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HOMILETIC DIAGNOSIS AND THERAPY FOR SCHISMATIC RIGORISM THROUGH LUCAN PARABLES

Lisa D. Maugans Driver¹

No congregation is bereft, for very long, of those who think that they are better or more holy than others and find ways to make their superiority known. Also, there is often a steady supply of congregations whose complacency or blatantly sinful behavior seems to confirm the opinion of the self-righteous. These tensions were keenly felt in Asia Minor in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. This was an era and a region richly blessed with fervor for ascetic endeavors, from rigorist Eustathians to settled Basilians to enthused Messalians to apostolically inclined vagrant ascetics. In fact Daniel Caner's analysis of this latter group—the “wandering, begging monks”—reveals that many ascetics were deemed problematic precisely because they tended to remain part of their home towns and churches, rather than withdraw or wander. One local bishop in particular, Asterius of Amaseia, was especially concerned about how the presence of these ascetics affected their home congregations. Asterius struggled with the question of how to manage his flock when the levels of commitment varied so greatly. Moreover, he was alarmed when some of his priests became so enamored with high ascetic standards that they became reluctant to care for the entirety of their congregations. Some even began to refuse sinners access to repentance.

1 This article was developed from a presentation given at *Patristic Homilies and Their Reception History* October 9–11, 2014 sponsored by the Pappas Patristic Institute, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. I benefited greatly from discussion at the Institute as well as later with my colleagues in the Department of Theology at Valparaiso University. Thanks also extend to Rev Dr Steven Driver for his thorough reading and comments. Finally, Dr Nicholas Kauffman, Lilly Fellow in Classics, provided important feedback on the Greek translations.

This article will focus on how Asterius addressed these tensions in his homilies.² Of particular importance will be how Asterius used the recurring image of the Pharisees and his reading of the parable of the Two Sons (i.e., the Prodigal Son, Lk15:11–32) to address the fractious situation within his congregation and the broader region. Asterius felt compelled to censure a group of rigorists because they “barred the entrance to the kingdom to those who have wandered astray.”³ As a result, potential penitents despaired of forgiveness. Following a series of ineffective, private reprimands, Asterius resorted to public denunciation in his homilies.⁴ Beginning with the diagnosis of pharisaical behavior within his flock, and ultimately some of his clergy, Asterius then redirected the rigorists to adopt a God-like model of mercy in dealing with sinners through this and other parables.

From Philosophers to Pharisees

Under ordinary circumstances, Asterius valued the regular presence of resident ascetics within his congregation. Yet Asterius' praise of ascetics had limits. For example, he once ranked the efforts of “those practiced in serious pursuits” as falling short of the glorious achievements of more stellar athletes of piety, such as the martyrs.⁵ Nevertheless, Asterius followed the example of his Cappadocian neighbors by praising ascetics as “philosophers.”⁶ He singled them out as laudatory models for other believers, addressing them as

2 The extant corpus consists of sixteen homilies and excerpts from four other homilies preserved by Photius in his *Bibliotheca* 271. *Asterius of Amasea. Homilies I–XIV*, ed. Cornelis Datema (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), and “Les homélie XV et XVI d’Asterius d’Amasée,” ed. Cornelis Datema, *Sacris Erudiri* 23 (1978–79): 63–93.

3 Homily 13 *Adhortatio ad poenitentiam* (hereafter *On repentance*) 3.2.

4 Homily 13 *On repentance* 4.2.

5 Τοῖς ἀσκουμένοις τὰ σπουδαία. Homily 9 In *S. Phocam* 1.1. See also Homily 10 *In sanctos martyres* (hereafter *On the holy martyrs*).

6 For example Basil's *Epistle 2* to Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa's depiction of his sister Macrina as highly accomplished in philosophy in the *Life of Macrina*. See Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 70–72. Susanna Elm reminds us of the oft ignored aspect of philosophy in the ancient world which is the assumption that the philosopher would exert leadership. See *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church. Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Vision of Rome* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 158.

