

On the Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis

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1. Background of the Doctrine of Theosis

A. Introduction

The doctrine of deification teaches us the end or goal of Christian life. Some of the names used interchangeably for this doctrine are “theosis” (from the Greek word for God, Theos) Divinization and Deification (from the Latin words for God, Divinus and Deus). The Armenian name for this doctrine is, “Asdvadzatsoom,” which likewise comes from the Armenian word for God, Asdvadz. Thus in each of these titles the word “God” is the root. The reason for this is that the doctrine of deification teaches man how to become a partaker of the divine nature and recover God’s likeness in himself.

The doctrine of theosis has as its basis Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Holy Church Fathers. It is the traditional explanation of Christian sanctification among all the Orthodox and Eastern Churches, including the Armenian Church to which I belong. As an eminent Armenian theologian of the 20th century wrote, “Theosis is the cornerstone of [our] world outlook” [Nersoyan, Unpublished Writings, 32].

Today there is a great need for the re-presentation of this doctrine within the Church because many people do not understand it -if they have even heard of it. To those who have heard of it, deification sounds too remote, too theological or just too foreign to give much time too. This is the result of the great influence that Western theology has had on our Churches: our own theology now sounds foreign. Yet if deification is the “Goal of Christian Life,” as Orthodox Theologians clearly affirm, this lack of knowledge and understanding is taking a devastating toll on the ability of our faithful to obtain the union with our Creator which He intended them to have. It is no wonder, therefore, that many have sought Western theological explanations and expressions to fill the void which has resulted.

B. Scriptural and Patristic Background

The background of this doctrine begins in the Book of Genesis where we learn that man was made “in the image and according to the likeness of God” [1:26]. In the Orthodox understanding, these two words, image and likeness, are not synonymous or repetitious as many take them to be. As St. John of Damascus put it, summarizing the Eastern Patristic tradition, the words, ‘in the image,’ speak to our rationality and freedom, while the words ‘according to the likeness,’ indicate our ability to be like God through grace and divine energy [Ware, 219]. The image of God is inscribed in our being and cannot be erased. Even after the fall of our first parents, man remains rational and free like his Creator. Unlike animals, man is not compelled by the demands of his natural appetites but rather is free and conscious to make rational decisions, the most important of which is to love God. Yet because of the fall man, he has lost his likeness to God. No matter how much we sin, God’s image in us cannot be lost, but our likeness to God depends upon our moral choices and can therefore be obliterated by sin. The process of regaining

this lost likeness is what is known as deification. It must be done by degrees as St. John of Damascus said, as we become assimilated to God by virtue [Ware 219].

Those who are unfamiliar with our doctrine of theosis are often surprised to learn that the origin of this unusual title as well as the seemingly strange terminology used to describe it are both rooted in Holy Scripture. For example, our Lord quotes from the Holy Psalm which states, "I said you are gods, and you are all sons of the Most High [Ps. 81:6, St. Jn. 10:34-5]. Since we have been given by grace the potential to become like God, we are thus called "gods" in Holy Scripture. As Fr. Thomas Hopko, Dean Emeritus of St. Vladimir Seminary said in a talk, "To be fully deified is to become by grace every that God is by nature" [The Word of the Cross]. All of this is summarized in the famous expression of St. Peter the Apostle when he writes in Scripture that we can become "partakers of the Divine Nature" [2 St. Peter 1:4].

An important thing to understand regarding the doctrine of theosis is the root meaning of the word "theos" in Greek. St. John of Damascus, makes an important observation about the word "theos," viz., that it comes from the Greek verb meaning to 'run,' 'see' or 'burn' [OSB, 1692]. Thus the word for God connotes energy. When we speak of becoming deified and partaking of the Divine Nature, this refers to partaking of God's energy rather than His essence. This essence/energy distinction is critical to understand the doctrine of theosis. We partake of God's energies not His essence.

God is unknowable in his essence. "He is outside all things according to his essence," writes St Athanasius, "but he is in all things through his acts of power," i.e. God's energy. "We know the essence through the energy," St Basil affirms. "No one has ever seen the essence of God, but we believe in the essence because we experience the energy" [Ware, Orthodox Way, 21]. Thus we can only know God through his energies which are manifest to us and we become like God through partaking of His energies. By making this clear we avoid the error of pantheism which teaches that everything is in God. The doctrine of theosis with the essence/energy distinction avoids the error that man becomes fused with the deity (or swallowed up by it). Man retains his full personal integrity and his nature is not changed [Ware, Orthodox Church, 232].

C. The Importance of the Incarnation

Man's potential to partake of divinity is only possible through the Incarnation of our Lord. As St. Irenaeus said, "the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is" [Against Heresies, Pref., Bk. 5]. Many Church Fathers testified to the centrality of the deification in the Christian message of redemption. St. Athanasius the Great made the classic statement on this doctrine, "God became man so that man might become god" [On the Incarnation, 54:3]. St. Athanasius' words could just as easily be rendered, "God partook of humanity in order that man could partake of divinity." St. Cyril of Alexandria in his book, On the Unity of Christ, echoed these words writing, "What He was by nature, we become by grace" [35]. In fact the works of Cyril of Alexandria "represent a definitive theological vision for Eastern Christianity's understanding of Christ, and the mystery of redemptive deification which the incarnation has effected" [McGuckin, 16].

