marriage overshoot the virtue of moderation or chastity in the opposite extreme from those who are indulgent and lack firmness of soul against pleasure. Second, he argues that those who reproach marriage necessarily reproach themselves as well, since every human being is in fact the fruit of marriage. "These people, branded in conscience and bruised by the absurdity of their teaching, are refuted by such self-contradictions."⁷⁰

The heart of the problem seems to be the denial of either side of a human being's dual nature as a "rational animal."⁷¹ The indulgent live as though they were only animals; the despisers of marriage live as though they were not animals at all. By such denial they "sear their consciences" and become living self-contradictions. In this chapter Gregory again turns to the discussion of rhetoric and admits that his rhetoric in favor of celibacy and against the pleasures of the body is deliberately imbalanced. He justifies this practice, however, as a way to restore a natural balance.

Let no one think that by saying these things we set aside the economy of marriage. For we are not ignorant of the fact that this is also no stranger to the blessing of God, but since the common nature of human beings is a sufficient coworker toward marriage, automatically putting the inclination toward such things into all who come forth into being from marriage, while virginity somehow goes against nature, it would be superfluous to make the effort to write an exhortation on behalf of marriage to promote the cause of its coworker which is difficult to fight—I speak of pleasure.⁷²

Pleasure is the coworker of marriage, while virginity is the coworker of purity of heart. The attraction of pleasure is so obvious to all and the natural inclinations in that direction are so persuasive that no verbal exhortation is necessary. Purity of heart is, as we have seen, the natural pleasure of the soul once it is purified from attachment to the body. Given the human condition of sin, however, this pleasure is something one must *recover* and something one must *persuade* people to seek. Only when the natural pleasure of purity has been experienced can it argue sufficiently on its own behalf. Chapters 5 and 6 reveal that virginity of the body can be a suitable coworker toward this discovery. Gregory admits that this helpful practice is in some sense against nature; however,

⁷⁰ *De virg.* 7.1.22–3.3. *V. Moysis* 2.289 also places moderation between indulgence and having a "branded conscience."

⁷¹ In 12.2.1 Gregory uses this definition of the human being from Aristotle.

⁷² *De virg.* 7.1.1–10.

he argues that it is necessary to combat something which is more fundamentally unnatural and thus ultimately more harmful, i.e. the inclination to judge the good only by the pleasure of the body. Only those imbalanced in the opposite direction, i.e. those hating the body, require a defense of marriage.

Gregory then states more clearly what the balance is toward which his teachings on both marriage and celibacy tend. In support of this ideal he cites the example of the patriarch Isaac:

We, however, recognize this as well about marriage, that while the concern and desire for divine things must be put first, we must not overlook the public service (*leitourgias*) of marriage if it can be used with moderation and measure. Of such a kind was the patriarch Isaac, who did not accept the cohabitation of Rebecca in the peak of his prime, lest his marriage be a work of passion, but did so when his youth was already spent, because of the blessing of God upon his seed. After serving the marriage up until the birth of a single child, he belonged again wholly to the unseen, closing his bodily senses. For the story seems to me to indicate this by telling of the weight of the eyes of the patriarch.⁷³

The mean that Gregory recommends is thus not celibacy but moderation within marriage, and the cornerstone of moderation in marriage is an understanding of the value of marriage which differs greatly from that of most people. What Gregory speaks against in chapters 3 and 4 are those marriages which are founded upon the satisfaction of the passions. Those who seek in marriage the fulfilment of erotic longing lay for themselves the foundation of a tragedy, as another mortal human cannot totally satisfy this longing for the immortal. However, those who are free of this delusion may indeed have a different basis for marriage—public service (*leitourgia*).⁷⁴

