

## THE PERFECTION OR MYSTICAL UNION AT THE CAPPADOCIAN SAINTS BASIL THE GREAT AND GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN

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### ABSTRACT

*The Holy Three Hierarchs, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, have remained in the consciousness of posterity as teachers and luminaries of the entire Christian Church, especially thanks to the essential contribution they had to the elaboration of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the true theognosy. At the same time, the development of the Christian teaching on perfection or deification (Gr. theosis), especially by St. Basil and St. Gregory, is a turning point for the patristic vision of man. "Man," said St. Basil, "is a creature who has received the command to become a god." But this commandment, addressed to human freedom, is not a constraint. As a personal being, man can accept or reject the will of God. The Cappadocian saints emphasize the attainment of likeness to God through imitation: for them, Christianity means nothing more than imitating the life in the flesh of Christ. We imitate God by practicing virtues and by enclothing with Christ. Baptism means the beginning of deification and tears purify like a new flood, when they come out of loving mercy. Through the Eucharist one participates to the death and resurrection of Christ. Thus, the human being is accepted in the totality of the mystery of this liturgy that internalizes the acts that lead to salvation: "We become gods for Him, as He became man for us" (St. Gregory). Purification from passions, prayer, the Liturgy, communion through the Holy Mysteries, opened the great hierarchs to the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit, Who led them to the contemplation of the Holy Trinity, thus transforming them into "speakers of God" (theologizers). Knowledge of the divine being consists "in the feeling that we cannot know the being of God" (St. Basil), for, as St. Gregory apodictically points out: "Understanding God is difficult, but expressing Him is impossible*

**Keywords:** deification, mystical union, Cappadocian Fathers, Holy Trinity, likeness to God through, imitation, contemplation, divine grace.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Holy Scriptures, where God himself speaks, we read of a unique call<sup>1</sup> addressed to all of us. God speaks to us, human beings, clearly and directly, asserting: “I have said, ‘You are Gods and all sons of the Most High’” (Ps 81:6; In 10:34).

Do we hear this voice? Do we understand the meaning of this call? Do we accept that we should, in fact, be on a journey, on a road that leads to *theosis*, to *deification*? As human beings, each of us has this unique calling, to reach perfection. In other words, each of us is destined to become a god; to be like God Himself, to be united with Him<sup>2</sup>. The Apostle Peter describes the purpose of life clearly, unequivocally: we are to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4).

But in order to understand *cum grano salis* this grandiose “becoming into being”, we need, *volens nolens*, a language of our own, appropriate to such a narrative. Yet all academic approaches, however erudite, however uninspired (all too often), have been somewhat guilty of hypertrophy of a metalanguage whose rigour has often suffocated the “spirit” of the vivifying Eastern tradition.<sup>3</sup>

In this context it is hard to see how *Mystical* and *Dogmatic Theology* could have been separated - slowly but surely! And yet, there is no doubt that in the West, and perhaps not only in the West, they have come to be so, and that “dogmatic and mystical theology or theology and spirituality have been separated into mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for holy women and theological studies were for practical men who, alas, were not holy”<sup>4</sup>

One of the results of this Western divorce between theology and spirituality is that it tends to be transferred into the study of the Fathers, so that those who study patristics know Origen from his treatises *On Principles* and *Contra Celsum* or St. Gregory of Nyssa from *Contra Eunomius* and other polemical writings, but they do not know Origen from his “homilies” or “commentaries” (which form the majority of his work!) nor Gregory from his *Life of Moses* or from the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. With the Fathers, however, there is no divorce or cleavage between dogmatic and mystical theology, the latter being at the heart of their theology, the questions raised in their dogmatic theology being profoundly affected by - and even resolved at the level of mystical theology.<sup>5</sup>

### What is mysticism?

At the level of the phenomenology of religions, no definition could be meaningful and comprehensive enough to include all the experiences that, at one time or another, have been described as “mystical”. In 1899, Dean W. Inge, in his famous work: “Christian Mysticism”, listed twenty-five definitions. Since then, the study of world religions has

<sup>1</sup> The question is: How much attention have we paid to our divine calling? We speak here not of our natural and physical purposes, but of our spiritual calling. Has the sense of our spiritual calling reached the depths of our souls? Has it entered our very being? Is our heart, therefore, inflamed by the call addressed to us by the one Lord and Master of life, by our one true Father, God Himself?

<sup>2</sup> Archim. Christoforos STAVROPOULOS, *Partakers of Divine Nature*, Translated by The Rev. Dr. Stanly Haraks, Light & Life Publishing Company (January 1, 1976), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Teodor BACONSKI, in *Preface to Leonid USPENSKY, The Theology of the Icon in the Orthodox Church*, trans. by T. Baconski, Bucharest: Anastasia, 1994, p. 7. It is hard to understand how the article “Mystical” is given (by Archim. Teofan Mada - Arad) only two half-columns in the Dictionary of Orthodox Theology, published in 2019, Basilica, Bucharest (pp. 582-583)!

<sup>4</sup> Thomas MERTON, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Anthony Clarke Publisher, 1972, p. 197

<sup>5</sup> Andrew LOUTH, *The Origins of the Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. Ioan I. Ică jr., Edit. Deisis, Sibiu, Sibiu, 2002, pp. 12-13

expanded considerably, and the so-called new mystical cults have sprung up everywhere. The etymology of the term offers little assistance in formulating a clear definition. In Greek mystery cults, *muein* (“to keep silent”) probably referred to the secrecy of initiation rites. But later, especially in Neoplatonic theory, ‘mystical’ silence came to mean wordless contemplation.<sup>6</sup>

But even the early Christian term *mustikos* does not correspond to our present understanding, since it referred to the spiritual meaning which Christians, in the light of Revelation, detected beneath the original, literal meaning of Scripture. Eventually the idea of a meaning hidden beneath surface appearances was extended to the whole of spiritual reality (the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, even nature itself as an expression of God's majesty). However, the strictly private character that we so easily associate with the term ‘mystical’ was never part of it.

