



Andrew Louth

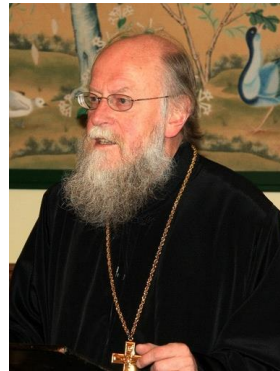
St Makrina: the Fourth Cappadocian?

Abstract

In this article, Fr. Andrew Louth, one of the most significant orthodox theologians of the 21st century, analyses the understanding of St Makrina as “Fourth Cappadocian”. By her ascetic spirituality and educational skills she played a major role in the life of St Basil and St Gregory of Nyssa. Fr. Louth analyses at the one hand the biographical aspects regarding St Makrina as an educated woman capable of being a teacher, at the other hand her ascetic community and spirituality.

Keywords

St Makrina, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Basil, ascetic spirituality, ascetic community



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1 **Introduction: Historical Role of St Makrina**

In his book, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, after introducing the three Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Gregory of Nyssa, Jaroslav Pelikan continues:

To the three Cappadocians should be added, as ‘the Fourth Cappadocian’, Makrina (the Younger), the oldest sister of Basil and of Gregory of Nyssa, named for their grandmother, Makrina the Elder. Not only was she, according to Gregory’s accounts a Christian role model for both of them by her profound and ascetic spirituality, but at the death of her parents she became the educator of the entire family, and that in both Christianity and Classical culture. Through her philosophy and theology, Makrina was even the teacher of both of her brothers, who were bishops and theologians, ‘sister and teacher at the same time [ἡ ἀδελφὴ καὶ διδάσκαλος]’, as Gregory called her in the opening sentence of the dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (as he elsewhere referred to Basil, his brother, as ‘our common father and teacher’). Adolf von Harnack once characterized the *Life of Makrina* by Gregory of Nyssa as ‘perhaps the clearest and purest expression of the spirituality of the Greek Church’, which anyone looking for an epitome of Greek Orthodoxy should consult at the outset. Its author did intend it to be an authentic portrait of this saint who was his sister, of whom he said elsewhere that she was the only one on whom, in her final hours, he could rely to answer the objections of unbelievers to the resurrection. Although various scholars have pointed out the parallels between the statement by Gregory of Nyssa about Makrina and Plato’s description of the disciples of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, that literary device does not necessarily take away from its historical verisimilitude, any more than it does from that of Plato’s accounts of the public defence and the final hours of Socrates. But without reopening here the entire quest for the historical Socrates, it does seem to be at least permissible, if perhaps not obligatory, to take Gregory of Nyssa at his word about Makrina’s philosophical learning

and about her doctrinal orthodoxy, and therefore to link her name with those of her two brothers and Gregory of Nazianzus as the Fourth Cappadocian.¹

If one consults the index to the book to find out what Pelikan makes of Makrina, we read that ‘The name of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Makrina appear on almost every page of the book (...) and therefore they are not listed separately in the index’:² that may well be true of the three men, but it is certainly not true of Makrina, so without very great effort it is not possible to work out what exactly he ascribes to Makrina by way of thought and teaching. The paragraph just quoted really contains all that he has to say, and, even if only in outline, it is impressive. It also points us to the sources we have for Makrina, which are little more than the two treatises by her young brother Gregory, and also raises one of the most significant problems about interpreting them, viz. the difficulty of being sure whom we are reading in these treatises - Gregory himself or his sister.

Particularly in the case of *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, it is undoubtedly Gregory’s literary art that models the scene of Makrina’s deathbed on the conversations Socrates had with his disciples in the hours before drinking the hemlock. It is, as we say, a literary *topos*, though in this case an extended one, but it has been observed that a literary *topos* is often used because it is appropriate to the situation being described, and so, most certainly, here. Apart from these two treatises - *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, called, significantly in some MSS, τὰ Μακρίνια, maybe ‘Makrina’s [thoughts]’, and the *Life of St Makrina* - we

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (Gifford Lectures Series, New Haven and London: Yale University, 1993), p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 357.

should know almost nothing about her.³ She is not mentioned by Gregory the Theologian in his Panegyric Homily on St Basil, despite the vital role she played in his life, so the other Gregory tells us, though the Theologian did dedicate an epigram to her, preserved in the *Greek Anthology*:

The earth holds the glorious virgin Makrina if you ever heard her name, the first-born child of great Emmelia. She let herself be seen by no man, but is now on the tongues of all, and has glory greater than any.⁴

Basil never mentions her (so far as I can see).⁵ There is, however, no question that she played an essential role in the life of her family.

