Theosis in Patristic Tradition

THE DEIFICATION OF MAN IN EASTERN PATRISTIC TRADITION (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GREGORY NAZIANZEN, SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN AND GREGORY PALAMAS)

by Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev [source] paper with all footnotes and documentation

The doctrine of the deification of man is a central point of the theology, asceticism and mysticism of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This doctrine derives from the Bible, having at the same time certain analogies in ancient Greek philosophy.

The most important Hellenistic element of the doctrine is its vocabulary: as I.-H. Dalmais points out, the vocabulary of this doctrine is alien to the biblical language with its emphasis on the absolute transcendence of the divine. But many texts in the Gospels and apostolic writings can be cited which were later assumed by the Fathers as the basis of their doctrine of deification. In particular, Jesus Christ Himself speaks of people as “gods”, quoting Psalm 81/82:6 (John 10:34). In the Johannine corpus we find the ideas of our adoption (John 1:12) and likeness to God (1 John 3:2). The Second Epistle of Peter speaks of men as “partakers of the divine nature” (1:4). In the Pauline epistles, we find the development of the biblical notion of the divine image and likeness in man (cf. Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10), the idea of our participation in God’s incorruptible immortality (1 Cor 15:53), the doctrine of our adoption by God (Gal 3:26; 4, 5) and the image of man as a temple of God (1 Cor 3:16).

The eschatological vision of St Paul is characterized by the idea of the glorious state of humankind after the resurrection, when it will be transformed and restored under Christ as a head (Rom 8:18-23; Eph 1:10), and when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

These New Testament notions found their development in the Fathers of the second century. Ignatios calls the Christians theophroi (“those who bear God”), speaking of their union with and participation in God. In Irenaeus we find the idea of the living man as the glory of God and the concept of ‘recapitulation’, the return of humankind to its primordial state through participation in Christ. The following expressions of Irenaeus are of a special importance:

[The Word of God] became what we are in order to make us what He is.


The assertion of man’s becoming god through the Incarnation of God will be a cornerstone of the doctrine of deification of subsequent Orthodox writers.

Though the doctrine of deification was anticipated by Irenaeus, it was Clement of Alexandria in whom the terminology of deification appeared more advanced and who first used the verb theopoieo (“to divinise”): “The Word divinises man by His heavenly teaching”. This divinization is understood by Clement as moral perfection: in his perfect state man becomes “godlike”. Clement looks at divinisation in its eschatological perspective: “We will become pure in heart, and there will be a restoration for the sake
of eternal contemplation [of God] face to face… We will be called gods and will stand among other gods”.

The doctrine of deification became fully established in patristic theology during the fourth-century polemic with Arianism. The classical formula of the deification of man is contained in Athanasios: Autos enenthropesen hina hemeis theopoiethomen (“God became man in order that we may become gods”). For Athanasios, as for all the Fathers of the age of the Ecumenical Councils, the Incarnation of the Word of God is the sole basis of man’s deification. Athanasios emphasises the ontological difference between our adoption by God and deification on the one hand, and Christ’s sonship and divinity on the other: in the final deification “we become sons [of God], but not in the same manner as He is, not by nature and reality, but by the grace of Him Who called us”.

The idea of deification is common to all three Cappadocians, among whom it was Gregory Nazianzen who most widely employed the terminology of deification, whereas both Basil and Gregory of Nyssa were more reserved in using non-scriptural terms.

Gregory Nazianzen, however, ascribes to Basil the following significant phrase: “I am a creature but I am called to be god”. Gregory himself went far beyond his predecessors in constant application of the concept of deification. He uses the word theosis and other terms related to this doctrine much more widely than preceding theologians. As in Irenaeus and Athanasios, in Gregory deification is linked with the Incarnation of God. Thus, in his first public sermon he said:

...Let us recognize our dignity; let us honor our Archetype; let us know the power of the mystery, and for what Christ died. Let us become like Christ, since Christ became like us. Let us become gods for His sake, since He for ours became man. He assumed the worse that He might give us the better; He became poor that we through His poverty might be rich; He took upon Himself the form of a servant that we might receive back our liberty; He came down that we might be exalted; He was tempted that we might conquer; He was dishonored that He might glorify us; He died that He might save us; He ascended that He might draw to Himself us, who were lying low in the fall of sin. Let us give all, offer all, to Him Who gave Himself a ransom and a reconciliation for us. But one can give nothing like oneself, understanding the mystery, and becoming for His sake all that He became for ours.

