Gregory the Theologian’s *Funeral Oration* (ἐπιτάφιος λόγος) on Basil is one of his most important works. It is certainly one of his most well known. Composed of 82 “chapters,” it is also his longest, and thus probably not delivered in its present form, which may be the result of later reworking. (We know that, in his retirement, Gregory spent his time polishing up the text of his orations, which he afterwards “published”). Basil died on 1 January, 379, at a time when Gregory was about to embark upon the greatest undertaking of his life: a mission to Constantinople in order to assume the theological defense of the city’s beleaguered pro-Nicene minority. The Arian emperor Valens had died fighting the Goths on 9 August, 378, and the pro-Nicene emperor Theodosius did not accede to the throne until January of 379, setting in motion a series of events that climaxed in 381 at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople. As a result, Gregory does not seem to have been able to deliver the *Funeral Oration* until the third anniversary of Basil’s death, that is, on 1 January, 382 (in §2, Gregory apologizes for “coming forward so long after the occasion, and after so many others have eulogized him”). In the meantime, the Metropolitan Bishop of Caesarea, Helladios (Basil’s successor), had already established an annual liturgical commemoration for Basil’s death, and Jean Bernardi, following Jean Daniélou, has suggested that Gregory of Nyssa delivered the actual eulogy.

Basil himself does not seem to have produced any funeral orations, at least none that survive, although he did write many letters of consolation to grieving friends and relatives. Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, produced several such orations (for Meletios of Antioch, and for the Theodosian empresses Pulcheria and Flaccilla, which indicate the esteem in which Nyssa was held by the imperial court), as did Gregory of Nazianzus (for Basil, Athanasius, his father Gregory, his sister Gorgonia, and his brother Caesarius). For Gregory and other Christian rhetors the genre of the funeral oration presented rich possibilities for reworking and transforming classical rhetorical models in the light of Christian experience and hope.

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1 Rousseau reminds us that this oration is “the only ‘real biography’ of Basil that we possess, from his own generation” (p. 18). George Kennedy, *Greek Rhetoric under Christian Emperors* (Princeton, 1983), 237, described


At first glance, the chief aim of Gregory’s *Funeral Oration* is to memorialize his friend Basil and present him to Christian posterity as an exemplary model for imitation. Thus, the language of imitation (*mimesis*) pervades the entire oration, beginning with the first paragraph, setting the tone for much of what follows: “To the admirers of virtue may this discourse of mine be at once a pleasure and an inspiration to virtue” (p. 28). Gregory understands the unfolding of his “discourse” as the creation of a portrait, with Basil posing as the model, and visual metaphors prevail throughout. For instance, the audience is invited to “contemplate (θεωρήσωμεν) the life of Basil” (§11, p. 36). Such contemplation reveals that Basil himself is but a mimetic link in a larger visual chain, “having the example of his ancestors before his eyes” (§8, p. 33), an “example of virtue on which he had only to keep his eyes (πρὸς ὀν βλέπων) to be excellent from the beginning” (§12, p. 37). Just as Basil’s ancestors had suffered during the persecutions, Basil too was a “bloodless martyr” (ὁ χωρὶς αἵματος μάρτυς) (§57, p. 75). Family pedigree is, in turn, subsumed into mimesis of the divine, since Basil also “imitated the ministry of Christ” (τὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ διακονίαν μιμώμενος) (§35, p. 58, cf. §63, p. 81: τῇ Χριστοῦ μιμήσει, and §56, p. 73). In one passage, Basil seems even to have acquired the divine attribute of omnipresence, when Gregory quotes him as saying: “I am not circumscribed by any place” (§49, p. 68). These mimetic associations are solidified as Gregory extravagantly compares Basil to a crowded portrait gallery of Biblical figures from Adam to Christ (see the various συγκρίσεις cited on the “Rhetorical Structure” handout). It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that Basil should be a “model (τύπος) of order for others” (§27, p. 51), having become “all things to all men” (§81, p. 98, citing 1 Cor 9:22).

Such comparisons were rather bold, which Gregory himself recognizes somewhat apologetically (τολμηρὸς ὁ λόγος, §75, p. 93). How, then, should we explain this somewhat heavy-handed emphasis on Basilian mimesis? What is the end toward which Gregory is rhetorically striving? Gregory notes that Basil’s disciples have already begun to imitate their teacher’s mannerisms, so that one could see “many Basils” (§77, pp. 94-5) walking the streets of Caesarea. But much to Gregory’s dismay, these imitations are “badly conceived” (μὴ καλῶς), being but clumsy, amateurish copies of the original. They are “statues obscured in shadows,” unworthy even to be called “echoes” of Basil (an allusion to the statues and echoes of Plato’s Cave, Rep. 7). Gregory believes that, the greater the desire for mere external imitation, i.e., the aping of gestures and the parroting of words, the further removed from the original such copies become. One factor, then, would seem to be Gregory’s discomfort with these superficial imitations. However, the point here is actually Basil’s greatness, evidenced in the fact that “many of his minor traits and even his physical defects have been affected by others, as means of gaining esteem.”

Further light is shed on this problem by Andrea Sterk (cited above, note 2). Sterk notes that Gregory presents Basil, not simply as a model of virtue, but as a model of the Christian priesthood. As a result, the *Funeral Oration* should be read in connection with Gregory’s *Oration 2* (“On the Priesthood”), *Oration 42* (a farewell address to his episcopal colleagues in the capital), and many of his poems, all of which launch scathing attacks on the clergy, especially

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4 In the short treatise On Faith (PG 31:676C-692C), Basil sees himself as an imitator of both the Lord, who spoke only what he was authorized to say by the Father (Jn 12:49-50), and the Holy Spirit, who speaks only what he hears from the Son (Jn 16:13) (677AC).
bishops. To these latter, Gregory contrasts Basil as the τύπος και παράδειγμα of the true highpriest. What specific qualities did Gregory single out for emulation? He notes that Basil practiced a long and arduous program of asceticism, and possessed a profound familiarity with sacred scripture (the legacy of Origen). These are eminently ascetical and contemplative ideals, and, at first sight, they might appear as unusual qualities to promote among the secular clergy.

