

“YOU ARE GODS, SONS OF THE MOST HIGH”: Deification and Divine Filiation in St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Early Fathers

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I wish to pursue in this article the topic of baptism and its relation to our “sonship”—that is, to our becoming sons and daughters of God in Christ. I then want to take up the related topic of Christian deification, asking the question: Is deification properly a Christian doctrine? But I have chosen to follow the path of my own discovery, rather than simply present my conclusions in systematic form.

Sometimes it is more helpful to present, as it were, the final architectural drawing in its finished form. But at other times it is useful to show how one arrived at this final form, revealing the sketches along the way that led to the finished product. I am adopting the latter procedure in this case, because I think it will help give this topic a certain freshness and offer new insights that might not be as apparent if only the final form were presented.

I began my studies on St. Cyril of Alexandria (378–444 A.D.) some years ago with the rather vague notion of investigating his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. As I read through his writings with this aim in view, what I found was different from—and rather more than—what I had expected. I found myself needing to grapple, not just with Cyril’s pneumatology, but with his panoramic understanding of our salvation, following up various leads and seeking to put together in a coherent whole what he said about our share in the divine life of God.

Eventually this led me to the subject of deification. But the avenues that brought me to the subject of deification are crucial to how I understand and evaluate the controversial subject of deification. And so to begin, I will offer an abbreviated account of St. Cyril’s understanding of our salvation in Christ through the Spirit, and then move to consider deification and its value for Christian theology and practice.

One of the first things to strike the reader of Cyril’s New Testament biblical commentaries is the importance he places on Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River.¹ By the time Cyril comes to comment on it, the baptism of Jesus

¹ For a full treatment of the baptism of Jesus in Cyril, see Daniel A. Keating, “The Baptism of Jesus in Cyril of Alexandria: The Re-Creation of the Human Race,” *Pro Ecclesia* 8 (1999): 201–222.

already possessed a long and varied interpretative history in patristic theology. Cyril draws upon and develops this tradition in his own characteristic manner.²

The particular theological problem surrounding the baptism, especially for Church Fathers coming after the First Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), was a reading of this event that led to "adoptionism." According to the adoptionist account, Jesus' anointing by the Spirit was the event in which he *came to be* the Son of God. This, by implication, denied his eternal divine sonship.³ Given the potential problems that the baptism of Jesus raised in the post-Nicene climate, it is all the more remarkable that Cyril emphasizes the central importance of the baptism, even as he defends it against adoptionist readings.

In his *Commentary on John*,⁴ Cyril immediately draws our attention to the witness of the Baptist who says: "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven and it *remained* on him" (John 1:32). It is this word, "remain," that catches Cyril's eye. Cyril admits of course that the Spirit came upon many people in the Old Testament before the time of Christ. But it is only upon Christ, the New Adam, that the Spirit descends and *remains*. The abiding of the Spirit upon Christ at his baptism is qualitatively different from all other anointings of the Spirit that we see in the Scriptures before Christ. For Cyril, the baptism of Jesus is nothing less than the decisive return of the Holy Spirit to the human race for the sanctification of our nature.

Cyril reads the text of the baptism in the light of Paul's Adam-Christ typology (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:20–22, 44–49), enabling him to accomplish two ends at once. First, by viewing Christ as the representative man, Cyril resolves the exegetical *crux* of why Christ submitted to baptism. He did so not for himself—being the eternal Son of God he required nothing—but for our sake, as the first fruits of the new human race. Secondly, the Adam-Christ typology also enables Cyril to unfold the overall scope of the plan of redemption from this one event.

By viewing the baptism of Jesus in this light, Cyril transfers the significance of the text from Jesus' own career *per se* to a revelation of the redemption of the

2 For the baptism of Jesus in patristic thought, see Robert Wilken, "The Interpretation of the Baptism of Jesus in the Later Fathers," *Studia Patristica* 11 (1967): 268–277; Kilian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1997); and Sebastian P. Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," in his *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature and Theology* (Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1992), 15–23.

3 Gabriele Winkler, "A Remarkable Shift in the Fourth-Century Creeds: An Analysis of the Armenian, Syriac and Greek Evidence," *Studia Patristica* 17 (1982): 1396–1401, demonstrates how Jesus's baptism was progressively dropped from the creeds precisely in order to eliminate subordinationist readings of Jesus's relationship to the Father.

4 All quotations from Cyril, unless otherwise noted, are made by the author from *Sancti patris nostri Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini in d. Joannis Evangelium* [Our Holy Father Archbishop Cyril of Alexandria's Commentary on the Gospel of John] (hereafter, *In Jo.*), 3 vols., ed. P. E. Pusey, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1872). For Cyril's exegesis of the baptism of Jesus in John, see *In Jo.* 1:32–33, vol. 1, 174–190.

human race. Cyril envisages the Adam-Christ typology in such a way that Christ becomes, in his capacity as the Second Adam, not only the *agent* but also the *recipient* of redemption. On this view, the incarnation is more than an instrumental means whereby God has access to the human race and can accomplish a work of salvation upon us. By becoming a man, the eternal Word also carries out the work of redemption and recreation in himself, as representing in himself the new humanity.