⁷³ Ibid. 7.3.3–7. Aubineau (109) notes that Gregory's account of the character of Isaac seems to be based upon a passage in *Quaest. Gen.* 4.196 (LCL 380) in which Philo speaks of the "eyes of the patriarch" as being "closed," and a passage in *Deter.* 14.46 (LCL 227) where he says that Isaac is "the only form which is without passion in its generation." Philo's account in the latter passage seems to differ from Gregory's account quoted above inasmuch as Philo seems to be speaking of Isaac as *begotten* rather than Isaac's character as *one who begets*. Isaac is a "form" (*eidos*) inasmuch as Isaac is representative of virtue or wisdom which is begotten without passion. Origen speaks similarly of Isaac as "that which is begotten by the Gospel" (*Hom. in Gen.* 7.1.19 [SC 7, 194]), the image of Christ which one can conceive in oneself "if you are pure enough in mind, holy enough in body, and immaculate enough in your deeds" (*Comm. in Rom.* 46 [PG 14, 983C]). Gregory shifts the focus from the figure of Isaac as an example of the virtue God engenders in us to the figure of Isaac as an example of the way the virtuous go about the task of engendering other human beings and involving themselves in human affairs.

⁷⁴ Clement of Alexandria also refers to marriage as *leitourgia* (*Strom.* 3.12.79 [PG 8, 1180A]): "Both celibacy and marriage have their own different forms of service (*leitourgias*) and ministry (*diakonias*) to the Lord; I have in mind the caring for one's wife and children."

The word *leitourgia* in ancient Greece referred to the public duty which fell to the richer citizens of financing athletic training, choral performances, banquets, and the outfitting of ships for battle. By using this term Gregory returns to and revises his previous statement in chapter 4 that marriage is the *chorēgos*, the financier of tragic performances. Marriage in chapters 3 and 4 had been considered under the aspect of pleasure, and from that perspective the burden of marriage and childbearing was presented as something one should seek to escape. Chapters 7–9 consider marriage under the aspect of moderation and duty, what one owes to the political body, the community. Thus Christian life cannot pretend to ignore ministry to the legitimate needs of the body,⁷⁵ particularly to the service of bringing children into the world.

We can thus appreciate the full significance of Gregory's application of the term *leitourgia*, public service, to describe the benefits of married life, and his application of the term *ateleia*, immunity or exemption from taxes, to describe the advantage of the celibate life.⁷⁶ His use of this terminology points to the relationship of marriage and celibacy to civic duty and the way in which the privilege of the latter depends upon the labor of the former. In chapter 2 Gregory calls God *chorēgos*, provider, in God's relationship to humanity,⁷⁷ and calls the Incarnation an act of *philanthrōpia*, philanthropy or love of humanity.⁷⁸ In the Christian economy of salvation God is not content to remain in the incorruptible state proper to the divine nature but accepts freely the physical corruptibility and vulnerability to suffering proper to human nature.⁷⁹ By calling marriage *leitourgia* and God *chorēgos*, Gregory is suggesting that married life bears a greater resemblance to divine life than celibacy in its role as benefactor and provider for the community and its willingness to assume

⁷⁵ As an example of Gregory's heightened awareness of the need to serve the body, compare his interpretation of "Give us this day our daily bread" in *De or. dom.* 4 with that of Origen in *De orat.* 27. Origen totally spiritualizes the passage by making it refer only to "heavenly bread," while Gregory insists that it commands us to give the body its due. Moderation, i.e. staying within the legitimate needs of the body, makes us equal to angels, who have no material needs at all.

⁷⁶ *De virg.* 4.1.18; 14.3.7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 2.1.15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 2.2.6.

⁷⁹ Gregory's fullest development of this notion is to be found in his exegesis of Phil 2:1–11 in *Contra Eunomium*. The Lord unites in his love of humanity what "in speech" appear to be two things, the "freedom from passion" of God and the human "economy of passion," thereby demonstrating that "the divine is not polluted through its condescension." Gregory distinguishes two meanings of the term "passion." "Nothing is truly called 'passion' unless it bears one toward sin, and one would not strictly call 'passion' the routine that nature necessarily follows." Thus the Lord undergoes the "passion" of birth, nourishment, growth, and fear of death, but these things are for him "action" rather than "passion," for he enters the "economy of passion" not "by weakness of nature but by the power of his will" (*Eun.* 6.2–3 [PG 45, 716B–725A]).

bodily burdens, even though celibacy may bear a greater resemblance to divine life in its freedom from the burdens of bodily existence.