“lover[s] of learning.”⁷ He used the image of an ascetic lover of wisdom to encourage Lenten devotion and elevated ascetics as examples worth emulating by all believers. Asterius’ praise of ascetics also suggests that he elevated them to official and unofficial positions of leadership.⁸ Those devoted to Christian asceticism were “pupils of philosophy and lovers of lofty matters and disciples of the Logos” who were engaged in training their souls to “practice righteousness and virtue, as a friend to God.”⁹

Asterius worried, however, that some apparently excellent ascetics were manifesting symptoms of a degenerative disease that sapped their virtue and harmed those who looked up to them.¹⁰ This seems similar to a situation discussed by Basil of Caesarea and Amphilochius of Iconium. Basil’s *Letters 188* and *199* address how to handle schismatic encratites whose division from more acceptable ascetics likely involved differences of practice more than doctrine.¹¹ Some consider the encratites to have been a formally organized counter-church, pointing to the schismatic parasyagogues described by Basil as well as to material evidence.¹² On the other hand, given research into the varieties of ascetic life in Asia Minor of this period, it might be better to consider the encratite label to be just another way of referring to one of the many forms of established asceticism—granted, one that was losing official approval.

7 Homily 10 *On the holy martyrs* 16.1.

8 See Rousseau, *Basil* (229–231) on the *Moralia*. For Basil’s ideal regarding *asceticism* as a universal calling for Christians and his intention to keep the more professional ascetics as integral and active models for the congregation, see Paul Jonathan Fedwick, *The Church and the Charisma of Leadership in Basil of Caesarea* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979), 12–23, 161–65.

9 Homily 14 *In Principium Ieiuniorum* 2.1 ... τῆς φιλοσοφίας τρόφιμοι καὶ τῶν ὑψηλῶν ἐρασταὶ καὶ μαθηταὶ τοῦ λόγου. 1.3 [ἡ ψυχὴ] Ἀσκούσα δὲ δικαιοσύνην καὶ ἀρετήν, ὡς Θεῷ φίλη.

10 Homily 10 *On the holy martyrs* 11.1.

11 Fedwick, *Charisma* 65.

12 Richard N. Slater, “An inquiry into the relationship between Community and Text: The Apocryphal Acts of Philip I and the Encratites of Asia Minor,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, eds. F. Bovon, A. Brock, & C. Matthews, Harvard Divinity School Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999): 281–306, at 291–300 (Basil) and 302–5 (epigraphical evidence).

In the case of complaints against certain forms of asceticism, Daniel Caner has persuasively argued that fourth- and fifth-century heresiologists regularly created *ex post facto* labels and genealogies in order to discredit traditional forms of asceticism that were no longer deemed acceptable in the late fourth century drive to organize lay asceticism under episcopal authority.¹³ This practice creates confusion about the actual motivations and practices of ascetic groups whose rigorism had fallen out of favor.

Asterius' concern was less with those who separated themselves from the assembly and more with trying to keep a varied assembly intact. The extreme claims of rigorist ascetics could not easily coexist with a model of church as a family whose members varied considerably in their zeal and practice. It rankled Asterius that the rigorists were so convinced of their own righteousness that they would "call their neighbors 'sinners.'" Believing that they were "separating themselves as sheep from goats," these rigorists would "loathe all who walk, not the highest, but the middle way of life."¹⁴ Asterius vehemently denied that ascetics with this attitude came anywhere near to "liv[ing] according to virtue" or rivalling the martyrs, as some claimed. Rather than true ascetics who practiced virtue or piety, Asterius observed sarcastically that they were "practitioners" (ἀσκούντας) of "severity in preference to sympathy."¹⁵ Their behavior and grandiose claims were characteristic of a "braggart" (ἀλαζόνος) which, like that of the "arrogant Pharisee," were "foreign to all humility."¹⁶

Arrogance alone did not qualify these self-righteous ascetics for the title of "Pharisee." Asterius was also angered by how ascetic "philosopher priests" abused their pastoral authority. Their honorable reputations and positions of authority enabled these ascetic priests to cause

13 Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks. Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 84–86.

14 Homily 13 *On repentance* 1.3.

15 Homily 13 *On repentance* 10.1. "Concerning therefore those who are too harsh in their judgment and who practice severity in preference to sympathy" τὴν ἀποτομίαν πρὸ τῆς συμπαθείας ἀσκούντας. My emphasis.

