

Life as a Journey in the Letters of Gregory the Great

Hector SCERRI, Msida, Malta

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the theme of life as a journey in a carefully-chosen selection of letters from the *Registrum epistularum* of Gregory the Great. An in depth study of the five letters in question reveals a detailed picture of the man of God who was a just and tactful administrator, but who was also a man of the people. Aware of the fact that this Church Father wrote with remarkable dexterity and artistry on countless topics to a whole spectrum of people from all walks of life in a variety of circumstances, this study seeks to focus on a pivotal existential theme: the image of life as a journey with its ups, downs and meanderings. Gregory's profound knowledge of human nature can be extrapolated from an exegesis of the five letters which are the scope of this research.

The aim of this communication is to study five letters by Gregory the Great with the objective of presenting the concept of life as a journey. This also gives us a number of insights into Gregory's character and the values he embraced. At the previous Patristics Conference, I studied the highlights of a tug-of-war between Gregory and an insubordinate bishop of Melita, Lucillus. My task, then, entailed an analysis of the information gleaned from four of Gregory's letters, written between July 592 and January 603.¹

My present task concerns a far more irenic theme. The theme which delves into the concept of life as a journey, has practical suggestions to contemporary men and women. The return to what Henri de Lubac calls the '*vitalité explosive*'² of the Fathers leads the reader to experience the fertility of patristic thought, '*une actualité de fécondation*',³ and its practical applications to life. My endeavour leads me to focus on just five letters from Gregory's vast *Registrum epistularum*, the fourteen papyrus books containing the enormous amount of his correspondence. John Moorhead states that

some 850 of these letters survive, approximately as many as the surviving letters of all preceding popes combined, but many of theirs, and many of Gregory's have disappeared.

¹ Hector Scerri, 'Gregory the Great Deposes a Disobedient Bishop', *SP* 48 (2010), 321-6.

² Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes* (Paris, 1946), 68.

³ Henri de Lubac, 'Preface', in France Quéré-Jaulmes, Adalbert-G. Hamman (eds), *Les chemins vers Dieu* (Paris, 1967), 7.

[...] His correspondence gives an impression of boundless energy and a capacity to involve himself resolutely in apparently humdrum matters.⁴

For the scope of this communication, the text of the letters found in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* has been used. The English translation which has been extremely useful is that by John R.C. Martyn, published in 2004 by the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, in Toronto. As Martyn affirms in the preface to his three-volume masterpiece, ‘this translation of the *Registrum epistularum*, or Register of Letters, of Saint Gregory the Great, the first complete version in English, and only the second in any modern language, will provide all medievalists with access to one of the most important documentary collections to have survived from the period’.⁵ Martyn gives credit to the efforts made in the same field by James Barmby (who translated about one third of the *Registrum*, a publication which dates back to 1895), the incomplete translation by Pierre Minard in *Sources Chrétiennes* (appearing in 1991), and the complete Italian translation by Vincenzo Recchia (published between 1996 and 1999). Both Recchia’s as well as Martyn’s translation use the standard critical edition by Dag Norberg published in the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (Turnhout, 1982).

The following five letters are studied:

III 51	to Priscus	July 593
VIII 22	to Rusticana	May 598
IX 218	to Aurelius	July 599
IX 229b	to King Reccared	August 599
XI 1	to Palladius	September 600

The obvious issue which arises with such a prolific output concerns the actual authorship of each and every letter which bears Gregory’s name: ‘Did he possibly write all that bears his signature? How did he manage to write all this, without neglecting his pastoral duties and his daily prayer rhythm?’⁶ Gregory was a Benedictine monk, and his life must certainly have been marked by such a rhythm, although he confesses how difficult it had become for him to be faithful to it. With regard to the question of authorship, Moorhead holds that ‘Gregory was not the author of all the letters which went out in his name. While some of his correspondence, such as letters to close friends, must have been dictated, although not physically written, by Gregory himself, most of the letters were presumably written on his behalf by his staff, who sometimes followed standard forms’.⁷

⁴ John Moorhead, *Gregory the Great* (Oxford, 2005), 16-7.

