

# ***St Basil the Great - On the Holy Spirit***

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St Basil the Great of Caesarea wrote his important work, "On the Holy Spirit" during the fallout of the Arian controversy which continued to plague the Church even after the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Some of these Arianizing elements in the Church, known as the "*Pneumatomachoi*" (or "Spirit-deniers") thought they could defeat the teaching of the Council of Nicaea if they could prove that the Holy Spirit was not divine. On the other hand, St Basil knew that "by affirming the equality of the Spirit with the Father and the Son, he could make a water-tight case for orthodoxy" (Anderson, *On the Holy Spirit*, Intro, 9). By convincing others in the Spirit's divinity, he would likewise convince them that the three persons of the Holy Trinity share one divine nature. Basil's doctrine, as he described it, was "gathered from the Scriptures, or received from the unwritten tradition of the Fathers" (*On the Holy Spirit*, 42).

Much of St Basil's argumentation in the beginning of his work is centered upon the doxological formulae used by the Church to glorify the Most Holy Trinity. The reason for this was because he had been attacked for using the formula, "Glory to the Father with [*meta*] the Son together with [*syn*] the Holy Spirit." But Basil defended this usage as being a traditional formula used in the non-Greek or Syriac speaking Churches of the East. The Greek-speaking Churches were accustomed, on the other hand, to using the formula, "Glory to the Father through [*dia*] the Son in [*en*] the Holy Spirit." The region of Caesarea, where St Basil was from, had significant influence by both the Greek and Syriac Christian traditions. Therefore its Churches, according to Basil, were accustomed to using both doxological formulae. According to Anderson, "[Basil] thought that the first formula was best for adoration offered to the Godhead, while the second was most appropriate for describing the way God deals with man" (*On the Holy Spirit*, Intro, 11). Regarding these St Basil states, "Both doxologies are used by the faithful, and so we use both; we believe that either one ascribes perfect glory to the Spirit" (*ibid*, 90). He further made the point that often differing words are needed for the sake of accuracy and precision (*ibid*, 12).

St Basil offers proofs using various scriptural texts, to convince his opponents that using "through" and "in" does not subordinate the Son and the Spirit -as they had claimed (cf. chap. 6). Secondly, Basil had to defend the use of the word "with" since it was not found in Scripture. His opponents argued that at the end of the *Gospel According to St Matthew*, Jesus instead used the word "and" in the baptismal formula (28:19). Basil justified the use of the word "with" by appealing to common sense that the conjunction "and" and the preposition "with" really serve the same purpose -only "with" better conveys the emphasis of cooperation between the Divine Persons. On this point Basil finally proposed a compromise to those who refused to use "with the Spirit" because it was not found in Scripture. He offered to settle for everyone using "and" because this expressed both the unity of the persons and the oneness in nature. Anderson points out, "This was certainly a prophetic compromise, since that is the form of the doxology which finally was adopted by all catholic Christians" (*ibid*, 12).

St Basil first addresses those who refuse to offer the Son glorification equal to the Father. To them he states, "Listen to the Lord Himself, who clearly declares that He shares equal glory and honor with the Father. He says, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' and that 'all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father' and 'we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only-

begotten of the Father" (*ibid*, 31). In stating this St Basil affirms that the Son is the perfect representation of the Father, "the express image of His person" as stated in the *Epistle to the Hebrews* (1:3). Therefore He is to be honored and glorified just as God the Father.

St Basil then goes on to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son in greater detail stating, "the work of the Father is not separate or distinct from the work of the Son; whatever the Son 'sees the Father doing... that the Son does likewise.'" This speaks of the Father and the Son sharing and identical will and action. As St Basil explains in the same chapter, "[The Son] shines forth from the Father, and accomplishes everything according to His plan. He is not different in essence, nor is He different in power from His Father, and if their power is equal, then their works are the same" (*ibid*, 39). Again the great Basil explains this equality of Father and Son stating, "Everything the Father has also belongs to the Son; He does not acquire it little by little, but has it all at once" (*ibid*, 40).

Then St Basil moves on to speak about the Holy Spirit. He notes that in the scriptures, "He is called the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father" (*ibid*, 42; Jn 15:26). In defense of belief in the Holy Trinity and the equality of the Holy Spirit, St Basil makes an argument based on the above mentioned baptismal formula found in the *Gospel According to St Matthew* (28:19). There our Lord is recorded as commanding baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. As Basil states, "When the Lord established the baptism of salvation, did He not clearly command His disciples to baptize all nations 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?'" St Basil goes on to make the case, "No one is so shameless that he will deny the obvious meaning of the words which clearly say the Spirit is one with the Father and the Son." For St Basil this point is simple, "As for us, we will follow the words of Scripture" (*ibid*, 45). St Basil then elaborates on the inter-relationship of the Holy Trinity. "If someone rejects the Spirit, his faith in the Father and the Son is made useless; it is impossible to believe in the Father and the Son without the presence of the Spirit. He who rejects the Spirit rejects the Son, and he who rejects the Son rejects the Father" (*ibid*, 48). Then Basil cites 1 Cor 12:3, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit," and John 1:18, "no one has ever seen God; the Only-Begotten God, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known." Basil then brings together the meaning of these verses by stating, "It is impossible to worship the Son except in the Holy Spirit; it is impossible to call upon the Father except in the Spirit of adoption" (*ibid*, 48). Indeed "God anoints the Son with the unction of the Spirit" (*ibid*, 49) as St Peter taught in the *Acts of the Apostles* (10:38). St Basil argues that the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from the Father and the Son in any way, stating, "the Holy Spirit is indivisibly and inseparably joined to the Father and the Son" (*ibid*, 60). The example in *Acts* of the death of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11) shows us that "to sin against the Holy Spirit is to sin against God" (*ibid*, 61). St Basil explains, "Understand from this that in every operation, the Holy Spirit is indivisibly united with the Father and the Son" (*ibid*, 61). St Basil then explains that the Father is the "First Cause of everything that exists" the Son is "the Creator," and the Holy Spirit is "the Perfector." He states about the Father, "The Originator of all things is One: He creates through the Son and perfects through the Spirit" (*ibid*, 62).

