

Letter #1 BY ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA and Letters (31 & 44) on Presents by St. Jerome

1 *To Eusebius*

2 When the length of the day begins to expand in winter-time, as the sun mounts to
3 the upper part of his course, we keep the feast of the appearing of the [true](#) Light
4 divine, that through the veil of flesh has cast its bright beams upon the life of men:
5 but now when that luminary has traversed half the heaven in his course, so that
6 night and day are of equal length, the upward return of [human nature](#) from death to
7 life is the theme of this great and universal festival, which all the life of those who
8 have embraced the [mystery](#) of the Resurrection unites in celebrating. What is the
9 meaning of the subject thus suggested for my letter to you? Why, since it is the
10 custom in these general holidays for us to take every way to show the affection
11 harboured in our hearts, and some, as you [know](#), give [proof](#) of their good will by
12 presents of their own, we thought it only right not to leave you without the homage
13 of our gifts, but to lay before your lofty and high-minded [soul](#) the scanty offerings
14 of our poverty. Now our offering which is tendered for your acceptance in this
15 letter is the letter itself, in which there is not a single word wreathed with the
16 flowers of rhetoric or adorned with the graces of composition, to make it to be
17 deemed a gift at all in literary circles, but the mystical gold, which is wrapped up
18 in the [faith](#) of [Christians](#), as in a packet , must be my present to you, after being
19 unwrapped, as far as possible, by these lines, and showing its hidden brilliancy.
20 Accordingly we must return to our prelude. Why is it that then only, when the

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21 night has attained its utmost length, so that no further addition is possible, that He
22 appears in flesh to us, Who holds the Universe in His grasp, and controls the same
23 Universe by His own power, Who cannot be contained even by all intelligible
24 things, but includes the whole, even at the time that He enters the narrow dwelling
25 of a fleshly tabernacle, while His mighty power thus keeps pace with His
26 beneficent purpose, and shows itself even as a shadow wherever the will inclines,
27 so that neither in the creation of the world was the power found weaker than the
28 will, nor when He was eager to stoop down to the lowliness of our mortal nature
29 did He lack power to that very end, but actually did come to be in that condition,
30 yet without leaving the [universe](#) unpiloted ? Since, then, there is some account to
31 be given of both those seasons, how it is that it is winter-time when He appears in
32 the flesh, but it is when the days are as long as the nights that He restores to life
33 man, who because of his [sins](#) returned to the earth from whence he came — by
34 explaining the reason of this, as well as I can in few words, I will make my letter
35 my present to you. Has your own sagacity, as of course it has, already divined the
36 [mystery](#) hinted at by these coincidences; that the advance of night is stopped by the
37 accessions to the light, and the period of darkness begins to be shortened, as the
38 length of the day is increased by the successive additions? For thus much perhaps
39 would be plain enough even to the uninitiated, that [sin](#) is near akin to darkness; and
40 in fact [evil](#) is so termed by the [Scripture](#). Accordingly the season in which our

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41 [mystery](#) of godliness begins is a kind of exposition of the Divine dispensation on
42 behalf of our [souls](#). For meet and right it was that, when [vice](#) was shed abroad
43 without bounds, [upon this night of [evil](#) the Sun of righteousness should rise, and
44 that in us who have before walked in darkness] the day which we receive from
45 Him Who placed that light in our hearts should increase more and more; so that the
46 life which is in the light should be extended to the greatest length possible, being
47 constantly augmented by additions of good; and that the life in [vice](#) should by
48 gradual subtraction be reduced to the smallest possible compass; for the increase of
49 things good comes to the same thing as the diminution of things [evil](#). But the feast
50 of the Resurrection; occurring when the days are of equal length, of itself gives us
51 this interpretation of the coincidence, namely, that we shall no longer fight with
52 [evils](#) only upon equal terms, [vice](#) grappling with [virtue](#) in indecisive strife, but that
53 the life of light will prevail, the gloom of [idolatry](#) melting as the day waxes
54 stronger. For this reason also, after the moon has run her course for fourteen days,
55 [Easter](#) exhibits her exactly opposite to the rays of the sun, full with all the [wealth](#)
56 of his brightness, and not permitting any interval of darkness to take place in its
57 turn : for, after taking the place of the sun at its setting, she does not herself set
58 before she mingles her own beams with the genuine rays of the sun, so that one
59 light remains continuously, throughout the whole space of the earth's course by day
60 and night, without any break whatsoever being caused by the interposition of

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61 darkness. This discussion, dear one, we contribute by way of a gift from our poor
62 and needy hand; and may your whole life be a continual festival and a high day,
63 never dimmed by a single stain of nightly gloom.

64 Letter 31 – St. Jerome

65 [Jerome writes to thank [Eustochium](#) for some presents sent to him. He also
66 moralizes on the mystical meaning of the articles sent. The letter is similar in
67 theme to Letter XLIV (Arabic 44, see below).]

