

Life Is a Stage: Neoplatonic Participation and Imitation in Gregory of Nazianzus's *Oration* 45

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Introduction

THE CHARACTER JACQUES in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* famously said that all the world is but a "stage": "And all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages."¹ In his *Oration* 45, on the holy Pascha, Gregory of Nazianzus treats his listeners as if they are on a similar stage, as he encourages them to imitate and participate in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ in their daily lives.² But there is ambiguity as to how the hearers of Gregory's preaching actually participated and imitated in the Paschal mysteries of Christ's life. Some have asked for greater precision when discussing Gregory's use of participation and imitation. In his review of Andrew Hofer's treatment of Christ's paradigmatic suffering in *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus*, Lewis Ayres seeks such clarity: "Where are we imitating, where are we participating, and precisely what difference does it make that our imitation is 'framed' by participation? Hofer is most certainly onto some very important

¹ From William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, act 2, sc. 7.

² Andrew Hofer, O.P., *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 182–93. See also Nonna Verna Harrison, "Introduction," in St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Festal Orations*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics 36 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 11–56. All English quotation of *Oration* 45 will be taken from Harrison's translation.

themes, but there is still more to be said.”³ In partial answer to Ayres’s questions, this article will attempt to provide context and clarity as to how Gregory speaks of participation and imitation in his preaching on the holy Pascha.⁴

Participation and Imitation in Late Antiquity

Participation in its late-antiquity context has been described as the process by which what is lower is made “real and becomes related to other (peer or higher) realities, by somehow receiving its intrinsic reality from what is higher.”⁵ Imitation, as understood by classicists and scholars in patristics, has been described as a pattern of thought in which people sought to represent and identify themselves with exemplary figures from the past.⁶

The patristic use of participation and imitation language has often been categorized under the theology of deification.⁷ In his work *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Normal Russell offers different kinds of patristic models of deification, some of which refer to participation: the nominal, the analogical, and the metaphorical, with the metaphorical being characteristic of the ethical and the realistic. He says that participation (*methexis*) in God is behind the realistic approach, whereas attaining likeness (*homoiosis*) is behind the ethical. The ethical approach, which is derived from attaining likeness to Christ, is also spoken of as an imitation of Christ both interiorly and exteriorly in a person’s life. Even with a delineation of

³ Lewis Ayres, Review of *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus* by Andrew Hofer, O.P., *The Thomist* 80, no. 2 (April 2016): 314–17.

⁴ Not only is Ayres’s question a concern for scholars today; it was also one for Gregory. Although he does not directly pair participation and imitation in *Oration* 45, Gregory does use both in a paired manner to discuss the means by which the believer can share in God’s divinity in heaven by imitating the life of Christ on earth.

⁵ Torstein Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University, 2012), 6. See also Leo Sweeney, S.J., “Participation and the Structure of Being in Proclus’ Elements of Theology,” in *The Structure of Being: A Neoplatonic Approach*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

⁶ Hofer, *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus*, 160; Harrison, “Introduction,” 29.

⁷ For a comparison of Gregory of Nazianzus’s treatment of deification to Neoplatonism, see Boris Maslov, “The Limits of Platonism: Gregory of Nazianzus and the Invention of Theōsis,” *Greek, Roman & Byzantine Studies* 52, no. 3 (2012): 440–468.

these different approaches, Russell advocates for a spectrum of participatory language, rather than a wooden separation of categories.⁸ He concludes his brief introduction by saying that there are four basic approaches: nominal, analogical, ethical, and realistic.⁹ It is in the realistic approach that we find the participation model, and in the ethical approach that we find the imitation model.

According to Russell, in the realistic-participatory sense, complete and total deification occurs only in the humanity of Christ, since it alone is “mingled” with the divinity of the Logos. Human beings, since they are not God, are not deified in the realistic approach, but they are nevertheless called to an imitative ascent of their soul toward God and to a transformation of their lives through the sacraments. For Russell, Christianity is essentially the “imitation of the incarnate life of Christ, who deified the body which he assumed in order to enable us to return to the likeness we have lost.”¹⁰ Christ’s humanity fully participates in his divinity so that we human beings can imitate the Godhead, whose likeness we once had. The believer’s imitation is both external and internal, consisting of overcoming the passions, putting on Christ in baptism, and the practice of virtue. But, according to Russell, for Gregory Nazianzen and the other Cappadocians, the Christian’s deification was never more than a figure of speech to express his imitation in the likeness of God.

In response to Russell’s categories of deification, Daniel Keating finds that the four categories are applied well to some patristic authors but unfittingly to others. For example, Keating concurs with Russell that some texts expounding Athanasius’s doctrine on deification rightly reveal an ontological and ethical (a synonym for realistic) approach to deification.¹¹ At the same time, however, Keating disagrees with Russell’s grouping of the Cappadocians (Basil, Greg-

⁸ Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2: “Analogy, imitation, and participation thus form a continuum rather than express radically different kinds of relationship. Furthermore, the realistic approach, which is based on the participation model, has two aspects, one ontological, the other dynamic.”

⁹ Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 2, 13.

¹⁰ Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 13.

¹¹ Russell refers to Ps. 82:6, “you are gods and all of you sons of the Most High,” a verse that Athanasius and other patristic figures refer to in their writings on the Incarnation of Christ and the Christian’s sharing in his divinity (see Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012], 30).

ory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa) as providing their hearers with merely an ethical or metaphorical sense of deification by way of imitation.¹² Keating holds that, while the ethical and metaphorical may apply aptly to Basil's approach, for example, it would not be fitting for the Nyssan, who sees the sacraments as the means by which the Christian participates in the deifying effect of the Incarnation, or for Nazianzen, who identifies Christ's Incarnation as the basis of man's deification.¹³

Though there is disagreement over the extent to and manner in which Gregory of Nazianzus utilized participation and imitation language in a realistic and ethical framework for speaking about the deification of his hearers, it is clear that he was borrowing some of his terms from the Neoplatonic tradition. Russell writes that Nazianzen, like the other Cappadocians, adapted the doctrine of deification to a "Platonizing understanding of Christianity as the attainment of likeness to God so far as was possible for human nature."¹⁴ One way to understand Gregory's use of the terms "participation" and "imitation" is to examine the philosophical background from which Gregory would have derived these terms in antiquity.¹⁵ While Gregory has been noted for his "philosophical eclecticism" due to his broad education at Cappadocian and Palestinian Caesarea, Alexandria, and the academy in Athens, there are significant streaks of Neoplatonism in his treatment of participation and imitation in *Oration 45*.¹⁶ In this

¹² See Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 13. For the critique of Russell's categorization, see Daniel Keating, "Typologies of Deification," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 3 (July, 2015): 270.

¹³ Keating, "Typologies of Deification," 270.

¹⁴ Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 13.

¹⁵ Other ways to consider Gregory's use of participation and imitation would be through the background of Scripture, the liturgy, and other early Christian authors. Without excluding the liturgical context in which Gregory wrote his oration, the main focus of the present study is to view the Neoplatonic background from which Gregory derives some of his philosophical and theological vocabulary for discussing imitation and participation. For other ways to consider imitation and participation, see, for example, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). See also Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 75–79.

¹⁶ Brian Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34–35. See also Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried Schatzmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 284.

article, I will examine how Gregory uses the terms of participation and imitation in his *Or. 45* in light of his Neoplatonic background, exemplified in the writings of Plotinus. This reading of Gregory's *Or. 45* through Neoplatonic eyes is not meant to paganize Gregory's writings. The Nazianzen had a distaste for philosophy when it cast doubt on the truths of the faith.¹⁷ My aim is to present any connection between Gregory's ideas of participation and imitation in *Or. 45* in order to show the distinctively incarnational difference Gregory utilizes when discussing the possibility of human beings sharing in and imitating the divine. To accomplish, this I will first examine how Plotinus uses participation and imitation language in his *Enneads*, giving attention to his treatment of the soul's mid-rank position and its contemplation of its higher principle. I will then reveal the similarities Plotinus's structure of reality has with the beginning of Gregory's *Or. 45* and then demonstrate that Gregory's beginning remarks in his festal oration provide the fertile ground from which he cultivates a rich understanding of the Christian's participation and imitation in the life of Christ as beginning with Christ first participating in and imitating human life.