Mysticism is concerned with the knowledge and union of man with God (*unio mystica*), in a process involving concerted *cognitive* and *ascetic* efforts. Mystical Theology is concerned with the means for acquiring this extraordinary knowledge of the divine being. These means, however, are of two kinds: some concern the believer's own efforts to gain divine grace and constitute the domain of *asceticism*; others concern the divine grace given to us to make this kind of extraordinary living and knowing possible and constitute what is called *mysticism*. Mysticism does not seek, in the classical pattern, to moralize man, but rather to accede to the direct and immediate knowledge of God.

Mysticism is not, therefore, primarily an ethical question, but a *theoretical*, or rather an epistemological one. For what is sought and realized in states of ecstasy is a different kind of knowledge from that which is permitted to humans in the common state, knowledge which is also a particular state of grace<sup>7</sup>.

The term “*mystic*” comes from the Greek. The origin of the verb *μύω* (*myo*) = has as its primary form the meaning “to close one's eyes, to close one's mouth, to close one's ears”; the figurative meaning is to be initiated into a secret cult. The noun *μυστής* (*mistês*) indicates one initiated into the mysteries, and the notion of *μυστήριον* (*mistêrion*) indicates a religious ceremony in which not every layman takes part, but only those instructed, initiated, by a mystagog. The adjective *μυστικός* (*mysticos*), which appeared relatively late in Greek, means “secret”, “mysterious”, something that pertains to mysteries.

If “mystical” means something hidden, secret, outside ordinary experience, the phenomenon as such refers, on the one hand, to the movement of self-transcendence of the ordinary state of man, towards an object or being beyond the limits of ordinary experience, and, on the other hand, to the actual perception of the object or being towards which he is moving. Knowing, perceiving this object or being involves an inner effort, an experience. This is the mystical or simply *mystical* experience.<sup>8</sup>

From the “descriptions” of mystics, the experienced reality is “Something” beyond this world, beyond conventional human language, which is why their accounts have been labeled by “scientists” as mental deviation, manifestations of pathological, schizoid states. This is because the Reality with which the mystic comes into contact is “das ganz Andere”

<sup>6</sup> Even this “contemplation” does not coincide with our own use of the term, since *theoria* denotes speculative knowledge as well as what we call contemplation

<sup>7</sup> Ioan Gh. SAVIN, *Mysticism and Orthodox Asceticism*, Foreword by Antonie Plămădeală, Sibiu, 1996, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Pr. Dr. Vasile RĂDUCĂ, in: *Introductory study* at Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit* (*Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*), trans. by Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă, trans: Edit. Anastasia, 1993, pp. 12-13.

(Rudolf Otto), an “árreton” (inexpressible), which only allows itself to be caught up in mystical narratives in a distorted form. This is why mystics warn that in the face of the Absolute the watchword is simply *silence*, being “neither this nor that” (*neti neti*).<sup>9</sup>

In the *Eastern tradition* there has never been a clear distinction between *mysticism* and *theology*, between the personal living of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the Church. The dogma which expresses a revealed truth, which appears to us as an unfathomable mystery, must be experienced as work during which, instead of adapting the mystery to our own way of understanding, we must instead watch so that a profound change may take place, an inner transformation of our spirit, so we may become capable of mystical living.

Far from being opposites, theology and mysticism are mutually supportive and mutually enriching. One cannot be *lived* without the other: if **mystical living** is a *personal* enhancement of the content of the common faith, **theology** is an expression, for the benefit of all, of what can be tried by each one. Apart from the truth preserved by the Church in its totality, personal experience would be devoid of any certainty, of any objectivity; it would be a mixture of truth and falsehood, of reality and illusion, it would be “*mysticism*” in the pejorative sense of the word.

On the other hand, the teaching of the Church would have no influence on souls if it did not express a somewhat interior experience of the truth given, to a different degree to each believer. Thus, there is no Christian mysticism without theology, but above all there is no theology without mysticism.<sup>10</sup> It is not by chance that the tradition of the Eastern Church has reserved the name “theologian” for only three sacred writers, the first of whom is St. John, the most “mystical” of the four evangelists, the second, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, author of contemplative poems, the third, St. Simeon, nicknamed “the New Theologian”, who extols union with God. Mysticism is thus considered to be the consummation or the pices of all theology or theology *par excellence*.

Unlike Gnosticism, in which knowledge itself is the goal of the Gnostic, Christian theology, in the final analysis, is always a means, a body of knowledge that must serve a purpose that is above all knowledge. This ultimate goal is union with God, deification, (θεωσις), as the Greek Fathers call it. This leads us to a *conclusion* that may seem *paradoxical*: Christian contemplation has a more *practical* meaning, all the more so because it is more mystical and because it aims more directly at the high goal of union with God. The entire course of the dogmatic disputes maintained by the Church throughout the centuries – if we look at it from a purely spiritual point of view – seems to us to be dominated by the Church's constant concern to preserve for Christians, at every moment of its history, the possibility of attaining the fullness of mystical union.<sup>11</sup>

## 1. The Christian concept of perfection or deification (θεωσις)

*Theosis!* What does this profound and deep word mean? It means *the elevation of* human beings to the divine sphere, to the atmosphere of God. It means human union with the divine. That, in essence, is the meaning of *theosis*. Thus, human nature should move towards spiritualization and in the process its gross materialism is to be sweetened, or rather transfigured. The human soul must be polished so that it can be transformed from its present

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Alexandru-Corneliu ARION, *Hindu Pantheism and the teaching about God*, Bucharest: Enciclopedică, 2010, pp. 413, 417-418 passim.