2 Biographical Aspects

St Makrina was the oldest of the nine children (Tillemont says ten, because Peter is described as the ‘tithe’, ἐπιδέκατος, but Gregory’s life says ‘four sons and five daughters’ [55]⁶), born to her parents, Basil and Emmelia, and was named after her paternal grandmother, Makrina the Elder, a disciple of St Gregory

³ Critical texts and translations of these two treatises: *Vita S. Makrinae*, by V. Woods Callahan in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Ascetica* (Gregorii Nysseni Opera VIII/1, Leiden, 1963), pp. 347–414; trans. by Joan M. Petersen in *Handmaids of the Lord: Holy Women in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cistercian Studies Series, 143, 1996); *De Anima et Resurrectione*, by Andreas Spira, brought to completion by Ekkehard Mühlenberg in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Dogmatica Minora* part 3 (Gregorii Nysseni Opera III/3, Leiden, 2014); trans. by Catharine P. Roth, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (Crestwood, New York, 1993).

⁴ *Greek Anthology*, bk VIII, epigram 163 (Loeb edition, p. 470; translation [slightly modified], p. 471).

⁵ The index to the Loeb edition of the letters of Basil gives the impression that he refers to her three times; on each occasion, the reference is to his grandmother.

⁶ Page reference to Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord*.

the Wonderworker. However, while she was still carrying her first-born child, Emmelia had a dream in which she saw herself carrying her baby, which was addressed by a being 'of greater than human magnificence' as Thekla, the great saint, and companion of St Paul, called 'Equal to the Apostles', whose cult was widespread throughout Asia Minor in late antiquity.⁷ Although known publicly as Makrina, her secret name was Thekla; Gregory regarded the name as prophetic of the life she was to follow. The next child Emmelia bore was Basil, and seven (or eight) more children followed, three boys and four girls (plus maybe one who died in infancy). We know the names of the boys: Naukratios, who became an ascetic beside the river Iris, near the family estate at Annisa, at the age of 22, and five years later died in a hunting accident, or, according to Gregory of Nazianzos,⁸ a fishing accident, as his net was caught in a whirlpool and dragged him down to his death (he was attempting to provide food for the men he looked after), Gregory, later bishop of Nyssa, and Peter, who was the Benjamin, the last-born, who became Bishop of Sebaste. Of the girls, we are much less well informed: one was called Theosebeia - it is likely that she lived with her brother Gregory after the death of his wife, and is the companion on whose death Gregory the Theologian consoled his namesake.⁹ They seem to have been found satisfactory husbands by their elder sister. Makrina was clearly very close to Gregory - everything he writes about her breathes warm affection - and according to Gregory's *Life* Makrina was also very close to the youngest

⁷ See Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thekla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ *Greek Anthology*, bk VIII, epigrams 156–8 (Loeb, 468).

⁹ See Gregory Nazianzen, *ep.* 197, and epigram 164 (on the death of Theosebeia, sister of Basil).

child, Peter (whose father died shortly after his birth): he tells us that she 'became everything for the little boy: father, teacher, tutor, mother, counselor in all that was good; thus even before he left the age of childhood, he flourished with the gentle charm of an adolescent boy and was being raised towards the high goal of philosophy' (61).

Gregory's picture of his sister presents us with a formidable, rather determined figure. She was educated by her mother, and Gregory emphasizes that her education was undertaken through reading and interpreting the Scriptures, not through studying the classical poets; she knew the Psalter by heart, and other parts of the Scriptures, too, for example, the Wisdom of Solomon. She was an intelligent and cultivated girl, and also beautiful: she quickly became betrothed to a suitable young man, a lawyer. He died before they could be married, but Makrina regarded their betrothal as marriage, and thereafter refused to consider remarriage, as she thought of it, and insisted on devoting herself to a life of virginity (fulfilling the prophecy, as her brother saw it, of her secret name), or, from another point of view, widowhood: as Anna Silvas puts it, '[c]asting her social role as that of a "widow", that is, a socially respected form of being an unattached woman, she secured her commitment to virginity'.¹⁰ She became a close companion to her mother, Gregory remarking that 'she even frequently prepared bread for her mother with her own hands' (55). This is often taken as a reference to making *prospora*, bread for the Eucharist, but that is not stated; what is more to the point is to notice that such a manual task would have been quite unusual for an educated girl of a wealthy family: spinning and weaving