Lack of appreciation of the bodily and political realities which support them is one basis for the sin of pride among celibates. As Gregory points out, those who despise marriage forget that they were born from marriage, forget the tree of which they are the fruit.⁸⁰ Pride thus involves the attempt to assert one's own autonomy in the face of the community and claim as one's own achievement a virtue which is in fact contingent upon the generosity of others whose bearing of children and business in the world support this way of life. Gregory's preference for a combination of marriage and contemplation is perhaps in part in view of the danger of pride among celibates and the tendency to view holiness as a separation from that which is lower rather than its service in imitation of the divine *philanthrōpia*.⁸¹

Ordinary marriages, undertaken as a means to attain one's own security and pleasure, do not reflect the divine beneficence. Only when marriage becomes *leitourgia* rather than an act of passion does the generation of children become an act of generosity and beneficence in imitation of the divine. Those who separate the soul from the body have no delusion that their children are "their own" and the bearers of their honor or immortality. They are thereby immune from the temptation to use their family as an excuse for seeking an ever-larger estate to support them and will judge these material concerns in terms of the legitimate needs of the body.⁸² To illustrate this point, Gregory returns to the analogy of the water and the spring, this time revising it so that it more accurately reflects his opinion. The skilled farmer is able to open a spot in the channel which will allow just enough water out for what the crop needs. An "inexperienced" or "unstewardly" farmer, on the other hand, is liable to open the hole too wide so that there is danger of the whole stream leaving the channel and flooding the field.⁸³

In the same way, since there is a necessity in life for the succession of one from another, if, on the one hand, someone thus uses procreation so as to put the

⁸⁰ *De virg.* 7.2.24-29.

⁸¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, in his funeral oration on the death of his sister Gorgonia (*Or.* 8.8 [PG 35, 797A-B]), stresses the way in which her marriage helped her to avoid the danger of pride and thus to attain a more perfect degree of moderation.

⁸² Gregory emphasizes this in his sermons on the Lord's Prayer. When prayer, i.e. the memory of God, is established in the heart, sin finds no entrance into the soul. Remembering that all one has comes from God, that nothing is one's own, all will be done according to justice. Prayer prevents the farmer from the desire for more. The same is true, he says, of the traveler, the person on military campaign, or a marriage (*De or. dom.* 1 [PG 44, 1121D-1124A]).

⁸³ *De virg.* 8.7-15.

spiritual first and to use the desire for such things with thrift and restraint because of the shortness of time, that person would be the moderate farmer who cultivates himself in wisdom according to the precept of the Apostle.⁸⁴

By altering the analogy of the stream, Gregory allows us to see more clearly the value of celibacy and renunciation of business in the world. Celibacy and renunciation make up for deficiencies in experience and wisdom, providing the concentration on spiritual matters which truly moderate individuals could provide for themselves in the world. Wisdom is the basis of true moderation, and ascetic withdrawal is a temporary substitute for and a pedagogue of this.

Gregory's explanation of the value of renunciation in fact functions to remove the temptation to pride among those who choose this way of life.

One who is so weakly disposed as not to be able to stand up courageously to the burden of nature would do better to keep himself far away from such things rather than descend into a struggle which is greater than his ability. For there is no small danger for such a person, being led astray in the experience of pleasure, that he think that there is no other good than receiving it through flesh with a certain attachment and that he become wholly flesh by turning his mind entirely away from the desire of incorporeal goods, hunting in every way for the pleasant in these things, so as to be more a friend of pleasure than a friend of God. Well, then, since it is not possible for everyone, because of the weakness of his nature, to hit the mark of due measure in such matters, and because, according to the Psalmist, there is a danger for one who is carried away from measure of being stuck "in a deep mire," it would therefore be profitable, as our treatise suggests, to pass through life without experience of such things, lest, under the excuse of things which have been conceded, the passions gain an entrance into the soul.⁸⁵

In this argument Gregory reverses the usual understanding of the relationship between celibacy and marriage. One might expect him to say that *marriage* is a concession to human weakness and a remedy for concupiscence. Instead, Gregory tells us that *celibacy* is a concession to human weakness⁸⁶ and a remedy for concupiscence. The practice of celibacy can itself be viewed as a compromise with respect to the perfection of true virtue.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid. 8.15–21.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 8.26–42, quoting from Ps 69:2.