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 6

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 6-7.

state of weakness into a *radiant spirituality*. This is how human union with the divine becomes a reality. We are transformed according to His likeness. However, this union is not absolute. It is relative, because it is not the transformation of our essence. Rather, it is natural, ethical and in accord with grace. It is the union of the whole person with God as unlimited happiness in the divine kingdom. Human nature becomes the “excess” of the divine nature, as the Greek theologian Christophorus Stavropoulos put it. It is restored to its original beauty; it is reborn to new life. It is recreated by divine adoption. St. Anastasios the Sinaite says the following in a wonderful definition of *theosis*: ‘It is the raising to what is better, but not the reduction of our nature to something less, nor is it an essential change in our human nature; it is the voluntary, gigantic condescension of God, which he has made for the salvation of men. That which is God’s has been exalted to greater glory, without His own nature being changeable.’<sup>12</sup>

The deification of man is considered the Eastern theology’s *way of expressing “the consummation and full interpenetration of man with God”* (Dumitru Stăniloae)<sup>13</sup>, “participation in the divine life of the Holy Trinity” (Karl Christian Felmy)<sup>14</sup> and, at the same time, “the blessed purpose for all things were created”<sup>15</sup>. Far from being “a mythological fantasy” or “a (difficult) idiosyncratic metaphysical speculation”, according to Panayotis Nellas, deification is “a constant of the human condition and human history as a whole”, one of the most active and penetrating contemporary ideas (Christoph von Schönborn)<sup>16</sup>, which “profoundly marks the utopias and anxieties of the modern age” (P. Nellas)<sup>17</sup>.

This idea, of the elevation of man to the status of “god by grace”, is the red thread of Orthodox theology, running through the whole patristic tradition. Having its origin in Holy Scripture, it also has certain parallels in ancient Greek philosophy. Although its vocabulary is foreign to the biblical language which emphasizes the absolute transcendence of God, there are nevertheless numerous scriptural testimonies which have been taken up by the Holy Fathers as the basis of their teaching on the deification.

In the Eastern tradition, the notion of “*deification*” is present from the beginning, but there is no consensus among the early Christian fathers on its exact meaning. This is mainly because in the first five centuries, the idea of deification was addressed only in the context of Trinitarian and Christological controversies. Its development and spread throughout the Christian East is due to *St. Maximus the Confessor* who, because of its use as the foundation and at the same time the center of his entire theology, was rightly called “the theologian of the deification”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> V. *Concerning the word*, P.G. 89,77BC, apud Archimandrite Christoforos STAVROPOULOS, *Partakers Of Divine Nature*, Translated by The Rev. Dr. Stanly Haraks, Light & Life Publishing Company (January 1, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe (Ascetics and mysticism of the Orthodox Church)*, Ed. IBMBOR, Bucharest, 2002, p. 425.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Christian FELMY, *Dogmatics of Ecclesial Experience. The renewal of contemporary Orthodox theology*, translation and presentation Prof. Ioan Ică sr, Edit. Deisis, Sibiu, Sibiu, 1999, p. 202.

<sup>15</sup> Panayiotis CHRISTOU, *Partakers of God*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline Mass, 1984, p. 36

<sup>16</sup> Christoph von SCHÖNBORN, *Über die richtige Fassung des dogmatischen Begriffs der Vergöttlichung des Menschen*, apud Panayotis NELLAS, *Omul, animal îndumnezeit (Man, a divinized animal)*, Transl. Ioan I. Ică jr., 4th ed., Sibiu: Deisis, 2009, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Panayotis NELLAS, *Man, a divinized animal*, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> For details: Jean-Claude LARCHET, *The Deification of Man in St. Maximus the Confessor*, Basilica, 2019; PHD student Dr. Daniel Sorin CHERAN, *The Deification of Man in the Thought of St. Maxim the Confessor*, PhD thesis, Constanta, 2014. Dalmais calls St. Maximus “the Teacher of the Incarnation and of the deification”, and notes that the deification constitutes “the favorite theme of his contemplation”, that “as a monk and a



The classic formula of the notion of deification belongs to St. *Athanasius* the Great: “God became man, that we might be made god through him”. For him, as for the rest of the Holy Fathers, the incarnation is the sole foundation of human deification.

The salvation and the deification of man who believes in God is nothing other than the extension of the relations of love and affection between the Persons of the Holy Trinity to the rational creature, which is precisely why the Holy Trinity is the basis of our salvation. Through the Incarnation of the Son, according to St. John the Apostle (1, 14)<sup>19</sup>: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt in us; and we beheld his glory as the glory of one born of the Father, full of grace and truth”; we enter into filial communion with the Father, and through the Holy Spirit we pray to the Father as sons. He identifies Himself with us by grace, so that we may also identify ourselves with Him by grace. Therefore, if in the incarnate Son we have become sons according to grace, in the Holy Spirit we become conscious of becoming sons of the heavenly Father. St. John Damascene said:

*“The Incarnation is the mode of a second subsistence, adapted only to the only-begotten Son and to the Word, so that His personal property may remain unchanged, or so that He may also remain as man in the relationship of Son with the Father.”* And St. Gregory of Nazianzus points out: “Be reconciled to God and do not quench the Spirit; rather, let Christ be reconciled to you and let the Spirit enlighten you. But if you persist in enmity, we keep the Trinity and will be saved by the Trinity”<sup>20</sup>.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus attributed to St. *Basil the Great* the following formulation: ‘man is an animal who has been commanded to become god’<sup>21</sup>. However, “god” is merely a title, bestowed by God on the worthy, which expresses man's eschatological fulfillment.

## 2. Mystical Theology of St. Basil the Great (330-379)

The Holy Three Hierarchs, *Basil the Great*, *Gregory of Nazianzus* and *John Chrysostom* have remained in the consciousness of posterity as teachers and enlighteners of the entire Christian Church, not least thanks to the essential contribution they made to the elaboration of the doctrine of the *Holy Trinity*, the true *theognosy*. The traces left by these three giants of the One Church on the sands of Christian thought on the consummation or union of the human soul with God are truly remarkable, even if they are situated on a slightly secondary level, compared to Origen, Evagrius Ponticus, St. Gregory of Nyssa or St. Maximus the Confessor, the theologian of deification.

