

Human Freedom and the Hope of Universal Salvation: St. Gregory of Nyssa's Theological Dilemma

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Abstract: *This article explores the doctrine of apocatastasis, or universal restoration, in the thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the leading figures of early Christian theology. Central to Gregory's vision is the idea that all of creation will ultimately be restored to its original goodness through the transformative power of divine love. The first section examines Gregory's understanding of baptism as a means of purification and salvation, with an emphasis on the concept of salvation by fire—where the soul is purified through divine suffering, culminating in ultimate reconciliation with God. The second section addresses Gregory's belief that the evil nature of sin and corruption will eventually pass into non-existence, as God's redemptive plan works toward the eradication of all that is contrary to divine goodness. The article then turns to Gregory's third argument from the unity of humanity, where he contends that the indivisibility of the human race demands the salvation of all, as God desires the restoration of the entire human family. Finally, his fourth argument considers the tension between human freedom and universal salvation, exploring how Gregory navigates the problem of free will in light of his eschatological hope for the eventual reconciliation of all souls with God. Through these four key themes, the article highlights Gregory's distinctive contribution to early Christian thought on the restoration of all things.*

Keywords: *Apocatastasis, Universal Salvation, Christian Universalism, Eschatology, Human Freedom*

Introduction

Apocatastasis, the teaching encompassing the final restoration of all things, is a central theme in the theological thought of many Church Fathers, among whom St. Gregory of Nyssa plays a crucial role¹. This doctrine, which postulates the rehabilitation and salvation of all of creation, including the fallen, was a cornerstone in the Gregorian vision of universal salvation and the final destiny of mankind². In the context of this teaching, Gregory of Nyssa offers a profound vision of divine and human nature, of free will and the relationship between good and evil, all of which are integrated into a divine plan of restoration and cosmic reconciliation.

The present study aims to explore the concept of apocatastasis in the writings of St. Gregory of Nyssa, to analyze the biblical and philosophical foundations³ of this doctrine, as well as its theological implications for understanding salvation and human destiny. We will also explore the

¹ Alexandru Lazăr, „Salvarea Universală. Noi Opinii în Teologia Contemporană”, in *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. VIII, No. 16, p. 253-264; Alexandru Lazăr „Anthropo-theological Fragility: Soteriological Excursion and Dogmatic Consequences”, in *Astra Salvensis*, XII (2024), No. 23, p. 3-20

² Alexandru Lazăr, „Actualitatea apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului”, in *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. IX, No. 17, p. 175-182.

³ Alexandru Lazăr, „The Problem of Eternal Life – Some Anti-Universalist Landmarks”, in *International Journal of Religion*, Volume 5, No. 8, 2024, p. 709.

historical context in which Gregory developed this doctrine and how it has been interpreted and controversialized over the centuries⁴. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to a better understanding of an essential aspect of Gregorian theology which, although marginalized in some theological circles, remains a vital topic of discussion on universal salvation

St. Gregory held an optimistic view of salvation⁵, in which apocatastasis plays an essential role. He developed this idea based on his understanding of God's infinite love and divine omnipotence. In his theological thinking, the ultimate purpose of creation is union with God, and this union will be complete only when all humans are brought into communion with God⁶.

The term *apokatastasis* occurs approximately forty times in Gregory's writings in a variety of contexts⁷. The most predominant usage refers to the general resurrection and restoration of man, seen through the prism of the expression: "πρὸς τὸν ἀρχαίων ἀποκατάστασις"⁸. Many modern commentators have concluded from Gregory of Nyssa's application of the term that the doctrine of universal restoration is present throughout his work, and point to passages in which he seems to state directly and unequivocally that all will be saved. Among these works in which we find his formulations are: *On the Soul and the Resurrection*⁹, *About the making of man*¹⁰, *The great catechetical word*¹¹, and *About the life of Moses*¹².

⁴ Alexandru Lazăr, „The Politico-Dogmatic Stage of the Apocatastasis’ Condemnation. Post-synodal Perspectives”, in *Theologia*, Vol. 92, Issue 3/2022, p.154; Alexandru Lazăr, „Maran Atha and the Soteriological Consequence of the Eshaton”, in *Research & Science Today*, Vol. 26, Issue 2/2023; Alexandru Lazăr, „Orthodox Response to Christian Universalism: The Theological Perspective of Pavel Florensky”, in *Khazanah Theologia*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2023, pp. 169-178.

