



## SEMINAR ON WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH:

### 4. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, *A Letter on the Life of Saint Macrina*

trans. Kevin Corrigan, *Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Saint Macrina*.  
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You certainly cannot have forgotten our meeting when, on my way to visit Jerusalem in order to fulfill a vow to see the signs of the Lord's residence in the flesh in those places, I ran into you in the city of Antioch and we discussed all sorts of things (for it was hardly likely to be a silent meeting with your keen intelligence prompting numerous starting-points for discussion); and, as often happens in these cases, in the course of our conversation we recalled the life of an honoured person; it was a woman who prompted our narrative, if, that is, we may call her a woman, for I do not know if it is appropriate to apply a name drawn from nature to one who has risen above nature.

Our narrative was not based on hearsay, but we talked with detailed knowledge of things our own experience has taught us, without appealing to any outside testimony; for the maiden we spoke of was no stranger to my family so that I had to learn from others the marvels of her life. No, we had the same parents and she was, so to speak, a votive offering of the fruits to come, the first offshoot of our mother's womb.

And so, since you were convinced that the story of her good deeds would be of some use because you thought that a life of this quality should not be forgotten for the future and that she who had raised herself through philosophy to the highest limit of human virtue should not pass along this way veiled and in silence, I thought it good to obey you and tell her story, as briefly as I could, in a simple, unaffected narrative.

The maiden was called Macrina. Some time ago, there had been a celebrated Macrina in our family, our father's mother. At the time of the persecutions she had suffered bravely for her confession of faith in Christ, and it was in honour of her that the child was given this name by her parents. But this was her public name used by her acquaintances; another name had been secretly given her as the result of a vision which had occurred during labour before she emerged into the light of day. For, in fact, her mother was so virtuous a person that she let herself be led by the will of God in everything and had embraced an exceptionally pure and spotless way of life with the result that she had even chosen of her own free will not to marry. But since she was bereft of both parents, and because her body was just springing into full bud and the fame of her fairness had drawn many young men together in pursuit of her hand, 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. For this reason she chose a man known and proven for the uprightness of his life so that she acquired a guardian for her own life. In her very first pregnancy she became the mother of Macrina.

And when the time came when she was to be freed from her labour pain by giving birth to the child, she fell asleep and seemed to be carrying in her arms the child still embraced by her womb, and someone in suprahuman majesty of form and shape appeared to address the little child by the name of Thekla, that Thekla of great fame among maidens. After doing this three times and calling upon her to witness it, the person disappeared from her sight and gave ease to her labour pains so that as soon as she woke up from her sleep she saw that the dream was reality. And so that was Macrina's secret name. In my view, however, the figure who appeared declared this not so much to guide the mother in her choice of name as to foretell the life of the child and to point out, by the identity of name, a similarity in their choice of life.

And so the child grew. Although she also had her own nurse, for the most part her mother nursed her herself. When she had passed the age of infancy, she was quick to learn her children's lessons, and whatever lessons her parents decided to have the girl study, in those the nature of the little girl excelled.

It was a matter of serious interest to her mother to instruct the child, but not in this pagan, secular course of where the students' early years are for the most part formed by the study of the poets. For she held that it was shameful and altogether unfitting to teach a tender and easily influenced nature either the passions

of tragedy—those passions of women which have given the poets their sources of inspiration and their plots—or the indecent revels of comedy, or the causes of the evils which befell Troy, definitely spoiling the child's nature with the really rather irreverent tales about women. Instead, any passages of divinely inspired Scripture which seemed accessible to very young persons, were the child's study, and above all, the Wisdom of Solomon, and after this, whatever was conducive to the moral life. But also there was none of the psalms which she did not know since she recited each part of the Psalter at the proper times of the day, when she rose from her bed, performed or rested from her duties, sat down to eat or rose up from the table, when she went to bed or got up to pray, at all time she had the Psalter with her like a good travelling companion who never fails.

Growing up with these and similar occupations and having become especially skilled in the working of wool, she attained her twelfth year, the age in which the bloom of youth starts to radiate more than at any other time.

