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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HELLENISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN ST. BASIL'S *SPEECH TO THE YOUNG*...

The St. Basil's work: *To the young, how they can benefit from the Greek texts*¹ is a speech delivered in front of young people, who intended to become priests or ascetics². It is not a treatise whose motivation was theoretical, but a speech for practical reasons³. It was written between 359 and 362 a.C., when Basil was an ascetic in Annisa and in the hermitage of Pontos, where he met and admonished young people⁴. Professor Stylianos Papadopoulos relates the writing of speech with the ban of teaching in public schools Julian imposed to the Christians⁵. J. Gribomont⁶ characterizes the work *Apology* in favor of the Christians to become ascetics on the basis of examples from ancient Greek literature and philosophy.

The timely character of the text is undeniable, since up to our days concerns about the relations between Hellenism and Christianity are formulated and opinions that Christianity rejects or absorbs Hellenism are expressed. Indulgence will be attempted in this characteristic on the topic text of our Bishop to investigate what the Father himself says and what the Father himself does, so as to determine our modern practice according to the patristic spirit.

St. Basil aims at young people to advise them, considering himself the second father of the young after their natural parents. As it seems from the title of the speech and as referred at the beginning of the text the benefits that come from the Greek non-ecclesiastical courses are undeniable. Basil the Great sets examples of holy men who were educated firstly in non-ecclesiastical schools. The wise Moses sharpened his mind with the lessons of Egyptians and then he entered in the theory of God⁷. The wise Daniel learned the wisdom of

¹ Cf. Basilius Magnus, *Sermo de legendis gentilium libris* (CPG 2867), PG 31, 564-589.

² Cf. Κ.Γ. Μπόνη, *Βασίλειος Καισαρείας ὁ Μέγας. Βίος καὶ ἔργα συγγράματα καὶ διδασκαλία*, Βιβλιοθήκη Ελλήνων Πατέρων καὶ Εκκλησιαστικῶν Συγγραφέων (= ΒΕΠΕΣ) 51, Αθήναι 1975, 97.

³ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 96.

⁴ Cf. Σ.Γ. Παπαδόπουλος, *Πατρολογία*, vol. 2, Αθήναι 1999, 397.

⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 397.

⁶ Cf. J. Gribomont, *Le monachisme au IV^e s. en Asie Mineure: de Gangres au Messalianisme*, StPatr 2 (1957) 422.

⁷ Cf. Basilius, *Sermo de legendis libris gentilium 2*, PG 31, 568C, transl. F. Boulenger: Saint

the Chaldeans in Babylon and then studied the sublime teachings⁸. St. Basil emphasizes that it is imperative we prepare ourselves with secular teachers and then become listeners of sacred subjects. He indicates association with poets, Dictaphones, orators and generally everyone who can benefit our soul⁹. He sets criterion about which texts will be approached and which not. The criterion is the relation of those who write the Greek texts with the eternal life. If they contain eternal truths, then we should love these texts. But if they make things such as ancestral origin, physical strength, beauty, grandeurs, human values or power utter, we should despise them because they have an expiry date and they are changeable¹⁰. We will accept the ancient Greek texts that commend virtue and stigmatize wickedness. Let us keep in mind the example of bees: we should derive anything beneficial and leave anything vain just as they get only what is useful¹¹. So we will study poets, when they narrate words or actions of fine men. Indeed, Basil does not hesitate to suggest imitation of these men role models¹². On the contrary we will not take in mind poets when insulting, when describing lovers and drunkards and much more when talking about the gods. Especially when they advocate polytheism, lack of concord between the gods, the adulteries and loves of the gods, we will pay no attention¹³. It is obvious here that, while in all other texts the only criterion is virtue and whether written things contribute to this, whatever related to the gods of the ancient Greeks' is rejected, since it is the word of men about God, while in Christianity there is the Word of God Himself, God's revelation to people. Saint John Chrysostom blames the pagans especially for this reason: because they allowed everything in mind¹⁴ and thus deified anything they imagined. Unable to lead themselves from the Creation to the Creator God, they deified edifices¹⁵ and human passions¹⁶. They thought up their own opinions about God instead of letting God to be revealed.