16 Homily 10 *On the holy martyrs* 11.1 Μάλιστα μὲν οὖν ἀλαζόνος ταῦτα τὰ ῥήματα δικαιοῦτος ἑαυτὸν κατὰ τὸν μέγαν Φαρισαῖον καὶ πάσης ταπεινότητος ἕνεκα.

significant spiritual and even physical harm to ordinary believers. Some, whom these priests derided as sinners and despised as goats worthy of damnation because they “follow[ed] the middle way of life,” might be refused access to shelter and food.¹⁷ This might refer to the social services that ascetics often helped provide. On the other hand, given the ecclesiastical exclusion that angered Asterius, it might also have referred to the church itself where believers in good standing were fed with the eucharist. Some, who possessed both the courage and the humility to confess their sins, might be assigned forms of penance that could last years. In Homily 13 *On repentance*, Asterius directly addressed such priests eight times and devoted an entire section of the homily to “the art of shepherding” in the hope that he could lead his rigorist priests toward a better form of pastoral practice.¹⁸ He praised those who had the courage and commitment to approach their clergy and acknowledge their sin. Sadly, by being honest and contrite, rather than complacent and impenitent, they became victims of rigorist zeal.

In order to clarify the identity of the rigorists’ targets, we can pursue clues that Asterius dropped surrounding the penitential status of the so-called sinners and goats. When describing the rigorists’ interference, the homilies refer to at least two stages of canonical penance common to central Asia Minor.¹⁹ Homily 13 *On repentance* portrays the rigorists as those:

17 Homily 13 *On repentance* 1.3. οὐ στέγης, οὐκ ἔδεσμάτων ἀξιούντες τοῖς πολλοῖς κοινωνεῖν. The figurative goats, in contrast to the sheep, are condemned to eternal fire in this allusion to Mt 25:31–46, the judgment of the gentiles.

18 Homily 13 *On repentance* 8–9. Μιμῆσώμεθα τὴν ποιμαντικὴν τοῦ Δεσπότητος. 8.1.

19 See also Homily 16 *In illud duo homines ascenderunt* (*On the Publican and the Pharisee*) (6.4) where Asterius employed related terms in order to depict the violence of the Pharisee’s words against the penitent Publican:

[He] scratches the wounds of the man present, reproaching [the publican’s] sins and trampling on him [as he] wails [θρηνοῦντι], walking on him [who is already] lying prostrate [τὸν κείμενον] and scorching him who has been burnt [τὸν κεκαυμένον] and drawing up tightly him who is [already] bound [τὸν δεδεμένον]. See Alexis Torrance on the intersection of onetime canonical penance and ongoing therapeutic discipline in the monastic tradition in *Repentance in Late Antiquity. Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life c. 400–650 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 64–87.

who are now embittered against others who sin, drive away [the potential penitents] as they approach; they slight the prostrators [ὕποπίπτοντας]; they ignore those seeking to be healed; they do not turn [to acknowledge] the expression of the weepers [δακρύντων].²⁰

The procedure outlined by Basil of Caesarea in his canonical letters to Amphilochius of Iconium begins with the weepers and proceeds through the hearers, prostrators, and standers, ending with restoration to full communion.²¹ Prostrators could be present during the liturgy of the catechumens, but they did so on their knees. Weepers, however, or mourners, were not even allowed in the church, but were required to stand outside, stating their sin and seeking intercessory prayers from believers who were entering the church. In Amaseia, the situation seems to have been even more dire for the penitent. It appears that some were ignored or even driven away. And, while priests were Asterius' primary concern, the laity also played a role in this, for Asterius warned them to "be afraid of appropriating a weighty yoke" when seeking to purify others without possessing the authority of ordination.²²

In this same homily, Asterius also ridiculed the rigorist ascetics for meting out harsh judgment while failing to live up to their own standards. He called them "feeble combatants and inexorable

20 Homily 13 *On repentance* 8.8. Οἱ δὲ νῦν πρὸς τοὺς ἀμαρτάνοντας πικραίνόμενοι προσιόντας ἐλαύνουσιν, ὑποπίπτοντας παρατρέχουσιν, θεραπευθῆναι ζητούντων ὑπερωσιν, δακρύντων οὐκ ἐπικλῶσι τὸ πρόσωπον.

21 *Letters* 188, 199, 217. See especially the process in *Letter* 217, canon 56 regarding the rehabilitation of murderers and canon 75 regarding the man "who has been polluted with his own sister" (NPNF² 8:258). The terminology appears in canon 11, a later addition to Gregory Thaumaturgos's canonical letter, where "weeper" might be better translated as "mourner." See Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying. Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 79, n. 77. See also Torrance, *Repentance*, Appendix II, 199–203, and Heinz Ohme "Greek Canon Law to 691/2," in *The History of Byzantine and Eastern Canon Law to 1500*, eds. Wilfried Hartmann & Kenneth Pennington (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 24–114, at 100–101.