Here it is indeed worth marvelling how the beauty of the young girl, although concealed, did not remain unnoticed. There did not seem to be any such marvel in the whole of that country which could compare with her beauty and gracefulness, so that not even painters' hands could come close to her fresh beauty; and the art which engineers everything and which dares even to wrestle with the greatest subjects, going so far as to fashion in imitation images of the planets themselves, did not have the power to render a true likeness of her blessed beauty. Because of this, a great swarm of suitors surrounded her parents. But her father (for he was indeed wise and practised in the discernment of what is noble) chose from the rest of the company a young kinsman of good repute, known for the moderation of his life who had recently finished school and decided to betroth his daughter to him when she came of age. Meanwhile the young man was among his brighter hopes and brought to the girl's father his reputation for oratory, like a pleasing wedding gift, demonstrating his rhetorical ability in lawsuits on behalf of people who had been wronged. But Envy cut short the bright promise by plucking him from life at a pitiable early age.

The young girl was not unaware of her father's resolution, but when the young man's death had broken off what had been decided for her, she called her father's decision a marriage, as if what had been decided upon had in fact really happened, and she determined to remain by herself for the rest of her life, a decision which was more firmly rooted than one might have expected in one of her age.

Her parents brought up the subject of marriage to her on many occasions because of the many young men who as a result of her famed beauty, wanted to sue for her hand, but she would say that it was improper, indeed unlawful, for her not to embrace a marriage which had been concluded for her once and for all by her father and to be forced instead to look to another when marriage, like birth and death, is by nature something that only happens once. She strongly insisted that the young man who had been joined to her in accordance with her parents' decision was not dead, but that, in her judgement, he who was living in God because of the hope of the resurrection, was simply away from home on a journey and not a dead body; and it was improper not to keep faith with a husband who was away on a journey.

By arguments such as these she pushed aside those who were trying to persuade her and she hit upon one safeguard for her good decision, never to be separated from her mother even for a moment, so that her mother often said to her that she had been pregnant with the rest of her children for the prescribed term, but as for Macrina she bore her always and everywhere, embracing her, as it were, in her womb. But sharing her life with her daughter was not hard for the mother nor was it without benefit. For, instead of her many maidservants, there was now the attentive care of her daughter and a true exchange was realised between the two of them. The older woman cared for the young girl's soul, the young girl for her mother's bodily needs, fulfilling in all things the service that was needed, even frequently preparing bread with her own hands for her mother. This was not her first preoccupation, but after she had lent her hands in service to the liturgies, she thought this occupation fitting for her way of life and, in the time she had left, she provided food for her mother by her own toil; and not only this, but she also took an active part helping her mother in all her pressing concerns; for her mother had four sons and five daughters and was paying taxes to three governors, since her property was scattered throughout that number of provinces.

In many different ways, then, her mother was divided by the worries of this situation—for Macrina's father had already departed this life—and Macrina was a partner to her in all these tasks, taking an equal

share in her worries and alleviating the burden of her sufferings. Furthermore, under the guidance of her mother, she kept her own life spotless, being directed in everything by the approval of her mother's eyes; and at the same time by the example of her own life she provided great guidance to her mother towards the same goal, namely that of philosophy, drawing her on little by little to the immaterial, more perfect life.

And when her mother had arranged in a fair and fitting way the situations of her sisters with a view to what seemed best for each of them, the great Basil, brother of the girl we have been speaking about, came back from the school where he had been trained for a long time in the discipline of rhetoric. Although when she took him in hand he was monstrously conceited about his skill in rhetoric, contemptuous of every high reputation and exalted beyond the leading lights of the province by his self-importance, so swiftly did she win him to the ideal of philosophy that he renounced worldly appearance, showed contempt for the admiration of rhetorical ability and went over of his own accord to this active life of manual labour, preparing for himself by means of his complete poverty a way of life which would tend without impediment towards virtue. But the life of Basil and the subsequent activities for which he became famous in every land under the sun and, by his reputation, eclipsed all those who were illustrious for virtue, would need a lengthy narrative and a lot of time to tell; so then let my story be turned back again to the subject before it.

Since any reason for living a more materialistic way of life was now taken away, 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 receive 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. But I would prefer here to make a small insertion into my narrative and not to leave unrecorded an event so noteworthy as to bear further witness to the sublime character of the maiden.

The second of her four brothers after the great Basil was called Naucratus, and he surpassed the others in the good fortune of his nature, his physical beauty, strength, swiftness and facility for everything. At the age of twenty-one he gave such proofs of his industry at a public recital that the whole assembled audience was deeply moved by him, but prompted by some divine providence he looked down upon all the opportunities at hand and went off in some real inspiration of thought to a life of solitude and poverty, taking nothing with him but himself. One of his servants, however, Chrysaphios, followed him, both because of his friendship for him and because he was intent upon the same choice of life.

