

Basil the Great

Introduction Part 2 – Basic Facts about Basil the Great

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"Basil the Great is excellent in all his works ... inferior to none." —Photius (Patriarch of Constantinople)

"Basil started out for his life's work with the equipment of the most liberal education which the age could supply. He had studied Greek literature, rhetoric, and philosophy under the most famous teachers." —Blomfield Jackson

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This introduction comes from the Cave's
The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education.

Introduction Part 2

Basic Facts about Basil the Great

WHO WAS *BASIL the Great*? Basil was a fourth century AD bishop of the Christian Church. He is primarily known for his teaching about the nature of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, and for his work in organizing and devising rules for monastic communities. As for the latter, his own work influenced Benedict of Nursia, the chief founder of monasticism in the West.

Born in 329 or 330 AD in Caesarea, in the Roman province of Cappadocia, in what is today central Turkey, Basil grew up in an affluent family of practicing Christians that could trace its Christian lineage back for many generations. He was educated to follow

after his father in a career that would have highlighted his talents in rhetoric and the law. Instead, after studying in Caesarea, Constantinople, and Athens, he went on, after a very brief secular career, to devote himself to pursuing and serving God in various ways—as an ascetic monk, a deacon (ordained in 362), a priest (ordained in 365), and, finally, the bishop of Caesarea (ordained in 370). It was during this time, from the 360s through the 370s up to his death in 379 AD, that Basil began to teach and write. Otherwise, he worked to bring aid to the poor and sick, among other activities.

What are Basil's major works? Of his work

expounding Christian doctrine and scripture, there are three to note. The *Against Eunomius* defends the orthodox Nicene position of the divinity of Christ (that the Son was God, that is, consubstantial with the Father) against Eunomius and other Arians, who taught that he was a creature and not essentially divine. In this work, Basil cautions the reader to be aware of the human mind's limitations in comprehending and naming the divine reality. The *On the Holy Spirit* defends the proper place of the Holy Spirit as God within the Trinity, and the Holy Spirit's role in the life of individuals and of the Church. Finally, the *Hexameron*, or the *Six Days* (of Creation), offers an exploration of the cosmology or creation account presented in the book of Genesis, emphasizing not only the creation of human beings but their eventual salvation. Aside from these three, Basil additionally prepared countless homilies (we possess many), as well

as exegetical reflections on portions of the Bible, such as the Psalms.

Basil also wrote a handful of ascetic writings emphasizing endurance, renunciation, offerings to the poor, and monasticism, among other points having to do with Christian asceticism or practice. Of significance is the *Moralia*, a work that provides eighty rules of life.

He is also known for his many letters, some three hundred, in which he banters with old friends, consoles, offers counsel, and explains Christian teaching and disciplinary practice.

Finally, there is his work offering tips on how his students—how anyone, really—can benefit from reading non-Christian Greek literature. It is to this treatise that we now turn in order to explore some of the more significant themes and ideas he presents therein.

So ends this item. See you in **another Cave reading or item.**

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