

UNIT 3A: DOCTRINE

67: Theosis - Deification

Biblical and Patristic Foundations

The Biblical foundations of the Orthodox doctrine of deification (*theosis* in Greek) are found in 2 Peter 1:3-7 which reads:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature. For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these things is blind and short-sighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Both the historian Eusebius and the early Church Fathers unanimously accepted the canonicity of 1 Peter, but there was considerable doubt among the Church Fathers whether 2 Peter was actually written by the apostle Peter. It was not until the time of St Bede (673-735) that the authenticity of 2 Peter was widely accepted, in keeping with the exegesis of St Bede that “it is by the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ that we come to understand the mysteries of his divinity by which we have been saved.”¹

¹ St Bede, *On 2 Peter*, cited by Gerald Bray (Ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*,

It should be noted that several of the Early Church Fathers, including Origen (b.185) and St Ambrose (c.333-397) strongly supported the importance of the message of 2 Peter 1:3-7 about how to live the Christian life. For example, St Ambrose wrote quite explicitly in his *Letters to Priests*:

The fact is that God made human-kind a partaker of the divine nature, as we read in the second epistle of Peter. He granted us a relationship with himself, and we have a rational nature which makes us able to seek what is divine, which is not far from each one of us, in whom we live and are and move.²

The balanced insight of St Hilary of Arles (c.401-499) has become the Tradition of the Church: “Just as God stepped out of his nature to become a partaker of our humanity, so we are called to step out of our nature to become partakers of his divinity.”³ The possibility of continuing progress in this personal accession of deification has been set out by St Bede:

The greater your knowledge of God becomes, the more you will realise the magnitude of his promises. When God blesses us, he changes our very being so that whatever we were by nature is transformed by the gift of his Holy Spirit, so that we may truly become partakers of his nature.⁴

This is not an impossible objective, because in the words of Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria (c.1050-c.1108): “Grace and peace are the means by which God gives us everything we need in order to live godly lives.”⁵

Blessed Theophylact has also set out clearly an order in which we can receive this grace and peace. In his *Commentary on 2 Peter* on this opening chapter, he writes:

New Testament XI (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 132. On the authorship of 2 Peter, see Bray, “Introduction to the Catholic Epistles,” pp. xix-xxi.

² *Letters to Priests* 49, cited by Bray, p. 132. It may well be that the differences between the polished Greek of 1 Peter and the rough language of 2 Peter are linked to the fact that Silas is identified in the closing sentences of 1 Peter as the scribe, but not in 2 Peter.

³ St Hilary of Arles, *Introductory Commentary on 2 Peter*, cited by Bray, p. 133.

⁴ St Bede, *On 2 Peter*, cited by Bray, p. 133.

⁵ Blessed Theophylact of Ohrid, *Commentary on 2 Peter*, cited by Bray, p. 132.

Peter lays out here the order which we are follow to come into full maturity. First of all comes faith, which is the foundation and source of all good works. Next comes virtue, by which he means good works, for without them faith is dead, as St James said [James 2:26]. Next comes knowledge. What is that? It is an understanding of the secret things hidden in God which are not revealed to everyone, but only to those who continue faithfully in the works already mentioned. Next in the list comes self-control. This is necessary in order to ensure that those who get this far are not carried away by the magnitude of the gift they have received and become haughty as a result. Steadfastness follows next, because it takes time to acquire steadfastness, and without steadfastness a person is liable to give up and fall into something even worse than what he has been delivered from. Steadfastness increases our trust in God, which is why godliness comes next. The more we are like God, the more we are compelled by that likeness to love others, which is why brotherly love is next on the list. Finally, there is charity, the perfection of all virtues, as Paul also confirms [1 Corinthians 13]⁶

With these Biblical and Patristic foundations about a path toward deification, let us now consider how this Biblical and Patristic understanding can be achieved both theologically and practically.

Deification: The Purpose of All Our Journeys and Struggles

For Orthodox Christians, *theosis* or deification is the destiny of each and every human, as well as “the return of the entire creation to its paradisaic form ... when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9).⁷ Therefore, it should be seen as the purpose of all our journeys and struggles in the arena in which

⁶ Cited by Bray, pp. 133-134. Some of the names of the specific virtues have been changed from the virtues listed in the translation by Bray in order to follow the Revised Standard Version quoted at the beginning of this lecture, as used throughout *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*.

