

# Worshipping the Undivided Trinity: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

Written by Robert Miclean

Week 4:     *The Orthodox understanding of Creation, the Fall, the Human Person, and Salvation.*

*Prayer...*

Therefore, as I have said, He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished. And again: unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it securely. And unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility. For it was incumbent upon the Mediator between God and men, by His relationship to both, to bring both to friendship and concord, and present man to God, while He revealed God to man. ... Wherefore also *He passed through every stage of life*, restoring to all communion with God (St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.18.7).

We read in Genesis that God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...” (Gen. 1:26). Every human being is possessed of a soul and bears the imprint of the image of God, of the Holy Trinity, and is *thus* of infinite value. We are all created to be in relationship (communion) with the God who lovingly created us for this purpose.

For the Orthodox, this truth is foundational to understanding all other Orthodox theology because in that verse from Genesis, God establishes our relationship *to* Him and *with* Him, as well as our dependence *on* Him. St. Augustine writes in his *Confessions* of this profound truth, saying, “For You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.” We are created to be in communion with the Holy Trinity. He has given us the moral responsibility, a body and soul meant for virtue, and the freedom to choose to be in such close fellowship with the God of the universe or, conversely, to reject Him.<sup>1</sup>

*But we have chosen to reject Him.* By our sin we have rejected that intimate communion offered to us by our Heavenly Father. This is what is referred to as the Fall. There is no one in the race of Adam who is without sin. Only Jesus Christ is without sin. But no matter how sinful each of us may be or humankind in total, the image of God in us, this moral responsibility, the soul with which we have been endowed, and our freedom to come back to God is never completely obliterated. It is damaged by sin but not completely destroyed. The Orthodox would reject the Calvinistic understanding of “total depravity.” Instead, the Orthodox describe sin as a darkening of the image of God in the human person. The fact is, however, that while the image of God is not totally destroyed in us, nevertheless, our communion with God is broken by sin—*unless restored through Christ.*

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<sup>1</sup> Ware, 219.

What *is* destroyed by sin, however, is the *likeness* of God in us. Adam and Eve were created in the *likeness as well as the image* of God. They had the opportunity to attain perfection, to become truly virtuous—both by the exercising of their own freedom and assisted by God’s grace. We are not robots. We must choose to strive to live for Christ and in Christ. I like how Bishop Kallistos (Timothy Ware) puts it when he writes, “God wanted sons and daughters, not slaves.”<sup>2</sup>

In Orthodoxy, SIN is seen not in juridical terms, as is often the case in the West. Rather, SIN is seen as an *illness*.<sup>3</sup> Destroying the unity between creation and the uncreated God, decay and mortality entered into human life through the Fall. And this spiritual disease called sin, separates us from God. However, Man is incapable of restoring this image and likeness on his own.

But what Adam is unable to do on his own, Christ, the Word of God, came to make possible for us. We read in St. John’s Gospel, chapter 1, that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” The Gospel goes on to say, that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-2, 4, 14). In the Greek, WORD is *Logos*. And *Logos* denotes the *personal wisdom and power that is in union with God; His minister in the creation and governance of the universe*.

In the Holy Scriptures Christ, the Logos, brings God’s light, love, truth, and grace into the world. He is said to ‘dwell’ among us. *Humankind is infused with grace*—not just externally as was the case after the Fall, where the Holy Spirit rested upon the righteous, such as Abraham, David, the prophets. Now Christ makes possible the internal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus invites us to be restored into a right relationship with the Holy Trinity, saying, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20).

In Eastern and Mediterranean culture—the culture in which Christ and His Apostles lived and by which we have come to understand the Christian Faith—to dine with someone connotes the ultimate acceptance of the other person on a fraternal and intimate level. We see this exemplified in the Last Supper. Thus, Jesus is, in effect, inviting us to become by grace God’s adopted sons and daughters.

The early Fathers of the Church understood in the Incarnation of the Word of God, the *LOGOS*, the beginning of the redemption from the Fall. These Fathers took St. Paul’s words to heart that Jesus was the “new Adam” as he says, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (I Cor. 15:22).

Consistently through the first millennium throughout the Church and then continuing in the Orthodox Church to the present, Christians have understood Christ’s redemption in terms of

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<sup>2</sup> Ware, 221.

<sup>3</sup> Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *The Mind of the Orthodox Church* (Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2000), 144.

finding new life in Christ. Christ went through every stage of our human lives redeeming the human race and making possible the salvation of all who put their trust in Him.

