

20 Married Women in the Christian Empire: The Family of Gregory Nazianzen

Gregory's mother Nonna (d. 374) who converted her husband, (*Orat.* 18.7-12):

- My mother was a worthy companion for such a man and her qualities were as great as his. She came from a pious family, but was even more pious than they. Though in her body she was but a woman, in her spirit she was above all men... Her mouth knew nothing but the truth, but in her modesty she was silent about those deeds which brought her glory. She was guided by the fear of God....

For the most excellent of men and of women were so united that their marriage was a union of virtue rather than of bodies: since, while they excelled all others, they could not excel each other, because in virtue they were quite equally matched...

But she who was given by God to my father became not only...his assistant, but even his leader, drawing him on by her influence in deed and word to the highest excellence; judging it best in all other respects to be overruled by her husband according to the law of marriage, but not being ashamed, in regard of piety, even to offer herself as his teacher. Admirable indeed as was this conduct of hers, it was still more admirable that he should readily acquiesce in it....

She was drawn to prayer first thing in the morning, to fasting and vigil, to all night singing of psalms; she was patron of orphans and widows.

- Gregory's sister Gorgonia with her husband Alypius had two sons and three daughters. We know the daughters' names: Alypiana, Eugenia, and Nonna (named after her grandmother). Gorgonia was said by her brother to surpass everyone in modesty, prudence, and wisdom, and to surpass *even men* in the chanting of psalms and knowledge of Scripture. (Gregory Nazianzen *Orat.* 8).

Orat. 8.8: She blended the excellence of the married with that of the unmarried state, and proving that neither of them absolutely binds us to, or separates us from, God or the world....For though she had entered upon a union of flesh, she was not therefore separated from the spirit....but, performing those duties due to the world and nature, according to the law of the flesh, or rather of Him who gave these laws to the flesh, she consecrated herself entirely to God.

She lived her role in marriage, with prudence and piety, no adornment, and charity to the needy. Gregory recounts two episodes in which she was injured and ill, but was miraculously cured. Her brother writes that she died with a psalm on her lips, while her parents and husband were still alive, for they attended her funeral.

For this time and place when asceticism was gaining popularity, these are very interesting portrayals of Christian marriage.