

## DEIFICATION OF MAN

by

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How should we understand Orthodoxy today? Just as it has been conveyed to us by the Fathers of the Church down through the centuries. Orthodoxy is immersed in spirituality and yet is exercised by man's freedom of choice not subjugation of will. We rely on the mystic truths of the Church as witnessed to us through the Scriptures, the Patristic Age, especially the Eastern Fathers and the other Holy Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils of the Church. Our dogmas are not understood as rationalistic truths derived from logical analyses; rather, we take logic and analysis as far as they can take us, but we accept the Church's teachings as true because they have been revealed and we have faith in them, not due to of any scientific proofs. This is a fundamental departure from western forms of thought. As Orthodox we must live it, not just think about it. We must absorb Orthodoxy by spiritual experience and practice and concentrate upon life's struggle along Orthodoxy's Royal Path, which leads to deification in His energies.

The "deification of man" is the "ideal of Orthodoxy" and the chief aim of the Church's existence".<sup>1</sup> What does "deification of man" mean? This humble writer would not pretend to provide an answer to such a profound question that St. Gregory Palamas himself might have avoided. Mantzaridis states that deification is a mystical event occurring within man "through God's supranatural power, and as such is essentially unutterable. Palamas himself avoided speaking of it, because he reckoned it impossible to express in words or logical forms".<sup>2</sup>

But St. Gregory did say:

On this account, although we have written at length about stillness, whether enjoined to do so by the fathers, or at the request of our brethren, we have never dared to write about deification. But now, since there is need to speak, we will speak, reverently, with the Lord's grace, though to describe it is beyond our skill. For even when spoken of, deification remains unutterable: as the Fathers say, it can be identified only by those who have been blessed with it.<sup>3</sup>

Deification is considered "God's greatest gift to man", "the ultimate goal of human existence", "the religious ideal of Orthodoxy", and "that which from the beginning has constituted the innermost longing of man's existence".<sup>4</sup> St. Gregory Palamas (+1359) followed the "mystical theologians of Byzantium" in seeing "deification as the ultimate goal of human existence".<sup>5</sup>

Even though it cannot be described because its essence is unutterable, it can be experienced if we follow the path of deification provided us through the Holy Spirit.

This is made possible by God's love restoring to man the possibility of his deification through His Son's incarnation.

How do we achieve deification? This question assumes really that we expect it in the future. But we already have it. The gift of deification has been given to us by God through His Beloved Son's Sacrifice on the Cross for Adam's corruption and by this He created the potential for our deification. The main vehicle for attaining it is through the Mysteries of the uncreated grace of God. We receive the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual gift within the created part of the sacrament partaken, freely, as a gift from Christ. We exercise our free will God gave us in accepting this gift. It is not imposed upon us. We return to God through the Mysteries of our own free will as He intended, and this is the only way we can remain free. This means that a man alive in Christ and guided by His grace, having the uncreated and imperishable grace of God within him by accepting His gift, becomes genuinely regenerated, imperishable, eternal, and unoriginate.<sup>6</sup>

Our gift of deification is immediate. It is ours to accept, to choose to act upon, to take up the Cross. As Orthodox Christians, we strive for our deification through the Church's Mysteries, the Sacraments. The center of our eucharistic life is the Divine Liturgy. We must prepare ourselves spiritually to receive our Lord's Body and Blood and walk the Royal Path continually examining ourselves in accordance with the Faith, repenting and confessing our sins and loving our neighbours. Through our repentance, we realise that we need God's help in making our spiritual transformation. We throw ourselves on the mercies of His Divine Court, giving ourselves to Him and asking *Him to transform us*.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Georgio I. Mantzaridis, *THE DEIFICATION OF MAN St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1984, p.129.

<sup>2</sup> *id.*, p.127.

<sup>3</sup> *id.*, Mantzaridis citing *Defence of the Hesychasts* 3, 32, *Works* 1, p. 644.

<sup>4</sup> *id.*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *id.*, p.13.

<sup>6</sup> *id.* See Chapter II on The Sacramental and Ecclesiological Nature of Deification, pp.42-43.