*The Cappadocians* present themselves as philosophers. In the New Testament, the notion of *philosophy* has a pejorative meaning (Col 3:8; Acts 17:18), as it is considered inoperative for the knowledge of God. The reconciliation between philosophy and Christianity takes place in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. The monks become the true philosophers, those who devote themselves to wisdom in solitude, silence and asceticism. There perfect thinkers can be found. It is no wonder that St. Gregory of Nazianzus gives third rank to the philosopher, placing him after God and the angels (or. 26, 13, P.G. 35, 1246

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spiritual father, he is concerned above all with everything that can guide the progress towards the deification”, or, in short, that “deification holds a place of first rank in his entire thought”.

<sup>19</sup> Iustin POPOVICI, *Man and God-Man. Abisurile și culmile filosofiei (The abysses and heights of philosophy)*, Sibiu: Deisis, 1997, p. 57: “Through Him time was also made, therefore time is logotic, and time is certainly a preparation for eternity”.

<sup>20</sup> St. JOHN Damascene, *Contra Iacobitas*, PG 94, col. 1364A; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio Theol.* XXX, PG 94, col. 104A.

<sup>21</sup> Ilarion ALFEYEV, *St. Simeon the New Theologian and the Orthodox Tradition*, translated from the English by Ioana Stoicescu and Maria-Magdalena Rusen, Bucharest: Sophia, 2010, p. 314.

b). The love of wisdom becomes “love of God”, which is why the same Cappadocian saint called the monks “professionals of philosophy”. Now, such a philosophy opens precisely towards the mystical.

St. Basil presents his *mystical thought* particularly in *Homilies* and *Letters*. Influenced by Stoic morals, he preaches the freedom of the wise from the trials of life and death. Stoic formulas are put at the service of faith in the fullness brought by Christ. Every spiritual endeavor begins with self-knowledge: “watch yourself carefully”, “be careful with yourself” he says incessantly. This knowledge leads to humility, the foundation of all exaltation. It is that which allows you to leave the earth and to climb the steps leading to perfection, necessarily passing through different degrees which are also different states.

“The Spirit accomplishes the elevation of hearts. It leads the weak by the hand, perfects the advanced and enlightens the purified” (*De Spiritu Sancto*, PG. 32, 109 b)<sup>22</sup>.

This triple division of *beginners*, the *advanced* and the *perfect*, already classic, will always be taken up by mystics. Intellectual knowledge has its importance, but it is not enough, for it is only a fragmentary approach. When God makes Himself known to the heart and draws it towards Him, it receives a kind of light; it is the knowledge of God that makes you discover the weakness of the body, detach yourself from it and cease to be held back by earthly things<sup>23</sup>

St. Basil largely owes to the Greeks the meaning of beauty expounded by him in the *Hexaemeron*. The universe is the source of continual meditation; when you admire and describe the wonders of the world, you discover God in his splendor and the heart turns to him. So the beauty of the universe is a path to divine beauty.

“Blessed are those who thirst for the contemplation of true beauty. They are ruled only by pure divine love”, St. Basil will say.

Contemplation of beauty is expressed in faith and advances to perfection. To establish the beauty and glory of God, the eye of the soul must be purified from the darkness of ignorance.<sup>24</sup>

In his discourse on renunciation of the world and spiritual perfection, the great Cappadocian insists on the necessity of renunciation in order to adhere to God. Yet the Rule he proposes is marked by wisdom and moderation. His ideal is not to embrace a monastic life, but a chivalric life, where the monk is with his brothers and a superior who leads, strengthens and passes on his own experience. Just as the sailor who lets himself go out to sea needs the wind, so too man needs someone to take him by the hand and guide him safely through the bitter waves of life.

Often judged by commentators as less original and more traditional than the other two Cappadocians, Basil expresses himself more freely in the *Correspondence* than in the *Homilies*. The warmth of his sensitivity comes through in his language. Thus, in *Letter 133*, he will say that the eyes of the body give bodily friendship, while those of the soul lead to true union in faith. Friendship in the world needs eyes and presence, but those who love one another spiritually do not necessarily need to resort to the senses to provoke and nourish

<sup>22</sup> St. BASIL the Great, *Writings. Part Three: On the Holy Spirit. Correspondence (Epistles)*, Translation, introduction, notes and indexes by Prof. Dr. Constantin Cornițescu and Prof. Dr. Teodor Bodogae, in the collection PSB (Fathers and Writers of the Church), vol. 12, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1988, p. 243

<sup>23</sup> Jean BOESSE, Jacques LACODRE, “Greek and Latin Fathers”, in: Marie-Madeleine DAVY (coord.), *Encyclopedia of Mystical Doctrines*, vol. 1, Timișoara: Amacord, 1997, p. 302.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 303.

affection. To one of his correspondents, Basil writes that the text of his letter flows like water from a very pure spring; to another, he says: “I have seen your soul in your letter”; he compares the message to a mirror in which the soul is shown. In a letter addressed to a monk and alluding to the dark situation of his age, he compares it to a shining star on a moonless night. To an archbishop he testifies how rare is the spiritual communion that can be established with a brother living in the spirit, for few are able to educate their tongue and train their eye in the spirit of the Gospel (*Letter 173*).

St. Basil lived with the desert obsession. Nostalgia for solitary life always comes through in his works and letters. Towards the end of his life, he was able to fulfill his longing. He writes to his friend, Gregory of Nazianzus:

“I have abandoned my city occupations as the causes of a thousand evils, but still I could not abandon myself. I am like those who, at sea, suffer from nausea because they are not accustomed to sailing. They are annoyed by the size of the ship, they leave it to change into a dinghy... Everywhere disgust and fear change places with them. (*Letter 2*).<sup>25</sup>

“He who loves God withdraws close to God”. “Monastic poverty is the nurse of philosophy”. St. Basil does not reject profane wisdom but gives it a propedeutic role. When man worships God, he becomes a stranger to the sinful world. It is necessary to distinguish between material solitude and separation realized only in the intimacy of the heart, the latter being the most important.

