

A TROUBLED CHURCH SEEKS KNOWLEDGE: MOUNT SINAI IN THE ORATIONS OF GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

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Abstract

This paper explores Gregory of Nazianzus' understanding of the imagery of Mount Sinai (from the book of Exodus) with an eye towards its significance for the modern Church. For Gregory, Mount Sinai serves as a key image of the Church especially in its capacity as a knowledge-seeking body. Gregory frames the Church's quest for knowledge in explicitly hierarchical (though not necessarily clerical) terms, emphasizing the role and responsibility of those who would "ascend the mountain" of knowledge to gain theological insight. For Gregory, the Church's leaders, whether clergy or not, must be appropriately cautious (even fearful) about their epistemological ascent while nonetheless carrying out their essential duty to guide and teach the Church. Above all, such leaders must seek deep spiritual purity lest their quest for knowledge result in disaster. Remarkably, Gregory frames Christian conflict, both political and theological, as frequently arising from a failure to approach theological knowledge correctly in accordance with the image of Sinai as he understands it. When considered within the context of the Church's modern struggles, Gregory's message reads as a reminder to return to the work of knowledge-seeking with both diligence and deep caution as a way forward from our present-day struggles.

Keywords: Gregory of Nazianzus, church, Sinai

Introduction

Today's Orthodox Church finds itself in a state of turmoil, disarray, and internal schism to the point that its future as a specific and identifiable global institution may be in threat. Yet turmoil – whether political or doctrinal – is nothing new in the Church's history, a fact that may give us both pause and comfort in facing our modern challenges. In this paper, I wish to examine a key aspect of the response to doctrinal and political conflict