Plotinus's *Enneads*

Participation

Several scholars have written on how Plotinus's treatment of participation have influenced Christian thought in middle and late antiquity.¹⁸ In his *Enneads*, Plotinus constantly speaks of how the individual soul comes to share in some higher principle through its middle position in the cosmos, a theme that Gregory adopts in some fashion in his *Oration 45*.¹⁹ And yet, participation has a wide connotation for Plotinus that undergirds his entire philosophical system of unity and plurality and the hierarchy of beings that permits degrees of perfection in the

¹⁷ Claudio Moreschini, "Gregory Nazianzen and Philosophy, with Remarks on Gregory's Cynicism," in *Re-Reading Gregory of Nazianzus: Essays on History, Theology, and Culture*, ed. Christopher A. Beeley (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 106.

¹⁸ See: Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 14–31; John Dillon, "Origen and Plotinus: The Platonic Influence on Early Christianity," in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. Vincent Twomey (Dublin: Four Courts, 1992), 7–26; Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 40.

¹⁹ Gregory, *Or. 45.7, 45.11, 45.26, 45.28*.

created realm.²⁰ For Plotinus, participation requires both identity and difference.²¹ Unity alone is perfect for Plotinus, and all other things are perfect only insofar as they relate to or participate in this unity, meaning that their imperfection, conversely, is measured by their difference or distance from that unity.²² The highest principle for Plotinus is the One, or Good, which, while participating in nothing itself,²³ is the principle in which all things participate and toward which they are all directed.²⁴ Although the One is present to all things, that presence is limited or shaped by the capacity of each thing to receive it.²⁵ Degrees of perfection, then, are constituted by degrees of participation in the higher principle. The Intellect, or “Intellectual-principle,” for

²⁰ All references to the *Enneads* are taken from *Plotinus: The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson, 1992), available also at sacred-texts.com/cla/plotenn/index.htm (references will follow the format of ennead, section, and tractate number: *En.* 1.2.3). The Greek texts for the *Enneads* and for the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus are taken from *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: A Digital Library of Greek Literature* (Irvine, CA: TLG, 2001), stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/index.php. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus uses the term “participation” when speaking of the material world (*En.* 4.4.38; 6.4.13), degrees of participation (*En.* 3.2.3), the particular soul (*En.* 4.7.9; 6.8.12), the body’s relation to the soul (*En.* 4.3.23; 6.4.16), the higher realities of the Intellect (*En.* 1.8.2) and the Soul (*En.* 4.4.32), the ideal forms (*En.* 1.2.2), the cosmos’s partaking of the One (2.9.16), accidents in relation to substances (*En.* 6.3.6), the necessity of likeness (*En.* 1.2.2), and the ability to participate according to one’s capacity (*En.* 1.8.2; 6.4.5, 11; 6.5.3).

²¹ Plotinus, *En.* 5.1.4; 6.3.2; 6.4.13.

²² Plotinus, *En.* 5.3.15. See D. C. Schindler, “What’s the Difference? On the Metaphysics of Participation in a Christian Context,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 13.

²³ Plotinus, *En.* 6.8.21: “He is that to which nothing can be added. To add to him would be to lessen him.”

²⁴ Plotinus, *En.* 1.7.1; 2.9.16; 3.8.8; 3.6.13; 5.3.15, 17; 6.5.3, 10. This is why Plotinus says the One as Real-Being is “poised over all beings at once” (*En.* 4.2.1). The cosmos (*En.* 2.9.16), all individual souls (*En.* 3.8.8), and every higher principle share in the One as their origin. The One remains within itself (μὲν εἶναι) while all other things turn toward (ἐπιστρέφειν) it as their source of being (*En.* 1.7.1).

²⁵ Plotinus, *En.* 1.8.2; 6.4.5, 11; 6.5.3. See also *En.* 6.4.11: “While Being is omnipresent to the realm of Being, never falling short of itself, yet only the competent possess themselves of that presence which depends not upon situation but upon adequacy.” Almost paradoxically, participation in a higher principles such as the One occurs “without partition” of the higher principle (*En.* 6.4.8: “Any movement toward it is movement toward its entirety, and any participation attained is participation in its entirety”).

example, is the first derivation of the One and is its perfect image and self-thought; it participates in the One perfectly and purely. The Soul is the second derivation in Plotinus's system; it is an image of the Intellect, just as the Intellect is an image of the One.²⁶ Plotinus states that, unlike the Intellect, which simply contemplates the One, the Soul has a double activity that makes it both contemplator and actor. The higher part of the Soul is its purely contemplative part, which remains in constant contact with the Intellect. The lower part of the Soul is responsible for the production of the material cosmos, which Plotinus calls "nature."²⁷ The goal of the Soul's lower part is to have the entire material cosmos image, to the best of its ability, the ordered existence of the higher principles (Soul, Intellect, and One). Differentiated souls arise from the one Soul's production and governance of material bodies in nature.²⁸ Yet all souls remain united to the one Soul in virtue of their communal contemplation of their prior, the Intellect.²⁹ Since they are essentially united to the one Soul, individual souls participate in and image the same Intellect from which the one Soul is derived.

Mid-Rank of the Soul, Conversion, and Contemplation

In virtue of their essential unity with the one Soul, all individual souls possess a double-tipped nature with a higher and lower part, which are respectively contemplative and active.³⁰ The higher part of the individual soul aims through its intellectual powers to perceive the Intellect. The lower part of the soul is directed toward observing, administering, and governing the material cosmos so that it may more readily reflect the source of its existence in the higher principles of reality. Plotinus remarks: "So it is with the individual souls; the appetite for the divine

²⁶ Plotinus, *En.* 5.1.3. As the Intellect eternally contemplates the One as its source of being, the Soul is the productive fruitfulness of the Intellect's contemplation (*En.* 5.1.7).

²⁷ Plotinus, *En.* 4.3.9.

²⁸ Plotinus will also refer to the supreme, undivided Soul and the Soul divided among living bodies (*En.* 1.1.8).

²⁹ Plotinus, *En.* 4.1.1–3; 4.2.1–2. These souls, which Plotinus calls "living beings," are distinct from each other insofar as they possess material bodies. The individual souls and the one Soul that presides over the cosmos, however, are considered by Plotinus to be an essential unity. The one Soul and all individual souls form a single, indivisible entity (*En.* 4.1.1). There is only one essence (*ousia*) of the individual soul, which, like the one Soul, has its origin in the Intellect (*En.* 5.7.1–3).

³⁰ Plotinus, *En.* 4.8.3.

Intellect urges them to return to their source, but they have, too, a power apt to administration in this lower sphere.”³¹ In seeking to know what is above it, the soul “looks towards its higher and has intellection; towards itself and conserves its peculiar being; towards its lower and orders, administers, governs.”³² In this way, the rational soul has a mid-rank among existents:

Better for the soul to dwell in the Intellectual, but, given its proper nature, it is under compulsion to participate in the sense-realm also. There is no grievance in its not being, through and through, the highest; it holds mid-rank [μέσῃν τάξιν] among the authentic existences, being of divine station but at the lowest extreme of the Intellectual and skirting the sense-known nature.³³

Out of these activities, the better is for the soul to participate in the higher Intellectual-principle. But, given its dealings with the material world, the soul’s journey will necessarily be downward at times. Inasmuch as it governs matter, the soul will take on characteristics of the material world.³⁴ The soul can then fall into error by falling in love with the “types” of the true images it already contains in its higher part, and then by mistaking these types for realities.³⁵ But when the soul returns to itself and realizes its own middle existence, it can begin to perceive again the origin of its being. The result of such self-reflection is a spiritual desire and longing for unison with the Intellect, from which it derived its existence.³⁶ This turning and desiring on the soul’s part is what Plotinus calls its conversion or return (ἐπιστροφής).³⁷ The soul’s return to face its intellective principle in which it participates is part of the dramatic act that constitutes the soul’s middle position in the realm of created beings:

³¹ Plotinus, *En.* 6.8.4.

