

Session Two: Christian Theology/Church History  
 A NOTION OF RECONCILIATION IN THE 4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CHRISTIAN CAPPADOCIA:  
 CONSIDERING ST BASIL'S APPROACH TO THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

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St Basil of Caesarea, who lived in Cappadocia, modern Turkey, is one of the greatest theologians of the 4<sup>th</sup> century whose ideas influenced the development of the Christian thought for centuries. He became known as an author of orthodox Trinitarian theology, as a model of a social ministry, and as a preacher of love. Although he lived almost 16 centuries ago, his insights and views may enrich our understanding as well as our practice. As one of the scholars noticed: "When you read Basil's words, you will think they were written yesterday... It is unbelievable how precisely he describes our modern struggle."<sup>1</sup> Many of his ideas are relevant to our contemporary situation. However, this paper will focus on only one aspect of St Basil's legacy: his views related to the idea of reconciliation.

St Basil's understanding of reconciliation can be seen at different levels. The role of Christ in the divine economy and His mediatory function in salvation serves as a foundation for his theological views. The second level is the life of a local community which becomes a community of reconciliation where people can be reconciled not only to God but to each other as well. Third level is relationships between local communities as members of only One Body of Christ. Owing to disagreements and fights among Christians during St Basil's life reconciliation of all separated groups of believers becomes one of the main goals in his life. The last level is St Basil's perception of the role of the Church as an agent of reconciliation, mercy, and love in the world around.

St Basil believes that the role of Christ in the divine economy is especially important because He is "the Peacemaker who makes peace and reconciles completely two in one new human," and this reconciliation happens "in the heaven and on the earth" and all this through Christ's "blood on the cross."<sup>2</sup> In this sense salvation starts with the union of two separated natures in Christ and it finishes with the union of God and humanity.<sup>3</sup> He is also "the Mediator" between God and people.<sup>4</sup> St Basil compares His mediatory function in salvation with that of Moses, through whose help people were able to know truth and to receive the words of God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gregory P. Yova, "Foreword" in C. Paul Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary, 2009), 9.

<sup>2</sup>*Ps. XXXIII.5*, PG 29:361C. See this idea also in *Ps. XLV*: "He himself is our peace, he it is who has made both one, that of the two he might create one new man." Way, *Exegetical Homilies*, 309.

<sup>3</sup>The notion of this idea can be found in *Letter XCVII*: "The Lord Himself undertook the economy, that by the blood of His cross He might make peace between things in earth and things in heaven."

<sup>4</sup>*HS XIV.32*.

<sup>5</sup>*HS XIV.32*.

According to St Basil, this unity of divine and human natures in Christ allows Him to “destroy death’s reign” and to “kill sin in the flesh.”<sup>6</sup> For St Basil, this means, that the immediate aim of humanity’s redemption is salvation from sin. At the same time their salvation will be fully realized only in the age to come in their union with God. There is a “great mystery of salvation,” Basil writes, which includes “the gradual progress of our education, while being brought to perfection in our training for godliness.”<sup>7</sup> We have to mention that when St Basil uses the word “godliness” he implies first of all Christ-likeness. Christ’s ability to unite human and divine natures provides for humans the opportunity to become like Him.

From the previous paragraph, we can conclude that in St Basil’s understanding human sin and the fall led to an alienation from God and to a deadly “disease”<sup>8</sup> that the human race had to suffer. The only medicine or solution to this problem was the Incarnation of the Son and His blood on the cross which provided the way to reconciliation with God and to life in the Heavenly Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> In this case St Basil’s thinking demonstrates the important Eastern view of Christ’s economy. Although the whole economy passes through the cross, the main goal of this pass remains as it had been from the moment of creation: the union of created humanity with God.<sup>10</sup> St Basil does not stop at the cross and suffering but moves on to the Heavenly Kingdom and the new community. He looks at reconciliation and redemption from an eschatological perspective.<sup>11</sup> St Basil leads us through the cross but then goes beyond to the Church of the “firstborns” whose names are “written in the heaven,” to “the rejoicing assembly of saints” who were reconciled to God.<sup>12</sup>

There is always a corporate aspect in St Basil’s thinking concerning the divine economy. It is not about individuals but about reconciliation and salvation for the whole of fallen humanity because “the holy and precious blood of Jesus Christ our Lord” was “shed for us all.”<sup>13</sup> In Basil’s thought the existence of the community of believers, the Church, is connected with the coming to earth of

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<sup>6</sup>Letter CCLXI.2.

