

Kenotic Love and the Soul's Transformation

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Chapter I: Introduction

Our discovery of God is, in a way, God's discovery of us.¹

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.²

Abstract

The intent of this thesis is to illumine an understanding of kenotic love and how one's encounter with this love leads to personal transformation, resulting in a relationship of authentic self-giving love with God, oneself, and others. This claim will be demonstrated first through examining the theology of kenosis and theosis, followed by a critical analysis of the life and teachings of St Macrina the Younger (327-370AD). Our comprehension of this will be strengthened by the thoughts and theology of the early church mothers and fathers as they explored and developed a doctrine of divinization, or theosis,³ a process they understood to come through an "ever-greater participation in God."⁴ These findings will then be applied to the intersection of encounter and incarnational faith.

Impetus

I have always considered my personal faith to be quite fragile. My temperament tends toward doubt, and with that doubt comes fear.⁵ There have been multiple moments in my life when the whole story of faith I'd been holding seemed to crumble and turn to dust. Oftentimes I

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (The Abby of Gethsemane, Inc.: 1961), 39.

² Ibid., 60.

³ Defined as *divine-like*.

⁴ Carla D. Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 51.

⁵ In recent years enneagram work has helped me to understand this part of myself. I am a type six, a loyal skeptic, a questioner to the end. My work (or point of growth) is not just to make peace with this part of my psyche, but to find peace *within* it.

would find myself sinking and asking the question: *is there anything I can trust?* However, in every moment of chaos, frailty, and even despair – Love remained. Love has been my bedrock; my one sure thing. Love has been The Presence I cannot escape. In seasons when nothing else made sense to me I could still somehow manage to close my eyes and say, “I believe in Love.” Though it was a mystery I could not explain, I knew that Love had never left me. Time and time again, this is all that held my faith together.

I believe love to be the foundation of Christian faith⁶ and the center of Jesus’ heart and message.⁷ And yet, some of the central teachings and practices I have found in the Church seem to counter that message of love. This has led me to consider how our understanding of the nature of God’s love impacts the life of the believer and the broader praxis of the Church.⁸ The implications, both personally and socially, are vast. Within Christianity we believe Jesus to be the embodiment of God – revealing God’s perfect love. For this reason, it is critical to investigate what this love looks like. The early church mothers and fathers developed an understanding of divine love that was rooted in the word *kenosis*. Kenotic love, as defined by them, is *self-giving* love. Throughout scripture we see this love demonstrated in God’s relationship with Godself⁹ and in God’s relationship with humanity. Jesus becomes the ultimate example of this providing a human picture of perfect kenotic love.¹⁰

Throughout my life, when certain core doctrines, beliefs, or practices of the church have seemed to land in contradiction with love to me,¹¹ I’ve had little more than the inner protest of

⁶ 1 Jn 4:7-21.

⁷ Matt 22:36-40.

⁸ Potentially leading us down paths of harm and exclusion or love and embrace.

⁹ Within the Trinity: “For the One Love of the Three Persons is an infinitely rich giving of Itself which never ends and is never taken, but is always perfectly given, only received in order to be perfectly shared.” Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 68-69.

¹⁰ Phil 2:6-11.

¹¹ Particularly in relation to beliefs surrounding human origin (as it pertains to innate goodness/Imago Dei), the final judgement/hell and who is included into full participation in the life of the Church.

my own heart to support an argument or make a defence. Frequently feelings of embarrassment would rise at my use of the word “love” as I sensed it to be a weak explanation of my core beliefs. There have been many times when I’ve raised my hand, both literally and figuratively, tearfully explaining that a punitive god/gospel and the doctrine of eternal damnation are simply incompatible¹² with an all-loving God. To my dismay, I was told I was mistaken. And, *to my alarm*, a determined conviction that God *is* love¹³ seems to have lost its gravity in the Church.¹⁴

In my personal life, this inconsistency in the Church’s message regarding the nature of God’s love resulted in a gripping fear that hindered my ability to trust God/Love.¹⁵ And yet, nothing else has ever held me in the same way. The persistent notion that something was amiss propelled me toward the margins in the arena of faith and theology.¹⁶ By following this path I came to discover that the cry of my heart echoed voices of long ago, and the voices of long ago had much to teach me. Through studying the words of our early church mothers and fathers my heart and mind have come into alignment, allowing me to rest and explore a beautiful theology that is deeply rooted in the life of Christ. I have come to believe that returning to these foundational Christian teachings can provide a path out of harmful practices embedded in much of Christianity.¹⁷ For many of us, the need to distance ourselves from these damaging practices and beliefs left us bereft of faith and community.¹⁸ The motivating force for this thesis is to find

¹² The Oxford Dictionary defines incompatible as, “so opposed in character as to be incapable of existing together.”

¹³ 1 Jn. 4:16b.

¹⁴ It is not enough to provoke change.

¹⁵ In the grip of fear, we hide/self-protect.

¹⁶ Listening to marginalized voices and following theologians who were pointed at as heretics in evangelicalism.

¹⁷ Such as patriarchy, colonization, exclusion of sexual minorities, beliefs that shame and perpetuate violence, abuse of the earth, spiritual superiority that discriminates other religions/religious expression, racism/white supremacy.

¹⁸ Many of my peers have left the church because it was too painful to stay. I have often thought that the ones who have left were simply *too good* to remain. Their standards of justice, integrity and love outgrew us.

the Christian message that is rooted in Love and returns us to It. Only Love will heal us. This message is the hope of my heart.

Background

Central to Cappadocian faith was their understanding of divinization, or *theosis*.¹⁹ Carla Sunberg explains that “this concept of theosis signaled a return to the *telos* of humanity, a humanity that was made in the image and likeness of God.”²⁰ Foundational in this belief was an assertion that the image, though tarnished, was restored in Christ’s complete assumption of humanity and was also being transformed through every image-bearer’s journey of “ever-greater participation in God.”²¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and the Resurrection* details a thorough critique of the nature of the soul in which St. Macrina’s voice gives clarity. Turning to scripture, she explains that “we should consider nothing peculiar to the soul which is not also proper to the divine nature.”²² Macrina insists that everything that is not the image and likeness of God in us is not who we truly are.²³ Therefore, every unhealthy attachment,²⁴ impurity and imperfection we find in ourselves is considered to be the *false self*. The *true self* is the pure likeness of God.²⁵

¹⁹ “To become like God, or union with God.” Ibid., 15.

²⁰ Ibid., 15.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

²² St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. by Catharine P. Roth, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 51.

²³ “All of these conditions are around the soul and not of the soul itself. They are like warts growing on the mental part of the soul which seem to be parts of it because they grow on it, but they are not what the soul is in its essence.” St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 54.

²⁴ The Cappadocians often use the word attachment as a negative. In their understanding this word pertains to desire as well. I have placed *unhealthy* before desire as a way to bring clarity to this concept. It will be expounded within the thesis.

²⁵ Macrina makes a distinction here between the use of the word “same” and “like” explaining that we are made in the image and likeness of God but we are not God. “Still we do not consider the small and perishable nature equal to the invisible and immortal. We suppose that its essence is intelligible, since it is an image of an intelligible essence, yet we do not say that the image is the same as the archetype.” Ibid., 45.

For the Cappadocians, a kenosis-theosis pattern/parabola emerged at the center of their faith.²⁶ F.W. Norris writes, “Nazianzen intends the self-emptying – divinizing figure to be the primary organizing principle of his theology.”²⁷ The *kenosis* of the Christ hymn becomes the focal point for this doctrine in which the self-giving, self-emptying nature of love is revealed through Christ.²⁸ *Transformation*, as it pertains to this subject, is the restoration of the divine image in each person which is realized through entering the kenosis-theosis parabola. This is where I suggest that it is through one’s encounter with kenotic love that true transformation occurs.²⁹

This subject takes us back to the very foundation of Christian faith. The early church mothers and fathers worked extensively to develop an understanding of these doctrines. The implications of Christ as both fully human and fully divine³⁰ meant that through Christs’ complete assumption of human nature all of humanity was restored.³¹ Sunberg explains that “in the eastern Church tradition what has been assumed has also been saved.”³² In understanding all of humanity to be assumed and restored through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, they also affirmed the image of God in everyone, making no distinctions of gender, race or social status.³³ This led to a beautiful anthropology that honours the Imago Dei at the heart of humanity

²⁶ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 51.

²⁷ Norris, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Doctrine,” 132. *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁸ Phil 2:6-11.

²⁹ “To be fully human one must turn toward God and allow divine love to fully form a reflection within the human. Without this response the corrupted image within humanity will not reflect what God intended originally for humanity and the result is that one is not fully human. It is in the process of deification or theosis that we become truly human.” Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 60.

³⁰ Conserving this understanding was critical at the height of Arianism and Apollinarism.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³² Nazianzen writes, “This is the intent of God, who for our sake became poor, in order to raise our flesh and restore his image and remake man, that we might all become one in Christ, who was perfectly became in all of us all that He is Himself, that we might no longer be male and female, barbarian, Scythian, slave or freeman, and distinctions of the flesh, but might bear in ourselves only the stamp of God by whom and for whom we were made, so far formed and modelled by Him as to be recognized by it alone.” *Ibid.*, 50-51

³³ *Ibid.*, 61.

and it laid a framework for an eschatological view that holds hope for the restoration of all things.³⁴ The impact of this theology is vast, resulting in a worldview that upholds the unequivocal worth of all people and opening a path toward personal transformation and increasing participation in God throughout eternity.

Methodology

Throughout my work I will employ the wisdom of feminist hermeneutical principles³⁵ that provide a way to engage with a history and texts that often failed to incorporate women.³⁶ These principles will become guides while looking at scripture and literary accounts³⁷ of the lives and doctrines presented. In addition to this, an approach to interpretation that recognizes the bible's "public nature, its dynamic, living qualities and its inclusivity" will be applied.³⁸ Utilizing such methods activates a responsible literary approach that allows us "to find the theological rhetoric within the text"³⁹ and it takes seriously the social and theological implications regarding the interactions of both the male and female figures that appear within it.⁴⁰

The Cappadocian mothers and fathers will provide the theological framework regarding an understanding of the doctrines of kenosis and theosis. Their theology will undergird my study of St. Macrina, who become an iconic picture of kenotic transformation. When looking at the life

³⁴ *Apokatastasis* is the concept that eventually there will be "a restoration of all things in Christ." Nyssen, *Ascetical Works* (FC, 196). Ibid., 43.

³⁵ Hermeneutic of *Suspicion*, Hermeneutic of *Proclamation*, Hermeneutic of *Remembrance* and Hermeneutic of *Creative Actualization*. Ibid., 4.

³⁶ These principles can also be applied to other minorities that have been excluded from the historical account or the text. "The critical insight of feminist hermeneutics has ramifications not only for historical scholarship but also for our contemporary-political situation because the Bible still functions today as a religious justification and ideological legitimization of patriarchy. To speak of power is to speak of political realities and struggles although we might not be conscious of this when we speak of the power of the Word." Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, xi. Ibid., 4.

³⁷ i.e., Hagiography, spiritual autobiography, homilies and letters.

³⁸ Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, New York, NY: Avon Books, 1996, 24.

³⁹ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 15.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.

of St. Macrina, I will focus on how her lived reality provides a human face of kenotic love and the soul's transformation. St. Macrina is not only a living icon in her time, she is also referred to as The Teacher.⁴¹ Indeed, she presents a wealth of theological insight into the subject, thus revealing her rightful place as *theologian to the theologians*. My intention is to highlight this female figure within early church history as a primary source of spiritual wisdom and to apply the social implications of her life into our modern context.

Interlocutor: Saint Macrina, Icon of Kenotic Transformation

While I've never doubted that there were powerful women at the center of early church history, the reality is that western Christianity has failed to emphasize their wisdom. In part, this is due to having fewer first-person accounts of such women – an outcome of their marginalized place in society.⁴² In the case of St. Macrina, we know about her life and doctrine primarily through the writings of her brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote *The Life of St. Macrina*⁴³ and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Hagiographical in form, the *VSM* is written to memorialize and conserve the story of this beloved woman, elder and teacher of the early church, while *On the Soul* gifts us with Macrina's philosophical and theological brilliance. Through both writings Gregory illumines and contextualizes Macrina's pivotal place in this affluent family of theologians.

Named after her paternal Grandmother, Macrina the Elder, St. Macrina is the eldest of the ten children born to St. Emmelia. In the *VSM* Gregory pays careful attention to the character of his older sister, especially noting how she came to support her mother and lead the family after

⁴¹ Most notably by St. Gregory of Nyssa in *On The Soul and the Resurrection*.

⁴² Women were typically not permitted formal education and were therefore illiterate.

⁴³ *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, hereafter *VSM*.

their father's death.⁴⁴ We learn that after the ten children born to Emmelia had all reached maturity Macrina encouraged her mother to fully renounce their material possessions and to convert their family home into a monastery.⁴⁵ While this may sound like a difficult undertaking for Emmelia, we do learn that she had once longed to live the life of a monastic/virgin but was unable to do so.⁴⁶ In this way it is possible that Macrina helped her mother realize a lost dream by encouraging her to finally break free from the expectations of society.⁴⁷ This chapter of Macrina's life offers us a beautiful picture of kenotic love on this fourth century homestead.⁴⁸ Gregory writes:

Turning her [mother] away from all she was accustomed to, she led her to her own standard of humility, prepared her to put herself on an equal footing with the community of maidens, so as to share on equal terms with them one table, bed and all the needs of life, with every difference of rank eliminated from their lives.⁴⁹

This is a soaring example of Christianity parting paths with societal norms through embracing a theology of love, compassion and liberation.⁵⁰ St. Macrina convinces her mother to lay aside her privilege and together they empower those without.⁵¹ The monastery became actively engaged in

⁴⁴ Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, trans. by Kevin Corrigan, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 25-26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁶ Emmelia was an orphaned young girl which made it unsafe for her to remain single. Gregory writes, "But since she was bereft of both parents, and because her body was just springing into full bud. . . there was a risk that if she were not by her own choice united with someone, she might against her will suffer some violence because the suitors were maddened by her beauty and were getting ready to carry her off." *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁷ Early female monastics displayed a momentous stride toward autonomy and feminist ideals. (i.e. in refusing marriage and child-rearing, they escaped the plight of being the property of a man.) In many ways, they were free.

⁴⁸ We find this family making tremendous strides of cultural resistance through embracing the teachings of Christ in 327-370 A.D.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁰ This distinction must be made: St. Macrina *found her* liberation in laying aside power/prosperity/privilege through renouncing material possessions. The servants in her home *found their* liberation through the full inclusion and equality Macrina embraced them with.

⁵¹ "Macrina persuaded her mother to give up their accustomed way of life, their rather ostentatious life-style and the services she had previously been accustomed to from her maids, and she also persuaded her to put herself on an equal footing with the many in spirit and to share a common life with all her maids, making them sisters and equals instead of slaves and servants." *Ibid.*, 26-27.

the community⁵² and was a source of refuge and healing for many.⁵³ This is the epitome of kenotic love.⁵⁴

In *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, St. Gregory presents a fascinating eschatological conversation in which he is postured as Macrina's pupil. It is clear that Gregory is distressed after the recent death of their brother St. Basil. He comes to his sister grappling to understand the possibility of the resurrection and what does or does not become of the soul. Throughout the text the strength of Macrina's faith both instructs and comforts her brother through the grief and the questions that spring forth from his heart. She demonstrates a beautiful confidence in the hope we have in Christ as she unveils an understanding of the transformation that takes place as a soul comes into union with God.⁵⁵ Among her many insights, she explains that while the process of purification can be painful, it is unto our healing.⁵⁶ She also asserts that the goodness and beauty of the soul⁵⁷ will faithfully be drawn toward the goodness and beauty of God.⁵⁸ It is through this

⁵² Macrina (and most like her of the Patristic era) understood that kenosis/deification is intricately and intimately connected to the larger life of the parish and church. She was not a woman working in isolation. For her, theosis is embedded in, tested by, and perfected through her life in a community that continues to share the Cross as a pattern of self-giving love. I won't explore that theme directly in this thesis but the role of community for kenosis/theosis is worthy of further study.

⁵³ Particularly in the time of the famine. *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁴ See Phil. 2:5-8 "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

⁵⁵ "This is love, the interior attachment to that which is pleasing. So when the soul which has become simple and uniform and an accurate image of God finds that truly simple and immaterial good, the one things which is really lovable and desirable, it attaches itself to it and combines with it through the impulse and operation of love. It conforms itself to that which is always being grasped and found, and becomes through it's likeness to the good that which the nature is in which it participates." St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. by Catharine P. Roth, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 80.

⁵⁶ "For it is not out of hatred or vengeance for an evil life (in my opinion) that God brings painful conditions on sinners, when He seeks after and draws to Himself whatever has come to birth for His sake; but for a better purpose He draws the soul to Himself, who is the fountain of all blessedness. The painful condition necessarily happens as an incidental consequence to the one who is drawn." *Ibid.*, 83-84.

⁵⁷ Which is the true-self.

⁵⁸ Macrina uses a metaphor of mud plastered to a rope being drawn through a small hole. The pain of passing through that space is what frees the rope from the mud. Expounding this she says: "Something like this I think we should imagine for the state of the soul. Wrapped up as it is in material and earthly attachments, it struggles and is stretched, as God draws His own to Himself. What is alien to God has to be scraped off forcibly because it has

process that transformation occurs. Sunberg points out that the ideal presented through Macrina is a true “expression of the Cappadocians’ understanding of theosis, and Macrina’s life simply becomes the incarnational model of the theosis-kenosis parabola.”⁵⁹

Carla Sunberg: Interpreter

I must give credit to the scholarship of Carla Sunberg and recognize her as a key interpreter in the field of research I have found myself mining. Her insight into the lives and minds of the Cappadocians and her expertise in the theological genre of kenosis and theosis has been invaluable to me. Not only that, but her roots in the Nazarene church have provided a strange and comforting sense of circling back into my own church of origin to both re-imagine and re-interpret some of the foundational Christian teachings of my youth. It has been a privilege and a delight to glean from her work.

Argument: Transformation [theosis] occurs through one’s journey into Love

The doctrine of theosis (or divinization) is seen as a participatory process through which one comes into union with God. Expounding on the work of Irenaeus,⁶⁰ Athanasius wrote “For he was made man that we might be made God.”⁶¹ The word kenosis is taken from Phil 2:7 which says that “Christ emptied himself, becoming a bond-servant to appear in the likeness of man.”⁶² This concept unfolds in a definition of divine love that is self-giving and self-emptying.⁶³ Like many theological concepts theosis and kenosis can be applied in a variety of ways. For my

somehow grown onto the soul. This is the cause of the sharp and unbearable pains which the soul must endure.” Ibid., 84.

⁵⁹ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 139.

⁶⁰ “In the preface of *Against Heresies* 5, he stated, “The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” Irenaeus, preface of *Against Heresies* 5, Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 22-23.

⁶¹ Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, Ibid., 23.

⁶² Philippians 2:7, NASB.