⁸⁶ He makes a similar interpretation of Moses' "monastic" sojourn in Midian (V. *Mosis* 2.16–18). Due to weakness Moses could not yet stand up to vice (Egypt). Before he could return to Egypt to lead them out, he needed the illumination of the truth of beings which is the "burning bush." Monasticism is thus temporary and directed toward an experience of truth which liberates one to return to the world and its pretensions.

⁸⁷ Gregory reverses the position of Origen, who says that chastity in marriage is the "milk" for infants to which Paul refers in 1 Cor 3:2, while virginity and perfect chastity are the "solid food" of which the spiritually mature partake (*Frag. in 1 Cor.* 12 [JTS 9, 241, 1.30]).

Gregory tells us that celibacy is for those who are too weak to stand up to the burden or impetus of nature. We might expect him to say the opposite, that celibates better than anyone else are able to oppose their sexual impulses and refuse temptations to worldly wealth, power, and honor as well.⁸⁸ Celibates have removed themselves from the world, but by this act alone they have not uprooted the passions which tie them to the world. Their way of life allows them to have a certain "forgetfulness and amnesia" about bodily needs and thus puts the passions to sleep, but that itself does not mean that they have gained that wisdom about the body which will allow them to both "remember" the needs of the body and be free of passion. Were they to marry and give their bodily nature its due, they might succumb in time to immoderation in wealth or concern for honor. Without true wisdom no one is likely to be able both to pursue the spiritual life and to fulfil one's duty to the community in raising children. For most people who wish to pursue a spiritual life, it is better to remain celibate than let passion gain an entrance into their soul.

Gregory indicates that the weakness of celibates consists in their lack of courage. One must be able to stand up to the burden of nature "courageously" or "with manliness." By "burden of nature" Gregory seems to refer not merely to the troubles and concerns which are the everyday fare of life with a family and children but also the insecurity and inevitability and death and loss which accompany all worldly activity.⁸⁹ We should recall here our analysis of the diatribe against marriage in chapter 3. There Gregory emphasized how the presence of death casts its shadow over every joy of married life. Though in chapter 3 it appeared as though the solution to the sorrow of marriage is to escape it through celibacy, Gregory now suggests in chapter 9 that the only real solution to the problem of death is not the avoidance of human affection and human responsibilities but the development of courage. Married life and political life require courage, that virtue which allows one to live and act reasonably in the face of death. As one accepts one's mortality and the inevitability of bodily separation from that which one loves, one has ever more balance and equanimity in the face of misfortune and acts as the

⁸⁸ Chrysostom, e.g., emphasizes this (*De virg.* 27 [SC 125, 176–82]). Origen also writes that Paul allows marriage for the same reason that Moses allowed divorce among the Hebrews: hardness of heart (*Comm. in Mt.* 14.23 [GCS 60, 339, 1.30], and *Hom. in Lev.* 16.2 [GCS 6, 496, 1.21]).

⁸⁹ Clement of Alexandria also thought that "true manhood is not shown in the choice of a celibate life; on the contrary, the prize in the contest of men is won by him who has trained himself by the discharge of the duties of husband and father and by the supervision of a household, regardless of pleasure and pain—by him, I say, who in the midst of his solicitude for his family shows himself inseparable from the love of God and rises superior to every temptation which assails him through children and wife and servants and possessions. On the other hand, he who has no family is in most respects untried" (*Strom.* 7.12.70 [PG 9, 497C–500A], tr. Oulton and Chadwick).

nature of a situation requires. True moderation thus requires true courage, and both of them require wisdom concerning the proper value of the things which come to be and pass away. His rhetoric in chapter 3, in its appeal to the fear of death, is thus tailored for those who lack this virtue, to attract them to the state of life of greatest benefit to them.