<sup>7</sup>HS XIV.32.

<sup>8</sup>See also *Hexaemeron IX.4* where Basil says that “a disease of the soul” is all vice.

<sup>9</sup>LR, Clarke, 169.

<sup>10</sup> See more on this topic about the ecclesiological differences based on the economy of Christ in the Eastern and Western theologies in Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, 133-134.

<sup>11</sup>The eschatological perspective which we see in St Basil became one of the distinctive features of the Eastern theology. See George Florovsky, “The Patristic Age and Eschatology: Introduction” in *Aspects of Church History* (The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, vol. 4, Vaduz: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 63.

<sup>12</sup> Ps. XLV.4, PG 29:424A.

<sup>13</sup> Ps. XLVIII.4, PG 29:441A. This corporate way of thinking can be also noticed when St Basil refers to the Fall. He employs the first personal *plural* pronouns in his expressions connected to this event. He thinks of the whole mankind when he uses sentences which say that the Fall happened to “us,” and it is result of “our” insult (PG 31:349C), and “we” have drawn death upon “ourselves” (PG 345AB). See this idea in Orphanos, *Creation and Salvation according to St Basil of Caesarea*, 92.

the Son of God, who became the “*in-humanated* God”<sup>14</sup> in whom the union of created and uncreated was realised.<sup>15</sup> He was “God in human nature” who through the “economy of incarnation” descended to “mean and weak” humanity.<sup>16</sup> He came to “destroy death,” and to give “a hope of resurrection.”<sup>17</sup>

St Basil conveys the corporate aspect reflected in the economy of Christ through one of the great biblical images – the image of the Church as Body of Christ.<sup>18</sup> This image implies that ultimate salvation cannot be achieved individually because it is a process of restoration<sup>19</sup> which includes co-operation with the other members of the Body. In this sense the economy of Christ results in the incorporation of redeemed people into the new community, His Body, which has the ability to have fellowship with God.

This Body of Christ, the Church, is depicted by St Basil as a new social entity where God assembles His children providing for them the proper environment for their growth and development. In Basil’s thought this is the place where reconciliation happens not only with God but with other human beings as well.

St Basil emphasizes the idea that this community is constituted by the Holy Spirit. In this sense the Holy Spirit fulfils the economy of Christ and brings together a corporate body of people who have been saved.<sup>20</sup> Through prophets and apostles the Spirit gathers them from different nations, and with different socio-economic status, and both male and female.<sup>21</sup> He breaks down all the existing borders which divide society. Using the words from Psalm 19:4, St Basil shows that the Spirit of God is able to reach any person who lives on the earth, including any geographical location, and help him or her join the community. People from different cultural settings and from different languages can be assembled together.<sup>22</sup> This sounds very much relevant to the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ps. XLV*, PG 29:425C. Translation is mine. This word “*in-humanated*” (*ton enanthropesanta Theon*) was invented in order to communicate the real meaning of the Greek text. It is possible to use the English word “incarnated” which is a literal translation of another Greek word *sarkoseos*. Basil used this word in his *Letter CCLXV.2* and the meaning is slightly different.

<sup>15</sup> *Letter CCXXXVI.1*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ps. XLIV.5*, PG 29:400AB. See similar idea in *Hom. 27, On the Holy Birth of Christ*, PG 31:1460BC.

<sup>17</sup> *Hom. 3*, PG 31:213A.