³² Plotinus, *En.* 4.8.3.

³³ Plotinus, *En.* 4.8.7.

³⁴ Plotinus, *En.* 1.8.8.

³⁵ Plotinus, *En.* 4.8.4: “It has fallen: it is at the chain: debarred from expressing itself now through its intellectual phase, it operates through sense, it is a captive; this is the burial, the encavernment, of the Soul.”

³⁶ Plotinus, *En.* 4.4.18; 6.4.3; 6.6.7

³⁷ Plotinus will also refer to the soul’s return, following its desire, as “retracing the way” (ἐπανελθεῖν, ἐπανερχομαι; *En.* 2.9.4).

But in spite of all it has, for ever, something transcendent: by a conversion towards the intellective act [ἐπιστραφεῖσα δὲ πρὸς νόησιν], it is loosed from the shackles and soars—when only it makes its memories the starting point of a new vision of essential being. Souls that take this way have place in both spheres, living of necessity the life there and the life here by turns, the upper life reigning in those able to consort more continuously with the divine Intellect, the lower dominant where character or circumstances are less favorable.³⁸

While emphasizing that the soul's higher activity of contemplation is superior to its activity of governance, Plotinus clearly sees the soul living in both spheres. He states that the soul, unlike the material cosmos, is "more nearly complete and therefore more contemplative." But the soul is not able to contemplate its higher principle without turning to see it. Though the soul's lower part can take it away from its contemplative activity, it is also the lower functions of the soul that aid it in turning back to a vision of the divine realm. The lower part of the soul is concerned with ordering the material realm, but ordering the material realm also includes ordering one's own life, the body, the passions, and the exercise of virtues, which aid in this process of return. Because it is not yet perfect, the soul is eager to "penetrate the object of contemplation [τὴν τοῦ θεωρηθέντος καταμάθῃσιν]," and through its lower part, the soul does this by seeking "the vision that comes by observation [θεωρίαν τὴν ἐξ ἐπισκέψεως]."³⁹ The soul's lower activity of self-ordering, therefore, leads to its higher activity of contemplation. In Plotinus's words: the soul "returns [ἐπανιοῦσα], and it possesses its vision by means of that phase of itself from which it had parted."⁴⁰ When the soul returns to itself, it can better contemplate, and hence participate in, the higher realities from which it derives its existence.

The Steps of the Return

Plotinus explains that, for the soul to contemplate higher realities, it must undergo a series of stages that purify its intellectual vision. Plotinus refers to these stages as (1) the exercise of the virtues and (2) the process of dialectic (ἡ διαλεκτική). First, Plotinus mentions different

³⁸ Plotinus, *En.* 4.8.4 (the soul's descent into a body).

³⁹ Plotinus, *En.* 3.8.6.

⁴⁰ Plotinus, *En.* 3.8.6.

types of virtue that purify the soul. Civic or natural virtues (*aretas politikas . . . phusikas*), such as prudence, fortitude, and restraint, are the lowest kind.⁴¹ These keep the passions of the body from controlling the movements of the soul. Above these virtues are those that purify the soul more intensely. Through the higher virtues, the passions are entirely checked and disengagement from the body is seen as attainable.⁴² This purification allows the soul to stand in a new orientation to the Intellectual-principle, from which it came.⁴³ In a later section of his *Enneads*, Plotinus discusses the process of dialectic, a philosophical conversational method that redirects the soul's thinking upward toward the Intellectual-principle, in which it participates.⁴⁴ Freed from undue attachment to sensible things, the now-virtuous soul is able to converse and pronounce about the true "nature and relation of things, what each is, how it differs from others, . . . in what rank each stands," and whether a thing's "being is real being."⁴⁵ Plotinus calls dialectic the "most precious part of philosophy" because, through it, the soul receives another virtue, that of wisdom, which allows it to engage in perfect contemplation.⁴⁶ Through the virtue of wisdom, the soul contemplates all things insofar as they exist, including itself and its Intellectual-principle.⁴⁷ The soul's contemplation can become so

⁴¹ Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.1; 1.3.6.

⁴² Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.3.

⁴³ Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.4: "By the purification the true alignment stands accomplished."

⁴⁴ Plotinus borrows the idea of dialectic from Plato's dialogues, in which conversation begun in free play aims at the self-disclosure of the Good, whose light is the very means by which we see (see, e.g., *Republic* 6). Similarly, Plotinus begins with free-play conversation (*En.* 3.8.1) for the sake of a more serious goal of contemplating the higher principles (*En.* 3.8.6, 16; 3.8.32; 7.17.17–18). "I and all that enter this play are in contemplation: our play aims at vision" (*En.* 3.8.1). See Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005), 103.

⁴⁵ Plotinus, *En.* 1.3.4.

⁴⁶ Plotinus, *En.* 1.3.6. Wisdom is the "virtue peculiarly induced by dialectic." For Plotinus, contemplation is a simple vision of all things that are. The soul's contemplation is a participation in its higher principles: "Since the supreme realities devote themselves to contemplation, all other beings must aspire to it, too, because the origin of all things is their end as well" (*En.* 3.8.7).

⁴⁷ Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.6. Wisdom, for Plotinus, consists "in the contemplation of all that exists in the Intellectual-principle, and as the immediate presence of the Intellectual-principle itself." Plotinus explains that the individual soul has as its virtue the same wisdom that the Intellect has as its proper act and essence. "Philosophy uses dialectic: by dialectic it comes to contemplation" (*En.* 1.3.6).

perfect that what is contemplated “becomes progressively a more and more intimate possession”; the soul becomes more “one thing with [it] . . . well on the way towards the Intellectual-principle.”⁴⁸ In his treatment of the virtues, dialectic, and contemplation, Plotinus is concerned not simply with the soul’s moral purity or absence of sin, but with its participation in the divine life: “Our concern is not merely to be sinless but to be God [θεὸν εἶναι].”⁴⁹ The goal is always to transition from this life to another that is more divine.⁵⁰ The conversion of the soul to the divine life occurs through its contemplation of and eventual identity with its higher principle:

If this is the soul once it has returned to its self [ἐφ’ ἑαυτὴν ἀνέλθῃ], how deny that it is the nature we have identified with all the divine and eternal? Wisdom and authentic virtue are divine, and could not be found in the chattel mean and mortal: what possesses these must be divine by its very capacity of the divine, the token of kinship and of identical substance.⁵¹

The soul’s higher activity of contemplation is so important in Plotinus’s system because it unites the soul to the divine realities from which it came to be. The soul participates in what is above it by means of its contemplative vision of the divine. This perfect vision of the soul in turn transforms it to mirror the object of its contemplation. At the same time, the soul would lack such a clear vision through its higher part if it failed to undergo the purification process that began with its lower part, its ordering of the material cosmos and exercise of virtues.

⁴⁸ Plotinus, *En.* 3.8.8.

⁴⁹ Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.6.

⁵⁰ Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.7. Here, the solution in understanding the virtues and dialectic is to see the degree of perfection each soul has: “Thus the man will learn to work with this or that as every several need demands. And as he reaches to loftier principles and other standards these in turn will define his conduct: for example, Restraint in its earlier form will no longer satisfy him. . . . He will live, no longer, the human life of the good man—such as Civic Virtue commends—but, leaving this beneath him, will take up instead another life, that of the Gods.” See also *En.* 1.2.2: “Any participation in the ideal-form produces some corresponding degree of likeness. . . . Participation goes by nearness: the soul nearer than the body, therefore closer akin, participates more fully and shows a godlike presence, almost cheating us into the delusion that in the Soul we see God entire.”

⁵¹ Plotinus, *En.* 4.7.10.

Imitation for Plotinus

Plotinus will speak on occasion of the soul's imitation of its higher principle through its governance of the material cosmos. The role of the soul's lower part is to establish an order in the material realm that mirrors the true order (*logos*) persisting in the intelligible realm.⁵² Where the soul finds diversity and multiplicity in the world, it will establish a unity that reflects the order of the divine sphere. Plotinus portrays the soul's imitation in terms of an actor on a stage who follows the instructions of a director, but doing more than merely repeating the words it receives.

