

ON THE SIXTH PSALM, CONCERNING THE OCTAVE

INTRODUCTION

This short treatise on the inscription or heading to Psalm Six ("For the End, a Psalm of David, Among the Hymns for the Eighth"¹) has for its subject the eschatological nature of the Christian life. For the Church Fathers in general, the symbol of the eighth day is preeminent.² As Jean Danielou points out³, the seven days of the week, a figure of time, are followed by the eighth day, a symbol of eternity. It is Basil the Great, the brother of Gregory of Nyssa, who gives the clearest expression to the Christian interpretation of the week (On the Holy Spirit chap. 27) by relating to it the Church's liturgical life. For him, the Lord's day or day of resurrection is the *arche* or principle of the new life and is called "one day," not the "first day."⁴

Why does scripture say "one day" and not the "first day"? . . . God, who made the nature of time, measured it out and determined it by intervals of days. He ordered the week to revolve from period to period upon itself, to count the movement of time, forming the week of one day revolving seven times upon itself; a proper circle begins and ends with itself. Such is also the character of eternity, to revolve upon itself and to end nowhere. If then the beginning of time is called "one day" rather than the "first day," it is because Scripture wishes to establish its relationship with eternity.

If this day beginning the week is "one," it indicates that the week, returning on itself, form a unity. In this definition we see time governed by the seven day period, a theme reminiscent of Pythagoras. Such a seven day week represents a closed cycle constantly turning in on itself; it lacks beginning or end, and is therefore a symbol of eternity. It is this Hellenistic notion of time which Basil and the other two Cappadocians modified in light of biblical and Christian revelation.

As for Gregory the Theologian, he sees the eighth day as the octave of Easter when all creation, both spiritual and material, will be fully restored to their primal unity:

¹This inscription is also prefixed to Psalm Eleven.

²For eight brief excerpts from some Fathers of the Church regarding the octave, refer to the list at the end of the Introduction.

³**The Bible and the Liturgy** (Notre Dame, 1956), p. 262.

⁴The Hebrew text for Gen 1.5 is *yom 'echad*, "day one." This phrase, instead of the conventional "first day," suggests something more than a natural day consisting of sunrise, sunset and night; rather, it injects a mystical connotation of time to this first day and to the succeeding days.

This is what the divine Solomon wishes to symbolize when he commands a part, seven to some, that is, this life; and to others, eight, or the future life. He is speaking here of good works and of the restoration (*apokatastasis*) of the next life. The great David seems to sing of this day in the psalms on the octave. [**On the New Lord's Day**, PG 36.612C-13A]

It is interesting that Gregory the Theologian mentions *apokatastasis* (the restoration of all things in Christ), a theme dear to his friend, the bishop of Nyssa. Although the latter Gregory does not include the term *apokatastasis* in his treatise dealing with Psalm Six, its meaning does pervade this short work which forms a kind of appendix to his lengthy work, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*. A passage from this treatise implying *akolouthia* runs as follows:

Everyone who exercises diligence with regard to virtue has in mind the future life. Its beginning is called the "eighth," for it follows this perceptible time when the number seven is dissolved. Therefore, the inscription "for the eighth" advises us not to set our minds on this present age, but to look to the eighth . . . The present time of the seventh number which is subject to measurement will remain; the eighth will succeed it, the full day of the age to come. [J.83-84].

Despite the absence of *apokatastasis*, its meaning as related to the eighth day is certainly clear. Later on in this same treatise, we have this word mentioned in connection with evil: "If a troublesome, insubstantial root briefly sprouts up, it will pass away and disappear in the restoration (*apokatastasis*) of all things to the good" [J.155].