<sup>18</sup> *Letter CCXLIII.1, Ps. XLIV.5*, PG 29:397CD, *De Jud.*, PG 31:660A, *HS V.9*.

<sup>19</sup> *Hom. 20.1*, PG 31:525AB. St Basil believes that the part of the process of restoration is the restoration of the original state of humans which they had at the moment of creation and which they lost after the fall. See also this idea in his homily *On Psalm LXI* where St Basil compares the state of a human with a building which God can restore after the reconstruction. PG 29:473C. See Way, 344.

<sup>20</sup> *Ps. XLVIII*, PG 29:433A.

<sup>21</sup> *Ps. XLVIII*, PG 29:433B.

<sup>22</sup> *Ps. XLVIII*, PG 29:433A. Although everything is done through the apostles and prophets the main idea behind the text is that the Holy Spirit is the One who makes it happen.

situation we face right now in Eurasia region and especially in Europe.

What seems very important for St Basil is the idea that the relationships of love can be practiced by believers despite our human differences.<sup>23</sup> He states that this fellowship (*koinonia*) brings people together in peace<sup>24</sup> even if they oppose each other in the world because of their lifestyle. But in order to establish and to keep these relationships, St Basil teaches, they have to forget about their privileges and their riches when they enter the Church of God.<sup>25</sup> The Church is a community of reconciliation and this reconciliation takes place among people who in any other circumstances would not be able to communicate at this level. In Basil's words, "through the Church they are habituated to love (*agape*)."<sup>26</sup> This implies that the Triune God structured the Church on earth in a way that through love brings people closer to the community in which they will live hereafter, and where the criteria to measure their dignity will be different. It is not their material possessions or their social rank but their ability to love according to God's commandments that will be considered by God in the community for which they were made originally. God structured the life of this community on earth in a way that each person has the opportunity to develop new and better relationships, which lead to reconciliation and peace.

Unfortunately, St Basil's writings reveal to us the sorrowful reality in which he lives: the Church on earth requires healing and restoration. Throughout his works and especially in the epistles St Basil equally uses both terms "the Church" and "the churches" in regard to the Christian communities in the world.<sup>27</sup> We can understand from the context that for St Basil there is only One true Church of God which is the Mother of all believers, the bride of Christ and His body that makes itself known in the world through the presence of local "members" of this Body which are also called "churches."<sup>28</sup> In his thinking this bodily metaphor includes both the congregations and the individual believers who are separated by distances but united by God for the fulfillment of His purpose. The dysfunction of its members caused by the schisms and separations is a sign of a sickness which shows that the Church is in need of peace and reconciliation.

St Basil strongly believes that divisions and fights among Christian communities lead to separation of these churches from God Himself. Basil cannot accept the situation and asks other faithful believers: "...pray to the Lord yourself, and join all Christ's noble athletes with you in prayer for the Churches, to the end that... God may be reconciled to his own churches and

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<sup>23</sup> *Ps. XLVIII*, PG 29:433D. In some sense this idea is reflected in the current popular expression - "reconciled diversity". See C. Gunton, "The Church on Earth: the Roots of Community," in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1989), 66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ps. XLVIII*, PG 29:433D. Literally in text it is "the fellowship of calling" which implies that these people were called to this fellowship by God.

<sup>25</sup> *Ps. XLVIII*, PG 29:436A.

<sup>26</sup> *Ps. XLVIII*, PG 29:433D.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, *Letter CXIII*, *Letter CCXLIII*, *Letter CLIV*, *Letter CLXIV*, *Letter XXX*.

<sup>28</sup> The discussion of metaphors "the mother" and "the body" can be found in the chapter 4 of my unpublished PhD thesis.

restore them to their ancient peace.”<sup>29</sup> He argues that this reconciliation would only happen among the believers if they communicate with each other as the servants of one God and the Ruler of the Church.