The goal of the Incarnation, declared Gregory in his second public sermon, is “to make man god and a partaker of heavenly bliss”. By His sufferings Christ deified the human person, having mingled the human and the heavenly image. The leaven of deification made human flesh “a new mixture”, and receiving this leaven, the intellect “was mingled with God and deified through Divinity”.

The formulas of Irenaeus and Athanasius recur in Gregory’s writings in various modifications:

Being God, You became man and mingled with mortals: You were God from the beginning, and You became man later in order to make me god, since You became man.
Christ... made me god through the image of a mortal (which He accepted upon Himself). The Word of the Father was God, but became man, as we are, so that, having mingled with the mortals, He might unite God with us.

...As man, He is interceding for my salvation, until He makes me divine by the power of His incarnate manhood.

Since man did not become god, God Himself became man... in order to reconstruct what was given through what is assumed.

Gregory not only repeats a classical formula of deification, but also adds a tantum-quantum ("so far as") specification to it: God becomes man hina genomai tosouton theos hoson ekeinos anthropos ("in order that I may become god so far as He has become man"). Here a direct link is established not only between God’s Incarnation and man’s deification, but also between the extent to which God became man and man, god. This qualification is added in order to oppose the teaching of Apollinarius: if God did not become a man entirely, there is no possibility for a man to become entirely god. In one of his poems directed against Apollinarius, Gregory goes even further and argues that the Incarnation of God bears a direct dependence on the deification of man: “He became man to the same degree that He makes me god”.

Recognition of the fullness of the human nature in Christ presupposes belief in the deification of the entire human person, including his intellect, soul and body and vice versa: deification presupposes faith in Christ as a human person with intellect, soul and body.

That the body participates in deification is one of the main points of difference between Christian deification and its Platonic counterpart seen in Plotinus, namely, the idea of “becoming god”. In the latter philosophical system, matter always remains evil and opposed to everything divine. Gregory, on the other hand, asserts that in the person of Christ the flesh is deified by the Spirit: the incarnate God is “one from two opposites, flesh and spirit, of which the latter deifies and the former is deified”. In the same manner the body of every person who attains to deification in Christ becomes transfigured and deified:

By a narrow and difficult way, through narrow gates, which are impassable for many, with a solemn escort, Christ leads me to God—me, a god made of dust, who was not born god, but was made immortal from mortal.

Together with the great image of God, He draws also my body, which is my assistant, in the same manner as a magnet-stone attracts black iron.

Deification is perceived by Gregory (as well as by many other Fathers) within an eschatological framework, when he speaks of the final deification of man in the kingdom of heaven. He says, in particular, that in this life (entautha) we are being trained and prepared, whereas “elsewhere” (allahou) we will be deified by our inclination towards God. Gregory understands the final deification of man as participation in the divine light in the kingdom of heaven: “Light is the brilliance there for those who have been purified
here, when ‘the righteous will shine forth as the sun’ (Mat.13,43) and God will stand amongst them, gods and kings”.

In Dionysios and Maximos the Confessor, as in Gregory, deification is understood as a gift of divine grace and as an effect of the reception of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Dionysios defines deification as “likeness to God and union with Him, as far as this is possible (hos efikon)”. Maximos in his concept of deification takes as his basis the Irenaeo-Athanasian formula, especially emphasizing the interdependence of the deification of man and the Incarnation of God; he not only uses Gregory the Theologian’s tantum-quantum formula, but he also presents it in reverse by putting it in the context of the notion of the two natures of Christ: in the person of Christ, God becomes man insofar as man has deified himself. Maximos does not hesitate to say:

In fact, the most perfect work of love and the end of its activity is to allow, through a reciprocal attribution, the individual characteristics (idiomata) of those who are bound together by it… to become mutually useful, so that man is made god, and God is called and appears as man.

Both the Incarnation of God and deification of man are, therefore, understood as fruits of synergeia (“co-activity”) of God and man.

In John of Damascus we find a summary of the patristic idea of deification. In his 1st discourse To Those Who Reject the Holy Images John writes, alluding to biblical and patristic texts:

For John the Theologian said: ‘Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He will appear, we shall be like Him...’ (1 John 3,2). For as iron united with light becomes light not by nature, but by union [with fire] and participation (methexein), so what is being deified (to theoumenon) becomes god not by nature, but by participation… Concerning the fact that the saints are gods by deification, it is said: ‘God is in the assembly of gods’ (Ps. 1/82,1), [which will happen] when God will stand among gods, awarding ranks, as Gregory the Theologian said.