One of the Fathers, St. Athanasius, for forty-five years Bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century, writes that “He (God) became man so that we might become divine.”<sup>4</sup> This process, *becoming by grace what God is by nature*, is called deification or *theosis*. In Christ, we become a new creation (II Cor. 5:17) and our life, as St. Paul also says, is now “hidden with Christ in God” so that “when Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:3-4). By grace we participate in God’s unity—our spirits united with the Holy Trinity. We are elevated and the likeness of God in us is restored.

St. Irenaeus, a second-century Father of the Church and bishop of Lyons (in what is today France), writes that *Christ...*

caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished. And again: unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it securely. And unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility. For it was incumbent upon the Mediator between God and men, by His relationship to both, to bring both to friendship and concord, and present man to God, while He revealed God to man. ... *Wherefore also He passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God (Against Heresies, III.18.7).*

Thus, our salvation begins not at the cross, but at the Incarnation of Christ, “the Word made flesh.” Christ is, according to St. Paul, the new Adam, and as He sanctifies each stage of our human existence, His truth and grace infuse humankind with new life. The Incarnation reconciles us again to the Father and presents us with “the potential of realizing ‘the likeness’ of God in our lives.”<sup>5</sup>

And by His death on the cross, Christ defeats death by His own death. St. Irenaeus writes, “The Lord now... came to His own, and, born by His own created order which He Himself bears, He by His obedience on the tree renewed [and reversed] what was done by disobedience in [connection with] a tree.” The words of the Paschal Orthodox hymn convey this truth beautifully: “*Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.*”

Christ destroyed death and was resurrected for our sakes that we too may one day be raised from the dead. Since our life as Christians is “hidden in Christ” we must follow Christ where He has led the way before us—from birth through life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven—that those who trust Him and are in fellowship with Him may go to be with Him and enjoy that intimate fellowship and communion with Him.

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<sup>4</sup> St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.

<sup>5</sup> Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light and Life Publishing, 1976), 29.

“... That you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19):  
Theosis as the Goal of our Life in Christ

Our choice is clear—either to live as slaves to SIN or to live as sons and daughter for GOD. St. Paul writes that, “the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Rom. 8:16-17). For the Orthodox, the goal of the Christian life is none other than participation in and unity with the life of the Holy Trinity as God’s adopted sons and daughters. This is the purpose of our growth in holiness, our desire to become more like Christ and be glorified, to be *deified*.

St. Peter writes in his Epistle,

*Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature... (II Pet. 1:2-4).*

The word *theosis* (deification) is from the Greek and literally means “the process by which we become gods.” But lest anyone get the wrong idea, *theosis* is **not** of course any kind of pantheism. We do not *become* divine as God is divine. We remain always God’s human creation. But we are united in spirit to the Holy Trinity and participate in His divine energies. In so doing, we are infused with the divine Light and Love, not by nature (for we are *created* humans) as is God, but by grace.

At the same time, neither does *theosis* mean mere moral purification, as the term ‘sanctification’ is sometimes explained in the Roman and Protestant churches. It *is*, to be sure, growth in holiness and the virtues of Christ—for God is holy, and we cannot participate in the life that is in Him without ourselves being made holy and acquiring those necessary virtues which make us holy. But it is more than this as well. St. Paul wrote that he prayed that his fellow followers of Christ would be “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).

*All the places where the New Testament refers to God indwelling the heart of the believer are synonymous with theosis.*<sup>6</sup> Thus, *theosis* bespeaks a unity of spirit and not of substance. St. Paul says further that “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him (I Cor. 6:17).

You may now be asking, “So where does this *theosis* process lead?” It is the belief that as Christ our God was transfigured before His disciples on Mt. Tabor (Matt. 17, Mark 9, Luke 9), so we too will one day be *glorified*—the light, love, and grace of God will shine through us more and more. The one who is deified is the one who is glorified by God and it is this person who is

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<sup>6</sup> Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *The Mind of the Orthodox Church* (Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, Greece, 1998), p. 134.

a true Saint. This is the destiny of all true Christians and what it means ultimately to “*live in Christ.*” For many of us, our glorification will only be fully achieved once we are in heaven, but some have even experienced deification in this life. Moses, we are told, glowed with the transcendence of glorification and such intimate fellowship with God is reported throughout the Church’s history to the present.

But it is now, in this life that we must choose to live for Christ. There is no purgatory in the Orthodox Faith. Our lives must be in the here and now little by little adapted to eternal life. It is the Orthodox belief that through the life of the Church, the worship, Sacraments, and Sacramental life, which we will talk more about next week, we practice and indeed begin to live for eternity with God.