⁶³ We do not say self-emptying in the sense that Christ was no longer divine. He was fully divine and fully human. However, Christ descended, assuming our complete humanity, and became vulnerable in every way that a human is vulnerable.

purpose, I will enter the Cappadocian understanding of the kenosis-theosis parabola and explore how this concept guides us into an encounter with kenotic love that results in personal transformation. This encounter is twofold, involving an emptying (or letting-go) of the false self and a discovery of the true-self in union with God.

Many notable contemplatives throughout history⁶⁴ have spoken of purification or purgation. There is a perception of pain that undergirds this word, and it is important to understand that that pain is real. Describing a similar process St. Macrina offers a metaphor of mud plastered to a rope being drawn through a small hole. She explains that the pain of passing through that space is what frees the rope from the mud.⁶⁵ The pain that occurs through this is not a method of punishment but of healing and freedom. We experience pain because the false self has become a barrier to the soul's exposure to Love.⁶⁶ As we allow Love to pull us free, we experience an emptying of the exterior self, just as God (through the Incarnation of Christ) was emptied.⁶⁷ In a passage that magnificently echoes Macrina's theology, Thomas Merton explains this as the essence of salvation,⁶⁸ writing:

It is not only human nature that is "saved" by the divine mercy, but above all the human person. The object of salvation is that which is unique, irreplaceable,

⁶⁴ i.e., St. John of the Cross, *St. Teresa of Ávila*, Thomas Merton.

⁶⁵ Expounding this she says: "Something like this I think we should imagine for the state of the soul. Wrapped up as it is in material and earthly attachments, it struggles and is stretched, as God draws His own to Himself. What is alien to God has to be scraped off forcibly because it has somehow grown onto the soul. This is the cause of the sharp and unbearable pains which the soul must endure." St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*, 84.

⁶⁶ "We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good. His inscrutable love seeks our awakening. True, since this awakening implies a kind of death to our exterior self, we will dread His coming in proportion as we are identified with this exterior self and attached to it." Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 15.

⁶⁷ "If, then, we want to seek some way of being holy, we must first of all renounce our own way and our own wisdom. We must 'empty ourselves' as He did." *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁸ "To be 'lost' is to be left to the arbitrariness and pretenses of the contingent ego, the smoke-self that must inevitable vanish. To be 'saved' is to return to one's inviolate and eternal reality and to live in God." 38.

incommunicable – that which is myself alone. This true inner self must be drawn up like a jewel from the bottom of the sea. . .⁶⁹

This brings us to the second part of the parabola, which is realized in discovering the true self, accepting this self, and then giving *this self* as an offering to God. To do this we must embrace humility. Contrary to many spiritually pious *misconceptions* of humility that often lead to a denial or repression of the self, Merton explains that true humility “consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God.”⁷⁰ In this place we are invited to take off every garment that has hidden our beauty and to bask in the glory of that which we are: image bearers of God.

Merton writes,

God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. . . You seem to be the same person and you are the same person that you have always been: in fact, you are more yourself than you have ever been before. You have only just begun to exist. You feel as if you were at last fully born.⁷¹

Theosis is both the outcome of salvation and the continuous journey that every person is invited into.⁷² I see theosis as an open door into active participation with God. Sunberg explains that “the concept of the Cappadocians is truly one of synergy – people partnering with God, enabled by grace.”⁷³ Synergy is integral to our understanding of theosis because it emphasizes the activity of grace and the role of consent.⁷⁴ Expounding this concept, Sunberg asserts that “it is synergy which helps to bring healing to humanity and restores the image in humankind.”⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁷¹ Ibid., 227.

⁷² Similar to our modern concept of the now and not yet of the kingdom. We are both restored and *being* restored, transformed and *being* transformed, saved and *being* saved.

⁷³ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 66.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 59.

Theosis takes place as the heart opens to Love and consents to Love's response. Love does not force us to enter this dance. Rather, Love invites, welcomes, calls out and moves with each heart as It continuously pours out Love from Its ever-giving Source. As we respond to this invitation a union occurs and we become like God, which is to say that we become what we truly are.

The more a person engages with the synergistic activity of Love the more they will become an offering of Love in the life of the world. As this union with Love occurs, a person is transformed in their relationship with themselves and with those around them. Just like we see in the life of St. Macrina, the result in our life is self-giving love as a lived reality. Gregory of Nyssa writes, "It is evident that she who moulds her own beauty in accordance with this grace imitates Christ himself in her endeavours and so becomes that to others, which Christ himself became to human nature."⁷⁶

Outline

Throughout my thesis the themes presented in the introduction will continue to be explored and examined in the following manner:

I. Introduction

- A. Background
- B. Methodology: Theological Framework and Hermeneutical Approach
- C. Interlocutors
- D. Argument: Transformation (theosis) occurs through one's journey into Love

II. Kenosis

- A. Definition: emptying/letting go/descent
- B. Definition: kenotic love = *self-giving* love

III. Theosis

⁷⁶ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 67.

- A. Definition: Filling/ascent by the transforming energies of the Holy Spirit
- B. The transforming energies of God = the Grace of the Holy Spirit

IV. Kenosis and Theosis Together

- A. Summary of Sunberg's six key points

V. St. Macrina

- A. The genius of her doctrine; a brilliant mind
- B. The incarnation of her theology; a beautiful life

VI. Application: The Intersection of Encounter and Incarnational Faith

- A. Encountering kenotic Love; surrender and salvation of the true self
- B. Incarnational faith; when Love becomes Love

VII. Critical Analysis

- A. The challenge of distance (time, context and culture)
- B. Feminism & kenosis (feminist concerns/challenges)

VIII. Summary of Findings

- A. Synthesis
- B. Creative Epilogue

Conclusion

The early church mothers and fathers gazed upon the life of Christ as the ultimate example of divine love. The love revealed through Christ illuminated a path of restoration, transformation and unification with God. When looking at the Cappadocians' understanding of these core doctrines we find an anthropology that emphasizes the divine image that is innate in all of humanity. We have seen that the kenosis-theosis parabola modeled through the life of Christ went beyond the realm of doctrine/theology and became a dynamic, lived reality in the life of our interlocutor. The embodiment of such theology resulted in a Christocentric worldview that was radically inclusive, providing a picture of love and liberation that extends to us today. This will be realized in the heart of individuals through consent and participation with the limitless Love that is ever reaching toward all humanity and faithfully drawing each heart unto Itself.

Finally, it is through the soul's encounter with this Love that transformation occurs and the true self emerges. This results in an awakening – a birth. The true self, which is the essence of each individual and a unique expression of Love, is both freed and poured out into the life of the world.

Chapter II

Kenosis: The Emptying

*Hast thou not heard, that my Lord Jesus died?
Then let me tell thee a strange story.
The God of power, as he did ride
In his majestic robes of glory,
Resolved to light; and so one day
He did descend, undressing all the way.⁷⁷*

I begin this chapter with the second stanza of George Herbert's poem, *The Bag*, in order to provide a picture that can guide us as we explore the meaning of kenosis. Through Herbert's work we find an image of a majestic God in robes of glory *descending*. As the God in this poem descends, [he] begins "undressing all the way." There are multiple layers in this metaphor to explore, not unlike the layers found in Philippians 2:1-11, the primary text for kenotic scholars. Throughout my research these few lines of poetry have acted as a tether, pulling me in again and again toward the heart of this topic with a picture that captivates me.

Defining Kenosis

The etymological root of the word kenosis is Greek and translates "emptying" or "to empty." This word appears in Philippians 2:7, which says "but [Christ] emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men."⁷⁸ As with most theological concepts, there has been and continues to be a spectrum of interpretation that surrounds this subject. In this chapter, I will look at the theological root of this word and then apply it to how it illumines the nature of Love as revealed through the kenosis of Christ.

⁷⁷ George Herbert, *George Herbert: The Country Parson, The Temple* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981).

⁷⁸ Phil 2:7, NASB.

Throughout history there have been some theologians who have concluded that the emptying of divine attributes in the Incarnation of Christ resulted in a loss of deity.⁷⁹ This understanding is a departure from Trinitarian theology⁸⁰ and it is not the path I will take. I pause to recognize it because the distinction is important.⁸¹ The theologians and philosophers of the early church engaged in much debate regarding this concept and careful attention was given to the examination of the complex nature of Christ as fully human and fully divine. The *hypostasis*,⁸² or *hypostatic union*,⁸³ is a term that came out of this debate.⁸⁴ Cyril of Alexandria⁸⁵ was a key contributor and the theological insights he helped bring forth became the bedrock for the churches understanding of how the One person [God] subsists of two.

The importance of this foundation cannot be overstated. We must remember that the act of kenosis never separates Jesus of Nazareth from God. They are One. They never cease to be One. Cyril is meticulous in the way he turns the scriptures over and over again brilliantly revealing the complexity of this theology. It is difficult to choose a single excerpt from his work on this topic. When reading his letter, *That Christ is One*, I was struck by how the repetitive nature of his

⁷⁹ The Arian controversy ignited debates concerning the union of God the Father and God the Son. The primary assertion of Arianism was that the incarnation temporarily suspended this union, making the Son subordinate to the Father. Arianism was condemned as heretical by many. The Council of Chalcedon (451) formally denounced Arianism and approved the creed of Nicaea (325), the creed of Constantinople (381; later known as the Nicene Creed), as well as two letters of St. Cyril of Alexandria against Nestorius, which insisted on the union of both divine and human natures in Christ.

⁸⁰ The Christian doctrine that the one God subsists of three: Father, Son & Holy Spirit.

⁸¹ Some of the concepts engaged in defining kenosis can become problematic without this foundation.

⁸² Greek, literally translates "that which lies beneath as basis or foundation; sediment, substance, subsistence." Pace, E. (1910). Hypostatic Union. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Accessed, April 19, 2020 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07610b.htm>.

⁸³ A technical theological term meaning: the revealed truth that in Christ one person subsists in two natures, the Divine and the human. This was "definitively established by the Council of Chalcedon (451), which declared that in Christ the two natures, each retaining its own properties, are united in one subsistence and one person." The Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. "Hypostatic Union," accessed April 19, 2020 from New Advent: <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07610b.htm>.

⁸⁴ "It has well been said that Cyril's entire Christological undertaking could be ranged under the heading of an extended exegesis of Philippians 2." Sarah Coakley, *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, edited by C. Stephan Evans (Vancouver, BC: 2006), 250.

⁸⁵ 375AD-444AD.

Socratic style gave room for subtle nuances of the subject to emerge. While this allowed my mind to expand just enough to make the inconceivable *momentarily* conceivable, I have found that the only way to truly enter a place of understanding this mystery is to begin to see with the eyes of my heart.⁸⁶ This is where deeper comprehension begins. Of our primary text, Cyril writes:

The all-wise Paul, the steward of His mysteries, the Priest of the Gospel preachings, will make it clear saying, *He ye thus minded each one in yourselves according to what was in Christ Jesus also, Who being in the Form of God held not the being Equal to God a thing to seize, yet emptied Himself taking bondman's form, MADE in likeness of men, and, found in fashion as a man, humbled Himself, MADE obedient unto death, the death of the Cross.* For His Only-Begotten Word albeit God and out of God by Nature, the *Brightness of the glory and the Impress of the Person* of Him Who begat Him, WAS MADE man and that not turned into flesh, or undergoing commingling² or mixture or ought else of such like, but rather abasing Himself unto emptiness, and *for the joy set before Him despising shame* and not dishonouring the poverty of the human nature. For He willed as God to render the flesh which is holden of death and sin, superior to both death and sin, and to restore it to what it was in the beginning, having made it His own, not (as some say) soulless but ensouled with intellectual soul: yet, not disdaining to go along the path hereto befitting, He is said to undergo a birth like ours, abiding what He was. For He has been born in wondrous wise according to flesh of a woman: for no otherwise was it possible that He being God by Nature should be seen by them on earth than in likeness of us, the Impalpable and without body, yet Who thought good to be made man and in Himself Alone to shew our nature illustrious in the dignities of Godhead: for He the Same was God alike and man, and *in likeness of man*, in that herewith He was also God, but *in fashion as a man*. For He was God in appearance as we, and in bondman's form the Lord, for thus do we say that He was MADE FLESH.

Therefore do we affirm that the holy Virgin is also mother of God.^{87 88}

⁸⁶ "In the Christian context, we do not mean by a 'mystery' merely that which is baffling and mysterious, an enigma or insoluble problem. A mystery is, on the contrary, something that is revealed for our understanding, but which we never understand exhaustively because it leads into the depth or the darkness of God. The eyes are closed—but they are also opened." Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way, Revised Edition*, (Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995).

⁸⁷ Cyril, *That Christ is One: by way of dispute with Hermias*. Trans. by P. E. Pusey.

http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril_christ_is_one_01_text.htm Accessed April 25th, 2020.

⁸⁸ Theotokos: Greek; meaning "Mother of God." This term was canonized by the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431). "The Church declared that both Divine and human natures were united in the person of Jesus, the son of Mary. Hence, Mary may be called *Theotokos*, since the son she bore according to the flesh, Jesus, is truly one of the

Cyril's insight⁸⁹ propels the early church toward an understanding of what they call "the communication of attributes"⁹⁰ which asserts that "anything that can be ascribed to either nature can be ascribed to the one person because both natures truly belong to the one person."⁹¹ Therefore, as Cyril demonstrates, we can say that "the holy Virgin is also mother of *God*."⁹² Striking as it is, this statement leads us into a deeper understanding of what the Incarnation truly meant and means today. Following Cyril's example, we can say that *God* grew in the womb of a woman. We can say that *God* was born a helpless naked babe. We can say that *God* was nursed and nourished at Mary's breast; that *God* wept, that *God* bled, that *God* died, and that *God* rose again. Without a doubt, it is hard to say or comprehend such things. But this is precisely why it's so important to stretch the imagination in this direction. Consider the depth of humility revealed through this act, this emptying, this self-giving love. Consider the invitation extended to Mary and the power and beauty of her loving consent to be a home to God. The kenotic God who is brought to light through these poetic assertions pulls us toward an understanding of the very essence of God – for it is the nature of Love revealed in the Incarnation of Christ.

If the essence of God and the nature of Love is revealed through The Emptying,⁹³ then we must ask the question, what was emptied (or taken off) through the Incarnation? We turn again to Philippians 2, The Christ Hymn:

Divine persons of the Trinity." University of Dayton Online Dictionary.

<https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/t/theotokos-meaning-of.php> Accessed April 25th, 2020.

⁸⁹ Earlier influencers include Tertullian (160-225) and Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373).

⁹⁰ "The standard view of orthodox Christianity is that the attributes of both the divine nature and human nature are 'communicated to' or predicated of the one person, Jesus Christ." Ronald J. Feenstra, Edited by C. Stephen Evans, *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 141.

⁹¹ Mathison, Keith A. A Forgotten Father: Cyril of Alexandria. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/a-forgotten-father-cyrl-of-alexandria/> Accessed April 25th, 2020.

⁹² Cyril, *That Christ is One: by way of dispute with Hermias*. Trans. by P. E. Pusey.

http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyrl_christ_is_one_01_text.htm Accessed April 25th, 2020.

⁹³ A term coined by Cyril and used frequently throughout the text in *That Christ is One*. The capital 'T' and capital 'E' have directed me to consider The Emptying not as a mere act - *what* God did - but rather as a true revelation of *Who* God is.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁹⁴

The text tells us that Jesus existed in the form of God and emptied himself, becoming human. It serves us well to remember that this passage uses poetic narrative to tell a story.⁹⁵ My exegesis of the passage will do the same. Perhaps, like the creation poem, this story cannot be told through any other medium but this. We need the transcendent to understand.

Returning to the question, “emptied of what?” this passage reveals that the disrobing that occurred in the Incarnation is a demonstration of Divine solidarity with humankind. The emptying was not one of deity, but of privilege *and the exploitation* of privilege for self-gain.⁹⁶ Through Christ we see that God is not separate from humanity, rather, God literally becomes One of us. As we consider the gravity of this, it's important to remember that the nature of God was not changed in The Emptying, the nature of God was revealed. The annunciation of God's arrival in the womb of Mary stands as a proclamation of the Divine's all-loving, self-giving, unshakeable solidarity with humankind. Jesus is a revelation not just of who God is but of what God isn't. If Christ sets aside the *form of majesty* and the *use of privilege* without the loss of deity, might we conclude that the majesty and privilege we ascribed to God is false? We see no

⁹⁴ Phil. 2:5-8, NASB.

⁹⁵ “But as we approach Phil 2:6-11, we must never forget that it is a poetic narrative. Like most poetry, this text is rich in metaphor and allusion, and it is probably more accurate for us to speak of intertextuality rather than sources of even ‘backgrounds.’ Although we must strive for appropriate historical and theological precision, we must also learn to live with semantic overlapping and ambiguity in this rich tapestry of intertextual threads.” Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God, Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 13.

⁹⁶ The exploitation of privilege for self-gain is a pattern that humanity (the church being no exception) painfully participates in throughout history. This is the opposite of kenotic love.

exploitation of power in Christ because Christ is God and God is Love and Love is kenotic.⁹⁷

Could it be that The Great Emptying, the undressing of Christ, is the act of God stripping off all our false assumptions and projections of who and what God is? Can you picture that? The world was looking for a mighty king and then a baby appears, God in flesh – perfect, vulnerable, naked Love.

Defining Kenotic Love

God arrives in human form that we might see God as God is. In so doing, God removes every obstacle and every potential separation before perceived by us. Not only that, but Jesus enters the world through the womb of a marginalized woman and offers us a clue, perhaps, that this is always where God will be – tending to the margins of society as a *doulos/doula*⁹⁸ (bondservant) to all humanity.⁹⁹ As Cyril has so beautifully said, “For He has been born in wondrous wise according to flesh of a woman: for no otherwise was it possible that He being God by Nature should be seen by them on earth than in likeness of us. . .”¹⁰⁰

Biblical text offers pictures of kenotic love prior to the Incarnation. The Trinity Itself is a good example of this, as is the event of Creation. Father Richard Rohr beautifully brings all of them together in the following meditation.

Kenosis, or self-emptying, is revealed in the Trinity. The Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century saw that God the Father, who is Love, completely empties God’s self into the Son; the Son empties into the Spirit; and the Spirit empties into the Father. Incarnation flows from this kenosis that is inherent to God’s nature.

⁹⁷ Self-giving.

⁹⁸ “*Doulos*” (Greek, masc.) is the word used for “bond-servant/slave” in Phil. 2:5 “taking the form of a bond-servant.” “*Doula*” (Greek, fem.) is the word used for “handmaid/servant” in Lk.1:38, when Mary exclaims, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.”

⁹⁹ Love at the margins is an important thread that will be followed throughout the thesis.

¹⁰⁰ Cyril, *That Christ is One: by way of dispute with Hermias*. Trans. by P. E. Pusey.
http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyrl_christ_is_one_01_text.htm Accessed April 25th, 2020.

The first incarnation happened at the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago. *Every created thing is the self-emptying of God into multitudinous physical and visible forms.* Two thousand years ago, God revealed the human face of love through the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus taught us to follow him down the path of humility, servanthood, and surrender. As Paul writes, “His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6).¹⁰¹

Through these examples we see that the nature of Love is to give Itself, freely and without reserve. The nature of Love is to be *self-giving*. The Trinity and all of Creation testify to this. God is being poured out, emptied into God, and into Creation, and into Us.