Baptism and the New Temple of the Spirit

At his baptism, Christ is revealed as the new Temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells effectively, so that the Church, which is his body, can also become the Temple of the Holy Spirit, enabling each of us as well to become personal dwelling places of God in the Spirit. For Cyril, *the* true temple is the Word incarnate himself. Because it is the eternal Word—one who is truly God—who has become flesh, his very body is now the true Temple of God on earth (John 2:21). Cyril underlines that nowhere in the Scriptures previous to Christ is anyone called a “temple” of God—this is only true of Christ because he is God incarnate.⁵ But the Word has obviously taken our humanity as his temple, not for his own sake but for ours, so that we might become temples of the Holy Spirit within us (1 Cor. 6:19) and “become partakers of the divine nature.”⁶

The characteristic feature of Cyril’s exposition of Jesus’ baptism is the prominence he accords to the Holy Spirit in the narrative of salvation. He renarrates the opening chapters of Genesis in terms of the imparting of the indwelling Spirit to Adam and the subsequent flight of the Spirit due to the sin of Adam, or “the Fall.” He describes redemption, then, in terms of the reacquisition of the Spirit, signified by the dove descending on Jesus, finding in him a reliable and secure dwelling place, free from all sin. In turn, Jesus secures the Spirit for our sake, sanctifying the whole of our nature in himself.⁷

If the baptism of Jesus displays in a particularly poignant way the divine plan of salvation in Cyril, other mysteries in the life of Christ are essential for illuminating the completion of that plan. The crucial hinge text for Cyril is John 7:39, “For as yet the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”⁸ Cyril

5 See *In Jo.* 2:21–22, vol. 1, 212–13; 7:39, vol. 1, 696.

6 *In Jo.* 17:18–19, vol. 2, 722. For Cyril, Christ’s humanity itself remains pre-eminently the “Temple of God.” He is the Temple in the fullest sense, because his flesh becomes life-giving in the Eucharist, while our flesh does not give life in the same way (see *In Jo.* 6:57, vol. 1, 537). But because of our participation in Christ through the Holy Spirit received in baptism, we too are rightly called “temples of God” because God makes his effective abode in us.

7 Not all of this is new with Cyril, for discrete aspects of his exposition can be found in Irenaeus, Origen, and Athanasius before him. Yet the strikingly prominent place he accords to the gift, loss, and reacquisition of the Spirit surpasses what we find in their accounts.

8 For Cyril’s exegesis of John 7:39, see *In Jo.* 7:39, vol. 1, 690–698.

begins his explanation of John 7:39 by admitting first of all (as Augustine does) that the Spirit was plainly at work in the prophets and others before the glorification of Christ, and then asking in what possible sense the Spirit was “not yet given” until after Christ’s resurrection. In answer, he recounts the creation of Adam and traces the entire narrative of salvation in broad strokes, leading to the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, the new Adam.

Cyril offers what can be described as a “narrative of the Holy Spirit” in the economy of salvation. According to this narrative, the breathing of life into Adam (Gen. 2:7) is nothing other than the gift of the indwelling Spirit. Adam and his descendants drove away and lost this same Spirit through the progressive sin of the human race.⁹ And though the Spirit was plainly active throughout the history recorded in the Old Testament, it was only in Christ himself, the New Adam, that the Spirit came once again to dwell effectively in the human race. Christ received the Holy Spirit as man for our sake, Cyril tells us, so that the Spirit might once again inhabit our humanity and cause us to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).

But why, for Cyril, is the Holy Spirit not given in this full sense until Christ’s glorification? First, since Christ became the first fruits of our renewed nature only at the time of his resurrection, it would be impossible for us, as “the plant,” to be seen springing forth before “the root,” the resurrected Christ. In Cyril’s view, our human nature is only fully renewed in Christ’s resurrection, thus marking out the boundary line for our reception of the Spirit. Our humanity needed to be fully renewed in Christ in order to provide a proper dwelling place for the Spirit.

Second, the gift of the Spirit, dependent on Christ’s resurrection, is genuinely new, different *in kind* from the activity of the Spirit in the Old Testament. To show this, Cyril points us to Matthew 11:11, where Jesus calls the least in the Kingdom of Heaven greater than John the Baptist. For the prophets, the Spirit was a light and illumination, but among those in the Kingdom of Heaven, the Spirit “himself dwells and has his habitation.”

Cyril draws the distinction between the old and the new covenants precisely in terms of the abiding gift of the Holy Spirit. Notably, he says that our new birth into the Kingdom of God occurs not by “grace alone,” but by “God indwelling and taking up his abode within us” through the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ And this, he concludes, is the meaning of John’s statement that “the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” The evangelist is signifying nothing less than “the complete and entire dwelling of the Holy Spirit in human beings.”¹¹

To complete Cyril’s narrative of salvation, we need to look briefly at how he handles the gift of the Spirit breathed upon the disciples in John 20:22 and how he

9 Here Cyril cites Gen. 6:3 in support.

10 *In Jo.* 1:12–14a, vol. 1, 137.