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa used the term apokatastasis (ἀποκατάστασις), but it occurs predominantly in his writings in reference to the eschatological restoration of the state of humanity intended by God, or "restoration" in different ways and in a variety of contexts, resurrection. Cf. Mario Baghos, „Reconsidering Apokatastasis in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s on the Soul and Resurrection and the Catechetical Oraῖon”, in *Phronema*, Vol. 27, Issue 2, 2012, p. 125. Cf. Manubu Akiyama, „Soteriological dimension in the Anaphora of the Liturgy of St. Basil in light of the Eschatology of St. Gregory of Nyssa”, in *Folia Athanasiana* 8, 2006, p. 102.

⁶ Eirini Artemi, „The aspect of the Body in the writing On the Soul and the Resurrection of Gregory of Nyssa”, in *Singi Logos*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Septembrie 2022 p. 124.

⁷ According to Friedhelm Mann's dictionary, the term ἀποκατάστασις and the verb with the same root can be found in 40 episodes in the works of Gregory of Nyssa and are used in almost every sense in the works of the Cappadocian father. Gregory of Nyssa's theological perception of apocatastasis is the most debatable issue in his theology. Cf. Tamar Aptsiauri, The theory of ἀποκατάστασις in The Life of Moses by Gregory of Nyssa, in *Phasis* 13-14, 2010-2011, p. 125.

⁸ Ludlow Morwenna states that "the goal and end of the journey is restoration to the original state (πρὸς τὸν ἀρχαίων ἀποκατάστασις) which is nothing other than similarity with the divinity". Cf. Ludlow Morwenna, *Universal Salvation. Eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, p. 43.

⁹ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre suflet și înviere*, coll. PSB 30, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998.

¹⁰ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre facerea omului*, vol. 30, coll. PSB 30, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998.

¹¹ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, coll. PSB 30, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998.

¹² Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre viața lui Moise*, Editura Sfântul Gheorghe-Vechi, București, 1995.

To be able to decipher St. Gregory of Nyssa's vision of apocatastasis, there are four key themes of research that will be presented in the following order:

1. The concept of baptism and salvation by fire
2. The theme of the evil nature of sin and corruption passing into non-existence
3. The argument of restoration led from the unity of humanity
4. The problem of navigating human freedom and universal salvation

1. Baptism and salvation by fire

St. Gregory of Nyssa regards these two conditions as external factors to a human being that can offer the path to salvation: the Christian baptism and the "baptism" by fire.

The centrality of Christian baptism in St. Gregory's soteriological thought reflects the centrality of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection in the economy of salvation and the necessary condition for salvation. Gregory presents baptism as a foreshadowing and preparation for the eventual resurrection and final restoration of man¹³ and asserts that this "great resurrection" could not take place if it were not preceded by the rebirth offered by the baptismal bath, which is described as an act of initiation.

The terms *ἀποκατάστασις* and *μυστήριον* are in the thinking of the Cappadocian father synonymous. For him, the term *μυστήριον* is primarily the mystery of the saving *iconomia*, and the mystery of baptism refers directly to it. The "mystery of economy" is the mystery of salvation, which centers on the incarnation of Christ¹⁴.

If things are like this for those who are baptized, what will it be like for the unbaptized? Gregory of Nyssa considers that for those who have not received the mystery of baptism there is still a chance in the next life where "baptism" by fire will take on this purifying and preparatory function of salvation. Meaning, "since fire and water have a certain power to cleanse, those who have been cleansed from the stain of sin by the water full of the mystery of Baptism have no need of another form of purification; on the contrary, those who have not wished to partake of such cleansing must

¹³ Gregory's conception of baptism itself is strongly eschatologically oriented, so that, in his view, baptism is the beginning of *τέλος*; and a direct anticipation and preparation for *ἀποκατάστασις*. In this regard, it is no accident that baptism in St. Gregory's thought is profoundly connected with the resurrection, that of Christ and that of all men. For Gregory strongly links baptism to the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection of Christ has resurrected all humanity, as Origen and, under his influence, Athanasius have already strongly emphasized. Cf. Ilaria Ramelli, „Baptism in Gregory of Nyssa's Theology and its Orientation to Eschatology”, in David Hellholm ed., *Ablution, Initiation and Baptism. Late Antiquity, Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, De Gruyter, 2011, p. 1209.