In order to get a full picture and a more precise definition of kenotic love, we must follow The Christ Hymn beyond the Incarnation, all the way to the crucified Son. Philippians 2:8, “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”¹⁰² The cross is both the human picture and the pinnacle of kenotic love. It is at the cross that we gaze upon pure, self-giving, sacrificial love. By this I do not mean that the violence we find at the cross is to be glorified. It is not. The violence we see in the crucifixion is the antithesis of kenotic love, which is to say, it is the antithesis of God.¹⁰³ Here the two collide, and violence is exposed for what it is: evil and rendered powerless¹⁰⁴ in the presence of perfect Love. Philippians 2:9-11:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Fr. Richard Rohr, Daily Meditations, *Kenosis*. <https://cac.org/kenosis-2017-12-10/>. Accessed September 19th, 2020.

¹⁰² Phil. 2:8, NASB.

¹⁰³ Which is why the historical violence done in the name of Jesus we find throughout church history is an abomination of the grandest kind. (i.e. the crusades, the doctrine of discovery, colonization, slavery.)

¹⁰⁴ By powerless I do not mean without effect, pain, or inconceivable harm.

¹⁰⁵ Phil. 2:9-11, NIV.

The complete surrender of self-will¹⁰⁶ that we see in Jesus as he refuses to participate in a system that upholds the cycle of violence, oppression, and hate while he clings, unites, and abandons himself to Love *even onto death* is the epitome of kenosis. Through Christ, heaven and hell intersect, and the cross – that which was used for evil – is transformed into an eternal icon marking the way of Love.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

I began this chapter with a few lines from George Herbert's poem, *The Bag*, and now I return to them again.

Hast thou not heard, that my Lord Jesus died?
Then let me tell thee a strange story.
The God of power, as he did ride
In his majestic robes of glory,
Resolved to light; and so one day
He did descend, undressing all the way.¹⁰⁸

It is a strange story indeed. The kenotic God we are given – the God of the early church mothers and fathers – comes to us not through might but meekness, not through force but humility. “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your king is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’ ”¹⁰⁹ One might be left wondering if there ever were robes of glory to begin with. I suspect not. We certainly do not find them in the human expression of God revealed in Christ. This God undresses. This God takes off anything that would separate God from the Other. This God empties and pours out Love – which is God

¹⁰⁶ If Jesus is fully human, we can conclude that every impulse to save himself we would experience in such a situation, he experienced too. His “obedience unto death” is a sacrificial obedience and surrender unto Love.

¹⁰⁷ Cruciform Love. “Cruciform literally means cross-shaped, as in the form of the crucifixion. A cruciform God would be the God whose nature (love) is revealed through ‘Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:2).” Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God, A More Beautiful Gospel*, (Pasadena, CA: Plain Truth Ministries, 2015), p. 325.

¹⁰⁸ George Herbert, *George Herbert: The Country Parson, The Temple*.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 21:5, NASB.

Godself. This leads me to imagine that if there ever is a robe to be worn, we will find God in a continual act of taking it off and passing it on throughout eternity. This is because *God is self-giving, self-emptying, kenotic Love*.

Chapter III

Theosis: The Filling

*Who, through his immense love became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.*¹¹⁰

For the Son of God became man in order that we might become God.^{111, 112}

Perhaps the most provoking assertion St. Athanasius makes in his work *On the Incarnation*, is that God became man in order that we might become God. I say provoking because western Christianity is not accustomed to this way of speaking. It can even sound offensive to our ears today.¹¹³ But the early church mothers and fathers did not just arrive at statements such as this. They engaged in rigorous dialogue as they worked to understand the heart of Christian faith. This faith was rooted in the life of Christ, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the apostolic writings that would become the New Testament.¹¹⁴ Irenaeus and Athanasius provide the Cappadocians with a foundation on which to build their concept of theosis, and the Cappadocians go on to do so with great care.¹¹⁵ Unfortunately these core doctrines, once central to Christianity, faded from western consciousness proceeding the reformation. The eastern church however, remained rooted in their understandings of theosis and divinization, and the

¹¹⁰“*qui propter immensam dilectionem suam factus est quod sumus nos, uti nos perficeret esse quod est ipse.*” Fr. George Florovsky, *St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers*, accessed, November 5th, 2020 from Orthodox Info: http://orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/florov_palamas.aspx.

¹¹¹ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, accessed, Nov. 5th, 2020 from Coptic Church: http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/theology/incarnation_st_athanasius.pdf.

¹¹² Or, “*Gegonen gar anthropos, hin hemas en heauto theopoiese.*” [He became man in order to divinize us in Himself (*Ad Adelphium* 4)]. Fr. George Florovsky, *St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers*, accessed, November 5th, 2020 from Orthodox Info: http://orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/florov_palamas.aspx.

¹¹³ Indeed, there are ways to interpret this which are offensive.

¹¹⁴ Carla D. Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 14

¹¹⁵ Irenaeus (130-202AD) preceded them, while Athanasius was in direct communication with the Cappadocians and his influence is clear. *Ibid.*, 44-46.

concept grounded them in a beautiful vision of the ultimate telos¹¹⁶ of humanity. In this chapter, I will seek to clarify an understanding of theosis by looking at key texts in scripture and the insights of early church theologians. In doing so, I hope to pull to the surface the significance of a foundational Christian teaching that has often been forgotten in western Christianity.

Defining Theosis

The word theosis is defined as “likeness to or union with God and the process of attaining this state.”¹¹⁷ The words theosis, deification and divinization often appear together, and can be interchangeable as all connote a similar meaning: to be made divine. It is important to pay attention to the preface “to be made” when looking at this word. Deification is thought to be a transformative process made possible through humanities willing participation with God and God’s synergistic activity in our lives.¹¹⁸ Carla Sunberg explains,

In Cappadocian thought, the goal of the Christian life was theosis: to become like God or union with God. This concept signaled a return to the telos of humanity, a humanity that was made in the image and likeness of God. People are saved through their participation in theosis, culminating in their growth in holiness, love and Christ-likeness. Throughout their lives the Cappadocians worked toward this salvific goal.¹¹⁹

In St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, the great St. Macrina offers deep insight into the Cappadocian understanding of theosis as she responds to Gregory’s questions regarding the origin and destination of the soul. While Macrina is not using the word theosis, she speaks extensively on purification¹²⁰ and union with God.¹²¹ In this text, Macrina

¹¹⁶ Telos: Greek: τέλος, translit. télos, lit. "end, goal, or ultimate purpose", Collins Dictionary, s.v. “telos” accessed Oct. 29th, 2020 from Collins Dictionary: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/telos>.

¹¹⁷ Your Dictionary, s.v. “theosis” accessed Oct. 29th from: <https://www.yourdictionary.com/theosis>.

¹¹⁸ Carla D. Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 15.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁰ Or purgation. For St. Macrina, this is seen as a painful but loving process, by which we are saved/restored to our original state. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 83-84.

¹²¹ Whom she also calls Beauty, Love & Goodness.

builds a beautiful anthropology concerning both the origin and the destiny of humankind. She is thorough and articulate in her examination of how The Image resides in humanity, exploring what we can deduct from this and what we cannot. Carefully correcting her brother as he gives voice to questions most of us would identify with, she explains:

That which is made in the image of something else, must keep in every respect a similarity to its archetype. The likeness of the intellectual is intellectual. The likeness of the bodiless is bodiless, freed from all weight and escaping all dimensional measurement like its archetype, but different from it according to the particular property of its nature. For it would not be an image if it were the same as its original in all respects. But whatever appears in the uncreated nature, the same appears in the created nature. Often in a small fragment of glass, when it happens to lie in the sunlight, the whole circle of the sun is seen, not appearing in it according to its own size, but as the smallness of the fragment allows the reflection of the sun's circle. In the same way the smallness of our nature reflects the image of those ineffable properties of divinity. . .¹²²

Macrina and the Cappadocians took seriously the foundational Christian teaching that humanity was created in the image of God. They understood every human being to be a reflection of God. This image, though tarnished because of the fall, is being saved by Christ through the Holy Spirit. The ultimate mission of Christ was believed to be the restoration of the divine image in all creation, that is, in us. This restoration *is* theosis; it is (re)union with God. Macrina explains:

This is love, the interior attachment to that which is pleasing. So when the soul which has become simple and uniform and an accurate image of God finds that truly simple and immaterial good, the one thing which is really lovable and desirable, it attaches itself to it and combines with it through the impulse and operation of love. It conforms itself to that which is always being grasped and found, and becomes through its likeness to the good that which the nature is in which it participates. . . For the life of the superior nature is love, since the beautiful is in every respect lovable for those who know it, and the Divine knows Itself. But knowledge becomes love, because that which is known is beautiful by nature. . . There is no limit to the operation of love, since the beautiful has no limit, so that love might cease with the limit of the beautiful.¹²³

¹²² Ibid., 45.

¹²³ Ibid., 79-81.

Here, Macrina is speaking of the interior attachment to love and the union that occurs *through the impulse and operation of love* as the soul is drawn towards God. This interior attachment of the soul is pulled toward that which is pleasing and beautiful, because that which is pleasing and beautiful, that which is love, is the true nature of the soul. As the soul participates in this nature it conforms to it, becoming beautiful through its participation in beauty. In this way the soul returns to its original state. The soul returns to love.

Transformation: The Work of The Spirit

But what is the impulse and operation of love and where does it come from? The Cappadocians understood this to be the transforming energies of the Holy Spirit. Following the tradition of the fathers^{124 125} St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359AD) is known for his contribution to the church's understanding of how the uncreated energies of God enter/interact with the Christian. Palamas makes a critical distinction here regarding the *essence* of God and the *energies* of God.¹²⁶ Father George Florovsky writes,

¹²⁴ "Following the Holy Fathers'... This is not a reference to some abstract tradition, in formulas and propositions. It is primarily an appeal to holy witnesses." Fr. George Florovsky, *St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers*, accessed, November 5th, 2020. http://orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/florov_palamas.aspx

¹²⁵ "The true tradition is only the tradition of truth, *traditio veritatis*. This tradition, according of St. Irenaeus, is grounded in, and secured by, that *charisma veritatis certum* [secure charisma of truth], which has been 'deposited' in the Church from the very beginning and has been preserved by the uninterrupted succession of episcopal ministry. 'Tradition' in the Church is not a continuity of human memory, or a permanence of rites and habits. It is a living tradition—depositum *juvenescens*, in the phrase of St. Irenaeus. Accordingly, it cannot be counted *inter mortuas regulas* [among dead rules]. Ultimately, tradition is a continuity of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, a continuity of Divine guidance and illumination. The Church is not bound by the 'letter.' Rather, she is constantly moved forth by the 'Spirit.' The same Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, which 'spoke through the Prophets,' which guided the Apostles, is still continuously guiding the Church into the fuller comprehension and understanding of the Divine truth, from glory to glory." Ibid.

¹²⁶ "'Divine Energies' – are God himself at work. They are not merely attributes of God, but rather, God himself in his actions, in his activity, in his self-revelation to us. We'll never penetrate the infinite depths of God's *essence*, but God's *energies* do penetrate our lives and our world. Another phrase we use for these energies is 'the grace of the Holy Spirit.'" Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God, A More Beautiful Gospel*, 325.

St. Gregory begins with the distinction between "grace" and "essence": *he theia kai theopoios ellampsis kai charis ouk ousia, all' energeia esti Theou* [the Divine and Divinizing illumination and grace is not the essence, but the energy of God]... The source and the power of human *theosis* is not the Divine essence, but the "Grace of God": *theopoios energeia, hes ta metechonta theountai, theia tis esti charis, all' ouch he physis tou theou* [the divinizing energy, by participation of which one is divinized, is a divine grace, but in no way the essence of God]. *Charis* is not identical with the *ousia*. It is *theia kai aktistos charis kai energeia* [Divine and uncreated Grace and Energy]. This distinction, however, does not imply or effect division or separation. Nor is it just an "accident," *oute symbebekotos*. Energies "proceed" from God and manifest His own Being. The term *proienai* [proceed] simply suggests *diakrisin* [distinction], but not a division: *ei kai dienenochē tes physeos, ou diaspatai he tou Pneumatos charis* [the grace of the Spirit is different from the Substance, and yet not separated from it].¹²⁷

With this distinction in mind an understanding unfolds; *theosis* is a gift, a "divine grace" that is not attained through the exertion of our own will¹²⁸ but through our surrender¹²⁹ to God and our willing participation with the "divinizing energy" of God. This allows a synergy¹³⁰ to take place as we yield to the work of the Spirit (the impulse and operation of love) and consent to the Energy that lifts us towards Godself. This Energy is also called Grace. An experience of Grace is an encounter with God's own Spirit. Grace, *the uncreated energy of God*, shows up many places and arrives in many forms. I know Grace as the floor that appears where it wasn't before. Grace is to find yourself held by something when nothing else is there. It is the unseen energy that lifts us from despair – even for a moment. Grace is the relief, the exhale, the unforeseen gift. Grace is the dancing child and the stranger's smile. Humans *know* Grace. Grace makes the presence of God real. Father Florovsky emphasizes that St. Gregory was primarily a

¹²⁷ Fr. George Florovsky, *St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers*, accessed, November 5th, 2020. http://orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/florov_palamas.aspx.

¹²⁸ Or self-will.

¹²⁹ Surrender is kenotic.

¹³⁰ Synergy is defined as "the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects." Here, we are speaking of a cooperation that takes place between the human heart and the heart of God.

monk and a bishop, explaining that “the ultimate purpose of St. Gregory's theological teaching was to defend the reality of Christian experience. *Salvation is more than forgiveness. It is a genuine renewal of man.*”¹³¹

There are many New Testament passages that bring clarity to our understanding of theosis, particularly in the writings of Paul.¹³² 2 Corinthians 3:18 is a key text that offers important insight. Paul writes, “But we all, with unveiled faces, looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”¹³³ This one verse offers us a map, so to speak, regarding both the *how* and the *what* at the center of this concept. The text could even be read as Paul’s prescribed path of theosis. Inserting the definitions already explored, we can come to read the passage like this:

But we all, (as in all creation) with unveiled faces, (having taken off/surrendered that which separates¹³⁴ so as to be fully seen/face to face) looking as in a mirror (gazing at a clear reflection) at the glory of the Lord, (Jesus *is* the glory of the Lord/Jesus is Lord)¹³⁵ are being transformed (through consent/cooperation/synergy/participation) into the same image (the cruciform image of Christ) from glory to glory (which is ascent/transfiguration/divinization/deification) just as from the Lord, the Spirit (by the operation and impulse of Love, by Grace/the uncreated energies of God).¹³⁶

While this is not the only way to interpret the text, it is *a* way, and the meaning injected here is rooted in orthodox understandings that are meant to propel us toward the primary vision of this thesis: encountering kenotic love and the transformation of the soul.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Michael Gorman asserts that “Paul’s soteriology is best described as theosis, or transformation into the kenotic, cruciform God revealed in the faithful and loving cross of Christ, and that Spirit-enabled theosis is the substance of both justification and holiness.” Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God, Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology*, 161.

¹³³ NASB.

¹³⁴ Separation is the lie; it is the false self/the ego, that which keeps us held down/isolated/in hiding/etc.

¹³⁵ “The confession ‘Jesus is Lord’ means, implicitly, that the crucified, servant Jesus, and no other Jesus, is Lord.” Ibid., 32.

¹³⁶ NASB. Personal definitions inserted.

Transfiguration: The Image of Christ

At this point it is critical for us to keep at the forefront of our minds that when we speak of becoming like God, we are speaking of the image of God revealed in Jesus. It might seem redundant to return to this but return we must. There are many images of God humans have projected over time and many of these images are not the image we see in Christ. We are not speaking of a tyrant king or a powerful ruler. We are not speaking of an almighty god in robes of glory who sits above us all. We are speaking of the kenotic, self-giving, self-emptying, crucified God of the cross. It is in gazing at this God, the human face of Christ, that we come to see who God is and what God is like. Michael Gorman emphasizes this well in the following passage:

If the crucified Christ is the glory and image of God, what does that say about God, and what does it say about the process of becoming Godlike? As in Phil 2:6-11, the answers are implicit but nonetheless clear: God is like Christ crucified. To become like God is to become like that kind of God. . . That is, God is Christlike, and transformation into Christlikeness is theosis.¹³⁷

These words pull us deep into the ethos of early Christian understanding. Theosis, for the Cappadocians in particular, went far beyond a philosophy, it was a way of life. Theosis was not merely a mystical experience nor was it an elevated state of arrival. Theosis was practiced through active participation in Christlike living. The heartbeat of the early church was a clear demonstration of women and men seeking to embody the life Jesus modelled, even onto death. In the Cappadocians we find a community of people who welcomed the stranger and cared for the sick and the poor. Just as many early Christian communities did, they gave their very lives in service to those around them as they sought to follow the way of Christ.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 121.

¹³⁸ Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 44.

Ultimately this devotion, activated solely through our surrender to the One who loves us and our participation in that Love, gives way to transfiguration. Transfiguration is defined as “a complete change of form or appearance; a metamorphosis, an exalting, glorifying, or spiritual change.”¹³⁹ At the end of St. Macrina’s life, St. Gregory describes her as nearing this final state. He writes, “It was as if an angel had providentially assumed human form, an angel in whom there was no affinity for, nor attachment to, the life of the flesh. . .”¹⁴⁰ There are many mystics who describe similar experiences, and while we do not presume to attain such a state in this life, we certainly begin the journey. “We are being transfigured into his very image as we move from one brighter level of glory to another. And this glorious transfiguration comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”¹⁴¹

Michael Gorman explains that “this transformation is not a matter of human effort.”¹⁴² He then quotes Bonhoeffer who writes:

To be conformed to the image of Christ is not an ideal of realizing some kind of similarity with Christ which we are asked to attain. It is not we who change ourselves into the image of God. Rather, it is the very image of God, the form of Christ, which seeks to take shape within us (Gal. 4:19). It is Christ’s own form which seeks to manifest itself in us. Christ does not cease working in us until he has changed us into Christ’s own image. Our goal is to be shaped into the entire form of the incarnate, the crucified, and the transfigured one.¹⁴³

Conclusion

¹³⁹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “Transfiguration” Accessed, November 8th, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transfiguration>.

¹⁴⁰ Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 40.

¹⁴¹ 2 Cor. 3:18b, TPT

¹⁴² Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 169.

¹⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4, trans. By Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 284-285. Ibid., 169.

This chapter is positioned to provide us with a firm foundation of the doctrine of theosis; one that will serve as the footing for further exploration moving forward. We have looked extensively at the theological origins of this concept in order to identify key teachings provided by some of the great theologians of the early church. These teachings plant us in the heart of classical Christian theology. We stand secure in the tradition of the holy mothers and fathers. The definition of theosis that has emerged will continue to grow. My hope is that the exploration of these topics will encourage a movement of the heart, an opening of some kind toward the Love that is always reaching out and pulling us back toward Itself. Rumi writes, “God is pleased when your love realizes it is part of something oceanic and begins to move with the whole. The larger love is more real, being itself reality.”¹⁴⁴ Theosis occurs in the letting go; in the surrender. As our hearts merge with this Larger Love, we become It. The two are one.

