

Her spirituality, not His

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1. Introduction

What is feminine spirituality in early Christianity? Nobody can deny that *The Life of St. Macrina* is one of many priceless texts we encounter in early Christian literature which addresses this question. One of many reasons is that St. Macrina shows what Christian life really was in the community of women. Traditionally *The Life of St. Macrina* is believed to have something to do with the spirituality of asceticism. However, this understanding is not supported by feminist historians of Christianity because *The Life of St. Macrina* was written by her brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, who was one of Cappadocian Fathers. In other words, the male values are literally mirrored in *The Life of St. Macrina* in the voices of women.

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The Life of St. Macrina as a hagiography is based on the memory of the biographer. According to literary criticism, a saint's narrative is necessarily reconstructed from the writer's point of view. Apparently most of the authors of hagiographies were men. It follows from this that *The Life of St. Macrina* is colored by patriarchal values. To take an example from the text, there are a few passages mentioning the nature of a woman. Gregory asserts that Macrina transcends her nature and is in line of reasoning, exalted by virtue.¹⁾ We can decipher that Gregory had a prejudice that women are not reasonable beings. From this we can further infer that Gregory depicts his values through Macrina. It is also natural that Gregory relates the spirituality of Macrina in his own terms.

Therefore, this paper aims to restore the spirituality of Macrina suppressed by Gregory in *The Life of St. Macrina*. To do so, we first have to deconstruct the text so that we may discern the voices of Gregory and Macrina about spirituality. Then we can reconstruct the understanding of Macrina about spirituality.

The Life of St. Macrina is a letter to Olympius, whom Gregory came across in Antioch in the journey to Jerusalem, in memory of his sister. The text is a biography dealing briefly with the life of Macrina from birth to death. The author tries to portray Macrina's life as a life of virtue. For Gregory, the purpose of the text is to make Macrina a model of asceticism in pursuit of virtue.

1) Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 170.

2. Ascetism, Gregory's Spirituality

We dare to say that the ideal figure for Gregory in *The Life of St. Macrina* is Socrates. This is evidenced by the conversation between Macrina and Gregory ahead of her death. At a glance we can guess that the text is greatly influenced by Plato's book, *Phaedo*. Many scholars, such as Elizabeth A. Clark²⁾ compare *The Life of St. Macrina* with *Phaedo*. It is self-evident that the first follows the second in literary terms. Like *Phaedo*, there appears in *The Life of St. Macrina* a dialogue between Macrina and Gregory about the problem of death. Like Socrates, Macrina explains to Gregory the relationship between soul and flesh and persuades him to overcome the fear of death.³⁾ In this respect, Gregory is a follower of Neo-Platonism.

What's more, Neo-Platonism had a great impact upon Gregory's understanding of spirituality. Nyssa founded Christian spirituality on the basis of asceticism on the grounds that the ideal life for Christians is that of virtue in the same way as Plato stressed virtue in his works. According to the teaching of Plato, "goodness is a matter of reason."⁴⁾ Gregory further thinks that a virtuous life is a life in imitation of God.⁵⁾ Gregory pursues "human virtue through philosophy."⁶⁾ For Nyssa, "the goal of life" means "the immaterial and simpler life."⁷⁾ Gregory believes that "the high goal of philosophy" is virtue, continence and moderation.⁸⁾ In short, Gregory understands the ascetic life

2) Elizabeth A. Clark, "Holy men, Holy words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the "Linguistic Turn"", in *Studia Patristica* 37 [2001], 424.

3) Gregory of Nyssa, 176.

4) G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 216.

5) This writer will employ the term in the same way as Plato does.

6) Gregory of Nyssa, 163.

7) *Ibid.*, 167.

8) *Ibid.*, 167.

as the most perfect one. This is also reflected in his other work, *Life of Moses*.⁹⁾ Gregory models Moses as an ascetic figure. Gregory, in writing the biography of his dead sister, tries to make Macrina an exemplar of asceticism in history as well. Considering asceticism as a male value in the times of Gregory, we can reach the conclusion that the *The Life of St. Macrina* is colored by a male perspective on asceticism.

3. Prayer, Macrina's Spirituality

The question arises about what the spirituality of Macrina really is. Except for the word virtue, the most frequently employed word in *The Life of St. Macrina* is *prayer*. For example, Macrina began praying from childhood. Macrina was praying while Gregory talked with her before her death. When she performed miracles for herself and a young girl, she prayed. Additionally, Macrina's mother was also described as a woman of prayer. During the funeral of Macrina, the women of her monastery prayed. Even though Gregory uses the word prayer several times, he never attempts to place an emphasis on this word. It seems that Gregory understands how important prayer is for Macrina. Nonetheless he never gives prayer the importance as it deserves.

