

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 101

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 15: The Meaning of THEOSIS

(Source book: *The Life*, by Clark Carlton, chapters 8 and 9)

The Lord Jesus taught the MEANING OF THEOSIS when He prayed to His Father for us:

²¹“**that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us**, that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²²And **the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one.**” John 17:21-22

In order to discuss the Meaning of Theosis, we first need to *review* important theological truths that we learned in this first semester of our catechism course:

The Most Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity, One in Essence and Undivided.

God has revealed Himself to us. There are:

- **Three** eternal uncreated Divine **Persons**,
- Who always **interpenetrate** each other [living in an **undivided** eternal communion of love],
- and Who share One Divine **Essence**,
- and Who share One Divine **Will**,
- and Who share the same Divine **Energies**.

Thus, when we speak about God, we speak about His **Essence**, His **Energies**, and the **Three Persons**, using one **will**.

Essence is also called “Nature”, “Substance”, and “ousia” [in Greek].

Essence is **what God IS**.

Energies are also called “Grace”, “Power”, “Presence”, “Glory”, “Manifestation”, “Working”, “Actions”, etc. (These terms are all synonyms.)

Energies are **God doing what God does.**

God is **fully present** in His Energies, in His Manifestation, in what He does. (Think of Moses meeting God in the Burning Bush. Moses did not see God’s transcendent inner Essence, but Moses truly met God. Moses *experienced* the Presence of God as he saw God’s Glory and Energies appearing as a Divine Fire which did not burn up the physical leaves of the bush.)

Thus, humans can experience God, by experiencing His Presence, His uncreated Energies. But, humans, being created, can never see God’s inner uncreated Essence, since it is transcendent and far above any creature.

Person. Hypostasis (singular) and **Hypostases** (plural) mean “**person**”. There are three Divine Hypostases (**Persons**) in the Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

St. Gregory Palamas writes: “There are **three realities in God**, namely, substance [Essence], energy [Grace] and a Trinity of divine hypostases [Persons].”³ (*The Life*, p. 112.)

The Church Fathers have interpreted the Bible to show us that God has revealed that there are distinctions between “Who God is” and “what God is” and “what God does”

person/essence/energies distinctions [i.e. Who God is/what God is/what God does]

Person refers to **WHO** God IS

Essence refers to **WHAT** God IS

Energies refers to **WHAT** God **does**

A. “Who God IS” vs. “What God does”. (Persons vs. Energies)

Who God IS. In the Creed we confess with faith that the Son of God is “Light of Light, True God of True God, **Begotten, not made**; of one essence with the Father.”

1. An eternal Father—to be an eternal Father—IS an **ETERNAL BEGETTER** of an ETERNAL SON. **This is Who the Father is.**
2. And His ETERNAL SON IS the One Who is **ETERNALLY BEING BEGOTTEN**. **This is Who the Son is.**

3. And the ETERNAL SPIRIT is the One Who is **ETERNALLY PROCEEDING FORTH** from the eternal Father. **This is Who the Holy Spirit is.**

Eternal **Begetter**, Eternally **Begotten**, and the One Who **Eternally Proceeds** – these are **not** ACTIONS that God decides to take or does not decide to take. They are not things that He decides to do. Simply, this is **WHO GOD IS**. The Father did NOT decide to make a Son, nor did He decide to breathe forth His Spirit. Rather, the Father has ALWAYS AND FOREVER BEEN **BEGETTING HIS SON**, AND ALWAYS AND FOREVER BEEN **BREATHING FORTH HIS SPIRIT**. These relationships are **eternal**. This is **WHO** the Father IS, and **WHO** the Son IS, and **WHO** the Spirit IS.

B. The Distinction between “what God IS” and “what God does”.
(Essence vs. Energies)

Carlton: “As St. Gregory himself points out, understanding these **distinctions** is *essential* for understanding our *salvation*. . . . St. Athanasius drew a **distinction between what God is and what He does**. This distinction was further refined by St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory Palamas among others. Had the Fathers **not made** this distinction, there would be **no way to distinguish** between the Son of God, Who is ‘begotten of the Father before all worlds,’ **and the material creation**, which God spoke into existence from nothing.” (*The Life*, p. 112-113.)

The Father is Eternally Begetting His Son... this is Who the Father is.

The Father did not make His Son. We confess that the Son is “Begotten, not made.”

They share the SAME UNCREATED ESSENCE. What the Father is (Divine Essence) is the same as what the Son and Spirit are (same Divine Essence). We confess that They are “Light of Light, true God of true God”.

