

The Texts of the Convivium

FROM MERE SANCTIFICATION TO FULL AND TOTAL DEIFICATION

Saint John of the Cross, the supreme mystic of the Catholic Church, in order to express the essence of the soul, portrays it as a sort of “glass pane” through which a sun ray shines; the sun ray is in itself a symbol of the divine presence.

Let us go over the passage to see how he implies this idea in his words: “the soul – like a pane of glass is always fully exposed to the divine light – but when all veils or blots are gone... then it will give way to the divine light, thus the soul will be transformed in God (*Ascent to Mount Carmel* II, 4 (5)). Even though it remains a pane of glass: it is “herein that the soul becomes like unto God” (*Spiritual Canticle*, XXXIX, 3 (4)).

Here the classical idea of théosis or deification is resumed which the theology of the Eastern Christian Church indicated as the goal of ascesis.

However one may wonder: if one assumes that God donates himself to His creatures fully, and if we want to refer to this total effusion as deification, is it possible to limit such final goal to the mere acquisition of holiness?

A similar identification seems to me to be too restrictive, if compared with some very clear and strong expressions of which there is no shortage in the New Testament and in the whole Christian tradition, and which are mutually reinforcing.

Jesus who has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven is said to be seated at the right hand of the Father. This in itself conveys the idea that He is acquiring new and higher perfections, thereby growing in his divine nature.

By ascending to the Father, Jesus will take his seat next to His Father also for his disciples. “And so” he says “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14,3).

The whole body of disciples of Christ form together with Him a collective body, a human-cum-divine community, i.e. the Church. Jesus is the vine and they are the branches. And as the branches feed on the sap, so the disciples take their nourishment from Him, who is the head of this collective body (John 15, 1-5).

Jesus is God. He is the God who becomes man, so that man may become God, as is explained very concisely and effectively by Maximus the Confessor, one of the Fathers of the Eastern Christian Church.

Jesus receives all power from the Father. It is what the disciples receive, again from the Father, who come unto Him through the Son, who offers himself as the way unto the Father.

Thus every disciple will be able to do even greater things than those that the divine Master did in His life. Actually he draws from the Master that more powerful energy which he receives since, by ascending onto heaven, he has come to be seated at the right hand of His Father, that is to say in greater proximity with the Father himself.

Through Jesus the faithful receive the grace that makes them ever more perfect. Each and everyone, of course, is called upon to become more receptive and to cooperate.

Thus, the human condition improves. The bodily dimension of everyone, which extends the spiritual dimension, is perfected.

One may even conclude that, while souls live in close communion, and while every individual soul is extended in one’s individual physical body, the universe of matter

may be considered the common extension, the shared physical dimension of the whole body of human beings.

Those who believe in Jesus will do in Him, by His virtue, the same things and even greater things. He shall have such power as he will draw all energy from the Lord who is now one with the Father, seated on the right hand of the Father (John 14, 1 ff.).

The ultimate perfection which human beings shall be able to draw on through deification in its highest degree shall include every ability, including that to realize a perfect world. This is almightiness: almightiness which will then be fully realized while now it is simply virtual.

But let us go back to St. John of the Cross. We were saying that in order to express the essence of the soul, he portrays it as a sort of pane of glass through which a sun ray beams, a symbol, in itself of the divine presence.

Let us go over the passage to see how he implies this idea in his words: “the soul – like glass pane is always exposed to the divine light – but when all veils or blots are gone... the it will give way to the divine light, therefore the soul will be transformed in God (*Ascent to Mount Carmel* II, 4 (5). Even though it remains a pane of glass: it is “herein that the soul becomes like unto God” (*Spiritual Canticle*, XXXIX, 3 (4)).

Here the classical idea of théosis or deification is resumed, indicated by the theology of the Eastern Christian Church as the goal of asceticism.

Yet one may wonder: if one assumes that God donates himself to His creatures fully, and if we want to refer to this total effusion as deification, is it possible to limit such final goal to the mere acquisition of holiness?

A similar identification seems to me to be too restrictive, if I compare it with some very clear and strong expressions of which there is no shortage in the New Testament and in the whole Christian tradition, and which are mutually reinforcing.

Here, more specifically, I would like to recall a notion which is not so visible or not so explicit in biblical texts, which is expressed more clearly and obviously in the Divine Comedy. It does not seem to be completely new to the mentioned tradition and agrees with it fully.

In recalling what he saw when reaching the summit of heaven, Dante tries to portray it as follows:

“Oh abundant grace wherein I presumed
To fix my gaze on the eternal light so long
That I wearied my sight. Within its depth
I saw gathered in, bound by love in one volume,
The scattered leaves of all the universe: substance
And accidents and all their relations,
As though together fused, after such fashion
That what I tell is of one simple flame” .

“Substance” means every living being. “Accident” is everything that accides to or of everyone: every phenomenon or active manifestation or influence one has been under”.

“Together fused” means “united” as substances and their accidents are in the divine mind. This quotation from Dante vividly expresses the idea that the divine mind simultaneously contemplates all things and all events. Such is omniscience.

What more does Christianity, the Christian faith, give us? What does it offer us that is more specific?

I am trying to give myself an answer. I sense there is one here: the good news of Christianity, the *Eu Anghélion* or Gospel, is that the ultimate end of human evolution is

to become God. Man is a being who is – so to speak - learning to become God”.

It is a supreme objective which he pursues not out of his own choice, like Adam or later those who build the Tower of Babel (a very tall building which they wanted to reach far into the sky) but by God’s will.

This perfective goal is made possible by incarnation. *Cur Deus homo?* Why did God become man? Saint Maximus the Confessor, an eminent father of the Eastern Christian Church replies: God becomes man so that man can become God.

If we really want to emphasize all that is implicit in this “becoming God” we must conclude that deification entails not just holiness, but omniscience together with any possible and conceivable perfection.

These words try to give an idea of the extent to which – in the Christian view – God loves his creatures and is generous and self-giving.

Put it down to my ignorance, but with all due respect and appreciation I have for them, I can’t find in other religions a suggestion for a loftier ultimate goal for man.

By becoming man, God implements perfect humanity. Here nature prolongs humanity, therefore the perfection of mankind extends to nature, to the whole universe, its collective body. By becoming man God therefore makes not just humanity perfect in its spiritual aspects, but also the whole of creation.

The perfection of creation stems from the perfection of the Creator who cannot but work perfectly. Similar statements seem to be contradicted sometimes by so many appalling evils rife in the world.

One might object that divine action for the time being seems to be thwarted by several counterforces. They are the famous “gates of hell” which however “shall not prevail” (Matthew 16,18).

On the contrary, final victory belongs to God. In this sense God is almighty, endowed with virtual allmightiness.

In the end God shall be recognised and His “name” shall be sanctified by all creatures. His “reign” will extend everywhere to all levels of being. And His “will” shall prevail universally –“in earth” “as it is in heaven” which is His own Kingdom. On earth where that divine Kingdom, “which is not of this world” yet, will finally prevail (John, 18-36).

God becoming incarnate in man – in Jesus of Nazareth – extends to all other human beings until God becomes incarnate in the whole of humanity and in the whole of creation at all levels, in a completely new earthly and heavenly dimension.