So he lived by himself, settled in a remote spot by the Iris. The Iris is a river which flows through the middle of the province of Pontus, has its source in Armenia and empties itself by way of our own lands into the Black Sea. Close by this river the young man found a spot thickly covered by deep forest, hidden in a hollow of an overhanging mountain range, and there he lived far from the disturbances of the city and from the preoccupations of military service or of the rhetoric of the law courts. And having freed himself from all the usual, resounding noise of human life, with his own hands he took care of a group of old people living together in poverty and sickness, since he considered it fitting to make this type of service the care of his personal life. Because he was skilled in every sort of hunting technique, he would go hunting to provide food for the old people and at the same time to disciplining his youthful vigour by such tasks; but he also eagerly complied with his mother's wishes, if she ever asked something of him, and in both of these ways he kept his life upright and true, controlling his youthful vigour both by his labours and by obedient attention to his mother; and through observance of the divine commandments he made his way to God.

For five years he lived in this way, dedicating himself to philosophy and making his mother's life truly happy both because he ordered his own life with moderation and because he put all his strength into obeying the wishes of her who had given him birth. Then, a grievous, tragic accident happened for the mother; it was planned, I think, by the Adversary, and was enough to bring our whole family to misfortune and sorrow. All of a sudden he was snatched from life, and it was not sickness which prepares one to anticipate death nor any other of the usual recognisable causes which brought death to the young man.

He had gone out to hunt, his means of procuring the necessities of life for the old people in his care, but his dead body was brought back home—both he and Chrysaphios, his companion. His mother was far away from what was taking place, three days' journey from the disaster, and someone came to tell her what had happened. Perfect though she was in every kind of virtue, nature prevailed all the same even over her. She

became breathless and speechless and fainted away on the spot, reason giving way to grievous shock, and she lay under the assault of the dreadful news like an athlete of noble stock felled by an unexpected blow.

In this tragedy the excellence of the great Macrina became clear. Placing reason in opposition to passion, she kept herself from falling and, by becoming a support to her mother's weakness, she drew her back again from the depths of her grief. With her firm, unflinching spirit she taught her mother's soul to be brave.

Consequently, her mother was not swept away by her sorrow, nor did she give vent to her suffering in any base or womanish way so as to shout out against her evil fortune, tear her cloak, bewail her suffering or stir up lamentations and their mournful chantings. Instead she endured the attacks of nature with calm, resisting them with her own reasoned reflections and with those suggested by her daughter in order to heal her pain. For then above all, the sublime and exalted soul of the young girl made itself manifest, because her nature also experienced its own suffering; for it was her brother and her most beloved brother, who had been snatched away by death in such a way. Nevertheless, she rose above nature and by means of her own reasoned reflections she lifted her mother up together with her and placed her beyond suffering, guiding her to patience and courage by her own example. But, most of all, her life offered her mother no opportunity to give vent to sorrow at the thought of him who was absent, and instead gave her occasion to delight in the good which she could see before her.

When the responsibility of bringing up the children and the worry of their education and establishment in life was over, and when most of the resources for the more material side of life were shared out among the children, then, as mentioned before, the life of the maiden became for her mother a guide towards the philosophical, immaterial way of life. Turning her 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.

And such was the order of their life, such was the high level of philosophy and the holy conduct of their living by day and by night that it exceeds the power of words to describe it. For just as souls are freed from their bodies by death and at the same time liberated from the cares of this life, so was their existence separated from these things, removed from all of life's vanity and fashioned in harmonious imitation of the life of the angels. In them no anger, envy, hate, arrogance, nor any other such thing was seen; the desire for foolish things of no substance, for honour, glory, delusions of grandeur, the need to be superior to others, and all such things had been eradicated. Self-control was their pleasure, not to be known was their fame, their wealth was in possessing nothing and in shaking off all material surplus, like dust from the body; their work was none of the concerns of this life, except in so far as it was a subordinate task. Their only care was for divine realities, and there was constant prayer and the unceasing singing of hymns, extended equally throughout the entire day and night so that this was both work and respite from work for them.

