

LOVE FOR GOD AND OTHERS IS THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

The Life St. Basil the Great for Young People

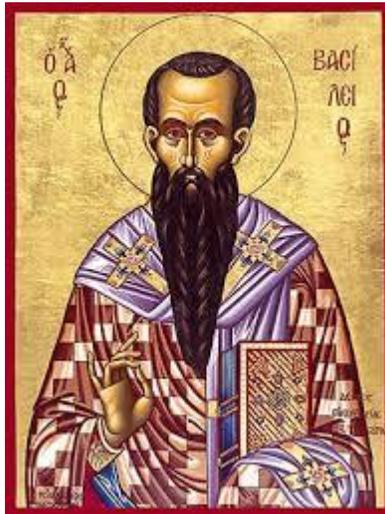
(compiled by Presbytera Candace Scheffe)

St Basil was born in Cappadocia, which is in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), in 329 AD. His whole family was devout and God-loving. His grandfather was martyred for not denying his faith in Jesus Christ; he was torn apart by hungry lions. His grandmother Macrina told Basil and his brothers and sisters this story of courage and faith in order to strengthen their own Christian faith.

St. Basil's parents were named Basil and Emmelia and they, along with a number of their children, became Saints. St. Macrina was the oldest child; and three of her brothers became bishops. St. Basil became Bishop of Caesarea, St. Gregory became Bishop of Nyssa and St. Peter became Bishop of Sebaste. Basil's family had a good position in society; they had plenty of property and were wealthy.

Basil grew up and went to university; he studied Greek literature, rhetoric (the art of using language well) and philosophy. He combined the ancient Greek spirit with his *Orthodox Christian Faith.

Most icons show St. Basil as a tall, thin man with a receding hairline and a long beard.



icon courtesy of Uncut Mountain Supply

He ate no more than was absolutely necessary for his survival and his food was poor and simple. He chose never to eat meat. He had just a couple pieces of clothing which were well worn, this again, being his choice. St. Basil believed that we should be in control of

ourselves at all times and have a blessed life of prayer. He said that we should season our daily work with the singing of spiritual songs (hymns) the same way that we season our food with salt when we cook. He said that the sacred songs can only lift us up and give us joy and not sadness. Basil loved all people and devoted his life to helping all those in need; he was also a fighter for God's Truth. At the age of 28, St. Basil became a monk; at 35, he was ordained a priest and at 41, he was made Bishop of Caesarea.

Philanthropist is a Greek word meaning “friend of people” (philo + anthropos). St. Basil had great wealth but this did not interest him. Instead, he sold all his possessions and used the money to build orphanages, hospitals, homes for the aged, schools and monasteries. Greek Orthodox churches have an organization named in honor of St. Basil called “Philoptochos,” and it means “friend of the poor,” (philo + ptochos).

St. Basil was full of love and compassion for others—he was known to plead for mercy and forgiveness from the emperor on behalf of those in trouble or for those who had made mistakes. Once, after an earthquake, he worked for days without sleep to dig through rubble with his own hands to save those who were trapped; he helped the injured and urged everyone to share their food with those who had none. St. Basil stood by the people and encouraged them throughout the catastrophe; he planted food in new areas and helped prevent the starvation of the people. After these things, St. Basil was made Bishop of Caesarea.

St Basil was responsible for starting monasteries where groups of monastics live, work, worship, pray and dedicate their lives to God together. Up until that time, many monks lived as hermits (on their own) and not in communities. St. Basil devised strict rules for monks to follow, in order to properly live with each other and serve God as a life-long vocation.

St Basil was not worried about offending anyone when it came to saying or doing what was right. His views often clashed with that of the emperor. One time, the emperor sent his prefect Modestus, with orders to make St. Basil support the false belief of Arius (also known as the Arian heresy) or resign from the Church. St. Basil refused to obey. Modestus threatened him and told St. Basil that he should fear him because he had the power to do anything he wished to him. Modestus told St. Basil that he could take his possessions, exile him, torture him and put him to death. St Basil said that these things did not trouble him. He said, "Take my possessions; I have none except for the worn clothing I wear. Exile me, for wherever I go I am at home as all of the earth belongs to God. Torture me, I am already ill and weak and will not last long to be tortured. Kill me? I welcome death as it will bring me to God much sooner." Modestus was stunned by St. Basil's answers and said that no bishop had ever spoken like this to him. St Basil replied that perhaps he had never met a real bishop before.

A saint's feast day is on the day he or she dies and goes to be with God—St. Basil died on January 1, 379. We remember and celebrate his memory on that day.

On January 1, St. Basil is remembered with the cutting of a Vasilopita, a sweet tasting bread baked in his honor. The bread has a coin hidden within. Do you know why?

The Emperor Julian the Apostate (do you know what an apostate is?) An apostate is someone who once followed the historic Christian faith and then rejected it. The Emperor Julian had been a schoolmate of St. Basil in Athens and they had studied the same things—even the Holy Scriptures. However, instead of staying close to his Christian Faith, Julian turned away from it and his heart became cold and ugly toward God and the Christians.

