

**Orthodox and some Catholic Triodions prescribe the Feast of St. Gregory of Palamas to be observed on this Sunday.**

## **SECOND SUNDAY OF THE GREAT FAST-SUNDAY OF ST. GREGORY PALAMAS**

**Gregory Palamas** (1296-1359) was a monk of Mount Athos in Greece and later the Archbishop of Thessaloniki known as a preeminent theologian of Hesychasm. The teachings embodied in his writings defending Hesychasm against the attack of Barlaam are sometimes referred to as Palamism, his followers as Palamites. Palamas is venerated as a Saint in the Eastern Church and he is venerated in the liturgy, and he has been called a saint and has been repeatedly cited as a great theological writer by Pope John Paul II. Some of his writings are collected in the Philokalia. The second Sunday of the Great Lent is called the Sunday of Gregory Palamas in those Churches that commemorate him according to the Byzantine Rite of Constantinople.

Gregory born in Constantinople in the year 1296. His father was a courtier of the Byzantine Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328), but he died soon after Gregory was born. The Emperor himself took part in the raising and education of the fatherless boy. The Emperor had hoped that the gifted Gregory would devote himself to government service.

The Emperor's ambitions for him, Gregory, then barely twenty years old, withdrew to Mount Athos in the year 1316 and became a novice there in the Vatopedi monastery under the guidance of the monastic Elder St Nicodemus of Vatopedi. Eventually, he was tonsured a monk, and continued his life of asceticism. After the demise of the Elder Nicodemus, Gregory spent eight years of spiritual struggle under the guidance of a new Elder, Nicephorus. After this last Elder's repose, Gregory transferred to the Great Lavra of St. Athanasius the Athonite on Mount Athos, where he served the brethren in the trapeza (refectory) and in church as a cantor. Wishing to devote himself more fully to prayer and asceticism he entered a skete called *Glossia*, where he taught the ancient practice of mental prayer known as "prayer of the heart" or Hesychasm.

In 1326, because of Turkish invasions, he and the brethren retreated to defended the city of Thessaloniki, where he was then ordained a priest. Dividing his time between his ministry to the people and his pursuit of spiritual perfection, he founded a small community of hermits near Thessaloniki in a place called Veria.

He served for a short time as Abbot of the Esphigmenou Monastery but was forced to resign in 1335 due to discontentment regarding the austerity of his monastic administration.

Hesychasm attracted the attention of Barlaam, a convert to Eastern Catholicism who encountered Hesychasts and heard descriptions of their practices during a visit to Mount Athos; he had also read the writings of Palamas, himself an Athonite monk. Trained in Western Scholastic theology, Barlaam was scandalized by hesychasm and began to combat it both orally and in his writings. As a private teacher of theology in the

Western Scholastic mode, Barlaam propounded a more intellectual and propositional approach to the knowledge of God than the Hesychasts taught.

On the Hesychast side, the controversy was taken up by Palamas who was asked by his fellow monks on Mt Athos to defend hesychasm from the attacks of Barlaam. Palamas was well-educated in Greek philosophy. Gregory wrote a number of works in its defense and defended hesychasm at six different synods in Constantinople ultimately triumphing over its attackers in the synod of 1351

Although Barlaam came from southern Italy, his ancestry was Greek and he claimed Eastern Catholicism as his Christian faith. Arriving in Constantinople around 1330, Barlaam was working on commentaries on Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

Palamas took issue with Barlaam's argument in support of the filioque, namely that efforts at demonstrating the nature of God (specifically, the nature of the Holy Spirit) should be abandoned, because God is ultimately unknowable and undemonstrable to humans. Thus, Barlaam asserted that it was impossible to determine from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds. Palamas viewed Barlaam's argument as "dangerously agnostic". In his response titled "Apodictic Treatises", Palamas insisted that it was indeed demonstrable that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father but not from the Son. Saint John Paul II proved Palamas was correct.

Gregory's teaching was affirmed by the superiors and principal monks of Mt. Athos, who met in synod during 1340-1. In early 1341, the monastic communities of Mount Athos wrote the Hagioritic Tome under the supervision and inspiration of Palamas. Although the Tome does not mention Barlaam by name, the work clearly takes aim at Barlaam's views. The Tome provides a systematic presentation of Palamas' teaching and became the fundamental textbook for Byzantine Catholic mysticism.£§1

Barlaam also took exception to the doctrine held by the Hesychasts as to the uncreated nature of the light, the experience of which was said to be the goal of Hesychast practice, regarding it as heretical and blasphemous. It was maintained by the Hesychasts to be of divine origin and to be identical to the light which had been manifested to Jesus' disciples on Mount Tabor at the Transfiguration.rm Barlaam viewed this doctrine of "uncreated light" to be polytheistic because as it postulated two eternal substances, a visible and an invisible God. Barlaam accuses the use of the Jesus Prayer of this.

In the third Triad, Palamas refuted Barlaam's charge of Messalianism by demonstrating that the Hesychasts did not share the antisacramentalism of the Messalians nor did they claim to physically see the essence of God with their eyes.rm