11 *In Jo.* 7:39, vol. 1, 696–698.

understands the purpose of the ascension of Christ referred to in John 16:17. Why, Cyril asks, does Christ “breathe” the Spirit on the apostles on Easter Day? He does so in order to reveal that the recreation of the human race follows the pattern of the original creation, and also to show that Christ as the New Adam is also the one who gives the Spirit. This is how Cyril puts it:

Therefore, in order that we might learn that it is *this* one who was the Creator of our nature in the beginning, and who sealed us by the Holy Spirit, the Savior again bestows the Spirit for us through a visible inbreathing on the holy disciples, as on the first fruits of our renewed nature. For Moses writes concerning our creation of old, that he breathed into his face the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). As therefore from the beginning he was fashioned and came to be, so too is he renewed. And just as then he was formed in the image of his creator, so too now, through participation in the Spirit, he is refashioned to the likeness of his maker.¹²

The same one (Christ Jesus) featured as the *recipient* of the Spirit at his baptism is now prominently displayed as the *giver* of the Spirit. The two-fold reality of Christ as the Second Adam appears here. As the Spirit was breathed into Adam, so the Spirit returns upon the Second Adam at the Jordan, Christ receiving it as a first fruits for us. But Christ as the Second Adam is also a “life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:49), and so is the one who imparts the Spirit to his apostles, as the first fruits of his Church.

For Cyril, however, the endpoint of Christ’s representative role does not end here. It is completed only with his ascension and enthronement to the right hand of the Father.

[Christ] places us in the presence of the Father, having departed into heaven as the first fruits of humanity. For just as, being himself Life by nature, he is said to have died and risen again for our sake, so too, ever beholding his own Father, and in turn also being seen by his own Father, he is said to be manifested now (that is, when he became man, not for his own sake but for us) as man. And therefore this one thing was seen to be lacking in his dispensation towards us, our ascension into heaven itself, as in Christ, the first fruits and the first [of all].¹³

The significance of the mystery of the ascension for Cyril resides in Christ ascending, interceding, and reigning *as man*, as the first fruits of our ascension to

¹² In Jo. 20:22, vol. 3, 135.

¹³ In Jo. 16:17, vol. 2, 619.

come. In Christ's fully restored human nature now in the presence of the Father the divine purpose for the whole human race is revealed and perfected in the first fruits.

This, in highly abbreviated form, is the outline of Cyril's account of our salvation in Christ as the first fruits. The mystery of the baptism of Jesus plays a pivotal role here, but only in concert with all the mysteries linked together.

Salvation and Filial Adoption

What I do not have the time to develop here is how Cyril unfolds from this narrative of salvation his account of how we are adopted as "sons and daughters" of God through the Spirit.¹⁴ He offers a very rich account of our filial adoption as sons and daughters, primarily through the coordinated means of baptism and the Eucharist, and then unfolds a vision of the moral life and the virtues grounded in the example of Christ himself. In lieu of the fuller development, let me offer three conclusions regarding Cyril's account of our adoptive sonship in Christ.

The principal and foundational conclusion is this: for Cyril a full and comprehensive account of the appropriation of divine life must include the human reception of, and progress in, this divine life. Human response and the moral life are not merely tacked on to a theological account that begins and ends with divine action through the Word. Divine initiative possesses both temporal and theological priority, but human response is essential for the effective reception of what the Father has accomplished in Christ through the Spirit.

Second, Cyril's account of the human reception of divine life is exceptionally well christologically grounded and centered. Christ is the agent of divine life and salvation, being Life himself, and accomplishes the restoration of human nature in himself. But he is also the pattern for *our* human reception of the divine life as man, first for our reception of the Spirit, and also for our response of love and obedience to the Father, and for a way of life conformed to the Father through himself. In other words, Christ is both the agent of our redemption and the primary exemplar for how we as human beings are made new and refashioned into the image and likeness of God.

The third and final conclusion concerns the dynamic outworking of the divine life in us: the gift of divine life, in cooperation with our own free response, yields a divine way of life and ushers in a progressive sanctification aimed at the perfection of the divine image in us. Cyril conceives of our growth into the image of God as rooted in the life-giving sap of the Spirit that flows from our union with Christ through faith and love. This union is productive of a variety of fruits: good works, manifold virtue, a life of godliness, and a share in the mission of Christ to the world. Cyril does not offer a technically drafted account of the spiritual life, or

14 For a thorough discussion, see Daniel A. Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003).

a theory of spiritual growth.¹⁵ But building upon biblical metaphors and examples in the life of Christ, he displays a high degree of confidence in the spiritual fruitfulness available to us in this life as sons and daughters of God.

