Sermons are a species of pastoral theology. They are broad-ranging rhetorical expressions on the nature of the Christian witness of faith that have undergone some degree of critical analysis. Unlike systematic theology, the pastoral task of preaching is not a simple matter of sustained reflection on the witness of faith as such. It is an interpretation or application of theological claims in the daily lives of believers. Schubert Ogden defines such a practical theology in this manner, it “properly asks what one is to do in the particular situation in and for which one must here and now take responsibility if one is to actualize…a Christian self-understanding.” In this sense, every sermon is distinctive and historically situated. Still, a sermon attempts to a greater or lesser degree to provide a meaningful context for present human activity by demonstrating or declaring that such activity is congruent with the aims of the transcendent as outlined in a sustained and deliberate reflection on the Christian witness.

Gregory of Nyssa’s sermons on the Lord’s Prayer are a provocative attempt to join such proclamation with emerging Nicene theology around the subject of pious practice. In itself, this is a complex task. What makes Gregory’s sermons even more daring is that they attempt

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1 By the terms “witness of faith,” “Christian witness,” “Christian witness of faith,” and the like, I am employing the work of Schubert Ogden, who argues that “the Christian witness of faith can become the object of theological understanding insofar as it indirectly becomes the subject of such understanding as well. To this extent, there is a sound basis for the traditional formula in which theology is succinctly defined as fides quaerens intellectum,” Schubert Ogden, *On Theology* (San Francisco, 1986), p. 2.

2 Ogden, *On Theology*, p. 97.
to speak to the specific context of his congregation, which provides us with a glimpse into the social topography that confronted a gifted Christian rhetorician and ecclesiastical leader in the fourth century. Each sermon then tells us something about Gregory’s theology and its application directly as well as something about the bishop’s community and its social construction indirectly. As defined by Douglas Sturm, the “polity is the inclusive form of coordinated activity among persons and groups that incorporates more or less adequately the conditions and qualities of civilization: truth, beauty, art, adventure, peace.” Adopting this definition for heuristic purposes, Gregory’s sermons constitute a form of Christian civic discourse that cast a vision of polity that he believed to be congruent with the teleological aim of God derived from the Christian witness of faith.

A TRANSFORMED POLITICAL CONTEXT AND A PRECARIOUS SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Gregory of Nyssa, as well as other bishops in the fourth century, confronted a different social context than their predecessors. Unlike Christians of earlier periods, their religion was now an object of imperial favoritism. The church had not only become the recipient of a great deal of governmental largesse, but scrutiny as well. The Christian community was forced to define itself and its function in a society where Christians still comprised only a portion of the populace. It did this by carving out a social niche, concern for the poor.

Jesus reportedly said, “For you always have the poor with you” (Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8 NRSV). The church made this group its concern. To do this, the church developed a renewed vision of its founder. Drawing from texts such as 2 Corinthians 8:9, the church developed the doctrine of the poverty of Christ and his apostles. This distinctive understanding of the incarnation maintained that Christ not only condescended to being human, but also took on the mantle of

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4 I define Gregory’s sermons as a form of civic discourse because they have a great deal in common with deliberative rhetoric, at least as defined by Aristotle.

5 It is interesting, but entirely consistent, that Luke would leave out this statement attributed to Jesus.