

The Liturgical Theology of Initiation in the Sermon »On Holy Baptism« by Gregory of Nazianzus

by Anastasios Salapatas, London

Introduction

(About Gregory of Nazianzus and his text »On Holy Baptism«)

Gregory, the so-called Theologian, is one of the greatest Fathers and Teachers of the Church that have ever lived. Stylianos Papadopoulos¹ suggests that he is the most prominent theological mind of the Church, after St. John the Evangelist.

He was born around 329/30 in Nazianzus. His father, also called Gregory, was the bishop of the city. His mother Nonna was a very pious Christian. She greatly supported her family and her son Gregory in particular in his spiritual endeavours. Gregory studied in Nazianzus, in Caesarea of Cappadocia (where he met Basil the Great), in Caesarea of Palestine, in Alexandria and finally in Athens. He started his career as a teacher of rhetoric in Athens and then in Nazianzus. After he had been baptised, around 358/9, he dedicated his whole life to Jesus and the Church. He was ordained as Priest (361/2), probably by his father, and then as bishop (372) by his friend Basil. In 378 Gregory went to Constantinople to take over as Archbishop of the Great City. He presided over the second Ecumenical Council (381) in Constantinople and before its completion he resigned from his Patriarchal throne. He went back to his home place and lived in Nazianzus until his death (390)². His blessed memory is commemorated on the 25th January by the Eastern Orthodox Church and on the 9th May by the Western Churches.

Being a very intelligent man and a great theologian, Gregory contributed greatly to the Church and Christianity, especially with his very important theological works. These works fall into three categories: a. *Epistles*, b. *Sermons* and c. *Poems*. He is the only poet among the great theologians of the »golden age« (4th A.D. century) of the Church³.

From a theological point of view his most significant works are his *Sermons*. One of these, *Sermon* 40⁴, is dedicated to the »Holy Baptism«. This sermon is one of the longer speeches presented by Gregory. It was delivered on 6th January 381⁵, a day after the *Sermon* 39⁶, which was dedicated to the »Holy Lights«⁷.

¹ S. G. Papadopoulos, *Πατρολογία*, vol. II, Athens 1990, p. 495.

² Kristoffel Demoen, »Some remarks on the life and poems of Gregory Nazianzen«, *Orientalia Cristiana Periodica* 63 (1997) 171.

³ J. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. III, Westminster MA 1960, p. 239.

⁴ PG 36, 360 – 425.

⁵ P. K. Christou, *Ελληνική Πατρολογία*, vol. IV, Thessaloniki 1989, p. 128. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Rhetor and Philosopher*, Oxford 1969, p. 179) suggests that the Sermon on Holy Baptism was delivered on the 7th January 380.

⁶ PG 36, 336–360.

⁷ T. K. Carrol – T. Halton, *Liturgical Practice in the Fathers*, (Message of the Fathers of the Church 21), Wilmington, DL 1988, p. 174. They suggest that this sermon was delivered on 6th January 381. This means that the sermon on baptism was delivered on 7th January 381 (?).

The ancient Eastern Church was keeping the feasts of Christmas and Epiphany⁸ (or Theophany) on the 5th January⁹. On that day the Church baptised the catechumens of the previous calendar year. The baptism was called »illumination«¹⁰, the newly baptised were called »newly illumined«, and the feast itself was named »the feast of Lights«, or simply »the Lights«, as it is still the case today in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The catechumens were a huge crowd of people. This is why the main celebration of the actual feast of Lights and the Sermon (as it is quite clear from the text of the *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*¹¹) were moved to the next day, 6th January. This practice was eventually established. Thus, in the Eastern Orthodox Church the feast of Lights has been kept on the 6th January ever since, while on the 5th January in remembrance of the baptism of the catechumens, the Orthodox Church celebrates a Service of the Great (or Imperial¹²) Hours and the Great Sanctification of the Waters.

In his *Sermon on the Holy Baptism* Gregory acknowledges three births of the human beings. The first is the physical or night birth, the second is the baptismal or day birth and the third is that of the resurrection, which is the most significant birth, for it will bring the people in front of God. The baptism, according to Gregory, is a rebirth and brings great fruits¹³. This *Sermon* is not clearly doctrinal; it is rather panegyric and admonitory¹⁴. It is one of the oldest texts of the Church, which openly promotes infant baptism¹⁵. The authenticity of the text is not disputed.

