

THE NOTION OF THE „NATIVE LAND” IN SYNESIUS OF CYRENE*

As we know there are some patrologists and Church historians who do not recognize Synesius as one of the Fathers. Suffice it to mention here Jean Daniélou and Henri Marrou, in whose "Nouvelle Histoire de l'Église"¹ his name is not even mentioned. Nevertheless, I would like to discuss briefly his attitude towards his native city and the roots of his political thought, which I consider particularly interesting in view of his having been a Hellenist in spirit and a bishop by choice.

Among academic studies of Synesius' political activities in Cyrene there are two which stand out having been published independently in the magazine "Byzantion". The first is by C. H. Coster: "Synesius, a Curialis of the Time of the Emperor Arcadius"², and the second by J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz: "Synesius and municipal Politics of Cyrenaica in the 5th Century AD"³.

Coster holds that Synesius much appreciated his membership in the city council of Cyrene and took great pride in his status as a curialis, whereas Liebeschuetz contradicts Coster assuming that Synesius detested his function of a decurion as he thought it completely obsolete in his times. This resentment first discussed by Liebeschuetz finds its corroboration in the philosopher's statements, but at the same time Synesius never concealed his attachment to, and a keen interest for the affairs of his native city. Let us quote some of them, though the pressure of space and time will not allow me to discuss them thoroughly.

In his treatise "Dio" /Δίων ἢ περὶ τῆς κατ'ἑαυτὸν διαγογῆς/ written for the "experts" of the Hellenic paideia, Synesius expresses his deep conviction, typical of the Greco-Roman

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1 Cfr vol. 1: Des origines à Grégoire le Grande, Paris 1963.

2 "Byzantion" 15/1940-1941/ 10-38.

3 "Byzantion" 55/1985/ 146-64.

political thought, that an ideal rhetor and philosopher /such as Dio Chrysostom/ should also deal with public matters and should participate in the state's policy. He is supposed to be an educator, an adviser and a leader of the people⁴.

This conviction finds its illustration in emotional epithets Synesius uses in his Letters to describe his native city: "ἡ ἱερὰ Κυρήνη"- Cyrene the holy⁵, "ἡ μήτηρ Κυρήνη" - Cyrene the mother⁶, "τὸ κλεινὸν ἔδαφος τῆς Κυρήνης" Cyrene the famous place⁷, or to describe the region of Cyrence: "Πενταπόλεως τῆς γεμητρίδος" - Pentapolis the motherly /native Pentapolis/⁸.

Soon afterwards, in one of the letters written to his brother, Synesius, still hesitant about becoming a bishop, states that he, who does not have a city cannot be happy (τὸν δὲ ἄπολιν, πῶς εἰκός ἐστι εὐτυχεῖν)⁹. The same idea appears in letter written to Pylaemenes¹⁰, a philosophizing lawyer, in which he refutes his friend's reproaches. Pylaemenes suspects Synesius of ridiculing his love for Heraklea, the city Pylaemenes was born and educated in. To defend himself Synesius argues that he is not one of those who have neither a native city nor home, that he is not ἄπολις and ἀνέστιος. After all, he loves Cyrene the ancient and the beautiful, and assists it with his political and military skills. Continuing along the same lines Synesius uses two terms: πόλις and πατρίς alternatively to describe the same political area, whereas to describe a citizen serving his polis he calls him φιλόπολις or φιλόπατρις. Hence when in Letter 5 we find Cyrene being called the dearest native land: "τῆς φιλοτάτης πατρίδος" - and not, like elsewhere, πόλις Κυρήνη or πόλις Ἑλληνίς,¹¹ we understand that for him this small city - state is at the same time his native land, and patriotism is identical with fulfilling various political functions in the city.

4 Synesii Cyrenensis Hymni et Opuscula rec. N. Terzaghi, II, Romae 1944, 237; More on the subject cfr P. Desideri, Il Dione e la politica di Sinesio, "Atti della Accademia delle Scienze di Torino" 107/1972-1973/ 551-593.

5 Epistola 103, Synesii Cyrenensis Epistolae, rec. A. Garzya, Romae 1979, 177.

6 Epistola 6, Garzya 12.

7 Epistola 52, Garzya 92.

8 Epistola 94, Garzya 156.

9 Epistola 95, Garzya 163.

10 Epistola 103, Garzya 174-178.

11 Cfr also Περὶ Βασιλείας 3, ed. A. Garzya/Sinesio di Cirene,

Synesius, giving a favourable account of Pylaemenes' patriotism which consists in carrying out the civic duties of a lawyer, a rhetor and, should the need arise, of a defender of the state, nevertheless introduces one qualification into the system of his political ideas. He writes that a citizen who is devoted to his city must combine love for his native city with love for wisdom: "εἶναι καὶ φιλόσοφον καὶ φιλόπολιν".

This combination is necessary as it is only philosophy that provides the political wisdom and sagacity based on the knowledge of the laws governing the world. Philosophy is the weapon one should use to defend the city, both in its physical and cultural meaning, against barbarian invaders /that is, writes Synesius in Letter 113, to "defend our land, our altars, our laws and property"/¹² and it is the principal means to settle various arguments and conflicts among citizens.