¹⁴ Ilaria Ramelli, „Baptism in Gregory of Nyssa's Theology and its Orientation to Eschatology”, p. 1224.

necessarily be cleansed by fire"¹⁵. In this passage, the fire in the next world has the same purifying function as the water of baptism and will provide purification from evil in cases where "baptism and/or repentance" and "repentance and repentance" could not provide purification in the present life.

Gregory defines God as love, according to the account of Scripture, and in his conception, this love is described as the consuming fire that purifies the soul from all impurity¹⁶.

Seen from this point of view, purification is not a punishment, but an act of restoring the soul to its original state of purity and communion with God by a fire which is not like the fire of this world¹⁷.

2. Evil nature will pass into non-existence

Gregory of Nyssa believed that sin and evil do not have an ontological existence of their own, but are rather a lack of good. In this sense he believes that in the end evil will be completely annihilated and all people, even those who have suffered in hell, will eventually be saved and participate in the universal restoration. All who had their being through God will return to their original state, a state which never received evil¹⁸.

The Scriptural text on which St. Gregory of Nyssa references is 1 Corinthians 15:28: "when all things shall be made subject to him, then shall the Son himself also be made subject to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all". Certainly St. Gregory of Nyssa believed that St. Paul the Apostle was certain that God will be all in all at the eschatological end of history. But the questions posed are controversial for: 1. either God will be all in all and therefore will also be in evil?

¹⁵ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, p. 323.

¹⁶ "Just as in the case of mixing gold with a worse material, those who are skillful in cleaning gold use the trial of fire to remove the foreign material that must be eliminated, in order to restore the metal to its former health and to give it the shine it should have - a laborious labor, for the consuming power of fire removes what is unwholesome only after a long time, not to mention that this is the true 'gold-leaching', by melting away the foreign element whose presence alters the beauty of the metal - in the same way death, wickedness, darkness, and every other fruit of wickedness, which their originator has sown, are destroyed when they feel the divine power approaching like fire, to remove every unclean element from the nature now enlightened, even if this enlightenment is very laborious". Cf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, p. 323.

¹⁷ Gregory also emphasizes the mystical dimension of fire, seen as a divine light that illuminates the mind and soul, leading to the true knowledge of God. This illumination is not only intellectual, but also experiential, transforming the human being into a vessel of divine grace: "When you hear that there will also be a fire there, know that it has a property that you do not find at all in ordinary fire; that fire does not go out, while for this fire the minds of people have discovered many ways to put it out, and between what can be put out and what cannot be put out there is a great difference. In other words, that is something completely different from the fire here". Cf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, p. 324.

¹⁸ Ludlow Morwenna, *Universal Salvation. Eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, Oxford University Press, p. 43.

Or 2. will God be all in all because evil will no longer exist? In his writings *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, it's highlighted that "Scripture teaches us (in 1 Corinthians 15:28) that the definitive disappearance of evil consists in the fact that God is everywhere in all that exists, then it is obvious that evil does not exist. If we make an exception, saying that evil exists parallel to God, this exception invalidates the whole demonstration. For he who is in all, cannot exist in that which does not exist"¹⁹. The resolution will be a state in which "God will be all in all and all will be united in the communion of good"²⁰. Here, Gregory emphasizes that the non-existent cannot exist forever²¹.

De facto, assuming that man's essence is good, knowing that the image of God in him has not been completely blurred, and that God, by his omniscient power, totally overcomes evil, Gregory believes that good attracts more powerfully than evil. Therefore, even if not fully known, the creatures of reason innately desire, at the deepest level of their being, , to be in the state for which they were originally created and in which they existed²²: "Evil is not so mighty that it surpasses the power of good, nor is the foolishness of our nature greater and more enduring than the wisdom of God"²³. In Gregory's thinking, human nature seems intrinsically to contain something akin to the Goodness of God, so that, by virtue of this embodiment of human nature in the divine nature, God naturally draws people closer to him.

If there are certain persons who have reached an advanced degree of satanization or stability in evil, due to the fragile nature of our nature, , they will be the one to resist. "The fickle nature of our nature does not let us take too strong roots in evil"²⁴, and likewise even if there will be a maximum degree of satanization, by reaching that point and knowing evil, the human nature will naturally turn to good. "If he who advances toward the good will never stop, for good has no boundary, he who is persevering toward the opposite goal, after having traversed the whole path of evil, will begin again the path of the return of our changing nature" towards goodness²⁵.