22 Homily 13 *On repentance* 7.6. Ἄλλος ἐστίν, οὐχ ἱερεύς, ἀλλὰ εἰς τῶν πολλῶν, φοβείσθω βαρὺν ἐπιτιθεῖναι ζυγόν.

lawgivers.”²³ It is no surprise that, when it came time to tackle this kind of enmity within his flock, Asterius found the Pharisee a useful figure for diagnosing the problem of the rigorists.

Diagnosis and Therapy through Parables

Cornelis Datema observed that parables held two main functions for Asterius. First, they are stories which contrast models of vice and virtue. Second, they conceal noetic truths.²⁴ I would add that Asterius, in line with a common pastoral approach in his time, medicalized the problems within his congregation. The spiritual ailments and disorders that afflicted his flock required diagnosis and therapy such as provided by Luke the Evangelist, whom he called a “physician of souls even more than of bodies.”²⁵ After listing the three lost–found parables in Luke 15, Asterius clearly stated that “these ... illustrations [are] instructional for priests in order that we neither rashly despair of men nor neglect those at risk.”²⁶

The last of the three parables, the Two Sons, provided Asterius with a scenario which matched the problems and the characters of his congregation. In many ways Asterius, as a homilist, paralleled and at times borrowed interpretations developed by the neighboring and near-contemporary Cappadocians. For example, like the Cappadocians, he pushed the general need for believers to imitate the Younger Son’s reflective turning from sin and turning home to the Father. However the extent to which the Pharisee syndrome drove Asterius’ critique of extreme ascetics, including some of his clergy, led him to an unusually robust analysis of the Elder Son. This set the stage for the contrasting therapeutic model of the welcoming Father and kenotic Son. In order to contextualize

23 Homily 13 *On repentance* 3.2. ἀσθενεῖς ἀγωνισταὶ καὶ ἀπαραίτητοι νομοθέται.

24 Datema, “Les homélies,” 63.

25 Homily 13 *On repentance* 2.1. See several of the articles in *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8, no. 2 (2015) which draw attention to “religion, medicine, health, healing and disability in Late Antiquity,” (253). See especially Wendy Mayer, “The Persistence in Late Antiquity of Medico-Philosophical Psychic Therapy,” 337–51.

26 Homily 13 *On repentance* 8.3. ἀλλ’ ἔστιν ὑποδείγματα ταῦτα τῶν ἱερέων παιδευτικά, ἵνα τῶν ἀνθρώπων μὴτε προχείρως ἀπελπίζωμεν μὴτε καταρραθυμῶμεν κινδυνεύοντων.

Asterius' preaching on this parable, I will also sketch some of the ways that the Cappadocian fathers—including Amphilochius—treated it.

Parable of the Two Sons (Luke 15:11–32)

Asterius' Homily 15 *On the two sons* begins by setting out his primary concern: the hard-heartedness and resentment which Pharisees demonstrated in the face of the Lord's mercy. Prior to reviewing the day's lection of Luke 15, Asterius introduced this root conflict between the Pharisee and Jesus over the sinful woman (Lk 7:36–50) in order to undergird his application of the Two Sons parable to his present-day Pharisees. As he would make clear, the rigorists in his congregation suffered from the same soul-sickness (τὰς ψυχὰς νοσοῦτες) as the Pharisees in the gospels, for "as they condemn others, they shut out their own forgiveness."²⁷ This behavior is ἀπαιδευτον—lacking proper *paideia*, uncultured, boorish—in contrast to God who does not abandon the wicked, even the Pharisees.²⁸ Though *On the two sons* contains admonitions for ordinary prodigal sons, Asterius bluntly indicated that parables would help convey the medicinal message of repentance for his own band of Pharisees.²⁹

The parable of the Two Sons finds its way into very few of the Cappadocians' homilies.³⁰ It does not appear in Gregory of Nazianzus' orations at all. When the other Cappadocians did refer to the parable, generally they limited themselves to brief allusions and key phrases, such as how the younger son "came to himself" or the Father's exclamation that "He was dead and is now alive."³¹ In

27 Homily 15 *De duobus filiis (On the two sons)* 1.1. ὡν τοὺς ἄλλους κατέδρινον, ἑαυτοὺς τὴν συγγνώμην ἀπέκλειον.

28 πάσης ἀρετῆς ἀπαιδευτον 1.1. Note the use of ἀπαιδευτον by Basil regarding lay participants in "para-synagogues" in *Letter 188*, canon 1 discussed by Fedwick, *Charisma*, 65–67.