¹⁴⁴ Rumi, trans. by Barks, Coleman. *The Essential Rumi*, (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 346.

Chapter IV

Kenosis and Theosis Together: A Partnership, A Pattern, A Parabola, A Path

For me, I've come to understand that it's the soul that rises. Not me, not my ego, not anything 'human' that I am. The soul rises up from within me. And I descend inward to meet it.¹⁴⁵ And this is how you rise; further up is farther in. And the darkness is where the light has always been.¹⁴⁶

Now that a foundation for understanding these two theological principals has been made, I will begin to look at how they are intrinsically connected. To do this, I will explore the Cappadocian understanding of the interaction between kenosis and theosis, two seemingly opposite motions. The idea here will be to highlight the partnership between descent and ascent; the emptying and the filling; the human and the divine merging within us.

Carla Sunberg carefully identifies six key points found within the Cappadocian understanding of what she calls a kenosis-theosis parabola. Because these points provide a theological roadmap for the rest of the thesis, I am going to state them just as she does, and then follow each point with how this understanding grounds and guides us on the path ahead.

1. "Humankind is made in the image of God and is a reflection or mirror of that image."¹⁴⁷

This is the foundation, the starting place. Everything else hinges on this principle. Humanity is made in the image of God and is a reflection of that image. Humans are a reflection of God. One of my theology professors is fond of reminding his students that when he really wants to see God, he looks in the mirror. If only our Sunday Schools had placed greater emphasis on this, the goodness within us, rather than what most Western churches came to

¹⁴⁵ Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*, (USA: Hayhouse Inc., 2019), 217

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 221

¹⁴⁷ Carla D. Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 51.

emphasize – which is our complete depravity. The Cappadocians gifted us with a beautiful understanding of our origin. Humanity is made in the image of God. This means that humanity is inherently good; eternally blessed by God’s own image shining through us. I need to say that again. *Humanity is inherently good; eternally blessed by God’s own image shining through us.* We are the Imago Dei.¹⁴⁸

Primarily informed by Augustinian¹⁴⁹ thought, Luther and Calvin both promoted the idea that humanity is completely depraved and utterly trapped in sin.¹⁵⁰ For many of us, this was the starting place of our early Christian education. You are bad, period. In her introduction to St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Catharine P. Roth explains the Cappadocian view regarding the image and sin, writing,

. . . if evil were the beginning of our human life, we could never become good. . . If chance were the beginning, we could never rely on Providence. The word ‘beginning’ (apxn) includes the idea of ‘principle,’ so whatever does not occur at least potentially in the beginning cannot develop later on. But in fact virtue does occur. Therefore it cannot be evil which begins our life, so it must be God who is responsible for our origin. Virtue is natural to us; evil is a defect in our nature, occurring either by our choice or by some kind of disease.¹⁵¹

While the Cappadocians do not deny the effect of the fall, it is not the starting place for them.

The starting place is that we are made in God’s good image and we are a mirror, reflecting that

¹⁴⁸ “Image of God.”

¹⁴⁹ Saint Augustine wrote many beautiful reflections relating to the spiritual life, but unfortunately his thoughts on sin and women were appalling, and these ideas have had devastating repercussions ever since.

¹⁵⁰ Total Depravity is a theological doctrine derived from Augustinian thoughts on original sin. The doctrine asserts that humans are completely enslaved to sin, and are not free to choose God, (or goodness) apart from the grace of God. This grace must precede a person’s movement toward God, and in reformed theology, this grace is also predestined. Predestination is the theological belief that God has chosen some for salvation, thus excluding the rest of humanity, which means that those who are not predestined onto salvation, have been predestined onto eternal damnation.

¹⁵¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 21.

image.¹⁵² Can you imagine how rooting our origin in this belief might change the way we see ourselves and everyone around us? If we take the Cappadocians seriously, they assert that there is nothing that can take this image, this innate goodness, away from us. We are good, period.

2. “The image is tarnished by the fall into sin.”¹⁵³

Point two is not a contradiction of the above. Nothing can take the image away from us. Nothing. The image remains. And yet, there is a fall. There is a sin. If we are a mirror reflecting the image, the mirror has been tarnished. Just as with a mirror, this distorts the reflection. In a brilliant study on Mary Magdalene, Meggan Watterson reflects on the following words, spoken by The Savior in Mary’s gospel. “There is no such thing as sin, rather you yourselves are what produces sin when you act in accordance with the nature of adultery, which is called ‘sin.’ For this reason, the Good came among you, pursuing (the good) which belongs to every nature.”¹⁵⁴

Watterson expounds writing,

Sin in Mary’s gospel is not about a long list of moral or religious laws; it’s not about wrong action. Sin is simply forgetting the truth and reality of the soul – and then acting from that forgetful state. The body then, the human body, isn’t innately sinful. ‘Sin’ is when we believe we are only this body, these insatiable needs, these desires and fears the ego conjures. ‘Sin’ is an ‘adultery,’ or an illegitimate mixing, a mistaking of the ego for the true self, rather than remembering that the true self is the soul.¹⁵⁵

The image is tarnished because of the fall. The image is still there, but the mirror is marred, distorting our vision, altering our reality. This is due to a variety of factors, both internal and

¹⁵² “It was Origen who provided the concept of image for the Cappadocians. Origen limited his understanding of image to the soul, and the Cappadocians’ expanded that understanding of image to include the whole person. Significantly, Origen provided them with the concept of restoration, and that restoration of the image was dependent upon ‘The Christian’s conscious imitation of Christ, God’s first image.’ This concept became formative in the Cappadocians’ understanding of theosis.” Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 53.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁵⁴ Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*, 19.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 20-21.

external, and it is deeply connected to where we've landed in this world. Our birthplace, our families, our triumphs, our traumas, the particulars of our place on the planet – all of this must be considered with deep compassion. Watterson goes on to write:

I think perceiving the good takes practice. And I think we need help getting to that place above the mountains, deep within the heart, that reminds us of what's good. Especially in a world, or within a heart, that has been shattered and has long since fallen apart.¹⁵⁶

For the Cappadocians the problem of evil is directly linked to our free will, which is viewed as both a sacred gift, integral to being made in the image, but also a vice, as it permits the human capacity to choose evil over good – to align ourselves with the lies of the ego rather than the truth of the soul.¹⁵⁷ But it is also free will that allows the human to consent to their own salvation.¹⁵⁸ Sunberg writes:

Free will includes the desire to practice virtues and to participate in the gracious acts of God. Nyssen sees 'human freedom as moral freedom, the freedom to become what we are made to be.' It means that humankind can make the choice to return to the Creator and obtain the 'divine likeness, but not, however, without the assistance of God.'¹⁵⁹

The assistance of God is what we call Grace. Grace is the Holy Spirit working with and within us. Grace is a gift. *Remember*, Grace is the floor that appears where it wasn't before. Grace is the uncreated energy of God. The gifts of Grace grow as we consent to the work of Grace in our

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵⁷ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 58-59.

¹⁵⁸ "For the grace of God does not naturally frequent souls which are fleeing from salvation, and the power of human virtue is not sufficient in itself to cause the souls not sharing in grace to ascend to the beauty of life..." Nyssen, *De Instituto Christiano* (PG 46:289c), Ibid., 59.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 59.

lives. We learn to walk on that floor. We learn to trust it. This is the synergy the Cappadocians come to believe in. It is grace and free will working together.¹⁶⁰

3. “Christ assumes human nature in order to restore humanity to its original nature.”

The mission of Christ, then, is to restore the image within us. Christ descends, arrives in human form, and reminds us of who we really are. We are children of God, children of the Good, children of the Beautiful, children of Love. The kenosis of Christ makes the path back to our true selves possible. Christ comes to reveal and restore the image, to return us to the Good within us – to return us to ourselves. Christ assumes human nature in order that human nature might be saved.¹⁶¹ This salvation is directly connected to our humanity. Another way to say this is that the image of God will be revealed through the human person. Sunberg eloquently explains,

To be fully human we must turn toward God and allow divine love to fully form a reflection within the human. Without this response, the corrupted image within humanity will not reflect what God intended originally for humanity, and the result is that one is not fully human. It is in the process of deification or theosis that we become truly human.¹⁶²

Here it becomes imperative to understand that it is through the incarnation of Christ that humanity is healed. Nazianzen’s analysis, highly recognized in the eastern tradition, concludes “For that which he has not assumed he has not healed.”¹⁶³ Christ assumed it all. He was fully human and fully God. The path toward our own healing begins in the way Christ modelled. It is through the path of descent, not ascent, that restoration begins to be realized. We do not rise

¹⁶⁰ Norris, “Deification,” 417, referring to Maximus the Confessor, *To Thalassius* 61. Ibid., 59.

¹⁶¹ “Christ’s assumption of humanity had huge implications for the Cappadocians’ understanding of the potential for deification as well as their understanding of the nature of Christ. In the Eastern Church tradition, it is believed that which has been assumed is that which has been saved.” Ibid., 60.

¹⁶² Ibid., 60.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 61.

above ourselves, we settle into ourselves. Like Christ, we begin by becoming human. “Further up is farther in.”¹⁶⁴

4. “In conversion one’s capacity to reflect the divine nature is once again restored.”¹⁶⁵

Conversion can be a complicated word in the Christian tradition. The western evangelical church in particular has monopolized the meaning of conversion in ways some of us will struggle to overcome for the rest of our lives.¹⁶⁶ But for the Cappadocians “conversion was to be experienced graciously, through faith and baptism.”¹⁶⁷ For them baptism was a way of imitating Christ, as Christ had been baptized. It was also seen as a way of clothing oneself in Christ.¹⁶⁸ Sunberg explains that the “sacrament of baptism was seen as a means of God’s grace reaching out to humanity, liberating from sin and death in a desire for restoration ‘of the original human destiny which consists in being the image of God.’”¹⁶⁹

One of the great conversion stories in the New Testament is the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus, found in Acts chapter 9. In this story, Saul, thereafter Paul, is confronted by Jesus who appears with a bright light and a question: “Why are you persecuting me?”¹⁷⁰ While I’m quite sure this kind of bright-light-voice-from-on-high-followed-by-blindness encounter is uncommon in the literal sense, I believe we all experience something like this plenty of times throughout our lives in a metaphorical sense. I trust that everyone, at some point, is confronted by Love. And I can imagine that the voice of Love, in one way or another, finds a way to ask each of us the same thing: “Why are you persecuting me?” Conversion is a reckoning, or better

¹⁶⁴ Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*, 221.

¹⁶⁵ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 63.

¹⁶⁶ Emotionally manipulative “come to Jesus or burn in hell” altar calls come to mind.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁷⁰ Acts 9:4, NASB.

yet – a recognition. Something like scales fall from our eyes and a new way of seeing begins to emerge. Conversion is to turn toward that voice of Love, to cease our persecution of Love, to understand our place in Love, and by Grace, to keep turning and turning and turning again, until at last, we are only Love. It is through this turning, this conversion, this consent to Love taking shape within us, that all corruption¹⁷¹ is removed and our capacity to reflect the image is restored.

5. “The Christian life becomes one of ‘incessant transformation into the likeness of God as man stretches out with the divine infinity.’”¹⁷²

This point returns us to the concept of synergy. Again, synergy is contingent on our free will. The Cappadocians understood that we are active participants in our own salvation. Our restoration happens in partnership with God “enabled by Grace.”¹⁷³ I love the following excerpt as an example of synergy, from Richard Wagamese’s book, *Embers*:

MY DEAL WITH CREATOR IS THIS: I’m dragging a sack of old worries, hurt, anger, doubt and fear up a long hill trying to get to the other side, to relief, to healing: CREATOR SAYS, “If you need a hand, I’m here. You pull and I’ll push.”
I SAY, “Really?”
CREATOR SAYS, “I promise that I will always be there to help you. But there’s a catch.”
I SAY, “What’s the catch?”
CREATOR SAYS, “You have to pull first.”¹⁷⁴

The Cappadocians understood salvation to be an ongoing process of transformation through the believers’ participation in the divine nature. Another way this has been said is that the believer is transformed through the imitation of Christ. Often this transformation is painful

¹⁷¹ Corruption is simply a change from the original intent.

¹⁷² Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 66.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 66.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Wagamese, *Embers*, (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 2016), 70.

because as we turn toward Love we allow It to consume/burn away¹⁷⁵ all the stubble and hay¹⁷⁶ until the true self, the treasure, the original image is revealed. We consent to the scraping away of all impurity so that finally we are that which was intended from the beginning. This is the path of kenosis and theosis – this is the parabola. We let go to become. To become we must let go of power, of ego, and of the false self with whom we have been identified, until at last what is revealed (in Christ and in us) is perfect Love. Christ is the original archetype, the original image, and Christ revealed the original intent for humankind. As we gaze upon the Christ we are transformed into this image, the image of God; which is what we really are. The truest self is revealed. This transformation is ongoing and ever unfolding. This Love never ends.¹⁷⁷

6. “Throughout this journey there is an ‘ever-greater participation in God.’”¹⁷⁸

Sunberg writes, “It is only because of the work of Christ, his kenosis and theosis, that humanity can participate in God.”¹⁷⁹ The Cappadocians understanding of this is greatly informed through how they understood the Trinity, which revealed a living and interactive relationship of God with God. The words perichoresis¹⁸⁰ and interpenetration, first used by Nazianzen as a Christological term, help bring deeper meaning to this. Richard Rohr explains these concepts well in a reflection titled, *The Trinity as A Circle Dance*.

The fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers tried to communicate this notion of life as mutual participation by calling the Trinitarian flow a “circle dance” (*perichoresis*) between the three. They were saying that whatever is going on in God is a flow that’s like a dance; and God is not just the dancer, God is the dance itself! The Incarnation is a movement—Jesus comes forth from the Father and the Holy Spirit to take us back with him into this eternal embrace, from which we first came (John 14:3). We

¹⁷⁵ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 66.

¹⁷⁶ See 1 Cor. 3:10-17.

¹⁷⁷ “Nazianzen describes the spiritual journey as one without end. It is a journey in which we continue to climb, as if ascending a mountain in our minds, in which we will finally see God.” Ibid., 69.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 70.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 70.

¹⁸⁰ Translates: “to go around something.” Ibid., 71.

are invited to join in the dance and have participatory knowledge of God through the Trinity.¹⁸¹

As we contemplate this relationship within the Trinity (which is the Image) we can begin to see the reality of our own place in this dance. As this is revealed to us, we return with Christ to the eternal embrace of God. The Cappadocians encouraged the virtue of patience here, which would sustain ones' gaze as the image was revealed.¹⁸² For the Cappadocians "seeing means the same as possessing"¹⁸³ so as we begin to see, we also begin to enter in and become partakers in the divine nature.¹⁸⁴ We join the dance.

It is important to note that "ever-greater participation in God" does not mean that humans become God. Sunberg explains that "while humans are invited to be 'partakers in the divine benefits,' humanity will never become God. This is primarily because of God's *ousia*¹⁸⁵ and an understanding that God in his nature is infinite."¹⁸⁶ She goes on to cite Brooks Otis as naming the "distinctive note in Cappadocian mysticism to be the doctrine of infinite pursuit and infinite progress in the never completed journey to God."¹⁸⁷ If the idea of infinite pursuit and infinite progress in a *never completed* journey is somewhat unsettling to you, please know you are not alone. We humans want to achieve, we want to accomplish, we want to arrive. But this doesn't seem to be the point of Love. Meggan Watterson writes,

¹⁸¹ Fr. Richard Rohr, Daily Meditations, *The Trinity as a Circle Dance*, <https://danutm.wordpress.com/2014/08/20/richard-rohr-the-trinity-as-a-circle-dance/> accessed, December 28th, 2020.

¹⁸² Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 71.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 69, quoting Nazianzen.

¹⁸⁴ 2 Peter 1:4 is a key verse here. "Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature." Ibid., 71.

¹⁸⁵ True being. (essence/substance)

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 72.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 72.

I have this deeply held belief that there's this place I'll reach, this state of mind—meaning heart—where I become too aware, too conscious, to be hurt again or too enlightened to fall down neck deep in the mess of my ego. I keep thinking there will be this “X marks the spot,” this plateau where I arrive, this place where I free myself once and for all from myself.

But there is no there.
The whole point is that it never ends.¹⁸⁸

The whole point is that it never ends. This is Macrina's mindset when she says “There is no limit to the operation of love. Since the beautiful has no limit, so that love should cease with the limit of the beautiful.”¹⁸⁹ And Nazianzen echoes her, writing “Since, then, those who know what is good by nature desire participation in it, and since that good has no limit, the participants desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless.”¹⁹⁰

Conclusion

This chapter is meant to be an overview of the six key points provided by Carla Sunberg in her study of what she calls the “kenosis-theosis parabola.”¹⁹¹ I have identified Sunberg as an interpreter in my work and her expertise in the field of Cappadocian theology has been a tremendous asset for my own research. In this overview I have sought to summarize her material on these six points while also turning to insights from other theologians and inserting thoughts of my own. My goal here has been to deepen the theological concepts that will move us forward and as we continue to explore the path of kenotic love and the soul's transformation. As we have begun to see, this is a path of descent and ascent, it is a path of restoration and return, and it is the path revealed through Christ – the original archetype, both human and divine, the eternal

¹⁸⁸ Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*, 183-184.

¹⁸⁹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On The Soul and the Resurrection*, 81.

¹⁹⁰ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 72. Quoting Nazianzen.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

revelation of God. May our souls begin, even now, to fall into the Limitless Love that lifts us toward Itself.

Chapter V

Saint Macrina Icon of Kenotic Transformation: A Brilliant Mind; A Beautiful Life

*The holy one is not she who is most remote from life,
but she who was always at the heart of it.*¹⁹²

*What we hope for is nothing other than what was at first.*¹⁹³

For as long as I can remember I have been deeply troubled by the doctrine of hell. I imagine most of us are. I grew up in a church context that taught there was both a literal heaven, a place in the sky with streets of gold and gates of pearl; and a literal hell, a place beneath us where many would go to be punished in a lake of fire for all eternity. In my tradition, one might lose their salvation, their entrance into heaven, their golden ticket, so-to-speak, on any given day. I recommitted my little heart to Jesus over and over, and over again. My after-church conversations with friends churned over the possibilities that lay before us all, “What if I sin and then we get into a car accident and I haven’t repented yet? Will I go to heaven or hell?” One could never really know.

While I eventually grew out of these worries in particular the fear simply manifested itself in other ways, or rather, it went underground permeating much of my life. The quest to be “good enough” for God was unending and Grace was a mystery I’d barely glimpsed. Should I encounter it, my deeply internalized shame for needing it at all overshadowed any relief to be had. Never did the depth of my insecurity on the subject rise to the surface with such intensity as it did when I was being put under anesthesia to have an emergency surgery for an ectopic pregnancy that had ruptured. As I lay on the operating table counting down from a hundred I

¹⁹² Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 12.

