



# Theological Work in Gregory of Nyssa and Renovation of Theological Work Today. Conceptual Framework from *De Vita Moysis* and *In Canticum Canticorum*\*

Gabriel Alberto Jaramillo Vargas<sup>a</sup>  
Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8356-1094>

Orlando Solano Pinzón  
Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4446-626X>

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**ABSTRACT:** Theology as an exercise in constant elaboration and in dialogue with the signs of the times, needs to be renewed permanently to respond to the urgent challenges of a post-modern culture that is increasingly disenchanted and wounded. This article will show some results of the doctoral research carried out by the author at the Pontifical Xavierian University (Colombia), titled “Theological work in Gregory of Nyssa and renovation of theological work today. Contributions from *De Vita Moysis* and *In Canticum Canticorum*”.

One of those problems that some contemporary theologians are urging to renovate is the problem of the separation between theology and sanctity that divided something that was a single reality in the theological work of the Fathers, as “flesh and blood have to be kept together originally to live”. This problem is sharpened in the Latin American context by the slow reception and development of patristic studies. In the current investigation, it seems that Gregory of Nyssa has a particular contribution to this problem in two of his most mystical works. Indeed, he displays his specific way of doing theology.

From the hermeneutic of appropriation in Paul Ricoeur, in which the interpreter lets himself be guided by the world opened by the text, understands it, and appropriates it into an experience that allows him to discover new dimensions of his being in the world, this article aims to show a synthesis of Gregory’s theological work in *The Life of Moses* and *Homilies of the Song of Songs*. In this sense, the theological position of Gregory could be understood in the conceptual framework of the following categories: *μυστήριον*, *μυσταγωγία*, *μυστικά*, *γνόφος*, *ἀκολουθία* and *ἐπέκτασις*. These six important categories could help in the renovation efforts

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<sup>a</sup> Correspondence author. E-mail: [gabrieljaramillo@javeriana.edu.co](mailto:gabrieljaramillo@javeriana.edu.co)

already being promoted by the Second Vatican Council and are present in Latin-American contextual theologies, following the double renovating dynamism *ad fontes* and *a giorno*.

KEY WORDS: Gregory of Nyssa; Renovation; Theological Work; Patristics.

Quehacer teológico en Gregorio de Nisa y renovación del quehacer teológico hoy. Marco conceptual desde *De Vita Moysis e In Canticum Canticorum*

RESUMEN: La teología como ejercicio en continua elaboración y en diálogo con los signos de los tiempos necesita renovarse permanentemente en orden a responder mejor a los desafíos de una cultura posmoderna, marcada por el desencanto y heridas de diversa índole. Este artículo mostrará algunos resultados de la investigación doctoral realizada por el autor en la Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia), titulada “Quehacer teológico en Gregorio de Nisa y renovación del quehacer teológico hoy. Aportes desde *De Vita Moysis e In Canticum Canticorum*”, la cual se centra de manera especial en la manera como Gregorio hace teología.

Uno de los problemas sobre el cual algunos teólogos contemporáneos buscan indagar consiste en la separación entre teología y santidad, la cual dividió algo que era una sola realidad en el quehacer teológico de los padres, como la sangre y la carne deben permanecer juntas para poder vivir. Este problema está acentuado en el contexto latinoamericano, por la lenta recepción y desarrollo de los estudios patristicos. En la presente investigación parece que Gregorio de Nisa tiene una contribución particular frente a dicho problema en sus dos obras místicas más importantes, en las cuales despliega su manera particular de hacer teología.

Desde la hermenéutica de la apropiación de Paul Ricoeur, en la cual el intérprete se deja guiar por el mundo que los textos le abren, lo comprende y apropia en una experiencia que le permite desubrir nuevas dimensiones de su ser en el mundo, este artículo desea presentar una síntesis del quehacer teológico de Gregorio en *La vida de Moisés* y *Homilías sobre el Cantar de los cantares*. En este sentido, el quehacer teológico de Gregorio se podría comprender en el marco conceptual de las siguientes categorías: *μυστήριον*, *μυσταγωγία*, *μυστικά*, *γνώφος*, *ἀκολουθία* y *ἐπέκτασις*. Estas seis importantes categorías podrían contribuir a los esfuerzos de renovación propuestos por el Concilio Vaticano II, y presentes en las teologías contextuales latinoamericanas, que siguen el doble dinamismo de renovación *ad fontes* y *a giorno*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Gregorio de Nisa; renovación; quehacer teológico; patristica.

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## Introduction

Gregory of Nyssa is a Cappadocian Father who enjoys increasing popularity among systematic theologians and patristics scholars worldwide,<sup>1</sup> yet he remains almost unknown in Latin America<sup>2</sup> despite all his contributions to the new trinitarian developments, spirituality, and apophatism.<sup>3</sup> This article aims to give more visibility to his theological work and to some of his contributions to the renovation efforts already promoted by the Second Vatican Council and present in Latin American contextual theologies, following the double renovating dynamism: *ad fontes* and *a giorno*.

For this reason, his contributions will be presented in the following order: (1) The problem assumed by research about the challenges of the theological work and its need for renovation; (2) the possibility of developing a conceptual framework that will contribute to the renewal of theological work; and (3) a brief conclusion of the article.

## Challenges of the theological work and the urgency of renewal

The situation of the theologian in today's world is strangely paradoxical. In terms of vocation, he is devoted to a study of the past, where God has manifested himself. Even beyond this study of the past, though, he is a man devoted to a contemplation of the Eternal. But by the very fact of his existence, he is immersed in a world that is teetering on its foundations and seems ready to collapse.<sup>4</sup>

The quote above presents the opening words of von Balthasar's essay on the religious philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa, *Présence et pensée*, which reveals an ambiguous and paradoxical reality of the theological work in seeking answers appropriate to new contexts and challenges from the sources of Revelation in a dialogue between eternal truths and the numerous contemporary problems. One of the problems that von Balthasar wanted to address in the European context of the mid-twentieth century was the separation between theology and sanctity.<sup>5</sup> It is a problem that separates what

<sup>1</sup> Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern*, 1-7.

<sup>2</sup> See Cassin, "Bibliography: Gregory of Nyssa".

<sup>3</sup> Coakley, *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Von Balthasar, *Présence et pensée. Essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nyssa*, vii. This and the other translations from Spanish, Italian, German, French and Greek, are from the author.

<sup>5</sup> "In the history of Catholic theology there surely does not exist an event that has been studied so little and, nevertheless, is worthy of greater attention than the fact that, from the great scholasticism, there have been very few saint theologians" (Von Balthasar, *Ensayos teológicos I: Verbum Caro*, 235). Holiness,

was a single reality, “as flesh and blood have to be kept together originally to live”<sup>6</sup> and affects the theological<sup>7</sup> identity of theology; and as he said, “its division has undoubtedly been the worst disaster in the history of the Church”.<sup>8</sup>

In studies on Gibellini,<sup>9</sup> Ford,<sup>10</sup> Ratzinger,<sup>11</sup> Cordovilla,<sup>12</sup> González de Cardedal,<sup>13</sup> Kristiansen and Rise,<sup>14</sup> we can observe this separation between theology and spirituality identified by von Balthasar, which undoubtedly affects the identity of the theological work. It is also important to mention that this concern was also present in several works of his contemporaries<sup>15</sup>—such as Congar,<sup>16</sup> De Lubac,<sup>17</sup> Daniélou,<sup>18</sup> and Rahner,<sup>19</sup> some great reformers who managed to receive the Fathers’ thought, in order to respond to the problems of their context without falling into anachronisms, because they understood the *ad fontes* as a relay race in which the flame of evangelical creativity is passed from one generation to another. Their contributions flourished in

spirituality and mysticism here, refers to the same reality thanks to the “renewal of the exegetical and patristics studies that interferes [...] in an enlargement of the word mystic” (Solignac, “Mystic”, 1891-1939).

