GREGORY OF NYSSA AND THE NEOPLATONIC
DOCTRINE OF THE SOUL

BY

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I. Introduction

In her work Rhetorik und Theologie, Henriette M. Meissner offered a first exhaustive analysis of both the total structure and the argumentative procedure in the De anima et resurrectione: in so doing, she fully succeeded in her aim of giving a more satisfactory starting point for a better understanding of the philosophical and theological contents of one of the most thoughtful works Gregory of Nyssa ever wrote, and surely one of the most meaningful as regards the relations with the philosophical tradition of his time. In her discussion of the introductive part of the work, Meissner clearly pointed out, among other things, that the De anima et resurrectione falls within the literary genre of “consolatio”; more exactly, this dialogue between Gregory and his dying sister Macrina resembles, from the beginning, a “consolatio mortis” based on a λόγος περὶ ψυχῆς. It is by such a “logos,” in fact, that Macrina would lead Gregory, and with him the reader, to overcome fear in the face of death, showing the rational grounds of Christian hope in an eschatological future, in opposition to any materialistic view that encloses man within the horizon of earthly life through the affirmation of the perishable nature of the soul. Just so, the prologue of the De anima et resurrectione opens with Gregory plagued by profound “pathos” at the sight of his dying sister and ends with a discussion on the nature of the soul and on its immortality (ἡ περὶ τοῦ διαμένειν τῆν ψυχῆν δόξα, 17 C): from the beginning the lack of a ἀκριβῆς ἐπιστήμη on man’s destiny after death emerges as the first cause of every “pathos” and lack of hope.

The criterion that the Christian hope relates to, as regards death, is not however only the immortality of the soul, according to the Platonic view, but the resurrection of man as a whole: soul and body. For this reason, the δόγμα περὶ τῆς ψυχῆς referred to in the first part of the dialogue (“de anima”) becomes the starting point and, at the same time, the presuppo-
sition for a quest ("de resurrectione") that, in the face of the pagan objections and also those doubts suffered by a believer, sets out to delineate, following a rigorous argument (ἐξ ἀκολουθίας, 108 A), how the Christian faith in the resurrection of the body is by no means alien to rational credibility. It thus remains open to an understanding based on philosophical principles. It is in this very connection between the λόγος περὶ ψυχῆς and the λόγος περὶ ἀναστάσεως that, as Meissner points out, the true novelty of the De anima et resurrectione of Gregory of Nyssa resides.

Therefore, within this unitary and clearly Christian σκοπός of the dialogue Gregory deals with a subject (that of the soul) which had played a leading rôle in the philosophy of the Hellenistic and Imperial age. The discussion on this subject, the fundamental concepts of which caused the divergences in opinion among the various philosophical schools, had come to centre on a set of "quaestiones" that, from the second century onwards, relying on a doxographic material widely spread and utilized, formed the traditional outline of treatises about the soul. It is just this outline which formed the route along which Gregory himself travelled in the ζήτησις about the soul which is presented in De anima et resurrectione.

We have had elsewhere the opportunity to consider in detail the "quaestiones de anima" that Gregory of Nyssa deals with in the course of the dialogue, and to insert them in the context of his thought, on one hand, and in that of the philosophical tradition of the Imperial age, on the other. From this comparison, from the analysis of the discussions in the philosophical "milieu" of that age, from the ideas which Gregory receives and from the way he transforms them, there emerge some essential elements for the understanding of his anthropology and, more generally, of his philosophical and theological thought. For it is well known that the theme of the soul had always concealed the key to the solution of problems of greater importance. Our aim here is to look more closely to the link that, as we said, Gregory of Nyssa establishes between the λόγος περὶ ψυχῆς and the λόγος περὶ ἀναστάσεως, in order to single out the characteristics and the philosophical sources of the soul doctrine set forth in De anima et resurrectione.

II. The Doctrine of Resurrection in the Discussion between Platonism and Christianity

It is well known that the dogma of the resurrection had always been, since St. Paul's speech at Areopagus, one of the fundamental themes in the debate between Platonism and Christianity. As a matter of fact, for