What human works could ever bring such a mode of existence before one's gaze—in a community whose way of life lay at the boundaries between human nature and the nature which is without body? For to have freed nature from human passions was a feat beyond human strength, while to appear in body, to be encompassed by bodily shape and to live with the organs of sense was thereby to possess a nature inferior to that of the angelic and the incorporeal. Perhaps one might even go so far as to say that the difference was minimal, because, although they lived in the flesh, by virtue of their affinity with the incorporeal powers they were not weighed down by the attractive pull of the body, but their lives were borne upwards, poised on high and they took their souls' flight in concert with the heavenly powers. The time spent in such a way of life was not short and their accomplishments increased with time, since philosophy always granted them an abundance of help in the discovery of good things which led them on to greater purity.

Macrina had a brother who was of special assistance towards this great goal of life. His name was Peter, and with him our mother's birth pangs ceased; for he was the last, tender shoot of his parents, called both son and orphan because at the moment he came into the light of this life, his father departed from it. However, right at the time of his birth when he had only been a few moments at the breast, his eldest sister, the subject of our story, snatched him straight up from the woman who was nursing him and brought him up herself, and she led him to all the higher learning, exercising him from infancy in the sacred teachings so as not to give his soul the leisure to incline to any profane pursuit.

She became everything for the child, father teacher, guide, mother, counsellor in every good, and she perfected him in such a way that before he left childhood, while he was still blossoming at the tender stage of adolescent youth, he was lifted up towards the sublime goal of philosophy; and by some happy, natural disposition he possessed a skillfulness for every kind of handicraft so that without having had anyone to teach him the art in all its specific details, he succeeded in mastering skills for which the majority of people require a long and laborious apprenticeship. He looked down, then, on the practice of profane studies, and holding nature as a sufficient teacher of all good learning and always looking to his sister and making her the ideal of every good, he made such progress in virtue that he was of no less repute than the great Basil for the superior qualities of his later life. But then, in preference to everything, he was working together with his sister and mother with a view to that angelic life. Once, when there was a severe famine and many people from all over, drawn by the fame of their generosity, came pouring into the remote country in which they lived, he provided such an abundance of provisions, thanks to his inventiveness, that because of the throng of visitors, the wilderness looked like a city.

Meanwhile, our mother, who had reached a rich old age, migrated to God; and it was in the arms of both of her children that she left her earthly life. It is worth recording the blessing she pronounced upon her children; she remembered, as was fitting, each of those not present so that no one of them should be without a share of her blessing, and she especially entrusted those present to God in her prayer. These two of her children sat on either side of her bed, she took hold of the hand of each and addressed these, her last words, to God:

To you, O Lord, do I offer the first and the tenth fruit of my labour pains. This is my first born, my eldest daughter, and this my tenth child, my last born son. To you, both have been consecrated by law and your votive offerings they are. So may sanctification come to this my first and to this my tenth born.

And her words clearly betokened her daughter and son. When she had finished her blessing, she ended her life, having instructed her children to place her body in our father's tomb.

They fulfilled her command and devoted themselves in a still more sublime fashion to philosophy, always carrying on the struggle with their own lives and overshadowing their earlier accomplishments with those that followed.

Meanwhile, Basil, a man distinguished among holy people, was chosen to be bishop of the great church of Caesarea and he led his brother to the vocation of the priesthood in the council of elders, ordaining them in the sacred rites himself. By this too their lives made progress in piety and holiness because the priesthood gave increase to their philosophy. Eight years after this, Basil, famed throughout the whole world, departed the life of men and went to God, and his death was a common source of sorrow for both his own country and the world.

When Macrina in her retreat far away heard the news of his death, her soul was deeply upset at such a great loss (for how could suffering fail to touch her too, when even the enemies of the truth were affected?). But just as they say the quality of gold is purified in different melting-pots, that if anything escapes the first casting, it is separated out in the second, and again in the final casting all impurity mixed in with the metal is cleansed from it, and the most accurate test of true gold is if, having come through the whole casting process, it gives off no further impurity; something similar to this happened also in Macrina's case.

The high quality of her thinking was thoroughly tested by successive attacks of painful grief to reveal the authentic and undebased nature of her soul, first by the death of her other brother, Naucratis, after this by the separation from her mother and third when Basil, the common honour of our family, departed from human life. So she stood her ground like an undefeated athlete, who does not cringe at any point before the onslaught of misfortune.

