

Fit or Unfit for Priesthood? Priestly Ministry According to the Writings of Gregory of Nazianzus

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Abstract

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Gregory's writings on the nature of Christian ministerial priesthood are believed to be the first on this subject; they influenced John Chrysostom and Gregory the Great. His analyses, as presented in various Orations and in two poems, "Concerning Himself and the Bishops" and "Concerning His Own Life," are examined. Factors influencing his reflections include his upbringing, his father's role in his life, his social status, and his forced appointment as bishop. His understanding of the priest's role as Christian leader leads him to discuss the characteristics which, he believes, indicate a man is either fit or unfit for ministry; these characteristics, positive and negative, are outlined. His views are extremely pertinent to today's ministerial situation. Gregory's views remind us that, on the one hand, it is of no benefit to the Church to accept persons unfit or unprepared for ministry; and on the other hand, that good priests and ministers are worth the time and support required to form them, to support them during their ministry, and so to enable them to take up their work of healing their own flocks.



"Priests Removed for Alleged Abuse," read the headlines. Such words create enormous consternation and bring into question the role and character of lay and ordained leaders within Christian communities, and indeed of all persons in fiduciary relationships, guilty or not. Issues of trustworthiness,

appropriateness for ministry, as well as readiness for service, inevitably come to the fore. This situation is by no means restricted to contemporary North America: some early writings of the Fathers of the Christian East reflect similar concerns. Gregory the Theologian penned treatises believed to be the first writings on the nature of Christian ministerial priesthood; his writings influenced John Chrysostom and Gregory the Great in their works *On the Priesthood* and the *Pastoral Rule* respectively.¹

This paper explores Gregory of Nazianzus's insights about persons he considered either fit or unfit for the priesthood, along with his indicators of readiness to engage in ministry. My analysis proceeds in six sections. The first identifies specific works in which Gregory reflects on priestly ministry. The second notes pertinent factors which influenced his reflections. The third outlines Gregory's understanding of the role of the priest as a Christian leader. In the fourth, I describe the characteristics which, according to Gregory, indicate a person is unfit for ministry. The fifth section delineates attributes which Gregory believes identify a person as fit to serve. Finally, the sixth considers the ways in which Gregory's insights can benefit North Americans today.

Gregory's Writings on Ministry

Reflections on priestly ministry, particularly the episcopacy, are scattered throughout Gregory's writings. They provide a window into the characteristics by which Gregory identifies a person as "fit" for ministry and leadership within the Church. He also alludes to the work of lay people throughout his works, but the focus here is on his remarks about the ordained minister. These views will help provide a general understanding of Gregory's view of Christian leadership in ministry.

Gregory first presented his model of ideal priesthood in four orations, namely, *Orations* 1-3 and *Oration* 6, formulated

¹Andrew Louth, "St. Gregory Nazianzen on Bishops and the Episcopate," in *Vescovi e pastori in epoca teodosiana: Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 58 (Rome, 1997), 281.

between 362 and 364², *Oration 2*, in defense of his flight from Nazianzus, is of particular import. In addition, he reflects on the episcopacy in two panegyrics, *Oration 21* (for Athanasius) and *Oration 43* (for Basil), as well as several poems,³ most notably *Concerning Himself and the Bishops* and *Concerning His Own Life*.⁴

Personal Influences on Gregory's Understanding of the Episcopacy

Four key factors influencing Gregory's thought demand particular attention: his upbringing, the tension between him and his father, his social status, and his forced appointment by Basil to the see of Sasima.⁵

Upbringing

Gregory was born in 329 or 330, the second of three children born to middle-aged, aristocratic parents named Gregory and Nonna. Gregory's father, Gregory the Elder, would have been at the beginning of his episcopal career at the time of the younger Gregory's birth.⁶ Through this relationship, Gregory first experienced the episcopacy. Gregory's connection with his family was an important dimension of his character and career; he remained in close contact with them throughout his life. Even after completing extensive training in rhetoric, together with his friend Basil (the Great), he

²S. Elm, "The Diagnostic Gaze: Gregory of Nazianzus' Theory of the Ideal Orthodox Priest in His Orations 6 (*De Pace*) and 2 (*Apologia de fuga sua*)," in *Orthodoxie, Christianisme, Histoire*, ed. S. Elm, E. Reillard and A. Romano [collection de l'École française de Rome] (Rome, 2000), 86.

³Louth, "St. Gregory Nazianzen," 283.

⁴St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Concerning Himself and the Bishops*, in *Three Poems, Fathers of the Church [FOTC] vol. 75*, ed. D. Meehan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987) (PG 37:1166-1227); idem, "Concerning His Own Life," in FOTC 75 (PG 37:1029-1166). All references to both poems are taken from this translation.

⁵See Andrew Louth, "St. Gregory Nazianzen," 281-283; Elm, "The Diagnostic Gaze," 84-85; and J.A. McGuckin, *St. Gregory Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).