

The Importance of the Eastern Doctrine of Deification for the Theology of Grace

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Part I

By Philip Kariatlis

Introductory Remarks

In the history of theology, one can detect quite different, but not always necessarily opposing emphases in the understanding of grace in the Western and Eastern Churches. The West has tended to perceive grace in terms of 'justification' and 'sanctification'.¹ Namely, grace is seen as that divine power, beyond any virtue or any merit which has restored and continues to restore humankind to its 'original beauty'. In the East, however the **doctrine of grace** has been closely **connected to 'deification'**. The predominant idea here has been that the grace of God is that **undeserved divine gift** which has **led humanity**, created from the dust of the earth, to become **god-like**. Here, the doctrine of grace is not understood in juridical terms, whereby one is granted an extrinsic justification, only as a result of the fall. Rather, the salvific effects of divine grace are understood as signifying an entirely new reality – a **real fellowship** in the **divine and eternal life of Jesus Christ**. More correctly, deification is understood as a **personal encounter** with the three Persons of the **Holy Trinity** through their uncreated and saving energies in the world.

However, to speak of grace in such terms has caused a lot of confusion throughout the centuries and continues to do so even to this day. Indeed some have even perceived the doctrine of deification as an aberration of little doctrinal importance. It must also be admitted that in the East too, only with the patristic revival did Orthodox theology come to appreciate the importance of deification. For this reason, this article will seek to explain briefly the notion and importance of deifica-



tion for a theology of grace. Whereas the first stage will concentrate on a general outline of deification as the ultimate aim of humanity, the second will set forth the theological basis for a doctrine of deification which will reveal the continual regenerative grace of the Holy Spirit working with human persons, endowing them with a god-like existence. It is the contention of this article that as a result of a) the creation of the human person in the image and according to the likeness of God; b) the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the person of the incarnate Logos and c) the permanent presence of God through the Holy Spirit, the ultimate destiny of the human person – that is, to become god-like – has been secured.

Deification: The Human Destiny

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, **deification** (θέωσις) denotes a **direct union** and a **total transformation** of the human person with the living God **by divine grace**. **St Basil** the Great pointed out that **human beings** are nothing less than creatures that have **received** the **order** to become **gods**.² The strong language suggesting that God did not simply invite the world, but indeed ordered it to become 'gods' by grace **betrays** nothing other than the **intense love** of God to **share** everything He is **by nature, by grace** with the entire created *cosmos*. For **St Basil**, as for many Eastern fathers, the **descent** (κατάβασις) of God, especially in the **Incarnation** and *kenosis* of the only-begotten Son of God has **offered** the created order the **capability** of **ascending** (ἀνάβασις) towards the Divine by the power of the Holy Spirit. For the Eastern fathers, deification was God's greatest gift to, and the innermost goal of, human existence. That is, in the formulation of the doctrine of 'deification', the reality of humanity's innermost hope as "belonging to God" was affirmed. **St Gregory Nazianzus**, like **St Basil** insisted that the root of

1. The fact that the West perceives the effects of grace primarily as justification and sanctification does not imply that the notion of deification is totally absent from its tradition. For example St Augustine writes that "God received a body and a soul in order that the body and soul of humanity may be blessed: the soul with his divinity and the body with his humanity". *Enchiridion*, 26 (cited in Nicodemus of Athos, *Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*, (Paulist Press, New York, 1989), 204).

2. *On the Holy Spirit*, 1.2.

a person's true greatness and calling lay in being "called to be a god".³ The ultimate destiny of humanity was seen as none other than to attain likeness to God and in this way to be united with Him. Consequently, deification, as a concept used to denote the participation of humanity in the being of God was only **possible** by the **sanctifying** power of divine **grace** (implying that the **initiative belonged wholly to God**).

Although, as a term deification does not occur in the Holy Scriptures, the Greek fathers believed that it was a fitting theological term affirming the command of 2 Peter 1:14 – i.e. "to become participants of the divine nature". Regarding deification, **St Anastasius of Sinai**, a seventh century father wrote the following:

Deification is the elevation to what is better, but not the reduction of our nature to something less, nor is it an essential change of our human nature. A divine plan, it is the willing condescension of tremendous dimension by God, which He did for the salvation of others. That which is of God is that which has been lifted up to a greater glory, without its own nature being changed.⁴

Not only an important definition in its own right, especially in its rejection of any alleged pantheism – a charge often directed towards the Orthodox Church by others – the above passage beautifully captured the **dynamism** with respect to deification, highlighting its meaning entirely in terms of a divine gift which raised the faithful up towards God, as a result of God descending into the world in the first place.