¹⁰ Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 61.

were ladylike occupations, not cooking and housework.¹¹ Next, Gregory tells us of Makrina's influence over her brother, the great Basil, for it was she who persuaded him, when he returned from his studies in Athens, to abandon a secular career, and embrace a life of asceticism. As we know, Basil visited monastic sites, following in the tracks of Eustathius of Sebaste, before returning home and beginning his ascetic life on the family estate at Annisa, to which he invited his close friend from his student days, Gregory the Theologian. It was there that they collaborated on the anthology drawn from Origen's works, which they called the *Philokalia*. If it is true that Makrina was instrumental in persuading him to embrace the ascetic life, it is odd that Basil nowhere mentions her; though, on the other hand, it may explain his initial flight from home in pursuit of the ascetic life.

The monastic community to which Basil invited his friend was only partly his initiative - if that - for it was about this time that Makrina persuaded her mother that they should turn their home in Annisa into an ascetic community. What grew from this, so far as Basil was concerned, is something we know (or can glean) a good deal about. What it meant for Makrina is something we shall come back to. It was in this ascetic family community that Emmelia finally died, in the arms of her children, Makrina and Peter - 'her first-fruits and her tithe' - in about 371. Basil died at the end of the decade, on 1 January 379, and it was shortly after this that Makrina herself died. The death of Basil, just after the death of the emperor Valens, took place just before the triumph of the Nicene Orthodoxy for which Basil had fought. This change of fortune enabled Gregory, who had been in exile, to visit home and see his sister. He found her bedridden and dying, and with his account of her death and the

¹¹ See Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord*, p. 83, n. 10.

following events, including the funeral and accounts of two miracles associated with Makrina, the *Vita* ends.

Such is the bare outline of what we know about Makrina. Is there any way in which we can glean some more about her? Maybe not, so far as more facts are concerned, but perhaps if we probe we can begin to discern a fuller picture. There are three areas where I propose to probe a little: first, the matter of her education; secondly, the nature of her ascetic/monastic commitment; and thirdly, the account of her last prayer and her death as Gregory presents it in the *Vita*.

Gregory presents Makrina as educated, a learned woman capable of being a teacher - a position that would not have been open to her publicly. *On the Soul and the Resurrection* has Makrina teaching Gregory about the nature of the soul and the hope of the resurrection. He relates to her as his teacher, addressing her «διδάσκαλε». In the arguments she puts forward in the dialogue, she clearly understands the ideas of the philosophers, though she does not quote from them directly; she argues from Scripture (the same, however, could be said of Gregory himself and indeed many of the Fathers). When Gregory speaks of her education, at the hands of her mother Emmelia, he emphasizes that she did not undertake the traditional secular education, focused on the classics and in the initial stages through the works of the poets, and comments that his mother

thought it degrading and altogether improper that either the passions of tragedy, or the indecencies of comedy, or the causes of the misfortunes at Troy should be expounded to a girl whose character was gentle and easily influenced and would in some way be polluted by these ignoble stories about women. (53)

I wonder how unusual this was, not just for girls, but for the children of Christian parents in general? Perhaps our view of the education of Christians in the fourth century is unduly influenced by the shrill reaction of educated Christians to the

rescript issued by the Emperor Julian the Apostate in 362, forbidding Christians to teach the pagan classics on essentially moral grounds: Christians did not believe in the gods of classical antiquity and so should not teach the poets and philosophers who believed in them, any attempt to do so being dishonest. Julian's rescript back-fired spectacularly: two of the most distinguished professors in the Empire resigned - Victorinus at Rome and Prohaeresius at Athens, both Christians - and most pagans seem to have thought it regrettable. As I have mentioned, the Christian response was one of appalled shock: Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Cyril of Alexandria all wrote against Julian, all keen to preserve classical culture, even as they baptized it. The reasons for this may not have been their cultivated appreciation of classical culture; for this education was indispensable for participation in the ruling elite of the Empire. Denying Christians access to education would have handicapped their influence in the Empire, presumably part of the emperor's intention. We are told that Apollinaris and his father rewrote parts of the Bible in classical forms - epic poems, tragedies, philosophical dialogues, and so on - to be used as a basis for education. None of this survives, because after his death the following year, Julian's rescript became a dead letter. However, was the Christian reaction to Julian so uniformly negative? Might there not have been Christians who already refrained from teaching the classics for moral reasons, essentially the same as those that Julian put forward? Surely when we read Gregory telling us about his sister's education we are not to read this as his telling us about a *deficiency* in her learning, for he is unstinting in his praise of his sister, he must, actually, be commending the purity of the education she received, and approving her not being exposed to the classical poets. He insists on the biblical grounding of her education; this doesn't exclude that at some stage she might not have encountered the philoso-