Turning now to the elements of *anthropology* and *triadology*, to which he has made an extremely great contribution, Basil the Great (in his work, “On the Creation of Man”) states that the name *άνθρωπος* comes from the Greek word *άνιρ* meaning “man”, and this from the preposition *άνό* = upward. He says: “Of all creatures, man is the only being who looks upward to the heavens and to his creator”. Also, as St. Maximus the Confessor says: “Man is the king and priest of creation, performing a true cosmic liturgy”, he is a link between the two worlds that seek each other, the material and the spiritual. Last but not least, the vocation of the human being is *the theosis* or, as St. Maximus the Confessor says, “the Passion of the theosis into which he must draw the whole world, pointing her to God”.

The sense that God is beyond all that we can affirm about Him, so that *cataphatic* theology must be qualified by *apophatic* theology, is found (without the specific terminology) in several Greek Fathers. Beginning with Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), it is particularly strong in the Cappadocian Fathers Basil of Caesarea, his friend Gregory of Nazianzus (330-90) and his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-394) - as well as in their younger contemporary John Chrysostom. It is *St. Basil* who introduces the distinction between God's *essence* and his activities or *energies* (*energeiai*), stating that:

“From his activities we know our God, but we do not claim to approach his very essence. For his activities come down to us, but his essence remains untouchable.”

In addition, St. Basil notes, “knowledge of the divine essence is a sense of its incomprehensibility”.<sup>26</sup> His brother Gregory of Nyssa, in *The Life of Moses*, sees the ascent

<sup>25</sup> In St. BASIL the Great, *Scieri. Part Two: Ascetics*, col. PSB, vol. 18, Translation, introduction, indexes and notes by Prof. Iorgu D. Ivan, Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1989, p. 533.

<sup>26</sup> BASIL of Caesarea, Letter 234 in *The Letters*, vol. 3, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), pp. 371-377.



of the soul towards a closer union with God as a progress into a deepening darkness, in which the soul is increasingly aware of the transcendence and total unknowing of God.<sup>27</sup>

Deeply apophatic of any authentic theology is what the great Cappadocians defended in their dispute with Eunomius. He argued for the possibility of expressing the divine being in innate concepts through which it reveals itself to reason. For St. Basil, not only the divine being, but not even created beings could be expressed in *concepts*. Contemplating objects, we analyze their properties, which allows us to form concepts. However, this analysis can never exhaust the content of the objects of our perception; there will always remain an “irrational remainder” which will escape them, and which cannot be expressed in concepts; this is the depth of the unknown of things, which constitutes their true being that cannot be defined. As for the names we give to God, they reveal His energies which flow towards us, but which do not draw us closer to His inaccessible being.<sup>28</sup>

We shall not speak of cosmology except to draw out a few theological ideas which have their place in relation to union with God. The work of the six days is presented – in the *Hexaemeron* – as a successive distinction of the elements created simultaneously on the first day. St. Basil depicts this first day, the “beginning”, the first moment of created being, as being “outside the seven days”, as the “eighth day”, which we celebrate on Sunday and which will be the beginning of eternity, the day of resurrection.<sup>29</sup> In the five days that follow the creation of the intelligible and sensible elements, of heaven and earth, the seen world is progressively organized, but this successive ordering, according to St Gregory of Nyssa, exists only for creatures. The latter are governed by a “luminous power” which God has introduced into matter, and which is His Word (“words-will”, of St. Maximus), the commandments given to the created beings of which *Genesis* speaks.<sup>30</sup>

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As the image of God, man is a personal being placed before a personal God. God addresses him as a person and man responds to him likewise (as a person). Man, said St. Basil, is a creature who has received the commandment to become God<sup>31</sup>. But this command addressed to man's freedom is not a constraint. As a personal being, man can accept or reject the will of God. He will remain a person no matter how far he departs from God, becoming by his very nature unlike God, which means that the image of God cannot be destroyed in man. He will also remain a personal being fulfilling the will of God, realizing the perfect likeness of Him in his nature, for, according to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, “God has honored man by giving him freedom, so that the good belongs to him who chooses it no less than to Him who placed the archvuna (the beginning) of good in the flesh”<sup>32</sup>.

Saints *Basil the Great* and *Gregory of Nazianzus* emphasize the attainment of likeness to God through imitation: for them, Christianity is nothing other than the imitation of Christ's life in the flesh. Christ deified the body which he assumed, the purpose of the incarnation being to enable us to recover the likeness lost through the fall of our forefathers.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew LOUTH, “Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, edited by Amy Hollywood, Harvard Divinity School, Patricia Z. Beckman, St. Olaf College, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 138.

<sup>28</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105.

<sup>30</sup> St. GREGORY of Nyssa, in *Hexaemeron*, P.G., vol. 44, col. 72-73

<sup>31</sup> Words of St. Basil reported by St. Gregory of Nazianzus in: *In laudem Basilii Magni*, or. XLIII, par. 48, P.G., t. 36, col. 560 A.

<sup>32</sup> In *Sanctum Pascha*, or. XLV, 8, P.G., t. 36, col. 632 C., apud Vl. Lossky, *op.cit.*, p. 124.

The imitation of Christ is not only outward but consists also in overcoming the passions and freeing the soul from the constraints of bodily life<sup>33</sup>. We imitate God by practicing the virtues and putting on Christ. Both baptism and the moral life ensure deification.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. The mysticism of perfection at St. Gregory the Theologian (330-390)

“To talk about God is a great thing, but it is an even greater thing to be pure for God!” (St. Gregory the Theologian)

The approach of St. Gregory, explicitly contemplative, tends towards a theology, fruit of spiritual experience. Endowed with a deep sensitivity, enamored by the beauty of nature, he tries to lift the veils of the visible in order to discover the invisible. For him, everything is a call, an invitation to penetrate the dimension of inner depth. He loves literature, not for the erudition and knowledge it provides, but because, placed at the service of true knowledge, it fosters it, clarifies it and gives it a penetrating and vivid character. Gregory receives the legacy of Alexandria through Athanasius and Origen. He is a rhetor without any verbalism. The richness of the terminology, the music of the verb could disconcert a reader without a sense of politics and sensitivity.