⁵ John R.C. Martyn, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, translated, with introduction and notes, 3 vols. (Toronto, 2004), I ix.

⁶ H. Scerri, ‘Gregory the Great Deposits a Disobedient Bishop’ (2010), 321-2.

⁷ J. Moorhead, *Gregory the Great* (2005), 17.

The concept of life as a journey is present in both sacred and profane texts. Religious art belonging to different faith traditions often highlights the fact that earthly life can be seen as a journey. Profane sources, whether artefacts, monuments, mythology or literature have often depicted life as a journey with its ups and downs, its meandering routine, as well as its calm and its stormy experiences. The Judaeo-Christian tradition is rich in examples of journeys which serve to illustrate one's relationship to God, and the themes of spiritual maturation and conversion. Some examples suffice: the journey of Abraham from Ur to Canaan, the exodus event, the travels of Tobias, and the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul.

Gregory's knowledge of classical literature and rhetoric, as well as his deep immersion in Scripture, contributed to the plethora of images, metaphors and moral teaching in all his works. The image of life as a journey is a relatively rare image in Gregory's *Registrum*. In his *Letter to Priscus*, a patrician from the East (July 593), Gregory considers the contrast between walking on even ground and on uneven ground, and takes these situations as an epitome of the varied experiences of life. Priscus who had led the Emperor of Constantinople's military campaign against the Avars, was congratulated by the pope for his success. Gregory writes:

If we truthfully consider the course of human life, we find nothing in it firm, nothing stable. But as a traveller walks now over level ground, and now over uneven ground, so certainly do we, while we remain in this life, now meet prosperity and now adversity, and finally they succeed one another in alternate periods of time, and with each in succession they become confused.⁸

The language used and the metaphor adopted by Gregory are very straightforward. This is, as one observes, the style of this Church Father: direct, concise and clear.

In the same letter, the bishop of Rome advises Priscus to remain on the lookout and exercise self-control. He tells him that while everything in the world is bound to change, human beings are to be careful not to let prosperity lead them neither to a false sense of security and over-enthusiasm, nor to allow difficulties discourage them. In the same letter, Gregory advises Priscus to keep his feet on the ground, especially during success, as well as to embrace humility.

The next text is Gregory's letter (VIII.22) in May 598 to the patrician Rusticiana, a noblewoman who lived in Constantinople, and who belonged to a noteworthy family. John R.C. Martyn, in the detailed introduction to the English translation of the Letters, states that 'Gregory seems to have had a special affinity with women, especially upper-class ones'.⁹ He also informs us that Rusticiana had lived in Rome, but had moved to Constantinople by 592 and exercised her influence at the Emperor's court. Rusticiana was married to

⁸ Greg. Magn., *Registrum Epistularum* III 51 (CChr.SL 140, 196.2-6): J.R.C. Martyn, I 269.

⁹ J.R.C. Martyn, I 8.

Appio, an Egyptian nobleman, and their three children – Eudoxius, Gregoria and Eusebia – are all mentioned by name in Gregory's correspondence. In this Letter, it seems that Rusticiana is unwilling to travel to Rome for fear of the bloodshed taking place on account of war. Gregory expresses his gratitude to the noblewoman for the ten pounds of gold – the equivalent of 720 *solidi* – she had sent him for the redemption of captives. It is only in the final lines of this letter that the Pope makes a passing comment on the pilgrimage of life: 'May almighty God, who sees your bodily weakness and *pilgrimage*, comfort you always with his grace, and by the life and health of my most charming son, his Lordship Strategios'.¹⁰ The latter is the son of Eusebia, and thus, Rusticiana's grandson, and according to Martyn, probably a godson to the pope.¹¹ It is not clear what *debilitatem corporis* (bodily weakness) Gregory is referring to in this text, whether it is the weakness of old age, or a sickness, or one's failures. The pope prays that God may not only take note of this weakness (whatever it is), but also of Rusticiana's efforts in the pilgrimage of life. One observes Gregory's concern for Rusticiana.