Particularly positive is the attitude of Basil the Great against the ancient Greek philosophers. He praises and looks up to philosophers, because they are

Basile, *Aux jeunes gens sur la manière de tirer profit des lettres helléniques*, Paris 1935, 45; or see also ed. *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας* (= ΕΠΕ): *Βασιλείου Καισαρείας τοῦ Μεγάλου ἅπαντα τὰ ἔργα*, vol. 7: *Ὀμιλῖαι καὶ λόγοι*, transl. Ψ.Σ. Βασίλειος, Θεσσαλονίκη 1973, 322 (next I use this issue).

⁸ Cf. Basilius, *Sermo de legendis libris gentilium* 2, PG 31, 568C, ΕΠΕ vol. 7, p. 322.

⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, PG 31, 568B, ΕΠΕ vol 7, p. 320.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, PG 31, 365B, ΕΠΕ vol. 7, p. 318.

¹¹ Cf. *ibidem* 3, PG 31, 569C, ΕΠΕ vol. 7, p. 326.

¹² Cf. *ibidem* 2, PG 31, 568D, ΕΠΕ vol. 7, p. 324.

¹³ Cf. *ibidem*, PG 31, 569B, ΕΠΕ vol. 7, p. 324.

¹⁴ Cf. Joannes Chrysostomus, *In Epistula ad Romanos hom.* III 2, PG 60, 413.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, PG 60, 412.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibidem* VI 6, PG 60, 440.

who praised virtue¹⁷. He recommends that we pay close attention to the words of philosophers, because these words give birth to familiarity between our souls and virtue. He has knowledge of Plato and uses his words. He borrows ideas and images of him. Platonic and Stoic anthropology and moral is prolific in this work, and in the „Watch yourself,” notes Professor Stylianos Papadopoulos¹⁸. Basil's opinions about the body and its value, show a strong Platonic effect, and that is why the contempt of the body is so widespread at his work *To the young*... However, later, Bishop of Caesarea overcame the influence of Greek philosophical thought and firmly founded in the anthropology of the Church¹⁹. This really negative influence of Greek philosophy in St. Basil, reveals the positive attitude of the Father against Greek philosophy and his liberal spirit, so that he do not hesitate to ownership philosophical positions without any prejudice against them. Of course, philosophy does not seem to commit him, since later he redefines his views and expresses the anthropology of the Church.

Then he argues that „the philosophy liberates the soul”²⁰ and stresses the value of reasonable word. A sagacious man must have for leader of his life the reasonable word and he cannot deny things that are proven correct²¹.

Moving in the same spirit St. Gregory of Nyssa, stresses that it is essential the logical understanding of what is said and it is imposed to research the truth in the texts of the Scripture via philosophy²², while it is not necessary to understand those texts, who transcend our mind. St. Gregory of Nyssa considers the Scripture to be more important and reliable than the reasonable word. He resorts to logical demonstration because of the weakness of the human mind²³. However, he fully understands those, who need logical explanations to believe and meets their need of logical explanations by using the reasonable word. It is obvious that both the two Fathers have confidence in the reasonable word, even if it is not the only way to reach the truth. However, it is undoubtedly the safest way to find the truth, not mentioning of course those subjects who transcend our mind.

Basil the Great emphasizes that, all those Greek people who are renowned for their wisdom, extolled virtue, others more and others less. He suggests we

¹⁷ Cf. Basilus, *Sermo de legendis libris gentilium* 3, PG 31, 569C, EΠE vol. 7, p. 326.

¹⁸ Cf. Παπαδόπουλος, *Πατρολογία*, vol. 2, p. 359-360.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 360.

²⁰ Basilus, *Sermo de legendis libris gentilium* 7, PG 31, 581A, EΠE vol. 7, p. 345.

²¹ Cf. *ibidem* 8, PG 31, 587A, EΠE vol. 7, p. 355.

²² Cf. Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum hom. Prooemium ad Olympiadem*, PG 44, 761, ed. EΠE: Γρηγόριος Νύσσης: *ἅπαντα τὰ ἔργα*, vol. 7: *Εξήγησις του Ἀσματος των Ασμάτων*, transl. Σ. Ιγνάτιος, Θεσσαλονίκη 1989, 19.