phers, doubtless in excerpted form, very much the form in which they would have been presented to those who went on to the higher levels of education. The place of philosophy in ancient education seems to have been marginal anyway. In the *enkyklikos paideia*, essentially a rhetorical training, one would have learned something about the philosophers, just as one would have learned some geography, some medicine, and so forth, so as to be able to deal convincingly with these matters in constructing speeches. Serious study of the philosophers themselves, however, was advanced study, probably beyond what either Basil or Gregory Nazianzen would have encountered at Athens. It is worth remembering too that, later on in the West, education was based on the Scriptures. Indeed it has been argued recently - this is part of the thrust of the Swedish research project, 'Early Monasticism and Classical *Paideia*', led by Samuel Rubenson of Lund University¹² - that monasticism came very soon to incorporate a form of Greek *paideia* as part of monastic training, required, not least, by the need for monks able to read and write to enable their increasingly elaborate worship to function. This would make a lot more sense if already, in devout Christian households of sufficient means (and Makrina and Basil's family is presented as extremely wealthy), something along the lines of a kind of Scriptural *paideia* already existed.

This leads naturally to the second topic I want to explore about Makrina: the kind of ascetic community and regimen she established with her mother Emmelia after the death of the elder Basil, Emmelia's husband and Makrina's father.

¹² Lillian I. Larsen, Samuel Rubenson (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

3 Ascetic Community and Spirituality

Here we might say that we are on the fringe of a fringe. Traditional accounts of monasticism see the fourth century as the period of the beginnings of the monastic movement: the traditional account sees monasticism originating in the Egyptian desert and spreading to Palestine, Syria, and then to the West. This account is strengthened by the fact that the word *μοναχός* is a fourth-century coinage, for without the term it is indeed difficult to talk about ‘monks’ with any confidence.¹³ I have argued elsewhere that what we are really looking at in the fourth century is not the origins of monasticism, but rather a movement of monastic or ascetic reform, that sought to control an already existing ascetic movement, and in particular bring it under the developing authority of the bishops: both monasticism in its defined forms and the power of the bishops are a product of the freedom of the Church with the end of persecution and the increasing favour in which the Church was held in the Empire.¹⁴ I developed this idea more thoroughly when I found myself wondering why Basil the Great is so often ignored in discussions of monasticism in the fourth century.¹⁵ If Basil seems to be marginal in discussions of early monasticism,

¹³ See the classic study E. A. Judge, ‘The Earliest Use of Monachos for ‘Monk’ (*P. Coll. Youtie 77*) and the Origins of Monasticism’, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20 (1977), pp. 72–89, but Judge’s account has been the subject of much debate.

¹⁴ See my chapter, ‘The literature of the monastic movement’, in: *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 373–81.

¹⁵ Andrew Louth, ‘On being a Christian in Late Antiquity: St Basil the Great between the Desert and the City’, in: Geoffrey D. Dunn, Wendy Mayer (eds.), *Christian Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium. Studies inspired by Pauline Allen (Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements, Volume: 132, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015)*, pp. 83–99.

then Makrina must be even more marginal - on the margins of the marginal.

In thinking about Basil, I started by wondering why Basil is so marginal to discussions of monasticism in the fourth century. The extent to which he is left in the shadows by scholarly accounts of monasticism is amazing. He is not mentioned at all in the classic work on early Eastern monasticism - Derwas Chitty's *The Desert a City*¹⁶ - or in the much more recent 'introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism' - William Harmless' *Desert Christians*.¹⁷ However, what we find in Basil's writings is a contemporary reflection on early attempts at pursuing the monastic life among Christians. I put this neglect down to the spell cast by the legend of the Golden Age of the Egyptian Desert, pointing out that, in contrast with Basil, who provides genuine contemporary evidence for fourth-century monasticism, the evidence for the Egyptian Desert is mostly later - the *Apophthegmata*, which belong to the late fifth century, even the Pachomian Corpus which we have in a form edited by Shenouda and the monks of the White Monastery - or unusual in one way or another - Athanasios' *Life* of St Antony, which tells us as much about Athanasios as it does about Antony, or the Evagrius corpus, which is too exceptional to be typical. The historical evidence for Egyptian monasticism, then, does not consist of a kind of direct eyewitness core, presented by the sayings and lives of the Fathers, around which we can group various attempts, more distanced from direct experience, to appropriate and assimilate their teaching and example. Instead - partly because of, and partly creative of - the sense of the Egyptian Desert as a Golden Age, a return to paradise, there is the paradoxical