Nine months, or a little more, after this a synod of bishops was convened in the city of Antioch, in which I also took part. And when we were free to return again, each to his own diocese, before the year went by it was weighing heavy on my heart, I, Gregory, to go and visit her. For it was a long time since our last meeting during which the critical circumstances of my trials had prevented our visiting each other, since I

was constantly being exiled by the leaders of heresy. And when I counted up the intervening time in which my trials had precluded our seeing each other, no brief interval did it appear—it came to almost eight years. And so when I had finished most of the journey and was only one day’s travel away from her, I had a vision in a dream which made me apprehensive for the future. I seemed to be holding in my hands the relics of martyrs, and there came from them a bright gleam of light, as from a flawless mirror which had been placed face to the sun, so that my eyes were blinded by the brilliance of the gleam.

During that same night this vision occurred three times, and I was not able to interpret clearly the dream’s hidden meaning, but I foresaw some distress for my soul and I awaited the outcome to make a judgement about what had appeared to me. And in fact when I did get close to the remote spot in which she spent her angelic, heavenly life, I asked one of her community first if my brother was there. He told me that he had set out about three days ago to meet me, and I understood what had happened, that he had taken another road to meet us. Then I enquired of the great Macrina; and when he told me that she was sick, I was in an even greater hurry to finish the rest of the journey, for in truth a foreboding of what was to happen had come upon me and was troubling me deeply.

As I was arriving at the place itself (and the news of my presence had already been announced to the community), an entire contingent of men poured forth from the monastic enclosure—for it was customary for them to honour guests by coming out to greet them—and a group of maidens from the convent awaited our coming by the church in good order.

When the prayers and blessing had been completed and the women had bowed their hands respectfully to receive the blessing and had retired to their own quarters, since none of them remained behind with me, I guessed correctly that their Superior was not among them. Someone guided me to the house where the great Macrina was, opened the door, and there I was inside that holy place. Macrina was already caught in the grip of a grievous sickness, but she was resting not on a bed or a couch, but on the ground, on a plank covered with sack-cloth, with another plank supporting her head and designed to serve instead of a pillow, lying under her neck muscles at a raised angle and giving the right amount of support to her neck.

When she saw me standing by the door, she raised herself on her elbow, but she was unable to run up to me because her strength had already been undermined by the fever. But, planting her hands on the bare floor and stretching forward as far as she could reach from her bed, she managed to do me the honour of greeting me; and I ran up to her, and taking her bowed head in my hands, I lifted her up and put her back in her accustomed reclining position. And she stretched out her hand to God and said, “Even this favour you have fulfilled for me, my God, and you have not deprived me of my heart’s desire in that you have inspired your servant to visit your handmaiden.” And so that she might not bring any despondency to my soul, she tried to stifle her groans and forced herself somehow to hide her tortured gasping for breath.

Throughout everything she was trying to create a more cheerful mood, and she initiated suitable topics of conversation and gave me the opportunity to speak by the questions she asked. But when in the course of our conversation we inadvertently made mention of the great Basil, then my heart sank, my face fell in sorrow and the tears poured from my eyes. But she was so far from being downcast by our sorrow that she made our mention of the holy man a starting point for the higher philosophy, and she expounded arguments of such excellence, explaining the human situation in terms of natural causes, unveiling to reason the divine providence hidden in sad events and recounting in detail events of the life to be hereafter as if she were inspired by the Holy Spirit, that my soul seemed to be almost outside of human nature, uplifted as it was by her words and set down inside the heavenly sanctuaries by the guidance of her discourse.

And just as we hear in the story of Job, that the man was wasting away covered at every point of his entire body with festering and oozing sores, and yet he did not allow his perception, by means of his power of reasoned reflection, to incline towards his pain, but kept the faculty which felt the pain in the body, and would neither blunt the edge of his concentration upon his own proper activity nor interrupt the conversation when it embarked on high matters; it was something like this that I was also seeing in the case of the great Macrina; although the fever was devouring all her strength and driving her headlong to death, she refreshed her body as if with some kind of morning dew, and so she kept her mind unhindered in the contemplation of sublime things, without being at all affected by a sickness of such severity.

And were it not that my narrative was stretching out to infinity, I would record everything in the order and way it happened: how she was lifted up by her discourse and spoke to me of her philosophy of the soul; how she explained the reason for life in the flesh, for what purpose man exists, how he is mortal, what is the source of death and what release there is from death back to life again. On all of these subjects, as if inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit, she explained everything clearly and logically, her speech flowing on with complete ease as water is borne from some fountain-head downhill without anything to get in its way.

