

Theosis: The Goal of Orthodox Christian Life

I. DEIFICATION

(from the Orthodox Study Bible, p. 1692)

Deification is the ancient theological word used to describe the process by which a Christian becomes more like God. St. Peter speaks of this process when he writes, "As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. . . . you may be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:3, 4).

What does it mean to partake of the divine nature, and how do we experience it? To give an answer, first address what divinization is not, then describe what it is.

What deification is not: When the Church calls us to pursue godliness, to be more like God, this does not mean that human beings then become divine. We do not become like God in His nature. That would not only be heresy, it would be impossible. For we are human, always have been human, and always will be human. We cannot take on the nature of God.

St. John of Damascus, writing in the eighth century, makes a remarkable observation. The word "God" in the Scriptures refers not to the divine nature or essence, for that is unknowable. "God" refers rather to the divine energies -the power and grace of God which we can perceive in this world. The Greek word for God, *theos*, comes from a verb meaning "run," "see," or "burn." These are energy words, so to speak, not essence words.

In John 10:34, Jesus, quoting Psalm 82:6, repeats the passage, "You are gods." The fact that He was speaking to a group of hypocritical religious leaders who were accusing Him of blasphemy makes the meaning doubly clear: Jesus is not using "god" to refer to divine nature. We are gods in that we bear His image, not His nature.

What deification is: Deification means we are to become more like God through His grace or divine energies. In creation, humans were made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26) according to human nature. In other words, humanity by nature is an icon or image of divinity: The divine image is in all humanity. Through sin, however, this image and likeness of God was marred, and we fell.

When the Son of God assumed our humanity in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary, the process of our being renewed in God's image and likeness was begun. Thus, those who are joined to Christ through faith in Holy Baptism begin a re-creation process, being renewed in God's image and likeness. We become, as St. Peter writes, "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).

Because of the Incarnation of the Son of God, because the fullness of God has inhabited human flesh, being joined to Christ means that it is again possible to experience *divinization*, the fulfillment of our human destiny. That is, through union with Christ, we become by grace what God is by nature -we "become children of God" (John 1:12). His divinity interpenetrates our humanity.

Historically, divinization has often been illustrated by the "sword and fire" example. A steel sword is thrust into a hot fire until the sword takes on a red glow. The energy of the fire interpenetrates the sword. The sword never becomes fire, but it picks up the properties of fire.

By application, the divine energies interpenetrate the human nature of Christ. Being joined to Christ, our humanity is interpenetrated with the energies of God through Christ's glorified flesh. Nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, we partake of the grace of God -His strength, His righteousness, His love- and are enabled to serve Him and glorify Him. Thus we, being human, are being divinized.

II. THEOSIS IN ORIENTAL ORTHODOXY

by Bishop Yousseff

Note: The doctrine of Deification is not unique to the Byzantine Churches but it is one which is common to all Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The following is an example of this from a bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern U.S.

Theosis or Deification means "union with God" taken from the Greek Theos - God, and the word *henosis* - union. Our Lord Jesus Christ asked God the Father "*They also may be one in us*" (Jn 17:21). He also gave us the command of Theosis "*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in Heaven is perfect*" (Mt 5:48), our goal in life is to accomplish perfect union with God through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Man was created in the image and likeness of God, and then sin created a gap between God and mankind, causing damage to our souls. All Christians through baptism receive the seed of Theosis, which is not only to the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation and justification, but also a restoration of God's image. The sinful inclination of our human nature should not govern our behavior anymore; instead we should strive to live a holy life looking towards Jesus Christ the author of our faith, and growing in His knowledge and sonship. The restoration and sanctification of Theosis brings us back into relationship with the Creator. St. Athanasius' presentation of Theosis was summarized as "the reintegration of the divine image of man's creation through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit conforming the redeemed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ, and also of the believer's transition from mortality to immortality so that he is enabled to participate in the eternal bliss and glory of the kingdom of God."

Our full union with God is a union with the "energies" of God. These energies, while an extension of God, are not to be confused with the "essence" or "substance" of God, which is unknown by humans and is shared only by the Holy Trinity. Our union with God will not make us gods but will make us partners in the Divine nature in works not in essence. We will not acquire the unique characteristics of God such as being the Creator, the Omnipotent, the Omnipresent, but it will make us partners with Him in building the Kingdom by our own salvation and by winning the souls of others to the Lord Jesus Christ.

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