The difficulty posed by these passages is obviously the possibility of the salvation of the devil, not to mention his insistence on the complete eradication of evil, though many scholars take this view

¹⁹ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre suflet și înviere*, p. 385

²⁰ Wojciech Szczerba, „The Concept of Apokatastasis as a symbol of Human Equality”, in *Forum Philosophicum* 27, No. 2, 2022, p. 250

²¹ Wojciech Szczerba, „Apokatastaza po Orygenesie – casus Grzegorza z Nyssy”, in *Analiza i Egzystencja*, No. 3, 2006, p. 183.

²² Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, p. 87.

²³ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre facerea omului*, vol. 30, coll. PSB 30, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 59.

²⁴ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre facerea omului*, vol. 30, p. 59.

²⁵ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre facerea omului*, vol. 30, p. 59.

of St. Gregory of Nyssa's on the disappearance of evil as akin to the salvation of evil/devil²⁶. However, St. Gregory noted that the healing and restoration of the devil to the place from which he had fallen would depend on his free acceptance of the benefits of the incarnation; just as the salvation of human beings presupposes an existential process whereby they freely cultivate the way of virtue. We may infer, therefore, that although his healing was made possible by the transfiguration of all things in the incarnation of Christ, it was not in fact actualized, because the devil did not and never would willingly accept the Lord or his exhortations to virtue: "By being united with the human nature and taking upon Himself all the attributes of the human nature: birth, growth, and even passing even the ordeal of death, God has accomplished all the things of which I have spoken, freeing man from wickedness and healing even the originator of wickedness"²⁷.

3. The "unity of humanity" argument

Although some scholars are of the opinion that the teaching on the unity of human nature does not provide grounds for universal salvation in Gregory of Nyssa's theory²⁸, Gregory's reasoning for apocatastasis from the argument on the unity of humanity is eloquently based on the fundamental premise that, in the first creation, humanity was created in the image of God as a whole²⁹, therefore it too must be restored back to the image of God seen as a whole³⁰. Through this argument the Cappadocian father affirms the interconnectedness in both the primary act of genesis and the final act of salvation, consolidating a solid theological basis for his anthropological, soteriological and eschatological vision.

²⁶ Ludlow argued that "the salvation not only of sinners but also of devils is in keeping with the direction of the rest of Gregory's eschatology" and that "Gregory asserts that the devil will be saved". Cf. Ludlow Morwenna, *Universal Salvation. Eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, p. 96. Anthony Meredith also noted, albeit lightly, that Saint Gregory of Nyssa speaks of "the final salvation even of the devil". Cf. Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa. The Early Church Fathers*, Routledge Publisher, 1999, p. 22.

²⁷ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, p. 371.

²⁸ Karl Holl, *Amphilochius von Ikonium in seinem Verhältnis zu den Kappadoziern*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1969, 208.

²⁹ The theology of the image of God is biblically grounded in Genesis 1:26: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," but it also has a strong philosophical basis in the Platonic notion of "ὁμοιωσις θεῷ." From this perspective, the unity of humanity is a reflection of the divine unity. Cf. Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, p. 401. Rejecting evil and clinging to good according to the second argument presented above by Saint Gregory of Nyssa results in the restoration of the image of God in a human being and, ultimately, the restoration of all humanity to its original state.

³⁰ A similar nuance was also captured in the work of Morwenna Ludlow: "I have no doubt that there will be one race of all men when we shall all be one body of Christ, formed in one form, when the divine image shall shine equally". Cf. Ludlow Morwenna, *Universal Salvation. Eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, p. 89.

This vision is echoed in Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation of the Pauline texts in the Christological hymn found in the Epistle to the Philippians 2:10 and in the archtypical text found in 1 Corinthians 15:28: "That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of heavenly and earthly and of those who are under the earth" (Philippians 2:10). In this context St. Gregory of Nyssa interprets: "once, in a time of ages far distant, wickedness perishing, there will remain nothing but good. Then also those beings (below) will confess with one voice that Christ is Lord"³¹. Besides the fact that Gregory outlines an explicit exposition of the vision of apocatastasis³², we seek to emphasize the unity suggested by the phrase: "in one voice", which clearly captures the argument of the unity of humanity.

Second, Gregory assumes that the submission of Christ's body to the Father (according to 1 Corinthians 15:28) achieves the union of humanity with God and that this union is salvific, for by it Christ brings all humanity under God's authority. His conclusion is, therefore, that 'there is nothing beyond what will be saved'³³.