One should not minimize his *Platonism*. Gregory of Nazianzus, like Gregory of Nyssa, does not seek to denounce Hellenism, but to put it at the service of Christ; was not Plato the wisest of men?

His asceticism brings him closer to the Stoic morality by which he was deeply influenced. His preference for solitude allows him to understand the Plotinian contribution, “alone with the lonely” could be his motto. He is a man of friendship. For Cappadocians, love of God does not therefore exclude love of neighbor, but stimulates it and makes it affectionate. We must, St. Gregory said, let love pour out from the heart; it gives birth to *unity*. The poet's sensitivity, his need for exchanges and human relationships, does not harm his inner life; on the contrary, everything stimulates it. *Apatheia* inherited from the Stoics does not mean indifference, but order and measure. The important thing is to assume: what is assumed is saved. We thus find in Gregory – and already in Origen's thought – one of the principles of the psychology of the abyss. When it comes to the guidance of souls, Gregory would say that it is the art of the arts; he who exercises it must be both physician and shepherd.

Those whom he calls “Holy Fathers” mold him and enable him to structure his theology of the Trinity, “my Trinity” as he says, from which he not only retains *the essence* (truth, goodness, power, glory, holiness), but also *the hypostasis* (Fatherhood, Sonship, Procession). The Divinity of the Holy Spirit is problematic; even St. Basil vacillates, but Gregory affirms it. This lamentable hesitation about the Holy Spirit is noteworthy; ecclesiastical or theological teaching is already moving away from *the pneumatic dimension* of the early Christianity.

By introducing the concept of “purcession” (procession), Gregory inaugurates a new stage in Trinitarian theology. It is the Spirit who perfects and divinizes. It is through the Spirit that union with Christ and the return to the Father takes place. Gregory the Theologian

<sup>33</sup> Norman RUSSEL, *The doctrine of Deification in the Greek patristic tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, p. 233. See also the Romanian translation: *Învățătura despre îndumnezeire în tradiția patristică greacă* - STUDII 15, translation Dăscă Dragoș, Iași: Doxologia, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> For Gregory of Nyssa, the concept of participation is of the utmost importance - so much so that he tends to replace the terminology of *deification* with that of *participation*: man gains his deification through participation in the divine attributes.

often uses the term *kenosis*, so beloved of St. Paul. What is God? An ocean of beings without shores, he will write in reference to the *Banquet* (210 d), the archetype of being in the sense given by Plotinus.

Is Gregory more *intellectual* than *mystical*, and is his approach to the divine more a description than an experience? The question can be asked even if we consider it unusual. Who can guarantee another's experience apart from the inner shock, the emotions provoked in the deep places? You have to be at the level of the builder in order to know his level of understanding. With Gregory *theoria* may seem more intellectual than affective; moreover, he draws attention to its excesses; it is facilitated by *praxis* and *hesychia*. The meaning of the term *theoria* is constantly evolving. Let us not forget that we are at a time when words in the Christian vocabulary are beginning to take shape. *Theoria*, which is not of biblical origin, will be used by St. Antony the Great and Evagrius and will receive new meanings in Christian terminology; it refers to the activity of the spirit: the supreme mode of exercise is to contemplate; it is therefore opposed to practical activity. He who devotes himself to *theoria* has a contemplative gaze. From this perspective, the activity of the spirit makes him intuitive and insightful. He perceives and understands. Thus, as Basil will say, *theoria* is an intuitive science, with a spirit of insight that leads to the understanding of the glory of God.<sup>35</sup>

Taking up the image of *the mountain*, of biblical origin, described by Origen as the meeting place between the divine and the human, Gregory will say that God descends to the man who ascends to him. Like Moses on Sinai, it is necessary to penetrate the cloud, a kind of mysterious veil surrounding the presence, the opacity of the earthly, the source of darkness. To enter the cloud, to penetrate it, to perceive its density, is to enter oneself, to see the limits, unhappiness, poverty. Everything fades, fades away and disappears before the divine clarity; man becomes a mirror in which his own image appears. At this stage, the visible disappears, forms are diluted, passions no longer manifest, the contemplative has eyes only for the Divine Presence

Between God and the mystic there is a relationship of intimacy; exchanges are made from person to person, the mystic becomes the temple of the Trinity, and the Trinity operates effectively in the soul. It is a temple where a liturgy is celebrated in the mystery of the holy mysteries as a participation in Christ, in the mystery of prayer like breathing, in that intimate liturgy without words from without, which becomes loving and which completes the state of restoration of the divine image. A liturgy that takes in the 'face of being', reshapes it, makes it transparent as the likeness is realized.

Baptism signifies the beginning of deification, and tears purify like a new flood, when they come forth from a loving mercy. Through the Eucharist I participate in the death and resurrection of Christ; thus, the being is accepted in the totality of the mystery of this liturgy that interiorizes the acts that lead to salvation. "We become gods for Him, as He became man for us," St. Gregory<sup>36</sup> will say in evoking it. Little by little, the cloud dissipates, the darkness is illumined, the temple is transformed into a perfect mirror, light is added to light, and the mirror becomes immaculate. It is in this contact that man becomes divinized, he learns to enter into the holiness of God. Purity becomes more and more demanding. The renowned Cappadocian thinker grasped its significance in a dream which revealed to him the beauty of chastity, of consecrated virginity, which gives the approach the necessary impetus to appear before the Bridegroom. Only the pure gaze is equal to the light.

<sup>35</sup> Jean BOESSE, Jacques LACODRE, "The Greek and Latin Fathers", in Marie-Madeleine DAVY (coord.), *Encyclopedia of Mystical Doctrines*, vol. 1, p. 306

<sup>36</sup> *Oratio Catechetica*, I, 4-5, P.G., 35, col. 398.