<sup>6</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theologie und Spiritualität*, 586.

<sup>7</sup> It’s interesting this adjective that authors like Galli and Cordovilla use; it seems to be patently obvious, but it doesn’t amid a crisis of identity in the theology (Galli, “¿Una nueva fase en la teología iberoamericana? ¿Un salto hacia el futuro de la teología en castellano?”, 158-160; Cordovilla, *El ejercicio de la teología: introducción al pensar teológico y a sus principales figuras*, 36-40, 254-277; Cordovilla, *En defensa de la teología, una ciencia entre la razón y el exceso*, 9-33).

<sup>8</sup> Von Balthasar, “Discurso con ocasión de la recepción del premio Pablo VI”, 290.

<sup>9</sup> See Gibellini, *Teología del siglo XX*.

<sup>10</sup> See Ford and Muers (eds.), *The Modern Theologians. An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*.

<sup>11</sup> See Ratzinger, *Naturaleza y misión de la teología. Ensayos sobre su situación en la discusión contemporánea*; Ratzinger, *Teoría de los principios teológicos*.

<sup>12</sup> See Cordovilla, *El ejercicio de la teología: introducción al pensar teológico y a sus principales figuras*.

<sup>13</sup> See González de Cardedal, *El quehacer de la teología. Génesis. Estructura. Misión*.

<sup>14</sup> See Kristiansen and Rise, *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern*.

<sup>15</sup> See Daley, “The Nouvelle Théologie and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols and the Science of Theology”.

<sup>16</sup> Congar, *Tareas actuales de la teología*, 27-50.

<sup>17</sup> De Lubac, *Mística e mistero: la fede cristiana*, 1-32.

<sup>18</sup> Daniélou, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse”, 5-21.

<sup>19</sup> Rahner, “Espiritualidad antigua y nueva”, 13-34.

the Second Vatican Council and the great renewal of Catholic theology,<sup>20</sup> and led to an openness in the dialogue of mutual fertilization between different religious traditions.<sup>21</sup>

The arrival and subsequent reception of these renewing currents from Vatican II in the Ibero and Latin-American context—according to Saranyana—has been an arduous and gradual process, with not few tensions or exaggerations, such as the “inflation of sociological and economic reports”;<sup>22</sup> these “fostered a pastoral exposure to horizontalism, which competed with the equilibrium of Medellín”.<sup>23</sup> According to Ratzinger, the years after Vatican II, as well as those in the councils of the 4th Century were eventful and plagued by naive enthusiasms, confusions, polarized interpretations, and wounds at every level.<sup>24</sup> Along with such tensions, there is “a very complex problem, in which the whole dilemma of theology is concentrated [...] their split between *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*”,<sup>25</sup> in which the Fathers go back to a remote past.

In this sense, the Latin American reception of the “double movement of renewal *ad fontes* and *a giorno*”<sup>26</sup> remains scarce and precarious, as well as the possibilities to reunite theology and sanctity.<sup>27</sup> The urgency of this renewal is sharpened by the emergence of a liquid postmodernity<sup>28</sup> disenchanted and devoid of foundations<sup>29</sup> as well as the social problems that still affect the Latin-American context.

Pope Francis’ has been one of the voices that has recently challenged Catholic theologians the most to renew their work, by insisting on the need to do theology

<sup>20</sup> Concilio Vaticano II, “Constitución dogmática *Dei Verbum* sobre la divina revelación” 2, 8, 23, 24; Concilio Vaticano II, “Constitución pastoral *Gaudium et spes*, sobre la Iglesia en el mundo actual” 4, 44, 62; Concilio Vaticano II, “Decreto *Ad gentes* sobre la actividad misionera de la Iglesia”<sup>22</sup>; Concilio Vaticano II, “Decreto *Optatam* totius sobre la formación sacerdotal (1965)” 16-18.

<sup>21</sup> Concilio Vaticano II, “Decreto *Unitatis redintegratio* sobre el ecumenismo (1964)” 11.

<sup>22</sup> Saranyana, *Breve historia de la teología en América Latina*, 283.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ratzinger, *Teoría de los principios teológicos. Materiales para una teología fundamental*, 439-443.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 158-159.

<sup>26</sup> Galli, “¿Una nueva fase en la teología iberoamericana? ¿Un salto hacia el futuro de la teología en castellano?”, 140.

<sup>27</sup> According to Ratzinger, a proper reception of the Council “only in an indirect way depends on the texts and the groupings. The decisive factor is whether or not there are men –saints– who, through the unshakable commitment of their own person, are right in creating new and living things” (Ratzinger, *Teoría de los principios teológicos. Materiales para una teología fundamental*, 453).

<sup>28</sup> Bordoni and Bauman, *Estado de crisis*, 73-111.

<sup>29</sup> Bauman, *Tiempos líquidos. Vivir en una época de incertidumbre*, 7-17.

on one's knees<sup>30</sup> and to reunite theology and sanctity,<sup>31</sup> explicitly following the inspiration of von Balthasar.<sup>32</sup> Francis believes that theological work is a spiritual discipline centered on discernment,<sup>33</sup> which implies a spiritual exercise between thought and prayer,<sup>34</sup> that commits the theologian with the wounds of his brothers, because “the theologian who does not pray and who does not worship God, ends up sunk in the most disgusting narcissism.”<sup>35</sup>

## A Conceptual Framework for the Renewal of Theological Work

With these concerns and following the Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic of appropriation<sup>36</sup>—which helps to establish a fruitful interaction between the interpreter's world and the world of the text<sup>37</sup>—the theological work of the Nyssen expressed in *Life of Moses* and in *Homily on the Song of Songs* is considered as a proposal that can help to unite theology and sanctity in contemporary theological work.<sup>38</sup> In the process

<sup>30</sup> “Thus, there is only one way of doing theology: on your knees. It is not just a pious act of prayer, after which you think about theology. It is a dynamism between thought and prayer” (Francisco, “Videomensaje al Congreso Internacional de Teología organizado por la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina [2015]”).

<sup>31</sup> Francisco, “Exhortación apostólica *Gaudete et exsultate* sobre el llamado a la santidad en el mundo actual (2018)” 45.

<sup>32</sup> Servais, “Jorge Bergoglio and the Theologians Who Shaped his Reading of the Spiritual Exercises”, 483-507.

<sup>33</sup> Coda, *La Chiesa e il Vangelo. Alle sorgenti della teologia di papa Francesco. La teologia di papa Francesco*, 19-29.

<sup>34</sup> “Doing theology on your knees is daring to think while praying and pray while thinking. It entails a play between present and future, between the already and the not yet” (Francisco, “Videomensaje al Congreso Internacional de Teología organizado por la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina [2015]”). For Francis, theological work cannot be left in a “desk-bound theology” (Francisco, “Exhortación apostólica *Evangelii gaudium* sobre el anuncio del Evangelio en el mundo actual [2013]” 133).

<sup>35</sup> Francisco, “Discorso del Santo Padre Francesco alla comunità della Pontificia Università Gregoriana e ai Consociati del Pontificio Istituto Biblico e del Pontificio Istituto Orientale (2014)”. Repugnance consists of blocking oneself to the encounter with God and not letting this encounter transform him and commit him to live the social dimension of the Gospel in his own environment.

<sup>36</sup> Garavito, “Hemenéutica de la acción. Apropiación para una teología de la acción humana”, 279-298.