Emperor Julian was filled with pride and highly regarded himself. He marched off to war against the Persians with his troops with a plan to conquer both lands and people. He sent a letter to St. Basil who was Archbishop of Caesarea at that time. Although Julian and St. Basil knew each other for years, St. Basil did say the Julian was an unfit emperor and for good reason. The Emperor's letter stated that he required that St. Basil deliver one thousand pounds of gold to him by messenger. He threatened that if he did not do this, Julian would destroy all the buildings of Caesarea and in their place, erect temples and statues of Roman gods in their place to humble the people and exalt himself. Julian then closed his letter saying, "I have learned to know and condemn that which I once read," in other words, he told St. Basil he rejected the Christian Faith he had once received.

St. Basil did not waste time in writing back to Emperor Julian saying that his actions and words were shameful and that he disgraced the empire by his words and threats that sounded high and mighty but were actually the work of demons—in that Julian would insult the Church and lift himself up against God. He went on to say how badly he felt for the ruin of Julian's soul after they had studied the Holy Scriptures together and for the choices Julian was making. He commented that if Julian had understood what he read, he would never have condemned it.

St. Basil went on to mention that he lived in poverty and that Julian was aware of it. Nevertheless, St. Basil put together an offering for the Emperor from what he had—three barley loaves which would have been St. Basil's regular food. Julian accepted the gift, but in return, he gave St. Basil an insulting gift—grass from a pasture.

St. Basil responded by saying that he gave a gift from among the best he had to eat—from his own table and Julian had done the same. This response, of course, angered Emperor Julian very much.

Julian then threatened, "When I return from Persia, I will indeed burn down your city and take prisoner the foolish people there who have been led astray by you because you dishonor the gods (idols) whom I worship and you, too, shall receive a just reward!"

After returning to the city, St. Basil called the people to himself. He told them about the emperor's threats and counseled them saying, "Don't grieve, fellow Christians, but consider what money you need to live on and bring whatever excess you have that we might gather it all together in one place. Then, when we hear the emperor is returning, we shall cast heaps of money onto the road, that when he sees all the treasure, as the lover of money that he is, he will accept the offering and not follow through on his plan."

Therefore, the Christians brought together a great deal of wealth, gold, silver and precious stones. The items were placed under the care of the Church.

When St. Basil learned the Julian and the army were on their way back from war, he called together the multitude of Christians from Caesarea and commanded them to keep a three day fast. Afterwards, he and the faithful went to the summit of the mountain called Didymos, to the Church of the Most Holy **Theotokos. There they prayed together that the will of the emperor would be changed and that the people might remain safe.

During that time, St. Basil received a heavenly vision. He saw hosts of heaven, that is to say, angels, encircling the mountain where they were praying. He also saw a woman enthroned with great glory. She said to the angels standing by, "Call Mercurios to me so that he might go and slay Julian, the enemy of my Son." Who was the woman? The Holy Theotokos, of course! St. Basil then saw the holy Great Martyr Mercurios come and take up his weapons and leave.

After this vision, St. Basil left the mountain with some of the clergy and went back into the city where the church of the holy Great Martyr Mercurios was. Within that church were the relics (bones) of St. Mercurios and his weapons which were venerated or honored by the Christians.

One hundred years had passed since St. Mercurios' martyrdom in Caesarea. Upon entering the church, St. Basil could not find the Saint's relics nor weapons. He asked the keeper of the church's vessels and he knew nothing about what had happened. The Saint then realized that the vision he had seen was true and on that same night, June 26, 363, the ungodly apostate emperor was slain. Saint Basil then returned to the mountain and announced, "Rejoice and be glad today, Christians! Our prayers have been heard, a fitting punishment has come upon the ungodly emperor. Let us offer thanks to God and go into the city that each may receive back his money."

When the Christians heard this, they cried with one voice, "We thought to give the money to the ungodly emperor in exchange for our lives. Now, shouldn't we offer these gifts to the King of Heaven and earth who granted us our lives?" At that, St. Basil praised their eagerness. He determined, however, that each should receive back one-third of their contribution. The remainder of the money went to help the poor.

Regarding the portion of wealth that was returned, St. Basil had one-third of the treasure baked into large loaves of sweet bread, which were cut and shared among the people. That is why a Vasilopita (St. Basil's bread) is baked by Christians each year on January 1. A coin is baked within to remind us of St. Basil and what happened to the people of Caesarea in the fourth century. The bread is blessed; the first piece cut is for our Lord, the second for the Theotokos and then a piece for the poor and then one to each member of the family. If the coin is in the piece for the Lord or the Theotokos, it is given to the Church. If it is in the piece for the poor, it's given to the church Philoptochos organization for a charitable purpose.



There are other episodes in St. Basil's life that we could recount, but there is not enough time for that now.

What do you think made St. Basil so great? Very few people in history have been given the title of "Great". Alexander the Great was so called because he conquered the world of his time. But St. Basil was called "Great" because he conquered (won over) the hearts and souls of men for Jesus Christ. He dedicated his life and all he had to fully loving and serving God and God honored him greatly because of it and countless numbers of people benefited from St. Basil's intense faith, love and generosity.

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*Orthodox Christian Faith: up until the first part of the 11th century, there was no division in Christendom, i.e., Roman Catholicism, Protestantism did not exist. The historic Christian Faith is known as Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

**Theotokos: a Greek word meaning "God-bearer." (Theo = God + tokos = bearer). The Virgin Mary carried in her womb what the whole world could not contain—God Himself.