However, there is the **difference** between “**what God is**” (A Trinity Who **share the same Uncreated Essence**) and “**what God does**” (as the **Maker** of Heaven and Earth). God has not eternally been creating. Creating is not part of His inner existence of what He eternally is. Rather, creating is what He can do, if He chooses to. He can either do it or not do it. **God DOES DECIDE to use His Will and decides to create a universe** out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. It has a Beginning. The universe is not part of God. The universe did NOT always exist. Rather, God decided to create this world, and He decided to create humanity. He said: “Let Us make man in Our Image, after Our Likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The making of creation involved the use of the **Divine Will** and ACTION (**Divine Energies**), which created time and matter, by His power and will, out of nothing. Creating is something that God does, not what He is.

C. Another **important distinction** was highlighted by the Church Fathers – the **distinction between person and essence [nature], “Who God is” and “What God is”.**

Carlton: The “**distinction, between person and nature**, was developed to help express as best we can the mysteries of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation. The Church believes and confesses that the **Word of God** [the eternal **Logos**], one of the Holy Trinity, became man for our salvation. We also confess, however, that in becoming man He ‘**remained what He was.**’ That is, we believe that the Son of God became man, suffered, and died on the cross, and yet His divine nature underwent no change whatsoever.... The Second **Person** of the Trinity suffered in the flesh, but His divine **nature** did **not** suffer.” (*The Life*, p. 113-114.)

In other words, in the Incarnation, One of the Three Divine Persons, took upon Himself our human nature, while at the same time KEEPING FULLY INTACT His Divine Nature. One Person, **Who** is BOTH GOD and MAN at the same time. This One Person carried His cross, suffered the physical pain of human death in His human flesh (in His human nature), while at the same time His Divine Nature was NOT harmed, NOT hurt, NOT even scratched by death. Thus, **He tramples down death by death**. So in theology, it is very useful to be able to talk about the “**Who**”—the Son of God—and then to be able to talk about “**what He is**”—both Divine and human at the same time.

If a person **does not make the distinction** between **Who God is** and **what God is** and **what God does—between Persons, Essence, and Energies**— he or she will easily fall **into heresy**. He will invent false religions which claim that **everything is “God”**—such as old pagan Greek Platonism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and New Age religions. They all **blend** “God” and “creation” **together**...and say that YOU (a human being) are **ALREADY BY NATURE/ESSENCE** part of the “One”, the “God”, the “Ultimate Reality”, etc. This is the Devil’s age-old lie of **pantheism** – “everything is god.” He tricks us into thinking that everything, including you and I, are already part of “God” by nature/essence, so that we do not have to bend our knees and bow our hearts to worship the true God, the Most Holy Trinity. Instead, we have become tricked into being idolaters, worshipping ourselves and creation...and worse yet...worshipping the Devil.

Many people misunderstand us Orthodox Christians when we speak about salvation as “**Theosis**” – union with God – which we can call “**deification**”. It is extremely important that we Orthodox know EXACTLY WHAT WE MEAN when we use the terms “theosis” and “deification”, or else our listeners will think that we have fallen into pantheism. Yet for us, as the **Lord Jesus revealed**, **theosis is the very Purpose and ultimate Meaning of life** for humans. When He prayed His High Priestly prayer to His Father for us on the night in which He was betrayed, **Jesus spoke of our possible Union with God and the possibility of our sharing Divine Glory with God** (John 17:20-23).

²⁰“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹**that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us**, that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²²And the **glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one**: ²³**I in them, and You in Me**; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

IN this prayer the Lord Jesus is showing us **His original plan for us**. We were made to be **loved** by God and to **unite** with that Love, to be **transformed** by the **Glory** of that shared Love, and to pour out and shine out the energy and power of that glorious Love to others, as God does. To be “gods” by Grace. Godly. Temples of the Living God. Saints.

What makes humans absolutely different from all other creatures on the planet or in the universe is that we alone were made in God’s Image. We alone were designed to have the Creator’s Likeness. **We alone can become “gods” by Grace**. Everything that God is by Essence – loving, truthful, kind, glorious, powerful, etc. -- we humans get the chance to share BY GRACE, by GIFT, by participation in the Divine Glory and Energies of God. By having God come to actually dwell in us as His living Temple. Monkeys, dolphins, parrots – none of them, no matter how “smart” they are in certain aspects of their creation – none of them gets to be energized, transfigured, and deified to the level of being a “son of God” by Grace.

Carlton: “The Orthodox doctrine of salvation is often **misunderstood** by Protestants and Roman Catholics alike. One of the primary stumbling blocks is the notion that salvation is ultimately a matter of *theosis*, or “deification.” St. Athanasius wrote that God became man that man might become divine. This disturbs many people, who see in Orthodoxy a revival of the pagan confusion between man and God.” (*The Life*, Chapter Nine, p. 117)

Let us clarify that confusion:

1. Orthodoxy is NOT Mormonism. Some people misunderstand us and think we are like Mormons, who use the term “deification” and teach that all men can be exalted to become “gods” and “goddesses” of their own planets.