As Jean Danielou shows⁵, Gregory of Nyssa takes up the theme of the *ogdoad* from his friend, Gregory the Theologian, and develops it philosophically and mystically. As a philosopher, the former Gregory is concerned with the mystery of time, and as a Christian mystic, he desires the presence of Christ as the fulfillment of the eighth day. Note how his mature work, the **Commentary on the Song of Songs**, eloquently closes with reference to our oneness with Christ and each other:

Everyone is drawn to desire what they bless and praise, so the daughters praise the Dove [Holy Spirit] and desire by all means to become doves. And the fact that they praise the Dove shows their zeal to attain what they praise until all become one. All will look to the same goal, and every evil will be destroyed. God will be all in all, and all persons will be united together in fellowship of the God, Christ Jesus, our Lord [J. 469].

⁵The Bible and the Liturgy, p. 270.

We find traces of Platonic influence in Gregory's description of the octave in such expressions as "no longer subject to numerical succession" [J.189, 1.21-22], "the flux of the world's movement" [J. 189, 15-6], and "without argumentation or diminution" [J.188, 1.25]. Such reference to stability versus instability pertains not so much to biological existence as to spiritual reality. This contrast does in fact lie at the heart of Gregory's commentary on Psalm Six where he systematically analyzes each of this psalm's ten verses [J.191-93]. Such exegesis succeeds Gregory's majestic description of the octave 'enfolding all things in its own brilliant power" J.189, 1.27]. We can thus see what concern the bishop of Nyssa had for the necessity of repentance (*metanoia*) for sin since he devotes the bulk of his little treatise to this theme: "In order that the benefit of conversion might remain forever and that a person no longer need it, the psalmist prays for his enemies' conversion" J.192, 1.18-21]. The separation of a sinner from the Church's life and return to God is effected through tears. Here we may compare **On the Sixth Psalm** with another treatise by Gregory, **On Perfection**:

How can you implore mercy for correcting transgressions? How can you placate God? Psalm Six says, 'I have labored with my groanings and I shall wash my bed from sin with the water of my tears.' Why are these things so? Because . . . in my wrath my eye is troubled and I have become old and subject to decay [J.191-92, 1.26/11.2), **On the Sixth Psalm**.

Every law of the Apostle and observance of the Gospel becomes our norm to receive Christ's holy body with a pure conscience; if anyone has a blemish due to sin, he cleanses it by the water of tears [J.192, **On Perfection**].

As Reinhard Hubner points out⁶ Gregory stresses the pedagogical worth of disgrace as a means to return to virtue. The sacrament of repentance⁷ a theme mentioned in the second half of the treatise, is related to the eschatological fulfillment of creation and is effected by one's own free will Gregory of Nyssa relates this to the symbol of the

⁶**Die Einheit des Leibes Christi bei Gregor von Nyssa** (Leiden, 1974), pp. 180-83.

⁷For Gregory, the beginning of philosophy is not curiosity as it is for the Greeks, but despair. Despair casts out the world's eternal return on itself and makes one rely in God through faith. Cf. Danielou's **Platonisme et Theologie Mystique** (Paris, 1944), p. 139. Gregory's Song Commentary says that this despair has a positive connotation: "When the bride says, 'the guards struck me,' she boasts about her further advancement to one high. If she says this upon being wounded, the divine rod has penetrated deep within . . . The divine rod or Spirit is a comforting staff whose blows effect healing and whose fruit consists of those other good things listed by Paul, especially temperance" [J. 365-66].

eighth day:

The inheritance of the octave is kept for persons worthy of it. This psalm (six) distributes God's just judgment to each person according to his worthiness . . . One's own free will (*proairesis*) effects punishment and chastisement through repentance and by making public any hidden sin" [J.190, 1.4-191,1.5-8].

We clearly see the emphasis Gregory places upon free will grounded not in a universal, impersonal reality but in an attractive, personal response to God's gift of the eighth day⁸.

Notice the optimistic, if not enthusiastic tone of Gregory's treatise which begins with perhaps his most original insight, our progress⁹ "from strength to strength" through "noble ascents" [J.187, 1.3-4]. Gregory naturally has in mind the goal of these ascents, the eighth day (of rest) which strips away "this earthly life." Such is "our hope of glory" (*he elpis tes doxes*) [J.193, 1.20], a phrase occurring at the treatise's end which continues the same upbeat note on which it began.