²³ Cf. Gregorius Nyssenus, *De anima et resurrectione*, PG 46, 108, ed. EΠE: Γρηγόριος Νύσσης: *ἅπαντα τὰ ἔργα*, vol. 1: *Περὶ ψυχῆς καὶ ἀναστάσεως*, transl. Κ. Αθηναγόρας, Θεσσαλονίκη 2011, 269.

should trust their words and we should try to make them happen in our lives²⁴. The examples cited by virtuous men, like the example of Pericles who showed exceptional patience and goodness to someone who insulted or the example of Euclid of Megara, who exercised himself in being mild are a great help to our effort²⁵. The fact that Basil does not hesitate to encourage young people follow non-ecclesiastical examples of ancient Greek men, posing as a criterion virtue, indicates his free from any prejudice or narrowness thinking. He finds analogy between the ancient-Greek's virtuous acts and the acts which the Bible recommends. The patience, that Socrates showed when someone beat him up, toes the line with the Order of the Gospel (Matt. 5, 39), which says that, when someone beats you in the one jaw you have to offer and the other²⁶. Similarly, the cases of Pericles and Euclid, have an accordance with the Gospel (Matt. 5, 44), which says that we should endure the persecutors, we should tolerate their wrath by showing mildness and we should wish all good to our enemies and not curse. Alexander the Great was praised because when he captivated the beautiful daughters of Darius he did not even looked at them with pleasure, thus implementing what Christ would say much later about cunning look and adultery. These examples-ethical role models are helpful to follow, since they are provisions to eternity. Generally, the authority to turn to the ancient Greek world wherever there is something right is emphasized.

The orientation of Bishop of Caesarea in virtue is clear and he tries to make young people run up to virtue. However, he does not underestimate whatever constitutes a sign of civilization and anything which is the result of effort and good use of material goods. As a result, he admires Phidias who created the gold and ivory statue of Zeus to the Eleans and Polykleitos who created the gold and ivory statue of Hera to the Argeious. He states that both artists made good use of the material and he considers their art more valuable than the material and he thinks that these statues worth boasting. Basil the Great surprises us since he praise for the good use of material goods two sculptors of idols. This fact shows the breadth of his mind and his discretion since he fights against idolatry without being unjust to sculpture art, even though this art served idolatry.

Professor Constantinos Bonis finds that our Bishop „considers that the human thought expresses eternal values familiar to Christianity”²⁷. He concludes that „Basil who was so strict in moral laws and such a true Christian became liberal in thought and superior in his feelings and in his judgement even towards non-Christians”²⁸.

²⁴ Cf. Basilius, *Sermo de legendis libris gentilium* 4, PG 31, 576B, EΠE vol. 7, p. 332.

²⁵ Cf. *ibidem* 4, PG 31, 576BC, EΠE vol. 7, p. 334-335.

²⁶ Cf. *ibidem* 5, PG 31, 576CD, EΠE vol. 7, p. 336.

²⁷ Μπόννη, *Βασίλειος Καισαρείας ὁ Μέγας*, p. 102.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

Tracing his spirit in relation with the use of Greek courses through what Bishop of Caesarea says and what he does in his speech *To the young...* we note the following:

1. He has great knowledge of the ancient Greek texts and he makes use of them having as criterions the virtue, the reasonable word and their accordance with the Bible. He recommends to be keen on Greek philosophy, poetry and oratory and he believes we should learn from them.
2. His relation with the ancient Greek world is dialectical and selective. He does not reject anything which is non-Christian, but he prefers to scrutinize it having as a criterion the reasonable word.
3. He approaches the ancient Greek world in a uniting and not in a disuniting way. This is very obvious from the policy he follows. He looks for the common things between Hellenism and Christianity and he talks about them. Of course, he does not forget to mention the differences between Christians and ancient Greeks. Those differences are the idolatry-polytheism, the lack of charity between the gods and the morality that comes from them. He suggests no retreat to them. Nevertheless, he does not persist in the differences which divide but in those which can form common grounds for consultation.
4. The question that the human has about God does not find an answer in the ancient Greek world and in polytheism but it finds the answer in the Scripture, where the God is revealed in all His three forms. Basil the Great is explicit when he says that we must not pay any attention to what the ancient Greeks teach about the gods. In this way our faith will be pure from any adulterations.
5. He recognizes the value of the art of the ancient-Greek sculptors. The value belongs to the art, not to the theology-idolatry which is formed by the art.
6. Basil has a liberal spirit and his Christian property does not confine him.
7. Bishop of Caesarea combined the charity for the ancient Greek world and the charity for Christ, he took advantage the most of the most and he offered to us the model of the educated saint.