In the dramas of human art, the poet provides the words but the actors add their own quality, good or bad—for they have more to do than merely repeat the author's words—in the truer drama which dramatic genius imitates in its degree, the soul displays itself in a part assigned by the creator of the piece [ἐν δὲ τῷ ἀληθεστέρῳ ποιήματι, ὅ τι μιμοῦνται κατὰ μέρος ἄνθρωποι ποιητικὴν ἔχοντες φύσιν].⁵³

Plotinus uses the imagery of a theatrical play because it reveals how the soul must mimic the dramatic sequence revealed to it by its higher principle but accomplish the drama of its life in a way that adds its own quality and personality, as any actor would while putting on a play. Each soul, in its lower activity of cosmic observation and governance, is as an actor in the drama of the universe, making itself a part of the play by putting forth its own personal vice or virtue, which hinder or aid it in this life. As imitators of the higher sphere, souls are actors in a place far vaster than any stage. The Author of all has made them “masters of this world,” and “they themselves determine the honor or discredit in which they are agents,” since their place and part is dependent on their quality of living.⁵⁴ Through their imitation of what is above, the souls of persons “fit into the Reason-principle of the Universe” according to their own adjusted mode of existence.⁵⁵ As strings of an instrument, souls are “set in the precisely right position, determined by the Principle directing musical utterance, for

⁵² Edward Moore, “Plotinus,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Peer-reviewed Academic Resource*, iep.utm.edu/plotinus/.

⁵³ Plotinus, *En.* 3.2.17.

⁵⁴ Plotinus, *En.* 3.2.17.

⁵⁵ Plotinus, *En.* 3.2.17.

the due production of the tones within its capacity.”⁵⁶ Imitation, for Plotinus, occurs when what is below and less real identifies itself in some activity or state of being with some higher and more perfect and real existent. In the case of the soul, it imitates the Reason-principle of the universe by governing the material world through a virtuous life. As Plotinus pairs together the soul’s dual activities of contemplation and action, there is another unspoken pairing between the soul’s participation and imitation.

For Plotinus, the soul’s participation in its higher principle requires its purification and contemplative vision of that reality. In a similar way, the soul’s imitation of its higher principle occurs through the exercise of its lower activity that orders the material cosmos and its own life through the exercise of the virtues. Even the soul’s lower part, however, is ultimately aimed at imitation of the divine. Lesser virtues may be useful in imitating virtuous men, but the higher virtues are a participation in divinity. In Plotinus’s words: “It is to the gods, not to the good, that our likeness must look.”⁵⁷ For, to model ourselves upon good men is “to produce an image of an image.”⁵⁸ What is greater is to “fix our gaze above the image and attain likeness to the supreme exemplar.”⁵⁹ To summarize: Neoplatonic participation is, for the soul, by way of its higher faculties, to share in the Intellectual-principle in order to become like it; imitation is the activity of the rational soul in governing the world and so ordering it to reflect the virtue that the soul finds in itself. It is through the soul’s imitation of what is above itself that it participates in the higher realities.

Gregory’s *Oration 45*

Gregory Nazianzen’s *Oration 45* is one of his more prominent festal orations, where he expounds some reality of Christ’s life based on the liturgical time of the year. *Or. 45* was written some time before Gregory’s retirement from the see of Nazianzus in 383. It borrows much from his *Oration 38*, On the Nativity of Christ, written in 380 at Constantinople with the goal of expounding an orthodox position on Christ’s

⁵⁶ Plotinus, *En.* 3.2.17.

⁵⁷ Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.7.

⁵⁸ Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.7.

⁵⁹ Plotinus, *En.* 1.2.7. For more on the distinction between image and likeness in Plotinus, see Daniel E. Wilson, *Deification and the Rule of Faith: The Communication of the Gospel in Hellenistic Culture* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow, 2015), 132–34.

Incarnation.⁶⁰ Though *Or.* 38 is seasonally written at Christmas and *Or.* 45 at Easter (the Pascha), they share much in common concerning the ability of the believer to share in the fullness of God by way of the Word's assumption of our humanity. When Gregory mentions the Pascha in *Or.* 45, he does not speak of it as a merely historical and completed event. It is something all of his listeners can participate in and celebrate at present in the festal liturgy.

In *Or.* 45, Gregory uses the term "participate" in a number of ways: participating in the law and the Gospel (45.23); our sharing in the divine image as a rational soul and our failure to keep it (45.9); our participation in the Pascha and its Old Covenant symbols; our sharing in the fullness of God and the Word (45.9, 16); the Word's participation in our flesh to make us immortal; and lastly, our passing through this life, from one reality to another, in order to have a more perfect participation in the next life (45.23). He likewise enjoins his listeners to imitate Christ in his Passion and suffering (45.23) as Christ has mimicked our poor condition (45.27), and he lists specific ways different members of the faithful are called to replicate the life of Jesus (45.24). Each of these places where Gregory discusses participation and imitation will be examined in detail, but even a brief look at these instances makes clear what Gregory means by participation and imitation. To participate is to have one reality share in another without restriction on the lower sharing in the higher or vice-versa, whether it be the Word's sharing in our flesh or our sharing in the next life. And to imitate is for the believer to live in a way that replicates the life of Jesus after a pattern first lived by the Savior for others to follow.

The Call to Return, for Christ Has Returned

Though clearly a Christian exhortation, much of what Gregory says at the beginning of *Oration* 45 about the Pascha has a Neoplatonic ring to it. The hierarchy of being, the mid-rank of the soul, and humanity's sharing in the divine life through a reason-endowed nature are all present.⁶¹ His discourse is about the Pascha, but the Pascha in the context of how the rational minds of his listeners are drawn into the

⁶⁰ Harrison, "Introduction," 17. See also John Anthony McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 386.

⁶¹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.2: "But we will contribute a discourse, the most beautiful and most honorable thing we have, especially when singing the praises of the Word for a good deed done for reason-endowed nature."

Paschal mysteries by coming to know God and things divine. Gregory must, like Plotinus, start from the source of reality and run “back to God [πρὸς Θεὸν ἀναδραμεῖν]” so as to give the clearest description to man’s rational ascent to higher things. It is this ascent to higher things that forms the context in which Gregory will discuss participation and imitation. As he begins his oration, Gregory asks his listeners to have their mind, hearing, and reason purified in order to feast on the mysteries of the Pascha as he presents them. In covering these topics through his discourse, Gregory hopes to open the minds of his listeners to the reality of the resurrection. It is through contemplating the realities of Christ’s life that his hearers will be led to return to God, as Christ has already returned to the Father:

Today salvation has come to the world, to things visible and to things invisible. Christ is risen from the dead; rise with him. Christ has returned to himself; return [Χριστὸς εἰς ἑαυτὸν, ἐπανέρχεσθε]. Christ is freed from the tomb; be freed from the bonds of sin. The gates of Hades are opened, and death is destroyed, and the old Adam is put aside, and the new is fulfilled. If anyone in Christ is a new creation, be made new.⁶²

Gregory gives the goal of his discourse at its beginning. In a language similar to Plotinus’s treatment of the soul’s conversion to its higher principle, Gregory tells his listeners that, just as Christ has returned to himself, being fully man and fully God, so they are commanded to return with him on the same path of the Passion and resurrection Christ took. To celebrate the feast of the Pascha means to understand that things begin with God and that the destination of reason-bearing humanity is heavenward, toward the same God from whom all things came.