Gregory then discusses the difficulty of resisting human custom. Many who are "lovers of moderation" at puberty give themselves over wholly to the life of passion after participating in pleasures which are considered lawful and permitted. These "weaker ones" require celibacy as a "secure fortress" and should not descend from that fortress "toward the sequence of life."⁹⁰

In this context Gregory mentions the Pauline notion that the married must divide their attention between God and the world:

For it is not possible for one who has turned his thought to this world, taking up its anxious concern and busying himself in pleasing humans, to fulfil the first and great commandment of the Lord, which says "to love God from one's whole heart and strength." For how will someone love God from the whole heart if ever he divides his heart between God and the world and, stealing the love owed to Him alone, exhausts it in human passions? "For one who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord, but one who is married cares for the things of the world."⁹¹

Gregory thus gives his interpretation of the Pauline teaching that celibacy is better than marriage. Such a preference is only true in the absence of true virtue. Marriage only robs the love due to God when one is still held under the delusion that marriage and the involvement in the affairs of the community it requires can be a means to immortality and ultimate fulfilment. Having separated the soul from the body and discovered "that

⁹⁰ *De virg.* 9.1.21–2.9. "The weaker ones" and those more susceptible to the illusions of human customs are perhaps the young. See 23.2.27–3.6; 5.1–2; 6.13–29. Through the example of the patriarch Isaac, Gregory is perhaps advocating that monastic practice and celibacy be encouraged for the young but that in later life, having learned the value of purity of heart and acquired discipline in the face of pleasure, one might return to life in the city and accept marriage. In later chapters Gregory discusses the problems to which ascetic life leads—living idly, trusting one's fantasies more than the gospel, mistaking insociability for virtue, living in suspicious arrangements of cohabitation with the opposite sex, and holding marriage in contempt. See *De virg.* 7.1.10–18; 17.1.9–15; 23.3.15–4.11. In 22.2.5–16 he explains that health consists in balancing the elements that compose the body so that there is an "equal dominance" of each of the four elements, which form two pairs of contraries, hot and cold, and moist and dry. We should not "add fire during the time of youth to its abundance of heat, nor multiply the cooling and thinning for one who is chilled by suffering or time." The austerity of the lives of Elijah and John the Baptist "dry up" the passions, but that task is most appropriate to youth who are "hot and wet" anyway; by prolonging the ascetic ideal into adulthood and even old age, one risks lethargy and bitterness due to the sterility of the life. A prudent involvement in the stream of life may be what a later stage of life requires.

⁹¹ *De virg.* 9.2.9–19, quoting 1 Cor 7:32–33.

which is truly to be desired," the duality of human nature is no longer a dualism. Gregory states this position quite clearly in his seventh sermon on the Beatitudes. The true peacemaker is one who reconciles the conflict between the spirit and the flesh. In this passage, as in *De virginitate*, he finds himself faced with the task of interpreting a Pauline teaching:

We should not, however, think that Scripture [by speaking of the law of the body warring against the law of the mind] counsels that the life of those who are righteous be conceived in a duality. Rather, whenever the partition-wall of the vices has been removed which fenced them off in us, the two become one and coalesce in seeking what is better.⁹²

SIGNIFICANCE OF GREGORY'S THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

When read carefully, chapters 3–9 provide a reasonable and balanced theology of marriage. Gregory's view of the passions and their genesis reveals a profound understanding of human character and psychology. His use of rhetoric in this section, far from being a servile obedience to the rules of the genre as Aubineau believes, is the applied psychology of a thinker who is sensitive to what the varying characters within the Christian community require in their pursuit of holiness.

Within these chapters Gregory is also able to explain how the needs of the body and the soul are ultimately compatible and thus provides a nondualistic understanding of the goal of asceticism, grounding asceticism in overcoming the illusions about the body rather than in the spirited struggle against the body. In doing so, Gregory is able to overcome a problem with respect to Christian virtue which even his brother Basil had found difficult, the notion of how marriage and contemplation may be effectively combined.⁹³ Gregory does so through a reconsideration of the passions and their origins, pointing to a freedom from passion which does not require the renunciation of marriage and worldly activity for its foundation. Gregory thus provides the remedy for the problem which the Eustathians had raised for Christian theology in Asia Minor: giving marriage a secondary and doubtful status in the life of Christians.⁹⁴

⁹² *De beat.* 7 (PG 44, 1289D). Walter Völker (*Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker* [Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1955] 58) states that Gregory's whole anthropology is based upon humanity's task "to lift up the earthly to the divine" (*Or. cat.* 6 [PG 45.25B–28A]).