The Holy Spirit makes *theosis*/deification possible. As the third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is God’s instrument in communicating God’s grace to the Church. At the same time, this grace acts only on those who willingly put their trust in God and strive to live for Christ. Thus, through God’s great love for us, the whole Trinity is involved in our *theosis*. As Archimandrite Christophoros Stavropoulos explains it so eloquently, “God the Father, before all ages, conceives of the work of salvation and theosis. He realizes it in time, in the Son. The Holy Spirit completes and perfects and adapts this work to [the] people.”<sup>7</sup>

It is the Holy Sacraments and worship of the Church, in turn, which are God’s chosen instruments to communicate this deifying grace. In Orthodoxy, the Church is seen as a ‘spiritual hospital,’ where the sin-sick receive spiritual and sometimes physical healing. The body in Orthodoxy is not neglected. It is the conviction of the Fathers of the Church that the resurrected body will be reunited with the resurrected soul already in heaven at the time of Christ’s Second Coming and the Resurrection of the dead.

Since our souls and bodies are in need of deification and are destined for eternity, we come before the priest for an anointing with holy oil following the Eucharist. We often sip from blessed water imparted to the faithful at Theophany (Epiphany), when we celebrate Christ’s Baptism. Twice a year we experience the grace of Holy Unction—a special sacramental service of anointing.

By His love for us, God makes possible for everyone to be cured of sin-sickness. But as emphasized earlier, we must *desire* the cure as well and open the gate of repentance into our own souls. Only when we begin to say “yes!” to God’s deifying work in our lives and “no!” to sin, can we be healed by His grace. This is what it means to live for and in Christ.

Thus, what Adam failed to do, Christ did for us, making the possibility of sharing in His deification possible for everyone. By His Incarnation, Christ deified human nature and became our cure for sin-sickness. He is the “way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 4:16) and His divine condescension—becoming Incarnate, and His submission to torture and death for our sakes—all demonstrate God’s great love for all humanity. This love, in turn, is what is offered to us

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<sup>7</sup> Archimandrite Christophoros Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1976), 31.

through *theosis*—to share in God’s unity and love, to live in the nearness of His presence in a glorified state with all the Saints.

As we are deified, living for Christ and increasingly being transformed into His likeness, we cannot help but begin to radiate the light, love, and truth of Christ in this sin-sick world. We, in turn, become God’s messengers of the truth of the Gospel, His ambassadors. We are used by God as His ‘icons’ to represent Him to others, so that they too may come to the knowledge and love of God, and be saved.

Perhaps this fundamental teaching on *theosis* and the purpose of our life in Christ can best be summed up in the words of fourth century Father of the Church, St. Gregory the Theologian. St. Gregory admonishes us to “*travel without fault as a disciple of Christ through every stage and faculty of His life; be purified... be crucified with Him, and share in His death and burial gladly, that you may rise with Him, and be glorified with Him and reign with Him.*”

As has been mentioned, the primary means by which God deifies us is through the Sacraments and worship of His holy Church, foremost being the Holy Eucharist. We will discuss the Sacraments next week.

There are also other means, however, which God uses to deify us. Among the most important and vital for the Christian life is personal prayer, communication and communion with God. St. Paul admonishes us to “pray without ceasing” (I Thess. 5:17). I remember when I was younger thinking in reference to this verse, “but how can we pray *all the time*? Isn’t that impossible?”

Prayer is both an instrument which God uses in our *theosis*, as well as the fruit of theosis itself. As we are more and more united to God, our communication with God, the prayer of the heart, increases. We participate increasingly in the life of the Holy Trinity and our prayers, our communication with the living God, becomes more intimate and yes, ‘ceaseless.’

In Orthodoxy this pure prayer, *the prayer of the heart*, characterized by perfect peace, is called *hesychia*. The hesychast tradition really began with the desert monks of the 4th century, such as St. Anthony the Great. More ‘recently’ it is associated with the spiritual sanctuary of Mt. Athos in Greece, a large grouping of men’s monasteries and monastic communities that was founded in 961 A.D. Mt. Athos, also called “the Holy Mountain,” has been a well-spring of spiritual renewal and intercession for the Orthodox Church for over 1,000 years now. The Holy Spirit has been particularly present in miraculously preserving the communities through many hardships, including a number of Muslim invasions.

The hesychasts, like all true Orthodox Christians, have always held the Name of Jesus in particular reverence. They also have taken St. Paul at his word, and have emphasized the importance of the practice of continual prayer. Through prayer, God deifies us, makes us holy. And as we grow in holiness, we grow in unity with Christ.