29 Homily 15 *On the two sons* 1.2. ὡσπερ τινὶ μέλιτι πικρὸν καὶ ἀγδὲς φάρμακον.

30 Passage references collected through BiblIndex, a database of the *Biblia Patristica*. <http://www.biblindex.mom.fr/>

31 Basil's homiletic corpus does not address this parable in terms of breaking up the fam-

fact we must go to Basil's *Asketikon* in order to see a more extended pastoral application of the parable. On the one hand, he connected the younger son's "coming to himself" with the need for a Christian to practice balanced self-awareness in caring for both body and soul as part of a healthy Christian life.³² On the other hand, in a section devoted to sin and repentance, he referred to the celebratory feast prepared for the younger son in order to allay fears that God might set limits on forgiving serious sins.³³

In a catechetical vein, Gregory of Nyssa used the parable as a paradigm for the human condition. While preaching on the Lord's Prayer, Gregory related how mankind sadly despised the Father's house and ended up wallowing in a far country of sin. Humbly imitating the younger son's repentance, all must pray "forgive us our trespasses" in order to travel back to "our beautiful fatherland" where "our Father who is in heaven" lovingly reconstitutes us into our "original nobility."³⁴ Asterius may well have cribbed some of Gregory's interpretation of the squandered inheritance, the far country, the robe, ring and so on in this homily.³⁵ Nevertheless Gregory did not develop the problem of in-house elder sons.

ily of God through sin. His single use arises in the context of a fire that had narrowly missed burning the church just outside Caesarea, but caused a great deal of damage to the city. Having wrapped up his homily, a call from the congregation prompted Basil to say a few words about a recent emergency. He counseled his congregation to take care of those displaced by a recent fire and rejoice that "He was dead and is come to life again." Homily 21 *On detachment from worldly goods* in *Saint Basil. Ascetical Works*, tr. M. Monica Wagner (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 500.

32 *Shorter Responses* (SR) 140 and 314. Anna Silvas, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 349, 448.

33 Section on sin and repentance in SR 3–16 (Silvas, *Asketikon* 276–82). Reference to the celebration of the younger son's return, SR 13 (Silvas, *Asketikon* 281).

34 Homilies 2 and 5 in *S. Gregory of Nyssa: The Lord's Prayer, The Beatitudes*, tr. Hilda C. Graef. *Ancient Christian Writers* 18 (New York: Newman Press, 1954), 41–44, 75–77.

35 Also similar to Amphilochius of Iconium, *Contra haereticos* 7–8 in *Amphilochii Iconiensis Opera*, ed. Cornelis Datema, *Corpus Christianorum, series graeca* 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978). See also Pseudo-Chrysostom homily *On repentance* (cf. Datema, "Les homélies," 64–65).

We draw closer to Asterius's context and usage of the Two Sons parable with Gregory of Nyssa's other extended application in the mistitled oration "On the deity against Evagrius" (On his ordination). While addressing the contentious atmosphere of a church council, Gregory bitterly observed how the church had squandered its "patrimony" of Christ's command to love one another. Irritated with the unloving discord among the participants of the council, he also accused them of a greater failure of love by not seeking the return of their brothers who had strayed, especially the Pneumatomachians. Turning to these estranged brothers, Gregory exclaimed that he was moved to groans and tears because they had "come to dwell in a distant country." He then schooled the gathered fathers of the council on their duty to imitate the Father by running out "to greet, embrace and welcome" any who might be moved by spiritual hunger to return home to the Father's sacramental table.³⁶

Finally the *Contra haereticos* of Amphilochius of Iconium bears witness to a local schismatic crisis which corresponds with many of the symptoms Asterius described.³⁷ This partially intact treatise represents, above all, an effort by the bishop to stem the outflow of ascetics toward a schismatic exclusivism.³⁸ Amphilochius cast the dissidents as those who refused to recognize or receive help from the church family (spiritual and biological parents, siblings), noting that "even if one should wish to help, he would be received as hateful

36 "On the deity against Evagrius / On his ordination," CPG 3179 J334–337 tr. Richard McCambley & David A. Salomon (<http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/index.html>). This is generally thought to have been presented at Constantinople in 381 but Silvas argues for a later gathering at Constantinople in May 383 whose task was to specifically address the Pneumatomachians and the Eunomians, see *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 50–51.

37 *Contra haereticos*, ed. C. Datema, 185–214.

