

## Imaging the Word: Art & Theology

The bush that burns with fire but is not consumed--this is perhaps in all of Scripture the most arresting image of God's holiness on earth. From the bush, God speaks: "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place you are standing is holy ground" (3:5). Not only is this a place where God speaks, but it is the place where God comes down: "I have come down to deliver [my people] from the hand of Egypt and to bring them up from that land" (3:8). Here we recognize the essence of the gospel already expressed from the burning bush: God has come down to deliver us and to bring us to a land of promise.



Moses and the Burning Bush (Sinai) Icon, 17th century

It was perhaps inevitable that the early Greek theologians, with their wonderful associative imaginations, would see the link between the Burning Bush and the Incarnation. St Gregory of Nyssa, in the 4th century, was the first to articulate the connection, in his treatise *On the Birth*

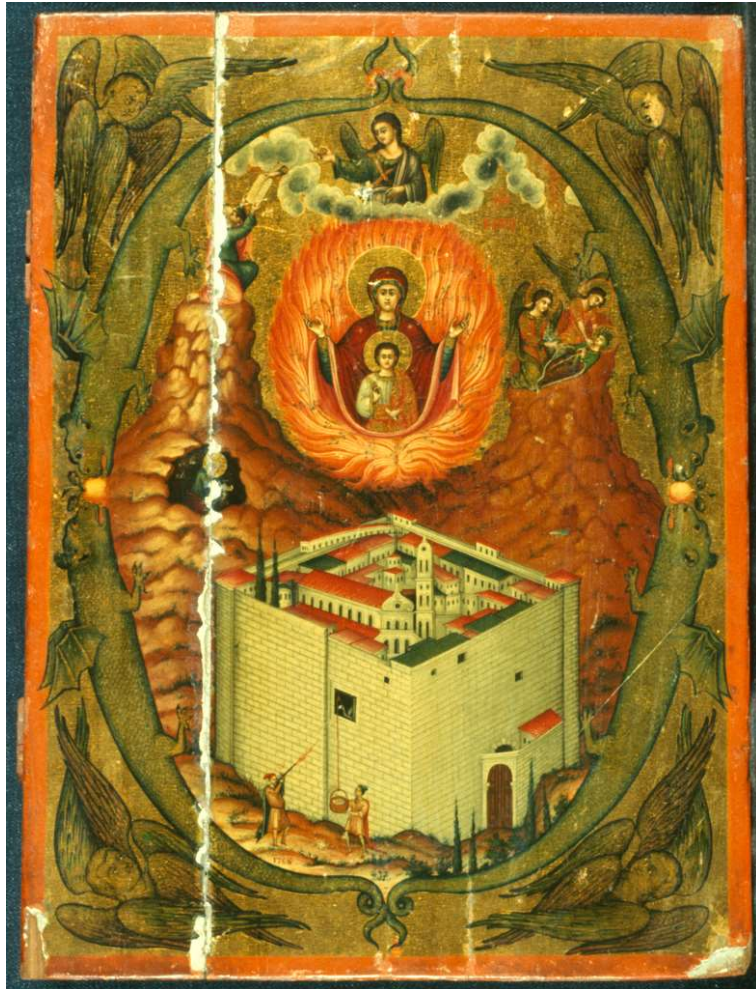
of Christ, and then later the tradition of icons picked this up: the icon of Mary Mother of God as the burning bush hangs at St. Catherine's monastery at Mt. Sinai. Mary--who carried God in her belly and later in her arms yet did not dissolve into ash--she is herself the bush that burns, but is not consumed.



"Virgin of the Burning Bush" over the Monastery of St Catherine

That image of Mary may serve as a refreshing perspective on the familiar story of the Burning Bush. Mary and Moses--in the history of the world, these are two people who have known God most intimately, known God in ways that mortal flesh ordinarily could not tolerate without being burnt to a cinder. The Israelites understood that trespassing on holy ground would bring instant death. indeed, the high priest took his life in his own hands when he entered the Holy of Holies of the Temple each year, and even he entered the holy place enveloped in smoke. For who could see God and live? Yet God spoke to Moses "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Ex 33:11)--and in one place, scripture says "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8). You don't get more intimate than that!





"Virgin of the Burning Bush" over the Monastery of St Catherine