The highest praise of philosophy as a servant of politics is contained in Synesius' address to the emperor Arcadius, in which he discusses the principles of conduct and morality that should characterize the first citizen of the "great polis" (τῆς μεγάλης πόλεως) that is the Roman emperor. Here Synesius lends his support to the emperor and aids him in his efforts to learn monarchical virtues. But since philosophy resides "at the throne of God himself"¹³ he asks the monarch to turn away from the earthly, materialistic world and to direct his thoughts towards divine values.

Our rhetor expresses the same belief which, after Plato, was expressed by Dio Chrysostom, Seneca, Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius, that political power should be in the hands of philosophers or at least in the hands of rulers surrounded by philosophers who act as his advisers. It is Dio Chrysostom who instructs us in his fourth speech *Περὶ Βασιλείας* that the ruler brought up on the principles of philosophical, divine *paideia* receives *Βασιλικός δαίμων* - a royal spirit that takes care of his ethical and political wisdom¹⁴.

Sul Regno, Napoli 1973/ 10.

12 Epistola 113, Garzya 198.

13 *Περὶ Βασιλείας* 29, Garzya 93.

14 Cfr Dio Chrysostom, transl. J. W. Cohoon, London 1961, 187.

In this the monarch should set an example for φιλόπολις - a citizen and a patriot of a "small city" who, when depressed by local conflicts and quarrels, oppressed by taxes or, like Synesius himself, sunk into despair in view of an often hopeless fight in defence of the city against barbarians from the desert, should immerse himself in philosophy. Synesius expresses this belief in Letter 5, which Liebeschuetz treats as a conscious rejection of the city, the city council and civic duties¹⁵. However, Synesius admits that he loves his city, but its prosaic conflicts and the degeneracy of public life bring about *c o n t e m p t u s m u n d i*, which makes him welcome philosophical leisure and contemplate the state of the divine Unity.

He repeats this confession in other Letters¹⁶ and once again confirms this belief in Letter 148: "Far from the city there is the time for philosophy and not for doing wrong"¹⁷. In order to admire the universe and to lose oneself in the great state of Nature, immune to mundane matters, one should leave the city. To describe this universal state governed by God only in his *Περὶ Βασιλείας* Synesius uses the expression "the greatest authority" (*ἀρχὴ μεγέθη*) or, even more explicitly, the superterrestrial order or organism - *τὸ ὑπερκόσμιον*¹⁸.

So the reason for his flight from the otherwise dear city is not only his fear of civic duties and his aversion to an active participation in municipal politics. It is also his desire to find a native land the way to which is paved by philosophy. This desire reflects a Stoico-Cynical idea of the state shaped in the times of the early empire and the dream of a Christian who based his belief in a transcendent world on a Neo-Platonic vision of the divine reality.

Dio Chrysostom, Synesius' spiritual teacher, praised the universe as "the city of Zeus"¹⁹ and admiring the state created

15 Cfr Liebeschuetz, op.cit. 161-63.

16 Epistolae 105, 132, 137, Garzya 189 f., 229, 238-39.

17 Epistola 148, Garzya 263.

18 *Περὶ Βασιλείας* 3, 8, 27, Garzya 12, 26, 86.

19 Oratio 36, 36, Cohoon 453.

by the divine nature he taught, like Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius before him, that man has two states and two native lands. They are firstly: the universal state (ὁ κόσμος, κοσμοπόλις, or, according to Dio Chrysostom θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων κοινωνία and according to Synesius τὸ ὑπερκόσμιον), which at the same time is the universal native land, and secondly a particular state (ἡ πόλις), which is man's small native land (ἡ πατρίς like ἡ πατρίς Κυρήνη)²⁰. As a citizen of the world-state Dio Chrysostom considered himself a cosmopolitan, whereas as a member of a particular state he felt himself a citizen and patriot of his city, that is, according to Synesius φιλόπολις and φιλόπατρις.

Περὶ Βασιλείας is Synesius' only work which contains the residual belief, once held by Marcus Aurelius and especially by Elius Aristides, that it is Rome which truly embodies the divine state of the universe with the emperor as the soul of the world. In his other works Synesius praises the extraterrestrial organism which is the immortal, native land of the omnipotent God—the object of adoration and contemplation.

Synesius' devotion to Cyrene as an ambassador, a military leader and a bishop, and his active participation in political events even after his consecration resulted from his attachment to the Hellenic idea of the state and to the Hellenic thought. The same thought allowed him to formulate his precept of "philosophical leisure" in view of political activities which, as a Neo-Platonic sage and a Christian, he held in deep respect.

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20 Cfr M. Józefowicz-Dzielska, W kręgu teoretyczno-ustrojowych zagadnień filozofii stoicko-cynickiej pierwszych dwu wieków cesarstwa rzymskiego, "Zeszyty Naukowe UJ" /Prace Historyczne 50/ 364/1974/ 7-30.