When our conversation was concluded, she said, “It’s time, brother, for you to rest your body for a little while, as your journey must have tired you out,” while for me it was really a complete relaxation just to look at her and to listen to her noble words; but since this was pleasing and important to her, in order that I might show obedience to my teacher in everything, I found ready for me in one of the nearby gardens a beautiful spot to rest in and I took my repose under the shade of the vine-girt trees.

It was, however, not possible to savour the delightful surroundings when my soul within was awash with foreboding of unhappy events; for what I had seen seemed to unveil the hidden meaning of the vision in my dream. What I had seen before me was truly the remains of a holy martyr, one who had been dead to sin, but illumined by the indwelling grace of the Holy Spirit. And I explained this to one of those who had already heard my account of the Dream.

We were in the depths of despondency (as was only natural) in the anticipation of sad events, but Macrina guessed (I know not how) our state of mind and sent a message of better tidings to us, telling us to cheer up and to be of better hopes for her; for she perceived a turn for the better. This was not said to deceive us, but her communication was absolutely truthful, even if we did not recognise it at the time. For, in reality, just as a runner who has overtaken his rival and is already close to the finish of the race-course, when he draws near to the prize and sees the victor’s crown, rejoices in his heart, as though he had already won the prizes which lie before him, and proclaims his victory to his supporters in the audience, from a similar intention Macrina gave us to hope for greater things for her, since she was already looking towards the prize of her upward calling and all but applying the words of the apostle to herself when he says that “all there is to come now is the crown of righteousness reserved for me, which the righteous judge will give to me,” since “I have fought the good fight, I have run the race to the end and I have kept the faith.” Reassured, then, by this good news, we started to enjoy the things that were put before us, and these were varied, the provision full of intent to give pleasure, since the great Macrina’s thoughtfulness extended even to these things.

When we were again in her presence—for she did not allow us to spend much time on our own—she took up the story of the events of her life from infancy and retold them all in order as in an historical narrative, what she could remember about our parents’ life, what happened before my birth and what afterwards.

The aim of her story was to give thanks to God. For, as regards the life of our parents, she emphasised not so much their brilliant prosperity at the time and the fact that they were admired everywhere, as that they had been given increase in abundance by God’s love for mankind. Our father’s parents had their possessions confiscated for their profession of Christ. Our mother’s grandfather had been put to death because he had angered the emperor and all his belongings passed to other masters. And in spite of this, their livelihood increased to such an extent because of their faith that there was no one more reputed than they were among the people of that time. Again, when their wealth was divided in nine ways according to the number of their children, the portion given to each was so multiplied by divine blessing that each child lived more prosperously than the parents had done. And of the wealth singled out for her in the equal distribution among the brothers and sisters, Macrina herself retained nothing, but everything was given into the hands of the priest to be administered in accordance with the divine commandment.

Her life was such, since God provided for her, that she never stopped working her hands in the service of God nor did she ever look to man for help nor through any human agency did there come to her the opportunity for a life of comfort. But neither did she turn away people who sought her help nor did she seek out benefactors, for God with His blessings secretly made the small resources from her good works grow like seeds into an abundant stream of fruitfulness.

I then told her all about the personal troubles I had, earlier when the emperor, Valens, had driven me into exile for the faith and later when confusion reigned in the churches and drew me into disputes and wearisome effort.

“Will you not put an end,” she asked, “to your failure to recognise the good things which come from God? Will you not compare your lot with that of your parents? And yet it is true that according to the standard of this world we can have great pride most of all in this that we were well born and from noble stock.

“Our father was very well thought of in his day for his education,” she continued, “but his reputation only extended to the law-courts of his own land. Later on, although he was a long way ahead of everybody else in his mastery of rhetoric, his fame did not reach outside Pontus, but he was glad to be widely recognised in his own country. But you,” she said, “are known in the cities, the townships and the provinces. Churches send you forth and call upon you as ally and reformer, and you do not see the grace in this? Do you not even realise the true cause of such great blessings, that our parents’ prayers are lifting you on high, for you have little or no native capacity for this?”

While she was saying this, I kept wishing that the day could be lengthened so that she might not cease to delight our hearing; but the singing of the choir was calling us to the evening thanksgiving prayers, and the great Macrina sent me off to church too and withdrew herself to God in prayer. And the night was spent in these devotions.

When day came, it was clear to me from what I saw that this day was to mark her last in the life of the flesh, since the fever had totally spent all her natural, inbuilt strength. She saw our dispirited thinking and tried to bring us out of our despondency by again dispersing the pain of our souls with those beautiful words of hers, but from now on her breathing was shallow and tortured.

