

WOMEN DEACONS: WHY NOT NOW?

A Project to Restore Women Deacons in the Catholic Church

Family History

Macrina was a 4th century woman renowned among laity and clergy alike as a teacher of the Word and defender of Christian doctrine. She was the leader of a religious community on which St. Basil of Caesarea, otherwise known as ‘the Great’ based his monastic rule. Yet she probably did not hold the title of Deacon or Deaconess. Still, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Church of England both name her as such and, with the Roman Catholic Church, celebrate her as a saint. Her feast is celebrated with her brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, on July 19th. How could Macrina help but be a saint when her paternal grandmother, both her parents and three of her brothers became saints? But sainthood is attained through a life well-lived and so our story begins.

Even in the womb there was a mystagogy aura about Macrina. According to Gregory of Nyssa, his mother fell asleep while in labor (a miracle in itself!) and dreamt that Thecla, the virgin and companion of Paul¹ appeared to her. Thecla addressed the child in her womb by the name of Thecla, presaging the kind of life Macrina would lead.²

Macrina was born in 327, the eldest of ten children. Her paternal grandmother, Macrina the Elder, and her husband were persecuted for their faith under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. They were forced to flee their home and endured many hardships. Her father, Basil the Elder, was a prominent rhetorician (lawyer) in Neocaesarea in Pontus (northeastern Turkey). Her mother Emmelia was a noble woman from Cappadocia in Syria (now modern-day Turkey). She too came from a line of staunch Christians – one of her forbears had died a martyr.

They were a wealthy, aristocratic family who educated their daughters as well as their sons, although not in entirely the same

manner. Gregory of Nyssa writes in his biography of Macrina “. . .[S]he (her mother) did not educate her (Macrina) in the customary secular curriculum which for the most part instructs . . . by means of poems. . . which through their degrading tales concerning women tend to the corruption of character. Instead . . . God inspired Scripture . . . especially the Wisdom of Solomon. . . and whatever bears on the moral life.”³ Macrina carried the Psalter with her and “kept up the psalmody wherever she went like a good travelling companion that never left her at any time”⁴ even as she went about weaving wool and attending to worldly duties.

MACRINA More than a Deacon



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

Domestic Ascetic Movement

To understand Macrina’s family, household, and upbringing, some knowledge is necessary of a movement, which Silvas refers to as the “domestic ascetic movement,”⁵ prevalent in 4th century Anatolia (Asia Minor) and throughout the Mediterranean world. After Constantine declared Christianity the state religion in 325, it became socially convenient for people to declare themselves at least nominally Christian. There were many catechumens who would delay baptism until the end of their lives. because they believed that all sins would be forgiven and

they would go straight to heaven. In a Cappadocian family like Macrina's, however, this was not the case. Families like hers committed to baptism early on (usually at the wife's behest). Christian practices such as reading, chanting, memorizing the Scriptures and learning Church traditions were practiced at home which translated into a lived Gospel hospitality, personal frugality and care for the poor.⁶ This unapologetic Christian stance was a phenomenon of 4th century Christianity in both the East and the West where families practiced asceticism in their homes and women functioned as the leaders.

Another aspect of the "domestic ascetic movement" was spousal celibacy. After having children, one spouse usually the wife, would convince the other that they should remain celibate in order to consecrate themselves more fully to God. Eventually the household came to imitate a monastic community where husband and wife lived together as brother and sister and class distinctions between themselves and their servants were nonexistent. This sort of domestic ascetic community emerging from an aristocratic household and transforming it into a monastic community was not entirely without social consequences, as it threatened the status quo. Yet it was happening all around the Mediterranean.⁷

Virgin Widow

By the age of twelve Macrina was becoming quite a beauty and on account of the "great swarm of suitors that buzzed about her parents",⁸ her father found her an appropriate fiancé. Macrina was promised to a young man, from a good Christian family who, like her father Basil, was a superb rhetorician. Unfortunately, the young man met an untimely death and Basil set about finding Macrina another suitable husband. Macrina, however, took the "promise" of her marriage as if it had actually occurred and when her parents brought her other marriage proposals she argued that marriage like birth and death could take place only once. Her betrothed was "alive to God (Lk 20:38, Rom 6:11) through the hope of the resurrection (Acts 23:6), and was away on a journey, not dead, and that it was out of order not to keep faith with one's bridegroom who had gone abroad".⁹ Imagine the precocious thirteen year old using the knowledge of Scripture with which her mother, Emmelia, had unwittingly taught her, not to mention her father's skill at rhetoric, and besting him at his own game!