Mormons teach: “**As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may be.**”

Mormonism is a modern-day **heresy** which only started in the 1800’s in America. It is really a form of **polytheism**. It believes in **multiple gods and goddesses**—who all USED TO BE ordinary humans. Their “God the Father” was originally only a man. In their theology, he did not exist from all eternity. There was a time when he did not exist. Then he started out as a human. Then he graduated to his “exalted state” as a “god” of this world. The “Son” and “Holy Spirit”, in Mormon teaching, each have their own separate wills, and therefore **they are all separate “gods”**, different from the “Father”.

And, remember, their teaching holds that there are grandparent gods and great-grandparent gods, all of which begs the question, where is the Original Almighty God Who has lived from all eternity and existed before Creation? He is **NOT** in Mormonism, which audaciously presents itself on the doorsteps of the ignorant and pretends to be the “true church of Jesus Christ”. A huge pile of lies. The Mormons ignore Church history and made up their own theology. Most people avoid them.

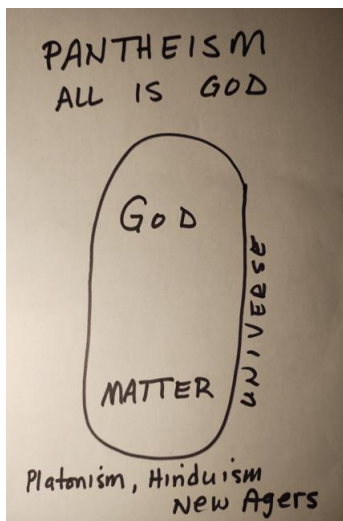
Mormonism does not follow any early Church teaching on the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity, nor does it follow any Orthodox teaching of Christology. Thus, their idea of deification is a joke, and is far from what the Orthodox Christians mean when they use the term.

2. Orthodoxy is NOT Pantheism. We are NOT Platonists, Hindu, nor New Agers.

“Some people **confuse** the human with the divine and conclude that **men are naturally divine** or a part of the divinity. This is what most people think of when they hear the word, ‘deification’.” (*The Life*, p. 118)

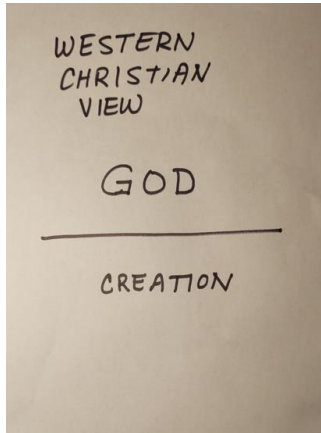
This is the HUGE ALTERNATIVE THEORY OF DEIFICATION THAT IS CATCHING MANY TODAY—New Age PANTHEISM. The Devil’s old lie repackaged.

“However, there is a more dangerous and more widespread theory of deification, and it is this version, popular among New Agers and devotees of ‘eastern mysticism,’ that many people confuse with Orthodoxy. According to this view, man does not *become* ‘a God’ as in Mormonism; **man is believed to already be divine or a part of the divinity**. The key here is “actualization.” One is urged to realize and actualize one’s divine nature. This approach tends to be **pantheistic**; that is, it asserts that **everything is God**.” (*The Life*, p. 119)



3. The West’s LIMITED view. “There is, however, an opposite mistake, and that is to draw **such a sharp distinction** between **divinity** and **humanity** that there can never be a real union of God and man. In an effort to avoid the first mistake [of pantheism], most modern **Protestants** have **fallen headlong into the second**.” (*The Life*, p. 118)

They draw a line to emphasize the **complete difference** between God the Uncreated Maker **and** His Creation.



By the teaching of Orthodoxy, it is correct to draw a line...but we must **not** stop there. We Orthodox **do believe** that God’s Essence is COMPLETELY DIFFERENT from our human essence...because **God is Immortal and Uncreated, while we are mere mortals and creatures**. However, in John 17, Jesus spoke about **us** humans having the possibility of **being “IN” God**, and God being **“IN” us**, and He spoke about us **sharing His “Glory”**. IF we draw too tight a line between God and humans, **we will exclude any understanding** of HOW we humans can be **“in”** a transcendent unreachable God, and we will have **no understanding of how** we can **share His glory** while not being Divine in Essence at the same time. How can God be **“in”** us and we **“share”** His glory and we **not** be pantheists? Orthodoxy has the answer.