In specifically ascetical literature, the traditional Eastern teaching on the deification of man is also present to a considerable extent. Repeating Athanasios, Mark the Monk says: “God… became what we are, so that we might become what He is”.

Diadochos teaches in one of his sermons: “What belongs to God by His body, the same belongs to those who are to become gods by the abundance of His grace, for God made people gods”. The author of the Makarian Homilies develops the theme of the final resurrection of all and transfiguration of the whole humanity.

In the Syriac tradition, the concept of deification was developed, in particular, by Ephrem of Nisibis. According to him, God has created man with the potential of being a “created god”.

As man was not able to fulfil this destiny, Jesus Christ came to fulfil it: “The Most High knew that Adam had wanted to become a god, so He sent His Son… in order to grant him his desire”. Ephrem speaks of the ‘exchange’ between God and man, using an
expression which reminds us of the Athanasian formula of deification: “He gave us
divinity, we gave Him humanity”.

The liturgical texts of the Eastern Church are full of references to the doctrine of
deification, and the Athanasian formula of deification appears there in various
modifications:

Thou becamest man, O good Christ, in order to make man god.
Thou wert [made] man, O Lover of mankind, in order to make man god.
Today Christ on Mount Tabor changed the darkened nature of Adam, and filling it with
the brightness He has made it godlike.

...Thou hast transformed [the nature of Adam] into the glory and splendour of Thine own
divinity.

‘In My Kingdom... I shall be with you as God among gods’.

This shows that for an Orthodox Christian the doctrine of deification is not simply a
matter of theological speculation, but rather an object of constant meditation in prayer.

This, in a brief outline, is the patristic teaching on the deification of man. It can be
summarized it in the following five points.

1/ Deification is perceived by the Fathers within a Christological framework: deification
of the human nature is possible because of the Incarnation of God the Word.

2/ Human body, according to the patristic teaching, takes full part in the process of
deification and is deified along with the soul.

3/ The church sacraments, in particular, Baptism and the Eucharist, are among the most
important means for deification.

4/ Deification is perceived by most of the Fathers within an eschatological framework: it
is anticipated and begun here, on earth, in via, but is fully realized in patria, in the
kingdom of the age to come.

5/ Deification is closely connected with a personal mystical experience of the believer, in
particular, with the vision of the divine uncreated light.

All these traditional patristic notions are reflected in the theology and mysticism of St
Symeon the New Theologian, one of the most direct predecessors of Gregory Palamas.
In Symeon’s mystical theology the doctrine of deification occupies a central and
prominent place. This may well be illustrated by the quantity of instances in his own
writings where this doctrine is implied. One can say that the doctrine of deification is the
nucleus of the whole of Symeon’s theological thought, shaping different elements of it
into a coherent system.

Symeon repeats almost word for word the Athanasian formula of deification, when, to
the question “Why did God become man?” he answers: “So that man may become
god”. This initial Christological dimension can be perceived in many instances where
Symeon speaks of deification. “God wants to make us gods from men... He wants this
so much that He... descends and comes for this purpose on earth”, Symeon says. “I am
God Who became man for your sake; I created you, as you see, and I will make you god”, Symeon writes, speaking in the person of Christ.

Like Ephrem, Symeon speaks of the “wondrous and new exchange” (synallagma) between God and man: God received His human flesh from the Virgin Mary and gave Her His divinity instead; now He gives His flesh to the saints in order to deify them.

Like many earlier Fathers, Symeon speaks of the deification of the human person after death and of the final restoration and transfiguration of all creation after the second coming of Christ. The eschatological dimension of the theme of the deification of man is developed, in particular, in Hymn 27, where Symeon describes the glory of the saints after they die:

Not only does God repose in the saints,
But also the saints live and move in God (cf. Acts 17,28)... O marvel! Like angels and like sons of God
Will they be after death, gods united with God:
Those who are gods by adoption being similar to Him Who is God by nature.

Elsewhere Symeon refers to the relics of the saints as a proof of their final deification: their bodies, since they were united with deified souls, are kept for many years without decomposition, being preserved for the final restoration and incorruption. In this argumentation Symeon follows John of Damascus, who also claimed that the saints became gods by adoption and cited as an example the incorruption of their relics.