Now, the patristic tradition has always sought to explain the process of deification in reference to grace. Deification is not brought about by humanity's own merits but becomes accessible ultimately as a gift which is both entirely gratuitous and poured out for all. Grace is that gift which the created order receives and by which it is deified. It is only the **grace of God and not human efforts**, which enables human beings to rise to this divine state. St Basil attributed the experience of deification to the Holy Spirit, when he wrote that:

[the Holy Spirit] being God by nature... deifies by *grace* those who still belong to a nature subject to change.⁵

Maintaining the need for grace in deification, **St Maximus** the Confessor stated that "all that God is except for an identity in essence, one becomes when one is deified by *grace*".⁶ It becomes clear that, for the Greek fathers **deification was dependant on the grace of God**. Moreover, grace was not something bestowed upon human beings so as to simply justify them, but was divine life itself. The Patristic literature clearly stated that created persons, as they are, cannot see God but rather the presence of the

Holy Spirit gives them the faculty to see God:

[the saints are] *transformed by the Spirit*; they receive a power which they did not possess before; they become Spirit and see in Spirit.⁷

So, it is only by being transfigured by the Holy Spirit that a human being – as a whole person, body, mind and spirit – has the **possibility to be united with God** and to share in His **eternal blessedness and beatitude**. From the above, it has become evident that, in insisting on the deification of humanity, the fathers of the East were simply affirming the reality of God's dynamic participation in creation and therefore the possibility of a direct, unmediated vision of God "face to face". But the question that must be addressed now is, on what premises did the Eastern fathers base their teaching on deification. The answer to this question is of fundamental since it will shed some light on another perspective of the theology of grace – that is its relation to the Incarnation. And it is to this that we shall turn our attention both now, briefly, and more extensively in the next issue of the *Voice*.

The Basis of the Doctrine of Deification

(a) "He created humanity in His own Image"

The fact that people are **created** in the **image** of God **implies** a certain **mysterious** and **indefinable aspect** with human persons. This is so because God, the prototype in whose image human beings are created, is beyond understanding.⁸ Lossky noted that, "the image of God in man... is necessarily unknowable... for as it reflects the fullness of its archetype, it must also possess the unknowable character of the divine Being".⁹ When one searches the writings of the fathers so as to find what aspect of human nature specifically reflects the image of God, one soon realises that many different interpretations exist. Sometimes the **image refers** to humanity's **free will** or sometimes to his/her **rational faculty**. Indeed, sometimes, as Lossky also noted, the image of God in humankind is occasionally compared to a certain **characteristic** of the **soul**, such as its **simplicity**, its **immortality**, as well as its **capability** of a true communion and union with God by means of the presence of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Beyond these different emphases, what can be said is that all human persons, by the grace of God, find their true meaning only when they strive to reflect and mirror their Image – namely to become godlike.

In the next issue of the Voice our reflection on the person created in the image and according to the likeness of God will continue.

3. *Funeral Oration for St Basil*, P.G. 36, 560A

4. *Concerning the Word*, P.G. 89, 77BC

5. *Against Eunomius*, 3.5

6. Book of *Ambiguities*, 41, cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, 267.

7. *Against Akindynos*, IV, 16 *Coisl.* 98, fol. 109. Cited in J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (Faith Press, Great Britain, 1964), 174.

8. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Creation of Humankind* 11, PG 44, 153D-156B, esp. 156AB.

9. V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 118.

10. V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 114-125

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Part II

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Following on from the last issue of the *Voice*, it could be said that, even though there is no clear understanding as to what the 'image' in the human person, specifically refers to the overriding principle for the Patristic tradition was that humankind was created in the image of God and more particularly in the image of Christ. For the fathers, this teaching was to be found in St Paul, in his epistle to the Corinthians:

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, **we** will also bear the image of the man **of heaven**. (1Cor. 15:49).

