

Theosis: The Divinization of Humanity

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Many years ago St. Athanasius wrote concerning Jesus' Incarnation that "He was made man that we might be made God."¹ While incredible, God loves us so much that he not only wishes to heal our defects, but also to transform us by sharing his very own divinity with us.

In this paper we will explore the divinization of humanity as revealed in the Scriptures, taught by the Church and the saints, and applied in the Sacraments. After establishing the groundwork, we will also briefly contrast the Catholic position with that of the Lutheran and Mormon. Finally, we will conclude with a few concerns and challenges regarding how one should engage in spiritual pursuits in light of divinization.

What is the divinization of humanity? It is simply the transformation of sinners into God's own perfect and glorified likeness and image. This is done by the merits of Jesus' incarnation and death, in the grace of the Sacraments, and lived out in co-operation by the faithful to be completely united with God. Divinization is only possible because of God's love, generosity, and power. This is not something that we are capable of achieving apart from God. "To this transformative power of the river of life that permeates the entire being (person and nature), the undivided tradition of the Churches gives an astonishing name that sums up the mystery of the lived liturgy: theosis or divinization."²

The word "theosis" means being made into God.

¹ St. Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, 53,3

² Jean Corbon, O.P., *The Wellspring of Worship*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2005, p. 216

Divinization in the Scriptures

The Scriptural concept of Divinization begins with the creation of humanity. For “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created him” (Genesis 1:27). One has to ask, what does being created in the image of God mean for human potential?

Jesus indicates that when in heaven, “the righteous will shine like the sun” (Matthew 13:43). Clearly the salvation that Jesus is talking about involves humanity taking on qualities that go beyond being merely human. For saints to shine like the sun means that those in heaven must bear a likeness to Christ, who also “shone like the sun” (Matthew 17:2) at his Transfiguration.

This Christ likeness is possible because we will be with God in all his Glory. Scripture says that “our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). Just like a bar of steel placed in a fire takes on properties of the fire and becomes like the fire in many ways, so those in heaven become like God by being with him. “Beloved we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

This transformation that God works in us allows us to be called God’s children and to “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Deeply connected to the idea of divinization is our filial adoption as sons of God. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). Children

bear their nature from their parents. If we are God's children, this must imply that we are to receive divine qualities from God our Father.

Perhaps the most striking scripture on divinization is found in John 10:22-39. Here Jesus says "I and the Father are one" (30). The Jews pick up stones to kill him accusing him of claiming to be divine. Jesus' response is amazing. "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, your are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'you are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'"

This passage Jesus quotes comes from Psalm 82:6 which reads, "I say, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.'" There are several things to note about this passage. First of all, notice how it is because we are sons of God that it can be said that we are gods; again the connection between filial adoption and our divinitation. Second, it is because of Jesus that we are able to become God's children, and thus be called gods. One must appreciate the irony of Jesus quoting this passage. Here the Jews wish to kill him because he claims to be the Son of God. Jesus reminds them that they are called to be sons of God and be called gods themselves. This is only possible through the one they are wishing to kill! As Jesus is the only way we can become children of God.

The Testimony of the Saints and the Church

Several early church Fathers explicitly taught that God wished to make us more like himself. In commenting on Jesus' quote of Psalm 82:6, St. Irenaeus wrote the, "For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God

became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.”³

St. Athanasius goes a bit further. He wrote, “For He was made man that we might be made God.”⁴ Elsewhere St. Athanasius expanded the thought saying, “For He has become Man, that He might deify us in Himself... and that we may become henceforth a holy race, and ‘partakers of the Divine Nature,’ as blessed Peter wrote.”⁵

There is a direct connection between our becoming like God and our reception of the Sacraments. St. Thomas Aquinas applies divinization to the mass and our reception of Communion.

“Since it was the will of God’s only-begotten Son that men should share in his divinity, he assumed our nature in order that by becoming man he might make men gods. Moreover, when he took our flesh he dedicated the whole of its substance to our salvation... on the altar of the cross... he left his body as food and his blood as drink for the faithful to consume in the form of bread and wine.”⁶

The Church accepts the the view of the saints quoted above, as they are quoted in brief in the Catechism of the Catholic Church 460. Elsewhere the Catechism teaches connection between divinization and the sacraments and the Holy Spirit saying that the sacraments are “necessary for salvation... ‘Sacramental grace’ is the grace of the Holy Spirit... The Spirit heals and transforms those who receive him by conforming them to the Son of God. The fruit of the sacramental life is that the Spirit of adoption makes the

³ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3, 19, 1

⁴ St. Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, 53, 3

⁵ St. Athanasius, *Letters, Ad Adelphium*, 60, 4

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusculum 57*, in festo Corpus Christi, lect. 1-4

faithful partakers in the divine nature by uniting them in a living union with the only Son, the Savior.”⁷ “By the participation of the Spirit, we become communicants in the divine nature.. For this reason, those in whom the Spirit dwells are divinized.”⁸

In baptism, we are baptized into Christ’s death, put on Christ, and are born again (Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27, John 3:3-7). Baptism and Eucharist seem to have a particular importance when it come to our deification. Archbishop Chaput of Denver believes that “we are ‘deified’ simply through our baptism where we come to share in the life of the Holy Trinity. And, of course, that ‘deification’ increases as we become holier. Deification means a participation in the life of the holy Godhead... the primary means for most of us for sanctification is the Eucharist.”⁹ “There is a saying, “You are what you eat.” How true that is here, where we consume Christ and become more like God.

In the Mass, we offer up anew the one sacrifice of Christ and receive his own body and blood. During the mass, the priest pours the water into the wine saying, “ By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”¹⁰ Here the water symbolizes the faithful that becomes united with the wine and is consecrated along with the wine. What a beautiful symbol of our transformation through the Eucharist. Mother Theresa of Calcutta one

⁷ CCC 1129

⁸ CCC 1988, Quoting St. Athanasius, *Ep. Serap.* 1,24: PG 26, 585 and 588

⁹ Archbishop Charles Chaput, personal e-mail, November 20, 2009

¹⁰ *The Order of the Mass*, 24

time asked a bishop to pray for her when he mingles the water and wine at mass. She asked that he would pray that she “be assimilated into Christ” by his sacrifice.¹¹

Indeed, the Liturgy of the Eucharist is the source and summit of our transformation. “[T]he existential origin of our divinization is the liturgy of the heart, the synergy in which the Holy Spirit unites himself to our spirit (Rom 8:16) in order to make us be, and show that we are, sons of God.”¹²

A Few Concerns

One very obvious concern to the idea of deification is that there is only one God! How can we even use terms like deification, theosis, and gods when the Scriptures make it very clear that there is only one God! “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me” (Isaiah 43:10). “God is with you only, and there is no other, no god besides him” (Isaiah 45:14).

To understand this, let us look at a truth about Christ, he is the one that connects us with God. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). Taken in a strict and un-intended sense, this passage would mean that we could not pray for one another, because when we pray for one another we are acting as a kind of mediator between God and the ones we pray for. However this is not only allowed, but demanded by the very context of 1 Timothy 2:5. “I

¹¹ Msgr. Joseph Schaedel, Vicar General for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, personal interview June 13, 2007

¹² Corbon, p. 222

urge that supplication, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men... For there is one God, and there is one mediator” (1 Timothy 2:1-5).

The reason praying for others “is acceptable in the sight of God” (vs. 3) is that those interceding for another are joined to Christ, the one mediator. It is only by their participation in Christ that they are able to be a kind of sub-mediator, completely dependent upon the one mediator. Christ has shared his role as the one mediator with us. In no way is our role ever equal to that of Christ.

In the same way, those that God perfects in grace become God-like are “partakers in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Their divine qualities are completely dependent upon the divinity of the one God and a gift. In no way does their participation in the divine nature ever exalt them to be greater than God, nor deserving of worship or latria.¹³ They are just glorified to the extent God wishes as they participate in eternal worship of the Thrice Holy God.

Another very important concern deals with the original sin of Adam and Eve. The serpent tempted them to eat of the forbidden tree by telling them “you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Is not the idea of divinization the same as the sin of Adam and Eve?

No. The difference between the sin of the Fall and divinization is substantial. Adam and Eve sought to be like God on their own terms, trying to glorify oneself, and eating of the forbidden tree. Salvation through divinization is about conforming our will to God’s, being self-less in wishing only to glorify God, and consuming of the Sacraments. It is the difference between trying to become a god, and allowing God to transform us into his image. For “we need not imitate, from afar and in an external way, the behavior of

¹³ CCC 2096

Jesus as recorded in the Gospel, in order thereby to effect our own divinization and become 'like God'; self-divinization is the primal temptation ever lurking in wait. On the contrary, it is the Word who divinizes this human nature."¹⁴ There is not the desire to become a god, just the desire to be a faithful child of God.