This study of Cyril's understanding of salvation led me (and in fact required me) to address the issue of the doctrine of deification in Cyril. Cyril does in fact employ the characteristic vocabulary of divinization,¹⁶ but I have been able to locate only about twenty instances of the terms in his massive corpus, many of them appearing in one early work on the Trinity (the *Thesaurus*). For someone often hailed as the theologian of deification *par excellence*, it is instructive that he used the technical vocabulary rather sparingly. Why was he so cautious about using the terminology he inherited from Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus? I believe that under the press of anthropomorphite teaching about God in the early fifth century, and due to the polemics of the Nestorian controversy, Cyril largely refrained from using the characteristic terminology of deification, and instead more commonly employed the classic text from 2 Pet. 1:4 (that we have become "partakers of the divine nature") as his summary statement of deification.¹⁷

Cyril's teaching on deification may be understood in two senses, the first a strict and narrower sense, the second a broad and more comprehensive one. In the strict sense, deification is the impartation of divine life effected in us through the agency of the indwelling Spirit in baptism and through Christ's life-giving flesh in the Eucharist. Properly speaking, *Christ in us*—through his Spirit and his life-giving flesh—is the source and ground of our deification, accomplishing our justification, our sanctification, our divine filiation, and our participation in the divine nature. In the broad and more comprehensive sense, deification includes our progressive growth into the divine image. If for Cyril our deification is preeminently God's life implanted in us, bringing about the full spiritualization of human nature, it cannot be dissociated from our free and faith-filled response to God and our growth in virtue through obedience to the divine commands, yielding a way

15 Perhaps Cyril's most programmatic account of growth in the divine life appears in his *Letter to the Monks of Egypt*, where he comments on the stepwise path to holiness drawn from 2 Pet. 1:5–8: "And on my part I say that those who have chosen to tread that illustrious path of the spiritual life in Christ, that path we ought to love so much, must first of all be adorned with a simple and pristine faith, and then add to it virtue, and when this is done, try to gather the riches of the knowledge of the mystery of Christ, and strive vigorously for perfect understanding. For this, I think, is what it means to 'arrive at the perfect man, and reach the measure of the state of the fullness of Christ' (Eph. 4:13). Text in John Anthony McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 23 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 2004), 246.

16 For the development of the technical vocabulary of deification in Christian sources, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), 333–344.

17 As far as I can determine, Cyril cites or alludes to 2 Pet. 1:4 far more frequently than any other Christian author in antiquity.

of life pleasing to God. Without our free adherence of faith and progress in virtue through obedience it is no longer human life in its entirety that is divinized.

It is fitting to offer the following selection in order to conclude and sum up Cyril's magnificent understanding of our share in the divine life of the Trinity as sons and daughters of God. In it we find a densely constructed account of the Trinity, of creation, of the incarnation of the Word, and of the sanctifying work of the Spirit, all put at the service of the gift of divine life and sonship to the human race:

It was not otherwise possible for man, being of a nature which perishes, to escape death, unless he recovered that ancient grace, and partook once more of God who holds all things together in being and preserves them in life through the Son in the Spirit. Therefore his only-begotten Word has become a partaker of flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14), that is, he has become man, though being Life by nature, and begotten of the Life that is by nature, that is, of God the Father, so that, having united himself with the flesh which perishes according to the law of its own nature ... he might restore it to his own life and render it through himself a partaker of God the Father. ... And he wears our nature, refashioning it to his own life. And he himself is also in us, for we have all become partakers of him, and have him in ourselves through the Spirit. For this reason we have become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1: 4), and are reckoned as sons, and so too have in ourselves the Father himself through the Son.¹⁸

The "Doctrine" of Deification: Is it Christian?

At a certain point in my study of Cyril, I began to ask how this impressive account of our divine filiation through Christ in the Spirit compared with other accounts by significant patristic authors, especially those in the Western tradition. This led me eventually to compare Cyril's account with that of Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428 A.D.), St. Augustine (350–430), and Pope St. Leo the Great (d. 451), respectively. Subsequent to this, I began to read and study St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) more fully (both his *Summa Theologiae* and his biblical commentaries), and ask whether aspects of this account of deified life in Christ can be found in his thought.

What I found (with the single exception of Theodore) are striking similarities on the basic outline and understanding of our salvation, amidst of course many smaller differences and individual features. What I hope to do now is to offer an outline of the doctrine of deification as I have found it in the Tradition, handling

¹⁸ In Jo. 14:20, vol. 2, 485–486.

certain recurring objections along the way, and conclude with the need for a more thorough and accurate presentation of the doctrine of deification today.

There is no better place to begin an investigation of deification than with what is commonly termed the “formula of exchange” (often designated in the Christian tradition as the *admirabile commercium* [literally, “the wonderful exchange”]). In essence, this formula states that the eternal Son of God became what we are so that we could become what he is. There is no single established formula—each author who employs this paradoxical expression devises his own version. The earliest examples come from St. Irenaeus about 175–185 A.D. Irenaeus is considered the originator of this way of summarizing our redemption.

For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and he who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.¹⁹

But (we follow) the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself.²⁰

Norman Russell identifies this Irenaean principle as the “fundamental tenet” of the Christian doctrine of deification.²¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar describes the formula of exchange as the “fundamental approach” to the doctrine of salvation found in the Church Fathers.²²

Following Irenaeus—and probably dependent upon him—we find wide attestation to this formula throughout the patristic period. It is noteworthy that some form of this expression can be found in writers from Alexandria, Constantinople, Antioch, Syria, North Africa, and Rome. A selection of these witnesses, varying widely in expression, will show just how widespread was this manner of summing up the content of Christian faith.