¹⁶ Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966).

¹⁷ William Harmless SJ, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

cal sense that the closer we seem to come to the living words of the desert Fathers, the less we can hear.

With St Basil, however, we can hear his voice. Of course, it is true that the Basilian *Great Asketikon* exists in a later edited form, maybe associated with the Studite Reform of the late seventh century, but Rufinus' Latin translation of what he called *Basil's Rule* is now generally regarded as a translation of an early form of the *Asketikon*, and even if it is no more reliable than Rufinus' other translation (Rufinus is astonishingly candid about his translation technique), comparison with the Greek of the *Great Asketikon* can enable us to get close to Basil's early thoughts, and besides Basil left a body of undoubtedly authentic works - letters and treatises - that enable us to get close to his early reflections on the ascetic life.¹⁸ So, unlike the historical evidence, there is for the Egyptian monastic desert, we can find in Basil's writings contemporary reflection on early attempts at pursuing the monastic life among Christians.

Not that Basil himself was entirely free from the lure of Egypt. When, after his return from Athens - regarded by St Gregory Nazianzen as a betrayal of their friendship - he set off on what Gregory refers to as his 'voyages', it seems that he was - in company with, or perhaps better in pursuit of, Eustathios of Sebaste - making a tour of the monastic centres of the mid-fourth century: not just Egypt, but Coele-Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia, as is apparent from later references in his letters.¹⁹ (It is actually possible that Basil never made it to Egypt, in which case Egypt remained for him a place of report only.)²⁰ Basil was, then, well aware of contemporary monastic movements, and

¹⁸ On this see Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*, esp. pp. 102-45.

¹⁹ See Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 73.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

the places - Egypt, Palestine, Syria - that occupy a central role in traditional accounts of the rise of monasticism, but there were other influences. It is worth exploring, even if briefly, these influences, for they alert us to other aspects of the Christian monastic story, obscured by the traditional account. These aspects are twofold. Firstly, there is the question of Christian pre-monastic asceticism. It is striking that in Athanasios' *Life*, when Antony finally responds to the call to leave all and devote himself to a life of asceticism, he places his sister with 'known and trusted virgins', and he himself soon finds an 'old man, who had lived the ascetic life in solitude from his youth'.²¹ So in a *Life*, which is often read as the account of the first monk, though the *Life* itself makes no such unambiguous claim,²² there are clear references to earlier forms of Christian asceticism: in particular, groups of virgins (or widows), of whom we know from other sources, such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and solitary ascetics in villages. We can trace this background in Basil's own life. Whatever it was that Basil developed, there already existed a kind of ascetic family community in which his sister Makrina - according to his brother Gregory of Nyssa, an important influence on Basil himself, though, as we have seen, never mentioned by him - played a leading role.²³ But secondly, the traditional literature on early monasticism sets it in the context of withdrawal - ἀποτάγη - from human society. If, for Athanasios, as he praises Antony's success, 'the desert became a city', he is

²¹ St Athanasios the Great, *The Life of St Antony the Great* (Eastern Orthodox Books 1989), p. 3.

²² It is perhaps in Jerome that we first find the idea that Antony was claimed as the first monk, for in his *Life of St Paul of Thebes* Jerome contests this claim and puts forward the - largely fictional - Paul as the true candidate for the title.

