

## St. Paul: Saturday Session Twenty: Transformation in Christ 3

### *Theosis=God makes us into Himself*

As we noted on 6/20/09, divinizing man is dynamite. On the positive side, it makes ultimate sense. It satisfies our deepest desire. But on the negative side, it's too close to Original Sin. It's too much like Adam shortcutting his way to God. Sure, it's safe to say *theosis* is transformation in Christ. But this transformation makes us Christ. He was God, so we become God. How can we balance this strange process? Obviously, transformation does not make us God from all eternity. It does not make us one of the Divine Persons. We do not become charter members of the Trinity. Instead, God creates us in time, too late to be exactly God, too late to be God by our nature. But He raises us up to His nature, as Paul says many times. Perhaps you have a set of favorite passages. Here are some that I love. ***And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me***, Galatians 2:20. Christians thinking about this saw Christ living in them once they accepted Him. Their first acceptance was Baptism. Then they accepted Him in Holy Communion. Each experience transformed them more completely. Transformation is growth in God's love uniting persons, making one into One.

Paul extends this organic union. ***As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith***, Col 2:6-7. Christians live in Christ by faith. Somehow faith makes God and us one. How? ***For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God***, 2 Cor 13:4. Living with Christ by the power of God is perhaps Paul's most definite expression of *theosis*. ***But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us***, Eph 2:13-14. Christ's love-power draws us sinners to Him, and unites us in Him, even destroying our hostility. Spiritually, we are one with God, and with each other in God. ***But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him***, 1 Cor 6:17. Love Himself unites us to Him: ***So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin, and alive to God in Christ Jesus***, Romans 6:11. We can't identify all the mechanical steps, but we do experience this unity. Somehow Love transcends the difference between Creator and creature.

Love makes lovers one. Even human love unites two humans into one who is greater than either human lover. If God loves us, His union with us will be even greater. No wonder we don't understand it. The Catholic Catechism says that we exist to be one with God. See #'s 2548-2550. "The promise [of seeing God] surpasses all beatitude... In Scripture to see is to possess... Whoever sees God has obtained all the goods of which he can conceive." In that statement, St. Gregory of Nyssa sketches a unity that we'll develop next. We unite with whatever we know, and contemplation is knowing God. We unite with whatever we love, and contemplation is loving God. Contemplation unites knowing with loving. So contemplating God unites us with Him. It is one-ing by knowing and loving. When God unites, He "Ones" us perfectly.

Hence the Catechism says "The Spirit and the Bride call whoever hears them to perfect communion with God". Perfect communion is perfect union with the object, in this case God. St. Augustine develops this mystery: "...God Himself will be virtue's reward; He gives virtue and has promised to give Himself as the best and greatest reward that could exist. ... ***So that God may be all in all***, 1 Corinthians 15:28." 2550. To be all in all is rather complete *theosis*. St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his Great Catechism, # 1031, says: "If you inquire how divinity is conjoined to humanity, you will have first to inquire as to what the coalescence is of the soul with the flesh. [To know the coming divine unity, we must grasp the present unity of soul and body.] If you do not know the manner by which your soul is united to your body, do not imagine that the other question needs to be understood by you either. In the case of the soul and body, while we believe that the soul is something other than the body because the flesh, when the soul is isolated from the body, becomes dead and inert, we still do not know the manner of their union. So too in that other inquiry, while we confess that the divine nature differs in majesty from a nature that is mortal and perishable, we are not capable of perceiving the manner of the conjunction of the divine and the human. Yet the miracles recorded do not permit us to doubt that God was born of the nature of a man."

Gregory shows by these, and other, reasons that our comprehension is quite limited. If we take on faith what God reveals, then we expand our comprehension. But important truths do not yield to us all at once. Instead, they nourish us by continued improvements, especially through divine inspiration. This is why real theologians are saints. They dwell in revelation because they dwell in God, the Revealer. In this passage, St. Gregory probes Incarnation. Because it is a huge mystery, it nourishes us without end. Therefore, we do not expect closure. We can't clamp down on Incarnation as we can clamp down on where we left our keys. But where we left our keys is not interesting. It's practical, but once we find the keys, we lose interest immediately. By contrast, the Incarnation is forever interesting. It's so immense that we're fascinated forever. Gregory shows us a progression of interest: union of soul and body, then Incarnate union of God with man in Jesus. As we progress through these steps, we gain momentum for the ultimate union of God with man in heaven.