1. Preaching on Baptism

Since early Christian times preaching has always been one of the main elements of every Church service. It is certainly a liturgical activity, which gives the opportunity to the celebrant or to the preacher to communicate to the congregation the main purpose of the service.

On this particular occasion -for the reasons explained in the introduction- and although the service of baptism had already taken place the day before, Gregory delivered a very significant sermon on baptism. Thus, throughout his sermon there are numerous immediate references to both the celebration of the sacrament and to its liturgical theology.

Two of the most interesting questions are the following:

- a. To whom is this sermon addressed?
- b. What is the purpose of this sermon?

The answer to the first question is that Gregory delivered his sermon in front of a great audience, where different categories of people were found. Some of those were virgins¹⁶, others were married¹⁷, while some others were in the process of getting married¹⁸. Regarding their

⁸ »Epiphany« (or »Theophany«) in the Eastern Church means the feast of the Baptism of Jesus.

⁹ *Epiphanius*, Panarium 51, 24: PG 41, 932.

¹⁰ A. M. Coniaris, *These are the Sacraments*, Minneapolis 1981, p. 44.

¹¹ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36.

¹² I. F. Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox – Catholic Apostolic Church*, New Jersey 1983, p. 182f.

¹³ P.K. Christou, Γρηγόριος ὁ θεολόγος, in: *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 4, col. 720, Athens 1964.

¹⁴ S. N. Sakkos, Γρηγόριος ὁ θεολόγος 4, Thessalonika 1976, p. 8.

¹⁵ Ebd.

¹⁶ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 18.

¹⁷ Ebd.

¹⁸ Ebd.

social class, there were rulers and leaders, as well as slaves, poor and rich people¹⁹. Regarding also to their Church status, the members of the audience belonged to various categories, such as faithful, catechumens and others who had just been there to listen to the sermon, having no formal relationship with the Church. This is why in this sermon Gregory presents only those elements of the sacrament of baptism that could be communicated, but he keeps the secret parts only for the full members²⁰.

Answering the second question, one may suggest that there are various purposes of this sermon. Gregory, clearly states that the audience should listen carefully and accept his words about such an important issue with willingness and eagerness, not with superficiality and frivolity²¹. He also believes and states that those who know about the sacrament and feel its power are enlightened²².

The reader of this sermon will certainly get a strong feeling that the main aim of this Gregorian preaching is to urge and persuade his audience to get baptised as soon as possible. Gregory repeats again and again the idea of »not postponing«²³.

In order to persuade his audience, he uses very powerful rhetorical expressions, such as:

- »let us get baptised in order to be victorious«²⁴,
- »do not postpone the benevolent act«²⁵,
- »rush towards the present (δώραμα)«²⁶,
- »receive the gift triumphantly, and not mournfully«²⁷,
- »Evil (πονηρός) deceits you with the little postponements«²⁸,
- »you fulfil your life safely«²⁹,
- »have you got an infant? ...baptise it from infancy, dedicate it to the Spirit from the age of the soft nails (babyhood)«³⁰,
- »give to your child the Trinity, the great and good amulet (φυλακτήριον)«³¹,
- »do not delay to come to the grace«³²,
- »the sacrament (τὸ μυστήριον) is greater than the visible things«³³,
- »say yes and get baptised, and by baptism save yourself«³⁴.

¹⁹ Ebd.

²⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 45.

²¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 1.

²² Ebd.

²³ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26.

²⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 11.

²⁵ Ebd.

²⁶ Ebd.

²⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 12.

²⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 14.

²⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 15.

³⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 17. Here it becomes very clear that Gregory is suggesting »infant baptism«.

³¹ Ebd. Another reference to »infant baptism«.

³² Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 24.

³³ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 25.

³⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 26.

The sermon, delivered by the so-called »*Christian Demosthenes*«³⁵, is certainly very powerful, filled with diachronic baptismal messages. It is a literally masterpiece and full of theological symbolism. It contains many references to elements of liturgical theology of baptism. The audience should have been highly inspired by it.

2. Catechism: A way towards baptism

In the Christian tradition catechism has always been an inseparable part of the initiation process especially regarding the case of adult baptism. For those who came to be baptised in their adult age the Church offered a period of preparation, which contained various elements. Those elements were consisting of various features such as pastoral care and a healing experience³⁶.