<sup>37</sup> Cassin, “Text and Context: The Importance of Scholarly Reading”; Gregorii Nysseni, “Contra Eunomium. Libri I”, 109-131.

<sup>38</sup> Gregory was an important inspiring source for authors such as Daniélou, von Balthasar and Cordovilla in addressing the problem of the separation between theology and spirituality.

of “exposing oneself to the text and receiving from it a broader self”,<sup>39</sup> it is possible to generate a transformative<sup>40</sup> experience based on the theological work of Gregory.

The theological work of Gregory brings together theology and sanctity amid his works as a Pastor of Nyssa and defender of the Nicene Creed. His theology is intrinsically related to history<sup>41</sup>, such as the place where God reveals himself through an economy of salvation that involves all humanity in the Incarnated Word. In his heart, Gregory felt the presence of God. He expressed this mystical experience<sup>42</sup> of the inhabitation of the Trinity in his soul, in a dogmatic speculation,<sup>43</sup> coupled with a deep commitment with the social<sup>44</sup> and ecclesial problems of his time.

In this sense, one of the most important contributions is his Trinitarian thought; according to Drecoll, it “is the background of the theological discussions that ended the trinitarian controversy of the fourth Century”<sup>45</sup> and it made an impact on the theological work of his moment, giving a greater understanding of the eternal generation of the Son that reconciles the gap between infinity and finitude. This more complete understanding, instead of falling into rationalism, opens the possibility of participating in the eternity of God.

From the hermeneutic of appropriation and the “study of the texts with discernment”<sup>46</sup> that has been made of the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* and the *Life of Moses*, the theological work in Gregory is a synthesis between theology and sanctity. It could be understood in the conceptual framework of the categories *μυστήριον*, *μυσταγωγία*, *μυστικά*, *γνόφος*, *ἀκολουθία* and *ἐπέκτασις*. It is possible to identify, in

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, *Del texto a la acción. Ensayos de hermenéutica* II, 117.

<sup>40</sup> This method is also present in Gregory’s approach, as Morwenna Ludlow pointed out: “...the way in which he chose to highlight the notion of transformation of meaning –which he found in Origen’s work but elaborated on much more fully– marked an important development in Christian hermeneutics” (Ludlow, “Anatomy: Investigating the Body of Texts in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa”, 147).

<sup>41</sup> Maspero, “Teología de la historia”, 835-842.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory not only explained the mystical theology with allegories: he was also an author of a deep and truly mystical experience (Ferro Garel, *Gregorio di Nissa. L’esperienza mistica, il simbolismo, il progresso spirituale*, 9-15).

<sup>43</sup> His theologizing integrates the best of the Alexandrian theological-spiritual tradition, as well as the culture of its time in the inspiring line of the master Origen, who invited to take “from Greek philosophy the subjects that could be as initiations or propaedeutics for Christianity” (Origène d’Alexandrie, “Lettre d’Origène a Grégoire Le Taumaturge”, 187-195).

<sup>44</sup> Specially with the poorest and most sick (see Holman, ed., *The Hungry Are Dying*).

<sup>45</sup> Drecoll and Berghaus, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Minor Treatises on Trinitarian Theology and Apollinarism. Proceedings of the 11th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, Tübingen 17-20 September 2008*, x.

<sup>46</sup> Gregorii Nysseni, *Opera* VI, 12, 2-3. Hereafter, the references of the Gregorii Nysseni *Opera* collection will appear as GNO, followed by the volume number.

these two mystical texts, the maturity of Gregory, a kind of theological work centered in the Sacred Scripture, open to the mystery with an apophatic attitude and from a disposition of following Christ on a path of a progressive conformation with him.

The world of the texts shows a systematic and a-systematic theologian at the same time because—on one hand—there is a logical concatenation of ideas while—on the other hand—there exists a profound relationship in his entire thinking that escapes any systematization, because everything seems to be connected inside the ontological world of Gregory.<sup>47</sup> Being aware that each category in Gregory, such as hyperlinks, must be considered simultaneously in its relationship with others, we tried to identify some levels of comprehension between the six categories and their accents.

We grouped the most essential categories founded according to six dimensions of the theological approach: relational, liturgical, revealed, anthropological, epistemological, and exegetical. The distribution of the categories according to the dimensions was made as follows:

DIMENSION	RELATIONAL	LITURGICAL	REVELATION	ANTHROPOLOGICAL	EPISTEMOLOGICAL	EXEGETICAL
CATEGORIES	μετουσία διάθεσις ἐπιθυμία αἴσθησις ἄπτεται ἀνιπαμένη ἔκστασις ἄδυτον ἐνοικείωσις ἀνάκρασις κοινωνία σχέσις μυστικά	χειραγωγία ὁδηγία φωταγωγία ἀγιότης βαπτίσμα πνεῦμα μέθην μίμησις ὁμοίωσις ἀνοδον καθαρότης μετανοία μεταποιήσις συμμεμορφώσθαι μυσταγωγία	θεολογία θεοφανεία οἰκονομία σταυρός ἱστορία φιλανθρωπία φιλόχριστος παρουσία θαῦμα κατάβασις μυστήριον	φύσις συνεργία κίνησις διάστημα προαίρεσις παρρησία τρέχει παράδοξον ἀρετή βίος καρδία ἀπάθεια ἐρωτικῆ ἀνάβασις ἐπέκτασις	ἀπόρρητον θεογνωσία ὑπερκείμενα κατανόησις εὐσέβεια ἀληθεία πίστις γνόφος	ἐξήγησις σκοπός θεωρία συμφωνία ἐρμηνεία εὐκτικός ἀκολουθία

By dimensions, we want to express that—as in the figure of a polyhedron—there are six aspects of the theological work of the Nyssen which demand to be contemplated holistically and in its existential dynamism. The six dimensions constitute a circle of comprehension in which each dimension is understood in its relationship with the others, because they are interconnected, like the functioning of the body, in which the different systems also need to be united—nervous, lymphatic, skeletal, muscular, among others.

<sup>47</sup> Taranto, *Gregorio di Nissa. Un contributo alla storia dell'interpretazione*, 17-23.



The first dimension expresses the interconnection of each of the dimensions of Nyssen's theological work in its relationship, because the constellation of his thought and his way of proceeding as a theologian revolves around the Trinitarian relational ontology. In the relationship, the liturgical and revealed dimensions are united, inasmuch as in the trinitarian ontology, a link is established with humanity thanks to the revelation of God in creation and in its historical evolution. This link implies a real participation of the mystery in the liturgical dynamism that is driven by the action and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The relational, liturgical, and revealed dimensions make up a triangle of understanding to which the Nyssen's reflection constantly guides, with a gravitational pole of ascending type, because it always leads to higher horizons. This triangle connects simultaneously with another triangle, which is made up of the anthropological, epistemological, and exegetical dimensions. Through these last three dimensions, the theologians' position before the revealed mystery and their desire to relate with it through the spiritual interpretation of Holy Scripture, is shown, and goes hand in hand with the cultivation of virtuous life and the apophatic epistemology that is transparent in Gregory's texts. Considering these dimensions as a point of reference, an attempt has been made to group the categories as follows:

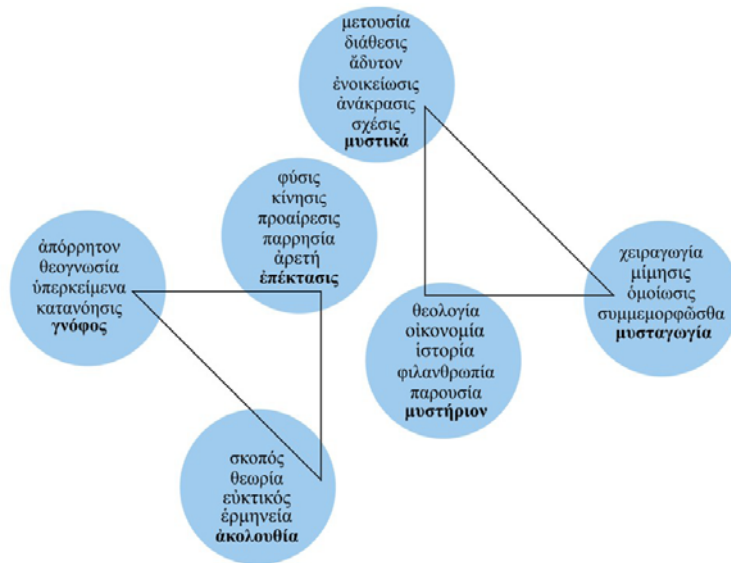


FIGURE 1. Two triangles (Source: The author).