¹⁹³ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 119.

found myself gripped with that familiar childhood fear, “Will I go to heaven?” At this point in my life it wasn’t that I feared a lake of fire so much as I feared eternal separation from God, who I knew as the source of all love in my life. I wanted to be with God. Panicking, I prayed this prayer: “Please God, please, if I die... please let me go to heaven.” Deeply convinced I was not good enough, I prayed on: *please, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, please, please, please...*

In that moment and in the days that followed I recognized that a somewhat forgotten fear residing deep within me had been revealed. And perhaps for the first time, I felt deeply compassionate toward myself. I saw through the veneer and understood that at my most vulnerable moment, I was deeply unsure of love and belonging. When facing death, my religious upbringing had formed me in such a way that I was bracing myself for rejection. Just a year later I would allow the faith of my childhood to crumble. I believe it was becoming a mother that cracked the foundation. The idea that a loving God would send billions of his so-called children to burn in eternal torment just would not hold up any longer. My heart was too big for that. I looked at the world around me and knew that there *must* be a greater love. So I let most of the building blocks evangelical Christianity had given me fall away. This was terrifying, to say the least. But in the end what I was left with was this: I believe in God. God is Love. Be Love.

These touchstones served me well. I was deep in the land of mothering my three children now, and early motherhood for me, was a minefield of grief unto itself.¹⁹⁴ I needed something to hold onto. Love it was. What I remember bringing to God through that time was my grief and my questions. This was all I had. I felt like my faith was fragile and failing. I had so little of it left. But these days, I look back and see a faith that was active and strong. Shame has been replaced by self compassion and now I imagine that God delighted in this *precise* version of me.

¹⁹⁴ My own mother struggled with addiction most of her life, and all of mine. For this reason, I spent most of my childhood in the care of others – be it family or foster care.

Eventually it would be that very grief and the deepest questions in my heart that led me to the feet of St. Macrina. I was in good company. St. Gregory, beloved bishop of Nyssa, knelt beside me there, taking the lead.

St. Gregory's questions are different than mine, but as soon as I began to read his book titled *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, my soul felt relief. So often biblical texts and theology books come at us as if they are factual – truths to be understood, not questioned. This way of learning theology had never worked for me. I needed a space to object. I needed a God I could confront. In some ways, I needed to throw my stones at Love and encounter a Love that could withstand it – that could withstand *me*.¹⁹⁵ St. Gregory, in his own way, had done the same. Just after the death of their brother, St. Basil, he came to his older sister whose own health was failing and he laid his questions bare. St. Macrina gathers them up – she gathers him up – and reveals a Love that can receive all the grief and all the questions within him; a Love that can endure.

While St. Macrina's theology is woven throughout this thesis as a whole, the following chapter is dedicated to taking in the full scope of her doctrine and her life as a living icon of kenotic transformation. To do so I will begin with an overview of her teachings – the doctrines, ideas, and thoughts that shaped her. Then I will look at her life and consider how her theology becomes a lived reality. My hope is to reveal how St. Macrina models an incarnational path of kenosis and theosis for us all.

St. Macrina: The Genius of Her Doctrine; A Brilliant Mind

¹⁹⁵ Meggan Watterson writes, "It isn't a failure to feel human, to be broken by heartbreak. It's the whole point. The choice we have, the opportunity that's presented to us in those moments of exquisite pain, is to also remember the soul... Try not to curse the pain, or avoid it. Or to feel like a failure because of it. Try not to run from it, and numb it. Try to see it as our chance to reach a love that can withstand it." Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*, 184.

In 327AD St. Macrina was born to a prominent Christian family in Cappadocia. She would be the oldest of nine. We come to learn of the breadth of her theological genius primarily through her younger brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa. St. Gregory writes two books in which Macrina is the lead. *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and *The Life of St. Macrina*. Nothing is written by Macrina herself, an obvious outcome of the disparity between the sexes in this time.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless Gregory calls St. Macrina “The Teacher.”¹⁹⁷ This alone should strike us as profound. It is certainly indicative of the way in which this band of Cappadocian Christians viewed the teachings of the New Testament, particularly relating to love, liberation, and equality, thus shaping their treatment of women.¹⁹⁸ Never is this seen more clearly than in St. Gregory’s *On the Soul*, in which the respected and renowned bishop of Nyssa literally sits at the feet of his elder sister, seeking her wisdom and guidance. Take that in. In the middle of the 4th century, this man of notability willingly places himself under the leadership of a woman. God, how I wish the tradition caught on.¹⁹⁹ Not only is St. Macrina *The Teacher*, illuminating an understanding of the soul and the nature of God that is simply breathtaking, she is also a living example of her theology.

There are different ideas regarding whether the teachings in *On the Soul* came from Macrina herself or if these words were placed in her mouth by her brother to make his own

¹⁹⁶ Women were not taught to read or write.

¹⁹⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 27.

¹⁹⁸ i.e. Nazianzen writes, “This is the intent of God, who for our sake became poor, in order to raise our flesh and restore his image and remake man, that we might all become one in Christ, who was perfectly became in all of us all that He is Himself, that we might no longer be male and female, barbarian, Scythian, slave or freeman, and distinctions of the flesh, but might bear in ourselves only the stamp of God by whom and for whom we were made, so far formed and modelled by Him as to be recognized by it alone.” Carla D. Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 50-51.

¹⁹⁹ “There was once a golden age of early Christianity in which women played a role they were scarcely to enjoy again until the rise of the feminist movement.” Ibid., 14.

point.²⁰⁰ Catherine P. Roth reflects on this in her introduction to this work but she does not insert a definitive stance on the matter. Instead, she simply points out the possibilities, then concludes:

We would like to know how closely the Macrina of the dialogue represents the historical Macrina. It is certainly possible that she was such an educated and reflective woman. If Gregory's own education was acquired chiefly at home, she could have learned as much as he. Unfortunately, we have no other witness to corroborate Gregory's testimony.²⁰¹

The marginalization of women – their wisdom, their voices, and their authority throughout church history is a pattern that has remained consistent. I wish to honor the voice of St. Macrina here.²⁰² She is the elder, the teacher, and the icon in her family, which we will come to see. To that end, I choose to believe the testimony of St. Gregory, and to protect St. Macrina's rightful place as theologian *to* the theologians,²⁰³ just as I would protect Mary Magdalene's place as a disciple of Jesus and an apostle *to* the apostles.²⁰⁴ We must keep women in the story.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ "Gregory similarly makes himself the pupil of his wise older sister, putting the stubborn and foolish questions into his own mouth. Is this merely modesty? Is it an honest depiction of his respect of Macrina's authority? Is it a means of avoiding full responsibility for the conclusions reached? Is it a way for Gregory to portray his own inner conflict, as he struggles to reconcile his Hellenism and his Christianity? In that case it makes sense that Macrina, who led him into an ecclesiastical career, should take the "Christian" part, while Gregory himself, the former teacher of rhetoric, assumes the contrary position." St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 11.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰² Sunberg comes to this conclusion, "It may never be known whether Macrina is the true voice heard in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*; nevertheless, her presence in the text is important and plays the role of correcting Origen's theology... Her voice brings us a Christian understanding of Greek concepts. Many authors scoff at the idea that Macrina can truly be found in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. It is interesting to note that Meredith, the great biographer of Nyssen, never claims one way or another. We are able to affirm that there was much to learn from the words given to her voice and that her presence within Nyssen's writings have expanded Christian understanding of deification." Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 44.

²⁰³ This view of St. Macrina is represented perfectly in an ancient Byzantine icon in which the three Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil of Caesarea, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Gregory of Nazianzus are depicted taking notes beside "St. Macrina The Teacher."

²⁰⁴ John 20:11-18.

²⁰⁵ And I would assert that when we find women removed from the text, we ought to do the work required to put them back in.

When St. Gregory is sinking in grief he turns to his sister and she meets him there. The humanity displayed within this initial encounter is moving from the start.²⁰⁶ St. Macrina's own health is failing but her spiritual fortitude is steadfast. Gregory's questions swell from his grief and he allows those questions the space required to find within his sister and his faith, a sure and certain hope. Throughout the entire dialogue, Macrina exhibits an understanding of spiritual realities that is hard to surpass. Following the classic Socratic style of the time, both teacher and student explore the depths of a most complicated Christian doctrine.²⁰⁷ It becomes clear that Gregory, having just endured the loss of his brother and facing the loss of his beloved sister as well,²⁰⁸ is grappling to understand the possibility of a bodily resurrection and what does or does not become of the soul. His grief is fresh, his mind is troubled, and his questions are honest. Gregory is exhaustive in his critique of these doctrines, as is Macrina in her defense. They are both brilliant ancient thinkers and through them we are given a treasure.

St. Gregory's questions are earnest. What is the soul? How is resurrection possible? Who will be saved? Why is healing so painful?²⁰⁹ The questions explored allow Macrina's magnificent understandings to soar. Her insight into each topic is thorough, I daresay, complete. Pertaining to the essence of the soul, Macrina insists that the soul is that part of us that is the pure likeness of God.²¹⁰ She consistently points to scripture to present her arguments, saying:

²⁰⁶ The dialogue begins, "When Basil, the great saint, had passed over to God from the life of men, he gave the churches a common cause for grief. As our sister and teacher still remained in this life, I went in haste to share with her the sad new concerning our brother. My heart was very sorrowful for grief at so great a loss, and I sought to share my tears with someone who would bear an equal burden of anguish." St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 27.

²⁰⁷ The bodily resurrection and the anatomy of the soul.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 27.

²⁰⁹ Or restoration/purification. Ibid., 83.

²¹⁰ Macrina makes a distinction here between the use of the word "same" and "like" explaining that we are made in the image and likeness of God but we are not God. "Still we do not consider the small and perishable nature equal to the invisible and immortal. We suppose that its essence is intelligible, since it is an image of an intelligible essence, yet we do not say that image is the same as the archetype." Ibid., 45.

For our discussion we shall fix our eyes on the mark of the inspired Scripture, which establishes the law that we should consider nothing peculiar to the soul which is not also proper to the divine nature. For he who said that the soul is a likeness of God has proclaimed that everything which is alien to God is outside the definition of the soul, for the likeness would not be preserved if there were differences.²¹¹

When considering those troubles that bring separation between the soul and God, Macrina asserts that all such attachments, impurities and desires that keep us from Love are brought about through a variety of life's conditions, but they are not our essence, they are not the true self within. She explains,

All of these conditions are around the soul and not of the soul itself. They are like warts growing on the mental part of the soul which seem to be parts of it because they grow on it, but they are not what the soul is in its essence.²¹²

Expounding on the Greek principle that "like is drawn to like" Macrina reveals a key tenet in the Cappadocian's understanding of the doctrine of divinization, stating that "we will be more strongly attracted to God as we become more like him."²¹³ This concept leads the way in terms of modelling Christlikeness and the practice of Christian virtues, a value deeply embedded in the early church.

Macrina's hopeful understanding regarding our ultimate destiny²¹⁴ does not cause her to deny the presence of evil nor the pain one suffers in life, or in death, or in life after death. Rather, she simply affirms that evil is not of us²¹⁵ and that the powerful nature of Love will faithfully

²¹¹ Ibid., 51.

²¹² Ibid., 54.

²¹³ Ibid., 19.

²¹⁴ Union with God.

²¹⁵ "But nothing is outside It, except evil only, which (paradoxical though this may be), has its being in non-being; for there is no other origin of evil but the deprivation of being." Ibid., 79.

pull us out of the wreckage of our lives to draw us toward Itself.²¹⁶ In her mind this is the loving process through which purification takes place. Why is it painful if God is not punishing us?

Macrina sees it this way:

For it is not out of hatred or vengeance for an evil life (in my opinion) that God brings painful conditions on sinners, when He seeks after and draws to Himself whatever has come to birth for His sake; but for a better purpose He draws the soul to Himself, who is the fountain of all blessedness. The painful condition necessarily happens as an incidental consequence to the one who is drawn.²¹⁷

It is painful because it is a scraping away of the evil that has clung to us but is not of us. Macrina continues to shine truth into the matter, not only describing theosis, but the kenotic path that cultivates it.²¹⁸ Continuing her thoughts on purification, she offers a metaphor of mud plastered to a rope being drawn through a small hole. The pain of passing through that space is what frees the rope from the mud. She continues this thought with the following reflection:

Something like this I think we should imagine for the state of the soul. Wrapped up as it is in material and earthly attachments, it struggles and is stretched, as God draws His own to Himself. What is alien to God has to be scraped off forcibly because it has somehow grown onto the soul. This is the cause of the sharp and unbearable pains which the soul must endure.²¹⁹

²¹⁶Macrina gives this poignant example: "If, on the contrary, it [the soul] is fastened to the material condition with the nails of passionate attachment, it will probably experience something like what happens to the bodies which are buried in debris when buildings collapse in earthquakes. Imagine, for example, that these bodies are not only weighed down by fallen debris, but also are pierced by some spits or stakes which are found in the pile. Whatever bodies in this condition are likely to endure when they are dragged out by their relatives from the collapse for funeral rites (they will be all mangled and torn, and will suffer whatever is most painful, as the debris and the nails lacerate them because of the force of those who pull them out)—some such experience I think will happen to the soul, when the divine Power by Its love for mankind draws Its own out from the irrational and material debris. Ibid., 83.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 83-84.

²¹⁸ That of surrender, letting go of attachments/the false self, and following the path of Christ.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 84.

Macrina believes that the process of purification will be unique in its effect and duration on every soul, as every soul has been differently impacted by their particular conditions in life, and death will come for each of us at different points on our journey.²²⁰ Nevertheless, she regards all the pain one suffers through this process to be unto their healing.²²¹

The questions St. Gregory puts forth and the explanations provided by St. Macrina are foundational in the way they relate to our understanding of the gospel. The conclusions Christians come to on these matters will potentially lead us down paths of harm and exclusion, or love and embrace.²²² Macrina's doctrine offers a strong foundation toward a much kinder Christian anthropology,²²³ one that is rooted in the goodness of humanity and in the goodness of God. The two seem to glimpse something rare together. In fact, the voice of Macrina beckons us toward a beautiful theology of universal hope.²²⁴ She insists on a Love that is limitless, a Love that will gently pursue us until finally that Love is *all in all*.²²⁵ Our true nature is eternally bound to The Good. Therefore, we can trust that that which is good and beautiful in us will continually be drawn toward Goodness and Beauty. With true elegance, she teaches:

For the life of the superior nature is love, since the beautiful is in every respect lovable for those who know it, and the Divine knows Itself. But knowledge becomes love, because that which is known is beautiful by nature. Insolent satiety does not touch the truly beautiful. Since satiety does not cut off the attachment of love to the beautiful, the divine life will always operate through love, the divine life which is beautiful by nature and from its nature is lovingly disposed towards the beautiful.²²⁶

²²⁰ "But the difference between a life of virtue and a life of wickedness will appear chiefly in allowing us to participate earlier or later in the blessedness which we hope for. The duration of the healing process will undoubtedly be in proportion with the measure of evil which has entered each person." Ibid., 116.

²²¹ Ibid., 116.

²²² Both in ourselves and in the way we relate to the world/others.

²²³ We are created in the good image of God. This counters the worm-theology of Augustinian thought.

²²⁴ "Apokotastasis" (alternately *apocatastasis* from Greek: ἀποκατάστασις; literally, "restoration" or "return"). The salvation/restoration of all things.

²²⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:28.

²²⁶ Ibid., 81.

St. Macrina: The Incarnation of Her Theology; A Beautiful Life

It is said that just minutes prior to the birth of St. Macrina that her mother, St. Emmelia, was visited by an angel and told to give Macrina the secret name of Thecla. This name is meant to be a revelation of the kind of woman Macrina will grow to be, as Thecla,²²⁷ a disciple and companion of Paul, had become a legend among early Christians.²²⁸ Macrina's public name came from her paternal grandmother Macrina the Elder, who is said to have "suffered bravely for her confession of faith in Christ."²²⁹ Macrina's own mother was a devoted believer and her desire had been to remain a virgin but due to her place in society as an orphaned young girl, it was not safe for her to do so.²³⁰ Macrina desired the same, and after an arranged engagement had fallen through because of the suitors death, Macrina insisted that she must honor this engagement as a marriage, and "determined to remain single for the rest of her life."²³¹

While much attention is given to St. Macrina's virginity which is glorified as a Christian ideal within the early church, Carla Sunberg points out that "all three of the Fathers had experienced excellent examples of earthly marriage in the homes in which they were raised."²³² In fact, the Cappadocians learned a great deal from the marriages they observed, undoubtedly assisting them in their view of "marriage to Christ as the ultimate goal of theosis."²³³ Sunberg goes on to explain:

²²⁷ Saint Thecla was a popular Saint in early Christianity, widely known and praised as a disciple of Paul. Her story can be found in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

²²⁸ "As a result, Nyssen was establishing Macrina as the new Thecla, building upon the legend of the past and providing a new model for virginity, a life of asceticism and complete devotion to God, leading to transformation and ultimately union with God as his bride." Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 137.

²²⁹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*, 22.

²³⁰ Gregory poignantly shines a light on this reality for women, writing: "But since she was bereft of both parents, and because her body was just springing into full bud. . . there was a risk that if she were not by her own choice united with someone, she might against her will suffer some violence because the suitors were maddened by her beauty and were getting ready to carry her off." *Ibid.*, 22.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²³² Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 134.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 134.

Nyssen's purpose in writing *De Vita Macrinae* was to honor his sister but also to represent Macrina as the living model of theosis or deification. He explains his purpose: "Such a life should not be lost sight of in time and, that having raised herself to the highest peak of human virtue through philosophy, she should not be passed over in silence and her life rendered ineffective." ...He presents her entire life as the embodiment of what it meant to be transformed into the image and likeness of God... The ideal presented here is truly an expression of the Cappadocians' understanding of theosis, and Macrina's life simply becomes the incarnational model of the kenosis-theosis parabola.²³⁴

In *The Life of St. Macrina* Gregory pays careful attention to the character of his older sister, especially noting how she came to support her mother and lead the family after their father's death.²³⁵ In his exploration of Macrina's influence he credits his sister for redirecting their brother Basil away from a prideful academic climb in rhetoric toward embracing a life of poverty that was rooted in philosophical ideology, thus contributing to the noble trajectory of St. Basil's life.²³⁶ In addition to this he notes that Macrina saw the family through the tragic death of their brother Naucratus and became a pillar of strength for their mother, writing, "With her firm unflinching spirit she taught her mother's soul to be brave."²³⁷

St. Macrina's leadership in this family is evident throughout the span of her life. She becomes both caregiver and counselor within the family and eventually forges the way for the entire homestead to become a monastery in which all rank is eliminated, and equality embraced. We see Macrina take the gospel seriously as she demonstrates a gritty kind of faith; a faith with its knees on the ground and its hands in the soil of life.²³⁸ Like her Savior, she does not separate herself from the world, she enters it with great love and endless care. Her faith leads her to carry

²³⁴ Ibid., 138-139.

²³⁵ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*, 25-26.

²³⁶ Ibid., 26.

²³⁷ Ibid., 28.

