

REFLECTIONS ON CREATION: THE “NORMATIVE MAN” THROUGH THE LENS OF SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA'S ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Our study explores the concept of the "normative man" from the perspective of Saint Gregory of Nyssa's anthropology. The starting point is the analysis of the biblical passage that describes the creation of man, a fundamental passage for understanding the place and purpose of humanity in the Christian vision. The emphasis will be on human dignity conferred by being created "in the image and likeness of God." We will explore how the image of God is reflected in various aspects of human existence: reason, free will, and relationships. We aim to offer a nuanced perspective on the complexity of the human condition, highlighting the extraordinary potential of man created in the image of God.

Keywords: *Christian anthropology; image and likeness; creation of man; normative man; Saint Gregory of Nyssa;*

INTRODUCTION

If society were to return to the teachings of Christianity, which draw their essence from the writings of the Holy Scripture, man would be restored to his primordial dignity, granted by the Holy Trinity when it decided: "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Genesis 1:26). This is one of the three biblical texts of the first book attributed to Moses, which the French theologian Jean-Claude Larchet considers fundamental for Christian anthropology: "Christian anthropology and its conception of gender are primarily based on the Scriptures, and first of all on three passages from the book of Genesis: 1:26-27; 2:18-25; 5:1-2."¹

The passage from the book of Genesis in the Holy Scripture describes the creation of man by God. The statement that man was created "in God's image and likeness" has generated multiple interpretations throughout history.

This concept suggests that humans possess certain divine qualities or enjoy a special connection with God, distinct from the rest of creation. Jean-Claude Larchet argues, based on the writings of some Church Fathers, that the distinction of sex is secondary to the fundamental human nature. The creation of man "in the image of God" represents a fundamental concept that precedes the differences between man and woman in contemporary discussions.

¹ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Transfigurer le genre*, Éditions des Syrtes, Genève, Suisse, 2023, p. 23.



1. ANTHROPOLOGY OF SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA

This interpretation emphasises the inherent value of each human being, regardless of gender, as the image of Divinity: "For many Fathers, in this text, the two parts of the sentence – 'in the image of God He created him' and 'male and female He created them' – must be disassociated, the second part not being an explanation of the first, but a second phase in relation to it. What is fundamental, primordial, is the human being, whose value lies in being created in the image of God, a consideration that precedes the distinction between the two sexes and applies equally to both."²

The concept of "image and likeness" of God suggests that humans have a moral, spiritual, intellectual, and relational capacity that reflects divine attributes. In Christian doctrine, this gives every human being intrinsic value and unique responsibilities, such as caring for and protecting creation, as indicated in the verse: "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

The expression "image and likeness" has been extensively debated in theology to elucidate the special relationship between man and God and the purpose of humans in the world. Although there are various theological interpretations, the fundamental concept of man being created in the image and likeness of God is essential in Judeo-Christian thought. It has significantly influenced Western culture and ethics.

A profound understanding of human dignity, as revealed by God, could provide contemporary society with a moral compass to navigate the waves of the current value crisis. The Church has a crucial responsibility in guiding communities toward an authentic understanding of Christian values, beginning with recognising the inherent value of every person as God bestows.

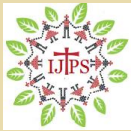
Although the book of Genesis presents the creation of man on the sixth day (1:24-31), and other biblical texts (such as 2 Maccabees 7:28) affirm the creation of man alongside the rest of creation, this does not diminish the importance and uniqueness of the human being. Man is not merely reduced to a simple part of creation but holds a special status.

In Christian theology, man is considered the crown of creation, the only being created "in God's image and likeness". This characteristic gives him a privileged place within creation. The symbolic interpretation of man's creation on the sixth day underscores his importance in the plan of the Holy Trinity, being designated as the steward of creation and called to actively participate in maintaining and developing the harmony created by God.

The biblical account of creation differentiates man from other creatures. Although man belongs to the material world and shares biological characteristics with other life forms, he is distinguished by cognitive, spiritual, and moral capacities that bring him closer to God. This dual nature gives man a unique mission and role in the world, setting him apart from the rest of creation.

Jean-Claude Larchet highlights Saint Basil the Great's interpretation of the biblical text from the book of Genesis. He argues that the term "man" does not refer exclusively to the male sex but to the human being in its entirety. Thus, both man and woman are equal in dignity, bearing the divine image.

² Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Transfigurer le genre*, Éditions des Syrtes, Genève, Suisse, 2023, p. 24.



"For Saint Basil of Caesarea, the precision is given so that 'no one, out of ignorance, takes the word man to mean only the male sex,' and indicates that 'the woman also has, like her husband, the privilege of having been created in the image of God'."³

According to the traditional Christian view, as in Saint Basil the Great, man is a unique creation of God with a different origin and dignity than other beings. This perspective underscores God's distinct creative act in the case of man, reflected in the human body and soul.⁴

Saint Gregory of Nyssa argues that sexual differentiation is after the creation of man in the image and likeness of God and is not a defining trait of fundamental human nature. The essence of man lies in communion with God, which transcends gender divisions: "'God made man,' says Scripture. 'He made him in the image of God.' The creation of the one who is according to the image thus reached its perfection. Then Scripture continues the story of creation and says: 'God made them male and female.' Everyone knows, I believe, that this aspect is excluded from the prototype: 'In Christ Jesus, as the Apostle says, there is neither male nor female.' And yet Scripture states that man was divided according to sex. Therefore, the creation of our nature is in a way dual: what makes us similar to Divinity and what establishes the division of sexes. Indeed, such an interpretation is suggested by the very order of the narrative: Scripture first says, 'God made man; He made him in the image of God.' Only later does it add, 'He made them male and female,' a division foreign to divine attributes."⁵

This passage emphasises that sexual differentiation, although part of the order of creation, does not reflect the image of God to the same extent as the spiritual nature of man. Drawing on the writings of Saint Apostle Paul, Saint Gregory of Nyssa accentuates the transcendence of the divine nature, which surpasses gender categories.

2. HUMAN NATURE IN THE VISION OF SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA

Saint Gregory of Nyssa considers gender differences to be a secondary aspect of human nature, added later to the creation of man in God's image and likeness. He emphasises the primordial importance of spiritual communion with the Divinity as the fundamental purpose of human existence, surpassing gender differences.

Jean-Claude Larchet, analysing Gregory of Nyssa's perspective on creation, underscores his belief that the essence of human existence lies in the creation of man in the image of God, reflecting Christ. The subsequent differentiation into "male and female" represents, in Gregory of Nyssa's view, a secondary level of existence, a deviation from the primordial perfection and unity of the divine image: "Gregory further explains that the formula 'male and female He created them' refers to a second level in the human being, the first being what makes him a being in the image of God and 'after the prototype' which is Christ; 'male and female' is indeed a 'division foreign to divine attributes.'"⁶

Father Ștefan Florea, examining the writings of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, highlights his view that man's uniqueness within creation lies in the fact that, being created in the image of God, he reflects the "Heavenly Man," another way of referring to Christ: "The image of

³ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Transfigurer le genre*, Éditions des Syrtes, Genève, Suisse, 2023, p. 24.

⁴ Cf. Gheorghe ISTODOR, „Omul – realitate dihotomică. O mărturie misionară împotriva concepțiilor eterodoxe antropologice”, in *Altarul Reîntregirii*, Nr. 2/2009, pp. 203-222

⁵ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *The Creation of Man*, XVI, PG XLIV, 181A-B.

⁶ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Transfigurer le genre*, p. 25.



God in man is considered by Saint Gregory as the source of humanity, but that humanity born from above, capable of reflecting the Heavenly Man."⁷

Interpreting Saint Gregory of Nyssa's vision, Father Ștefan Florea highlights a distinction between two perspectives on human nature: the "normative man" (man as he was created) and the "real man" (man marked by the Fall). The normative man is defined through the lens of the divine image, visible in his material and spiritual structure. Although affected by the Fall, the real man retains the divine image. However, it is obscured by the consequences of sin on human nature: "Saint Gregory, when speaking about man, uses two registers of humanity, analysing the normative man, the pre-Fall man or Christ-Man, in contrast with man as such. The normative man is considered from the divine image's perspective about the materiality structure. In contrast, the real man is analysed from the perspective of the divine image obscured in the same relationship with materiality. Hence the need to distinguish between what is and what should be. Moreover, we must affirm that both the pre-Fall man and the post-Fall man, by their very created human nature, are simultaneously material and spiritual..."⁸.