This deification effects man in his totality, body, soul and spirit and not just in his soul alone. Our body will be deified with our soul, but its full deification will not take place until the

Resurrection. Then the bodies of the saints will be raised a spiritual body and transfigured by divine light as was our Lord's on Mount Tabor. Some of the saints received a fore-taste of this bodily deification like the desert fathers, Arsenius the Great and Abba Pambo. Even the Old Testament Patriarch, Moses, saw the divine light and received a bodily manifestation of his own deification, "the skin of his face was glorified while God talked with Him" [Ex. 34:29; Ware, 233].

D. The Impact on all Creation

Another fruit derived from our Lord's Incarnation is the potential for the deification of the entire cosmos. The whole material creation will also be transfigured in the Resurrection. This follows from the Orthodox understanding of Christ's Incarnation. By assuming flesh, a part of material creation, He has made possible the redemption and metamorphosis of all creation, not just the immaterial but the physical creation as well [Ware, 235]. As St. John the Theologian writes in the Apocalypse, "There will be a new heavens and a new earth" [21:1].

E. The Role of Synergy

As mentioned above, because he is created in God's image, man possesses freedom and free will. This is important in relation to the doctrine of deification. In order to be deified man must cooperate with God's grace. This cooperation is known as synergy (from the Gk. *Synergie*). St. Paul, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, writes, "We are God's fellow workers (*Synergoi*, Gk.)" [1 Cor. 3:9, see also 2 Cor. 6:1] Thus God does not force His grace upon us. It is something we must freely choose to accept and cooperate with in order to be deified. This cooperation with God should not be understood as a 50-50 exchange between creature and Creator. What God gives us in His grace is infinitely greater than what we bring to the process of synergy. But both are absolutely necessary. Without the need for God's grace we fall into the error of believing we can be saved through our own efforts. Without the need for our free cooperation with God's grace we fall into the error of "irresistible grace," making man a mere passive robot and not truly free to accept or reject God. Our Lord in the Apocalypse of St. John the Theologian, states, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in" [3:20]. "God knocks, but waits for us to open the door - He does not break it down" [Ware, 221].

2. Practical Meaning and Application of the Doctrine

Some think the doctrine of theosis is too complex to be practically useful or helpful. If what has been explained above has not proven this assertion false there are several other considerations about the practicality of the doctrine to our lives as Christians. The doctrine of theosis is analogous to many modern day Christian slogans (like the popular, WWJD / What Would Jesus Do). These are designed to prompt Christians to be constantly in mind of our Lord's will for their life. What follows are several points on the practical nature of the doctrine of deification:

First it is important to note that deification is the goal for all Christians without exception. It must be begun in this life. If one waits until the after-life to begin, he will be too late. Although few reach full deification within this life, we must begin the process and trust God to help us. As long as we sincerely strive to love God and follow His commandments we have already begun and are undergoing deification [Ware, 236].

The next important thing to remember is, as hinted to above, the methods of deification are not esoteric (secret) or extraordinary. We become deified by living the Gospel. Simple things like going to Church, receiving the Sacraments regularly and praying to God daily are very important parts of Christian deification. Other things like reading God's Word regularly and following the Commandments are also indispensable [Ware, 236].

Deification also involves continuous repentance. The Jesus Prayer is a prayer used by all, on every point of the spectrum of holiness. We remain conscious of sin no matter how holy we become. In fact, the greater our sanctity, the greater the awareness of our own sin [Ware, 236]. Many saints who reached the heights of holiness were also strikingly cognizant of their own sinfulness. Repentance remains a part of deification for all who undergo it.

Deification is not a selfish or self-centered concept. It is centered on the love of God and the love of neighbor. One cannot exist without the other. One cannot love God if he does not love his neighbor. Nor can anyone truly love his neighbor without the love of God within him. As God does within the inner life of the Holy Trinity, man must live in social intercommunion with his fellow man in order to be fulfilled and complete. Our love for others can only be shown by our actions. Both praying for and helping our neighbor constitute the one way of deification [Ware, 237].

Lastly, deification is accomplished in and through the Church. This is because God has entrusted his truth and the sacraments to the Church as the means to deification. We cannot then by-pass the Church to become deified without circumventing the very means our Lord left us. As St. Cyprian of Carthage put it, "No one can God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother" [On the Unity of the Church, 1:6].

3. Conclusion

Thus the doctrine of deification is not only understandable to the average Christian it is the hallmark of Christian life. It is the way God left us to recover our lost likeness to Him. It is the gift of participation in his Divine Nature and Life for which we were created in the first place. It depends upon both our free will and our acceptance of His divine energy and grace. It not only involves our souls but also our bodies, i.e. the complete man. Not only is it the redemption of man but also of all of God's creation. Although it represents some of the Church's most sublime theology, deification is understandable and practicable by all.