Gregory’s description of the believer’s return to God by way of Christ’s Pascha is similar to Plotinus’s framework in that both rely on the principles of unity and plurality, similarity and difference, all of which yield degrees of perfection in a hierarchy of beings. For Gregory, this hierarchy relies on the perfection, unity, and eternity of the Godhead. God, who is “he who is,” holds “everything together in himself.” In one sense, God “possesses being,” but he does this without beginning or end; he is a kind of “boundless and limitless sea of being surpassing all thought and time and nature” who eter-

⁶² Gregory, *Or.* 45.1.

nally contemplates his own goodness.⁶³ Gregory considers God's act of creation in terms of the communication of divine goodness. A person's contemplation of God and Christ's Paschal mystery is first dependent on God contemplating his perfect goodness. "Yet it was not sufficient for goodness to be moved only in contemplation of itself [τὸ κινεῖσθαι μόνον τῇ ἑαυτῆς θεωρίᾳ], but it was necessary that the good be poured forth and given paths to travel, so that there would be more recipients of its benevolent activity, for this was the summit of goodness."⁶⁴ Gregory then treats different levels of creatures made by God. He speaks of the creation of the angels as the second splendors that serve the first Splendor, the Word of God. Following the creation of the spiritual world, God wished to create a second material and visible world, composed of heaven and earth and the realities existing between them. In doing so, God showed the harmony of the entire created sphere: "Thus God has shown that he was able to create not only a nature akin to himself but also what is entirely foreign to him."⁶⁵ Like Plotinus, Gregory in his oration first sets up a cosmology in which he can speak of likeness, difference, and degrees of perfection, all of which provide a context for discussing the rational soul's middle position and its return to God by sharing in the life of Christ.

The Mid-Rank of Humanity

In his act of creation, God had made intellectual minds in the angelic sphere and animals in the sensible sphere but had yet to join the two spheres together. For, angels and all spiritual natures apprehended by the mind are "akin to the divine, but those apprehended by the senses are entirely foreign to it, and those which are entirely without life or movement are still farther removed."⁶⁶ Different creatures could praise their creator in a way pertaining to them, but there was no middle position uniting the two spheres together. There was no "blending out of both, nor a mixing of opposites," which is, for Gregory, the sign of a greater wisdom and a divine outpouring of goodness.⁶⁷ This mixture of opposites arose in God's creation of a human being:

⁶³ Gregory, *Or.* 45.3.

⁶⁴ Gregory, *Or.* 45.5.

⁶⁵ Gregory, *Or.* 45.6.

⁶⁶ Gregory, *Or.* 45.6.

⁶⁷ Gregory, *Or.* 45.7.

The Creator Word also makes one living creature out of both, I mean invisible and visible natures, that is the human being. And having taken the body from the matter already created, he breathed in breath from himself, which is surely the intelligent soul and the image of God of which Scripture speaks.⁶⁸

The rational soul, imaged after the Creator Word, joins with its body to form a new creature standing at the middle position between the spiritual and material spheres. Gregory sees the human being as a kind of second world that parallels and unites the harmony of the entire cosmos, both sensible and spiritual. As Plotinus spoke of the soul's dual activity of contemplating what is above it and governing what is below it, so Gregory comments that the human being, as flesh and spirit, holds a double function in life. He is "great in smallness" like another angel placed on the earth to be a "composite worshiper," a "beholder of the visible creation, an initiate into the intelligible, king of things on earth, subject to what is above, earthly and heavenly, transitory and immortal, visible and intelligible, a mean between greatness and lowliness."⁶⁹ Because of his dual nature, the human being will undergo the trial of balancing his spiritual and fleshly components without falling into sin. "He is at once spirit and flesh, spirit on account of grace, flesh on account of pride, the one that he might remain and glorify his Benefactor, the other that he might suffer and in suffering remember and be corrected if he has ambition for greatness." The goal of humanity's burdensome trial is its training and purification in this life and its divinization in the next. The human being is "a living creature trained here and transferred elsewhere, and, to perfect the mystery, deified through inclination toward God."⁷⁰

The Incarnation and Christ's Mediating Role

In order for the human being to participate in the divine life, Gregory appeals to a divine condescension that Plotinus would not consider: the Incarnation of the divine Word. Because mankind's sin wrought the continual spread of evil, God realized that a greater remedy required a greater help. Working within a framework akin to Plotinus's hierarchy of being, Gregory explains how the Word of God, as

⁶⁸ Gregory, *Or.* 45.7.

⁶⁹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.7.

⁷⁰ Gregory, *Or.* 45.7: "τῇ πρὸς Θεὸν νεύσει θεούμενον."

the principle of all things, became a creature for the sake of redeeming fallen humanity. It was the Word of God, the eternal, invisible, incorporeal “Principle from the Principle,” who “approached his own image” in the Incarnation. The Word bore humanity’s flesh and “mingle[d] himself with a rational soul” because of our souls, “purifying like by like,” becoming a man in all things but sin.⁷¹ Gregory’s language of the union of contraries is noticeable on its own, but it is even more striking when considered in relief to Plotinus’s system of participation. For Plotinus, participation requires simultaneous likeness and difference and a hierarchy of existents, with the lower attaining to the higher through its contemplative return. Gregory seems to turn this Neoplatonic notion of participation on its head, beginning with Christ’s sharing in our humanity, so as to make any further progress of humanity toward God possible. Because of the divine Word’s likeness to our feeble human nature, humanity in turn could participate in the divine life of the Word, a difference mankind could not bridge on its own.⁷² Gregory speaks of this exchange as a paradoxical mixing of opposites. “He comes forth, God with what he has assumed, one from two opposites [ἐν ἐκ δύο τῶν ἐναντίων], flesh and spirit, the one deifying and the other deified [ὃν τὸ μὲν ἐθέωσε, τὸ δὲ ἐθεώθη].”⁷³ God, whom Gregory named before as “he who is,” now “comes into being,” the uncreated being created.

Gregory certainly puts forward the “incarnational difference,” which puts the believer on a different road map than Plotinus would have constructed for the soul’s ascent and return. But this difference of the Incarnation also leads to a difference of directionality when it comes to participation and imitation. The rational soul no longer merely participates in the higher levels of being by way of its return; that higher Principle himself has now shared in what is below in order to redeem and make whole again what has fallen away. Likewise, there is also for Gregory a priority to the Principle participating in what is below itself in order for the lower to be raised up to the

⁷¹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.9.

⁷² Absent from Gregory’s theology of the Word’s creation and Incarnation is the subordination of any one divine person to another. See Christopher Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20–21, 125–30. Yet Beeley does bring out well, for Gregory, God the Father’s *monarchia* in relation to the Son (“Divine Causality and the Monarchy of God the Father in Gregory of Nazianzus,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100, no. 2 [2007]: 199–200).

⁷³ Gregory, *Or.* 45.9.

higher. Though humanity was first created having a likeness to God, the divine Word initiated his participation in lowly flesh before man could fully share in the image of the divinity he had lost through sin. The priority of Christ's participation and imitation of our humanity allows there to be a complete road map laid out for the believer to follow, with the arrows pointing in the direction of the divine and Christ himself as the road to travel upon.

Unlike Plotinus, Gregory sees the need and possibility for the highest principle, God himself, to condescend and assume human flesh and spirit. Like Plotinus, however, Gregory sees that at the heart of this mixture is the rational soul acting as a mediator between the divine and created spheres: "The uncontained is contained, through the intervention of the rational soul [διὰ μέσης ψυχῆς νοερᾶς], which mediates [μεσιτευούσης] between the divinity and the coarseness of flesh."⁷⁴ By his taking on a rational soul, Christ joins the opposites of flesh and spirit in a way that perfects the mediating role of the individual soul in Plotinus's hierarchy of beings. As Plotinus had discussed, degrees of perfection do indeed constitute degrees of participation. But Gregory sees that our humanity was so drastically imperfect because of sin that God foresaw that our participation in the perfection of his divine life would be possible only by his assumption of our poverty:

The one who makes rich has become poor, and he is made poor in my flesh, that I might be enriched through his divinity. The full one empties himself for he empties himself of his own glory for a short time, that I may participate in his fullness [ἵν' ἐγὼ τῆς ἐκείνου μεταλάβω πληρώσεως]. What is the wealth of his goodness? What is this mystery concerning me? I participated in the divine image and I did not keep it [Μετέλαβον τῆς εἰκόνης, καὶ οὐκ ἐφύλαξα]; he participates in my flesh both to save the image and to make the flesh immortal [μεταλαμβάνει τῆς ἐμῆς σαρκὸς, ἵνα καὶ τὴν εἰκόνα σώσῃ, καὶ τὴν σάρκα ἀθανατίσῃ].⁷⁵

God's perfection is brought to humanity so that human beings can be made perfect by participating in divine goodness. The perfection and unity of God's divinity with humanity is found in the mediation

⁷⁴ Gregory, *Or.* 45.9.