²³ On Makrina, see Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*, pp. 60-83.

conscious of the paradox he has uttered, for the monasticism of withdrawal meant withdrawal *from* human society. But such monasticism of withdrawal was not the only kind of monasticism to emerge, it is just that the sources for the ascetic communities that remained in the city are much less evident and much more difficult to interpret. However, after the research of such as David Brakke and Peter Hatlie, we can form a much better picture of city (or town) monasticism. Brakke has shown how much effort Athanasios devoted to fostering ascetic groups in the towns and villages of Egypt, alongside his better known attempt to secure the support of the desert monks;²⁴ while Hatlie has built up a picture - from an array of sources: hints in historians, canonical material and evidence from hagiography - of the development of monasticism in the city of Constantinople, which, though scarcely typical, was far removed from the asceticism of the desert.²⁵ In 370, Basil became archbishop of Caesarea, and much of his later reflection on the monastic state concerned the group, or groups, of ascetics he established under his own authority in Caesarea of Cappadocia.

Gregory's *Life of St Makrina* is maddening when it comes to dates, and indeed it is clear that he is not much interested in the chronological dimension of Makrina's life. Nevertheless, it seems that the decision by Makrina and her mother Emmelia to establish an ascetic community at Annisa was occasioned by the death of Naukratios, which can be dated to the spring of 356.²⁶ And it has been argued, by Anna Silvas, that it was in the wake of that tragic event that, on the one hand, the ascetic community at Annisa was established, and, on the other, that Basil re-

²⁴ See especially David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

²⁵ Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350-850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁶ See Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*, p. 67.

turned from Athens, passing quickly through Constantinople, finishing his studies at Caesarea, before returning home. Once home, Makrina persuaded him to abandon his plans for a secular career and accept baptism and embark on an ascetic life. His monastic tour followed quickly on this decision, and he eventually returned home, to invite Gregory (who had been hurt by being abandoned in Athens) to join him at Annisa. If this chronology is right, however, the community, whose praises he sang, was the one set up by his sister, Makrina, to which he had returned, though he doesn't breathe a word of this.

For Basil was very enthusiastic about his ascetic retreat in Pontos, by the river Iris, as we learn from the letter numbered as second in the collection of his letters, which he sent to his friend, Gregory of Nazianzos, in about 359. The date and the recipient of the letter are significant; Basil had a little earlier written to Gregory praising the physical setting of his retreat in Pontos, to which he invites his friend Gregory whom he had abandoned in Athens:

There is a high mountain, covered with a thick forest, watered on its northerly side by cool and transparent streams. At its base is outstretched an evenly sloping plain, ever enriched by the moisture from the mountain. A forest of many-coloured and multifarious trees, a spontaneous growth surrounding the place, acts almost as a hedge to enclose it, so that even Kalypso's isle, which Homer seems to have admired above all others for its beauty, is insignificant as compared to this.²⁷

²⁷ Basil, *Ep.* 14.2. Translation by Roy F. Deffarari (St Basil, *The Letters*, I, London: Heinemann/Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1926, p. 107). I have used the text found in Basilio de Cesarea, *Le lettere*, I, ed. Marcella Forlin Patrucco, Corona Patrum, Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1983, with its valuable commentary.

And so on. Gregory eventually overcame his scruples and joined Basil in Pontos, but before joining his friend in Pontos, he had replied to Basil's letter and received a response, which is preserved in Basil's correspondence as the second letter. Gregory's response to Basil's account of the beauty of the place had been guarded; he had apparently said (Gregory's letter is lost) that he would rather learn something about Basil and his companions' 'habits and mode of life' than the beauty of the place - he wants to know about their *τρόπος* rather than their *τόπος*. Basil, in his reply, commends Gregory for this, remarking that, though he could leave behind his life in the city, he has not yet been able 'to leave himself behind' (*ep.* 2.1). What is needed is separation from the world altogether, but what this means is not so much bodily separation, as separation from sympathy, fellow feeling, with the body and its concerns, which include home, possessions, love of friends, social relations, and even knowledge derived from human teaching. To this end, solitude (*ἐρημία*) is very valuable, as it calms the passions and affords the reason leisure (*σχολή*) (cf. *ep.* 2.2). Basil goes on to speak of the purifying of the soul when it is deprived in the solitude of the constant distraction of civil and family life. The soul is enabled to relinquish this world and 'to imitate on earth the anthems of angels' choirs; to hasten to prayer at the very break of the day, and to worship our Creator with hymns and songs' (*ep.* 2.2). The beginning of this purification of the soul is tranquillity (*ἡσυχία*), which enables the soul to withdraw into itself and by itself to ascend to the contemplation of God. For this, the reading of and meditation on the Scriptures is valuable, for they contain not just precepts to follow, but examples to imitate. Prayer is stimulated by reading the Scriptures; it engenders in the soul a distinct conception of God, but more than that brings about the indwelling of God in the soul, for 'the indwelling of God is this—to hold God ever in memory, His shrine established

within us' (*ep.* 2.3). There then follow reflections on the way of life that is conducive to this: reflections on the way we are to behave one towards another, with respect and courtesy, neither harsh towards others nor withdrawn; reflections on clothing, utilitarian, not ostentatious; food is to be simple and adequate, preceded and followed by prayer; sleep to be light.