St. Clement of Alexandria, in the third century, writes that “the Word of God became man, that you may learn from man how man may become God.”²³ St. Athanasius of Alexandria, writing in the fourth century, made the formula of

19 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* Bk. 3, Chap. 19, 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 448.

20 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Bk. 5, Preface, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 526.

21 Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 321.

22 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 244.

23 Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation*, Bk. 1, Chap. 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 174.

exchange of key part of his anti-Arian theology: "For he was made man that we might be made God," and "he himself has made us sons of the Father, and deified men by becoming himself man."²⁴

From the Cappadocian fathers of the fourth century we hear the same message. St. Gregory of Nazianzus exhorts his hearers: "Let us become as Christ is, since Christ became as we are; let us become gods for his sake, since he became man for our sake."²⁵ St. Gregory of Nyssa argues that the Word became incarnate "so that by becoming as we are, he might make us as he is."²⁶ In the late fourth century, the Antiochene St. John Chrysostom teaches that "he became Son of man, who was God's own Son, in order that he might make the sons of men to be children of God."²⁷ And St. Ephrem the Syrian, also writing in the fourth century, adds his own terse formulation of this truth: "He gave us divinity, we gave him humanity."²⁸

The formula of exchange is widely attested also in the West. In the fourth century, St. Hilary of Poitiers offers his own twist on this expression: "For when God was born to be man the purpose was not that the Godhead should be lost, but that, the Godhead remaining, man should be born to be god."²⁹ St. Ambrose of Milan, also in the fourth century utilizes the exchange formula to show how the eternal Son became what he was not in order to bring us to what he was:

For [the Son] took on him that which he was not that he might hide that which he was; he hid that which he was that he might be tempted in it, and that which he was not might be redeemed, in order that he might call us by means of that which he was not to that which he was.³⁰

Augustine employs some form of this expression on numerous occasions.

24 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 4, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 65; *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, Dis. 1, 38, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, 329.

25 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 1, 5, quoted in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 215.

26 Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Apollinaris*, 11, quoted in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 229.

27 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Hom. 11, 1, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, vol. 14, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 38.

28 Ephrem of Syria, *Hymns on Faith*, Hymn 5, 7, quoted in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 322.

29 Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, Book 10, 7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene*, Second Series, vol. 9, 183–184.

30 Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit* Bk. 1, Chap. 9, 107, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene*, Second Series, vol. 10, 107.

God wanted to be the Son of Man and he wanted men to be the sons of God.

The Son of God [became] the Son of man that he might make the sons of men the sons of God.

For this thing God does, out of sons of men he makes sons of God: because out of Son of God he has made Son of Man. ... For the Son of God has been made partaker of mortality, in order that mortal man may be made partaker of divinity.³¹

In the fifth century, Pope St. Leo adds the testimony of Rome:

[The Savior] was made the son of man, so that we could be the sons of God.

He united humanity to himself in such a way that he remained God, unchangeable. He imparted divinity to human beings in such a way that he did not destroy, but enriched them, by glorification.³²

Witness to this formula appears also in the writings of major theologians, both East and West, of later centuries. In the East we find some version of this formula in St. Maximus the Confessor (seventh century), St. John of Damascus (seventh-eighth centuries), and Symeon the New Theologian (tenth and eleventh centuries). Thomas Aquinas shows that this formula was alive and well in the Latin Middle Ages:

The only-begotten Son of God, wishing to make us sharers in his divine nature, assumed our nature, so that made man he might make men gods.³³

31 Augustine, *Tractates in John*, Trac. 12, 8, in St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 11–27*, trans. John W. Rettig, *The Fathers of the Church* 79 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1988), 36; *Tractates in John*, Trac. 21, 1, in *Tractates on John 11–27*, 179; *Expositions on the Psalms*, Ps. 52, 5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene*, First Series, vol. 8, 204 (translation slightly adjusted).

32 Pope St. Leo, *Sermon* 26, 2 (my translation); *Sermon* 91, 2, in St. Leo the Great: *Sermons*, trans. Jane P. Freeland and Agnes J. Conway, *The Fathers of the Church* 93 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1996), 384.

33 Thomas Aquinas, *Opuscula* [Minor Work] 57, cited in Andrew Louth, “Manhood into God: The Oxford Movement, the Fathers and the Deification of Man,” in *Essays Catholic and Radical*, eds. Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams (London: Bowerdean, 1983), 74.

For the human mind and will could never imagine, understand or ask that God become man, and that man become God and a sharer in the divine nature. But he has done this in us by his power, and it was accomplished in the Incarnation of his Son: "That you may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).³⁴

To note just one example in the modern period, Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) provides us with a contemporary restatement of this exchange at the heart of the Gospel: "This exchange consists of God taking our human existence on himself in order to bestow his divine existence on us, of his choosing our nothingness in order to give his plenitude."³⁵

"You Are Gods, Sons of the Most High"

When studied in context, it is clear that the formula of exchange in the Fathers is directly dependent upon the scriptural witness. Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 8:9—"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor, though being rich, so that by his poverty you may become rich"—provides the logic for the idea of exchange.³⁶

The key texts on sonship (Gal. 4:4–6; Rom. 8:14–17, 29; 1 John 3:1–2), in conjunction with the texts on Christ as the New Adam and our transformation into his image (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:44–49; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 1:10) supply the primary biblical foundation and framework for the formula that the Son of God became as we are, so that we might become as he is. By asserting that "the Son of God became the Son of Man, so that the sons of men might become the sons of God," the Fathers were attempting to sum up the scriptural testimony concerning our redemption.