⁷⁵ Gregory, *Or.* 45.9.

of Christ. For, Christ is perfect, “not only because of his divinity—for nothing is more perfect than the divine—but also because of what was assumed.” The humanity Christ assumed has been “anointed with divinity and become that which anointed it”; in Christ, our humanity has become “one with God.”⁷⁶ It is significant that Gregory says that Christ “participates in my flesh.” Every aspect of our humanity is redeemed by Christ, including our flesh, both to save our image and even to make the flesh immortal. Such a statement distances Gregory’s theology from Plotinus. Nevertheless, there are a number of similar traits between the two thinkers. Gregory’s description of humanity’s union with God is similar to Plotinus’s treatment of the soul’s participation in the Intellectual-principle to the point of being identified with it. Using the language of conversion and return, Gregory explains that Christ’s Incarnation and resurrection are the perfect type of descent and ascent: “He is one year old as the sun of righteousness [ἥλιον δικαιοσύνης], starting from above [ἢ ἐκεῖθεν ὁρμώμενον],” but then “circumscribed by that which is visible [ἢ τῷ ὁρώμενῳ περίγραπτον],” and then “returning to himself [καὶ εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἐπιστρέφοντα].”⁷⁷ This circle of descent and return is similar to Plotinus’s description of the soul’s movement from its higher principle into the material realm before it returns back to its source. Gregory’s treatment differs from Plotinus’s, however, in that God himself, the principle of all things, is the one descending into creation in order to draw human beings to participate in his divinity. This kind of descent by a higher principle would not fit within Plotinus’s framework. Gregory, unlike Plotinus, is adamant in the need for the higher principle, God’s divine Word, to condescend to our level if we are to be raised above our current state of existence: “For in no other way does the coarseness of a material body and a captive mind come to comprehension of God except by being helped.”⁷⁸

Participating in the Pascha

Because the Word united himself to our human nature, he opened up a path to the divine life that was not available before. Throughout the remainder of Gregory’s *Oration* 45, he speaks about the manner in which his listeners can take this path opened by God, and so participate in the Paschal mysteries of Christ’s life. Gregory’s treatment of

⁷⁶ Gregory, *Or.* 45.13.

⁷⁷ Gregory, *Or.* 45.13.

⁷⁸ Gregory, *Or.* 45.11.

participation when he speaks of the Pascha is always direction- and action-oriented. Gregory tells his listeners that the meaning of the word “Pascha” implies both a “passing over”—in reference to the historical flight of the Jews from Egypt to Canaan—and the spiritual “progress and ascent from things below to things above” into the eternal land of promise, which is heaven.⁷⁹ For Gregory, to participate in the Pascha is to share in the liturgical rite of Eucharistic communion, which has its figures and types in the Old Testament. But even the Eucharistic rite uses signs that point to a further reality:⁸⁰

Now we will participate in a Pascha [Μεταληψόμεθα δὲ τοῦ Πάσχα] that is still a type even if more clearly unveiled than the old one, for the Pascha under the law, I boldly declare, was a more indistinct type of a type. But a little later, our participation will be more perfect and more pure [τελεώτερον καὶ καθαρώτερον].⁸¹

If the Pascha celebrated by Gregory and his listeners is but a type, then there is more to sharing in the Pascha than recalling its typological imagery. Gregory uses the imagery of food and drink to describe how his listeners learn to participate in the Paschal mystery. When the Word “drinks anew with us in the kingdom of the Father,” he will “reveal and teach that which now he has shown in a limited

⁷⁹ Gregory, *Or.* 45. 10. Gregory borrows his etymology of the Pascha from Origen’s treatise on the Passover. Hofer writes: “Origen altered previous Christian interpretations of Pascha by going back to the Hebrew and finding that the Hebrew word does not mean suffering, as in the Greek *pathos*, ‘passion,’ or *paschein*, ‘to suffer,’ but, rather, a ‘passage’ with the Greek equivalent of *diabasis*. Following Origen, Gregory makes the same distinction, but in a somewhat different manner. Gregory speaks of both a historical sense of *diabasis*, in the movement from Egypt to Canaan, and a spiritual sense of a journey from things below to things above and the land of promise. Both the historical flight and the spiritual ascent involve suffering and trial by the pilgrim” (*Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus*, 184–85).

⁸⁰ Hofer, *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus*, 188.

⁸¹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.23: “Μεταληψόμεθα δὲ τοῦ Πάσχα, νῦν μὲν τυπικῶς ἔτι, καὶ εἰ τοῦ παλαιοῦ γυνώτερον (τὸ γὰρ νομικὸν Πάσχα, τολμῶ καὶ λέγω, τύπου τύπος ἦν ἀμυδρότερος)· μικρὸν δὲ ὕστερον, τελεώτερον καὶ καθαρώτερον, ἡνίκα ἂν αὐτὸ πίνῃ καινὸν μεθ’ ἡμῶν ὁ Λόγος ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ Πατρὸς, ἀποκαλύπτων καὶ διδάσκων, ἃ νῦν μετρίως παρέδειξε. Καινὸν γάρ ἐστιν αἰεὶ τὸ νῦν γνωριζόμενον.”

way.”⁸² For drinking and enjoyment is “ours to learn, but it is his to teach and to share the word with his disciples [τὸ διδάξαι, καὶ κοινώσασθαι τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ μαθηταῖς τὸν λόγον].”⁸³ For, the teaching “is nourishment, even for the nourisher (Jn 4:34).”⁸⁴ The dietary imagery that Gregory employs not only uses the typological language of the Paschal sacrifice but also reveals that his treatment of participation in the divine life images a kind of educative and noetic consumption of the divine Word’s teaching offered to humanity.⁸⁵ Clearly, the typological imagery is important for Gregory, for it aids the people’s understanding of the meaning of the Pascha they celebrate. But Gregory is also exhorting his congregation to participate in a reality that is more perfect and pure. The typological language Gregory uses in this oration about the old covenant Passover sacrifice is meant to steer his listeners to understand the further reality awaiting them. Gregory exhorts his congregation to partake of the law, but in the manner of the Gospel, “perfectly, but not imperfectly, eternally, but not temporarily.”⁸⁶ Gregory’s exhortation to participate in the Pascha is as direction-oriented as God’s invitation for humanity to live in the kingdom of God in heaven. “Let us make our head not the Jerusalem below but the city above, not what is now trampled by soldiers as a campground but what is glorified by angels.” Participation in the Pascha means citizenship in a new Jerusalem not of this earth. It entails living in a society where membership implies union with God’s holiness: “Let us pass through the first veil, let us approach the second, let us peep into the Holy of Holies.”⁸⁷

⁸² Gregory, *Or.* 45.23.

⁸³ Gregory, *Or.* 45.23. Another instance of participation language through κοινώσασθαι.

⁸⁴ Gregory, *Or.* 45.23: “Τίς δὲ ἡ πόσις καὶ ἡ ἀπόλαυσις, ἡμῶν μὲν τὸ μαθεῖν, ἐκείνου δὲ τὸ διδάξαι, καὶ κοινώσασθαι τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ μαθηταῖς τὸν λόγον. Τροφή γάρ ἐστιν ἡ διδασκαλία, καὶ τοῦ τρέφοντος.”

⁸⁵ Gregory, *Or.* 45.28. Taking the activity of contemplation in stages allows there to be an education of soul: “We then fasted since before we did not fast, being overcome by the tree of knowledge. For the commandment was old; it came into existence at the same time as us and reasonably enjoined on us a kind of education for the soul. . . . We needed a God made flesh and made dead, that we might live. We were made dead with him that we might be purified. We have risen with him since we were made dead with him. We were glorified with him since we rose with him.”

⁸⁶ Gregory, *Or.* 45.23.

⁸⁷ Gregory, *Or.* 45.23.