Having been created in the image of Christ, humankind is therefore also called to realize the **sovereignty** and **freedom** of Christ. Beyond this however, the greatness of human persons lies in the fact that they have been called to **transcend** their **natural boundaries** and become **Christ-like**, to live a life in Christ – i.e., to become deified.

In the first chapter of the book of Genesis there is a description of the creation of humankind created in God's image and after His likeness. Even though modern scholarship often understands 'image' and 'likeness' as being synonymous, the Eastern fathers make a distinction. Indeed, the **movement from the divine image to the divine likeness** was **understood** in terms of **deification**. And so, the Eastern Orthodox tradition would claim that the image of God is common to all humanity by virtue of creation (cf. Gen. 1.26f.). However, having received the image of God, humanity must strive to attain likeness to God, its archetype, and so to be deified.¹ Therefore, the **likeness** of God can be thought of as a **realized image** and the **image** as a **potential likeness**. A father of the Eastern Patristic tradition observed that,

the image was given to us in our nature, and it is unchangeable; from the beginning until the end it remains. The likeness, on the other hand, we gain and achieve through our cooperation and volition; [it] exists potentially in us, and is energised through the good life and excellent behaviour.²

St Gregory Palamas, a thirteenth century Greek father, also noted that, "all human beings are in the image of God, and *perhaps* also in His likeness".³ Having received the gift of being created in the image of God, human persons find true meaning in life when, empowered by the grace of God, they strive to resemble Him and become gods themselves by grace.



(b) *The deification of human nature in Christ*

As it has already been stated above, the aim of the human person is to become Christ-like. But more than that, the fathers speak of the original destiny of human nature in terms of being incorporated into the body of Christ. Enjoying a perfect union of both a divine and human nature⁴, **Christ opened** the way for our **human nature to participate** in the **divine** life of God. For this reason many fathers interpreted the **Incarnation** of the Logos **not** as a simple **consequence** of the **Fall**, but as the **fulfillment** of the **original will of God** – namely that in the person of the Logos, human nature is capable of being united with the divine life of God. That is

to say, the deification of Christ's human nature made possible our deification as well. In his book, *Deification in Christ*, Nellas wonderfully summed it up in this way: "Christ is not the result of an act of Satan. The union of the divine and human natures took place because it fulfilled the eternal will of God.... Prior to the hypostatic union of the divine nature with the human, man even before the Fall was anterior to Christ, a fact which means that even then, in spite of not having sinned, man had need of salvation, since he was an imperfect and incomplete "child". This teaching lies at the core of the theology of St Irenaeus. Human nature could

3. *Second Letter to Barlaam*, 48.

4. Cf. the teaching of Chalcedon (451AD) on their teaching of Christ: "Following the holy fathers we teach with one voice that the Son of God and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same (Person), and he is perfect in Divinity and perfect in Humanity, true God and true Man. This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son (of God) must be confessed to be in two natures, without mixture and without change, without separation and without division."

1. G. Mantazrides, *The Deification of Man*, 21.

2. Work attributed to St Basil, *On the Creation of Humanity*, P.G. 30, 29ff, 32.

not have been completed simply by its tendency; it had to attain union with the Archetype. Since Christ is "the head of the body, the Church" (Col. 1.18), a fact which means in patristic thought that Christ is the head of true humanity, as long as human nature had not received the hypostasis of the Logos it was in some way without real hypostasis - it lacked real substance".⁵ In this long, yet important quote, Nellas emphasized that the **deification** of humanity **required** the **hypostatic union** of the divine and human natures of Christ in the Logos. And so the **Incarnation would have taken place** even if **humanity had not sinned**.