A Brief Comparison

At this point, let us briefly compare the Catholic understanding of deification with a common Protestant approach and the Mormon one. The Protestant approach is difficult as there are many different versions. So for the sake of simplicity, let us examine the Lutheran position. Lutherans believe that when we are in heaven, we will be "as Adam and Eve were before the fall. We will be completely forgiven and healed of all sin and perfect. We do not speculate that in heaven, we will be glorified beyond the Garden of Eden".¹⁵

The Lutheran view assumes that man before the fall could not be further developed. Yet this is not the case. The child Jesus, being completely free of Original Sin, thus the Garden State, still "increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 1:52). If Christ being perfect could develop, why not humanity graced by Christ? Especially those that are "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Moreover, Jesus implied that our glory in heaven would be astounding when he said, "Then the righteous

¹⁴ Corbon, p. 217

¹⁵ Rev. Mark Wagner, Pastor Assension Lutheran Church, Beech Grove IN, Interview Nov. 13, 2009

will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matthew 13:43). Certainly this goes beyond the Garden!

Concerning Mormons, they believe in a divinization of man called “exaltation”. According to *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that all resurrected and perfected mortals become gods... They will dwell again with God the Father, and live and act like him in endless worlds of happiness, power, love, glory, and knowledge; above all, they will have the power of procreating endless lives.”¹⁶

This exaltation goes far beyond the Catholic understanding in several ways. First, while Catholics believe that divine sonship is obtained through the grace of the Sacraments, and living out the Faith through prayer and serving others, Mormons believe they primarily obtain exaltation as a reward for their own efforts, works, and obedience. “People qualify themselves for this rank and degree of exaltation by bringing themselves fully in line with all that God has commanded them to do.”¹⁷ The process is driven by works. Maybe not quite salvation by works alone, but close.

Second, where the Mormons really take the idea of exaltation too far is their belief that they will be a god, like God in all ways. “Joseph Smith also wrote, ‘Every man who reigns in celestial glory is a God to his dominions’... Those who become like him will likewise contribute to this eternal process by adding further spirit offspring to the eternal

¹⁶ *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, New York, Macmillan Publishing Co, 1992, p. 553

¹⁷ *ibid* p. 554

family.”¹⁸ Those that attain to divinity, retain their earthy marriage (or in some cases marriages) in heaven. There they create *spirit children* for the Father’s glory.

The Mormon belief of exaltation is directly tied into this idea of celestial marriage and having spirit children. There is even serious consideration that some may even be granted their own planet to populate with their spirit children, and rule them as their God.¹⁹ Not only that, but Mormon believe opens the possibility that this is how God the Father himself obtained his Godhood. As the Mormon saying goes, “As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.”²⁰

The Catholic Church teaches that marriage is only marriage in this life. After the resurrection, we will “neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30). So the idea eternal marriage and thus having spirit children is totally outside of what Jesus taught. Furthermore, Scripture makes it clear that in heaven, we will remain with God for eternity. Not leave to be a God of another world. For in heaven, “the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Revelation 21:3).

Finally, there are many serious problems with the idea that God was once a man that was “exalted”. It implies that God was exalted by another God. This of course is opposed to Scripture that were no other Gods before our God (Isaiah 45:14). Also, if the purpose of having spirit children is to present them to the Father, then wouldn’t the

¹⁸ *ibid* p. 555

¹⁹ Bill Dudding, Mormon High Priest, Martinsville, In, Nov. 19, 2009, interview

²⁰ *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, p. 555

Father be obligated to introduce us to his Father? Yet, God seem quite intent on requiring that we only worship him, even calling himself a jealous God (Exodus 34:14).

Finally, assuming that the Father would have been exalted on the same grounds that Mormons believe we can be, this would require the Father be in marriage with an exalted divine woman also deserving of worship. Yet not in Scripture, nor within Mormon theology is there to be found the name of the Fathers divine wife. Surely such would be an important detail as any good husband would want his wife to receive credit for her part.

Conclusion

God truly surpasses all expectations! How wonderful is his love and generosity! In his love and generosity, he creates us in his own likeness and image. He sends his son to our level, so that we may be raised to his. It is most fitting for us to extremely thankful and to fervently live out our thanksgiving with the sacraments, prayer, liturgy, and love. Like a seed that becomes a tree, so we, created in God's likeness and image are able to grow in grace to become fully a child of God. Thus allowing God to transform us into what he wishes and bring glory to him.

By allowing God to mold us, we also discover ourselves. At baptism one puts on Christ (Romans 13:14), and enters into his "christoform self." This new self in Christ, "enables man at lat to come to an understanding of himself... his own archetype and ideal within himself... his potential."²¹ Only by losing ourselves in Christ are we able to find out who we really are. (John 12:25)

²¹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986, p. 59

Let us end with the thoughts of C. S. Lewis in saying “(God) said that we were ‘gods’ and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him... The process will be long and in parts very painful; bur that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said”.²² God has great intent for us; may we say yes to him.

²² C.S.Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York, Macmillan, 1984, p. 174-5

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