Gregory's Return through Contemplation

Gregory both inherits and diverts from Plotinus's conception of participation. Insofar as this language of participation pertains to the divine Word who assumes our flesh in order to mediate our sharing in divine life, Gregory's treatment of participation differs from Plotinus's system. However, insofar as Gregory teaches that the individual person is able to partake of the divine life through some process of purification in the person's soul, then there is much in common between Gregory's and Plotinus's use of participation. One of the largest similarities between Plotinus's treatment of participation and Gregory's preaching on participation in the Pascha is their common emphasis on contemplation. Both view contemplation as an activity of the mind that is part of the soul's upward ascent to participate in the life of God. For Plotinus, contemplation meant having a view of reality as it is, how one exists in oneself, and how one can come to participate in a higher reality. Gregory encourages his congregation to contemplate the mysteries of the faith, and in so doing to participate in the divine life to which God invites them. As God, the divine mind, is moved to contemplate himself, so we, as reason-bearing creatures made in God's image and likeness, are moved to contemplate God and all things through him.⁸⁸ To keep the Paschal feast well is to incorporate the saving events of Christ's life in one's own identity and way of life by contemplating Christ's Paschal life.⁸⁹ The act of contemplation, however, is not immediately accessible to everyone. For, God is "without limits and difficult to contemplate" but we are limited creatures who share but an image of the divine.⁹⁰ One can, in fact, be either too coarse in mind or "too contemplative" (τῶν ἄγαν θεωρητικῶν) for his state in life.⁹¹ Gregory gives the example of the first man placed in the garden, who was not prepared to contemplate the mysteries of the tree of knowledge but hastily grasped for its fruit. God gave him "a law as material on which his free choice could work," a commandment indicating which fruit to partake in (τε μεταληπτέον) and from which to abstain.⁹² The tree of knowledge was good in itself, but it was good for man only if "possessed [μεταλαμβάνόμενον] at the right time." Gregory then iden-

⁸⁸ Gregory, *Or.* 45.5.

⁸⁹ Harrison, "Introduction," 26.

⁹⁰ Gregory, *Or.* 45.3.

⁹¹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.12.

⁹² Gregory, *Or.* 45.8: "Ὁ δὲ νόμος ἦν ἐντολὴ, ὧν τε μεταληπτέον αὐτῷ φυτῶν, καὶ οὐ μὴ προσαπτέον."

tifies the tree with contemplation (θεωρία γὰρ ἦν τὸ φυτὸν), which is safe only for those of “perfect disposition,” and unsafe for people of harmful extremes, those “still simpler and those greedy in their desire,” as adult food is harmful to the infant needing milk.⁹³

Gregory teaches that to contemplate well in this life is to possess the proper object of contemplation at the right time.⁹⁴ Within *Or.* 45, Gregory reminds his listeners that the contemplative process occurs in stages. As Plotinus had discussed, there needs to be a certain level of virtue before contemplation is possible. Contemplation involves purification of all the members. In order to partake of the Pascha purely, for example, one needs to put down the passions by self-control and mortification of the members.⁹⁵ Healthy contemplation “binds desire on all sides” and does “not allow it to aim elsewhere,” for “that which wishes to be disposed lovingly towards one thing does not have the same impulse towards other pleasures.”⁹⁶ There are some matters that are to be contemplated only by those of a certain level of virtue and learning, akin to that of Moses.⁹⁷ The law of Scripture in the Old Testament offers a certain level of contemplation, and a higher contemplation is found in spiritually reading the realities in Scripture through its symbolic language.⁹⁸ One can also contemplate the Word as human as well as divine.⁹⁹ In any of these instances of contemplation, the human mind cannot approach God without his divine help.¹⁰⁰ Toward the end of his oration, Gregory commands his congregation: “Come into paradise with Jesus so as to learn from what you have fallen. Contemplate the beauties there; leave the murmurer to die outside with his blasphemies.”¹⁰¹ The goal of contemplating the mysteries of the faith is to follow Christ through his earthly life and into heaven.

Like Plotinus, Gregory teaches that one needs to undergo stages of purification before contemplation is possible. Because of our differ-

⁹³ Gregory, *Or.* 45.8.

⁹⁴ Harrison, “Introduction,” 50: “In this way they would grow over time, as one does through the practice of virtues and the resistance to temptations, so as to be ready for the contemplation for which man was created.”

⁹⁵ Gregory, *Or.* 45.18.

⁹⁶ Gregory, *Or.* 45.18.

⁹⁷ Gregory, *Or.* 45.11.

⁹⁸ Gregory, *Or.* 45.17, 20.

⁹⁹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.30.

¹⁰⁰ Gregory, *Or.* 45.11.

¹⁰¹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.24.

ences, “not all appear to be deemed worthy of the same rank and position,” but one person is “worthy of this, another of that, each, in my opinion, according to the measure of his own purification,” and others have been “altogether excluded” from contemplation and are “allowed to hear the voice [only] from above, as many as are like beasts in character and unworthy of divine mysteries.”¹⁰² Through his discourse, Gregory hopes to open the minds of his listeners to the purification God wishes to give them. In discussing how we come to knowledge of God, Gregory writes that God is sketched “only by the mind, and this in a very indistinct and mediocre way,” not from things pertaining to himself but from things around him. The human can gather impressions and glimpses of who God is, but even these can flee before they are grasped and understood. Yet the fact that God is hard to grasp is part of what makes the human mind desire to possess him, and so be purified by him in the act of contemplation: “Insofar as it is graspable, the divine draws [us] towards itself, for what is completely ungraspable is un hoped for and unsought.”¹⁰³

Connected to man’s wonder and desire for God is God’s purification and divinization of man. “One wonders at the ungraspable, and one desires for intensely the object of wonder, and being desired it purifies, and purifying it makes deiform [καθαῖρον δὲ, θεοειδέϊς ἐργάζεται].”¹⁰⁴ The movement from wonder to desire, to purification, and to deified contemplation is akin to Plotinus’s description of the soul’s desire to return to the higher principle from which it came. Gregory also mentions that the one undergoing purification is in conversation with the God who purifies him: “With those who have become such [God] converses as with those close to him.”¹⁰⁵ This relationship between the human mind and God is akin to Plotinus’s discussion of dialectics, where the mind is drawn to the Intellectual-principle through a conversational process of reason. For Gregory, the result of this purification is contemplation of divine things and union with God: “God is united with gods, and he is thus known, perhaps as much as he already knows those who are known to him.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Gregory, *Or.* 45.11.

¹⁰³ Gregory, *Or.* 45.3.

¹⁰⁴ Gregory, *Or.* 45.3. For more on the theme of divinization in Gregory’s writings, see Torstein Tollefsen, “Theosis according to Gregory,” in *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections*, ed. Tomas Hägg (Copenhagen, DK: Museum Tusculanum, 2006), 257–70.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory, *Or.* 45.3.

¹⁰⁶ Gregory, *Or.* 45.3.

Imitating Christ and the Saints

Participation and imitation are interrelated themes in Gregory's preaching. Participating in the Pascha through prayer and contemplation of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection allows the Christian to more easily imitate Christ's Paschal life in his thoughts, words, inclinations, and actions. Imitation is, for Gregory, a way that a Christian can represent or portray the life of Christ in his own daily living. A simple way to pair these two themes together in Gregory's writings is to say that participation is the contemplation of the life of Christ and that imitation is the practical implementation of identifying one's life with Jesus and those who surrounded him in his earthly life. Gregory desired to show his hearers that they could represent and identify themselves with exemplary figures from the biblical time period of Christ's life. In his preaching, Gregory uses scriptural images that portray the mysteries of the faith as unfolding before the eyes and ears of his listeners. The point is for the congregation to listen to the descriptions of Christ's life and so seek to imitate them in their own lives. Gregory reminds his listeners that Christ first became an imitator of us by participating in our humanity: "He was sent, but as human, for he was twofold. For he was tired and hungry and thirsty and endured agony and wept through the law of the body."¹⁰⁷ Earlier in his oration, Gregory had mentioned that Christ comes to participate in his flesh (μεταλαμβάνει τῆς ἐμῆς σαρκός).¹⁰⁸ Because of Christ's initial participation in the weakness of our human flesh, Gregory encourages his congregation to be imitators of Christ.