²³⁸ Turning her [mother] away from all she was accustomed to, she led her to her own standard of humility, prepared her to put herself on an equal footing with the community of maidens, so as to share on equal terms with them one table, bed and all the needs of life, with every difference of rank eliminated from their lives. Ibid., 29.

home the sick, plant food for the famine, and share all resources, relinquishing rights of status and privilege. She studies and teaches the holy scriptures as she lovingly leads those who come to her toward the greatest Love of all.²³⁹

Another key component in Gregory's account of Macrina's life is seen in her devotion to virtue. Carla Sunberg offers insight in the following passage,

Acts of virtue were the process in which a human could participate in God. The grace of God drew the individual toward the telos, but the acts practiced along the way revealed God's creative abilities as the virtues were unique to the talents, abilities, and social position of each individual. God's original intent for humanity was full participation in God.²⁴⁰

Macrina models a life devoted to such virtue and in doing so, she basically crushes social norms.²⁴¹ She excels in her role as a teacher, "a virtue traditionally thought as reserved for men."²⁴² There is something unique indeed about the Cappadocian understanding here. In fact, the entire monastic community Macrina eventually establishes at Annesi comes to be known as "the monastery of virtue." The creative cultivation of such virtues led this community "not to a life of solitude but to a life that constantly reached out beyond the walls of their community."²⁴³

St. Macrina provides a picture par excellence of kenotic love. It is this kind of cruciform love that transforms a person into the image of Christ. Sunberg describes Macrina's life as one of preparation for her bridegroom, writing that "She follows the example of Christ, pouring herself out to him in a lifelong commitment to humble service while being transformed into his image

²³⁹ They were those who had been left prostrate along the roadways at the time of the famine; and she had picked them up, nursed them, brought back to health and guided them personally to the pure, uncorrupted life. Ibid., 44.

²⁴⁰ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 141.

²⁴¹ "It is in Nyssens presentation in Macrina's development as a teacher that he again reveals the eschatological hope found in their theology of deification and the fact that social barriers were already being destroyed within the kingdom of God." Ibid., 141.

²⁴² Ibid., 141.

²⁴³ Ibid., 143.

here on earth.”²⁴⁴ It is this “pouring out” precisely that exemplifies true self-giving²⁴⁵ love.²⁴⁶ Through her we witness the true “goal of philosophy”²⁴⁷ take shape, as we see “the natural unceasing progression of the whole self into true loving union with God”²⁴⁸ emerge, not as mere philosophy, but as a lived reality.²⁴⁹ At the end of her life, Gregory reveals a deified Macrina who even exhibits “Christlike abilities”²⁵⁰ such as miracles, of which there were many.²⁵¹ As Gregory observes his sister’s transition from this life into the next, he describes her as “making manifest to those then present, that pure, divine love of the unseen bridegroom, which she had nourished secretly in the most intimate depths of her soul.”²⁵²

Conclusion

I return to the questions that first brought me to the feet of Macrina often. Most of those questions were rooted in what I would describe as both a longing and a knowing within me. My heart would not conform to the teachings I was given, though I tried to make it. Something deep within me insisted: *God must be better than this*. Through Macrina, I have discovered that the God I had always hoped for is not an illusion. In fact, I believe the source of this hope *is* the Divine within me, drawing me unto Itself. With both theological precision and true character,²⁵³

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 140.

²⁴⁵ Kenotic.

²⁴⁶ “This attitude of a servant, however, did not mean oppression or repression. Rather, every point of service became a moment of transformation, on in which to share and touch Christ, her future bridegroom.” Ibid., 140.

²⁴⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*, 17.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 17.

²⁴⁹ Recalling her demeanor upon approaching death, Gregory writes, “For this reason she seemed to me to be making manifest to those then present that pure, divine love of the unseen bridegroom, which she had nourished secretly in the most intimate depths of her soul. . .” Ibid., 40.

²⁵⁰ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 143.

²⁵¹ I.e. healing, multiplication of grain, prophecy, the casting out of demons. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*, 54.

²⁵² Ibid., 40.

²⁵³ Which consists in being our true self.

Macrina returns us to the Love that formed us in the beginning and guides us toward the Love that brings us home. Nearing the end of her dialogue with St. Gregory, she concludes:

God intends to set before everyone the participation of the good things in Him, which the Scripture says eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor thought attained. This is nothing else, according to my judgement, but to be in God Himself; for the good which is beyond hearing, sight, and heart would be that very thing which surpasses everything.²⁵⁴

The truth is, I am often like Gregory – somewhat despairing and full of fear. But Macrina’s faith has graciously soothed the cries of my own heart and her theology has given me wings.²⁵⁵ I join her in this hope: that God *will be* all and all in me, “a house, a garment, nourishment, drink,”²⁵⁶ and if in me, then also in all humanity.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 116.

²⁵⁵ A way out of harmful theology and an awakened longing to be a willing participant in my own transformation.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 118.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 63-64.

Chapter VI

Application: The Intersection of Encounter and Incarnational Faith

*It is not only human nature that is 'saved' by the divine mercy, but above all the human person. The object of salvation is that which is unique, irreplaceable, incommunicable – that which is myself alone. This true inner self must be drawn up like a jewel from the bottom of the sea. . .*²⁵⁸

*The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self, and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls.*²⁵⁹

The driving force of this thesis has been to deepen an understanding of kenotic love and to demonstrate how one's encounter with this Love leads to personal transformation.²⁶⁰ To do this I have looked closely at the life and teachings of St. Macrina, while also exploring the philosophies and theologies of early church mothers and fathers. Along the way certain core doctrines and/or theological concepts have emerged as central components to the development of my application. These include (but are not limited to) the following: kenosis, kenotic love, theosis, hypostasis/hypostatic union, Imago Dei, purification/purgation, Grace²⁶¹ and synergy. These teachings have become the building blocks for my argument; an argument that stands on the shoulders of St. Macrina, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, St. Irenaeus, St. Athanasius, St. Gregory Palamas and many others who worked so faithfully to form the foundation of Christian orthodoxy. With deep humility I want to say that the assertions now put forth seek to follow the tradition of these holy mothers and fathers while breaking fresh ground within the context of my own life and place in the world.

²⁵⁸ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 38.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 25.

²⁶⁰ Or theosis.

²⁶¹ The uncreated energies of God/the Holy Spirit.

Encountering Kenotic Love: Surrender and Salvation of the True Self

To begin, let's return to St. Macrina's teaching on the soul. In her dialogue with St. Gregory she insists again and again that the soul is drawn towards God "as if by a rope."²⁶² To expound on that image she explains that the true nature of the soul is the image and likeness of God, therefore the soul will always be attracted to God – to the Beautiful and the Good. "The Divine knows Itself."²⁶³ When speaking of the *true* self, this is the self of which we speak. The true self originates in the life of the Divine. The true self is the soul, the diamond, the unmarred image of God in each of us – diverse, unique, beautiful, and good.

But often this is not the self we identify with. Many spiritual teachers bridging different traditions instruct us to consider the ego as the false self. Meggan Watterson engages kenotic theology when speaking of the ego in her book, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*. She explains that the act of emptying is the kenotic path of "releasing the ego's idea, or will, and allowing the divine will to act through us."²⁶⁴ Just as Christ emptied himself of all power and privilege (of ego) through his incarnation, life, and death, we too must do the same. When we let go of the ego the true self emerges from within us. This emptying becomes our salvation.²⁶⁵ Mary 9:2-6 gives a powerful picture of the ego's relationship with the soul. In this passage, the ego is named "Desire."

And Desire said, "I did not see you go down, yet now I see you go up. So why do you lie since you belong to me?" The soul answered, "I saw you. You did not see me nor did you know me. You mistook the garment I wore for my true self. And you did not recognize me."²⁶⁶

²⁶² St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On The Soul and the Resurrection*, 78.

²⁶³ Ibid., 77.

²⁶⁴ Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*, 114.

²⁶⁵ This salvation is twofold: with the ego released the true self can now encounter Love, after which it will emerge, ready to live – to be embodied in the world through us. This is incarnation.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 113.

In her exegesis of this passage, Watterson writes:

Egoic desire, or craving, thinks that the soul “belongs” to it. And because of this, the ego cannot recognize the soul. It has always haunted me when the soul says, “I saw you. You did not see me.” The soul can see the ego. But the ego can’t recognize the soul: “You mistook the garment I wore for my true self. And you did not recognize me.” The soul is saying here to the ego’s desire, I am not this body, not essentially. I am what exists before the body and after. But if you are only focusing on the body, on the egoic garment I am wearing as a soul, you will not recognize me.²⁶⁷

The true self is always there, abiding deep within us, even when the ego has convinced us it isn’t real or doesn’t exist. The ego cannot see the soul, but the soul can see the ego and *by Grace* pass through it. In Mary’s gospel there are seven “demons” that represent the ego. These are also called powers.²⁶⁸ Watterson explains that these powers “test the soul and try to bind the soul to the ego.” The way through is “simply to let go of all attachments, all judgements we might have. This immediately frees the soul. (For that moment.)”²⁶⁹ I love that Watterson adds “for that moment” in parentheses here. It strikes me as deep experiential wisdom. Another word we could use to describe this act of letting go is *surrender*. Surrender is not something we do just once. Surrender is a path we walk, a choice we make over and over again to lay down our powers²⁷⁰ and to give ourselves instead to the highest Power of all – which is Love.

I believe the true essence of the soul is always shining through us in some capacity. We certainly see it sparkle in the eyes of an infant, and in the wonder of a toddler utterly captivated by the path of an ant, and in the joyous laughter of kindergarteners everywhere who seem to find nearly everything hilarious. But all along the way the true self is picking up cues from the world,

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 114.

²⁶⁸ The demons/powers in Mary’s gospel as translated by Meggan Watterson are darkness, craving, ignorance, craving for death, enslavement to the physical body, the false peace of the flesh and the compulsion of rage.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 115.

²⁷⁰ Please not the difference between laying down our “powers” (as in the false power of the ego) and laying down our “power.” Our true power comes through our surrender to Love.

and depending on what those cues are and how safe the world is for the person, we will see a false self begin to form. This false self is necessary. Bill Plotkin calls it our “survival dance”²⁷¹ which I find deeply relatable. Father Richard Rohr has written extensively on this topic. He speaks of the false self or “small self”²⁷² as a launching pad, explaining,

...your false self is *not* bad or inherently deceitful. Your false self is actually quite good and necessary as far as it goes. It just does not go far enough, and it often poses and thus substitutes for the real thing. That is its only problem, and that is why we call it “false.” The false self is bogus more than bad; it pretends to be more than it is. Various false selves (temporary costumes) are necessary to get us all started, but they show their limitations when they stay around too long. If people keep growing, their various false selves usually die in exposure to greater light. That is, if they ever let greater light get in; many do not.²⁷³

While St. Macrina does not use this term specifically, she is speaking a similar language when teaching St. Gregory about attachments that seem to grow onto the soul. These attachments are also referred to as irrational impulses, emotions or desires that pull us toward a false beauty,²⁷⁴ a pseudo-love if you will. This experience is simply unavoidable. It is the human condition. *The image is tarnished because of the fall.*²⁷⁵ But it is important to remember that these attachments, however deceptive they may be, are not the soul. They grow around the soul and must be exposed by a greater Light so the soul can attach itself instead to true Beauty – to perfect²⁷⁶ Love. We are not the attachments that plague us, but we all must pass through a process of purgation to be free.²⁷⁷

²⁷¹ Bill Plotkin, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche* (New World Library: 2003), 84, as cited in Fr. Richard Rohr’s essay, “What is the False Self” <https://cac.org/what-is-the-false-self-2017-08-07/> accessed, February 19, 2021.

²⁷² Fr. Richard Rohr, “What is the False Self” <https://cac.org/what-is-the-false-self-2017-08-07/> accessed, February 19, 2021.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 78.

²⁷⁵ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 57.

²⁷⁶ Or complete/whole.

²⁷⁷ Classical and mystical Christianity teaches a spiritual path of purgation, illumination and union.

So how do we do it? To begin, I suppose *we* do not. Instead, *we* surrender. We follow the rule of kenosis – we empty out. While the attachments that grow in and around us are different for everyone, the path out is the same. On this path we must surrender our own self-will, our ego, whatever it is we find ourselves clinging to. We let go of the controlling nature that convinces us we can make it on our own, that we can be our own salvation. We cannot. Salvation *is* within us. The kingdom of heaven *is* within us. Christ *is* within us. But we do not ascend to God, or to salvation, through our egoic selves. Rather, we descend deeper into the true self. We remove our robes of glory, just as Christ did, and become instead a naked, vulnerable baby – a real human being in the arms of Love. The power of kenotic love turns the world’s definition of power upside down. Kenotic love is God becoming human. Kenotic love is defined as self-giving, self-emptying, co-suffering love, and it is perfectly demonstrated through the life and death of Jesus Christ.²⁷⁸ This is the Love we surrender to. I think surrendering to this Love is a lot like sinking. It is to let go of the tools of the ego that keep us up above the surface of the water, (up above ourselves) and to allow ourselves to go under; to allow ourselves to be loved *sans* striving. This is the place that true union occurs.

Thomas Merton gives a beautiful description of a kenotic path that results in this kind of union and true self-revelation in the following excerpt:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ “What if Jesus’ humility, meekness and servant heart were never a departure from God’s glory and power, but actually *define* and *demonstrate* it? ...What if kenosis –self-emptying power, self-giving love and radical servant-hood– expresses the very nature of God!” Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God, A More Beautiful Gospel*, 100.

²⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

While union with Love is an ongoing journey, ontologically speaking, we are already one.

Merton highlights this reality. We are united.²⁸⁰ Even when we are not attuned to the truth of our existence, our souls belong to God. God is our true identity. God is our home.

At the same time, the journey further into God has no end point. We do not arrive but we are always arriving. And we can trust that whatever it is Love asks us to surrender along the way will always be motivated by Love's desire to show us even more Love. Macrina teaches us that "there is no limit to the operation of love, since the beautiful has no limit, so that love should cease with the limit of the beautiful."²⁸¹ What that means to me is that while we can and do experience union the increase of that union will never cease, because Love has no limit. The soul and God are in an eternal relationship – one in which there is always more to come.²⁸²

Incarnational Faith: When Love Becomes Love

One way to follow God's example as demonstrated through the incarnation is to empty ourselves of the world's definition of us and to allow our true identity to be revealed. This is what Christ did. In The Emptying²⁸³ God took off the false-god, the separate, detached god who was deemed too holy for humanity and revealed God's true nature – kenotic, self-giving, self-emptying, co-suffering Love. The Christ Hymn of Philippians 2 begins with these words: "Have this mind be also in you."²⁸⁴ It is a beautiful invitation that beckons us to follow the same path – to believe in our own belovedness so that we can become it, not just for ourselves but also for

²⁸⁰ Alanis Morissette's song *Ablaze* captures this truth beautifully with the opening lyrics, "First thing that you'll notice is some separation from each other. Yes, it's a lie, we've been believing since time immemorial." Alanis Morissette. 2020. "Ablaze." Track 2 on *Such Pretty Forks in the Road*. Epiphany Music.

²⁸¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 81.

²⁸² Carla Sunberg brings further insight into the Cappadocian understanding of this, writing: "Therefore, the life of holiness of theosis has no end. The more one knows God, the more one realizes that they do not know God, for he is infinite." Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 149.

²⁸³ Cyril of Alexandria, *That Christ is One*.

²⁸⁴ Philippians 2:5.

God and for the life of the world. If we look to St. Macrina's life as an example of this, we watch her make clear connections between kenosis, deification, and public engagement/responsibility. This is no less true today.²⁸⁵ In the midst of a society that is motivated by self-gain, the assertion of power and a perpetual climb toward ego-centered success, we are urged to follow the kenotic path of Christ, "Who, *being* God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself...becoming human."²⁸⁶

When we take off the heavy, ill-fitting garments we have found ourselves in, we finally get to see and experience the person God intended for us to be. This is the point of salvation and it is what I mean by incarnational faith. This kind of embodied faith is the fruit of a soul that has come to know it is deeply loved. Love, experienced in the deepest part of the soul, is what gives us the courage required to embrace the breadth of our humanity. Meggan Watterson explains that "in the original Aramaic of Jesus and his followers, there was no word for salvation."²⁸⁷ She goes on to quote Cynthia Bourgeault who offers this insight: "Salvation was understood as a bestowal of life, and to be saved was 'to be made alive.'"²⁸⁸ St. Irenaeus exemplifies this understanding in his well-known statement, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."²⁸⁹

While some might imagine that this kind of self-love and acceptance is an indication of pride, I would suggest that the opposite is true. I believe that this path is marked by profound humility, integrity, and self-discovery. Thomas Merton beautifully weaves these concepts together in the following passage:

²⁸⁵ I apply this concept throughout my application, critical analysis, and conclusion in ways Macrina may not have predicted. Specifically, I connect the kenotic path of deification with social justice work engaging sexual and gender minorities (2SLGBTQIA+), feminism, and racism.

²⁸⁶ Philippians 2:6.

²⁸⁷ Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*, 79.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 79. Citing Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*.

²⁸⁹ St. Irenaeus of Lyons.

Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed at being themselves. They never get around to being the particular poet or the particular monk they are intended to be by God. They never become the man or the artist who is called for by all the circumstances of their individual lives.

They waste their years in vain efforts to be some other poet, some other saint. For many absurd reasons, they are convinced that they are obliged to become somebody else who died two hundred years ago and who lived in circumstances utterly alien to their own...

In great saints you find that perfect humility and perfect integrity coincide. The two turn out to be practically the same thing... humility consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God, and since no two people are alike, if you have the humility to be yourself you will not be like anyone else in the whole universe.²⁹⁰

I believe that this is the heart of the matter: *We are the image of God God wants to see*. Every human life is a new expression of Love, a one-of-a-kind reflection of the Divine. When we humbly surrender to this Love within us, we find that the soul begins to rise – we are lifted up, we are transfigured, we come alive.

If the nature of Love is to give itself, then to give our true self to the world is the most God-like thing we can do. For this reason, I think it is critical to understand that self-giving love is not self-deprivation, in fact these are two opposing forces. To deny myself²⁹¹ is to oppress myself and if I oppress myself, I cannot give myself to God or to anybody else. This is one reason why I believe it is a grave abomination that the church has marginalized and rejected the beloved 2SLGBTQIA+ community. When we insist that someone is not their true self, when we enforce doctrine and policies that take away ones right to exist as they are, we are not just rejecting them, (which is bad enough) we are *also* rejecting the image of God they are meant to be. We are rejecting Christ. Merton writes, “If Christ became man it is because he wanted to be

²⁹⁰ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 98-99.

²⁹¹ Not in the sense of denying myself wealth in order to share resources, or to deny myself overconsumption, or revenge, etc. But to deny my true identity, my existence, the person I am created to be.

any man²⁹² and every man. If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ.”²⁹³

It is one thing to imagine God giving Godself to the world – through Creation, through Christ, through the Holy Spirit even. But how do we come to participate with God in this way? I think this is the great invitation of our lives. Allegorically speaking, we are all Mary. An angel arrives to all of us, announcing us chosen and favored to carry Christ – to carry Love. This Love is not just for ourselves’ but like an embryo it ignites and multiplies; it grows, taking on a shape that expands us beyond the borders our body knew before. This occurs through a holy fusion, a hypostatic union of our life with the life of God. The Love that is birthed through us could not exist without us. For some of us accepting this annunciation is the hardest part. It is easier to believe we are unworthy. But here, we have a choice. We *can* willingly consent to the conception of Christ in us. We can ask for the Grace to believe in our belovedness. We can surrender to Love, allowing it to grow in us and be birthed through us, however it will. This is Love becoming Love. This is the intersection of encounter and incarnational faith.