This mysticism of light, so highly esteemed in the first centuries of Christianity and to which Byzantine mysticism would remain faithful after the schism, is of the greatest importance for the Cappadocians. For them, the kingdom of God is light, as is contemplation; the action of the Persons of the Trinity in the soul is also luminous; the approaches to mystical fullness are comparable to increasingly luminous steps: transcendence is the source of light; whoever draws from it becomes a being of light.

These are the most important elements of the approach of St. Gregory of Nazianzus in his proximity to “Presence” *par excellence*. The contemplative, as a person who has been made divine, will have a new relationship with Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Father; his links with his neighbor, with himself and with the cosmos take part in the renewing light that regenerates him. Once divinized, man regains the state of virginity, hence the role and importance of the Virgin Mary. The flesh freed from its heaviness participates in angelic life, prefiguring the world to come.<sup>37</sup>

For *Gregory of Nazianzus*, deification is the goal of the human being, obtained through the deification power of the Holy Spirit – received at baptism – and through the ascetic effort to lead a moral life. Through the deification we are raised above the duality of matter to the unity of the Holy Trinity. This elevation of man was the purpose of the incarnation, a marvelous exchange through which man “was anointed with divinity and made *homotimos* (equal) with God” (Dumitru Stăniloae)<sup>38</sup>. But we can never become gods in the true sense of the word, i.e., we will never be able to cross the created-uncreated chasm. *Gregory of Nyssa* believes that man ultimately transcends his own nature and becomes immune from corruptibility and death, but he hesitates to call this state ‘deification’. For him, the deification is eminently a Christological concept, which by extension can also be applied to the Eucharist.

If the unknowable God reveals Himself as the Holy Trinity, if the unknowability of knowing Him appears to us as the mystery of the three persons and of the one being, this is possible precisely because the Holy Spirit reveals to our contemplation the fullness of the divine Being. This is why, in the Eastern tradition, the day of Pentecost is called “the day of the Trinity”. It is the absolute stagnation, the limit of all contemplation, of all exaltation and, at the same time, the principle of all theology, primordial truth, the initial datum from which every thought and every being commences.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Evagrius Ponticus, St. Maximus the Confessor and other Fathers identified the perfect knowledge of the Trinity with the Kingdom of God, the ultimate perfection to which created beings are called. The *mystical theology* of the Eastern Church will always affirm itself as triadocentric. The knowledge of God will be for her a knowledge of the Trinity, a mystical union, a unity of life with the three divine persons. The antinomy of the Trinitarian dogma, the mystical identity of the Monad-Triad will be zealously guarded in the spirit of Eastern apophaticism, which will oppose the Western formula of the procession *ab utroque*, so as not to emphasize the unity of nature to the detriment of the personal fullness of “the three Holies who are united in one Mastery and Godhead”<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> Jean BOESSE, Jacques LACODRE, “Greek and Latin Fathers”, p. 308.

<sup>38</sup> Emil BARTOȘ, *The concept of deification in Dumitru Stăniloae's theology (Conceptul de îndumnezeire în teologia lui Dumitru Stăniloae)*, Cartea Creștină Publishing House, Oradea, 2002, p. 35.

<sup>39</sup> St. GREGORY of Nazianzus, in Theophaniam, Or. XXXVII, 9, P.G., t. 36, col. 320 BC, apud Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 244.



## CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to their *congeniality* in the Spirit, the Cappadocian saints transformed Christian teaching on the Holy Trinity from theory into *life* and from speculation into *doxology*. For these great teachers, the Holy Trinity ceases to be an object of speculation and becomes a personal communion flowing with *life, light and love*. Thus, the “singer of the Holy Trinity”, *St. Gregory the Theologian*, declares with “emphatic empathy” in his poems:

“From the day that I cast off the things of this world to devote my soul to heavenly contemplations [...] from that day my eyes have been blinded by the light of the Trinity, whose brightness surpasses all that thought could present to my soul; [...] from that day I died to this world and the world died to me.” Toward the end of life, he desires to be “where my Trinity is,” and the joined brightness of His glory, “the Trinity, in which even the blurred shadows have filled me with emotion.”<sup>40</sup>

When they wanted to deepen the study of theology, the Holy Three Hierarchs withdrew from the world and dedicated themselves to prayer and asceticism. The “sojourn” spent in the “desert universities” was an essential stage in the development of each of the Three Hierarchs. Cleansing themselves of their sins, prayer, the Liturgy, and the sacraments opened them to the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit, which led them to contemplate the Holy Trinity, thus transforming them into “speakers of God” (*theologisers*).<sup>41</sup>

Andrew Louth<sup>42</sup> opines that Orthodox theology insists on the teaching of *theosis*, the *deification*, because recovering the image in its integrity requires real changes in ourselves, changes whereby the image of God, after whom we are created, becomes more and more clear. We need to become transparent, one might say, to the image of God reflected in who we are more deeply. Others must discover in us not the fragmented human beings that we are as a result of the Fall, but the love of God manifested in the image of God for whose sake we were created. In so doing, we will discover our true humanity: *deification*, as St. Maximus the Confessor teaches; it means the restoration of our true humanity, not its diminution or abandonment. And this change is based on the astonishing change God himself embraced, when he became man for us, not by abandoning what he is – his deity – but by assuming what he is not: humanity.<sup>43</sup>

St. Athanasius the Great made a statement which was then repeated by the other Fathers, one after the other: '[The Word of God] became incarnate, that we might be made divine'.<sup>44</sup> This astonishing exchange, based on the love of God, shows that at the center of human existence is openness to God and his love, through which we are brought to the divine life, where we discover what it means to be human, or what the purpose of human life is: communion with God in the Spirit

<sup>40</sup> St. GREGORY of Nazianzus, *Poemata de seipso*, I and X, P.G., t. 37, col. 984-985 and 1165-1166, apud Vladimir LOSSKY, *Theologia Mystica*, p. 75

<sup>41</sup> You have to empty yourself of the ballast of the passions, to cleanse your inner self in order to receive God within you and to rest in God. EVAGRIUS of Pontus emphasizes this by comparing the theologian to St. John the Evangelist at the Last Supper: “The breast of God is the knowledge of God; he who rests on it is the theologian.” Apud Kallistos WARE, *Theological Education in Scripture and the Holy Fathers*. See: <https://www.crestinortodox.ro/sfaturi-duhovnicesti/educatia-teologica-scriptura-la-sfintii-parinti-68479.html>

<sup>42</sup> The famous English theologian, convert to Orthodoxy, ordained priest in 2003, emeritus professor of patristic and Byzantine studies in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew LOUTH, *Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, p. 157.