There are several things that are striking about this. First of all, most of it could have been said by a pagan philosopher, talking about the higher life of thought:²⁸ the emphasis on tranquillity, the sense of distance from the world ushering in proximity to heaven and heavenly beings; again, Basil's account of appropriate dress for the Christian ascetic recalls the accounts of the cynic philosophers. However, secondly, the classical style and allusions are shot through with language that is distinctively Christian. In the Italian edition of Basil's letters, the fascinating commentary by the editor, Marcella Forlin Patrucco, reveals, for example, that just after describing the Christian monk's dress in terms of the cynic philosopher, when he describes them as 'mourners', or 'those who grieve' (οἱ πενθοῦντες), he is employing a word that had become a technical term for an ascetic in the Syrian tradition.²⁹ A more obvious example occurs right at the beginning of the letter, when Basil agrees with Gregory that solitude on its own is useless, because our minds remain cluttered, and says that we need 'to keep close to the footsteps of Him who pointed the way to salvation', and goes on to quote Matt. 16.24, about following Christ by denying oneself and taking up one's cross. Basil, then, seems to stand, quite un-selfconsciously at the interface between classical culture and

²⁸ See especially Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

²⁹ See Basilio di Cesare, *Le lettere*, I, (Turin: Corona Patrum, 1983), p. 272.

the message of the Gospel. However, having said that, we must add: Basil is certainly facing in one direction - towards the Scriptures; there is a kind of turning-point in the letter when he says, 'But the best way to the discovery of what is needed is a meditation on the Scriptures inspired by God' (*ep.* 2.3). It has recently been argued that it was his elder sister Makrina who, as well as turning Basil to the ascetic life, brought home to him the crowning significance of the Scriptures.³⁰ Finally, however, we find something else that is to become characteristic of Basil: viz., the way in which our relationships with one another become themselves an ascetic way. For Basil, though the ascetic way involves an inward transformation, it is something that involves others, something that is tested and furthered by our relationships with other people. In this letter it is very striking, for however much the language recalls the ideal of the 'alone returning to the alone', the letter closes with several pages concerned with how we are to live together, how we are to behave one towards another.

In that account, I have noticed a few places where, it has been argued by Anna Silvas, that the influence of Makrina is to be found. But maybe, we can go much further than this, and say that what Basil is describing is the community life that he joined after his search for the 'true monastic life'; he is talking about the community set up by Emmelia and Makrina. The ascetic life that Basil is extolling to his friend is something he discovered, not something he established. The features of this experiment in family-based ascetic life, as described by Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life* of his sister, are strikingly similar to what Basil describes in *ep.* 2 to Gregory: the communal life of these 'virgins' (as they are described), called 'philosophy', enabled them to be free from the cares of life and from worldly trivialities,

³⁰ Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*, p. 70.

and brought them into harmony with the life of the angels. They possessed nothing; their life was occupied with ‘attention to the things of God, prayer without ceasing, and the uninterrupted chanting of the Psalms, which was extended equally in time through night and day, so that for the virgins it was both work and rest from work’.³¹ We learn, too, that within the community of virgins, ‘all differences of rank were removed’.³² The nature of their life of prayer is described here only in general terms - continuous repetition of the Psalter is mentioned; at one point there is allusion to orientation, facing East, for prayer - elsewhere we learn that there was an evening office at the lighting of the lamp,³³ and we can presume there were other offices throughout the day. Although there is no direct reference, it is clear that the account of this life is meant to recall the apostolic community in Acts 2:42–7, in which the apostles held all in common and shared in a life of prayer. So, we find that the account in Gregory’s *Vita Macrinae* of the ascetic community Makrina and her mother had established is full of echoes of what we can read in Basil’s second letter. Or, perhaps it is the other way about: it is Basil’s letter that is echoing the ascetic, communal life that Gregory describes in the *Life*.³⁴

There are perhaps a few more touches that we can add to our account of Makrina’s ascetic community. Stephen J. Davis, in his study of the cult of St Thekla, put Makrina’s community in the context of communities of virgins and widows, inspired by the example of St Thekla, and gives another example, one Marthana, mentioned by Egeria in her account of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, who may have fostered another such communi-

³¹ *Vita* 382:15–19; Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord*, p. 60.

