

Who Are These Like Stars Appearing?

by Richard Fabian, St. Gregory's Co-Founder

Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on Psalm Fifty gives us his vision of the world's peoples in harmony— not just audible harmony, but active dancing harmony. While other ancient preachers decried popular dancing, and music in general, as dangerously libidinous, Gregory of Nyssa and his friend Gregory Nazianzen extolled its use in worship. Today St. Gregory's Church in San Francisco has revived congregational dancing; and in our church building, we commissioned iconographer Mark Dukes to present Gregory's vision in two circles of saints painted larger than life, dancing on the walls above our altar. While we dance below, the saints dance above—and Christ leads us all.

The identities of the saints portrayed may surprise some, but for years St. Gregory's church has fostered a broad idea of sainthood. Our idea of sainthood comes from both the Bible and Gregory's books. The Hebrew concept of holiness originally had no moral content, but simply meant having God's stamp on you; being marked and set apart as God's own.

As the Bible sees it, saints and sinners are the same people. We celebrate those whose lives show God at work, building a deep character to match the godlike image which stamps them as God's own from the start. Of course God works with more than Christians, and more than Christians are saints. Gregory held that every human can progress toward God – indeed, to stop our progress is already to move away. All humanity shares God's image, and shows it to the universe, so all people can move toward God together. That is what we are made for. Where God's image is obscured by sin, and nature's harmony is broken, Christ rediscovers Her image for us, and teaches us to mend conflict and restore harmony so that all can move toward God once again. Every aspect of human nature—our minds, our bodies, our virtues, our desires, our sexuality, even our mortality—God has made for this purpose. And so every human progressing toward goodness plays a part in the salvation of the world. This universal view made Gregory an extraordinary theologian in his day and draws fresh interest today, as people of many world faiths find more and more they share.

For an icon portraying St. Gregory's vision, the dancers must be diverse, and exemplify traits that Gregory's teaching emphasizes and our congregation's life upholds. Our members identified the qualities we were looking for; then committee of six members gathered 350 nominations and researched biographies, sifting, combining, stirring and reducing these to ninety. Nearly every life will find an exemplar.

Christian or not, these saints each show us some of God's image, as Christ makes that image fully plain to us. Our list includes people who crossed boundaries in ways that unified humanity, often at their own cost. Some proved lifelong models of virtue; others changed direction dramatically from evil to good, even near the end of life. Some were on the frontier of Christian thought and living, and had gifts that were unrecognized or disparaged in their time; yet their gifts matter for what we do today. Others have been long revered throughout the world's churches. Some overcame difficult circumstances; others moved toward God despite the distractions of worldly comfort and power. Musicians, artists, writers, poets, dancers, workers, organizers, missionaries, martyrs, spiritual teachers, protesters, prophets, reformers, judges, builders, liberators, scholars, healers, soldiers, monastics, couples straight and gay, diplomats, planners, governors, and wild and domestic beasts. Christian, Jew, Muslim, Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, Shinto, Pagan; of many continents, races, classes and eras. These saints lead us in our dancing, as all look upward to Jesus, the perfecter of human faith, drawing new harmony from his example as Gregory teaches us to do.