The distribution of categories into groups and theological dimensions responds to the desire of systematizing the theological work of the Nyssen in the two works

that are been analyzed. In this order of ideas, the integration between categories and dimensions would be as follows: *μυστικά* as the relational dimension, *μυσταγωγία* as the liturgical dimension, *μυστήριον* as the revealed dimension, *ἐπέκτασις* as the anthropological dimension, *γνόφος* as the epistemological dimension, and *ἀκολουθία* as the exegetical dimension.

This is a grouping proposal that remains consistent with the relational ontological universe of the Nyssen, because when considering each of the previous categories, reference is made to the other categories that comprise it and explain it according to the theological dimensions found in the texts as well as within the author's worldview as a whole.

Each of the six dimensions and their respective categories has a special meaning within the theological language of Gregory. This language not only is an essential feature of the Nyssen's procedure expressed according to the aforementioned, but also the author's own symbolic horizon, his interpretive world, and the particular way in which he nominated and appropriated it. For this reason, the six categories of analysis are not restricted to the dimension assigned to them, but rather exceed them, as if by double-clicking on each one, the other five appear immediately. As seen below, Nyssen's categories have a particular range of meanings that overlap, just as the threads that make up a fabric. Structuring categories by dimensions means identifying the different threads and the way in which they are interwoven.

### Μυστικά as the Relational Dimension

The category mystic in Gregory is concatenated with the categories *μυστήριον* and *μυσταγωγία*, as well as within his spiritual interpretation of Scripture and the concatenation of meanings that arise from dialogue with the philosophy and culture of his time, which served to express his apophatism through a colorful theological discourse. In this order of ideas, when Gregory speaks of mystic,<sup>48</sup> he does so about the mystery that is revealed in history and its mystagogical connotation, in which the human being participates in the divine life (*μετουσία*<sup>49</sup>). The connection between *μυστικά*, *μυστήριον* and *μυσταγωγία*<sup>50</sup> is evident since they share the same terminological root

<sup>48</sup> Mateo-Seco, "Mística", 627-643.

<sup>49</sup> This is a very important category that is strongly related to the Nyssen's ontology and anthropology as it was developed in more detail throughout the exposition. It appears thirty-seven times in the texts and its use is related to participation in the divine life.

<sup>50</sup> "The sequence of these terms (Mystery, Mystagogy, Mysticism) traces a path, the path that goes from the revelation of the mystery of Christ to the introduction into his mystery by the sacraments of the Church (mystagogy means action to introduce or lead by the hand in the mystery) up to the 'mystical' which is,

and express the same ineffable reality of which one can have experience (αἴσθησις) through the relationship (σχέσις).

With the category μυστικά, the experience of encountering the mystery of God is especially emphasized, which the Nyssen explains with the intensity of a kiss (διὰ τοῦ μυστικοῦ ἐκίνου φιλήματος<sup>51</sup>) through which God enters into a loving relationship with the soul.<sup>52</sup> This relationship is characterized by the baptismal reality in which the believer is intimately united with Christ and by the manifestation of his presence in the mystical words of Scripture (μυστικῶν ῥημάτων).<sup>53</sup>

The relational union (ἀνάκρασις/κοινωνία<sup>54</sup>) with God is indeed proportional to one's relational disposition (διάθεσις<sup>55</sup>), by means of which the soul enters the sanctuary of the divine presence (ἄδυτον<sup>56</sup>), lets itself be inhabited by God's presence (ἐνοικείωσις) and becomes aware of how He touches the soul inside (ἄπτεται<sup>57</sup>). The loving force (τὴν ἐρωτικὴν διάθεσιν<sup>58</sup>) that arises from this relationship orders the

according to Lubac's definition 'the lived mystery', the lived experience of the mystery within the soul or heart" (De Andia, *Mystère du Christ, mystère de Dieu. Introduction à la mystagogie et à la mystique*, 371).

<sup>51</sup> GNO VI, 323,19.

<sup>52</sup> "Per Gregorio (come per Origene, Filone e altri antichi) *mystikós* definisce soltanto il senso di mistero che circonda Dio e il contatto che in vario modo si può avere con lui" (Simonetti, "Introduzione", xxxvii).

<sup>53</sup> GNO VI, 27,16-17. Of the nineteen times that the term appears in the two texts, eight recurrences are related to baptismal reality and eleven to the mystical meaning of Holy Scripture. See the mystical relationship with Baptism in GNO VI, 77,3;205,15;318,8; 323,19 γ GNO VII/I, 72,9;73,13;74,9;96,8. On the mystical meaning of Scripture, see GNO VI, 15,12;27,17;178,2;193,6;286,18;308,8;339,21;43 6,5 and GNO VII/I, 17,23;80,11;26,1. This last reference might be a bit ambiguous, but if it is read in its context, it is hinting at the mystical words of the divine tabernacle and priestly garments (Ex 25–28), that the Nyssen designates on that occasion as mystical teachings (τῶν μυστικῶν μαθημάτων).

<sup>54</sup> *Κοινωνία* indicates a relational participation that implies discernment, insofar as man is freely disposed to become a participant in God or evil, as well as to share his experience with his brothers; while *ἀνάκρασις* appears only 4 times and is used only to designate the relationship of mystical union with God and the union of natures in Christ, *κοινωνία* has a broader meaning according to the relationship to which the person leans and appears 40 times in the texts.

<sup>55</sup> This relational category appears 32 times in the texts, especially in *In Canticum* where it appears 22 times. As you can see in the texts, the *διάθεσις* has a very special connection with *αἴσθησις*, *ἐπιθυμία*, *καρδία* and *σχέσις*, in that the relationship implies a cordial disposition to be able to feel God spiritually and to be able to guide the desires towards a constant progress in the good.

<sup>56</sup> The reference to the sanctuary of divine knowledge also refers to the intimacy of the heart where the meeting of the soul with God takes place.

<sup>57</sup> This is an essential relational category that Gregory uses to designate the dimension of encounter with God and the need to discern whether it is a touch of God or the enemy of the soul. It appears in the texts about twenty times.

<sup>58</sup> GNO VI, 264.

desires of the soul (ἡ ἐπιθυμία τὴν πρὸς τὸ θεῖον<sup>59</sup>) and drives it out of its mind (ἔκστασις) on an ascending flight (ἀνιπταμένη) according to the dynamism of permanence and progress that the texts presents.