Shortly thereafter Basil died (c. 341), and the household moved to Annisa, a day's journey west of Neocaesarea near the river Iris. Macrina shared in all her mother's household responsibilities -- and there were many. Emmelia had properties spanning several provinces and paid taxes to three governors. She had five daughters and four sons to look after. Apart from helping with all her mother's duties, Macrina took it upon herself to prepare meals and bake bread, chores well beneath her station in life. The relationship was symbiotic. Under Emmelia's guardianship Macrina's virtue was preserved. She not only helped her mother with mundane affairs, but she also guided Emmelia in her own vocation: the pursuit of philosophy. Today we would call philosophy wisdom, "a life of communion with the truth, which is life in communion with God."¹⁰ Now far from the city, she persuaded her mother to live as sisters with her slave girls and servants.

Her Brothers' Teacher

Macrina's influence on her brothers soon became evident. Her second brother Naucratus, having achieved success as a rhetorician in the city, followed her ascetic lead and retired with his servant Chryaphius to a campsite he made in the forest on the banks of the Iris. There he lived as a hermit, hunting and fishing and caring for a group of poor and infirm elderly people. He may well have been his mother's favorite as he spent his time, "philosophizing and making his mother very happy" because of the way he lived his life in moderation and did all his mother's bidding.¹¹

Macrina took her youngest brother, Peter II of Sebasteia born the same year their father died, under her wing. She taught him in the same way she herself had been educated becoming "father, teacher, guardian, mother and counselor of every good" to him.¹² When he had the choice of going away to study as his brothers had, he chose to stay home and live in the monastic community Macrina had created at Annisa. He was eventually canonized. One wonders how much her brother Basil's vocation was inspired by Macrina. Gregory tells us, that when Basil came home from school "excessively puffed up with the thought of his own eloquence," Macrina "took him in hand" and led him speedily "towards the goal of philosophy."¹³ After that Basil did a complete turn around, renouncing all worldly goods and desires and -- as we know -- became St. Basil the Great, the father of monasticism.

Tragedy Breeds Fortitude

Approximately five years after the move to Annisa, tragedy struck. Naucratius was caught in one of his fishing nets and drowned. Now the full force of Macrina's character was brought to bear, for her mother upon hearing the news "collapsed . . . like some noble athlete felled by an unexpected blow."¹⁴ Macrina, held her own grief for her "dearest brother" in check "rising superior to nature," and through her own courageous example showed her mother how to overcome her suffering. Some years later, after Emmelia had died, Macrina did the same for Gregory who, after their brother Basil's death, went to visit Annisa only to find Macrina about to depart this life (c. 379). Macrina, seeing Gregory's distress distracted him from the "grief of soul" by philosophizing about her convictions on "the life here below."

The Community at Annisa

We know about the life at Annisa both from Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of St. Macrina* and St. Basil's *Small Asketikon*, a question and answer manual on living the ascetic life. Annisa became a single community referred to as a fraternity including sisters. Nevertheless, originally it was a community of virgin/widows headed first by Emmelia and later Macrina. The community only incorporated male ascetics after Peter professed celibacy (c. 362).¹⁵