It was at this moment above all that my soul was torn by what confronted it; on the one hand, my nature was heavy with sadness, as is understandable, in the anticipation that I would no longer hear that voice of hers; but, on the other hand, in so far as I did not yet grasp that the glory of our whole family was going to leave this human life, my soul was divinely inspired, as it were, by the things I saw and I suspected that she had transcended the common nature. For not even in her last breaths to feel anything strange in the expectation of death nor to fear separation from life, but with sublime thinking to philosophise upon what she had chosen for this life, right from the beginning up to her last breath, to me this seemed no longer to be a part of human realities. Instead, 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, about whom it was not unreasonable that her thinking should remain impassible, since the flesh did not drag it down to its own passions. 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, and she seemed to transmit the desire which was in her heart to rush to the one she longed for, so that freed from the fetters of the body, she might swiftly be with him. For it was really towards her beloved that she ran, and no other of life’s pleasures ever turned her eye to itself away from her beloved.

Most of the day had already passed and the sun was starting to set. Her fervour, however, did not give way, but the more she neared her departure, the more she contemplated the beauty of the bridegroom and longed to rush impulsively to her beloved. She no longer spoke to us who were present, but to that one alone upon whom she held her eyes intently. Her bed had been turned towards the east, and she stopped conversing with us and was with God in prayer for the rest of the time, reaching out her hands in supplication and speaking in a low, faint voice so that we could only just hear what she said. ...

And as she spoke this prayer, she traced the sign of the cross on her eyes, her mouth and her heart. And little by little her tongue was burned dry by the fever and was no longer able to articulate her words, her voice was wavering and only by the parting of her lips and the movement of her hands did we recognise that she was praying.

Meanwhile, evening had come on and a light had been brought in. At once Macrina opened her eyes wide, directed their attention to the gleam of light and made it clear that she also wished to say the evening prayer of thanksgiving; but as her voice failed her, she realised her desire in her heart and in the movement of her hands, her lips moving in time with her inward impulse. When she had completed the prayer of



thanksgiving and, by bringing her hand to her face for the sign of the cross, had indicated that she had finished her prayer, she took a strong, deep breath, and with that she died.

...When it was finally time to wrap her pure body in the robe, and the great Macrina's command made it necessary for me to perform this office, the woman who had shared with me in that important inheritance of Macrina's possessions was there helping out with the work.

"Do not let the greatest wonder accomplished by this holy lady," she said, "pass by unrecorded."

"What is that?" I asked.

She laid bare a part of Macrina's breast and asked. "Do you see this faint, tiny mark below the skin? It looks like a scar left by a small needle." And as she spoke she brought the lamp closer to the spot she was showing me. "What is so marvelous about that if the body has a tiny scar here?"

"This is left on the body," she said, "as a reminder of God's great help. For at one time on this spot there was a painful growth, and it was just as dangerous to cut out the tumour as it was to let it take its own course entirely without treatment with the risk that it would spread to the heart area. Her mother begged and entreated her many times to accept medical treatment, for she argued that this art too had been revealed by God for the saving protection of mankind. But Macrina had decided that to bare a part of her body to the eyes of strangers was worse than being sick, and one evening, when she had completed the tasks which she usually performed with her own hands for her mother, she went into the sanctuary and remained there all night long prostrate before the God of healing, weeping a flood of tears to moisten the earth, and she used the mud from her tears as a salve to put on the affected place. Her mother was at her wit's end and again tried to get her to see the doctor, but Macrina said that it would be enough to cure her disease if her mother would make the sign of the cross with her own hand on Macrina's breast. And when her mother put her hand inside Macrina's robe to make the sign of the cross on the affected spot, the sign of the cross worked and the affliction disappeared.

"But this little mark," she continued, "appeared also at the time in place of the horrible tumour and stayed there till the end to be a reminder, I think, of God's visitation, as an impetus and cause for constant thanksgiving to God".

When our task was finished and the body adorned with the means at our disposal, the deaconess again told me that it was not right for Macrina to be seen by the maidens dressed as a bride.

"But I have a dark cloak of your mother's", she said, "which I think would be good to put over her so that this sacred beauty should not be made to shine in clothing brought in just for the occasion". Her view prevailed and the cloak was placed over the body. She shone even in the dark mantle; God's power, I think, added even such grace to her body that, exactly as in the vision I had while dreaming, rays of light seemed to shine out from her beauty.