⁹³ See his *Reg. fus. tract.* 6 (PG 31, 925C), where Basil says that virtue amid the common life "is difficult if not impossible."

⁹⁴ The Eustathians were ascetic communities in Asia Minor noted for their rejection of marriage. See Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* 3.14.31, and Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* 2.43. They were condemned by a synod at Gangra around 341. An English translation of the Synodal Letter of Gangra by H. N. Oxenham may be found in C. Hefele, *History of the Councils 2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896) 326–27. See also J. Gribomont, "Le monachisme au IV^e siècle en Asie Mineure: De Gangre au Messalianisme," *Studia patristica* 2 (1957) 400–415.

Chapters 3–9 constitute, in fact, a defense of the body and its pleasures, placing the source of sin and vice in the delusions of the soul alone.

Moreover, Gregory seems to be saying, in the example he gives of the patriarch Isaac, in the metaphor of the wise farmer who can skilfully let a little water loose from the channel, and in the caution to the weak not to enter a contest above their ability, that marriage may in fact be a higher realization of virtue than that generally found among celibates. This does not apply, however, to all marriages, but only to those undertaken as an action and as a service rather than out of need and attachment. He recapitulates in his own age, under the notion of the "true virgin," the ideal of the married gnostic of Clement of Alexandria. For Clement, the true gnostic is someone who "shares the passions of the body, whose nature is bound up with passion, but is not primarily motivated by passion."⁹⁵ Chapters 7–9 are thus the capstone of his treatment of marriage, not a brief digression to ward off the appearance that he rejects marriage altogether. His complaint in chapter 3 that his own marriage separates him from the benefits of celibate life is thus to be read as ironic.⁹⁶

I do not think, however, that he wishes thereby to reverse the position that celibacy is a "higher" state than marriage and argue now instead for marriage as a higher state. Once again he would face the problem of two levels of Christianity and the danger of pride attached to the "higher." Chapter 9 suggests that an enlightened marriage is superior to the virtue *generally* found among celibates, just as it is also superior to the virtue generally found among those who are married, but it is not clear that it is superior to the celibate life such as one finds in Gregory's brother Basil, whose activity in the community makes his life also a sort of *leitourgia* and whose virtue seems to be also based upon some sort of insight into nature beyond habit and perseverance against desire. If Gregory prefers marriage to celibacy, it is perhaps due to his concern for wholeness of life and the idea of an excellence of character that can participate in the whole range of human life that is necessary for human society, including marriage, sexual activity, and the management of property and a household.⁹⁷ Gregory wishes to redeem these aspects of

⁹⁵ *Strom.* 7.11.62 (PG 9, 485D–488A).

⁹⁶ *De virg.* 3.1.1–29. This ironic interpretation is supported by the Scripture passage to which Gregory alludes. He describes himself as "like a muzzled ox treading grain." The commandment of God in Deut 25:4 and its interpretation by Paul in 1 Cor 9:9 indicate that the ox should not be muzzled. If through his marriage Gregory were truly excluded from sharing the fruits of virginity, then the commandment of God would be violated.

⁹⁷ The principal objection to this interpretation might rest its case upon the passages of *De hominis opificio* (chaps. 16–17, 22) in which Gregory speculates that humans would have propagated like angels had they remained in Paradise, a notion that *De virginitate* 14 may

life amid the increasingly ascetic climate of opinion. His preference for marriage is perhaps due also to his concern that the Christian life be beneficent and, in imitation of the divine *philanthrôpia*, be voluntarily joined to the life of the body for the benefit of the human community.

be seen to support in saying that the virgin enjoys the "equality with angels" promised in the resurrection. The matter is quite complex and deserves greater attention than I can devote to it here, yet it is crucial to point out that Gregory gives some indication in *De hominis opificio* that we should not take him too literally: "Only the eyewitnesses of the truth and servants of reason may see the reason for this device [of sexual intercourse for procreation], but we, to the extent possible, by imagining the truth through conjectures and images, will not expose what comes to mind with a straightforward statement but will set it forth in the form of an exercise for those who consider prudently what they hear" (16.15 [PG 44, 185A]).