There was a men's section and a women's section where men and women lived and dined apart. A church divided the two areas where they worshipped communally but in separate choirs. Macrina headed the women's section and was in all likelihood the mastermind behind the community as Gregory frequently refers to her as "the great one." Basil ordained their youngest brother Peter a priest and he then headed the men's section and provided the sacraments for the entire community. There was a deaconess, Lampadion, who headed the women's section under Macrina and who led the choir of virgins ("Virgin" was the name given the female ascetics -- although some were widows).¹⁶ Sometime in the late 50's or early 360's, there was a great famine in the area and people came from all over because they knew of the great generosity of their monastery.¹⁷ Apparently during this time Macrina brought in women and children whom "she had rescued when they had been exposed by the roadside" and cared for them herself.¹⁸ A hospice and a place for visitors were provided. The atmosphere was well ordered,

communal and humble. "Their luxury was in self-control and their glory in being unknown. . . . Above all unceasing prayer and uninterrupted hymnody. . . [continued] throughout the night and day, so that it became for them both work and respite from work."¹⁹ After her death, Macrina's funeral was directed by Gregory. Yet in making the preparations for dressing Macrina's body he collaborated with the other women in charge. He followed his elder brother Basil's instructions that although there may be a male "superior" over the whole community, he may not act unilaterally without consulting the woman superior.²⁰ The local Bishop to whom Macrina had left her inheritance attended along with a multitude of his priests.²¹ There was such a throng of people "pressing around the bier . . . "insatiable for that sacred sight" that it was difficult to make progress.²²

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Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw about the life of this extraordinary woman and saint? Naucratius was the first brother to follow her into the ascetic life. Her youngest brother, Peter, originally Macrina's protégé became her co-leader at Annisa. St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote two works about his sister: *Life of St. Macrina* from which most of this essay is gleaned and *On the Soul and Resurrection*. Although the latter is a fictitious conversation said to have taken place on Macrina's deathbed, much of it was surely taken from conversations they had in their youth. By revealing her as a second Thecla, "he presents her as a teacher, evangelist and leader following a pattern validated by apostolic authority."²³ Thecla was a heroine and role model well known to fourth century ascetic women. She was not ordained and in all likelihood neither was Macrina. Macrina was too humble to seek ordination and Gregory of Nyssa does not mention it, although as superior of her community she could certainly have held the title of Deacon, Deaconess or Presbytera.

At a time when heresies abounded Macrina, like her brothers Gregory and Basil, defended the orthodox teachings of the Church. St. Gregory Nazianzen, another Cappadocian theologian, defender of neo-Nicene orthodoxy and archbishop of Constantinople admired her as an exemplary ascetic.²⁴ St. Basil the Great's *Small Asketikon*, was written c. 363-365 (much of it on a visit to Annisa) as a legacy to that community,²⁵ and clearly his form of monasticism is modeled upon Annisa. Even though he does not mention his sister by name he defends the "feminine ascetic endeavor and consecration to the Lord" and states that women are superior to men in "the pursuit of piety."²⁶ How can one help but see Macrina and her community at Annisa in his words? She has been called "the Fourth Cappadocian"²⁷ although in truth she was the first. If St. Basil is the father of monasticism, surely she is the mother.



References

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- ²Gregory of Nyssa. "Life of St. Macrina." *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*. Trans. Anna M. Silvas. (Belgium: Brepolis, 2008),112.
- ³Ibid. 113.
- ⁴Ibid. 114.
- ⁵Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*. (Belgium: Brepolis Publishers, 2008), 3 – 4.
- ⁶Ibid. 3 – 4.
- ⁷Ibid. 4-9.
- ⁸Nyssa, 114.
- ⁹Ibid. 116.
- ¹⁰Maria Poggi Johnson. "Daughter, Sister, Philosopher, Angel: The Life and Influence of St. Macrina the Younger." *Diakonia* 31.3 (1998) 181.
- ¹¹ Nyssa ,119.
- ¹²Nyssa 122.
- ¹³Ibid. 117.
- ¹⁴Nyssa, 120.
- ¹⁵Silvas, 39.
- ¹⁶Ibid. 39.
- ¹⁷ Nyssa, 123.
- ¹⁸Ibid. 137.
- ¹⁹Ibid. 121-122.
- ²⁰Silvas, 41.
- ²¹Nyssa. 143.
- ²²Ibid. 143.
- ²³Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Macrina; Virgin and Teacher." *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 17.1 (Spring 1979), 105.
- ²⁴Silvas, 79, 82.
- ²⁵Ibid. 40.
- ²⁶Ibid. 57.
- ²⁷Jaroslav Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 9.

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The feast day for St. Macrina is celebrated on July 19, Consider using the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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