Tribute To Our Saint

WHEN people leave the place of their birth and long residence for a distant and new home, most probably never to return, they usually take with them at least one or several things to bind them to the home they are leaving. Thus, as Father Oschwald and his Association planned their immigration to the United States, they made one inseparable link with their homeland: as a popular tradition has it, from the parish church whence a majority of the immigrants came and where Father Oschwald was pastor, they took their patron, St. Gregory of Nazianz, and made him the patron of their Association, and determined to call their settlement in the new land St. Nazianz in his honor, and to dedicate their church in America to him.

Through these 100 years St. Gregory of Nazianz has watched over his community and church. In the work of the early pioneers and in the achievements of their successors in the present day, he has had a definite, subtle influence, perhaps unknown to the parishioners themselves.

For what the first settlers did in furthering Catholic life and Catholic education in the whole territory surrounding St. Nazianz, what religious societies with their origins in St. Nazianz have done throughout the nation for that same purpose, and what the present parishioners of St. Nazianz are accomplishing toward the same end for themselves and other parishes of the county — all this is most dear to the heart of their patron, St. Gregory of Nazianz.

For St. Gregory is a Doctor of the Church, a title given to not even three dozen of the saints of God, but reserved for those who not only led heroically holy lives but also are eminent in Catholic learning and education. His special title as a Doctor of the Church is the same as that given to the Apostle-Evangelist, St. John—“The Divine.”

St. Gregory of Nazianz was born in southwestern Asia Minor (now Turkey) in the fourth century. Blessed with the greatest gift of earth, a father and a mother who were concerned first of all for his spiritual well-being and the proper development of his mental powers, he was educated in the most celebrated Catholic schools of his time, at Neo-Caesaria and Alexandria. When he grew to manhood, his life set a regular pattern of retirement in solitude to pray and study alternating with periods of teaching and instructing others in the fruits of his prayer and study, especially in eloquence at the University of Athens.

Ordained to the priesthood in 361 and consecrated bishop a few years later, he ruled first the diocese of Saisma and then the diocese of Nazianz. After the death of his father and mother, he resigned from his episcopal see again into solitude. But his zeal for Catholic truth soon brought him from retirement. The heresy of Arianism, the false teaching that Jesus Christ was not God become man, but only the most perfect of God’s human creatures, again burst forth in new strength after being condemned by the first General Council of the Church in 325, the Council of Nicea.

Gregory yielded to the pleas of Catholics who begged him to come and defend them against the Arians. So powerfully did the learned bishop attack the false teachers that in a relatively short time he triumphed over all. The Catholics of the capital, Constantinople, demanded Gregory as their bishop, but he refused and returned to Nazianz. After administering to the church there for two years, he again sought the quiet of prayer and study. He died six years later, in 389.

God’s purpose in man’s creation is that he may use the abundant divine gifts bestowed upon him to gain peace and happiness which will never end—God’s supernatural gifts to grow in the life of grace, God’s mental gifts which raise man far above all material creation to grow in the life of true wisdom, God’s physical gifts to be used in furthering the supernatural life of grace and the natural life of the mind. Perfectly St. Gregory of Nazianz fulfilled God’s purposes in himself. By his guidance he has urged the same constantly upon the parish and village of which he is the patron, St. Nazianz. May the people continue always to follow that guidance.

St. Gregory of Nazianz, copied from an oil painting on a banner of the Sick Benevolent Society, founded by the settlers in St. Nazianz in 1871.