The 7th Canon of the Second Ecumenical Council³⁷ defines in general lines the initiation process. It reads:

»And on the first day we make them Christians; on the second catechumens, next on the third (day) we exorcise them, breathing thrice on the face and the ears, and thus we offer them instructions, and we make them wait for a long time in the Church and listen to the Scriptures and then we baptise them«³⁸.

This is the clear and strict tradition of the early Church on the reception of people into the Christian faith. Catechism obviously plays an important part in this process.

Gregory is fully aware of this truth; and although he never mentions the term catechism or catechist in his *Sermon*, in his own way of speaking he insists in »writing«³⁹ on the stones of the peoples' hearts⁴⁰ the new faith, as a new Moses⁴¹. This is how he conveys to his audience the message of catechism.

In Gregory's mind this is not a theoretical statement, but it is certainly a necessary part of the initiation process. He even shares with his audience his views regarding the contents of catechism. He tells them that »*they will learn by listening and by following certain Church practises to renounce atheism and to join the divine*«⁴².

He then continues by offering them some kind of primitive instructions, using the word »believe«⁴³ three times. It is suggested that this part of his sermon reminds us of the Creed, which Gregory seems happy to communicate to his audience and also to interpret it.

³⁵ T. K. Carroll, *Preaching the Word*, Delaware 1984, p. 64.

³⁶ I. S. Vlachos, *Κατήχηση και βάπτισμα των ενηλίκων*, Athens 1993, p. 21.

³⁷ Gregory had been presiding over the Second Ecumenical Council, which took place in Constantinople in 381 A.D. It is quite possible that this Canon was formed with his inspiration and suggestion.

³⁸ I. N. Karmiris, *Dogmatica et symbolica Monumenta Orthodoxae Catholicae Ecclesiae*, vol. I, Athens 1952, p. 136.

³⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 44, 45.

⁴⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 45.

⁴¹ D. F. Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation. A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus*, Cambridge MA 1979, p. 41.

⁴² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 45.

⁴³ Ebd.

At the end of this part he states:

*»I spoke of those elements of the sacrament
which can be announced
and they are not forbidden for the hearing of many.
You will learn the rest from within
as the Trinity will grant you;
and you will keep them as a secret in yourself,
guarded by the seal«⁴⁴.*

By this statement Gregory is suggesting that the early Church had developed the idea and the practice of secretiveness⁴⁵, which could and should be interpreted as sacredness and mysticism; a highly valuable element of the Holy Tradition of the Christian Church.

The term »catechumen« appears once in the sermon, when the Holy Father states that:

*»While you are a catechumen,
you are at the front door of piety.
You must enter inside...«⁴⁶.*

The speaker of this great sermon seems to have been very clear about catechism and about the group of catechumens and their place in the Church. He addresses them openly (as open he could be) and encourages them to take the path of the instructions' process (μαθητεία⁴⁷).

As a real spiritual guide he offers them his assistance in their pious wish and endeavours to join the Church and become full sharers of the Christian faith. He is like a real father to them, as indeed a bishop should be.

3. The »lights« in baptism

The ancient Church, especially in the East, used the term »illumination« as a name for the baptism. St. Clement of Alexandria calls baptism an »illumination by which the holy, saving Light is contemplated«⁴⁸. St. John Chrysostom adds, »from the moment we are baptised, the soul, being cleansed by the Spirit, shines more brightly than the sun«⁴⁹.

In this sermon Gregory uses many similar expressions in order to show to his audience how baptism becomes an »illumination«⁵⁰. First of all the (united) feast of Christmas and Epiphany, celebrated by the ancient Church on the 5th January, is called the feast, or the day, of Lights⁵¹.

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 45.

⁴⁵ During the years of persecution the Christian people had to be very careful as to what they communicated to others (non Christians), because of the fear of martyrdom.

⁴⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 16.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 44.

⁴⁸ A.M. Coniaris, These are the Sacraments, Minneapolis 1981, p. 44.

⁴⁹ Ebd.

⁵⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 4, 6.

⁵¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 1, 3.