Gregory delights in contemplating these unions, and extends them to the Mystical Body, in # 1035. "Since it has been shown that it is not possible for our body to become immortal except it be made participant in incorruption through communion with the Immortal, it is necessary to consider how it is possible for that One Body, though distributed always to so many myriads of the faithful throughout the world, to be whole in its apportionment to each individual, while yet it remains whole in itself. ... This Body, by the indwelling of God the Word, has been made over to divine dignity. Rightly then, do we believe that the bread consecrated by the word of God has been made over into the Body of God the Word. ... In the plan of His grace He spreads Himself to every believer by means of that Flesh, ... blending Himself with the bodies

of believers, so that by this union with the Immortal, man too may become a participant in incorruption. These things He bestows through the power of the blessing which transforms the nature of the visible things to that [of the Immortal]. Gregory expands our consideration to the Eucharist, showing that God's transformation is the same there. He unites human soul with human body, Himself with humanity, Himself with apparent bread, and Himself with believers.

Gregory goes on to show that these unions are greater than ours with our souls, # 1071. "The creature does not participate substantially in the rational soul, as if by indwelling in it; for so to participate is proper to God alone." Gregory doesn't worry about mechanical steps. Instead, he's delighted to dwell in what God reveals in Christ. This dwelling expands him, so that he can write these important things to delight us. If we dwell in them, we begin to see more of God's masterful mysteries. Because God created us, He is closer to us than we are to ourselves. All these considerations point to *theosis*, perfect union with God. St. Gregory's words are in Jurgen's *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol 2, pp 47-62.

The Orthodox Wikipedia says: "**Theosis** ("deification," "divinization") is the process of a worshiper becoming free of *hamártia* ("missing the mark"), being united with God, beginning in this life, and later consummated in bodily resurrection. For Orthodox Christians, *Théōsis* is salvation. [But it is much more. **Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature**, 2 Pet. 1:4. Peter says it more clearly than Paul.] *Théōsis* assumes that humans from the beginning are made to share in the Life or Nature of the all-Holy Trinity. Therefore, an infant or an adult worshiper is saved from the state of unholiness (*hamartia* — which is not to be confused with *hamártēma* "sin") for participation in the Life (*zōé*, not simply *bíos*) of the Trinity — which is everlasting.

[Naturally, people in the East misinterpreted this. So Eastern Fathers insisted that] "...*theosis* is not to be confused with the heretical (apothéōsis) – 'Deification in God's Essence', which is imparticipable. [This last word tells us that God's essence is **not** something in which we can participate. No one but God can participate in His essence. However, we must take God seriously. So] the statement by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, 'The Son of God became man, that we might become God', indicates the concept beautifully. 2 Peter 1:4 says that we have become '... partakers of divine nature.' Athanasius amplifies the meaning of this verse when he says *theosis* is 'becoming by grace what God is by nature' (*De Incarnatione*, I). What would otherwise seem absurd, that fallen, sinful man may become holy as God is holy, has been made possible through Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate. Naturally, the crucial Christian assertion, that God is One, sets an absolute limit on the meaning of *theosis*: it is not possible for any created being to become, ontologically, God, or even another god. Through *theoria*, the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, human beings come to know and experience what it means to be fully human (the created image of God); through their communion with Jesus Christ, God shares Himself with the human race, in order to conform them to all that God is in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. *Theosis* also asserts the complete restoration of all people (and of the entire creation), in principle. This is built upon the understanding of the atonement put forward by Irenaeus of Lyons, called recapitulation.'

"For many fathers, *theosis* goes beyond simply restoring people to their state before the Fall of Adam and Eve, teaching that because Christ united the human and divine natures in his person, it is now possible for someone to experience closer fellowship with God than Adam and Eve initially experienced in the Garden of Eden, and that people can become more like God than Adam and Eve were at that time. Some Orthodox theologians go so far as to say that Jesus would have become incarnate for this reason alone, even if Adam and Eve had never sinned.

"All of humanity is fully restored to the full potential of humanity because the Son of God took to Himself a human nature to be born of a woman, and takes to Himself also the sufferings due to sin (yet is not Himself a sinful man, and is God unchanged in His being). In Christ, the two natures of God and human are not two persons but one; thus, a union is effected in Christ, between all of humanity and God. So, the holy God and sinful humanity are reconciled in principle, in the one sinless man, Jesus Christ. (See Jesus' prayer as recorded in John 17.) This reconciliation is made actual through the struggle (*podvig* in Russian) to conform to the image of Christ. Without the struggle, the praxis, there is no real faith; faith leads to action, without which it is dead. One must unite will, thought, and action to God's will, His thoughts, and His actions. A person must fashion his life to be a mirror, a true likeness of God. More than that, since God and humanity are more than a similarity in Christ but rather a true union, Christians' lives are more than mere imitation, and are rather a union with the life of God Himself: so that, the one who is working out salvation, is united with God working within the penitent both to will and to do that which pleases God. Gregory Palamas affirmed the possibility of humanity's union with God *in His energies*, while also affirming that because of God's transcendence and utter otherness, it is impossible for any person or other creature to know or to be united with God's *essence*. Yet through faith we can attain *phronema*, an understanding of the faith of the Church.