### Μυσταγωγία as the Liturgical Dimension

Under the category mystagogy,<sup>60</sup> the path of mystical experience is expressed as a personal relationship that involves a process that goes from Baptism to the Eucharist, through which God leads the believer by the hand (χειραγωγία<sup>61</sup>) towards higher and higher advances (ἄνοδον). Mystagogy involves a spiritual journey guided by the Spirit through which a process of transformation in Christ is lived, in the likeness with Him (ὁμοίωσις) through imitation of his virtues (μίμησις).<sup>62</sup>

According with the above, mystagogy is understood as a conformation (συμμεμορφῶσθαι) of the soul and the Church with Christ, insofar as it involves acquiring the form of the archetype in a personal and incarnate way, to always advance towards the goal of sanctification (ἀγιότης) or divinization (θεοποίησις<sup>63</sup>) that never ends. For Gregory, to be holy consists of the development of baptismal Grace through a transformation from glory to glory (ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν μεταμορφοῦσθαι<sup>64</sup>) or from dove to dove, by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the soul. In this transformation, the believer reaches greater participation in the divine life (τοῦ θεοῦ μετουσία<sup>65</sup>), to the point of becoming a friend of God (τοῦ θεοῦ φίλος).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 313,24-314,1.

<sup>60</sup> Maspero, "Iniciación cristiana", 544-549.

<sup>61</sup> This category is closely related to mystagogy and is more frequent than the latter. In both texts *μυσταγωγία* appears 12 times, *μυηθεῖς* appears 5 times, and *χειραγωγία* appears 21 times. While *χειραγωγία* expresses the pedagogical meaning of the process in which God guides the soul, *μυσταγωγία* and *μυηθεῖς* are used in direct relation to the mystery and its liturgical connotation. The above categories are applied to God, to the initiatives and to the process by which they are led. Other categories that are related to the pedagogical sense of the process that are being enunciated are *φωταγωγία* and *ὁδηγία*.

<sup>62</sup> The connection of Baptism with the mystical words of the Gospel is fascinating (Matt 28:19), in which the apostles receive the mission of initiating many other disciples into the Trinitarian life, in a follow-up that begins with Baptism, which was called *μίμησις*, because it implied an imitation of Christ in his death and resurrection (Maspero, "Bautismo", 181-185).

<sup>63</sup> Although this category is not explicit in the texts, it is implicitly present as the ultimate goal of perfection in virtue; as Balas affirms regarding the term *θεοποίησις*: "This is evident especially in his latest two major works, *De vita Moysis* and *In Canticum canticorum*, both stressing humanity's calling for endlessly progressive participation in God. It would be easy to show how these and other similar doctrines imply the deification of human beings" (Balás, "Deification", 212).

<sup>64</sup> GNO VI, 160,3.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 280,4-11.

In the *epektasis*, mystagogy is a continuous initiation into the mystery because every advance is only one step to continuing the race towards holiness. Theology understood in this dynamism arranges the heart of the theologian through the experience of a sacramental journey, making him a mystagogue of the mystical words of the Gospel. Gregory relates the three stages of spiritual life with the sacraments of Christian initiation, which constitute a continuous process of conversion (*μετανοία*). In this way, he who begins his journey through the illumination of Baptism (*βαπτίσμα*) and advances through the purification (*καθαρότης*) of his mind and heart with the help of the fullness of Grace received in Confirmation, is being strengthened to continue moving towards the culmination of the Christian life in the sacrament of the Eucharist. In the Eucharistic union, the fullness of the mystical encounter that the Nyssen expresses with the oxymoron of sober drunkenness takes place (*νηφάλιον μέθην*<sup>66</sup>).

Mystagogy is understood as a pedagogy for mystery, in which the study converges<sup>67</sup> with spiritual life, virtuous formation, community celebration of faith, and the ability to explain the divine mysteries to the people and become a guide (*ὁδηγία*) so that others can also advance on the virtuous path. It is a pedagogy that is inspired by Trinitarian ontology and its living expression in the ecclesial community as the mystical body of Christ. In communion with Christ, the Church celebrates the mystery in the sacraments and through Him is united with all humanity that has already been redeemed in the paschal mystery of Christ and is awaiting the glorious manifestation of her identity at his second coming.

### Μυστήριον as the Revealed Dimension

Mystagogy introduces a mystical relationship focused on the mystery of God, which has been fully revealed in the Incarnation of the *Logos*.<sup>68</sup> It is the mystery of God's love for humanity (*φιλανθρωπία*), which leads him to lower himself (*κατάβασις*), making himself like the human condition except in sin (Heb 4,15) and carrying it on his shoulders to raise it to participation in the divine life. In this loving overflow of God, Christ wants to become a friend (*φιλόχριστος*) of all those who look for him in *epektasis* using the mystagogical path already mentioned.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibíd.*, 362,12.

<sup>67</sup> "La historia te grita que no te atrevas a proponer una enseñanza o un consejo a los oyentes, si antes no has adquirido autoridad en eso mismo a través del mucho estudio" (Gregorio de Nisa, *Sobre la vida de Moisés* II, 55; GNO VII/I, 48,22-49,3).

<sup>68</sup> In *Contra Eunomio* the mystery of theology is called *θεολογίας ἐστὶ μυστήριον* (GNO II, 60,5).

The mystery<sup>69</sup> is the content of the theological work insofar as it deals with the person of Christ in his unity with the Father and the Spirit and in his hypostatic unity.<sup>70</sup> It is a mystery that can only be accessed thanks to the revelation of God (θεοφανεία) and his presence in history (ἱστορία) through the salvation plan (οἰκονομία) that has its culmination in the incarnation (Gal 4,5). Μυστήριον is the most recurring category of all those that share the same terminological root with a total of ninety-five occurrences, in which all the sources of the Christian mystery (αἱ τοῦ μυστηρίου πηγαί<sup>71</sup>) that spring from the Gospel are included (τὸ εὐαγγελικὸν μυστήριον<sup>72</sup>).

Mystery constitutes the center of theology (θεολογία), which revolves around the Trinity and the knowledge that can be obtained of God through a personal relationship with Christ. This relationship is one that passes through the sacramental liturgical dynamism in which the theologian is satisfied with the cross (σταυρός<sup>73</sup>) of Christ with an attitude of humility and amazement at his mystery.

From the perspective of amazement before the wonders of God (θαῦμα<sup>74</sup>) and in his presence, the theologian is called to contemplate the virginal mystery of the Mother of God,<sup>75</sup> as well as the mystery of the mystical union of the soul and of the Church with Christ, that passes through the sacraments, as well as the other mysteries of salvation (τὰ τῆς σωτηρίας μυστήρια<sup>76</sup>) in which history and economy come together. It is a contemplation that implies an attitude of faith and apophatic reception of its presence (παρουσία), because the mystery is far above human understanding, but little by little, it is revealed in the mystagogical dynamism.

<sup>69</sup> “El sentido patristico se fundamenta en el uso paulino, en especial en la referencia al plan de salvación de la Carta a los Efesios. El término indicaría también cada evento concreto de la vida del Señor” (Maspero, “Misterio”, 623). For a broader comprehension of this category, see Mann and Drecoll, “Μυστήριον”, 492-502.

<sup>70</sup> This expression is posterior to the Nyssen, but, as it was seen in the analysis, Gregory has an understanding of the union of natures in Christ that keeps a deep tune with Chalcedony, beyond the fact that its language is not totally decanted (Mateo-Seco, “Cristología”, 246-264).

<sup>71</sup> GNO VI, 250,18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 436,4.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 81,19.

<sup>74</sup> This is a very important category that accompanies the category mystery and in which the greatness of divine revelation is expressed, as well as the attitude of astonishment of those who recognize it present in history itself. Appears forty-six times in the texts.

<sup>75</sup> “τὴν παρθένον μυστήριον” (GNO VII/I, 77,23-24); “πῶς ἐν παρθενίᾳ τόκος” (GNO VI, 338,10).