Yet I will tell you something greater: let us sacrifice ourselves to God, or rather offer sacrifice every day and in every movement. Let us accept all things for the Word. By suffering let us imitate his suffering [πάθεσι τὸ πάθος μιμώμεθα], by blood let us exalt his blood, let us willingly climb up on the cross. Sweet are the nails, even if very painful. For to suffer with Christ and for Christ is preferable to feasting with others.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Gregory, *Or.* 45. 27. For more on Gregory's mixture of scriptural imagery in his rhetorical mode of teaching see Ben Fulford, "Gregory of Nazianzus and Biblical Interpretation," in Beeley, *Re-Reading Gregory of Nazianzus*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory, *Or.* 45.9.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.23.

Christ participates in our flesh in order that he might imitate our life completely, save for sin. By Christ's imitation of our life, we are able to imitate his suffering.

But not all are meant to imitate Christ so directly. There are also many ways to imitate Christ's life in the saints who were part of the earthly life of the Savior. Toward the end of his *Or.* 45, Gregory exhorts his listeners to imitate those who were with Christ in his crucifixion and death. "If you are Simon of Cyrene, take up the cross and follow. If you are crucified with him as a thief, come to know God as kindhearted; if he was counted among the lawless because of you and your sin, become law abiding because of him."¹¹⁰ Imitation of those who surrounded Christ in his earthly life is equivalent to following the saints, but in a way that leads to deeper conversion in the average Christian. Gregory's goal is always a deeper worship of Christ even if it entails gaining some good from Christ's loss. "Worship the one hanged for you even if you are hanging; gain something even from the evil, purchase salvation by death."¹¹¹ The same goes for those who identify with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, a certain Mary, or another figure who followed Christ.

In a way similar to that in which Plotinus spoke of the soul's theatrical activity in the drama of life by following its author's directions in its own personal way, so Gregory speaks of his congregation's imitation of the saints who preceded them, albeit in a manner specific to their way of life. Though God is the ultimate director of the dramatic sequence of events in a person's life, Gregory's own preaching could be seen as a director's stage commands to the actors under his care. Gregory uses a number of imperatives that would have his listeners mimic the very actions of Christ or those close to him. Say something to Christ; hear his voice; be as Peter or John; run with zeal to the tomb.

And if he descends into Hades, go down with him. Know also the mysteries of Christ there: what is the saving plan, what is the reason for the twofold descent, to save everyone absolutely by his manifestation, or there also only those who believe. And if he ascends into heaven, go up with him. Join with the angels escorting him or those receiving him.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Gregory, *Or.* 45.24.

¹¹¹ Gregory, *Or.* 45.24.

¹¹² Gregory, *Or.* 45.24.

Concluding Remarks

A few notable points can be made about Gregory Nazianzen's use of the language of participation and imitation in *Oration* 45. It is clear that Gregory is in debt to Plotinus's treatment of participation and imitation to some extent. And, as a result, there is a deeper understanding and context from which to consider Gregory's use of participation and imitation in *Or.* 45 than what might appear at first glance.

First, through his Neoplatonic background, Gregory borrows the language of participation, but he adopts it in a way that allows him to speak of a Christian's participation in the Paschal mystery in a manner different from how Plotinus would treat the soul's upward ascent to the Intellectual-principle. Gregory's treatment of how the Christian participates in the Pascha relies on an eternal and unchangeable God who is identical with being itself. He also relies on the middle position of the human being, composed of spirit and flesh, to be halfway between the heavenly and earthly spheres of reality. Nevertheless, Gregory departs from Plotinus's cosmological system in that he accepts God's entrance into the created, material realm through the Word's Incarnation. The Word incarnate adopts mankind's middle position by becoming the mediating principle between fallen humanity and divinity. Mankind is able to participate in God's divine life only because the Word has first participated in our humanity. In this way, the priority of Christ's participation and imitation of our humanity precedes man's participation in and imitation of the divine through the Word incarnate. Like his much younger and better known contemporary Augustine, who mingled with Neoplatonic philosophy as he began to understand the Christian faith, Gregory realizes that true contemplation of the divine arises only from the prior Incarnation and condescension of the one contemplated.¹¹³ Therefore, Gregory's emphasis on Christ participating in his flesh sets his theological framework of redemptive suffering apart from Plotinus's procedure of the soul's return to its heavenly reality.

¹¹³ The need for contemplation to arrive at beatitude and the priority of Christ's Incarnation to accomplish it are important themes for both Gregory and Augustine. John Kenney has written much on Augustine's evaluation of Platonic contemplation and the importance of the Incarnation to accomplish the Christian's ascent to God, e.g.: "None Come Closer to Us than These': Augustine and the Platonists," *Religions* 7, no. 114 (2016): 16 pp. (PDF link at europub.co.uk/journals/958?page=29); *Contemplation and Classical Christianity: A Study in Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

Second, the purification of the mind for the sake of its turning and participating in a higher principle is important for Gregory, as it was for Plotinus. Though Gregory does not have as exact of a treatment as Plotinus does on the stages of purification (the virtues, dialectic, and contemplation), he refers to each of these in some manner in his festal oration. While he does not mention dialectic explicitly, Gregory's own preaching could be considered as the conversational discourse that enables his listeners to participate in the heavenly realities. His discourse, like the dialectics of Plotinus, has become the human mode through which contemplation and apprehension of the Word become flesh is made possible.

Third, it seems that the locus of participation in the divine life is, for Gregory, the mental activity of contemplation. Gregory encouraged his listeners to contemplate the mysteries of Christ's life as a noetic vision of reality, each according to his state of perfection. The object of their contemplation is the Word, his divinity and humanity, and different events in Christ's life. Gregory sees his preaching on the Pascha as a type of noetic education that allows his listeners to contemplate the mysteries of Christ's life in their own.

Lastly, for Gregory, imitation is the fruit of the Christian's contemplation. By gazing on the saving mysteries of Christ's life, one can receive the grace needed to imitate Christ and the saints. The imitative aspect of Gregory's preaching corresponds in some way to the dramatic acting Plotinus attributes to each soul caring for itself and the material realm. Gregory saw his listeners in a dramatic theatrical performance called life. Members of his congregation were the actors, and their lines came from the saints who preceded them. God is the playwright and director of the entire performance, but Gregory is like the stage manager or director who guides each figure into his proper role at the right time.¹¹⁴ His congregation follows the example of the saints who came before them, but ultimately each soul's performance relies on its own particular and graced manner of imitating the Paschal mysteries of Christ in its life, just as any actor would give his lines in his own personal style.

Although Russell may be right that a spectrum of types of deification exist among different patristic authors, there does seem to be more than a rhetorical or analogical sense to Gregory's use of participation and imitation language. Gregory does indeed mention that we

¹¹⁴ For more on the theme of life as the theatre of the world (*theatrum mundi*) see Potolsky, *Mimesis*, 75–79.

not only imitate but also participate (μεταλάβω) in God's fullness and divine image (45.9) by participating in the Pascha itself (45.23). To the question "where are we participating?" Gregory would answer that it is primarily in our minds, which contemplate the mysteries of the Word. And when asked, "where are we imitating?" Gregory could say that we mimic the lives of the saints and of Christ in our daily lives as the fruit of our contemplation. It is not easy to differentiate Gregory's exhortation to participate in the Paschal mysteries from his exhortation to imitate Christ's life. After all, is it not the case that the way we are sure to be in union with Christ is for us to conduct ourselves just as he did (1 John 2:5–6)?¹¹⁵ There is some pairing between the soul's contemplation and virtuous life and its participation and imitation, but the pairing is not a perfect fit when moving from Plotinus to Gregory. Imitative Christic living appears to be the means to participatory contemplation of the divine. Yet, at times, for Gregory, the means taken can also become the end sought, just as the suffering Christ is also the divine Word and the Paschal mystery is conversed with as a living person for each of the faithful to contemplate within the liturgy and within one's daily life. N·V

¹¹⁵ Taken from the Liturgy of the Hours Office of Readings for the sixth week of Easter, Monday.