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CALLED TO BE THE
CHILDREN OF GOD:
The Catholic Theology of
Human Deification

Ignatius Press

San Francisco

Introduction

The Apostolic and Catholic faith is the continuation, imitation and appropriation of Christ's own life. As important as ethical growth in virtue is, Christianity can never be a religion of law and moral bookkeeping. Rather, the new way of life in Christ is ultimately the essence of love: for the lover is never content simply gazing upon the beloved but longs to be mutually transformed into the other, thereby becoming no longer two but one. This is the heart of love, to find one's own eternal welfare in another. While it is commonplace for all Christians to stress God's becoming human—what theologians have named the “incarnation”—this book wants to show what happens when such love is returned, when we humans become God—what is referred to as “deification,” “divinization,” or the Greek term, “theosis.”

This collection of essays arose out of our mutual interest in the ancient Christian teaching that, as so many of the great Church Fathers expressed it, in Christ God becomes human so we humans can become divine. What this entails and why it is the absolute fulfillment of our unique humanity and not its absorption or annihilation, how this “becoming God” is realized through prayer and sacramental worship, and how the greatest thinkers of the Church have expressed this, is the purpose of the pages before you. Here you will find some of the Church's top scholars bringing their area of theological specialization to bear on the beauty of our call to become God's own divinely-adopted sons and daughters, to see our Christian life as the glory of Christ's now dwelling in and as each of his baptized members.

When the Church at Galatia found freedom too demanding and too indefinite, they sought to return to the old law. They found in the externals of the law control and

safety: there was no need for humility or vulnerability. Furthermore, the freedom found in charity was too ambiguous and bereft of the kind of certitude every religion before Christianity promised its adherents. The members of the Galatian Church were nostalgic for that day when they remained relatively in charge of their relationship with God; that is, by keeping the law they knew where they stood with God and could determine their own status as members of his sacred bond. The Torah prescribed 613 precepts (*mitzvot*) which the chosen people dutifully fulfilled so as to keep their covenant with God. It must have been quite shocking to learn from one of their own, Paul of Tarsus, that the law in fact had no longer had the ability to save.

Once God had become human, there was no other way back to God except through the human. No longer was the law the measure of one's relationship with God. Love of neighbor thus became the new measure by which one understood his or her relationship with God. Paul therefore writes that salvation is now a matter of allowing the God-man Jesus Christ to grow within one's soul, to inform all we think and say and do, to become other Christs as he has become one of us:

. . .through the law I died to the law, that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me (Gal 2:19–20).

By giving himself up for all who have fallen short of the law, Christ has come into this world not to reestablish a law-based religion but to offer his children the freedom of allowing him to live their life. Through Our Lady's *fiat*, God has come not only to us and for us, but he has come *as* one of us, sanctifying and thus offering us his very own divine life.

This is what the earliest Christian thinkers called the “great exchange.” In the incarnation the Son lowers himself to humanity so as to elevate humans to divinity. In his kenosis is our theosis. To explain this, could the Church enroll any more foundational theologians than St. Peter, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Athanasius, and St. Thomas Aquinas? This is precisely what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has done in §460 where it points us to the heart of the Faith by teaching that:

The Word became flesh to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4): “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God” (St. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.19.1). “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God” (St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* §54.3). “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusculum* §57.1–4).

Notice that the Christian understanding of deification is one of participating, of becoming a *partaker*, never the possessor, of divinity. That is, Christian deification is never an autonomous sovereignty but one of humble reliance on God to inform us of all we are, to fulfill that divine image and likeness originally implanted deep within every human soul. Christian deification is not a matter of autonomy as in Mormonism, but a matter of eternally *receiving* the divine attributes that Christ longs to give his saints burning: charity, true wisdom, unalloyed joy, incorruptibility and immortality.

While this phrase of our “becoming God” is ancient, this is just the message we need to place at the center of today’s call for a “New Evangelization.” As Blessed John Paul exhorted all of us today, the Church in the 21st century is to help others *duc in altum*, to “put out into the deep” (Lk 5:4), by seeing how the divine longings of their hearts will be satisfied only by the God for whom we are all made. We must present to the world a

Christ who rushes past our own sinfulness and shortfalls in order not only to heal and embrace us, but to transform us into himself. He sends us his own Holy Spirit and thereby adopts us into his own life, making us divinely-adopted sons and daughters, children of the same heavenly Father.