Although the final resurrection of human nature belongs to the age to come, the process of deification begins in this life. The anticipation of the “eighth day”, the experience of paradise and the pledge of the kingdom of heaven are given here, and only those who became ‘heavenly and divine’ during their earthly life will enter this kingdom after death. According to Symeon, deification involves both human initiative and the descent of God to man: the one who has forgotten the whole world and has been stripped of earthly things acquires initial integrity of mind; then the unique God unites with Him and, through this union, totally deifies him.

In Symeon’s thought, deification is a gradual process, which presupposes a passing through different successive stages of spiritual life. In Cat.14 Symeon describes how man, through observance of God’s commandments, gradually attains to the state where sinful thoughts withdraw from his mind and passions diminish, at which point he obtains humility and compunction, which wash away every stain from his soul; then the Holy Spirit comes to him. The more he practises God’s commandments, the more he is purified, illumined and enlightened. He receives from the Spirit new eyes and new ears, by means of which he sees and hears spiritually: in this state God becomes for him all that he desires and more than he desires. He always sees God and contemplates the glory of his own soul, since he is now totally enlightened and transformed. Elsewhere Symeon adds, referring to Gregory Nazianzen, that the progress to deification has no end:

Perfection is endless,
For its beginning is its end.

How is it the end? As Gregory Theologically said:

“Illumination is the end
Of all who desire;
And the divine light
Is the termination of all contemplation”.

Thus, for both Gregory Nazianzen and Symeon deification consists primarily in illumination by and participation in the divine light, which is the limit of everything desirable. As it was noticed earlier, Symeon often links two themes, namely the divine light and deification, regarding them as counterparts of each other. “Those who repent”, Symeon says, “become sons of Your divine light; for the light engenders light, and so they become light, children of God… and gods by grace”. Elsewhere Symeon appeals to his readers: “Try… to kindle the intelligible lamp of your soul, in order to become suns shining in the world., in order to become like gods”. When the divine light illumines us, we become godlike – “gods who see God”. Referring to his visions of light, Symeon tells us how through them God entirely renewed him, entirely immortalised and entirely deified him, and made him Christ.

Deification through illumination by the divine light, therefore, became the experience of Symeon himself, and this is why he constantly returns to this theme. He speaks of deification in an almost “autobiographical” manner. There are many instances, especially in Symeon’s Hymns, where he speaks of deification as his own personal experience, but we shall confine ourselves to a single quotation from his Hymn 15. Here Symeon speaks of the total transfiguration of man’s nature, including his body and all its members:

We become members of Christ, and Christ becomes our members: My hand is Christ, and my foot is Christ…

And I, miserable, am a hand of Christ and a foot of Christ. I move my hand, and it is the whole Christ who is my hand (Since we should think that the divine divinity is undivided), I move my foot, and behold, it shines like He Himself. Do not say that I am blaspheming, but rather accept this And venerate Christ, Who makes you such! For if you want, you will also become a member of Him, And so all members of each of us separately Will become members of Christ, and Christ will become our members, And He will make all our uncomely members to be honorable, Having adorned them with the beauty of His divinity and glory,

And we will together become gods… and each of our members will be the entire Christ.

The notion of the transfiguration of all the members of the human body by the divine light was very important for Symeon; this is because he understands the deification of man as such a total transfiguration of his nature that it includes all his members, even those commonly considered as “uncomely”.
As I pointed out before, the idea of the participation of the body in deification is one of the most important characteristic features of the Eastern Orthodox approach to deification. It was not only Gregory Nazianzen and Symeon the New Theologian who expressed this idea. Makarios of Egypt speaks of the final transfiguration of the bodies of the saints, which will be glorified through unspeakable light. John Klimakos states that the bodies of the saints are being sanctified during their earthly life ‘and in some way rendered incorruptible through the flame of purity’. When the soul becomes god by participation in divine grace, Maximos the Confessor says, “the body is deified along with the soul through its own corresponding participation in the process of deification”. The saints, who are gods, kings and masters, possessed God implanted in their bodies, John of Damascus suggests when discussing the theme of the veneration of the relics of the saints: referring to 1 Cor 6:19 (“your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit”), he states that the bodies of the saints become “animated temples of God, animated houses of God”.