<sup>76</sup> GNO VI, 378,2-3.

## Ἐπέκτασις as the Anthropological Dimension

Epektasis,<sup>77</sup> as the anthropological dimension, could be rather reductive, considering that this vital category is part of the ontological approach that inspires the entire theological thought of the Nyssen. In this sense, epektasis also guides its epistemology<sup>78</sup> and the concatenation of senses that come into play in the spiritual interpretation of Gregory, because it constitutes the common thread of his thought.<sup>79</sup>

However, according to the Pauline inspiration from which it comes (Phil 3:13)<sup>80</sup> and the use that Nyssen makes of this category in the two works analyzed, the ἐπέκτασις could be proposed as the expression of an anthropological attitude of Gregory's theological work. This attitude is characterized by a movement (κίνησις) that is driven by the desire (ἐπιθυμία) to run up (τρέχει) in ascending sense (ἀνάβασις) towards perfection in virtuous life (τοῦ κατ' ἀρετὴν βίου τὴν τελειότητα<sup>81</sup>).

The ontological foundation of the ἐπέκτασις is based on the differentiation that the Nyssen makes between the infinite (ἀόριστος) nature of God (ἡ θεία φύσις<sup>82</sup>) and limited human capabilities (ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη δύναται φύσις<sup>83</sup>). Within creatural finitude and divine infinity, there is an abyss (διάστημα), in which there is the encounter between Christ and the infinite desire for perfection that nests in the human heart, for being created in the image and likeness of divine beauty. Amid the paradoxical encounter (παράδοξον) between the creature and the creator, there is a synergistic process between divine Grace<sup>84</sup> and free human cooperation (προαίρεσις), which allows itself to be attracted by the infinite beauty of God.

The synergistic dynamic between Grace and free cooperation is, in turn, characterized by a double movement that is expressed in the exact composition of the word, because ἐπί indicates something in which one participates, but not entirely, because one is in transit towards it,<sup>85</sup> and ἐκ refers to something that is outside, far away and

<sup>77</sup> Mateo-Seco, "Epéctasis", 345-352. The term appears 13 times in the texts.

<sup>78</sup> GNO VI, 352.

<sup>79</sup> Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, 273.

<sup>80</sup> "Sin embargo, olvido lo que dejé atrás y me lanzo a lo que está por delante (ἐμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος), corriendo hacia la meta (κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω), al premio a que Dios me llama desde lo alto en Cristo Jesús [...] tengamos estos sentimientos (τοῦτο φρονώμεν) [...] Por lo demás, desde el punto a donde hayamos llegado, sigamos en la misma dirección" (Phil 3:13-16).

<sup>81</sup> GNO VI, 418,5-6.

<sup>82</sup> GNO VII/I, 4,9-10.

<sup>83</sup> GNO VI, 26,2-27,5.

<sup>84</sup> "ἐπεκτείνουσα οὔτε ὁ λόγος συνεργῶν αὐτῇ πρὸς τὴν ἄνοδον" (GNO VI, 291,17).

<sup>85</sup> "Estar sobre, ir hacia sobre, de ahí" (García Santos, "ἐπί", 322).

that implies change.<sup>86</sup> In this regard, Daniélou affirms that “on the one hand, it is about a certain contact with God, a real participation, a divinization (ἐπι) [...] But, at the same time, God always remains beyond, and the soul must always leave itself (ἐκ)”.<sup>87</sup> It is a movement of Pauline inspiration, in which one seeks to remain in what one already is from Baptism: “Christ lives in me [...] my life is entrenched in the faith of the Son of God” (Gal 2:20) and, at the same time, it aspires to continuous progress: “I forget what I left behind, and I launch myself into what lies ahead” (Phil 3:13).<sup>88</sup>

In the epektasis, the mystical experience is presented as a burning desire (ἐρωτικῆ<sup>89</sup>) that is impassive (ἀπάθεια<sup>90</sup>) at the same time. It takes the soul out of itself, impelling it to seek its loved one in continuous progress in the double movement of permanence and progress, which the Nyssen draws on the wings that God gives to the heart (καρδία<sup>91</sup>) in the mystical union.<sup>92</sup> In this way, contemplation and action unite in the work of the Cappadocian, eyes and hands,<sup>93</sup> because the loving gaze of God (τῆς φιλανθρωπίας ὀφθαλμοῖς ὁ θεός<sup>94</sup>) returns the wings to the soul,<sup>95</sup> as much as it has stability in the Rock of Christ “the faster she runs her course”.<sup>96</sup> In the epektasis, the soul not only recovers the wings she had at the beginning of creation but also recovers filial trust (παρρησία) to address God in prayer and to speak boldly of Him.

### Γνώφος as the Epistemological Dimension

According to the mystagogical itinerary proposed by Nyssen, the γνώφος<sup>97</sup> is the place where ones learns to see God in not seeing because it is a personal contact with that ineffable reality (ἀπόρρητον) that is above (ὑπερκείμενα) human capacities. Indeed,

<sup>86</sup> García Santos, “ἐκ”, 256-257.

<sup>87</sup> Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, 23-33.

<sup>88</sup> GNO VII/2, 122-123.

<sup>89</sup> GNO VII/I, 114,5.

<sup>90</sup> This term is particularly present in the *Song of Songs*, in which it appears 23 times, unlike *Life of Moses*, in which it only appears twice.

<sup>91</sup> καρδία is another term that was very present in the texts, especially in the *Song*, where it appears 92 times. In *Life of Moses* it only appears 11 times, but still its importance is significant, like that intimate space in which the encounter with God occurs.

<sup>92</sup> GNO VII/I, 117-118.

<sup>93</sup> GNO VI, 393,19-394,4.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 449,2.

<sup>95</sup> Gregorio di Nissa, “Omèlie sul *Cantico dei cantici*”, 1497.

<sup>96</sup> Gregorio de Nisa, *Sobre la vida de Moisés* II, 244.

<sup>97</sup> Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, 23-33.



it is a fact that can only be perceived (*κατανόησις*) in communion with faith (*πίστις*) and the search for truth (*ἀληθεία*), which is shrouded in darkness that in turn is luminous.<sup>98</sup> Darkness, according to what the analyzed texts reveal, reflects the intimacy of the mystical relationship with God and the apophatic character of divine knowledge (*θεογνωσία*).

This apophatism is participation in the divine mystery, as well as the possibility of naming God in the relationship and in the recognition of his creative action (*δύναμις*), but it is also a denial of the claim to enclose God in a concept. For Gregory, such a claim would be to make an idol (*εἶδωλον*<sup>99</sup>) according to the reasoning itself, because “the knowledge of the divine essence (*τῆς θείας οὐσίας*<sup>100</sup>) is inaccessible [...] to all intellectual nature”<sup>101</sup>.

In the dark, whoever wants to know the mystery of God, learns to broaden his epistemological horizon through faith and piety (*εὐσέβεια*), which are accompanied by growth in the virtuous life, because it consists of a knowledge based on the experience of God in the heart. This experience involves letting oneself feel how God “knocks on the door of our mind through allegories and symbols, and says ‘open to me’”.<sup>102</sup>

Darkness drives the use of metaphorical language to express the ineffable character of theology, as can be seen in the metaphor of the hands of God. Through them, Gregory represents the two senses of his apophatism, because the hand expresses the creative power of God (*ἡ ἐνεργητικὴ αὐτοῦ δύναμις*)<sup>103</sup>, and also “the hand constitutes for the soul the limit of the knowledge of the one who is inexpressible”<sup>104</sup>, because his nature (*θεῖαν φύσιν*<sup>105</sup>) is above human understanding (*ἡ κατανόησις ὑπερκειμένη*<sup>106</sup>).