Just as God rested on the seventh day ("the seventh day is the end of creation and encompasses within itself the time coextensive with the creation of this world" [J.188, 1.20-22,] after he had created the world, so the world, having completed its course, will rest in God on the eighth and final day. Although you would expect Gregory to quote from the Book of Revelation with regard to this eighth day in his short treatise, he certainly must have had in mind the new Jerusalem of St. John's vision. In his eager expectation of the Lord's Day, Gregory does not disparage time nor hold it in contempt. However, as a Christian influenced by Platonism, he insists on the vanity of earthly and temporal things; those persons whom he addresses in the exegetical part of the treatise

⁸Earlier the treatise spoke of the number eight's spiritual content with respect to Rom 7.14 ("the law is spiritual," J. 188, 1.2). As Mariette Canevet has remarked (**Gregoire de Nysse et L'Hermeneutique Biblique** (Paris, 1983), p. 187), this contrast between flesh and spirit is frequently cited by Gregory. He often uses Rom 7.23 ("another law at war with the law of my mind"). For example, refer to the **Song Commentary**, Second Homily [J.57]. Here one's free will, *proairesis*, exercises itself in the struggle against sin.

⁹The theme of eternal progress emphasizes that for each attainment of the realization of God, new horizons continually open out. Gregory's favorite word for this advancement is *epektasis* as mentioned in the opening words of On the sixth Psalm: "Thus he who always stretches forward (*aei emprosthen epekteinomenos*) will never cease his good ascent through lofty thoughts." For a fuller explanation of *epektasis*, cf. **Platonisme**, p. 309-26.

dealing with Psalm Six proper consider such temporal things as they are in appearance, while their true summons consists in looking beyond them to "transcendent reality" (*ton huperkeimenon*) [J.187, 1.10]. By necessity, we as human beings must establish a foothold in time and prudently use it if we wish to meet the eighth day of eternity. Gregory claims that time "was determined with creation, for its nature is circumscribed in the week of days" [J.188, 1.28]. Thus the week of seven days falls back on itself, thereby forming a circle. Such a measure of time's totality exists until "things endowed with motion" [J.189, 1.5] cease and are supplanted by the octave.

Gregory corrects the Greek notion of matter's indefinite existence in time by presenting time as a way or ordered sequence. The term to express this concept is *akolouthia*, a necessary succession and process of events in time. It is applied both in the natural and supernatural orders.¹⁰ Gregory brings out another related aspect of *akolouthia* in his much larger treatise, **On the Inscription of the Psalms**, with respect to the order of a given text, in this case, the one-hundred and fifty psalms: "The divine book of the psalms wonderfully shows us the way (to blessedness) by a systematic, natural order (*diatinos technikes te kai phusikes akolouthias*) showing the various means for man to attain blessedness" [J.26]. Note too how *akolouthia* as sequence is carried over to his small work on Psalm Six: ". . . and (Psalm Six's) important role in the order (*akolouthia*) of the Psalter" [J.187, 1.12-13]. We thus have the temporal aspect of *akolouthia* implied in the sequential order of the Psalter, namely, the role played in it by Psalm Six.

Time, as von Balthasar points out¹¹, is the unfolding of the parts of a created being, a distention of its members, or in the words of the treatise, a "flux (*rhoothes*) of the world's movement" [J.189, 1.61]. One of Gregory's chief contributions to the Christian interpretation of time has been to make its cycle (refer to the seven days' cycle of time above) a symbol of finitude, not eternity: having arrived at its end or totality [J.189, 1.2-3], time attains the goal of its self-enclosed existence and expires, rather, is fulfilled. Here the restless poverty of the soul as depicted by Plotinos is put to rest in the glory of the Christian resurrection or the eighth day. Thus for this eighth and final age which bears to the seven others the same relationship as the Gospel to the Law or as Sunday does to the Sabbath, Gregory of Nyssa ascribes "another sun" to rise and continually enlighten all things in its brilliant glory.