Conclusion

While I think that kenotic love is counter-cultural, I don’t think it’s counter-intuitive. What I mean is that I believe it is within our nature to operate in this way. *We are made in the image of God and we are a mirror reflecting that image.*²⁹⁴ We see examples of this kind of love all around us. The earth freely gives itself to us, often in ways we fail to recognize. Contemplation invites us to consider the smallest acts of Love, and in doing this we come to see

²⁹² Merton is consistent in his exclusive use of the male gender in his writing. It is frustrating but understandable when considering that he is a monk, writing primarily to/for his community of brothers.

²⁹³ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 296.

²⁹⁴ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*. 52.

that they are not small at all. Consider, as Christ said, a lily.²⁹⁵ It does not labor or strive; it simply exists. In so doing, it gives everything it is: all its beauty in bloom, all its pollen in procreation, and all its seed in sacrifice. It descends. It ascends. It dies to rise again. The lily is surrendered; it gives its life. This is kenotic love. This is self-giving, self-emptying, sacrificial love. It is the most natural way to be if we can yield to it. We are made for this. If you look for it, I think you can spot kenotic love anywhere.

But there is no denying the fall. The world has become a place that teaches us to hoard, to hide and to hold onto our resources tightly, reserving everything for ourselves and for our own. We want to possess, to own, to control. Alanis Morissette provides a vivid description of this in her song *Ablaze*, writing, “One became two, and then everyone was out for themselves. Everyone was pitted against each other conflict ruled the realm. All our devotions and temperaments are pulled from different wells. We seem to easily forget we are born of the same cells.”²⁹⁶ The tendency to assert power through self-defensiveness is the opposite of kenotic love. While the desire, when threatened, makes sense, it will never lead to life – to salvation. Not only do we harm others, we harm ourselves too. We become disconnected, isolated, and afraid – both the oppressor and the oppressed.

The message of Christ counters all of this and it is why we look to Jesus, again and again, to show us what Love really is. The message is one of union: God is with us, in us and for us. God is *that* good. One might wonder if this path is to be trusted. After all, for Jesus it ended in death. Sadly, this is true. The world's response to kenotic love can be devastating. But Jesus provides a picture of protest par excellence. With his own body he shows us that violence will never win. God's response to our oppressive penal system is to become the One we kill, but

²⁹⁵ Matthew 6:25-34, NIV.

²⁹⁶ Alanis Morissette. 2020. “Ablaze.” Track 2 on *Such Pretty Forks in the Road*. Epiphany Music.

rather than recognizing this, we call God the killer. The death of Christ is not a required atonement for our sin but an eternal statement revealing a non-violent God of perfect kenotic Love who suffers *with* us. I reject the punitive gospel that positions God as the angry father who had to kill his son to satisfy his own wrath.²⁹⁷ That is not Love. That is not Good. That is not Beautiful. That is not God. Rather, I believe that God *is* Christ. Christ *is* God *embodied*. God is the one on the cross. Furthermore, God is on *every* cross.²⁹⁸ The cross is a demonstration of divine solidarity with humanity, particularly among the marginalized and oppressed. God's solidarity remains with us even in our blindness, *especially* in our blindness. Merton writes, "The mask each man wears may well be a disguise not only for that man's inner self but for God, wandering as a pilgrim and exile in His own creation."²⁹⁹ We may have forgotten the truth of our being, but God does not forget. God knows us. We are God's and God's presence abides with us. Love will never leave us nor forsake us. Love did not die on the cross. Love descended into death to reveal the depths of Love. Love lived. Love conquered. Love won. This is the Love that created us. This is the Love that brings us to life. This is the Love that draws us home. To encounter this Love is to be transformed.

²⁹⁷ Penal substitutionary atonement theory.

²⁹⁸ James H. Cone brings this reality to (devastating) life in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, in which he accurately points to the cross of Golgotha as a foreshadow of North America's lynching tree. He writes, "Unfortunately, during the course of 2,000 years of Christian history, this symbol of salvation has been detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings—those whom Ignacio Ellacuría, the Salvadoran martyr, called "the crucified peoples of history." The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians wear around their necks. Rather than reminding us of the "cost of discipleship," it has become a form of "cheap grace," an easy way to salvation that doesn't force us to confront the power of Christ's message and mission. Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a "recrucified" black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy." James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011).

²⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 296.

Chapter VII

Critical Analysis: Considering Distance and Feminist Concerns

*That which we cannot speak of is the one thing about whom and to whom we must never stop speaking.*³⁰⁰

*We are like an infant in the arms of God, unable to grasp but being transformed by the grasp.*³⁰¹

In this thesis I have worked to examine the theological origins of kenosis and theosis in order to demonstrate how these teachings lead us into a transformational path toward (re)union with Love. To do this I have looked closely at the life and teachings of St. Macrina while also exploring the ancient understandings of early church mothers and fathers alongside contemporary theologians. Through this process, I recognize that there are times in which words and/or phrases used become problematic. At the outset I identified feminist hermeneutical principles to act as a pillar in this work. In this chapter I will turn a critical eye on some of the words and word associations I have relied upon in order to clarify what I do and don't mean/intend. In a similar vein, I wish to recognize that the conclusions I come to in this thesis may not be the conclusions the theologians I have loved and studied would reach.

The Challenge of Distance

The life and teachings of St. Macrina have become a strong undercurrent in the way I approach theology. Her unshaking conviction that God is that which is Beautiful and Good –that God is Love– and that any characteristic that lands outside of this is not God has given me the language I needed to fully reject the harmful teachings/theology of my youth. That said, I recognize that my context is different than hers. I am living *sixteen hundred years* after her. I find this comforting and challenging all at once. The comfort I find is in how her words draw me

³⁰⁰ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), xiv.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

in, as if she is reaching through the centuries to speak directly to me. I feel an undeniable connection to her. She is a woman who loves Jesus and seeks to follow the God of her heart. I am too. She is surrounded by male theologians. I am too. She is doing the hard work of breaking out of a patriarchal society. I am too. These similarities are significant to me. They disrupt the challenge of distance in a way that allows me to (metaphorically) hold Macrina's hand, which I do. The gratitude that swells within me is deep and true. Macrina's voice has provided me with theological ideas that will continue to anchor and guide my life; and her life has animated the thick texts of church history that had failed to move me before. She put color on the pages and I *love* her for it.

But Macrina is also a woman of her time. There are practices within this era of Christianity that I would not condone now. In their pursuit of Christian virtue, the Cappadocians practiced a kind of asceticism that, in my opinion, contrasts the loving, beautiful and non-violent God revealed in Christ. A common but moderate example of this is the practice of wearing a hairshirt, a very uncomfortable piece of clothing that was lined with coarse hair on the inside. Many early monastics adopted this practice as a way of identifying with the suffering of Christ. Personally, I think this is a glorification of pain, and in many cases it opened the door to even more troubling acts of self-harm, acts that the early church would have called "mortification of the flesh."

A biblical metric we can use to look at this practice critically is to examine the fruit.³⁰² A more precise question one can ask as a tool for discernment is "was it redemptive?" In some cases these practices clearly brought about a type of freedom from earthly concerns that allowed the individual/community to focus on the cultivation of spiritual virtues, both in themselves and

³⁰² Matthew 7:17-18.

in service to the world around them. For example, a vow of poverty often resulted in financial liberation from the obligations that come with maintaining personal properties and possessions, making it possible to devote ones' whole life to God and a chosen community. Oftentimes this resulted in the Christian community becoming a primary source of care for the wider community, with offerings of food, medical care, spiritual comfort and so on. I think this is something that could be applied by believers today with measured success.³⁰³ By that I mean it could/would be redemptive, producing good fruit.

In the case of St. Macrina, she turned her family homestead into a monastery, which included the elimination of rank, making servants who had worked in the home equals. This cultivated a community of equality, mutuality, and love. They went on to share their resources and serve the wider community around them. The fruit was good indeed. Did Macrina sacrifice something? Yes. Was it in step with the spirit of Jesus to do so? Yes. She was born into a life of privilege and it was certainly her devotion to Christ that compelled her to reject that kind of privilege just as he had, which not only brought liberation and equality to the servants in her home, but to Macrina as well. I have no objections with this expression of asceticism. It is a beautiful form of kenotic love and it is precisely what Christ modelled. However, the practice of personal penances³⁰⁴ and more extreme forms of self-denial cause great concern. Anything that provokes us to hurt ourselves to appease God does not align for me. I just don't believe God delights in this. Furthermore, the fruit is not good. For example, many saints throughout church history are believed to have died of starvation that came about through such forms of self-denial.

³⁰³ Of course, this is still a common practice in many traditions, i.e., convent and monastery settings. And there are plenty of contemporary (unconventional) expressions of this seen in community/communal living settings today.

³⁰⁴ Penance is defined as "voluntary self-punishment inflicted as an outward expression of repentance for having done wrong." The Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. "penance", accessed March 13, 2021.

They called it fasting. Today, we would call it anorexia. Malnutrition that leads to premature death as a result of ones' devotion to God is not redemptive; it is bad fruit.

While St. Macrina is my primary source for her theologies and philosophies related to the nature of God, the soul, purification/healing, and the relationship between kenosis and theosis, I do not find much emphasis on the concept of self-love in her words, which is one of the most important outcomes of this thesis to me. That said, the absence of this is not a great concern for me, it is just important to note. I do not know if Macrina would agree with the idea of self-giving love as I have come to define it. The absence of attention on ones-self in this era of Christianity is familiar to me. It is woven throughout two thousand years of church history and it is a message I encountered frequently in my Christian upbringing. This message was one of self-denial, in which all emphasis was taken away from the self to give everything, everything, *everything* in service to God. Verses like "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."³⁰⁵ were often used to emphasize this message.³⁰⁶ The internalized outcome of this was a kind of detachment from ones' own desire or sense of self. 'I' am not supposed to matter. 'I' no longer live. I think this form of Christianity is harmful because it teaches us to suppress our real human needs/wants, which leads to a whole host of problems. Once again, the fruits not good. We become detached from our bodies – from our humanity. The goal is not detachment³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ Galatians 2:20, NIV.

³⁰⁶ If you take the time to read the full text, the story Paul is telling here advocates for the full inclusion of all people (the Gentiles) into the body of Christ. Paul is calling out the hypocrisy within the first century Jewish believers who were separating themselves from the Gentile believers as if they were saved by the law and not by the ministry of Christ. "I am crucified with Christ" in this context was simply to say that the body/law/circumcision is not what saves us. Paul goes onto say, "the life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I do not set aside the grace of God." Essentially, the body is not our salvation and to use the body/law as a metric of morality/holiness is to deny the grace of God.

³⁰⁷ While detachment from the ego/false self is the path toward union, we cannot detach from ourselves/our bodies and attach ourselves to God. We must exist in truth, in the fullness of who we are, in order to experience union with Love.

but union/unification with Love. To experience union in the truest sense we first need to exist in the body. We must become fully human to become fully divine.³⁰⁸

And yet, when we transpose the concept of kenotic *letting go* to our spiritual formation, we do recognize that cruciform faith calls us to ‘*let go*’ or ‘*die to*.’ For example, we can say that kenosis and theosis share a letting go of scrupulosity/perfectionism, or a dying to our ego/fear centered need to perform. So, the challenge is twofold. First, we must *carefully* discern what it is we are being asked to ‘die to’ and what we are not. Second, we must ask the question: through what means? Responding to this challenge, Brad Jersak writes:

Post-modern ideology and the practice of radical autonomy can tempt us to a counterfeit kenosis/theosis. Mistaking kenosis/theosis for autonomous pop-self-actualization³⁰⁹ can be an egoistic path straight back into self-will. Or it can be a dark descent into alienation and self-rejection. These missteps have drastic real-life implications. Discerning faux-kenosis/theosis is a particular challenge for spiritual directors and requires great sensitivity. In that sense, hearing the voice of a sage from another era can be an advantage. How might Macrina yet be of service? For her, the *letting go* or *dying to* is specific to unhealthy attachments that hinder our ascent as image-bearers into cruciform Love. She might ask simply, what is the rubble under which you're buried?³¹⁰ What are the splinters that still need removal? Or, more directly, *what drives you to turn from Love, and what calls you to turn toward Love*, however cross-like? Perhaps we can employ Macrina's imagery as contemplative probes with which to distinguish cruciform kenosis and its counterfeits.³¹¹

³⁰⁸ This is the path: descent then ascent. Kenosis then theosis.

³⁰⁹ A form of actualization that is void of the tenets of kenosis because it lacks humility/surrender, becoming more like a climb toward personal success, and oftentimes failing to remain rooted in compassion (co-suffering love) and connected to community and the needs of others.

³¹⁰ Referring again to Macrina's metaphor describing the pain of purification, which compares our progress towards God to be hindered by the “nails of passionate attachment.” In which case, we are like the “bodies which are buried by debris when buildings collapse in an earthquake.” The process of rescuing the bodies trapped beneath the rubble causes pain. Macrina explains, ‘some such experience I think will happen to the soul, when the divine Power by Its love for mankind draws Its own out from the irrational and material debris.’ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 83.

³¹¹ Brad Jersak, *Personal Correspondence*, March 23, 2021.

While I recognize that St. Macrina does not emphasize self-love and acceptance in the ways that I do, it is ultimately her vision of our innate goodness and God's limitless love for us that energizes the conclusions I've reached in my application. Primarily, this is seen in my assertion that encountering kenotic Love allows us to love and accept who we are as much as God does. Perhaps Macrina would agree. I do not know. The texts we are given representing her life certainly do not provide us with the full scope of her theology. She is speaking of what comes *after* this life while living a life that is undeniably beautiful and good, clearly reflecting the beautiful and good image she believed us all to be. As much as Macrina is a woman of her time, I am a woman of mine. My outcomes are undeniably shaped by my own context and biases. Religiosity that promoted moralistic metrics for holiness while emphasizing human depravity and self-denial did not produce good fruit in my life. Rather, this resulted in crippling shame that kept me locked in fear and isolated from myself and others. My work has been to encounter and surrender to a Love that can overcome that shame and fear; a Love that insists *only* that I yield to my own goodness and beauty, allowing myself to be seen and loved.

Feminism and Kenosis

When I decided to write a thesis on kenotic love there was something deeply unsettling about it for me at the start. Pretty much *every* word used to describe kenosis and kenotic theology engages triggering language for women.³¹² Kenotic love is defined as self-giving, self-emptying, co-suffering, sacrificial love. Need I say more? While I have worked to define these words through a lens of liberation and feminist theology, I have not explicitly named the potential problems the words bring with them. That is what I will do now.³¹³

³¹² And other marginalized/oppressed peoples.

³¹³ The truth is, I could not have given myself to this work without honestly confronting the objections to such language within me.

To begin, I would seek to untangle the words *self-giving* and *selflessness*.³¹⁴ This is an important distinction for women, especially within Christianity where they have not only faced the social constraints of a patriarchal society but have also been spiritually manipulated to believe they must sacrifice themselves for their homes, their families, and their communities as a required form of devotion to God. In her book, *Sexism and God Talk*, Rosemary Radford Ruether describes this complication, particularly among women from conservative Christian traditions, writing:

One of the most difficult barriers to feminist consciousness is the identification of sin with anger and pride, and virtue with humility and self-abnegation. Although this doctrine of sin and virtue supposedly is for “all Christians” it becomes, for women, an ideology that reinforces female subjugation and lack of self-esteem. Women become “Christlike” by having no self of their own. They become the “suffering servants” by accepting male abuse and exploitation. Women are made to feel profoundly guilty and diffident about even the smallest self-affirmation. They fear the beginning steps of asking who they are and what they want to do, rather than “putting others first.”³¹⁵

In my mind *self-giving* love begins with what Ruether calls “rebirth to authentic selfhood”³¹⁶ and it flies in the face of this form of piety that teaches us to perform/pretend in order to please and appease people in power. A woman with the audacity to be her authentic self and to give *herself* upsets the system of hierarchy, just as Christ did. Self-giving love is seen in one who turns away from the world's expectations of what they are supposed to be and consents to the creation of who they are. Ruether explains that, “*Metanoia* for women involves a turning around in which they literally discover themselves as persons, as centers of being upon which they can stand and build

³¹⁴ While there is a form of selflessness that is often engaged by contemplative writers (such as Thomas Merton, a primary source in my work) and there are echoes of their ideas in this thesis, my application centers on discovering the true self, which must be separated from denying the self.

³¹⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, *Toward a Feminist Theology*, 185-186.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

their own identity.”³¹⁷ In this context self-giving love is not to deny the self but to *discover* and *gift* it, rather than clinging to the costume –the false image– while suppressing and oppressing the true image within. Thomas Merton explains that “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree... the more a tree is like itself, the more it is like God.”³¹⁸ If we follow this thought it *should* lead us to say that a woman gives glory to God by being a woman, and that two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people give glory to God by being two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. The more each of us becomes like ourselves, the more we become like God.³¹⁹

One reason I love the Cappadocian fathers as much as I do is because they confronted the sin of patriarchy in their time, actively speaking out against unjust legislation and advocating for the equality of women as a tenet of the Christian faith. Nyssen speaks up on the fall of humanity and “stresses that he does not see the female as having greater responsibility for the fall.”³²⁰ This was a *sharp* contrast to the common view, popularized by Tertullian who, just a century earlier had declared women responsible for the destruction of God’s image – man.^{321 322} Nazianzen openly opposed the patriarchal laws that were unjust toward women with written objections like, “I do not accept this legislation; I do not approve this custom. They who made the Law were men and therefore their legislation is hard on women.”³²³ While I am sure the men of

³¹⁷ Ibid., 186.

³¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 29.

³¹⁹ “Therefore each particular being, in its individuality, its concrete nature and entity, with all its own characteristics and its private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what he wants it to be here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Art.” Ibid., 30.

³²⁰ Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers*, 157.

³²¹ Ibid., 157.

³²² A truly gut-wrenching quote: “And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil’s gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of *your* desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.” Ibid., 113.

³²³ Ibid., 157.

Cappadocia were influenced by their culture and context (they were not perfect feminists) what we see in them is a clear theological resistance against the oppression of women. These men center women³²⁴ and their stories in much of their writings, declaring them equal, (if not superior)³²⁵ and becoming allies and advocates, respectively.