While we were busy with these matters and the maidens' psalm-singing, mingled with lamentation, echoed all around the place, I do not know how but the news of her death had spread like wildfire throughout the surrounding area and all the people who dwelled round about began to flood in to witness the sad event, so that the vestibule was no longer big enough to hold the assembled people.

So we spent the whole night singing hymns around her body, just as they do in celebrating the deaths of martyrs, and when dawn came, the crowds of both men and women who had flocked together from all the neighbouring districts were interrupting the singing of the psalms with their loud cries of grief.

...When we had completed all the customary funeral rites and it was necessary to go back, I fell upon the tomb and kissed the dust and then took my way back again, downcast and tearful at the thought of how my life had been deprived of such a good.

Along the way, a distinguished military man who had command of a garrison in a little town of the district of Pontus, called Sebastopolis, and who lived there with his subordinates, came with kindly intention to meet me when I arrived there. He had heard of our misfortune and he took it badly (for, in fact, he was related to our family by kinship and also by close friendship). He gave me an account of a miracle worked by Macrina; and this will be the last event I shall record in my story before concluding my narrative. When we had stopped weeping and were standing in conversation, he said to me, "Hear what a great good has departed from human life." And with this he started to tell his story.

“It happened that my wife and I once desired to visit that power-house of virtue; for that’s what I think that place should be called in which the blessed soul spent her life. Our little daughter was also with us and she suffered from an eye ailment as a result of an infectious disease. And it was a hideous and pitiful sight, since the membrane around the pupil was swollen and because of the disease had taken on a whitish tinge. As we entered that divine place, we separated, my wife and I, to make our visit to those who lived a life of philosophy therein, I going to the monks’ enclosure where your brother, Peter, was abbot, and my wife entering the convent to be with the holy one. After a suitable interval had passed, we decided it was time to leave the monastery retreat and we were already getting ready to go when the same, friendly invitation came to us from both quarters. Your brother asked me to stay and take part in the philosophic table, and the blessed Macrina would not permit my wife to leave, but she held our little daughter in her arms and said that she would not give her back until she had given them a meal and offered them the wealth of philosophy; and, as you might have expected, she kissed the little girl and was putting her lips to the girl’s eyes, when she noticed the infection around the pupil and said, “If you do me the favour of sharing our table with us, I will give you in return a reward to match your courtesy”. The little girl’s mother asked what it might be and the great Macrina replied, “It is an ointment I have which has the power to heal the eye infection.” When after this a message reached me from the women’s quarters telling me of Macrina’s promise, we gladly stayed, counting of little consequence the necessity which pressed us to make our way back home.

Finally, the feasting was over and our souls were full. The great Peter with his own hands had entertained and cheered us royally, and the holy Macrina took leave of my wife with every courtesy one could wish for. And so, bright and joyful, we started back home along the same road, each of us telling the other what had happened to each as we went along. And I recounted all I had seen and heard in the men’s enclosure, while she told me every little thing in detail, like a history book, and thought that she should omit nothing, not even the least significant details. On she went telling me about everything in order, as if in a narrative, and when she came to the part where a promise of a cure for the eye had been made, she interrupted the narrative to exclaim, “What’s the matter with us! How did we forget the promise she made us, the special eye ointment?” And I was angry at our negligence and summoned some one to run back quickly to ask for the medicine, when our baby, who was in her nurse’s arms, looked, as it happened, towards her mother. And the mother gazed intently at the child’s eyes and then loudly exclaimed with joy and surprise, “Stop being angry at our negligence! Look! There’s nothing missing of what she promised us, but the true medicine with which she heals diseases, the healing which comes from prayer, she has given us and it has already done its work, there’s nothing whatsoever left of the eye disease, all healed by that divine medicine!” And as she was saying this, she picked the child up in her arms and put her down in mine. And then I too understood the incredible miracles of the gospel, which I had not believed in, and exclaimed: “What a great thing it is when the hand of God restores sight to the blind, when today his servant heals such sicknesses by her faith in Him, an event no less impressive than those miracles!” All the while he was saying this, his voice was choked with emotion and the tears flowed into his story. This then is what I heard from the soldier.

... In order therefore that those who have too little faith, and who do not believe in the gifts of God, should come to no harm, for this reason I have declined to make a complete record here of the greater miracles, since I think that what I have already said is sufficient to complete Macrina’s story.