The **hypostatic union** of divine and human **accomplished in Christ**, was the very **foundation** of the deification for human persons. Since Christ took on human nature and bestowed upon it the fullness of grace, He made humanity capable of ascending to God. Therefore St Athanasius correctly and succinctly noted that, "**God became human so that humanity may become God**".⁶ That is, it was this gift of the Incarnation which gave humanity the possibility of deification. Since the first Adam went astray and deprived himself of the gratuitous gift of union with God, the Second Adam, the divine Logos achieved this union of the two natures in His person. Therefore the **Incarnation** of Christ did **not simply redeem** humanity from the effects of the Fall but, **more importantly completed** the **pre-fallen nature** of humanity by deifying it. For the fathers the deification of Christ's human nature became the vessel by which our human nature could also be deified. This is the basis of the theology of deification which is found in the fathers. Meyendorff described it in this way:

The hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ is the very foundation of salvation, and therefore of deification: in Christ humanity has already participated in the uncreated life of God because the 'flesh' has truly become 'the flesh of God'.⁷

Far from being formulated with respect to the fall of man, the Incarnation, according to Meyendorff was understood as that event by which the original and pre-eternal plan of God could be realized.

(c) *The communion of God to humankind in the Holy Spirit*

Now, the saving act of Christ has been communicated throughout the ages by the grace of the Holy Spirit. For St Basil the Great, no gift could be received without the Holy Spirit.⁸ Elsewhere **St Gregory of Nyssa** asked:

How could we be united with Christ, if the Spirit did not effect the connection?⁹

For the Eastern fathers, whilst it is true that the deification of humanity was made possible by the **Incarnation** of the **Son**, which the **Father willed**, it is also true that they considered that it was to be **accomplished** or **perfected** by the **Holy Spirit** by means of the uncreated energies and grace natural to Him. Moreover, the grace which accomplishes the deifica-

tion of humanity is not created since this could not deify humankind. In this regard St Gregory Palamas asked:

"... but since the gift which the saints receive and by which they are deified is none other than God himself, how can you say that too is a created grace?"¹⁰

Clearly, it is the uncreated divine grace, bestowed by the Holy Spirit which makes deification possible. Karmiris argued that the grace of the Holy Spirit was necessarily "**preceding, cooperating** with, and **following** the **work** of **salvation**, bestirring him [i.e. the human person], enlightening him and directing him".¹¹ In this way the fathers avoided the Pelagian and Messalian temptation to consider deification possible by human effort alone.

Having affirmed the necessity and **primacy** of **grace**, it must also be stated that **human freedom** must **work together** with God. Indeed, the Patristic literature understood a clear cooperation or **synergy** between the **grace** of **God** and the **human response**. **St John Chrysostom** wrote:

God brings no one to Himself contrary to that individual's free will; although He wishes all to be saved, He forces no one.... Not without the consent of human persons, nor without their will.... rather, it is in accord with their desire and will that God prepares the salvation of humankind.¹²

Human freedom, generated by the grace of the Holy Spirit, was seen as mandatory since it was seen as the receptive instrument in our deification in Christ. Without divine grace or human synergy the subjective appropriation of deification would be rendered impossible.

Concluding Remarks

All that has been said thus far necessitates a theological synthesis between the Western and Eastern theologies of grace. Despite the Western understanding of the effects of grace as that which causes human beings to be 'justified' and 'sanctified' as a result of the Fall, this article - in two parts - has examined the Eastern understanding of the theology of grace as that which deifies the created order. What is called for therefore today is a complementary theology of grace so that the fullness of humanity's true existence might be realized. All too often, the West speaks of justification and sanctification at the expense of other concepts such as deification. On the other hand, the East is all too often tempted to speak of the effects of divine grace solely in deification terms. Both perspectives are necessary for a complete and integral understanding of grace. In a world where our struggles often seem hopeless, where our life seems meaningless because death is ever present, the good news and foundation of our hope is that Christ has overcome death by death and granted life in the tombs.¹³ The grace of God offers us a "life in Christ" empowering us to live as Christ, to love as Christ, to serve as Christ and to become one with Christ.

5. P. Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, 37-38.

6. *De Incarnatione verbi* 54, P.G. 25, 192B.

7. J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 182.

8. *On the Holy Spirit*, 24, 55, P.G. 32, 172B.

9. *Against the Pneumatichoi* 22, P.G. 45, 1328CD.

10. *Against Akindynos* 3, 8, cited in J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 64/

11. J. Karmiris, *A Synopsis of the Dogmatic Theology of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, 76.

12. John Chrysostom, *On "Saul, Saul"* 6, P.G. 51, 144.

13. An Orthodox hymn of the Resurrection.