We can now turn to St Gregory Palamas and see how the traditional patristic approach to the doctrine of deification is reflected in his theology. Deification of man is closely connected in his theological system with the Incarnation. Like Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas almost repeats Athanasius and Irenaeus when saying: “Having become son of man and having assumed mortality He transformed men into sons of God, having made them share in the divine immortality”. For Gregory, it is the deified Body of Christ which is our contact with God, and it is Christ Himself Who is a true mediator of deifying grace. As J. Meyendorff argues, “the doctrine of deification is for Palamas a direct consequence of the historical work of Christ; without Him, divine life would have been inaccessible for man”.

Gregory Palamas clearly states that the body participates in deification. Following John of Damascus, he refers to the relics of saints as a confirmation of this: “Glorify the holy tombs of the saints, and, if they are there, the relics of their bones, for the grace of God has not abandoned them, just as the Divinity has not passed from the worshipped Body of Christ after His death which brought life”. Gregory emphasizes that both the body and the soul of Christ share in His divinity, and the flesh of Christ is deified through the soul; in the same manner the grace of God is common to both the body and the soul of man, and is transmitted to the body through the soul.

Gregory perceives a strong link between deification and the sacraments of the Church, especially Baptism and the Eucharist. Through the Eucharist, he argues, Christ “mingles Himself with each of the faithful through participation in His holy body, becoming one body with us and making us the temple of the entire divinity”.

In a striking passage from one of Gregory’s homilies the union between the believer and Christ in the Eucharist and the deifying nature of this union are described as follows: Christ has become our brother, by sharing our flesh and blood and so becoming assimilated to us… He has joined and bound us to Himself, as a husband his wife, by becoming a single flesh with us through the communion of His blood; he has also become our father by divine Baptism which renders us like unto Him, and He nourishes us at His own breast as a tender mother nourishes her babies… Come, He says, eat My
Body, drink My Blood... so that you be not only made after God’s image, but become
gods and kings, eternal and heavenly, in Me clothing yourselves with Me, King and God.

Like many other Fathers, Gregory Palamas perceives the mystery of deification of man
within the eschatological framework. As G. Mantzaridis puts it, the Holy Eucharist itself,
according to Palamas, has a profound eschatological meaning. The scholar goes on to
summarize Gregory’s eschatological approach to deification through the Eucharist as
follows:

When communicating in the sacraments, man receives the pledge of the ineffable
communion with Christ in the life to come. Thus the believer, although he is on earth
and living in the present age, is participating at the same time in the new life and is a
citizen of the age to be.

The Kingdom of God is His communion with man in the Holy Spirit, and so it is already
in this life in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. The Kingdom of the age to come will
be the full and perfect expression of the communion already established in the Holy
Spirit between Christ and the faithful.

Finally, Gregory’s teaching on the deification of man is closely linked with his doctrine of
the mystical vision of the uncreated divine light. This light was contemplated by many
generations of Christian ascetics and mystics both before and after Palamas; its vision
was a common experience of the Athonite monks whom Palamas defended in his
writings. The divine light is identified by Palamas with the deifying grace of God: it is a
manifestation of this grace contemplated, whether inwardly or outwardly, by those who
are worthy. While the ascetics contemplate this light in their lifetime, they will fully
participate in it in the age to come, where they will not only see light, but also become
light. This is what the final deification of man entails:

Christ will come in the glory of the Father and… in that glory ‘the just shall shine as the
sun’ (Matt.13:43); they will be light and they will see light, a blessed and sacred vision,
that is the portion of the purified heart alone. Today this light shines out in part, a pledge
given to those who by dispassion have left behind all that is forbidden, and by pure and
immaterial prayer have passed beyond all that is pure. But on that day the splendour of
this light will deify ‘the sons of the resurrection’ (Luke 20:36) who will rejoice in eternity
and glory in communion with the One Who has given our nature divine glory and
radiance.

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The task of this paper was not to expound Gregory Nazianzen’s, Symeon the New
Theologian’s or Gregory Palamas’ teaching on the deification of man. My intention
was rather to survey the patristic teaching on deification and to place the three
authors mentioned in this traditional context. By doing so I wanted to emphasize the
integrity of Eastern Christian Patristic thought and the continuity of teaching from
the early Christian to the late Byzantine authors. This teaching is still preserved by
the Orthodox Church as a nucleus of its theology, liturgy and spirituality.