The third letter studied in this paper is that written by Gregory in July 599 to Aurelius who lived among the Franks, and who seems to have been a brother-in-law of the well-known Gallic patrician Dynamius, who had been, for a time, until September 595, administrator of the papal patrimony in Gaul, in the Marseilles district.¹² Gregory commences his Letter to Aurelius by offering his grief and his condolences on the death of the latter's brother. He takes this opportunity to share his reflections on Christian eschatology, also bringing in, between the lines, some thoughts on retribution, while encouraging his addressee to works of charity and hospitality. Gregory writes: 'For our present life is like a journey overseas, and when someone longs for his own country, the place of his travel abroad is a torment, even if it seems pleasant. But for you, who seek your own country, among the sighs that you make I also hear groans of human depression arising'.¹³ These words are a reminder of the Pauline image we find in the *Letter to the Philippians* (3:20-1): 'But our homeland is in heaven and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transfigure the wretched body of ours into the mould of his glorious body'. The Christian attitude of searching for the Lord and his values is mentioned by Gregory when he uses the clause: *qui patriam quaeritis* ('who seek your own country'). The challenge faced by Christians is that despite difficulties and the 'groans of human depression', they strive forward to reach their goal, their real homeland.

¹⁰ Greg. Magn., *Registrum Epistularum* VIII 22 (CChr.SL 140, 542.30-2): J.R.C. Martyn, II 518.

¹¹ In one of the letters Gregory wrote towards the end of his life, his *Letter to Eusebia* (XIII 33), mention is again made of Strategios. In this letter, Gregory urges Eusebia and her family to leave the risky situation in Constantinople behind, and to live in the tranquillity of Rome.

¹² See Greg. Magn., *Registrum Epistularum* III 33 (CChr.SL 140, 179): J.R.C. Martyn, I 257; VII 12 (CChr.SL 140, 461): J.R.C. Martyn II 465.

¹³ Greg. Magn., *Registrum Epistularum* IX 218 (CChr.SL 140A, 782.9-13): J.R.C. Martyn, II 682.

599 was a particularly prolific year for Gregory's letter-writing. The ninth volume of the *Registrum* includes up to 240 extant letters, because in 599, Gregory was sick, and was confined to bed for long periods, which meant he could devote more time to dictating letters to his secretaries. The fourth letter (IX 229) presented in this communication was written in August 599, and was addressed to Reccared, king of the Visigoths. Gregory's correspondence is clearly a reply to a letter by the king, following his conversion from Arianism to the true faith.

In his letter, Gregory praises king Reccared for having led his people to the true Catholic faith. While exalting the king's successful actions in favour of the faith, the pope accuses himself of inertia, and feels he has not worked enough for the Kingdom of God. Gregory mentions the abbots sent from Visigothic Spain with the king's offerings to the Apostle Peter, and how they had to discontinue their journey on account of 'the violence of the sea'.¹⁴ In Reccared's letter, these abbots had been described as having encountered tragic circumstances: 'They were hurrying, now almost in sight of the Italian shore, the force of the sea came upon them, and clinging on to some rocks near Marseilles, they were barely able to save their lives'.¹⁵ Martyn, in a note to Gregory's reply, comments that 'this is seen as a weak excuse to return home by the pope, although the jewelled cup did arrive intact'.¹⁶