Why is prayer underestimated by Gregory? To solve this we should understand the essence of prayer. In general, prayer is a dialogue between God and a human being. This means that prayer surpasses the field of reason. Gregory endeavors to describe Macrina as a woman of reason. He refuses to portray her as non rational. In this context, prayer for him may be

9) Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978), 136-7.

classified as non rational because it is transcendental. Given that the 4th century is an age of the Greco Roman world when reason was most favored by men, it is natural that Nyssa depicts Macrina a woman of virtue, not prayer.

On the side of the deconstructive interpretation of the text, we can reread *The Life of St. Macrina*. Gregory reconstructs the real life of Macrina in his interest, not her's. However hard he stresses virtue in her life, there remains the trace of the truth that she was more absorbed in prayer. A character like Sebastopolis, whose daughter's eyes were healed by Macrina in *The Life of St. Macrina*, emphasizes the significance of prayer in connection with healing. It is time for us to restore the role of prayer to what it was in the life of Macrina.

To conclude, the spirituality of Macrina can be understood as that of prayer while the spirituality of Gregory as that of virtue. Gregory approaches God by means of reason. He also believes that a man of reason should live a life of virtue, according to Plato. The spirituality of Gregory is defined as that of virtue. On the other hand, Macrina comes up to God via prayer. For her, God is a transcendent Being beyond our knowledge and reveals Himself in a transcendental way. Prayer is believed to be the best way for the finite being to approach the infinite Being by Macrina. Thus the spirituality of Macrina can be understood as that of prayer.

4. Conclusion

There are two ways to approach God: reason and transcendence. In a patriarchal society, men are supposed to be reasonable, whereas women to be passionate. Reason is associated with virtue, while passion is with prayer. So a life of

virtue is believed to belong to men, while a life of prayer to women. Gregory also regards reason as superior to passion. He believes that an approach to God by way of reason is better than by transcendence. Therefore, Gregory considers a life of virtue as superior to that of prayer.

However, there exists a paradox that "what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension."¹⁰⁾ With such patriarchal dualism as men/women, reason/passion, and virtue/prayer, we could not solve this riddle. To approach God, we have no choice but to forget the distinction of gender roles. Now we cannot help confessing that it is an imaginative product of patriarchy that reason/virtue are understood as better than passion/prayer.

Christian history proves that there has always been a conflict between the spiritualities of virtue and prayer. Since the ages of reason, the spirituality of prayer has been considered as inferior to that of virtue. For example, preaching was emphasized in the ages of Enlightenment rather than prayer. In this context, speaking in tongues was forbidden by conservative churches in Korea. However, Pentecostalism shows how dynamic prayer is in faith. Harvey G. Cox proves the impact of prayer in Christian spirituality in his book, *Fire from Heaven*.

It is time for us to restore the spirituality of prayer suppressed by male values. The reason is that prayer has the power to heal the oppressed by reason, whether men or women, as confessed by a figure in *The Life of St. Macrina*. His following witness will be a great heritage that a holy woman, Macrina, left behind. "Nothing of what was promised to us has been omitted, but the true medicine that heals the diseases, the cure that comes from prayer, this she has given us... .."¹¹⁾

10) *Ibid.*, 95.

11) Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 190.

〈 Abstract 〉

마크리나의 영성의 재구성

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마크리나의 동생이자, 가파도기아의 교부인 그레고리 닷사 (Gregory of Nyssa)는, 초기 기독교 역사에서 가장 위대한 聖女 중 한명으로 추앙받는 마크리나의 성인전을, 그녀의 사후 기록하였다. 마크리나의 생애(The Life of St. Macrina)라는 제목의 성인전에서 그레고리 닷사는 마크리나의 영성을 소상하게 소개하고 있다. 특히 신플라톤 주의의 영향을 받은 그레고리 닷사는 남성적 관점에서 마크리나의 영성을 덕으로 한정시켜 규정하고 있다. 하지만 텍스트에 기초하여 마크리나의 영성을 재구성해 볼 때, 그레고리 닷사가 묘사 하듯, 마크리나는 언제나 기도를 멈추지 않는 성인이었음을 알 수 있다. 이러한 관점에서 마크리나의 영성은 금욕주의가 아니라 기도 에 기초하여 재해석되어야 함을 알 수 있다.