68 To Eustochium

69 1. Doves, bracelets, and a letter are outwardly but small gifts to receive from a
70 [virgin](#), but the action which has prompted them enhances their value. And since
71 honey may not be offered in [sacrifice](#) to [God](#), [Leviticus 2:11](#) you have shown skill
72 in taking off their overmuch sweetness and making them pungent — if I may so
73 say — with a dash of pepper. For nothing that is simply pleasurable or merely
74 sweet can please God. Everything must have in it a sharp seasoning of [truth](#).

75 Christ's passover must be eaten with bitter herbs. [Exodus 12:8](#)

76 2. It is [true](#) that a festival such as the birthday of Saint Peter should be seasoned
77 with more [gladness](#) than usual; still our merriment must not forget the limit set by
78 Scripture, and we must not stray too far from the boundary of our wrestling-

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79 ground. Your presents, indeed, remind me of the sacred volume, for in it Ezekiel
80 decks Jerusalem with bracelets, [Ezekiel 16:11](#) Baruch receives letters from
81 Jeremiah, and the [Holy Spirit](#) descends in the form of a dove at the [baptism](#) of
82 [Christ](#). [Matthew 3:16](#) But to give you, too, a sprinkling of pepper and to remind
83 you of my former letter, I send you today this three-fold warning. Cease not to
84 adorn yourself with good works — the [true](#) bracelets of a [Christian woman](#).
85 [1 Timothy 2:10](#) Rend not the letter written on your heart [2 Corinthians 3:2](#) as the
86 profane king cut with his penknife that delivered to him by Baruch. [Jeremiah 36:23](#)
87 Let not Hosea say to you as to Ephraim, You are like a silly dove. [Hosea 7:11](#)
88 My words are too harsh, you will say, and hardly suitable to a festival like the
89 present. If so, you have provoked me to it by the [nature](#) of your own gifts. So long
90 as you put bitter with sweet, you must expect the same from me, sharp words that
91 is, as well as praise.

92 3. However, I do not wish to make light of your gifts, least of all the basket of fine
93 cherries, blushing with such a [virgin](#) modesty that I can fancy them freshly
94 gathered by Lucullus himself. For it was he who first introduced the fruit at [Rome](#)
95 after his conquest of [Pontus](#) and Armenia; and the cherry tree is so called because
96 he brought it from Cerasus. Now as the [Scriptures](#) do not mention cherries, but do
97 speak of a basket of figs, [Jeremiah 24:1-3](#) I will use these instead to point my

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98 moral. May you be made of fruits such as those which grow before God's temple
99 and of which He says, Behold they are good, very good. [Jeremiah 24:3](#) The
100 Saviour likes nothing that is half and half, and, while he welcomes the hot and does
101 not shun the cold, he tells us in the Apocalypse that he will spew the lukewarm out
102 of his mouth. [Revelation 3:15-16](#) Wherefore we must be careful to celebrate our
103 [holy](#) day not so much with abundance of food as with exultation of spirit. For it is
104 altogether unreasonable to wish to [honor](#) a [martyr](#) by excess who himself, as you
105 [know](#), pleased God by [fasting](#). When you take food always recollect that eating
106 should be followed by reading, and also by [prayer](#). And if, by taking this course,
107 you displease some, repeat to yourself the words of the Apostle: If I yet pleased
108 men I should not be the servant of Christ [Galatians 1:10](#)

Letter 44 – St. Jerome

110 To Marcella

111 When absent in body we are wont to converse together in spirit. [Colossians 2:5](#)
112 Each of us does what he or she can. You send us gifts, we send you back letters of
113 thanks. And as we are [virgins](#) who have taken the veil, it is our duty to show that
114 hidden meanings lurk under your nice presents. Sackcloth, then, is a token of
115 [prayer](#) and [fasting](#), the chairs remind us that a [virgin](#) should never stir abroad, and
116 the wax tapers that we should look for the bridegroom's coming with our lights

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117 burning. [Matthew 25:1](#) The cups also warn us to mortify the flesh and always to be
118 ready for [martyrdom](#). How bright, says the psalmist, is the cup of the Lord,
119 intoxicating them that drink it! Moreover, when you offer to matrons little fly-flaps
120 to brush away mosquitoes, it is a charming way of hinting that they should at once
121 check voluptuous feelings, for dying flies, we are told, spoil sweet ointment. In
122 such presents, then, as these, [virgins](#) can find a model, and matrons a pattern. To
123 me, too, your gifts convey a lesson, although one of an opposite kind. For chairs
124 suit idlers, sackcloth does for penitents, and cups are wanted for the thirsty. And I
125 shall be glad to light your tapers, if only to banish the terrors of the night and the
126 fears of an [evil conscience](#).