PREFAE: IMPORTANCE OF THE APPETITE (109,20–111,22)

Gregory begins his homily by resorting to medical knowledge to defend the importance of hunger and thirst: those who suffer stomach ailments, he says, are bothered by food, inasmuch as they think they are always satiated, since their illness has taken away their appetite. However, once cured, their appetite will return. Bodily hunger and thirst are so closely united that they are not capable of being separated.

After this preface, Gregory analyses the order of the Beatitudes. He considers them to be akin to a ladder in which each step forms a harmonious and united whole with all the others. He conceives them to be keeping a progressive order. Following Jean Daniélon's
schéma in *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, the first three beatitudes can be considered as belonging to the purifying order,\(^2\) whereas in the fourth Gregory begins to speak of the progress of the soul in its journey towards God, once its appetites have been purified.

Indeed, applying the analogy of food and the ailing stomach to the order of the Beatitudes, Gregory understands that once the soul is cured by the preceding Beatitudes – blessed are the poor, the meek and those who weep – the fourth Beatitude presents a different panorama: the exhortation to hunger and thirst for spiritual things.

From this follows Gregory’s positive view regarding the \(\pi\̊\theta\̊\omicron\zeta\) of hunger and thirst, the importance he places on them as the moving force of the ascent towards God. Bodily health and spiritual health are manifested in hunger and thirst, in the desire (\(\varepsilon\pi\theta\omicron\mu\iota\alpha\)) for that which is appropriate for the body and for the soul.

Thus does Gregory fully come to grips with the importance of the appetite, both in the corporal realm and in the spiritual realm. Gregory had already used this thought in his *Treatise on virginity*.\(^3\) Bodily forces are good, but they can only be conserved by means of sufficient nourishment; nourishment is produced by eating and eating is brought about by appetite. Therefore hunger and thirst are a good thing (\(\mu\acute{a}x\alpha\omicron\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\zeta\)) for bodily beings.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Thus do we appreciate it, for example, in chapter 22, which is entitled “It is not convenient to practice abstinence above and beyond what is necessary, since indulgence towards the body or mortification without measure are equally opposed to the perfection of the soul”. In this chapter, which inclines towards medical doctrine, Gregory puts the case in favour of asceticism which conforms to the nature of the body and which seeks personal equilibrium. “I heard a doctor who was expounding on matters of his science – he writes – saying that our body is made up of four elements which are not equal but rather contrary to each other (...). I have brought to mind these explanations because he who was explaining the constitution of the body according to this theory was advising us to be watchful, in so far as possible, to maintain an equilibrium of forces among the different qualities, since he claimed that health consists of avoiding the domination of one element over the others. If this reasoning is true, then in order to conserve our health we must pay attention to this equilibrium without introducing, in any of the elements which make up the body, any excess or deficiency stemming from the irregularity of our manner of living”. And he concludes: “The ultimate objective of continence does not consist of mortifying the body, but rather of facilitating the services of the soul”.

\(^4\) This has an immediate repercussion when speaking of Christian fasting and especially when establishing the right diet for those who have chosen the path of virginity. As J. Janini writes, Gregory of Nyssa approaches this matter in the only sensible manner: by means of scientific objectivity with an eye on the physiological reality of the human body. José Janini Cuesta, *Dieta y virginidad*. Basilio de Ancira y San Gregorio de Nisa: MCom 14 (1950) 185–196.