In his long letter – much longer than the average letter – Gregory makes use of these happenings and seeks to make practical applications which convey a moral to his addressee. At the back of his mind, the pope refers to the dramatic account of the shipwreck of the Apostle Paul in Melita, as narrated in great detail in the *Acts of the Apostles* 27-8. He confuses Paul with Peter, because immediately after mentioning Peter and the benefits of his preaching in Italy, he states: 'And yet on his way he suffered shipwreck. But the ship of his heart stood firm in the waves of the sea'. Therefore, while commenting negatively on the lack of courage and perseverance shown by the seafaring abbots from Spain, Gregory, through the metaphor of the ship ravished by the tempest, upholds the importance of being determined in one's good actions and showing constancy: '*sed navis cordis in marinis fluctibus integra stetit*' ('the ship of his heart stood firm in the waves of the sea'). Indeed, Gregory elaborates further upon this dimension of the concept of the true Christian's life as a journey, when he explains:

But the constancy of those abbots who had been sent over was on trial, whether they knew how to overcome dangers in their way with a holy desire, and not to be at all tired mentally when suffering from bodily fatigue. For adversity that impedes good intentions is a proof of virtue, not a sign of rejection.¹⁷

¹⁴ Greg. Magn., *Registrum Epistularum* IX 229b (CChr.SL 140A, 807.41): J.R.C. Martyn, II 700-1.

¹⁵ Reccared, king of the Goths, to Gregory, bishop of Rome, IX 229a: J.R.C. Martyn, II 699.

¹⁶ J.R.C. Martyn, II 701, note 697.

¹⁷ Greg. Magn., *Registrum Epistularum* IX 229b (CChr.SL 140A, 807.43-7): J.R.C. Martyn, II 701.

While bringing up other issues with king Reccared and passing enlightened observations based either on Scripture or on classical Latin texts (in this case from Juvenal's *Satires*), Gregory makes another reference to the journey of life. Having exhorted the king to show vigilant attention, especially when faced with cunning snares, he goes on to tell him: 'Indeed, our present life is a road. And it is necessary that one is all the more wary of evil spirits lying in ambush, the greater the gifts that one carries'.¹⁸ The pastoral solicitude and the wisdom of Gregory are once more clearly evident to the readers of his letters.

The fifth and final letter to be considered in this communication is that written on 1 September 600 to Palladius, a monk-priest of the monastery on Mount Sinai (XI 1). In a note accompanying the English translation of this letter, John Martyn states that 'it seems that Gregory knew Palladius well, but this is his only surviving letter to him'.¹⁹ The letter abounds in scriptural quotes – nine in all – and in spiritual reflections and advice. The tone used by Gregory is warm, and the words he adopts mirror his love for Palladius: 'I have written this brief reply in remembrance of our love'.²⁰ Moreover, the pope sends him a tunic and a monastic hood (*cucullus*) as a gift. The reference to the journey of life is when Gregory entrusts himself to his friend's prayers:

I ask that you should offer a prayer on my behalf, that almighty God should deign to protect me from malignant spirits and perverse humans, because *in this pilgrimage of my life* evils are surrounding me, and many of them [...] Let heavenly grace protect us in the cities and you in the desert.²¹

In the five letters studied in this communication – as is the case with his *Regula Pastoralis* – Gregory the Great is keen to suggest practical directives to individuals from all walks of life. It is evident from the *Registrum* as well as from his other works that this Church Father showed deep psychological insight, and the advice he gave is useful today as it was in his time. Basing himself on Scripture and on classical authors, Gregory manifests a deep knowledge of the human person, and seeks to share his profound thoughts on many themes, including that on life as a journey, in a direct, concise and incisive manner. Gregory's pastoral convictions are clearly revealed: *ars est artium regimen animarum*.²²

¹⁸ Greg. Magn., *Registrum Epistularum* IX 229b (CChr.SL 140A, 808.73-5): J.R.C. Martyn, II 701-2.

¹⁹ J.R.C. Martyn, III 736, note 10.

²⁰ Greg. Magn., *Registrum Epistularum* XI 1 (CChr.SL 140A, 859.39): J.R.C. Martyn, III 736.

²¹ *Ibid.* (CChr.SL 140A, 859.39-46): J.R.C. Martyn, III 736.

²² See Greg. Magn., *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* I 1: Grégoire le Grand, *Règle Pastorale*, I, SC 381 (Paris, 1992), 128.