<sup>44</sup> St. ATHANASIUS the Great, *On the Incarnation*, LIV, in: Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1987, p. 151. Here we have the famous sentence of St. Athanasius: “If the incarnate Word is not the Son of God, man is not divinized.”



The created world appears as a dynamic reality, tending towards a future fullness, ever present for God. The unshakeable foundation of the world created out of nothing is its fulfillment, which is the limit of its becoming. Now the One who fulfills, who gives fullness to every being is the Holy Spirit. Seen in itself, the created being will always be a non-fulfillment; seen in the Holy Spirit, it will appear as the fullness of the divinized being. Throughout its history, the created world will be placed between these two boundaries without ever being able to conceive of “pure nature” and grace as two juxtaposed realities which would be added to one another. The tradition of the Eastern Church recognizes the creature who tends towards deification, continually surpassing himself in grace; it also recognizes the fallen creature who separates himself from God in order to enter a new plane of existence, that of sin and death; but it will be careful not to attribute a static perfection to created being, seen in itself. Indeed, this would be to attribute a limited completeness, a natural sufficiency to the beings who were made to find their completeness in union with God.

*The way of imitating* Christ has never been applied in the spiritual life of the Eastern Church. It would seem that it has here a certain character of incompleteness, that it is an *outward attitude* towards Christ. For Eastern spirituality, the only way to become like Christ is to acquire the grace given through the Holy Spirit. *The saints of the Eastern Church* have never had stigmata, outward imprints that made some of the great saints and mystics of the *West* like the suffering Christ. In contrast, the Eastern saints were often transfigured by the inner light of uncreated grace and became resplendent like Christ during His Transfiguration.

Prayer must occupy a primordial place in the life of the student of theology. The Fathers of the Church understood theology not so much as speaking about God as speaking with God, accomplished in prayer, thus showing that God can only be known *liturgically*. The saying of Evagrius Ponticus, later echoed by other Fathers, has become a classic: “If you are a theologian (if you are concerned with the contemplation of God) pray truly; and if you pray truly, you are a theologian<sup>45</sup>

Participation in the services of the Church and, first of all, in Holy Liturgy, which is fully accomplished through communion, must be at the center of every Christian's life and, even more so, at the center of the life of the student of theology. The services can be characterized as the experiencing of Christian truths through the intercession of the worship of God in the Body of Christ, the Church, in a symbolic and real way. Worship in general and the Mysteries in particular lead us to the knowledge of the Most Blessed Trinity in illumination and deifying union.

One cannot conceive of true theologizing without systematic participation in Holy Liturgy and communion. The Holy Three Hierarchs are unanimous in urging all Christians, and even more so those who study theology, to *communion*.

“All the Christian faithful,” writes St. **Basil** the Great, need to nourish ourselves with the food of eternal life, which the Son of the living God has given us. It is good and useful for man to partake daily of the Body and Blood of Christ, for the Lord himself says: “He who eats my Body and drinks my Blood has eternal life”.

Undoubtedly, by partaking often with Life, man lives life more fully with all his bodily and spiritual powers and feelings.

<sup>45</sup> EVAGRIUS Ponticus, “Word on Prayer divided into 153 heads”, 60, in *Philocalia of the holy devotions of consummation*, vol. 1, translation from the Greek, introduction and notes by Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, București: EIBMBOR, 2008, p. 106. For “He who prays in Spirit and Truth no longer praises the Creator out of creation, but he praises Him out of Himself.” (59)

“Through Holy Communion,” says St. **Gregory** the Theologian, “we are more easily corrected, more patient in pain and suffering, more patient in love, more warm in love, more penetrating in knowledge, more diligent in service, more quick and more swift in the work of the gifts.”<sup>46</sup>

The theme of man's deification occupies an essential place in the theology of the Eastern Fathers from the very beginning. No other theme “sheds as much light on the concept of man that is characteristic of the Christian East”, writes a German Catholic theologian.<sup>47</sup>

In one of his letters, emphasizing the limit of exclusively human knowledge, St. Basil states:

“He who boasts that he knows all things, let him first explain to us the nature of the ant, and only afterward let him discuss the nature of the power of God, which passes all understanding. But if you do not even understand the constitution of a poor ant, how can you boast that you can comprehend in your mind the incomprehensible power of God?” (Epist. 16).

Now, knowledge of the divine being consists precisely “in the feeling that we cannot know the being of God” (Epist. 234, II).<sup>48</sup> We conclude our entire approach with the apodictic words of St. Gregory the Theologian: “To understand God is difficult, but to express him is impossible.”

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<sup>47</sup> Johannes Gerhardus REMMERS, *De vergoddelijke mens in de spiritualiteit van het christlijk Oosten* (The divinized man in the spirituality of the Christian East), Nijmegen, 1958, p. 90, apud Jean-Claude LARCHET, *The deification of man in St. Maximus the Confessor*, translation from the French by Marinela Bojin, București: Basilica, 2019, p. 5

<sup>48</sup> It is said that Eunomius was so saddened by his defeat that he did not dare to repeat it while St. Basil was alive. Cf. Jean RIVIÈRE, *Saint Basil, Eveque de Cesaree*, Librairie Lecoffre, J. Gabalda (éditeur), 1925, pp. 13-14

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