¹⁰Cf. **L'Être et le Temps chez Gregoire de Nysse** by Jean Danielou (Leiden, 1970), p. 30.

¹¹D' une part, une sorte d'etatement des parties d' un etre, une distension de ses membres (parastasis); de l' autre, cet espacement est aussi un mouvement, un ecoulement et par la une tension. Cette apparente contradiction se traduit dans l'ordre de la connaissance par le dechirement de la conscience en memoire du passe (Note the emphasis Gregory places on "memory of evil deeds," J.190, 1.18-19) et prevision du futur ("hope of glory," J.193, 1.20). **Presence et Pensee** (Paris, 1943), p. 5.

The following are eight excerpts from the Fathers with reference to the eighth day:

Irenaios, **Against Heresies**, PG 7.645B:

The economy of the ark at the deluge, in which eight persons among Noah's relatives were saved, indicates the salvific Ogdoad. Similarly, David was the eighth child among his brothers. The circumcision occurred on the eighth day, for it manifests the circumcision of the Ogdoad on high. The scriptures, when pointing to the number eight for our belief, have in mind the mystery of the Ogdoad.

Origen, **Homilies on Exodus**, PG 12.346C:

The sixth day represents life here below: "God made the world in six days" [cf. Gen 1.31]. During this sixth day one must gather and put in reserve provisions sufficient for the (seventh) day to come. If you amass during this time treasures of justice, mercy, and pity, they will serve as nourishment in the age to come . . . But if one gathers good works, they will live for the next day. (This 'next day' is the Sabbath represented by the Ogdoad).

Eusebius of Caesarea, **Commentary on the Psalms**, PG 23.120A :

The octave is the day of Christ the Lord's salvific resurrection on which we believe occurs the purgation of all sins. It is also symbolic of an infant's circumcision by which the soul is purged through regeneration by being begotten by God. This day is better than the seventh because on it the Law is dissolved.

Athanasius, **Treatise on the Psalms**, PG 27.75D:

What is the octave? It is the day of the Lord's resurrection on which we receive the fruit of our labors. Indeed our enemies have been turned back with shame and confusion. This psalm (six) sings of that blessed time of repentance made for sin.

Didymus, **Treatise on the Psalms**, PG 39.1173D-76A:

Psalm six contains a more divine sense in its verses. It sings about the end, because (these verses) are the most perfect contemplation on the octave. The person is circumcised spiritually by God, for it is not carnal. Circumcision is perfected in the octave because it is extolled above the six

days in which the world was made and attains the seventh day, the true, holy, and delightful Sabbath. Since perfect beatitude cannot be obtained through created things, we must assume a transcendent state, the octave.

Basil the Great, **The Hexaemeron**, PG 29.52 A:

The day of the Lord is without evening, without succession, and without end. It is not unknown to scripture, and it is the day that the Psalmist calls the eighth because it is outside this time of weeks. Thus whether you call it day, or whether you call it eternity, you express the same idea.

Gregory the Theologian, **On Pentecost**, PG 36.432B:

For the number seven, multiplied by itself, produces fifty minus one day, and we add this by taking it as the world to come: it is at once the first and the eighth, or rather one and indestructible. And indeed we must there cease the Sabbath-keeping of our souls, so that one part of seven may be given to some, of eight to others, as certain men who have come before us have explained.

John Chrysostom, **On Compunction**, PG 47.415D-16A:

What is the octave? It is that great and glorious day of the Lord, a bright furnace at whose sight the Virtues tremble and which manifests the hastening of the King. The octave calls him, declaring him to be a change of condition and a renewal of the future life. For the present life is none other than seven days which commences from the first day and is perfected in the seventh day.

The critical edition to **On the Sixth Psalm, Concerning the Octave** was prepared by James McDonough, s.j. (Leiden, 1962), vol. 5. The edition by J.P. Migne may be found in **Patrologia Graecae**, vol. 44.

