

Theosis: The Goal of Christian Life

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Theosis means "union with God." It is taken from the Greek word *Theos* - God, and another Greek word *Enosis* - 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 to pursue Theosis stating, "*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in Heaven is perfect*" (Mt 5:48). So our goal in life is to accomplish perfect union with God through the grace of the Holy Spirit (Bishop Youseff).

Theosis, Divinization and Deification are the ancient, Eastern theological words used to describe the process by which a Christian progresses towards union with God. The Apostle St. Peter speaks of this process when he writes in his 2nd Epistle, that God's "divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness... that through these 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 we must address what Theosis is not, then describe what it is.

1. *What Theosis 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, explains that 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.

This distinction between God's essence and His energy is important. When we speak of Theosis and Partaking of the Divine Nature, this refers to our partaking of God's energy rather than His essence. God is unknowable in his essence. According to St. Athanasius, "He is outside all things according to his essence, but He is in all things through his acts of power" [or energy]. St. Basil explains, "We know [God's] essence through [His] energy." "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 come to know and experience God through his energy

[As the Coptic Bishop Joseph writes, "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."]

In John 10:34, Jesus quotes the passage from the Psalms, "I said 'you are gods,' and all of you are children of the Most High" (81:6). The fact that Jesus was speaking to a group of hypocritical religious leaders who were accusing Him of blasphemy makes His meaning doubly clear: Jesus was not using "god" to refer to God's divine nature or essence. We are gods in that we are His children and bear His image, not His nature.

2. *What Theosis is:*

Through *Theosis* we become more like God through His grace or divine energies. In creation, humans were made in the image and according to the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). In other words, humanity by nature is an icon or image of divinity. The divine image is in us all.

In Eastern Christian teaching, these two words, "image" and "likeness," do not mean exactly the same thing. St. John of Damascus wrote that the words "in the image" refers to mankind's rationality and freedom, while the words "according to the likeness," indicate man's ability to be like God... [Ware, 219]. God's image is inscribed in our being and can never be erased -which is why all human life is sacred.

Even after the fall of our first parents, mankind retains God's image and is rational and free like his Creator. Man is not compelled by the demands of his natural appetites, like animals, but is free and conscious to make rational decisions. The most important of these is to love God with all of one's heart, soul, mind and strength (Luke 10:27). No matter how much we sin, God's image in us cannot be lost. Yet because of the fall, man has lost his LIKENESS to God. Our likeness to God depends upon our moral choices and can, therefore, be marred by sin. Remember man's sin DISFIGURES but God's grace TRANSFIGURES. The process of regaining our lost likeness and union with God is what is known as *Theosis* or *Deification*.

3. *The role of Synergy:*

As mentioned above, because man is created in God's image, he possesses freedom and free will. This is important in relation to the doctrine of *Theosis*. In order to be deified man must cooperate with God's grace. This cooperation is known as *synergy* (from the Gk. *synergeia*). As St. Paul, in his 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, writes, "We are God's fellow workers" (Gk, *synergoi*, 1 Cor. 3:9, cf. 2 Cor. 6:1). God does not force His grace or energy upon us. It is something we must freely accept and cooperate with. Our cooperation with God shouldn't be thought of 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 essential. Without recognizing our complete dependence on God's grace we can fall into the error of believing we can be saved through our own efforts (a heresy known as Pelagianism). But without recognizing the need for our free cooperation with God's grace we fall into the error of "irresistible grace," making man a mere passive instrument (a robot) and not truly free to accept or reject God. As our Lord states in the Apocalypse of St. John, "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).

4. *How Theosis is possible:*

When the Son of God assumed our humanity in the womb of the *Theotokos*, the process of our being renewed in God's likeness was begun. Thus, those who are joined to Christ through faith and baptism begin a transfigurative process, by God's Divine Grace, of being renewed into His likeness. We become, as St. Peter writes, "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).

It is only through the Incarnation of the Son of God that this is possible. It is because, as St. Paul wrote, the fullness of God has inhabited human flesh (Col 2:9), that our being joined to Christ means that we are able to experience *deification*, the fulfillment of our human destiny. Through union with Christ, we are meant to become by grace what God is by nature. As the Apostle St. John the Theologian wrote, we "become children of God" (John 1:12).

Our Church Fathers emphasize the centrality of our Lord's becoming man in regard to our own deification. This is why the feast of our Lord's Nativity is so important to us. As St. Irenaeus states, "The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ... through His transcendent love, became what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is" [Against Heresies, Pref., Bk. 5]. St. Athanasius the Great also states, "God became man so that man might become god" [On the Incarnation, 54:3]. St. Athanasius' words could just as easily be stated, "God partook of humanity in order that man could partake of divinity." As St. Cyril of Alexandria summarizes, "What He was by nature, we become by grace" [On the Unity of Christ, 35].

Theosis, union with God, affects man in his totality. Our body will also be deified along with our soul, but its full deification will not take place until the Resurrection. Then our bodies will be raised as spiritual bodies and transfigured with God's divine light just as our Lord's was on Mount Tabor at His Transfiguration. Some of the saints, like the Desert Fathers, received a foretaste of this in their body (e.g., Arsenius the Great and Abba Pambo). Even Moses in the Old Testament, saw the divine light and received in his body a sign of his deification. As it states in Exodus, "the skin of Moses' face was glorified while God talked with Him" (Ex. 34:29; Ware, 233). This is why our saints are always depicted in icons with God's divine light emanating from them. The saints are those who have been fully deified and reflect the light of Christ to all.

In Theosis, God's divine energy 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. But the sword never becomes fire, rather it picks up the properties of fire.

By application, God's divine energy penetrates the human nature of Christ. By our being joined to Christ, our humanity is likewise 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 deified.

5. *Theosis practical meaning for our lives:*

First it is important to note that *Theosis* is the goal of Christian Life 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 along the way. As long as we sincerely strive to love God and follow His commandments we have already begun and are undergoing deification [Ware, 236].

The restoration and sanctification of *Theosis* brings us back into relationship with our Creator. All Christians through baptism receive the seed of *Theosis*, which is not only 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. (Bishop Youseff).

Thus, the process of *deification* is not secretive or extraordinary. We become *deified*, simply by living the Gospel. Simple things like going to Church, receiving the Sacraments regularly and praying to God daily are very important parts of the process of *Theosis*. 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.

Theosis does not imply 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 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 way of *deification* [Ware, 237].

Lastly, *Theosis* is accomplished in and through the Church. This is because God has entrusted His Divine Grace and Truth to His Church as the means to deification. We cannot bypass the Church to become deified without circumventing the very means our Lord left for us. In our efforts to become deified children of God, as St. Cyprian of Carthage writes, "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 *Theosis* 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 and to regain our union with 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 us completely, body, soul and spirit. It is not only 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 meant for us all.