Christ, by virtue of his divine-human constitution and by means of his saving actions, is the center and locus of that redemption. He is the Second Adam who renews our nature in himself, thus inaugurating a new humanity, and breathes his Spirit into us, causing us to be adopted as sons of the Father. By means of the indwelling of God, we are set on a course in which we freely cooperate, to be conformed to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:29). It is only in the life of the age to come that this transformation will be completed, and we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

This account of our redemption embraces the full expanse of the biblical narrative, from Adam to Christ and the glory that awaits us in the new creation. It

34 Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians* 3:19 [182], in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. and intro. Matthew L. Lamb (Albany, NY: Magi, 1966), 147.

35 Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1985), 84.

36 My translation.

incorporates the victory of Christ over the enemies and ills that beset the human race: the power of indwelling sin, the slavery of the devil, and the curse of death on our nature. And it is both christocentric and trinitarian: the Father sends his Son in our fallen humanity, to redeem the human race and to win for us adoptive sonship through the Spirit.

At this point the question may reasonably be asked: How did we move from this account of the redemption of our nature in Christ to the language of deification? Why was this language employed, and how was it warranted? There has been a longstanding judgment by critics that both the language and concept of deification were foreign intrusions into the Christian faith from the world of Greek philosophy and the mystery religions of the ancient world. This was famously argued by Adolf von Harnack and others continue to revisit this case against the notion of Christian deification.³⁷ The early Christians certainly were aware of—and normally quite critical of—the various religious and philosophical currents of their day. In defense of the Fathers against this charge, Norman Russell and other scholars of the history of deification argue that the Christian teaching on deification was quite distinct, both in content and vocabulary, from other varieties.³⁸ It was a counter-proposal to Greco-Roman views rather than a capitulation to them.³⁹

On close inspection, one finds that the early Christians who used the terminology of deification, far from being simple enthusiasts for ideas and concepts drawn from Greek thought and religion, were attempting to describe a biblical account of our filiation in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In fact the specifically Jewish context may be even more significant than the Greco-Roman environment for the emergence of the notion of deification in Christianity.⁴⁰ And surprisingly, a short text from the Old Testament, Psalm 82:6, turns out to be the primary spur and warrant for the development of the technical terminology of deification.

In the Greek text of Psalm 82, the Lord God stands in the assembly “of the gods” and gives judgment against them (verse 1). In verses 6–7, he addresses his auditors as both “gods” and “sons of the Most High,” who will nevertheless die like (mere) men because of their failure to judge in righteousness. The specific warrant

37 See Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 2, trans. Neil Buchanan (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), 10–11, 317–18. For a more contemporary version of this critique, see Benjamin Drewery, “Deification,” in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp*, ed. Peter Brooks (London: SCM, 1975), 33–62.

38 Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 52; see also Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul A. Onica (Anaheim: A & C, 2002), 2.

39 Balthasar concludes that the exchange formula “is not due to some irruption of Greek thought into the biblical milieu: it results from the effort made to secure the full soteriological meaning of the New Testament’s *pro nobis*.” *Theo-Drama*, 4:245.

40 Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian*, 7–79; Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 53–78.

for applying the terms “gods” in Psalm 82:6 to human beings is the testimony of Jesus himself in John 10:34–35.

There, Jesus reasons that if Scripture calls “gods” those to whom the word of God came, then he (Jesus, the one sent directly from the Father) should not be condemned for calling himself “the Son of God.” What is important in both the psalm and in Jesus’ citation of it is the coincidence of the terms “gods” and “sons”. It is precisely because of this coincidence that the early Fathers saw in this psalm a shorthand account of our destiny in Christ, and hence believed themselves warranted to identify as “gods” those who are “the sons of God” through Christ.

This is just how the second-century Christian apologist, St. Justin Martyr, interprets Psalm 82:6 in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. He cites these verses to show that Christians are truly children of God, and he reads the psalm in its entirety as a prophecy of what is proclaimed in John 1:12–13—that through Christ we have been given the power to become children of God.⁴¹ In the same way, Irenaeus cites Psalm 82 as designating our graced adoptive sonship in Christ:

And again: “God stood in the congregation of the gods, he judges among the gods.” He [here] refers to the Father and the Son, and those who have received the adoption; but these are the Church. For she is the synagogue of God, which God—that is, the Son himself—has gathered by himself. . . . But of what gods [does he speak]? [Of those] to whom he says, “I have said, you are gods, and all sons of the Most High.” To those, no doubt, who have received the grace of the “adoption, by which we cry, *Abba, Father*” (Rom. 8:15).⁴²

The same application of this psalm can be found in Clement of Alexandria, who is importantly the first Christian author to employ the language of deification.⁴³ It is noteworthy for our subject here that in all these early instances, Psalm 82 is linked to our becoming “gods” (that is, “sons and daughters of God”) through the agency of Christian baptism.