38 See Andrew Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised* (92–94) on the Christology of embedded humanity that Amphilochius argued as a better model than the docetic one of the anti-meat and anti-family schismatics. Jacobs points out that the extremist ascetics sought an *imitatio Christi* which elevated virginity at the expense of biological family as well as vegetarianism at the expense of the goodness of Christ's own creation. In contrast, Amphilochius, like Asterius, privileged an *imitatio Christi* rooted in mercy.

and hostile by them.”³⁹ However, the bishop reassured the dissidents that, should they return, the family that stayed faithful would in no way behave like the Elder Brother. Instead he claimed that the family would imitate the model of the Father, the “philanthropic God.”⁴⁰ He and the congregation would “rejoic[e] with the Father and share our joy at your salvation: for there is not any ill will among us” toward the returning members.⁴¹

The Elder Son in Asterius

Coming home through repentance could be difficult if the very people to whom one would normally appeal for reconciliation refused to do so. In both Homily 13 *On repentance* and Homily 15 *On the two sons*, Asterius brought in all three lost–found parables in Lk 15 only after he established that the ascetic Pharisees of his congregation were the intended audience. With the Pharisee model in mind, Asterius constructed self-righteous opposition to Christ as the illness that drove the elder brother’s attempt to divide the Father’s family. The rigorists’ opposition to divine mercy is both opposition to the Father and an attack on the church family.

At issue was the need to recognize a shared human nature, a common susceptibility to sin, a universal need for mercy, and familial relationships established by God in baptism. These are themes that Asterius and the Cappadocians regularly employed when speaking about economic and social relationships. Asterius took these themes and developed them in the context of ascetic and unforgiving priests. In this new setting, faithful siblings are initially like the Elder Son who “remained with the grace given and with a love toward God, neither rebelling against the church nor lapsed from the participation in the mysteries, as from the father’s table.”⁴²

39 *Contra haereticos*, 6.208–210.

40 *Contra haereticos*, 8.271 φιλόανθρωπος ὁ θεός.

41 *Contra haereticos*, 8.279–281. Εὐρήσεις δὲ καὶ πάντας ἡμᾶς συγχαρέντας τῷ πατρὶ καὶ συνευφραϊνομένους ἐπὶ τῇ σῆ σωτηρίᾳ· παρ’ ἡμῖν γὰρ φθόνος οὐδὲ εἰς.

42 Homily 15 *On the two sons* 2.5. τὸν μὲν παραμείναντα τῇ δοθείσῃ χάριτι καὶ τῇ πρὸς θεὸν ἀγάπῃ, καὶ οὐδαμοῦ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἀφηνιάσαντα οὐδὲ ἐκπεσόντα τῆς μεταλήψεως τῶν μυστηρίων ὡς πατρικῆς τραπέζης· ἐκπεσόντα in this context refers to a self-

But, once the Younger Son comes home, Asterius used the same term he had for the Pharisaical campaign against mercy back in the opening of this homily: *ἀπαιδευτον*. The Elder Son—as-Pharisee is “annoyed” and “distressed” at God’s mercy to blatant sinners; he burst with anger when “the naked was clothed and the hungry fed and the homeless found a hearth.”⁴³ Asterius pointed out that the Elder Son responded to the perceived slight to his honor and his inheritance by ridiculing his brother’s profligacy before others, airing aloud what should have been left unspoken.⁴⁴ Having laid this foundation, Asterius was able to articulate the importance of the statements by exploring the emotional condition of the Elder Son.

What then do these matters recounted here teach the church? That we ought never to upbraid a brother turning back from a worse life, nor to exacerbate his wounds with abuses, nor to shame him in the presence of friends by describing in detail matters of the past. Instead we ought to have sympathy regarding his former behavior and rejoice at his present deeds, because after having left behind lawlessness, he strives after righteousness and after having recognized his offense, he turns back to virtue.⁴⁵

This prompts unanswered questions about the extent of gossip surrounding penitents. Were penitents subjected to the court of public opinion? Were priests being too free with sharing details about penitents’ sins? Were the Pharisee-like priests divulging this perhaps only with fellow rigorists, both lay and ordained? Whatever

excommunication. See Basil of Caesarea, *Ep. 188* (Canonical Letter 1) canon 1 on schismatic clergy who cannot be reinstated to the clergy because they “fell away.”