THE TEXT

[J.187 & M.608] Those persons who are advancing from strength to strength according to the prophet's blessing [Ps 83.6-8] and who dispose their hearts for these noble ascents, whenever they apprehend some good thought, they are led to a loftier understanding which yields for the soul an ascent on high. Thus he who always stretches forward [Phil 3.13] will never cease his good ascent through lofty thoughts to be ever guided to comprehend transcendent reality. I have mentioned these things to you, brothers, who turn your attention to the sixth psalm and its important role in the order of the Psalter: after the inheritance, (This refers to the inscription to Psalm Five: "For the end, a psalm of David, concerning he who inherits) this psalm pertaining to the octave is offered to us. Indeed, you are not ignorant of the symbol of the octave which does not concur with those opinions held by the Jews. With respect to the unbecoming members of our bodies, they degrade the nobility of the mystery of the octave, the law of circumcision and **[M.609]** purification following childbirth; they claim that the number **[J.188]** eight signifies these things. However, we learn from the great Paul that the Law is

spiritual [Rom 7.14], provided that the observance keep this number eight and prescribe circumcision for male children and a sacrifice of purification for females. We neither reject the Law nor accept it blindly, knowing that true circumcision administered by a stone knife occurs on the eighth day. You know that the stone knife which severs impurity is Christ [1Cor 10.41], the true Word [of God] and that it brings to an end the sordid flow of this life's actions once our human existence has been changed into a more divine state.

To clarify these matters, I will now set forth their meaning. The time of this life in the first creation is fulfilled in one week consisting of seven days. The creation of beings began on the first day, and the completion of creation terminated on the seventh day. Scripture says that the first beings were created on one day [Gen 1.5] and on the second day the second beings were created and so forth until the sixth day when all the rest were created. The seventh day is the end of creation and encompasses within itself the time coextensive with the creation of this world. Therefore, as no other heaven was made except this one, and no parts of the world were added to those which were made at the beginning; rather, creation was established in itself while remaining in its dimensions without augmentation or diminution. As a result, no other time existed except that which was determined with creation, for the nature of time is circumscribed in the week of days. **[J.189]** When we measure time with days beginning from the first and closing with the seventh again, we return to the first day. We always measure the totality of time through the circle of seven days until things endowed with motion pass away and the flux of the world's movement ceases. There will come, as the Apostle says [1Cor 7.31] a time when things that are no longer tossed about, for they suffer neither change nor alteration; this creation will always remain like itself in succeeding ages. It contains the true circumcision of human nature and true purification which will strip away this earthly life. Sin is this filth produced in human nature (because "In sin my mother conceived me" [Ps 50.5]). He [Christ] who purified us from sin next cleansed the universe and utterly destroyed from creatures everything that is bloody, sordid and uncircumcised. Thus we accept the law concerning the octave which cleanses and circumcises because once time represented by the number seven comes to a close, the octave succeeds it. This day is called the eighth because it follows the seventh **[M.612]** and is no longer subject to numerical succession. Another sun makes this day, the true sun which enlightens; since this sun enlightens once and for all as the Apostle says [2Cor 4.4], sunset no longer hides it but it enfolds all things in its own brilliant power. This light continuously makes light for those persons worthy of it and even makes other suns out of everyone who shares in it **[J.190]**. As the Gospel says, "The just will shine like the sun" [Mt 13.43].