⁷ Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013), p. 7.

we find ourselves. According to contemporary monastic elders, it is only when we are focused on *theosis* that we can set out on the great spiritual journey which is our calling as humans. This adventure will inevitably take us towards our true destiny. In the tradition of the Patristic writers, it is argued that it is only along this “royal road” that we can develop an enlightened overview of the many issues that we face in the time given us and in the places in which we find ourselves. Moreover, if the goal of *theosis* does not emerge as our guiding principle then our lives can easily be drained of meaning and our spiritual adventures can simply become an end in themselves. In the memorable phrase of St Augustine at the opening of his *Confessions*, “You [Lord] have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.”⁸

To achieve *theosis* we must seek to find the true Christ, heeding the warning of St Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4 of the dangers that “your minds will be led astray” when “one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we [i.e. Paul] have not preached, or you receive ... a different gospel.” Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis issues a warning that many non-Orthodox Christians would do well to ponder:

‘In Christ’ everyone has the potential to achieve *theosis*, union with God. But our faith must be in the true Christ. That is why the Church fought strenuously all Her life against heresy, against the falsification of any kind of the true doctrine about Christ, because union with a false Christ would be a false union. It would be a tragic deception. False prophets arise even in our days, attempting to steer the sheep away from the true Christ.⁹

This view is often unpopular, especially with non-Orthodox Christians, and should be exercised with considerable discernment and charity, while learning about “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). In seeking to understand the true

⁸ *Confessions* 1.1.1, cited by Hatzidakis, *Jesus Fallen?* p. 500.

⁹ Hatzidakis, *Jesus Fallen?* p. 500. See *Preaching Another Christ, an Orthodox View of Evangelicalism, A Letter by Saint Theophan the Recluse*, tr. Dimitri Kagaris (Chicago, IL: Orthodox Witness, 2011, 2nd ed.).

meaning of the journey toward *theosis* to which we are each called in 2 Peter 1:3-7, note that it is “the distinction between the essence and the energies [of God that] makes it possible to preserve the true meaning of the Apostle Peter’s words ‘partakers of the divine nature.’”¹⁰ St Basil the Great (c.330-379) explains the underlying theology:

We say that we know the greatness of God, His power, His wisdom, His goodness, His providence over us, and the justness of His judgment, but not His very essence.... The energies [of God] are diversified, and the essence is simple, [and] we say that we know our God from His energies, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His energies come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.... So knowledge of the divine essence involves perception of his incomprehensibility, and the object of our worship is not that of which we comprehend the essence, but of which we comprehend that the essence exists.¹¹

Such are the limitations of our own journeys to become “partakers of the divine nature.”

Ascending the Spiritual Heights as Persons and in Community

Archimandrite George, former Abbot of Gregoriou Monastery on Mount Athos, is an outstanding exponent of Orthodox teachings on *theosis*, which he explains in *The Deification as the Purpose of Man's Life*.¹² According to Archimandrite George, the purpose of our life is declared in the very first chapter of the Bible. Here we read that God created man “in His image and likeness.” We thus ascertain the great love

¹⁰ Exegesis of 2 Peter 1:4a in *The Orthodox New Testament, Vol. 2, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation* (Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent/Dormition Skete, 3rd ed., 2003), p. 473, available from www.HolyApostlesConvent.org .

¹¹ St Basil, *Letter 234 to Amphilochius*, cited in *The Orthodox New Testament, Vol. 2*, p. 473.

¹² (Mt Athos: Praxis Press, 2001). See also *The Living Witness of the Holy Mountain: contemporary voices from Mount Athos*, tr. with introduction and notes by Hieromonk Alexander Golitzin (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1996), especially chapter 11, “The Experience of The Transfiguration in the Life of the Athonite Monk by Archimandrite Aemillianos, pp. 194-215.

that the God has for us. He does not wish us simply to be beings with certain gifts, certain qualities, a certain superiority over the rest of creation, but He wishes us to “be a god by grace.” St Gregory the Theologian writes that man is “an animal ... which can be deified through its inclination towards God.”¹³ We should understand that the gifts of “in His image” were granted us that, as persons and in community, we may ascend the spiritual heights. It follows that our goal is not to simply cultivate an external, moral relationship, but rather to achieve a personal union with our Creator.

Orthodox Patristic writers have warned us, down the centuries that both within and without the Church many are shocked by such bold assertions. Particularly, today it is widely assumed that the purpose of our life is, at best, simply moral improvement—that that the aim of our spiritual journey is to help us become ever more socially aware, more measured, more reflective, etc. In wider society, where the Christian Church is allowed a role at all, it is often mapped out as relating to social justice and debates on morality, whether personal, inter-personal, ecological or economic. However, for St Athanasios the Great these and related concerns are simply our starting points on a much greater, more demanding and ultimately a more exciting journey.