Then, in his own words, he states that,

*»illumination is the splendour of the souls,
a change of life, a contract of conscience⁵² with God,
...a following of the Spirit, communion with the Word,
sharing in the light, ending of the darkness.
Illumination is a vehicle which brings us to God,
a journey with Christ...«⁵³.*

The light, or the »flood«⁵⁴ of the light, or the illumination, which the baptised accepts, makes him an illumined⁵⁵ person. This light comes from God, who is the »unutterable light«⁵⁶, offering to humanity the »radiation of His brightness«⁵⁷.

The human beings should make an effort to walk towards baptism and accept the light of Christ; but they should also be aware of the fact that apart from the »true light«⁵⁸ that comes from God, there is another kind of light, which comes from the »bitter fire«⁵⁹ of hell. This light should be avoided.

It is interesting to note that Gregory associates the light with the cleansing of humans from every spot of sin. He specifically says:

*»let us be illuminated in the eye,
in order to be able to see correctly...,
let us be illuminated in the hearing,
let us be illuminated in the tongue,
in order to hear, what the Lord God will say...,
let us get healed in the smell...,
let us get cleansed in the touch, in the taste, in the larynx...«⁶⁰.*

Thus, baptism -which is an illumination- becomes »a cleansing of flesh and spirit«⁶¹, according to the Gregorian statement:

*»Brethren, let us get cleansed, in every part,
let us purify every sense;
let us not leave anything incomplete,
or anything belonging to the original nature,
or anything not illuminated«⁶².*

⁵² 1 Peter 3:21.

⁵³ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 3.

⁵⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 8.

⁵⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 10.

⁵⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 5.

⁵⁷ Ebd.

⁵⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 37; John 1:9.

⁵⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 36.

⁶⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 38.

⁶¹ Fr. N. M. Vapori (ed.), The Service of Holy Baptism, An Orthodox Prayer Book, Brookline – Massachusetts 1977, p. 60.

⁶² Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 38.

Another important element, regarding in particular the liturgical ceremony of baptism, is the use of candles, which are a constant reminder of the light of Christ, and a visible sign of the symbolism (or symbolisms) of illumination in baptism.

Gregory clearly mentions the use of candles⁶³, connecting them to the lamps of the bridesmaids of the parable⁶⁴. The text reads:

*»The candles which you will light are mystical symbols
of the torchlight procession in the next world,
in which our joyful and virgin souls
will meet the bridegroom,
with the shining lights of the faith«⁶⁵.*

The use of candles in baptism is also mentioned in some other ancient Christian texts⁶⁶. According to Edward Yarnold, *»the use of lights must in any event have been necessary in a dawn (baptismal) ceremony«⁶⁷.*

4. Regeneration of the human being

It is the belief of the Church, and it is also part of her doctrinal teaching, that the human beings are reborn and regenerated by the sacrament of baptism. Through baptism, with the Grace of God, the human being is transferred from the condition of spiritual death into the renewed life in Christ⁶⁸.

The baptism is called by St. Paul *»a laver of regeneration«* (»λουτρόν παλιγγενεσίας«⁶⁹). Gregory has certainly followed the steps of St. Paul. Thus, very early in his sermon he declares his belief in three births of the human beings. The first is the bodily birth, the second is the baptismal one and the third is that of the resurrection⁷⁰.

The second birth is a day birth, whose main characteristics are the free choice and the dissolving of sufferings. Through this birth the human beings get away from sin and they are brought back to higher life (»ἀνωτέρα ζωή«⁷¹), to the renewed life in Christ.

⁶³ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 46.

⁶⁴ Matt. 25:1–13

⁶⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 46.

⁶⁶ Ambrose, De Lapsu Virginis: 5, 19: PL 16, 372.

⁶⁷ Edward Yarnold, The Awe Inspiring Rites of Initiation, Slough 1971, p. 34.

⁶⁸ N. E. Mitsopoulos, Θέματα ὀρθοδόξου δογματικῆς θεολογίας, Athens 1984, p. 293f.

⁶⁹ Tit. 3:5.

⁷⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 2.

⁷¹ Ebd.

This theological theme of baptismal »regeneration«⁷² in baptism is supported by what Gregory states in regard to the dying and rising (of the baptised) with Christ. The text reads:

»Let us be buried, then, with Christ through baptism,
in order to rise also with Him⁷³.
Let us go down into the grave with Him
in order to get raised together with Him;
let us go up with Him in order to get glorified with Him«⁷⁴.