### Ἀκολουθία as the Exegetical Dimension

Finally, *ἀκολουθία* represents the method that allows the Nyssens to systematize in a certain way his eminently relational theological work. This is the most frequent category with 107 recurrences and the broadest in their meanings, as it is used not only

<sup>98</sup> Laird, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration”, 592-616.

<sup>99</sup> GNO VII/I, 88,4.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 87,12.

<sup>101</sup> Gregorio de Nisa, *Sobre la vida de Moisés* II, 163.

<sup>102</sup> Gregorio di Nissa, “Omelia sul *Cantico dei cantici*”, 1285.

<sup>103</sup> GNO VI, 336,18-19.

<sup>104</sup> Gregorio di Nissa, “Omelia sul *Cantico dei cantici*”, 1305.

<sup>105</sup> GNO VI, 339,6.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 337,7.

as an exegetical method to chain the different senses that appear in Scripture causally but also to unite logically: Scripture and Philosophy, the concatenation of diverse thoughts, as well as the cosmological order and the order of the history of salvation. The Nyssen also uses the term for discipleship (*ἀκολουθεῖν*<sup>107</sup>), which is intrinsic to their theological way of proceeding.

As an exegetical method, the *ἀκολουθία* allows Gregory to understand the harmony of the Old Testament texts, their order and structure, and to interpret them (*ἐρμηνεία*) from the mystery of the Incarnation revealed in Christ and from the hand of Pauline theology. In this sense, the *ἀκολουθία* accompanies the theological work present in *De Vita Moysis* and *In Canticum Canticorum* from start to finish through a virtuous *σκοπός* and in a symphony (*συμφωνία*) with its method of spiritual interpretation (*θεωρία*). In *ἀκολουθία*, the theological work of Gregory is understood as a “movement that leads from life to mystery”<sup>108</sup> and from the literal to the spiritual sense, as circumstances require.

The *ἀκολουθία* is presented within the analysis as a spiritual method through which Gregory approaches Sacred Scripture and history in the key of salvation, to integrate and link them in his apophatic reflection. In a careful reading of the texts, it can be seen how Gregory prayed before taking the helm of speech;<sup>109</sup> he prayed with his faithful, to ask for the illumination of the Spirit when the meaning was particularly dark.<sup>110</sup> Still, he also savored the texts in prayer (*προσεύχομαι*), to the point of recognizing in the very words of Scripture an emphasis of prayer (*τὴν εὐκτικὴν ἔμφασιν ὁ τῶν ῥητῶν ἐκείνων*<sup>111</sup>).

In the *ἀκολουθία*, Gregory concatenates the categories and dimensions of his theological work as a single reality, and at the same time, distinguishes the particular connections and accents that exist between the different categories. Through *ἀκολουθία*, Pauline theology, the spiritual journey of Moses and the passionate running of the wife after the perfumes of the beloved are connected, as if they were the background chords of the symphony found in the texts.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 356,13.

<sup>108</sup> Maspero, “θεολογία, οικονομία εἰστορία: La teologia della storia di Gregorio di Nissa”, 395.

<sup>109</sup> GNO VI, 342,2-3.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 295,1ss.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 304,12-13.

## The Hermeneutical Circle

In the *ἀκολουθία*, Gregory's thought can be systematized in a certain way, according to the particular emphasis he expresses in his texts. In this way, a particular emphasis is perceived in the first three groups of categories, because they are more closely connected with the mystery of God and his desire to connect with humanity through revelation; in the same way, a particular accent is found in the last three groups, for having its gravitational pole in the human attitude before the mystery.<sup>112</sup> Two groups that, in turn make up the two faces of the same reality, can be seen in the following graph:

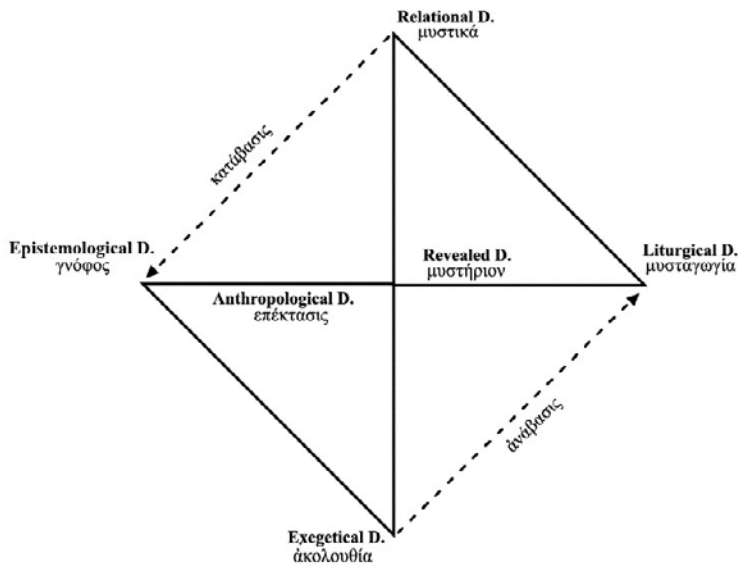


FIGURE 2. Dimensions and categories (Source: The author).

The two groups or category triangles make up the frame of reference from which the theological work of the Cappadocian is proposed as a spiritual exercise and dialogue between God and humanity. In them, the constant dynamism between divine Grace and free human cooperation, which has its point of intersection in revelation, is made explicit in a certain way.

<sup>112</sup> As one of the many examples where these three dimensions are connected, see GNO VI, 352,6-4, where although the category *γνόφος* does not appear explicitly the apophatic context and the allusion to the third degree of union with God in darkness is clear.

This revelation has its culmination in the mystery of the Incarnation of the *Logos*, in which the double movement of *κατάβασις* and *ἀνάβασις* takes place, since God becomes one with humanity to lift it by means of the cross and to introduce it to Trinitarian intimacy. In this movement, the *exitus* of God has an ontological preeminence, because—as Maspero affirms—“the fundamental signal is one that goes from God to man: only in dependence on it can the movement of man to God be given, in response to the initiative divine. *Reditus* cannot precede *exitus*”.<sup>113</sup>

Through the donation of the Son on the cross and the cruciform dynamism that it imprints on existence, the mystery of filiation is operated, in which the Trinity and humanity are united. From this dynamism, the theological work is understood as an effort to assume everything human because the cross is a synthesis of the union between God and humanity, as well as a mirror of the permanence (verticality) and the progress (horizontality) to which the human being is called, abiding in Christ, and seeking to grow more and more in the likeness of Him. In width, length, height, and depth (Eph 3:18) of the cross,<sup>114</sup> the double movement of descent and ascent that occurs in the theological work is contained as an exercise centered on the mystery of filiation because “the cross is a sign of ontology, it is a reality in which meaning, and signifier is inseparably united in the divine power”.<sup>115</sup>

In this sense, the cross is also a mirror of the theological work,<sup>116</sup> which requires an attitude of humility, remaining faithful to Christ, recognizing in faith the limits of rational understanding, and at the same time always seeking to advance in *epektasis* towards new syntheses and understandings. The cross integrates the different dimensions and categories of the theological work of the Nyssen, as a harmonious whole and coherent with the ontological plane in which his thought moves, as can be seen in the following graph:

<sup>113</sup> Maspero, “θεολογια, οικονομια ε ιστορια: La teologia della storia di Gregorio di Nissa”, 72.

<sup>114</sup> GNO IX, 300,8-301,1.

<sup>115</sup> Maspero, “θεολογια, οικονομια ε ιστορια: La teologia della storia di Gregorio di Nissa”, 84.

