

The mystery of theosis or divinization



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THE MYSTERY OF *THEOSIS* OR DIVINIZATION

by

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Introduction

Whenever a Western Christian commences to compare Eastern Orthodoxy with Roman Catholicism he usually starts from a generally accepted premise that there are no real differences in doctrine between the two, except in five major points. They are usually described as the stumbling blocks to re-union of the two major parts of Christianity. With greater or lesser variations they are traditionally enumerated as follows: 1. The Roman Primacy and papal infallibility; 2. The "Filioque" question; 3. Eucharistic differences (esp. *Epiclesis*), 4. Recent Marian dogmas, or the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Mother of God, and 5. Eschatological differences (especially retribution after death and purgatory).¹ However a closer examination of the above enumerated controversial points of doctrine reveals quite clearly that the real differences, or even antagonistic and divisive issues, are of historical, cultural, philosophical, linguistic and emotional origin and that therefore they are not theological issues strictly speaking. The dividing factors are much more subtle, much more profound and firmly rooted in the diverse mentality and different *Weltanschauung* of the two divided parts of Christianity.²

The hamartiocentric and thanatocentric mentality of Western Christianity, that is a mentality which is profoundly pessimistic and almost pathologically obsessed by its primary concentration

¹ This enumeration is adopted by many authors, e. g. Angel Santos Hernández, S. J., *Iglesias de Oriente. Puntos específicos de su teología* (Sal Terrae, Santander 1959) 119-312; G. A. Maloney, *Orthodox Churches*, In: *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, etc. 1967) 10: 795-796.

² On this see: A. Szeptycky, *Deux mentalités*, in: *Irenikon* (1926) 232-235 and 261-266. English translation: "Eastern and Western Mentality," in: *Commonweal* XII (Oct. 8, 1930) 570-574; also in *The Eastern Churches Quarterly* IX/8 (Winter 1952) 392-401; Deno J. Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Harper Torchbooks, New York and Evanston 1966).

on the problem and the mystery of evil, sin and death,³ is alien to the spiritual optimism of Eastern Christianity and especially to its Alexandrian tradition, the chief concern of which was eternal life, light and love of the Triadic God and His loving presence to His creatures. I am therefore convinced that any meaningful ecumenical or theological dialogue must start from the above mentioned premise, or otherwise it will remain superficial and in the long run will produce no fruitful results.

The central and characteristic part and the cornerstone of the Eastern Christian optimism is a very lively awareness of and an intense contemplation of the complex of ideas pertaining to the mystery of *theosis* (θεϊωσις) or divinization in its creational, Triadic, Christological, Pneumatological, anthropological, ecclesial, cosmological and eschatological dimensions. Here a preliminary description of *theosis* is in place. *Theosis* or divinization (or sometimes even deification) can be described as the omnipotent and sanctifying, divine and Triadic activity which, because of the indwelling of the Trinity and grace and because of the inborn and natural capacity of the creature for transfiguration, induces a process of assimilation to God the Father of the whole human person, of mankind and of the visible and invisible universe in its totality, through the mediation of the incarnate Logos, Christ the Pantocrator, and in the Holy Spirit.

From the above preliminary description we can distinguish several moments in *theosis*. In its creational dimension, *theosis* connotes that any creature by the very fact of its creation by God is dependent on God and is an image of God. Therefore this creature is ontologically good and meaningful. It is placed at the beginning of a divinizing process and is destined to tend from God the Alpha, or the Creator, through the loving, divinizing presence of God, to Him as the Omega, or the final goal and consummator of reality.

The Christological moment of *theosis* is rooted in the presence of the Logos in the act of creation, through Whom, in Whom, and for Whom it took place, and in the pantocratic function and dignity of Christ the Lord, who by His Incarnation, Life, Doctrine, Miracles, Transfiguration, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

³ These mysteries and connected problems have enjoyed great popularity in Western Christian tradition. Innumerable works based on different philosophical presuppositions have been written on these subjects. In many instances certain mystifications of evil tended to obscure the optimistic salvific message of the Gospel.