A similar way of thinking may be found in Basil's work *On the Judgment of God* where the division in the Church is considered as a sign that God does not rule the churches. Comparing the history of Israel from the book of Judges to the divisions in his own day, St Basil brings his readers to the idea that all these things happen in the Church “because of neglect of the one great and only King and God of all.”<sup>30</sup> He also believes that such discord and quarreling among the members of the Church is the result of people turning away from God when leaders of the Church abandon the teachings of the Lord and claiming to themselves authority in dealing with certain questions, making their own private rules, “and wishing to rule over against the Lord rather than be ruled by Him.”<sup>31</sup>

St Basil is totally aware that God Himself creates the Church and sustains its unity. He has no doubt that the restoration of peace in the Church is a “heavenly and saving gift of Christ.”<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, he believes that the human labour is necessary to reconcile all Christians with each other and “to renew laws of ancient love.”<sup>33</sup> Consequently, he puts a lot of effort into conversations with the leaders of the Church through the exchange of letters and visits. The reconciliation becomes one of his main ministries in the church. As Basil acknowledges, “For peace's sake there is no trouble that I will not undertake, no act, no word of humility that I will shrink from; I will reckon no length of journey, I will undergo any inconvenience, if only I may be rewarded by being able to make peace.”<sup>34</sup> Probably, this should become our attitude toward the ministry as well.

St Basil believes that only when this Body, the Church, is strong enough it may witness to the world about God's love and serve as an agent of reconciliation. In this sense his understanding of reconciliation is linked with the practical actions of believers in the Church and in the world around them. Therefore, it shapes Basil's attitude toward people and his ideas of the Church's ministry. As we have noticed earlier, St Basil perceives the Church as a social event which all believers begin to experience here on earth and which continues in the heavenly realities. Life in a Christian community leads the people to union with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit into the age to come when all their relations will be maintained according to God's law of love. In this sense, the Church is the sphere where believers should be united to their Triune Creator and to each other by the same law in this present life. In Basil's opinion this should be demonstrated as “faith working through love”<sup>35</sup> that includes feeding the hungry, offering hospitality to the stranger, helping the sick and the needy. In Basil's thought the Church as the community of

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<sup>29</sup> *Letter CLXIV.*

<sup>30</sup> *De Jud.*, Clarke, 78.

<sup>31</sup> *De Jud.*, Clarke, 78.

<sup>32</sup> *Letter LXX.* See also *Letter CCLXIV* where Basil asserts that God Himself will bestow peace on the Church.

<sup>33</sup> *Letter LXX.*

<sup>34</sup> *Letter XCVII.*

<sup>35</sup> *The Morals LXXX.22.* See also *De Jud.*, Clarke, 89.

faithful had to fulfill both functions: to save the souls of people through reconciliation to God and to minister to bodies of human beings through the improvement of their social conditions.

This suggests that the merciful attitude of Christ should be imitated by everyone in the world and this will lead to positive changes in the lives of many people and to the renewal of existing circumstances. The Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit should take the initiative in society and become the community which brings reconciliation, relief, and redemption. St Basil's understanding of reconciliation which begins with the divine economy of Christ and finishes with ministry of reconciliation which is practiced by believers found its practical realization in the life of his monastic communities. This kind of community of shared life and resources became for him a place where he tried to embody his ideal of the Church which should not be limited only to a monastic context but should become a model to be imitated by all. As successful ecclesiastical administrator he left an example which for centuries determined the attitude of Christians toward the social issues. His strategies and approaches were used by many other believers and leaders of the Church both in the East and in the West. Under prevailing circumstances, St Basil was able to create an alternative "new city" and communities where he was able to show how the Church was to operate in this world according to God's plan for humanity and to fulfill its ministry in order to reverse all negative consequences of human disobedience to God's will. Thus, he introduced the practical way in which the Christian community may become the reconciling and redeeming force. Following his example, we as the Church may take part in God's plan of transformation for this world. This may happen if our own reconciliation with Christ should be visible through our ministry of reconciliation in the Church and through the Church.