³² *Vita* 381:26–7; Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord*, p. 59

³³ *Vita* 399: 1–3.

³⁴ *Vita* 381, l. 15–383, l. 8.

ty.³⁵ The idea that Makrina could have been the dominant figure at Annisa was suggested long ago by Susanna Elm, and her book, *Virgins of God*, an exploration of female asceticism in the fourth century, gives us a glimpse, and sometimes more than a glimpse, of forms of Christian asceticism that antedate the 'rise of the monastic movement'.³⁶

Once we alter the focus of our lenses, so that the 'rise of monasticism' is no longer the event in sharp focus, we can maybe discern a picture of communal asceticism, often among women, in which Makrina is a significant figure. This could be put another way: once we stop looking at the history of Christianity as a history of men, the picture of the early Church becomes significantly different, and women like Makrina can step from the shadows.

4 Conclusions

I want to close by looking very briefly at the scene of Makrina's deathbed. As she is about to die, we are told that she stretched out her hands to God and prayed 'in a gentle undertone, so that we could scarcely hear her words': words that Gregory goes on to quote. She prayed:

It is you, Lord, who have freed us from the fear of death. You have made our life here the beginning of our true life. You grant our bodies to rest in sleep for a season, and you rouse our bodies again at the last trumpet.

You have given in trust to the earth our earthly bodies, which you have formed with your own hands, and you have

³⁵ Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 62–4, 56.

³⁶ Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (*Oxford classical monographs*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); on Makrina see p. 104.

restored what you have given, by transforming our mortality and ugliness by your immortality and your grace.

You have delivered us from the curse of the law and from sin, by being made both on our behalf. You have broken the dragon's head - that dragon who has seized man by the throat and dragged him through the yawning gulf of disobedience. You have opened for us the way of the resurrection, after breaking the gates of hell, and have destroyed him that had the power of death.

You have given as a token to those who fear you the image of the holy cross, to destroy the adversary and to bring stability to our lives.

Eternal God, for whom I was snatched from my mother's womb, whom my soul loved with all its strength, to whom I consecrated my flesh from my youth until now, entrust to me an angel of light, who will lead me by the hand to the place of refreshment, where the 'water of repose' is, in the bosom of the holy patriarchs.

May you, who cut through the fire of the flaming sword and assigned to Paradise him who was crucified with you and entrusted to your pity, remember me too in your kingdom, because I too have been crucified with you; from fear of you I have nailed down my flesh and have been in fear of your judgments.

May the terrible gulf not separate me from those whom you have chosen, nor may the malignant Enemy set himself across my path, nor may my sin be discovered in your sight, if having error through the weakness of our human nature, I have committed any sin in word or in deed.

May you who have power on earth to forgive sins, forgive me, that I may draw breath and that I be found in your presence, 'having shed my body and without spot or wrinkle' in the form of my soul, and that my soul may be innocent and spotless and may be received into your hands like incense in your presence. (70-1)

While she was thus praying, Gregory tells us, 'she made the sign of the cross on her eyes, on her face, and on her heart'. Evening

fell, and the lamp was brought in. Makrina opened her eyes and gazed at the light. Gregory saw that she wanted to recite the evening office of thanksgiving, which she did, though her voice failed her and she prayed only in her heart and by the gesture. After making the sign of the cross at the close of the office, 'she gave a great deep sigh and ended her life and her prayers at the same time' (72).

Scholars comment that it is unlikely that Makrina could have prayed such a prayer as she lay dying, but I wonder. For the prayer is a tissue of Scriptural allusions, especially to the Psalter, which we know she knew by heart. It seems to me entirely plausible that she prayed in these words, or words like them; indeed, one might reflect that Gregory, having been brought up in the household led by his mother and sister, would have had much the same mental tapestry of Scriptural passages, so that much would be familiar, and easily recalled. The prayer itself is carefully, though simply, constructed, falling into two parts, the former concerned with what God has done for us, pre-eminently in the Death and Resurrection of Christ, the latter consisting of a series of petitions that she, Makrina, be brought to enjoy the fruits of that victory.

It is a prayer that is in no way false to what we know about Makrina, and we can be confident that her prayer was heard, and that she is now among those on whose prayers we can rely.