The hesychasts hold that in stillness before God one can experience and grow in unity with God—as is written in the Psalms, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). To this

end, a very special tool developed in the Church to call on the Name of Jesus in the effort to become holy as He is holy and to be further united with Him and the Holy Trinity. This prayer is called the *Jesus Prayer*, which reads, “*Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*”

In this short prayer, we are given a summary of what our relationship to God is to be. Christ is God. He is our Lord. We call on His all powerful Name. He is the only One who can and does have mercy on us. As it is stated in Phillipians:

Therefore God also has highly exalted him and given Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

Jesus Christ is God’s Son because He is the eternal Word of God, the *Logos*, God incarnate. Out of His boundless love for us, God sent His Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, to save us. And He is the One who has the power and the love to have mercy on us, who are all sinners in need of salvation. “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

As we see repeatedly in the book of Acts, “in the Name of Jesus” the good news is preached, converts believe, baptism is conferred, cures and other ‘signs’ are accomplished, lives are risked and given.”<sup>8</sup>

In the sixth century, a great monastery was founded by the Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, Justinian I. The monastery, named after St. Katherine, became another center of hesychasm. The writing of St. John Klimakos, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, became a classic of Orthodox spirituality. One hesychast of the 1500 year-old St. Katherine’s Monastery on Mt. Sinai said of the Jesus Prayer: “Truly blessed is the man whose mind and heart are as closely attached to the Jesus Prayer and to the ceaseless invocation of His name as air to the body or flame to the wax.”<sup>9</sup>

As you would suspect, for the Orthodox, the mystical experience of prayer and spirituality has always been Christocentric. To this end, the Jesus Prayer has been a central part of God’s plan to help Orthodox Christians through the centuries to keep their focus where it should be: on their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As we begin to pray the Jesus Prayer, we pronounce the Invocation of His Name with adoration and love. We repeat it to the point where other distractions, stresses, temptations, are replaced by the attention we are now giving to Christ as we commune in our hearts with Him, who is our loving Creator and the Savior of our souls.

Many inquirers into Orthodoxy are taken aback at first by the number of times we repeat prayers and petitions to God in the course of worship. These are not empty words said in

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<sup>8</sup> Father David Hester, *The Jesus Prayer: A Gift from the Fathers* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Hester, 13.

mindless repetition. On the contrary, they remind us that our worship of God Almighty is in *kairos* time, i.e., eternal time, and not to be measured in human terms or according to *chronos* time. We pray repeatedly with our hearts for the things that are most important, always returning to the familiar refrain, “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Both now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.” In fact, every litany of prayers ends by glorifying the Holy Trinity, whom we worship. Likewise, we respond to the prayers with a shortened form of the Jesus Prayer, used since the first centuries, “Lord, have mercy!” Through this response, as with the longer version of the Prayer, we affirm that it is indeed God who is the One and only ‘person’ who *can* have mercy on us and through His great loving kindness *does* have mercy on His people.

The Jesus Prayer is not a magic formulaic prayer. There are certainly other ways to pray and invoke the Name of Jesus. But there is strength in joining our voices with the voices of our Christian brothers and sisters through the ages who have prayed and continue in our own day to pray this very same prayer in all of the various languages of the earth where Orthodox Christians are present. And most important of all, God has shown throughout the history of this prayer that it can be a means of communicating His grace and presence to us at the same time that our souls are being united closer to Him.

Many Orthodox Christians wear a knotted bracelet or longer prayer rope, which is used to assist the one praying to focus. But again, the emphasis of the hesychast tradition is not on repetition, but rather on the Person to *Whom* we are continually speaking.<sup>10</sup>

The more that the ‘prayer of the heart’ becomes part of us, the more we become united to Christ. The Jesus Prayer is one of the effective tools that God has imparted to His Church to help us to commune with Him. As Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia writes, “The more the prayer becomes a part of ourselves, the more we enter into the movement of love which passes unceasingly between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” He then quotes from St. Isaac the Syrian, who provides for us a fitting conclusion for this lesson and the proper context for next week’s class, when we will discuss the Worship and Sacramental life of the Orthodox Church:

Love is the kingdom of which our Lord spoke symbolically when He promised His disciples that they would eat in His kingdom: ‘You shall eat and drink at the table of my kingdom.’ What should they eat, if not love?... When we have reached love, we have reached God and our way is ended: we have passed over to the island that lies beyond the world, where is the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit: to Whom be glory and dominion.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality* (Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Power in the Name*, 25.