What conclusions can we draw from these early Christian testimonies to the interpretation of Psalm 82:6? First, the application of the psalm to our filial adoption in Christ predates—and is also concurrent with—the appearance of

41 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chap. 124, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 261–262. For this reading of Justin, see Carl Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretation of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origins of Christian Deification,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 56 (2005): 35–41.

42 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* Bk. 3, Chap. 6, 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 419. For other citations of Ps. 82:6 in Irenaeus, see *Against the Heresies*, Bk. 3, Chap. 19, 1; Bk. 4, Chap. 38, 4.

43 Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, Bk. 1, Chap. 6, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, 215. For Clement’s use of Ps. 82:6, see Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretation of Psalm 82,” 54–58.

the technical terminology of deification in Christian writers. It was precisely the Christian adaptation of this psalm, very probably building on an earlier Jewish exegesis, that ushered in the practice of identifying Christians as “gods.”

Secondly, the pairing of “gods” and “sons of the Most High” in Psalm 82:6 supplied the early Church with a biblical bridge between our adoptive sonship and our being called “gods” in a clearly defined and delimited way. What does it mean that Christians are called “gods”? It means exactly what the New Testament teaches about our being “sons of God” through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. And how did all this come to pass? “The Son of God became the son of man, in order to enable the sons of men to become sons of God.” In a majority of cases, the technical terminology of deification in the early Church describes just this: our becoming “sons of God” by grace. The formula of exchange and the language of deification are two ways of expressing the same reality.

Deification in the Tradition: Some Conclusions and Consequences

In the light of this overview of the origins of the doctrine of deification in the fathers, I would like to offer three conclusions that can guide our efforts to speak and teach about deification. The first is that the doctrine of deification is (and must be) grounded in and closely aligned with the Scripture. Deification in its fundamental form emerged, not primarily as a speculative exercise aimed at harmonizing Greek thought with Christian faith, but as the expression of Christian belief in the face of various unorthodox accounts that threatened that faith. It was the Gnostic challenge of the second and third centuries, and the Arian crisis of the fourth, that gave rise to the classic concepts and language of deification. In other words, the doctrine of deification arose from the Church’s hard-fought efforts to interpret the Scriptures rightly in the face of alternative interpretations of those same Scriptures. It is important when teaching on deification to show how it derives from and synthesizes the scriptural testimony to our “sonship” in Christ.

A second conclusion, closely related to the first, is that the doctrine of deification is not the patrimony of the Eastern Church alone, or an eccentricity of certain schools of Western theology. Rather, deification concerns the basic economy of God in Christ through the Spirit that is at the patristic root of both the Eastern and Western theological traditions. Despite real differences between schools of thought and individual writers, there is a remarkable convergence on the substance of the doctrine of deification between the Eastern and Western traditions. Though the doctrine of deification has occupied a much larger role in the language and piety of the East than of the West, it is also a teaching solidly rooted in the Western tradition.

The third conclusion is that a theological account of Christian deification must be firmly embedded within classical Christian doctrine and the creedal confession of the Church. Deification is not something unto itself, and does not stand

alone. It needs to be understood and taught in close correlation with justification, sanctification, filial adoption, regeneration, grace-filled union, transformation, and so forth. Deification is a kind of summary term that expresses all that God intends for us in Christ through the Spirit.

There is, it must be acknowledged, a persistent and recurring objection to the idea of deification in Christian theology. This concern arises principally within Protestant circles, but Catholic theologians and philosophers also worry about this potential implication of some versions of the doctrine of deification. Here is a strong form of the objection: Does the doctrine of deification, by means of its elevated and potentially exaggerated rhetoric, effectively compromise the fundamental distinction between God and the created order, and so lead explicitly or implicitly to a form of pantheism?

To restate the question against the backdrop of contemporary religious movements: Doesn't the notion of deification play into the hands of those religious movements that claim, "you yourself are God," and so refuse to recognize any sovereign and transcendent God deserving of our worship and obedience? The answer given by the Christian tradition is a resounding "No." These concerns are not new—they were present from the very beginning of discussion of deification in the Church. Clear distinctions were set in place to ensure that talk of deification would not fall prey to pantheism or fail to uphold the transcendence of the divine nature. Properly understood, the Christian doctrine of deification not only maintains the distinction between God and the created order, but is premised on it. Christian deification dissolves if the fundamental difference between what is divine and what is human is compromised.⁴⁴

The primary statement in the Christian tradition that upholds this difference takes some form of the saying, "we become gods, not by nature, but by grace." A few examples from the chorus of voices that attest to this position will suffice. In the East, Athanasius has this to say: "Wherefore [the Word] is very God, existing one in essence with the very Father; while other beings, to whom he said, 'I said you are gods' (Ps. 82:6), had this grace from the Father, only by participation in the Word, through the Spirit."⁴⁵ From the West, Augustine is particularly eloquent on this point. He consistently states that our share in the divine life—by grace and not by nature—is distinct from Christ's natural divinity.

44 To fully defend and explain this claim, an understanding of the concept of "participation" in the Fathers and in Aquinas is necessary. For a brief account of the concept of participation, see Daniel A. Keating, *Deification and Grace* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 97–104.