These theological ideas seem to have been generally accepted in the years of the early Church. Cyrill of Jerusalem suggests that the three days of our Lord in the tomb are represented in baptism by the three immersions into the baptismal water⁷⁵. Bearing this symbolism in mind Ambrose points out that the baptismal font is tomb – shaped⁷⁶.

This movement of going down and then up (with Christ), certainly reminds us of the (triple) immersion of the candidate (for baptism) into the baptismal font⁷⁷. Unfortunately, this Gregorian text doesn't clarify how this movement was actually performed in the liturgical practice. There is also absence of any kind of a baptismal font. The only relevant reference, to some kind of a place where the baptism would have taken place, is that to the »spring of baptism«⁷⁸, with no further explanation.

5. Infant baptism

The Christian Church has been baptising infants since the Apostolic period⁷⁹. In Gregory's era infant baptism had already been an established practice⁸⁰. In his *Sermon on the Holy Baptism* the »Christian Demosthenes« openly and clearly promotes infant baptism⁸¹. He specifically suggests:

»have you got an infant? ...baptise it from infancy,
dedicate it to the Spirit from the age of the soft nails (babyhood)
...give to your child the Trinity, the great and good amulet«⁸².

Gregory also connects infant baptism with the dedication of Samuel to God by his mother Hannah⁸³. Like Hannah, who believed in God, every Christian mother and father should believe in the Holy Trinity, and baptise their child, in order to make it powerful in his or her spiritual war against evil, who is the enemy of every human being.

⁷² Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 44 (with a special reference to the actual »time of regeneration« – »ώρα τῆς ἀναγεννήσεως«).

⁷³ Rom. 6:4

⁷⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 9.

⁷⁵ Cyrill of Jerusalem, Mystagogic Catechesis: SC 126, 2, 4.

⁷⁶ Ambrose, De Sacramentis: PL 16 3, 1.

⁷⁷ This is an ancient Christian practise, which is still observed in the Eastern Orthodox celebration of baptism.

⁷⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 9.

⁷⁹ Acts 2:38–39; 16:15; 16:33; 1 Cor. 1:16; Matt. 19:14; J. Jeremias, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, S.C.M., London 1960; K. Aland, Did the Early Church Baptise Infants?, London 1963.

⁸⁰ Ambrose, De Abraham: 2, 81.84, PL 14, 495.497; John Chrysostom, In Gen. 40:4: PG 53, 373.

⁸¹ S. N. Sakkos, Γρηγόριος ὁ Θεολόγος 4, Thessalonica 1976, p. 8.

⁸² Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 17.

⁸³ 1 Sam. 1:11.

Later on in the sermon Gregory gives more details about what he exactly believes on infant baptism. One of his opinions is that, the infants should be baptised if their life is in danger⁸⁴. And he supports his view by referring to a relevant Jewish practice mentioned in the Bible:

*»we have a reason given,
which is the circumcision⁸⁵ of the eighth day«⁸⁶.*

Regarding children with no health problems he suggested that it would be better if they were admitted in the Church when they were about three years old,

*»when they will be able to hear something sacred
and to reply, even if they cannot understand completely...«⁸⁷.*

6. Various theological and liturgical points on baptism

a) Time for baptism

The most appropriate time for baptism was discussed by Gregory in his sermon. In those days the Feast of Lights, Easter, and Pentecost were regarded as the best occasions to get baptised⁸⁸. However the Holy Father suggests that they should rush to baptism, as soon as possible, because they can never be certain as to when the end of their lives will draw near. *»The gift is ready«⁸⁹*, he says, *»let us speed up the salvation, let us stand up to perform the baptism«⁹⁰*.

b) The celebrant

In Gregory's time the people seem to have been trying to make the best possible choice when selecting the celebrant who would baptise them. However Gregory very firmly states that it is not the celebrant that really matters, but the baptism itself⁹¹. *»Do not judge the worthiness of those who cleanse you«⁹²*, he suggests.

He then adds that, *»each one of them is certainly higher or lower than the other, but they are all higher than you«⁹³*.

⁸⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 28.

⁸⁵ Jewish circumcision has always been regarded as a parallel initiation ceremony with the Christian baptism.