The role of universal nature should be understood as a means to salvation, but not as a motive or foundation for salvation. This statement is based on Gregory's words in Homily 15 on the Song of Songs: 'since creation exists from the beginning by divine power, the end of every creature is linked to its beginning'³⁴.

Balthasar observes that Gregory distinguishes between the principle of unity between God and creature, which he calls the "small image", and the perfect, eschatological image of God, which is the "total Christ". The transformation of the small image into the total Christ consists in "raising the created image to the level of the uncreated image and integrating it with it"³⁵. R. Sachs also notes this important detail³⁶ and recalls that this major idea is "at the heart of the whole theology of the Incarnation in Gregory of Nyssa"³⁷.

³¹ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre suflet și înviere*, p. 372.

³² In this context, one can observe the influence of Stoic thought, which foresaw a return of all things to their origin, as well as the influence of Plotinus' thought, according to which all emanations from the divine Unity unfold until they reach a necessary limit, a turning point (epistrophei) of both an ontological and ethical nature, after which the longing for the divine Unity determines the return.. Cf. J. R. Sachs, „Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology”, p. 633.

³³ Ludlow Morwenna, *Universal Salvation. Eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, p. 90.

³⁴ Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, p. 409.

³⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, Ignatius Press, First American edition, 1995, p. 82

³⁶ According to Gregory, the true bearer of the image of God is not the individual soul, but the one and only nature of humanity as a whole, of which individual human beings are only an expression and representation. Christ, insofar as he became an individual human being, assumed and divinized this universal human nature, and through this all human beings are in communion with him. Thus, the Incarnation will be fully completed only when the whole of human nature in all its members has become permeable to the grace of the Incarnation, when from the body of "Adam" the Mystical Body of Christ emerges. Cf. John R. Sachs, „Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology”, p. 637.

³⁷ John R. Sachs, „Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology”, p. 637.

4. The issue of human freedom

In his writings, Gregory of Nyssa often testified that human freedom is necessary in the process of salvation, since salvation is obtained on the basis of human efforts in training in virtue, in synergy with divine grace, and not on the basis of control or influence exercised by God: "If God would, they say, he could persuade even those who resist him to receive Christian teaching. But then where is freedom? Where is the worthiness of good works? Can the striving for good be commended? Only the soulless and unreasonable creatures act according to the dictates of a foreign will"³⁸.

However, he argued that if nothing, not even death and demons, would be able to separate us from the love of God - as St. Paul states in Romans 8:35-39 - then our free will, as such is even less able to do so³⁹.

In a new attempt to show that since God is the creator of things that are, he cannot be the creator of that which does not exist apart from "the movement of our own will" which has contracted "a fellowship with evil"⁴⁰. In order that this evil might be removed, death was permitted by God to affect human nature in an outward manner, with reference to the body; for inwardly the soul remains destined to immortality⁴¹. Even so, the dissolution of the body is not permanent, and St. Gregory went on to say that when the evil is removed altogether by the resurrection from *apokatastasis*, then human beings will be restored to their original beauty; the state intended by God⁴².

The question then arises: if salvation is attained by certain concrete human efforts to acquire virtue, and if, however, the free human will is not be able, in the event of a drift towards evil, to separate us from the love of God, by what means will human freedom be guided towards salvation?

In the above is stated that "the changeable nature of our nature does not allow us to take too strong roots in evil"⁴³ noting that he who goes deeper into evil will at some point turn to good: "after

³⁸ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, p 323.

³⁹ Ilaria Ramelli, „Baptism in Gregory of Nyssa’s Theology and its Orientation to Eschatology”, p. 1224.

⁴⁰ Understanding and thinking natures, if they lose their freedom, also lose the gift of understanding and thinking. Indeed, what use is thinking to them if the power to decide what they find good depends on someone else? On the other hand, if the will is not active, virtue necessarily disappears, because it is hindered by the inertia of the will, and if there is no virtue, then all life loses its value, the praise that is given to great deeds disappears, sin no longer entails danger, and no distinction can be made between the way of living and behaving of anyone..

⁴¹ The purpose of light is to disperse darkness, of life to swallow death, but since we took the wrong path as soon as we were created and fell into the clutches of death, then why does the Christian statement that incarnate purity itself unites with us the defiled, life with the dead, the helmsman with the lost, all this so that impurity may be washed away, wandering may be corrected, and the dead may return to life, seem wrong to us?