4. Orthodoxy teaches that Theosis (deification) is by Grace, by participation, not by Essence

Carlton: “[W]hat the Church says about the deification of human nature is exactly what She says about Christ’s human nature. **Man is not naturally divine**. He is a **creature** and will always remain a creature. Just as Christ’s human nature did not become mixed or confused with His divine nature, so **we**, in the resurrection, will not become mixed or confused with God. In Christ the human and divine natures remain distinct, and they shall remain so for all of eternity. Thus, there is an **irreducible gulf between the nature of God and the nature of man**. The fact that this gulf is irreducible, however, does not

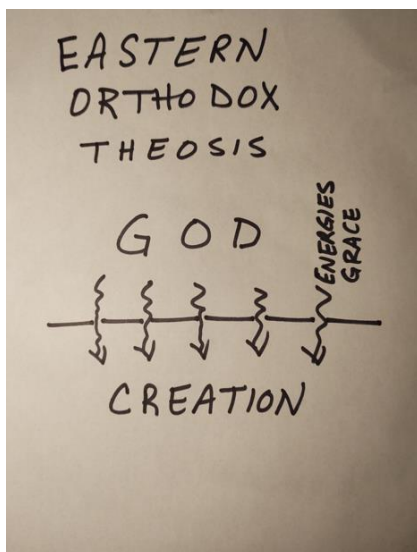
mean that it is irreconcilable. St. Paul affirms that God was in Christ **reconciling** the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5:19). (*The Life*, p. 120)

“St. Peter affirms that **we shall be partakers of the divine nature** (2 Peter 1:4).

If, however, there is such a radical difference between God and man, **how can this be?**

The **answer** is to be found in the distinctions between **person, nature, and energy**...

St. Gregory says that man’s union with God **cannot** be according to **substance [essence/nature]** because of the **gulf** between the **divine** and **human natures**. On the other hand, man **cannot** be said to participate in the **Persons** of the Trinity. **What is left, therefore, is participation in God’s energies.** (*The Life*, p. 120-121)



The Orthodox understanding of God’s Essence and His Energies: God is not locked in His unknowable Transcendence. He is fully capable of making His **Presence** known and felt, by His actions, by His **Grace**, by His **Energies**, by His love, just as Moses experienced God at the Burning Bush. **God is immanent, present, via His Divine Energies of Grace.** He **shines** through to us, like the sun. So, we have a **permeable line, through which God can manifest His Presence without losing His completely distinct Divine Nature.** As we cooperate and open our heart to God’s Grace, He moves inside us and energizes us with His Presence. This deifies us. We become saints. We share in the Energy of God just as a stained-glass window receives the energy of the sun and is illuminated by it, but does not change its nature and become a sun. It remains a glass window...but it is fully interpenetrated and transfigured by the sun’s rays passing through it. We become **saints** by having God’s Energies penetrate and pass through us. **In this way God’s Presence (His Energies) transfigures us, we share His Glory (His Energies), we unite with Him (via His Energies), but we do not become God’s Uncreated Divine Essence. We remain created humans with our human essence.** We are not pagan Greek Platonists, Hindus, Buddhists, nor New Agers. They have been deceived by the Devil’s lies.

Among all the Christians, East and West, only the Orthodox have the full and complete understanding of how we can achieve real union with God—Theosis—without being Pantheists on the one hand, or without locking God into His unknowable Transcendent Essence as the West did, on the other hand.

“It is **absolutely crucial** at this point to understand that while the divine **energies** are *differentiated* from the divine **nature** and the **Persons** of the Trinity, they are nonetheless divine and uncreated. When we participate in the divine energies, **we are participating in God Himself**, not a created intermediary. **This is a major point of difference between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic understandings of theology [the primary difference, in fact].** According to the Roman Catholic teaching, there is no real distinction between God’s essence and His energies [i.e. they say His essence and His energies are both transcendent and unknowable]; therefore, [in their understanding] the grace of God [that God sends to man] is not God Himself, but a created effect. But how can a created effect deify man? **[It cannot.]** (*The Life*, p. 122)

“The issue of the essence and energies of God rarely, if ever, comes up in **Protestant theology**. Nevertheless, Protestants have inherited the assumption that grace is created and that man has no possibility of direct participation in God. What is left, therefore, is the idea of salvation as moral improvement.” (*The Life*, p. 122-123) One could argue, however, that the Protestant holiness, Pentecostal, and Charismatic movements were a reaction to this very boring and stale version of salvation, as they were trying to correct the earlier Protestants’ errors which omitted a real role for the Holy Spirit in salvation. However, unguided as they are by the security of Orthodoxy’s ancient Holy Tradition, they are prone to fall into other heresies.

Conclusion: “Man’s thirst is for nothing less than **union with God**. This union cannot take place, however, **unless God in some way gives Himself to man. God gives Himself to man through His divine energies.** In this way **man** is truly *united with God*, truly **participates** in His unending and superabundant life, and yet remains man.” (Clark Carlton, *The Life*, p. 123) This is how to understand Jesus’ holy words in John 17, when He spoke of humans uniting with God and sharing His glory!