⁸⁶ Gen. 17:23–27; Lev. 12:3.

⁸⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 28.

⁸⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 24.

⁸⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 44.

⁹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 44.

⁹¹ This is the clear and strict teaching of the Christian Church, according to which the sacraments are always valid, even if the celebrant (whose priestly order should be fully recognised by the Church) does not have a high moral standard.

⁹² Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 26.

⁹³ Ebd.

c) The water

The classical Greek term »baptism« means »immersion into the water«⁹⁴. Thus, the baptism presupposes the existence of water. Baptism is also many times called by Gregory »a laver«⁹⁵.

In Gregory's sermon the water used in baptism is called »water of the sin«⁹⁶, probably meaning that the sins of the baptised are buried in this water. »The water and the Spirit«⁹⁷ are those important baptismal elements that they quench all the burning arrows of the evil⁹⁸.

d) The garment of the baptised

It is an ancient custom of the Church that the newly baptised are always dressed in white garments, in order to show, in a visible way, that they have just received Christ and thus their soul is dedicated to Him and it is free of any spot of sin⁹⁹.

Gregory mentions the »bright costume«¹⁰⁰ which is used by the newly baptised, and refers to those who are taking more care of the visible things rather than of the spiritual reality of baptism. To those people he points out that »the sacrament is greater than the visible things«¹⁰¹. »Make yourself fruitful«, he suggests, »put on Christ«¹⁰², for »those of us who have been baptised in Christ, we have put on Christ (like a garment)«¹⁰³.

e) In the name of the Holy Trinity

The Trinitarian theology of Gregory is presented in a very clear and direct manner in this *Sermon*¹⁰⁴. He declares to the candidates that he entrusts them with the confession of the Holy Trinity¹⁰⁵. Their baptism will be performed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit¹⁰⁶.

f) Salvation

According to Gregory baptism and salvation go together. »Say yes and get baptised, and by baptism save yourself«¹⁰⁷, he says. »Accept the salvation, of which there is nothing greater or more valuable«¹⁰⁸. He uses his very powerful rhetoric talent to persuade the people to »speed up the

⁹⁴ I. D. Stamatakos, *Λεξικὸν τῆς ἀρχαίας ἐλληνικῆς γλῶσσης*, Athens 1972, p. 208.

⁹⁵ »Not only a laver for the body, but for the image (Gregory refers here to the soul) as well«, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 32.

⁹⁶ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 4.

⁹⁷ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 10.

⁹⁸ Eph. 6:16.

⁹⁹ *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, *Baptismal Homilies*, 3, 26, in: *Edward Yarnold*, *The Awe Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, Slough 1971, p. 207.

John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*: PG 53, 4, 3.18; *Cyrill of Jerusalem*, *Mystagogic Catechesis*: SC 126, 4, 8; *Ambrose*, *De Mysteriori*: PL 16, 34.

¹⁰⁰ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 25.

¹⁰¹ Ebd.

¹⁰² Ebd.

¹⁰³ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 31; Gal. 3:27.

¹⁰⁴ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 41, 42, 43, 45.

¹⁰⁵ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 41.

¹⁰⁶ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 45; Matt. 28:19.

¹⁰⁷ *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 26.

¹⁰⁸ Ebd.

(their) *salvation*¹⁰⁹ by getting baptised. This is the only way for them to get their salvation «soon»¹¹⁰.

7. What about chrismation?

From the Church History we know that by the end of the 4th century A.D., when many of the Church Services had been fully developed, the two sacraments of initiation into the Christian Faith, namely baptism and chrismation (or confirmation), were celebrated together¹¹¹. This is still the case in the Eastern Orthodox Church, while in the West these two sacraments are celebrated separately.

In the Gregorian *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*, although one may suggest that there are many relevant hints, there is in fact no clear reference to chrismation as such. Even the actual name of chrismation itself, which is «*chrism*» («*χρίσμα*») in Greek, is used to signify the sacrament of baptism. Another name for baptism in the *Sermon* is «*seal*»¹¹² («*σφραγίδα*»), a word which is traditionally used in a chrismation context.

In certain other parts of the sermon there is a reference to the «*water and the Spirit*»¹¹³. The cleansing (or purification) of those baptised is double, with water and the Spirit; the water is typical while the Spirit is true and has the power to cleanse the depths¹¹⁴. Could we possibly assume that the water here means baptism, while the Spirit refers to chrismation?