<sup>116</sup> This is a very nice image that the Nyssen uses in *De tridui ... spatium* to talk about the cross as a theologian (ὁ θεολόγος ὁ σταυρὸς) (GNO IX, 303,10).

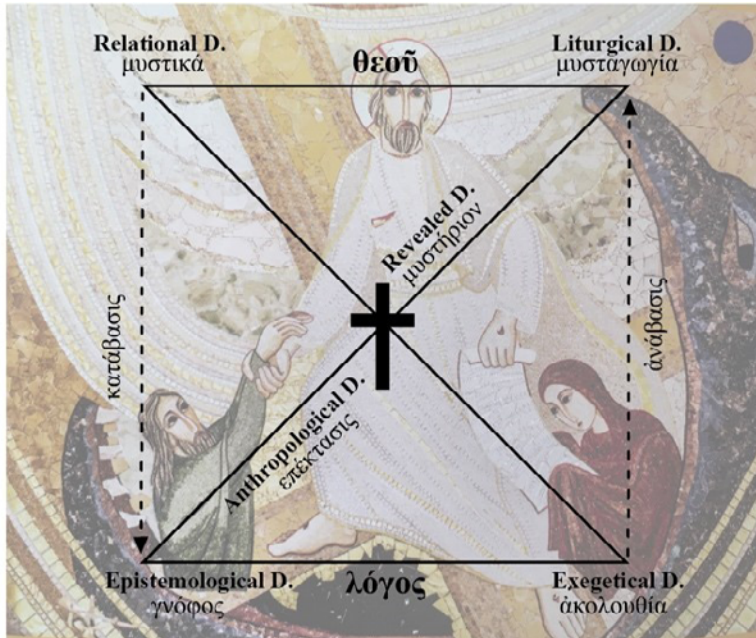


FIGURE 3. Icon (Source: The author).

The image of the background is a Mosaic of Rupnik.<sup>117</sup> It helps to understand the dynamism of the theological work of the Nyssen in the chosen texts, in which he expresses the movement of God who falls down to take up the human condition, and compares that process to the writing of an icon in our hearts, by the fingers of the Holy Spirit.<sup>118</sup> In this way, a hermeneutical circle of understanding of the theological work of Gregory is reached as a relational, dynamic, apophatic system in constant progress, as can be seen in this last graph:

<sup>117</sup> Rupnik, *Mosaicos del Santuario de San Juan Pablo II en Cracovia*, 8.

<sup>118</sup> Gregorio de Nisa, *Sobre la vida de Moisés II*, 215-217; and Gregorio, “Omēlie sul *Cantico dei cantici*”, 1441.

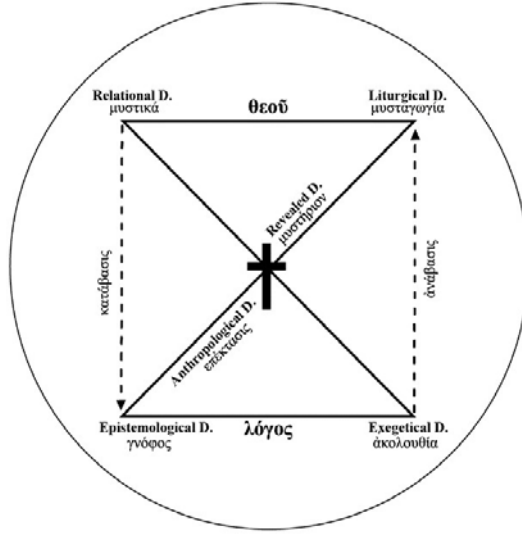


FIGURE 4. The Hermeneutical Circle (Source: The author).

The circle aims to express Gregory’s theological work as a constant movement,<sup>119</sup> infinite by not possessing an end, from Glory to Glory, from contemplation of the Trinitarian mystery and participation in Him through continuous progress under the guidance of the Spirit. The Trinitarian circularity that surrounds the entire theological movement as a constant dynamic of friendship with God and reflection on the revealed mystery, also implies another type of spiral circularity, insofar as it is an effort to return again and again to history and texts, without losing stability in Christ, as the sun that illuminates the Trinitarian mystery and around which all categories revolve.

This is a circular and spiral movement that far from being a mere repetition, is always something new and fresh,<sup>120</sup> because it is a constant rebirth in the waters of Baptism and from it, continually returns to the sources from which the evangelical freshness springs. In the spiral circle, it intends to synthesize, in some way, the theological work of Gregory, as a movement of constant search for Christ in history and the relational ontological dynamics towards which he points.

<sup>119</sup> Regarding this comprehension of circular movement, see Maspero, *Trinity and Man. Gregory of Nyssa’s Ad Ablabium*, 176.

<sup>120</sup> Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*, 69.

## Conclusion

Von Balthasar's words, quoted at the beginning, certainly continue to question theologians about the place of tradition amid ambiguous and complex contemporary contexts. The theological work of Gregory could be an inspiration in the search for an answer that brings together theology and sanctity today. This research and the conceptual framework only propose a contribution to this process, so that the sources of the living Tradition of the Church continue to irrigate the aridity of this world and apply balm on the many wounds of humanity.

The conceptual framework of the categories *μυστικά*, *μυσταγωγία*, *μυστήριο*, *ἐπέκτασις*, *γνώφος* and *ἀκολουθία*, could help us in our efforts to carry out a theological work based on a personal relationship with God. This effort includes all the above mentioned dimensions, because it requires a continual renovating process that goes from Baptism to Eucharist, and is centered in the mystery of the sonship of Christ, that gives us at the same time a correct comprehension of the human mystery, our epistemological possibilities to grasp the mystery and a method of concatenation based on Sacred Scripture.

In this sense, theological work is one of the noblest spiritual exercises, because it implies not only the mind of the theologian but his entire life, in continual progress in sanctity, which involves challenging desk work, but at the same time hard work in prayer, conversion, and social-incarnated compromise with all of one's neighbors, who are on the road waiting for balm. Theology should offer some balm, especially in these critical moments for the Church and the world, in this pandemic situation which creates feelings of instability and hopelessness.

According to Congar, renewals come "from the periphery, from below rather than from above"<sup>121</sup> and if Ibero-Latin-American theologians<sup>122</sup> want to respond to the new challenges, they need to continue the relay race of great reformers like Gregory of Nyssa, renewing their theological work in the double motion *ad fontes-a giorno*. They need to be kneeling before the mystery, because the renewal will come from a true experience of the presence of God, which could be enriched with the tradition of the fathers that contribute towards making an enculturated theology.<sup>123</sup> This renovation also

<sup>121</sup> Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 181.

<sup>122</sup> Methol Ferré also pointed out that "the world renewal of the Church passes through Latin America, burdening us with a grave responsibility" (Methol Ferré, *Marco histórico de la Iglesia latinoamericana*, 11).

<sup>123</sup> Solano Pinzón, "Inculturación de la teología. Aporte de la *paideia* cristiana en el *De vita Moysis* de Gregorio de Nisa" (Doctoral dissertation).

could build an ecumenical bridge with the Eastern Tradition, and allow the Church to become a universal body again, “breathing with two lungs”.<sup>124</sup>

Although much work remains, this research’s aim is to carry out an analysis of the Nyssen’s theological work and his contributions for the theological work today. It is a task that has not yet been carried out, and this research aims to offer a conceptual framework in the spirit of Gregory himself: “What we can say to this purpose would be no more than conjecture and hypothesis. Therefore, we allow our readers to accept or reject it as they see fit”.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Castellano, *Espiritualidad de Oriente. Mística carmelitana*, 11.

<sup>125</sup> GNO, VII, I, 91, 6-10.



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