"The journey towards *theosis* includes many forms of praxis. Living in the community of the church & partaking regularly of the sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, is taken for granted. Also important is cultivating 'prayer of the heart', and prayer that never ceases, as Paul exhorts the Thessalonians. This unceasing prayer of the heart is a dominant theme in the writings of the Fathers, especially in those collected in the *Philokalia*. See page 4 for excerpts from it.

"**Theosis in the Christian West** Although the doctrine of *theosis* came to be neglected in the Western Church, it was clearly taught in the Roman Catholic tradition as late as the 13th century by Thomas Aquinas, who taught that 'full participation in divinity which is humankind's true beatitude and the destiny of human life' (*Summa Theologiae* 3.1.2).

"**Some Protestant use of the term 'theosis'** In addition to the strong currents of *theosis* in early and some contemporary Catholic theology, one can find it as a recurring theme within Anglicanism: in Lancelot Andrewes (17th c.), the

hymnody of John and Charles Wesley (18th c.), Edward B. Pusey (19th c.), and A. M. Allchin and E. Charles Miller (20th c.). The Finnish school of Lutheranism led by Tuomo Mannermaa argues that Martin Luther's understood justification to mean *theosis*. *Theosis* as a concept is used among Methodists, especially in relation to the pietist movement, and in the distinctive Protestant doctrine of *entire sanctification* which teaches, in summary, that it is the Christian's goal, in principle possible to achieve, to live without any sin. In 1311 the Council of Vienne declared this notion, 'that man in this present life can acquire so great and such a degree of perfection that he will be rendered inwardly sinless, and that he will not be able to advance farther in grace' (Denziger §471), to be a heresy. Instead of *theosis*, **sanctification**, being set apart or made holy, is the term that is used more in Protestant theology. Specifically, *progressive sanctification* is the term that is used for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, whereby an individual is made more holy. The Protestant conceptions of praxis, phronema, ascetical theology, and sacraments are quite different from Catholic and Orthodox understandings, but the use of the term *theosis* may illustrate a commonality of objective or hope.

**“Deification in Mormonism** The doctrine of *theosis* or deification in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints differs significantly from the *theosis* of Orthodox Christianity. In Mormonism it is usually referred to as *exaltation* or *eternal life*. While the primary focus of Mormonism is on the atonement of Jesus Christ, the reason for the atonement is exaltation which goes beyond mere salvation. All men will be saved from sin and death, but only those who are sufficiently obedient and accept the atonement of Jesus Christ before judgment will be exalted. One popular Mormon quote, coined by the early Mormon ‘disciple’ Lorenzo Snow in 1837, is ‘As man now is, God once was; As God now is, man may be.’ This was taught first by Joseph Smith while pointing to John 5:19 of the New Testament, ‘God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did.’ (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, pp. 345-46).

“In the Mormon Book of Moses 1:39 God tells Moses, ‘this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.’ In that chapter, God shows Moses a vision depicting some of God's vast creations including a vast number of worlds created for other people—a sampling of what God created in the past and what he will continue to do forever. Each world was prepared and peopled by God for the purpose of bringing to pass the immortality and eternal life of humankind. By immortality is meant personal resurrection so that each individual can continue to enjoy a perfect, physical body forever. By eternal life is meant becoming like God both in terms of holiness or godliness and in glory. It is commonly believed by members of the Church that, like God, an exalted human being is empowered with the privilege to create worlds and people in an endless process of exalting humankind.

“Of all the Mormon doctrines including polygamy, critics generally deem this doctrine the most offensive or even blasphemous. Some Mormons argue that even assuming mainstream Christianity's definition of God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence, not only can God exalt mortal man, but God must do so. The argument is that if God is all-powerful, then God is capable of exalting man, and if God is all-good, then God should or must exalt man. They also point to comments by Christ & Psalmists that refer to the Divine nature and potential of humans as children of God. Some Mormons also suggest that discussions of *theosis* by early Church Fathers show an early belief in the Mormon concept of deification, although they disagree with much of the other theology of the same Church Fathers, most notably the doctrine of the Trinity. The Mormons’ belief differs from the Orthodox belief in deification because the LDS believe that the core being of each individual, the ‘intelligence’ which existed before becoming a spirit son or daughter, is uncreated or eternal. Orthodox deification always acknowledges a timeless Creator versus a finite creature who’s glorified by the grace of God. Mormons are clear promoters of henotheism, and the Church Fathers have absolutely no commonality with their view.”