43 Ibid., 11.1–2. *δυσχεραίνειν* 11.1. *βαρύνεται* 11.2. *διαρρήγνυται*, ἐφ’ οἷς ὁ γυμνὸς ἐνεδύθη καὶ ὁ λιμώττων ἐτράφη καὶ ὁ ἄοικος εὖρεν ἐστίαν. 11.2.

44 Homily 15 *On the two sons* 12.2–3.

45 Homily 15 *On the two sons* 13.1. Τί οὖν παιδεύει τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τὰδε λεγόμενα; Μηδέποτε ὀνειδίξειν τῷ ἀδελφῷ τῷ ἐπιστρέφοντι ἀπὸ βίου φαυλοτέρου, μηδὲ ἐπιξάινειν τὰ τραύματα αὐτοῦ ταῖς λοιδορίαις, μηδὲ καταισχύνειν ἐπὶ φίλων τὰ παρελθόντα ἐκδιηγούμενον, ἀλλὰ συμπάσχειν ἐπὶ τοῖς παρελθοῦσι καὶ χαίρειν ἐπὶ τοῖς παρούσιν, ὅτι καταλιπὼν τὴν ἀνομίαν ζῆλοῖ δικαιοσύνην καὶ ἐπιγνοὺς τὸ πλημμέλημα ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς ἀρετὴν. This concern arises in John Chrysostom as well; see his *Peccata fratrum non vulganda* CPG 2062.082 (PG 51:353–364).

the case of gossip surrounding the penitents, Asterius brought things back to the pharisaical Elder Brothers, especially among the priests, whose harsh judgment expelled sinners from God's household.

Therapy: Imitation of God

In the homilies that most directly address the problem of exclusivist ascetics, God shows the way for the Pharisee/Elder Brothers to be healed. Drawing on the parable of the Two Sons, Asterius highlighted the Father's behavior as the desirable contrast to the Elder Brother's behavior. Following a section entitled "The Master's Art of Shepherding," which was directed at priests, Asterius devoted the next section of Homily 13 to a similarly pointed explication of the Two Sons parable.⁴⁶ The Father behaves entirely contrary to the rigorist priests. Unlike the Elder Brother priests, the Father "did not turn [the Younger Son] away nor did he set the doors against him when he returns."⁴⁷ After the Father urgently ran and shed compassionate tears over the son, he set in motion the reunification of the family by the ready restoration of sonship. The opposing behavior—manifested by Asterius' problem priests—was demonstrated by the Elder Brother in his harsh judgment and grumbling against the Father's mercy. Priests should, Asterius urged, "wonder rather at the goodness and imitate the goodwill of God and embrace those turning back from error and enfold them."⁴⁸ Priests who acknowledged this divine model were in turn to become guides and teachers to the lost.

Similarly, Homily 15 *On the two sons* appeals to the Father's reaching out to the sinner in order to encourage not only priests, but the whole family, to reintegrate penitents gladly. In this homily, Asterius did not whitewash the shameful severity of the Younger Son's sins, which began with the renunciation of God and the sacraments and

46 Homily 13 *On repentance* 8.1–8.

47 Homily 13 *On repentance* 9.1. οὐκ ἀπεστράφη ὁ πατήρ οὐδὲ ἐπέθηκεν αὐτῷ τὰς θύρας ἐπανελθόντι.

48 Homily 13 *On repentance* 9.3. Θαύμαζε δὲ μᾶλλον τὴν ἀγαθότητα καὶ μμοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ τὴν εὐμένειαν καὶ τοὺς ἐκ τῆς πλάνης ὑποστρέφοντας ἐναγκαλίζου καὶ περιπτύσσου.

concluded with slavery to sin and to Satan. However, where some might scoff at whether baptism really “took” in some cases, Asterius insisted that the Father is not a miser, but rather a generous gift giver, granting a full inheritance immediately to all who ask both sonship and the remission of sins through baptism.⁴⁹ Unlike the Elder Brother types, the Father is not wrathful, nor does he turn his back to the penitent Younger Son. The congregation should emulate the Father’s eagerness to restore the Younger Son: he did not wait for the son’s arrival but ran to embrace him. In like fashion, Asterius would have his congregation look upon penitents as those who have suffered a great deal before coming to themselves and focus upon their restoration, not their sordid past. Imitating the Father’s welcome involved replacing a lack of concern, jealousy or even antipathy with “abundant tears” of joy so that “with diverse care and with kind treatment [the Father—and his imitators] might undo the misfortune of the son who had strayed.”⁵⁰ Like the Father, the congregation should be sensitive to the extent of harm experienced by the Younger Son in his absence from the life-giving and protective presence of the Father and the Church so that they, too, may respond with kindness, mercy and true philanthropy.⁵¹