Another very interesting quotation states: «*the baptism perfects me with the Spirit*»¹¹⁵ («*τὸ βάπτισμα τελειοῦν με διὰ τοῦ Πνεύματος*»). Chrismation (with the Holy Spirit descending upon the newly baptised) was always seen as perfecting and completing the rites of initiation. Could this be the actual meaning of the above Gregorian phrase?

This confusion (if it is really a confusion, not a misunderstanding of some kind) justifies the view expressed by Edward Yarnold, that «*the name, the rites and the significance of what we now call the sacrament of confirmation were all surprisingly fluid in the early Church*»¹¹⁶.

Epilogue

The *Sermon on the Holy Baptism* is an excellent piece of theological work by a great Father of the Church, Gregory of Nazianzus, who is one of the few people that the Church has called a «*Theologian*».

Although it is clear that Gregory is preaching *on* baptism, but neither *during* nor even immediately *after* a baptism¹¹⁷, he presents the views of the Church about baptism in a very systematic and theological way, touching all the important points related to the theology and

¹⁰⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 44.

¹¹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 45.

¹¹¹ Apostolic Constitutions 7, 22; *Cyrill of Jerusalem*, *Mystagogic Catechesis*: SC 126, 3, 1; Canon 48 of the local Synod of Laodicea.

¹¹² Gregory himself explaining the name «*seal*» says that, the baptism is called seal «*because it protects us and because it is the sign of our Lord on us*», in *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 4.

¹¹³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 8, 10.

¹¹⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 8.

¹¹⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Holy Baptism*: PG 36, 43.

¹¹⁶ E. Yarnold, *The Awe Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, Slough 1971, p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Gregory is preaching *on* baptism, as the initiation ceremony into Christianity, and it could be suggested that his preaching is connected to the actual celebration of the sacrament, which had taken place the day before.

to the liturgy of this sacrament. The systematic method of Gregory's presentation offers to those who study this sermon a clear understanding of the liturgical theology of initiation into the Christian Church.

The sermon itself signifies the preaching as a liturgical activity. It is quite probable that Gregory felt that by the sermon he was completing the celebration of the sacrament, which was performed the previous day¹¹⁸.

Those who attended the congregational meeting when the sermon was delivered, belonged to different categories of people and to various social classes. But Gregory is addressing mainly the catechumens, and those who were candidates for baptism, though not formal ones. The main idea which dominates a great part of his sermon is the »no postponement« theory. He offers many supporting arguments presenting and explaining his view. Catechism is a way towards baptism, a distinct part of the initiation process, and Gregory makes that clear to his audience. He even offers his opinion in regard to the contents of catechism.

The theology of lights and the illumination (another name for baptism), which »is a vehicle which brings us to God, a journey with Christ«¹¹⁹, together with the use of candles, which should be seen as a visible sign of the divine light of Christ, the light that leads our lives, are of the most important elements of the liturgical theology of Gregory, because they help us to understand the work of the Holy Trinity within humanity through baptism.

Another very interesting aspect of the liturgical theology of baptism, presented in this sermon, is the immersion into the baptismal water (although this particular practice is rather unclear in the sermon), which signifies the idea of dying and rising with Christ and the regeneration of the human being.

Infant baptism, as well as some other theological and liturgical features (e.g. time for baptism, the celebrant, the actual baptismal water, the garment of the baptised, the reference to the baptism being celebrated in the name of the Holy Trinity and the salvation), are also presented and supported by Gregory in his sermon. He even offers information about the reception¹²⁰ which followed the baptism at that time.

Unfortunately it has not been possible to establish whether Gregory is actually including consciously the sacrament of chrismation in the initiation ceremony described in his sermon. Although certain hints may be found in the text, those elements cannot formulate a clear idea of a specific reference to chrismation.

This Gregorian *Sermon on the Holy Baptism* is a very valuable source, which presents, in a clear and systematic way, the belief and certain liturgical practises of the early Church regarding baptism. Its liturgical theology of initiation is of priceless diachronic value for both the Church and the Christian theology.

¹¹⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 1.

¹¹⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 3.

¹²⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon on the Holy Baptism: PG 36, 25.