Accordingly, Blessed John Paul II rightly rooted the New Evangelization in the “Trinitarian shape” of the Christian life. He called us all to learn “this Trinitarian shape of Christian prayer and [to live] it fully, above all in the liturgy, the summit and source of the Church’s life, but also in personal experience.” This, John Paul argued, “is the secret of a truly vital Christianity, which has no reason to fear the future, because it returns continually to the sources and finds in them new life” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* §32). Eternally, the “Trinitarian shape” of the Christian life is the Father’s begetting of the Son in the Spirit; economically, it is the Spirit’s uniting us as adopted children in Christ before the same loving Father. As Maximus the Confessor once imagined this movement, “Because God has become human, humans can become God. He rises by divine steps corresponding to those by which God humbled himself out of love for us” (*Theological and Economic Chapters; Patrologia Graeca* 90.1165). The steps out of which the Son descends from heaven are the very means by which we ascend: love of God and love of neighbor. This is the new life promised by the ancient faith, the new life to be preached in the New Evangelization, life in Christ. Nothing else ultimately matters.

The fifteen essays that follow take the reader through the various figures and the varying ways the Christian theology of deification has been stressed in our tradition. We begin by offering our own insights into how humanity’s glorious transformation in Christ is expressed in both sacred scripture as well as in the first generation of Christian

thinkers, the Apostolic Fathers. Dr. Daniel Keating (Sacred Heart Seminary) next shows how theosis was the central metaphor by which the Greek Fathers presented the Christian life, Dr. Jared Ortiz (Hope College) concentrates on the Latin Fathers, while Fr. David Meconi, S.J. (Saint Louis University) provides the towering Church Father St. Augustine of Hippo with his own chapter. Next come the beginnings of medieval religious life with essays on divinization in St. Thomas Aquinas and the Dominican tradition by Fr. Andrew Hofer, O.P. (The Pontifical Faculty at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC) and in St. Francis, St. Clare and the Franciscans by Sr. M. Regina van den Berg, F.S.G.M. (Rome, Italy).

With the Council of Trent (1545–63), the Church began to synthesize and formulate doctrine anew; thus, in the next chapter, Dr. Chris Burgwald (Diocese of Sioux Falls) treats the Church's theology of deification during this time of the Counter-Reformation. From there, Dr. Michon Matthiesen (Providence College) introduces us to the unique strains of divinization as taught by the French School of Spirituality where the familiar voices of St. Francis de Sales, Thérèse of Lisieux and others come alive in a new way as we hear how they spoke of God's deifying grace. Oxford's eminent Fr. John Saward then takes us through the "Neo-Thomistic" revival of the 19th century. Two very important figures from that same century are given their own chapters, with Dr. Timothy Kelly (International Theological Institute) focusing on Matthew Scheeben and Dr. Daniel Lattier (Intellectual Takeout Institute) concentrating primarily on John Henry Cardinal Newman.

How divinization was being used to present the Catholic life in Christ between the end of Vatican I (1870) to the opening of the Second Vatican Council (1963) is examined

by Dr. Adam Cooper (University of Melbourne) while Dr. Tracey Rowland (John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family) treats Vatican II and the beautiful writings of Blessed John Paul II. Carl Olson (Ignatius Press) next shows how the theology of deification runs throughout the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and Dr. David Fagerberg (University of Notre Dame) rounds things off rightly with an examination of how Catholic liturgy is the means by which we today continue to receive and thus become Christ. Finally, we would like to thank Mr. Andrew Chronister of Saint Louis University's Department of Theology for his constant laboring in editing. His careful attention and intelligent suggestions are to be found on every page.

Fr. David Meconi, S.J.
Carl E. Olson, M.T.S.
15 August, 2013
Solemnity of Our Lady's Assumption

Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*

**“Conversion and Deification”
with guest, Father David Meconi, SJ**

***Called To Be the Children of God: The Catholic Theology of Deification* by Father David Meconi, SJ. Ignatius Press.**

***The One Christ: St. Augustine’s Theology of Deification* by Father David Meconi, SJ. The Catholic University of America Press. Available on www.amazon.com.**

*** *Jesus of Nazareth (Volume I)* by Pope Benedict XVI. Ignatius Press.**

*** *Gaudium et Spes – Vatican II. (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)* by Pope Paul VI. Pauline Books.**

*** *Catechism of the Catholic Church* by U.S. Catholic Church. USCCB Publishing.**

*** *Still Point: Loss, Longing, and Our Search for God* by Dr. Regis Martin. Ave Maria Press.**

*** *Consuming the Word: The New Testament and the Eucharist in the Early Church* * by Dr. Scott Hahn. Image Publishing.**

*** *Angels and Saints: A Biblical Guide to Friendship With God’s Holy Ones* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Image Publishing.**

*** *The Beggar’s Banquet: A Personal Retreat on Christ, His Mother, the Spiritual Life, and the Saints* by Dr. Regis Martin. Emmaus Road Publishing.**

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