The "normative man" represents the archetype of the ideal human, as conceived by God—in His image—existing in perfect harmony between the spiritual and the material. This is the state of man before the Fall. On the other hand, the "real man," is the man marked by the Fall, in whom the divine image, though present, is overshadowed by the effects of sin. Both human states, pre-fall and post-fall, are characterised by material-spiritual duality.

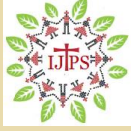
The difference lies in how these two dimensions relate to the divine image: harmoniously in the case of the "normative man" and discordantly in the case of the "real man." Father Ștefan Florea, following the teachings of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, urges us to reflect on the tension between our calling to be "normative humans," that is, the complete reflection of the divine image. The reality of the post-Fall human condition, in which we have become "real humans," marked by imperfection and sin. Jean-Claude Larchet clarifies the interpretation of the "double creation" concept in Gregory of Nyssa, emphasising that it does not refer to two distinct chronological moments but rather to two planes or levels of creation. The differentiation of sexes, added later to the divine image, is not a divine attribute in itself but rather an anticipation of sexuality as a means of perpetuating the human species after the Fall. He states that: "It has often been said that Gregory of Nyssa conceived a double creation. This second text shows that the two creations are not chronological but refer to two planes; the term 'creation' is actually not very appropriate. There is indeed a duality, but it is more 'logical' than chronological. The sexes are certainly 'superadded' to the image, not being divine attributes. By creating the sexes, God anticipates sexuality which will be implemented after sin to allow for the reproduction of the species"⁹.

Jean-Claude Larchet, interpreting Gregory of Nyssa's vision, emphasises that the differentiation of sexes, added later to the divine image, does not represent an inherent attribute of Divinity. By creating the sexes, God anticipates and prepares humanity for the reality of sexuality post-fall as a means of perpetuating the human species. The French theologian begins his analysis with the text of Saint Gregory of Nyssa on the Creation of Man: "As is easily seen, the human composite participates in two orders: that of Divinity,

⁷ Florea Ștefan, *Spiritualitate și desăvârșire la Scântul Grigorie de Nyssa*, Bibliotheca Publishing House, Târgoviște, 2015, p. 174.

⁸ Florea Ștefan, *Spiritualitate și desăvârșire la Scântul Grigorie de Nyssa*, Bibliotheca Publishing House, Târgoviște, 2015, p. 175.

⁹ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Transfigurer le genre*, p. 26.



possessing reason and intelligence which do not admit division into male and female; from the irrational, it derives its bodily constitution and the division of sex. Every being that participates in human life possesses both characteristics."¹⁰

The fragment presents a profound perspective on human nature, emphasising its fundamental duality. Gregory of Nyssa describes man as a unique synthesis of two distinct realities: the "order of Divinity" and the "order of the irrational." The "order of Divinity" defines the spiritual essence of man—reason and intelligence—which reflects the image of God and transcends gender differences, being universally present in every human being.

On the other hand, Gregory of Nyssa's "order of the irrational" encompasses the bodily aspects of human existence, including the differentiation of sexes. This dimension of our being is associated with materiality and primal instincts, representing a distinct component of the spiritual essence.

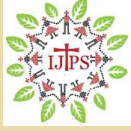
CONCLUSION

Therefore, Gregory of Nyssa emphasises cultivating spiritual and rational aspects to draw closer to the divine model without denying or neglecting our bodily dimension.

The biblical account of creation in the Holy Scripture highlights the distinct manner in which God created man compared to the rest of creation. God, through His direct involvement—forming man from the dust and breathing life into him—underscores the importance and exceptional value granted to humanity, in contrast to other beings, which were created merely by His word. Thus, man stands out about the created universe because, for the human being, God manifests special attention. While for the rest of creation, He simply commands it into existence from "nothing," for the "crown of creation"—man—God Himself acts.

In the biblical account of man's creation, we discover that God adds to the divine will the acts of "forming" and "breathing life into" as divine acts that elevate the one destined to rule the earth and all that was created upon it to the status of the "image" of the Holy Trinity. This dignity bestowed upon Adam is assumed by modern man today, yet it is not valued at its true worth.

¹⁰ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *The Creation of Man*, XVI, PG XLIV, 181B.



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