In the previous psalm [five] the inheritance of the octave is kept for persons worthy of it. This psalm distributes God's just judgment to each person according to his worthiness, and the prophet [David] rightly includes repentance by mentioning the octave. Whose conscience is not at once troubled and gripped by fear and terror when mindful of Christ's fearful judgment and with the knowledge that he should change for

the better? But when he considers the rigor of judgment which involves detailed questioning, in expectation of a dreadful outcome, he is terrified, not knowing the outcome of his judgment. His eyes are riveted on a fearful punishment: Gehenna, dark fire, the undying worm of conscience [Mt 8.12] which constantly makes the soul moan through shame and renews its pains by the memory of evil deeds. Now the suppliant beseeches God, praying that he may not be subject to his wrath at the cross-examination, nor suffer chastisement for offenses through God's anger. Judgment is considered to be the effect of wrath and anger with regard to persons condemned to a fierce chastisement of that dreadful punishment. Now psalm [six] represents by words of grief and pain the wrath and fury attributed to the punishment of wicked persons. It says [**J.191**] I do not expect from [God's] wrath any reproach concerning my hidden sins by means of fearful stripes: rather, I anticipate anguish from my own confession. For the grief resulting from the wounds of stripes manifests hidden iniquities; one's own free will effects punishment and chastisement through repentance and by making public any hidden sin.

When Psalm Six says, "Rebuke me not in your wrath nor chastise me in your anger" [vs. 1], the psalmist seeks refuge in mercy: not so much with regard to [man's] free choice, but with respect to the weakness of human nature, the cause of evil. Although I was born in evil, I am healed by [God's] mercy. Weakness causes me pain. What is this weakness? My bones are shaken and health has vanished from them. [Psalm Six] says that [**M.613**] sound thoughts steady the soul: "Heal me, Lord, because my bones are troubled" [vs. 2]. The symbolism of these words is explained in relation to those which follow: " My soul is exceedingly troubled" [vs. 3]. Why are you slow to cure me, Lord? How long will you withhold mercy? Do you not see the fleetness of human life? Remove the constraint to which our life is subject by converting my soul so that when death overtakes us, we can still be healed. No longer will a person whose sickness stems from evil and who can be healed by the memory of God suffer death because his confession belongs on earth, not in hell.

Next we hear words such as, "How can you implore mercy from correcting transgressions? How can you placate God?" Psalm Six says, "I have labored with my groaning and I shall wash my bed from sin with the water of my tears" [vs. 6] Why are these things so? Because the psalm claims that in wrath my [**J.192**] eye is troubled, and I have become old and subject to decay because the wrath of my enemies towards my soul has brought about this decay. If wrath alone causes such fear for an offender, how much greater will be the hope of salvation for those in despair who not only recognize the pains from wrath in their own lives but those caused by passion, greed, delusion, ambition, jealousy and the entire swarm of human evils? With respect to these various enemies Psalm Six says, "Depart from me, all you who work iniquity" [vs. 8]. It later shows the good hope offered to us from conversion. Right away the psalm speaks of conversion to God and comes to perceive God's good will for a person. It proclaims his grace and announces his bounty by saying, "The Lord has heard the voice of my petition; the Lord

has accepted my prayer" [vs. 9].

In order that the benefit of conversion might remain forever and that a person no longer need it, the psalmist prays for his enemies' conversion once they have been castigated through shame. For the person who puts his hands to evil is shamed; by training, he no longer is familiar with evil and will refrain from similar future temptations. Such is the fruit of a good ascent. The fourth psalm makes a distinction between the immaterial and bodily, fleshly good; the fifth psalm [J.193] prays for the inheritance of this good; the sixth psalm mentions the octave, the time for this inheritance; the eighth psalm sets before one's eyes the fearful judgment which warns us sinners to shun by repentance more calamitous results. Then the repentance duly offered to God proclaims [M.616] a benefit for us: "The Lord has listened to my voice with tears when I turned to him" [vs. 9]. Once this has come about and that this benefit may abide for the future, the prophet [David] beseeches [God] to destroy through shame hostile thoughts. Such lawless, hostile thoughts cannot otherwise be vanquished unless through shame. A deep gulf is established for those persons who have lived in evil, whereas shame has erected a wall of sin in oneself. We therefore say, "Let all my enemies be put to shame and sorely troubled" (vs. 10). My enemies are domestic and proceed from my heart to defile a person. By quickly vanquishing them with shame, our hope of glory which is free from this shame will receive thanks be to God, to whom be glory forever. Amen.