Understanding the societal oppression of women gives perspective for the Cappadocians glorification of virginity as the Christian ideal for women. This is a topic I have intentionally avoided up until now because, well, it is cringeworthy.³²⁶ Sunberg offers an explanation that certainly helps, writing,

Virginity brought freedom to women, not only freedom from the cycle of death but also from the misfortunes of marriage, which were many. . . Nyssen became passionate as he discussed the problems in marriage and suggested that a young woman should go to the law court and “read the marriage laws” for there she will discover “the abomination of marriage.” Albrecht notes that “the marriage of late antiquity was meaningless.” The hope for most women was “escape from the world.” Female ascetics, then, “were emancipated precisely by their asceticism – that is, by the withdrawal of their bodies from the roles usually imposed on them by society.”³²⁷

I think such explanations ought to both grieve and enliven us. We grieve the reality and rejoice in every step toward restoration. A woman asserting autonomy over her own body amidst a society that withholds her rights and fails to regard her as fully human is powerful. It is easy to read of these women now and overlook the strong strides toward equality and liberation they made, masked as it is in the language of religious devotion. I have come to not only marvel at their strength; but gain an inner sense of feminine fortitude by the courage they displayed through the

³²⁴ i.e., Macrina the Elder, Nonna, Emmelia, Theosebia, The Fallen Virgin, Macrina the Younger.

³²⁵ As seen in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s depiction of St. Macrina.

³²⁶ Even with these nuances exposed, the fact remains that they did view virginity as the ultimate form of virtue. A concept that would thrive throughout church history, eventually arriving in my context under the guise of “purity culture.”

³²⁷ Ibid., 88.

bold withdrawal of their bodies from the use of the world/men, declaring themselves married to Christ and in need of no other authority.

The truth is, while society has made steps toward equality throughout the centuries, the undercurrents of patriarchy are strong. Laws that protect women are good, but they do not absolve us of the core beliefs that created these conditions in the first place. A humble awareness of these oppressive realities for women must be maintained when we use words like self-giving, self-emptying, sacrificial and co-suffering. I think it is important that these concepts remain rooted primarily in a God who is this *to us*. It is treacherously easy to interpret these words in a way that suggests that we eliminate boundaries – that we are self-abasing. Sadly, the church has perpetrated upon the devotion of its women through a patriarchal institution that has failed to fully renounce and eradicate the systemic oppression within it. While there's always been streams of liberation flowing down through the ages of church history, the popularized view in the institutionalized church across every major tradition (i.e., catholic, protestant, orthodox) has maintained a view toward women that explicitly places them below men in terms of authority and equality, thus denying and degrading The Image of God within them.³²⁸ The views of Tertullian are alive and well, and the fact remains that the church has been and continues to be a hotbed for hatred imposed upon women. Again, Ruether rightly points out that “The more one becomes a feminist the more difficult it becomes to go to church.”³²⁹ I know many of us identify with this experience today.

Conclusion

³²⁸ “The discovery of alternative possibilities for identity and the increasing conviction that an alternative is a more authentic understanding of the Gospel make all the more painful and insulting the reality of most historical churches. These churches continue to ratify, by their language, institutional structures, and social commitments, the opposite message.” Ibid., 193.

³²⁹ Ibid., 194.

The history of Christianity can be overwhelming to sift through. While the disparities I've explored in this chapter continue to loom large in the church, I still rely upon and return to the message of Christ as a path toward true restoration of all that's been lost. I can find a red thread³³⁰ of hope that weaves its way through it all. The thread is Love. For me, the kenosis of God; the self-emptying, self-giving, co-suffering Love displayed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, offers the world an antidote for that which ails us. When I place my gaze on Christ I begin to understand that evil cannot be overcome by evil, but it *will be* overcome by good.³³¹ For Jesus-feminists³³² today, it is imperative to recognize that we cannot fight oppression with oppression, hate with hate, dominance with dominance. But this does not mean that we do nothing. Mother Teresa says, "I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love."³³³ Jesus is certainly not passive in his protest of the religious system of his time. He actively identifies himself with the disenfranchised and aggravates the powers that be through what many social activists today call non-violent direct action.³³⁴ And I ask you, could God be more direct than by descending into the womb of an unwed woman from Nazareth and declaring her chosen and blessed to carry the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah – God in flesh? Feminism and social activism, at its best, confronts injustice by infusing love into the wounded wombs of the world – into the people and places that have been hated, exploited and oppressed. As Martin Luther King Jr. so eloquently expressed it, "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of

³³⁰ The red thread is an ancient symbol spanning various mystic traditions. In some interpretations of its meaning, the red thread comes to represent a weaving together of our soul with the divine; (usually feminine) this thread is said to connect us to our origin, our destiny, and to those the soul is meant to find along the way. Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*.

³³¹ Romans 12:17-21.

³³² Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women*.

³³³ As cited by Sarah Bessey. *Ibid.*, 104.

³³⁴ Jesus is a primary icon for non-violent social movements.

stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”³³⁵

While the challenge of distance from my life to the time of St. Macrina is real, I believe in the message she brought forth. Sometimes I wish I could sit down and have a good long chat with her like Gregory did. I would absolutely love to hear her thoughts today. While we might find we have some differences in terms of application, I think the heart of the matter would hold us closer than one might imagine. She believed that we *are* Love and that we *will* return to Love; that this is our beginning and our end. Her teachings have settled my spirit and soothed my soul. Should I get off course, I trust this Love – this tether, this thread, this rope, to pull me back around. This is the hope that I have found.

³³⁵ Martin Luther King Jr.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion: Summary of Findings

That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don't you know also that God needs you – in the fullness of his eternity, you? How would man exist if God did not need him, and how would you exist? You need God in order to be, and God needs you – for that which is the meaning of your life.³³⁶

A thesis is a journey all its own, one you can only catch a glimpse of at the start. Some small flicker in the imagination draws you toward it. Is it real? You can't quite tell. You just know you have seen *something* that seems to be possible. So, you dig in, you draw a map, you trust an outline to lead you toward the original thought that got you started. Some moments are magical; many are not. It is hard work, and it is often complicated by the fact that whatever it is that pulled you toward it in the first place happens to be the precise point of healing or growth most needed in your own life. We are drawn toward what we *need* to know.

This is true for me anyway. I never imagined I would immerse myself in the writings of Cyril of Alexandria in order to understand the early Christian thoughts on the kenosis of Christ, the hypostatic union, and the communication of attributes. I had no known desire to dig into the original teachings on divinization. And I had no idea I would fall in love with a fourth century woman from Cappadocia. For me, these interests developed through some basic needs in my own heart. Primarily, I needed God to be Love and I needed that Love to be trustworthy – I needed that Love to be Good. Without this foundation I could not let go of the fear that had isolated me from God, from myself, and from the world. Even though I had built my life in close proximity to the teachings of Christianity, I found myself standing at a distance. On the heels of this need, (and intrinsically connected to it) I had always hoped for a version of Christianity that

³³⁶ Martin Buber, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *I and Thou*, (New York, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 130.

made space for the salvation/restoration of the whole world. I didn't just hope for it though – I needed it too. I was not interested in an exclusive religion and I had a notion that the heart of Christ's message was one of radical inclusion that was never meant to stop expanding. In my graduate studies, as I listened to my own heart and allowed the honest questions within me to surface, I saw my professor's eyes light up as they kindly encouraged my voice and directed me toward these early Christian theologians as an offering of hope.

What I realize now is that my life was acting as a kind of playing field for these ideas to take shape. For example, during some of my first studies on kenosis, the church I was attending and serving in was going through a process of exploring the root theologies that had led to the exclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ folks from full participation in the life of the Church. During this process an invitation was offered to those who identify as such to share their experiences honestly, in the hopes that putting a human face and story to what was often approached as an “issue” would encourage deeper empathy and understanding. One friend who was actively leading in the church came forward – she came out. Soon after she was told she would not be able to preach at the church anymore. Too many people had appealed to have her stopped. The pastors and elders assured it was meant to be temporary, a mere pause while everyone simmered down. But it was not.³³⁷ While I considered myself to be an ally, I knew I had never been confronted so head-on with a situation in which it was clearly time to stand in solidarity with someone who was actively being excluded and harmed by the church in this way. So it was that in the middle of writing my first paper on The Christ Hymn I also wrote a letter to the pastors of

³³⁷ In the end, the church released a letter stating that 2SLGBTQIA+ people were welcomed to attend the church but could not lead in any capacity unless they were celibate.

my church confronting the injustice and explaining that if this friend could not teach or preach at our church, then I couldn't either. In this letter I wrote, "I'm standing with Tara."³³⁸

My one hesitation in including this story here is that it focuses on what I did, when the truth is I wasn't the one being oppressed. I had the privilege of choice. This is no small thing. Standing in solidarity hurts sometimes, but it is not the same thing as being the victim of hate. I share this story because it taught me what it feels like to sacrifice in a Christlike way. This is the kind of pain that is born from Love. It is different than other kinds of pain. I love Eugene Peterson's translation of Philippians 2 and I believe it speaks directly into the heart of it all.

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ...if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care – then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.³³⁹

In today's world, what would this mean? What would kenotic, cruciform Love embodied through *us* look like? Historically speaking and in my own experience, the church hasn't always done such a great job of revealing God in this way. Time and time again, we have seen Christianity cower and cooperate with damaging power systems and/or create their own. And too often, we believe that there is nothing we can do to change it, so we sit (comfortably *or*

³³⁸ Name used with permission.

³³⁹ Phil. 2: 1-8, MSG.

uncomfortably) and become complicit with structures that oppress the other but benefit us. In his book, *Making America Great Again*, David Moore writes:

Many of us see Christianity as the entity that, at best, stood in silence while Africans were purchased, sold, raped, brutalized and humiliated in other ways and, at worst, provided religious justification. We see it as the force behind the theft of continents from indigenous populations who did not imagine the ownership of real property. We see it offering a rationale for inferiority and subjugation of women and the shaming of sexual and gender identity minorities. These historical realities help build the case that there is endemic, something built into Christianity that hampers the conscience so that adherents feel no compunction in denying the dignity of others.³⁴⁰

This is horrible and it is true. It does not serve anyone to ignore it. In fact, the current cultural landscape is loud. Many groups that have been systemically marginalized are crying out for allies and rallying for long awaited justice.³⁴¹ Power struggles between opposing groups are rampant amidst an outburst of pain that is being expressed in truth. It is an interesting moment in history to study self-emptying power and the humility of God.

My heart breaks, along with many, at the harsh realities we are facing today. This heartache is the right kind of heartache, and it is why kenotic theology ignites my spirit and gives me hope. God, “having become human, stayed human.”³⁴² God lives and dies in God’s Creation. God abides in us. That is what we see through the crucified Christ. God cries out in the lungs of Eric Garner, Javier Ambler, Manuel Ellis, Elijah McClain, and George Floyd, “I can’t breathe.”³⁴³ God has made a home among us. In fact, both the Old and New Testament begin with a message about God’s loving descent into the World. In Chapter 2, I briefly identify

³⁴⁰ David Moore, *Making America Great Again*, (Crowdscribed, LLC, 2017), 69.

³⁴¹ i.e., Black Lives Matter, #metoo, indigenous rights/sovereignty/reconciliation, 2SLGBTQIA+ and BIPOC rights/equality.

³⁴² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Phil 2: 6.

³⁴³ These are the names of black men in the United States who were killed during altercations with police officers. They each spoke the words, “I can’t breathe” as they pleaded for their lives.

Creation as the first picture of kenosis in the bible. The Creation poem reveals an outflow of generosity reflecting the nature of the Divine Spirit as a God who gives Godself. I like to think of Creation as Goodness overflowing, lovingly creating the substance for all that is; land, sky, sea and every living creature who lives. And God is in it. *And it is all called good.*

Then comes the fall. I don't know why, exactly, and I don't know how. But Christianity is not the only religion with a Creation narrative that encounters a fall, a schism, a separation. The human experience has long been described in these terms. For me, this reality underlines Macrina's belief that we all come from Love and will return to it. This is the collective longing of the human heart. But we do encounter an exile – a wilderness on the way. Meggan Watterson explains her wilderness like this:

This is what I learn as a little girl; I am only safe when I am divided.

I learn that there are forces, illusions, deep-seated misunderstandings, ego-driven needs that can overpower me. They come one night in the form of a teenaged boy mistaking me for an object.

And I learn that I have the ability to leave, in any moment, in any situation. I can choose to exist somewhere else so entirely that nothing at all is even felt. I just witness. I see her hands (my hands) frozen in shock. I just watch with eyes now that are as old as the soul that once inhabited my body.

In Aramaic, the language Christ spoke, the word death means “existing elsewhere.”

I learn that once that pathway out of myself, and out of the present moment, is created, it's very hard not to choose it again whenever I feel anxious, afraid, or just out of control. I learn to exist elsewhere.³⁴⁴

With Meggan and with many others, I speak the words “me too.”

This is what we need to know: the wound is not us. The wound is what separates us from who we really are. Remember the voice of Macrina saying “all of these conditions are around the

³⁴⁴ Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed*, 69.

soul and not of the soul itself. They are like warts growing on the mental part of the soul which seem to be parts of it because they grow on it, but they are not what the soul is in its essence.”³⁴⁵

In a recent Instagram post, historian, Duke professor, and author Kate Bowler shared a picture repeating the sentence, “You are not the bad thing.”³⁴⁶ *You are not the bad thing*. Sometimes the healing hurts like hell, depending on the strength of that attachment; the depth of that wound. But you are not the bad thing. You are not the addiction, the illness, the disorder. And Macrina insists that not even death can separate you from what you are. You are Good. You are Beautiful. You are Love. Watterson concludes her chapter on the wilderness writing, “We often think of the end, the happily ever after, as the external union or outward marriage. To be held in love by another is just the start. It’s not the end. The culmination is when that trauma or wound has left the body altogether, so we no longer have to.”³⁴⁷

The first time I heard St. Macrina’s metaphor that compares the divine judgement to a rope plastered with mud being pulled (by Love) through a small hole, thus painfully scraping away what is not meant to be attached to it, I interrupted the lecture. I didn’t mean to. The conversation was circling around what happens *after* death, and somehow, from the deepest place I know I spoke the words “but that starts now.” Then, feeling somewhat embarrassed and exposed I asked, “Right? Is it just me?” It’s not just me. And it’s not just you. We are all in this process, even now. And we are given a path to guide us. Descent then ascent. Kenosis *yields* theosis. Or perhaps kenosis *is* theosis. Each of us will encounter the false-self and need to let it go – to take it off in order to discover the true-self within. But this is a good invitation. Don’t be afraid. You are made for this. This is how we encounter Love: we let ourselves be seen. We let

³⁴⁵ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 54.

³⁴⁶ Kate Bowler, Photo of script, “You are not the bad thing.” *Instagram*, March 15th, 2021. Accessed on March 21st, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMdDgYwjnE_/.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

Love rush into the caverns of our lives. We let Love pour Love into us until we learn how to do it too. This encounter with Love, this surrender to It, is what saves us. It lets us live – truly, authentically, undivided, loved, and whole.

All good and loving invitations rely on willing consent. Love is not coercive. Love does not use force. Remember the role of synergy. Remember the partnership. Connecting the Eastern Orthodox view of synergy with human development, James Fowler explains:

Synergy means the mingling of divine love with our capacities to love, guiding them and grounding them in the grace of God. Synergy means the release of a quality of creativity and energy that manifests our likeness to the restored image of God in us. Synergy means being fully alive and using the gift of our strengths and virtues in the service of the realization of love and justice.³⁴⁸

The more I study the God of The Christ Hymn the more I come to marvel at the mystery of this God; this self-emptying, self-giving, eternal fount of Love. The intent of this thesis has been to illumine an understanding of kenotic love and to demonstrate how one's encounter with this love leads to personal transformation, resulting in a relationship of authentic, self-giving love with God, oneself, and others. My findings conclude that we can, with integrity, follow the path of Christ and engage the teachings of early church theologians to not only make the assertions I have made, but to *insist* on them. *Humankind is made in the Image of God and is a mirror reflecting that Image*. You are the image. Nothing can take the image away.

In an album released in February of this year, Grace Semler Baldrige (aka Semler) calls out the injustices faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ people in the Church, bellowing out “But I’m a child of God, just in case you forgot/And you cast me out every single chance that you got/And that’s your loss not mine, I’ll be better than fine/You just missed your shot to meet the unholy

³⁴⁸ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, (San Francisco: Joney-Bass, 2000), 115-116.

divine.”³⁴⁹ It seems to me that Jesus was also the “unholy divine” claiming to be the Son of God. Jesus was hated for this. He was not recognized. He was cast out. Even so mainstream evangelicalism marches on, neither seeing nor perceiving. In another strikingly kenotic song, Semler sings “Oh what a terrible honor it’s been/To learn that my blessings are things you call sins/I’ll spend the rest of my life tearing down/The Jesus from Texas you put in a crown.../But I won’t give up on you.”³⁵⁰ She ends the album with an outro sung in true gospel fashion repeating these words, “Well I don’t know who you think I am, but I belong in the promised land. I don’t who you think I am, but I’ll be ready at the Father’s hand. I may never know money, I’ll never know fame, but I’ve wrestled too long to lose my name.”³⁵¹ Being *fully* herself, a preacher’s kid and a “self-identified sad, queer, folk artist”³⁵² Semler strikingly invokes the spirit of Christ, *of course she does*. Jesus said, “The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy, I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”³⁵³ This is the whole point: Christ has come that you might have life – *your life*. This is the only life you are meant to give. This is the kenotic offering. Let us trust in the wise words of St. Macrina who insists that “there is no limit to the operation of Love,”³⁵⁴ and let us proceed with her toward the “limitless and unbounded good.”³⁵⁵ Let us give ourselves to It – refusing any gospel that is less beautiful than this.

³⁴⁹ Semler, 2021, “Bethlehem.” Track 1 on *Preacher’s Kid*. PK Records.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., “Jesus From Texas.” Track 2.

³⁵¹ Ibid., “Promised Land.” Track 8.

³⁵² Quote taken from a bio on Matthias Roberts podcast, *Queerology*.

³⁵³ John 10:10, NIV.

³⁵⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On The Soul and the Resurrection*, 81.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 81.

Creative Epilogue

God in a Body

I do not know why it takes
so long for some us
(or maybe all of us)
to arrive in our own lives
honestly.

But I believe the resistance
is common.

I have prayed to be saved
from my own longings,
my own imagination,
my own desire,
my own life,
me.

But this separation –
this schism within
creates a kind of pain unbearable.
Because we cannot outrun our lives
(which is a good thing.)

Our lives keep coming:
keep coming for us,
keep coming toward us,
keep coming to meet us where we are.

Recently,
reluctantly,
back against the wall,
I decided to turn to Jesus.
To look for him as I was taught
my whole life.

I'm still afraid I don't know how
but this day, determined to find him
I entered my heart
like a mother
searching for a lost child.

Voice of The Good within me,
 (please be there)
Eyes of Compassion,
 (come quickly)
Eternal Presence
 (be near).

I knocked on doors
 calling out.
I tracked him down
desperate to confront the problem:

I am human and I hate it
 – it hurts.

I am constantly compelled
 to escape it,
 to be better,
to rise above the real
 – to get out of here.

He just looked at me,
 wordless.
And I looked at him,
 wordless.

Eye to eye with the Divine,
this Man of my Imagination,
 this Body,
 this God in Flesh.

Skin, bones, muscle, sinew,
 heart, mind, soul –
 this Person.
 This Mystery.
This One Embodied Message
 stood before me
 silent, but Speaking:

Your humanness is holy.
This package is the point.

God, in a body.
God, in a baby.
God, in a woman.
God, in a world.

God, in me.

Believe it.

Receive it.

This is the plot:

Christ has come to save the lives we lost.

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