Orthodox theologians clearly and completely distinguish opposing views of *theosis*. They claim that God extends His divinity to us, making us His family. As 2 Peter 1:4 states, God makes us participate in His **divine nature**. Wondering about this, we see clearly that God does not make us His nature in every way. Instead we participate in His nature. But it is in divine nature that we participate. Since God is Almighty, it is a mistake to limit His might. His infinite inventiveness surpasses all limits we might try to impose on Him. Eastern theologians apply many scripture passages to support their conclusion that grace perfects us into divine participation. Starting with God as Father, they show that He lifts us up to be part of His family. ***See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.*** 1 Jn 3:1. God loved us into existence by creation. Thus we’re all His children. ***Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure,*** 1 Jn 3:2-3. St. John believes that we will be like Him when we see Him as He is. This transforming sight will make us participate in what we see. To participate in God is to become God in some way. What transforms us? ***But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*** Jn 1:12-13. These quotes show the difference between begotten and adopted: ***If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him,*** 1 Jn 2:29. ***Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God,*** 1 Jn 4:7. ***Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him,*** 1 Jn 5:1. ***In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures,*** James 1:18. Orthodox theologians focus on regeneration, as St. Gregory of Nyssa showed.

***The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,*** Rom 8:16. In some restricted way, we are God because we are the same nature as He. When Jesus rose from the dead, He changed His human nature. After His resurrection, matter could not confine Him. He went through locked doors. He exists now throughout creation both in body

& spirit. His transformation of human nature somehow affects all of us. Jesus shows us what we will be transformed in Christ. ....***which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord***, Rom 1:2-4. Paul alludes to transformation: ***For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren***, Heb 2:11. Paul tells us that we will be united in nature, to be brothers of Christ, and sons of God. That union follows from Christ's love, uniting us organically to Him: 2 Cor 5:17; 1 Cor 1:30; Gal 3:28. Our belief is our free acceptance of Love's union, Phil 1:29. Thus we allow Christ to graft us into Him, Rom 11:17 & 24. Eucharist nourishes us in Christ, as Jn 6:48-55 shows: ***I am the bread of life. ... I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh. ... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.***

By accepting God's love enfleshed in Christ, we let Love transform us into Him. The *Philokalia* records Orthodox spirituality. There, St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth record St. Maximos the Confessor's inspiring passages. In volume 2 of the 1981 edition, p 216, #30, Makarios explains virtue: "... he means the divinizing virtues which give rise to the love that unites man with God and with one another. This love wrests the soul away from all that is subject to generation and decay, and from all intelligible beings that are beyond generation and decay, and in so far as this can happen to human nature, it intermingles the soul with God Himself in a kind of erotic union, mystically establishing a single shared life, undefiled and divine. By truth he means the sole and unique cause, origin, kingdom, power and glory of created beings, from which and through which all things were made, and are being made, by which and through which the being of all things is sustained, and to which the lovers of God dedicate all their diligence and activity." What a poetic description of deification, and affirmation that it begins on earth! If we accept Love, we are Love.

Maximos exclaims, 218, # 36: "He who aspires to divine realities willingly allows providence to lead him by principles of wisdom towards the grace of deification. He who does not so aspire is drawn, by the just judgment of God, and against his will, away from evil by various forms of discipline." Definitely, God provides transformation into Himself for those who accept His offer. Commenting on Isa 11:2 (the gifts of the Spirit), in #38, Maximos affirms: "... by wisdom, the indivisible union with God, whereby the saints attain the actual enjoyment of the things for which they long. He who shares in wisdom becomes God by participation, and, immersed in the ever-flowing secret outpouring of God's mysteries, he imparts to those who long for it a knowledge of divine blessedness."

Maximos unites God's abilities with His Incarnation, to draw us to Himself, p 146, #40: "The Lord is wise, just, and mighty by nature. Because He is wise, He could not be ignorant of the way in which to heal human nature. Because He is just, He could not save man, whose will was in the grip of sin, in a tyrannical fashion. Because He is almighty, He could not prove unequal to the task of completing His healing mission." In # 43, Maximos describes the completion of that healing mission: "The Lord gave clear evidence of His supreme power in what He endured from hostile forces when He endowed human nature with an incorruptible form of generation. For through His passion He conferred dispassion, through suffering, repose, and through death, eternal life. By His privations in the flesh, He re-established and renewed the human state, and by His own incarnation He bestowed on human nature the supernatural grace of deification. [44] God became true man, and bestowed on human nature a new or second form of generation, leading us through suffering to the pleasure of the life held in store for us." This restoration of our nature fulfills it, even more than Adam and Eve were full of life. Our ultimate end is to unite with God: p 282, #88 "You should understand that God stimulates and allures in order to bring about an erotic union in the Spirit; that is to say, He (Spirit) is the go-between in this union, the one who brings the parties together, in order that He may be desired and loved by His creatures. God stimulated in that He impels each being, in accordance with its own principle, to return to Him." Orthodox theologians distinguish clearly between *theosis* and *apotheosis*. They inspire us with their descriptions of divinization to breathe with both lungs: East and West.