While the Father’s role provided an obvious point of correction for the rigorists who were behaving like Elder Sons, it is God the Son who inspired Asterius’ ideal for reaching out to sinners. The opening of Homily 13 *On repentance* depicted the self-righteous Pharisees in order to highlight the Master’s gracious condescension. Thus Asterius could invite believers into the imitation of God by “condescending to debased [sinners], not that we might lower ourselves with those lying prostrate, but that we might raise them up.”⁵² This is especially the case for those who claimed “the very

49 Homily 15 *On the two sons* 3.1–3.

50 Homily 15 *On the two sons* 9.2. περιχυθείς δαψιλές ἐπιρρεῖ τὸ δάκρυον. 9.4 ἵνα ποικίλη θεραπεία καὶ δεξιῶσει λύση τοῦ πλανηθέντος τὴν συμφορὰν.

51 Benefits from the Father, Homily 15 *On the two sons* 4.3. Benefits within the church, Homily 13 *On repentance* 9.1–2 and Homily 15 *On the two sons* 5.1.

52 Homily 13 *On repentance* 2.2. τοῖς ταπεινοῖς διὰ τοῦτο συγκαταβαίνοντες, οὐχ ἵνα ἑαυτοὺς τοῖς καμμένοις συνταπεινώσωμεν, ἀλλ’ ἵνα κάκεινους ὑψώσωμεν.

highest degree of righteousness” who out of gratitude to God should “hold out the right hand of benevolence and raise [others] from the mire and cleanse them from defilements.”⁵³ The image of search and rescue figures heavily in “The Master’s Art of Shepherding,” which Asterius embedded in Homily 13 *On repentance*.⁵⁴ Here in particular Asterius exhorted good pastors to undertake the Good Shepherd’s twofold action to “search for” and “restore” sinners. Imitating Christ means priests must not beat the lost sheep, but gently carry them and joyfully return them to the flock. Switching to another parable, the unfruitful fig tree, Asterius directed priests to their role as advocates, citing Christ the gardener who “propitiate[es] the Father on behalf of the race of men.”⁵⁵ Priests, standing in the breach for their wayward charges, must protect sinners from judgment while at the same time cultivating weak and ailing “plants” with the diligent labor of teaching and encouragement.⁵⁶ In the gardener’s supplications and in Moses’ demand to be blotted out in defense of the Israelites, Asterius saw the kind of audacious and risky advocacy which truly imitated both Christ and the Spirit.

Conclusions

By focusing on the criticism of rigorous ascetics in Asterius’ homilies, we can begin to understand the bishop’s overall strategy. Facing the failure of private correction, Asterius felt driven to rebuke the rigorists publicly. In doing so, he both offered correction and challenged the ways in which they had abused their authority. This approach had the added benefit of publicly restoring hope within those faithful who despaired of forgiveness. It also encouraged them, for Asterius made it clear he had noticed the problem and was offering an alternative vision of pastoral care. Finally in developing his model of pastoral care, Asterius drew heavily on the Two Sons parable in a manner and depth that was unique among

53 Homily 13 *On repentance* 4.1. τὸ ἀκρότατον δικαιοσύνης. 4.1 ὀρέγειν φιλαδελφίας δεξίαν καὶ ἀνεγείρειν ἐκ τοῦ πηλοῦ καὶ καθαίρειν ἐκ τῶν μολυσμάτων.

54 Homily 13 *On repentance* 8.3.

55 Homily 13 *On repentance* 8.6. ὑπὲρ τοῦ γένους τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὸν Πατέρα ἐξιλεούμενος.

56 Homily 13 *On repentance* 8.5.

his contemporaries. Whereas many contemporary models of the priesthood were rooted primarily in the Old Testament, Asterius developed his teaching primarily from the New Testament. Parables held pride of place in Asterius' assessment of pastoral problems as well as his model for resolving those problems. In the case of the Two Sons, Asterius wove together gospel images of rigorist Pharisees in order to tackle a specific need for pastoral redirection in his congregation. The Pharisee character allowed him to interpret the Elder Son so as to shame the pharisaical Elder Sons of his own congregation who claimed to be faithful imitators of Christ in their ascetic values, but who failed to imitate divine mercy.