However, Sterk argues rightly that standards for admission to episcopal office had declined since the conversion of Constantine, and bishops had increasingly become the object of ridicule on the pagan stage. Gregory therefore endeavored to “harmonize monastic ideals and practice with active service to the church,” and thus “contributed to the spread of an ecclesiastical ideal that eventually won the day in the Christian East” (228), which she later calls a “monastic model of church leadership” (230). “Far from being opposed to the active life of pastoral care, the life of contemplation is presented as a requirement for effective priestly service. To accept a position of authority without this spiritual experience would be folly and peril . . . the active life of love and service ought to complement the pursuit of contemplation” (241). According to Gregory, “the bishop was a monk who joined to his performance of episcopal duties a commitment to ascetic ideals,” two different modes of life that were intertwined and embodied in Basil, the consummate living mixture of theory and practice (246). Although this does not emerge clearly in oration 42, it was the figure of Moses who best typified this hybridized ideal of episcopal leadership. Moses had received the finest pagan education from the sorcerers of Egypt, which he later rejected for a life of humble fellowship with God. Retreating into the solitude of the desert for 40 years, Moses experienced both a transformative vision of God and a call to religious leadership, thereafter returning to society as the leader of God’s people. (The hagiographical genre of the vita of the “holy monastic bishop” will become fairly standardized in the succeeding centuries, but Gregory wrote without any precedents and was, in this respect, a pioneer.)

We can add to Sterk’s reading of the Funeral Oration by considering a critical passage that she does not cite. Near the end of the Oration, Gregory draws the curtain aside on his motivation for writing, and offers us the following:

My present object is not so much to mingle lamentations with my praises, or to portray the public life of the man, or exhibit a picture of virtue common to all time, and a program salutary to all churches, and to all souls, which we may keep in view, as a living law, and so rightly direct our lives, as to counsel you, who have been completely initiated into his teachings, always to fix your gaze upon him, as one who sees you and is seen by you, and thus to be perfected by the Spirit (§80, p. 97).

Noteworthy here is Gregory’s denial that he seeks to set Basil up as an exemplar of Christian virtue. The language of “picture” and “program” return us to the visual metaphor, which in this context seems suggestive of static, pre-conceived and pre-scribed moral categories. The Greek word for “picture” here (πίναξ) can also mean a tablet, like a bulletin board for laws and edicts, or “programs,” in the sense of juridical prescriptions and manifestos. Gregory, then, is arguing

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5 For an English translation of these poems, see: Denis M. Meehan, St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Three Poems, FOTC 75 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987).
against an idol of Basil as representing a lifeless, written code (poorly parroted by the Basilian Doppelgängers), an important point when one considers Basil’s work on canon law and monastic rules. To the contrary, Basil continues his presence in the community with the charismatic power to guide, not only Gregory (“If [my eulogy] approaches your worth, the thanks are due to you, for it was with reliance on you that I undertook this discourse concerning you,” §82, p. 98), but also the community as a whole. For Gregory, Basil is the real, permanent ἐπίσκοπος in a very literal sense (cf. ἐπὶ-σκοπεύειν). The entire Oration thus serves as the rhetorical ground on which such a view can be established. The detailed descriptions of Basil’s success in Athens and Constantinople (East and West, pagan and Christian), his family genealogy, his various virtues, his status as a powerful patronus, a mediator of disputes, a dispenser of benefactions, a defender of Orthodoxy and champion of the Church, serve to ensure the ongoing status of Basil within the community. (Gregory makes similar claims about Basil’s grandparents, who became, he says, “living martyrs, breathing monuments, silent sermons” (§5)).

We are not far off the mark if we suggest that the Funeral Oration is, in many ways, an argument for canonization, an attempt at writing a holy life, the success of which can be measured by its impact on subsequent depictions and assessments of Basil. Gregory invokes “Saint Basil” as a celestial mediator with the technical language of intercession (πρεσβεία). Basil is described as a “martyr without blood” (§57) (a christomimetic linking of martyrdom, asceticism, and episcopacy). In chps. 52-55, Basil performs a variety of miracles (prophecy, cures). At the Oration’s close, Basil is proclaimed to be “even now in heaven, and there, on our behalf, offering sacrifices and prayers for the people. Though he has left us he has not utterly abandoned us” (§80). In the closing paragraph, Gregory again addresses Basil directly: “May you look down upon us from on high, O divine and sacred head, and restrain by intercession the thorn of the flesh” (§82, p. 98). Compare the closing passage of Gregory’s Funeral Oration on Athanasius (Or. 21.37), where Gregory speaks directly to the departed bishop of Alexandria: “Mayest thou cast us from above a propitious glance, and conduct this people in its perfect worship of the perfect Trinity. And mayest thou, if my lot be peaceful, possess and aid me in my pastoral charge, or if it pass through struggles, uphold me, or take me to thee, and set me with thyself and those like thee (though I have asked a great thing) in Christ himself” (NPNF 7.280; SC 270.190).

Exemplarism and mimesis? Perhaps, and this despite Gregory’s explicit remarks to the contrary. But the emphasis is not so much on “seeing,” as it is on “being seen.” Or rather, on a communal, intersubjective, dialogical gaze, transcending the distorting mirror of enigmas for a redemptive encounter face to face (cf. 1 Cor 13.12).