St Basil next makes reference to Psalm 32 (LXX), "By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their hosts by the Spirit of His mouth." This passage is explained in sublime Trinitarian terminology: "The Word is not merely air set in motion by the organs of speech, nor is

the Spirit of His mouth an exhalation of the lungs, but the Word is He who was with God in the beginning, and was God and the Spirit of God's mouth is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father" (*ibid*, 62-63). Basil demonstrates to his opponents that the very words, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," like the baptismal formula found in Matthew, "declare that the relation of the Spirit to the Son equals that of the Son with the Father" (*ibid*, 70).

St Basil then he addresses those who argue that numbering the persons of the Trinity implies subordination between them. He states, "Their names are mentioned in one and the same series; how can you speak of numbering 'with' or numbering 'under'?" He further adds, "We use numbers to help distinguish various things, but the things we number remain what they are by nature and origin." To explain this St Basil states that although numbers are tools used determine various types of quantity, "no amount of weighing, measuring or counting can ever change a thing's nature." He gives the example of counting gold or tin, and shows that one thing is not subordinate to the other on the basis of weight. Therefore, he summarizes, "If such a principle of subordination is foreign to the created order, how dare anyone say the Spirit is subordinate" because He is numbered third? (*ibid*, 71). Basil concludes this point stating, "There is one God and Father, one Only-Begotten Son, and one Holy Spirit. We declare each Person to be unique, and if we must use numbers, we will not let a stupid arithmetic lead us astray to the idea of many gods" (*ibid*, 72).

St Basil gives arguments against the Arians to explain why belief in the Father and the Son does not equal belief in two gods. He states, "We worship God from God, confessing the uniqueness of the persons, while maintaining the unity of the Monarchy." Basil rhetorically asks "How does one and one not equal two Gods." His answer is, "We speak of the emperor, and the emperor's image -but not two emperors. The power is not divided, nor the glory separated. One is the dominion and authority over us; we do not send up *glories* to God, but *glory*; the honor given the image passes to the prototype." The only difference is that the emperor's image is "by imitation" while the Son is the image of the Father by nature (*ibid*, 72).

St Basil gives further proof of the Spirit's divinity stating that "He proceeds from the mouth of the Father, and is not begotten like the Son." Basil explains the significance of these words stating, "the Spirit is the essence of life and divine sanctification.. their intimacy is made clear, while the ineffability of God's existence is safe-guarded" (*ibid*, 73). The Spirit's divinity is further proved by the inter-glorification which the Three Persons of the Trinity share between Themselves, as Basil shows by making reference to various Scriptural texts (cf. Jn 17:4; Jn 16:14; Jn 12:28; Mt. 12:32). Further proof of the Spirit's divinity is that he shares titles in common with the Father and the Son, including the title *Paraclete* (Jn 14:16; *ibid*, 76). A further proof for Basil is that the Spirit, like the Father and the Son, cannot be grasped by our thoughts (*ibid*, 84).

Basil gives further arguments for the Spirit's divinity stating forcefully against his opponents, "The Lord has assigned the Spirit His proper place; why should we forsake it to invent another place?" According to Basil, the Spirit "is always described as united with the Godhead... His name is in the creed, at saving baptism, in the working of miracles... He takes up His abode in the saints [and] bestows grace on the obedient" (*ibid*, 87). The Spirit "searches the even the depths of God" and gives life together with the Father and the life-giving Son" (Rom

8:11). It is the Spirit Who "gives us the freedom to call God our Father (Gal 4:6). Basil concludes this point by clearly affirming the Spirit's divinity stating, "Who is so empty of sharing eternal hopes, that he would separate the Spirit from the God-head, and number Him among creatures?" (*ibid*, 88).

Regarding the Holy Trinity, Basil explains it is more appropriate to say that the Holy Spirit dwells *with* the Father and the Son, rather than *in* them (*ibid*, 95). Describing the inter-relationship of the Holy Trinity, he states, "Just as the Father is made visible in the Son, so also the Son is recognized in the Spirit." As a result, "the Holy Spirit cannot be divided from the Father and the Son in worship." Thus, "When we see Christ, the Brightness of God's glory, it is always through the illumination of the Spirit" and "through Christ the Image..." we are "led to the Father, for He bears the seal of the Father's very likeness" (*ibid*, 97, cf. Heb 1:3).

St Basil summarizes his teaching by affirming that he accepts the doctrinal "word that is familiar and dear to the saints," and the faith which is "confirmed by long usage." He states that his teaching is one that "from the day when the Gospel was first preached even until now... has been welcomed by the churches, and most important of all has been defined in conformity to righteousness and true religion." This teaching, as opposed to Arianizing elements in the Church, affirmed the true divinity of the Son and the Spirit, one in essence and consubstantial with the Father.

St Basil's monumental work offers numerous Scriptural arguments and proofs to manifest the truth of Spirit's divinity. This faith was finally crystallized in the doxological formula: "Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen" -which the Church recites to this day. But perhaps the greatest proof of his teaching is in Basil's own words, "that we were led to glorify the Spirit because the Lord Himself first honored Him; He associated the Spirit with Himself and the Father when He gave us the baptismal formula" (*ibid*, 112). Thus the Church teaches that the Father is the source or fountainhead of the Trinity from Whom the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds from all eternity. Through the teaching of St. Basil the Great, we can give proper glory to the Most Holy Trinity!