⁴² Mario Baghos, „Reconsidering Apokatastasis in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s on the Soul and Resurrection and the Catechetical Orațion”, p. 138.

⁴³ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre facerea omului*, vol. 30, p. 59.

having traversed the whole road of evil, the road of the turning of our changing nature” we will begin again towards good⁴⁴, thus this turning away from evil and turning to good reveals two overlapping dimensions:

1) **The objective dimension:** which concerns the divine will and wisdom, and thus an involvement outside the human being.

2) **The subjective dimension:** which concerns the free and conscious will of every creature created by God and, therefore, an ontological, interior human involvement.

4.1. The objective dimension

This dimension, affirms that evil is restrained by nature, and it is God who will work to restore the fallen. This restoration will be done by fire, a way that will draw out the venom of sin by a clarification in fire so that the human will would not be strangled in this purifying process, and that after a period of time it will regain its meaning according to the good sown in it. Thus, after these processes, the human nature will be surrendered without any sinful stain to God.

4.2. The subjective dimension

If the human soul feels the need to return to God before God cleanses the soul by fire (the objective dimension), then in the subjective dimension the purpose for which they return lies in their unconditional choice:

- a) The soul has not found rest in evil⁴⁵.
- b) Have compared „the nature of good with the extent of evil they will find that the one (good) very often surpasses the other (evil)”⁴⁶.
- c) They were shamed through a process of anamnesis through which they remembered how unhappy and unfulfilled they were enacting evil and became grateful to God for the second chance offered, even if this return was painful⁴⁷.

Gregory of Nyssa offers a profound explanation of human freedom and its relation to virtue: "According to nature, freedom is one and is related only to itself, and therefore everything that is free

⁴⁴ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre facerea omului*, vol. 30, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre facerea omului*, vol. 30, p. 59.

⁴⁶ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre facerea omului*, vol. 30, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, pp. 323–324

is bound by bonds of friendship. Virtue itself is independent, therefore in virtue everything is free. At the same time, divinity is the source of all virtue. In God, therefore, will be those who have freed themselves from wickedness, because, as the Apostle says, God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28)⁴⁸.

The idea of freedom as the desire for the good excludes the idea of a possible evil that takes its existence at the expense of the good within a perverted freedom, since this type of freedom will no longer exist and, therefore, there will no longer be the possibility of actualization. The theme of a non-existence of perverted freedom is one of the most important features in the theological thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa, but this element only partially covers the mystery of the antinomy of evil, since sin is not only an affirmation of freedom, but also a representation or example of the loss of freedom.

Conclusion

Gregory emphasizes the freedom of human will and respect for this freedom within the divine plan, suggesting that not all will freely and voluntarily accept the call to salvation. Thus, the idea of apocatastasis in the sense of a universal reconciliation is not at the center of his thinking, but rather a process of transformation and divinization, which leaves room for the personal response of each being to divine love.

Gregory emphasized the eschatological character of the divine act, in which all rational beings, by God's grace, will return to their original state of full communion with the Creator. Although the idea of apocatastasis was subsequently rejected at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, Gregorian thought had a significant impact on the development of Orthodox doctrine, helping to clarify the teaching on free will, salvation and the final judgment. Thus the concept of apocatastasis, despite later controversies, continues to be an important theme in Orthodox theology, inviting us to reflect deeply on human destiny and God's boundless love.

In conclusion, Gregory of Nyssa’s reflections on human freedom and the hope of universal salvation represent a profound theological dilemma that continues to provoke debate within Christian thought. While Gregory’s optimism about the eventual salvation of all is rooted in his belief in the infinite love and mercy of God, it is simultaneously complicated by his commitment to the genuine freedom of the human will. On one hand, Gregory envisions a divine plan that is all-encompassing and transformative, ultimately drawing all creation back into harmony with God. On the other hand,

⁴⁸ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre suflet și înviere*, p. 385.

this vision of universal salvation seems to conflict with the reality of human freedom, which can resist or reject divine grace.

Gregory's resolution to this tension lies in his understanding of God's persistent, patient love—a love that does not coerce but works through the freedom of human choices. His theology suggests that, while God's grace is irresistible in its power to heal and restore, it does not override the human capacity for free will. Instead, God's saving action is seen as a continual process of persuasion, drawing humanity toward a final reconciliation with divine goodness.