

**THE UNIVERSITY `ALEXANDRU I. CUZA` OF IAȘI,
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ABSTRACT

Ph. D. THESIS

Saint Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Epektasis

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Involved in doctrinal disputes against those who would reduce God to a limited Being, able to grasped by the human intellect, Gregory describes the Christian soul as engaged in an endless pursuit of the inexhaustible God. While many Greek theologians have described the soul's movement toward God, even using the word *epektasis* drawing on Paul's participle in Phil. 3, 13, Gregory is original in claiming that man's ultimate end its inself and endless progression. The implications of this famous theory of eternal progress, *epektasis*, are startling: according to Gregory, there is no final blessed vision of God.

The following list of references contains the word *epektasis*. It is not intended to be inclusive but as a means of showing how Gregory of Nyssa employs this term which translates as "stretching forward" as to attain a goal. *Epektasis* is best understood within the context of Phil 3.13 which Gregory quotes frequently: "Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it (perfection) my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining [*epekteinomenos*] forward to what lies ahead." This forward-looking view of the Christian life lies at the heart of Gregory's theology on spiritual

advancement in that it represents a movement of perpetual ascent towards God who is immovable. According to Gregory, we can never attain ultimate unity and stability in the divine good but simply expand towards it. This list presents epektasis in Gregory's own terms and is the foundation for an article to be written at a later time.

By participation in the transcendent, the soul continually remains stable in the good; in a certain sense, it is always being created while ever changing for the better in its growth in perfection. Neither is it limited, nor can it be circumscribed in its growth towards the good; however, its present state of goodness, even if especially great and perfect, is only the beginning of a more transcendent, better stage. The Apostle's words are thus verified: stretching out (epektaseos) to what lies before is related to forgetfulness of earlier accomplishments [Phil 3.13]. The good which is superior to the one already attained holds the attention of those participating in it while not allowing them to look at the past; by enjoying what is more worthy, their memory of inferior things is blotted out.

When the great Apostle Paul gave an account to the Corinthians of his lofty vision, he doubted his human nature, that is, whether he was in the body or in the spirit. He testifies "I consider myself not to have reached [the goal], but I stretch forward [epekteinomia] to what lies in front of me, forgetting what went before me" (Phil 3, 13). It is clear that Paul alone knew what laid beyond that third heaven (for Moses himself did not speak of it in his cosmogony). After hearing the unutterable mysteries of paradise, Paul still continued to move higher and did not cease to ascend. He never allowed the good already attained to limit his desire.

The soul looking towards God is raised to this sublime height as we have observed earlier. It does not know as it ought, as Paul says (1 Cor. 8, 2), nor does the soul estimate itself to have comprehended, but runs to what lies beyond, stretching forward [epekteinousa] to what is before (Phil 3, 13). The Song offers these words of the bride: "Upon the handles of the lock. I opened to my beloved". And she adds, "My beloved was gone. My soul went forth at his word". The bride teaches us here that the only way for comprehending that power transcending all understanding is never to remain in any notion of him, but to always move forward and never stand still.

The soul which looks to God and conceives that desire for incorruptible beauty always has a new desire for the transcendent, and it is never dulled by satiety. Such a soul never ceases to stretch forth [epekteinomene] to what lies before, going out from her present stage to what lies ahead. Anything great and marvelous always seems inferior in comparison to what succeeds it, since what the bride has found seems more beautiful than her earlier discoveries. Thus Paul died each day (1 Cor. 15, 13), because at all times he partook of a new life, being dead to the past and forgetful of previous things.

Thus we should not be unaware of the beauty praised in the bride who is compared to pleasure and Jerusalem. By these terms the Word clearly reveals the correct manner of ascent until the soul is exalted and reaches out [epekteinai] for her Lord's glorious deeds.

For if God is on high, then the One in the Father's bosom is united with men of flesh and blood for bringing peace on

earth to please his Father. It is clear that the bride compares her own beauty to such divine benevolence by imitating Christ in her works; she is to others what Christ was in his human nature.

The perfection of everything which can be measured by the senses is marked off by certain definite boundaries. Quantity, for example, admits of both continuity and limitation, for every quantitative measure is circumscribed by certain limits proper to itself. The person who looks at a cubit or at the number ten knows that its perfection consists in the fact that it has both a beginning and an end. But in the case of virtue we have learned from the Apostle that its one limit of perfection is the fact that it has no limit. For that divine Apostle, great and lofty in understanding, ever running the course of virtue, never ceased "straining toward [epekteinomenos] those things that are still to come" [Phil 3.13]. Coming to a stop in the race was not safe for him. Why? Because no Good has a limit in its own nature but is limited by the presence of its opposite, as life is limited by death and light by darkness. And every good thing generally ends with all those things which are perceived to be contrary to the good.

What then is being signified? Bodies, once they have received the initial thrust downward, are driven downward by themselves with greater speed without any additional help as long as the surface on which they move is steadily sloping and no resistance to their downward thrust is encountered. Similarly, the soul moves in the opposite direction. Once it is released from its earthly attachment, it becomes light and swift for its movement upward, soaring from below up to the heights. If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward

thrust (for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it), the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher--by its desire of the heavenly things "straining ahead [sunepkteinomene] for what is still to come" (Phil. 3, 13), as the Apostles says.

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