45 Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, Dis. 1, 9, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 4, 311.

It is evident, then, as he has called men gods, that they are deified by his grace, not born of his substance. ... If we have been made sons of God, we have also been made gods: but this is the effect of grace adopting, not of nature generating.⁴⁶

But let no one believe about the only-begotten Son what he believes about those who were called the children of God according to grace, not nature, as the evangelist said, "He gave them power to be made children of God" (John 1:12). On this same point, the Lord himself recalled what was said in the Law: "I have said, 'you are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High'" (Ps. 82:6).⁴⁷

And finally this from Aquinas, when he is explaining how and in what sense Christ loved his disciples as the Father loved him (John 15:9):

For [Christ] did not love them to the point of their being gods by nature, nor to the point that they would be united to God so as to form one person with him. But he did love them up to a similar point: he loved them to the extent that they would be gods by their participation in grace—"I say you are gods" (Ps. 82:6); "He has granted to us precious and very great promises, that through these you may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).⁴⁸

Divinization and Deification in Catholic Teaching

It is quite notable that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* uses the language of deification and cites some of the very texts that we have been looking at here. The article on the incarnation, while not using the term "deification" explicitly, cites 2 Peter 1:4 (an important text for deification), and makes reference to the classic patristic "formula of exchange" that lies at the root of the doctrine of deification:

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,

46 Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, Ps. 49, 2, cited in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 331.

47 Augustine, *Tractates in John*, Trac. 54, 2, in St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 28–54, trans. John W. Rettig, Fathers of the Church 88 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1993), 302.

48 Aquinas, *Commentary on John* 15:9–13 [1999], in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, vol. 2, trans. and intro. James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's, 1999), 397.

might become a son of God" [Irenaeus]. "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God" [Athanasius]. "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" [Thomas Aquinas].⁴⁹

But it is also quite noteworthy that the *Catechism* does not explain what all this means—it relies largely on simple citation. And when it does use the term "divinize," it supplies little description of what the term means. Man in original innocence is said to be in a state of holiness and "destined to be fully 'divinized' by God in glory," but we are not told what this divinization (either partial or full) entails.⁵⁰ On three occasions, the term "divinize" is found in citations of the Greek fathers, without further explanation.⁵¹ The fullest sense of deification appears in a paragraph where the grace of Christ is identified as "the *sanctifying* or *deifying* grace received in Baptism" (emphasis in original).⁵² Here deification is placed in parallel with sanctification, and located at the point of baptism. As we have seen, this is just how the fathers locate and understand deification.

One day in class a student approached me with a copy of the *Catechism* open in her hands. She pointed to the article on the "formula of exchange,"⁵³ and asked in a somewhat exasperated voice, "What does this mean?" The *Catechism* itself does not provide a direct answer. Given this situation, I believe there is need for a sound catechesis on the meaning of "deification" or "divinization" today—first among those trained in theology, and then something simpler for all readers of the *Catechism*. If this is done with care, it can open our eyes to see more deeply into the riches of what is ours from the Father in Christ through the Spirit.

Deification, rightly understood, ensures that our understanding of "sanctification" does not stop short at cleansing and purification from sin; that sanctification has as its end and goal communion with God himself brought about by his direct agency. It ensures that our understanding of salvation is nothing short of the union with God that we were created for, and that our creaturely destiny is found in direct relationship with the eternal God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A proper Christian account of deification also undercuts the tendency of our age towards idolatry, towards making ourselves gods or identifying ourselves

49 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 460.

50 *Catechism*, no. 398.

51 In *Catechism*, no. 1589, Gregory of Nazianzus states that the priest of Christ is "divinized and divinizes." In *Catechism*, no. 1988, Athanasius links our divinization with the gift of the indwelling Spirit; and in *Catechism*, no. 2670, Gregory of Nazianzus claims that we are divinized by the Spirit in baptism.

52 *Catechism*, no. 1999.

53 *Catechism*, no. 460.

as God. Unlike Adam and Eve who succumbed to the temptation to become “like God” on their own terms, we become “sons of God” and “gods” only in Jesus Christ, the true Son and image of God. Through deification, we are not enabled to become “gods” on our own and to achieve equal status with God. Rather, we are called to be gods by *participating* in God himself, by being joined to the incarnate Word through the Spirit. Accurately presented, deification reminds us that in Christ we remain the creatures that we are, yet find our joy and delight in being elevated by grace to communion with God and participation in his life and power.

The doctrine of deification enhances the doctrine of the incarnation, and consequently of the Trinity and the divine economy of the Father in Christ through the Spirit. It reminds us that there is no bypassing the incarnation or making it a temporary stage on the way to things higher. The incarnate Word remains the central locus of our salvation and deification—and our creaturely participation in the divine life is always mediated by being in Christ and members of his body.

We are “sons and daughters in the Son” and are deified to the degree that we are found in, and transformed into the image of, Christ himself. The primary warrant, then, for Christian deification is that it ensures and enhances the full biblical revelation of our call: to become sons and daughters formed in the image of Christ; to be temples of the Holy Spirit and members of the household of God; to live in direct and eternal communion with the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.