Archimandrite George writes that as:

... man is ‘called to be a god’, in that he was created to become a god, as long as he does not find himself on the path of deification he feels an emptiness within himself; that something is not going right; he feels no joy, even when he is trying to cover the emptiness with other activities. He may numb himself, create a fancy world, but at the same time quite poor, small and limited. He will cage and imprison himself inside it. He may organise his life in such a way that he is never quiet, alone with himself. He can try, through noise, tension,

¹³ *Homily on the Epiphany* MPG 36, 324, 13.

television, radio, continuous information about this and that, as if with drugs, to forget, to not think, not worry, not remember that he is not on the right path, that he has strayed from his purpose.

Like other Athonite thinkers, Archimandrite George argues here that our true challenge is to commune and unite with God.

Difficulties in Achieving Deification

In the epics and myths of many ancient peoples, and above all in the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, it is possible to detect a longing for the unknown God and a desire to experience the Divine (almost by any means). Although the Persians, Greeks, Romans and others were both faithful and devout they were unable to enter into full communion with God. Likewise, in the Old Testament, we encounter just, virtuous and saintly people. However, full union with God was only made possible with the Incarnation of the Divine Logos, as the Patristic writers have set out in the opening section of this lecture.

According to Archimandrite George:

This is the purpose of the incarnation of God. If the purpose of man's life was simply to become morally better, there would be no need for Christ to come into the world, for all these events of divine Providence to take place; for the incarnation of God; the cross, the death and resurrection of the Lord; all that we Christians believe to have happened by Christ. The human race could have been taught to become morally better by the prophets, the philosophers, the righteous men and teachers, just as well.

We need to reflect that there was no lack of such figures either amongst the Jews or the Gentiles of the pre-Christian centuries, nor has there been an absence of such luminaries beyond the Church to the present day.

Of course, Adam and Eve also wanted to become gods. However, this was a

premature desire, neither blessed by nor in collaboration with God the Creator. The first humans lacked spiritual discernment and had no experience of humility, sacrifice and love. In Scripture it is revealed that they relied on their own impulse and acted in a wilful manner, rather like impetuous children. For the Orthodox Church, the essence of the fall was, and will ever be, egotism. By giving in to the temptation of the ego, self-reliance and pride, our forefathers separated themselves from God. Instead of attaining deification they attained exactly the opposite: spiritual death. In the Patristic writings we are assured that God is life. Therefore, whoever is separated from God is separated from life.

The Incarnation: The Path to Deification

St. Gregory Nazianzen, the Theologian, is particularly helpful when explaining what has changed with the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. The Incarnation of the Logos establishes a second communion between God and humanity. The first such communion was in Paradise. This, however, was irrevocably broken. Man was separated from God. The merciful God then provided for another, a second communion, which can no longer be severed. This is the new of union of God and humanity—a second communion of God and men which happens in the person of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. This argument features prominently in the writings of all the Cappadocian fathers.

In the Christian dispensation, by means of the union of the two natures in the person of Christ, human nature is reunited with divine nature. This is because Jesus Christ is the eternal God-man (Theanthropos). As the true Messiah, He ascended to heaven thus demonstrating the path His followers should take. As the God-man, He sits on the right hand of the Father. As the God-man, He will come to judge the world at the Second Coming. Therefore, human nature is now enthroned in the bosom of the Holy Trinity. No longer can anything cut off human nature from God. After the Incarnation of the Word, no matter how many times we sin, no matter how many

times we detach ourselves from God, there is always the possibility of repentance, if, that is, we wish to be reunited with God.

Archimandrite George declares:

So, the Lord Jesus gives us this possibility, to unite with God, and return to the primal purpose, which God ordained for man. This is why He is described in Holy Scripture as the way, the door, the good shepherd, the life, the resurrection, the light. He is the new Adam, who rights the wrong of the first Adam. The first Adam separated us from God with his disobedience and his egotism. With His love, and His obedience to the Father, obedience unto death, to ‘death on the cross’, the second Adam, Christ, brings us back once more to God. He once again orients our freedom towards God, so that, by offering it to Him, we unite with Him.

It is this experience in Christ of orienting “our freedom towards God” that opens us to the journey towards theosis.

The Theotokos and the Saints: Examples of Deification

The hymnographer Kassiane, amongst others proclaimed that the “great project” of the new Adam presupposes the “complementary project” of the new Eve—the Theotokos, a theme going back at least as far as St Irenaeus of Lyons. The Theotokos, alongside her Son, put right the wrong done by the old Eve and transformed her transgression by making it the “first cause” of the Incarnation. Eve encouraged Adam to disobey. The new Eve, the Theotokos, contributes to the Incarnation of the new Adam who will guide the human race towards obedience to God. For this reason, as the first human person who achieved theosis in an exceptional and indeed unrepeatable, way, the Theotokos played a crucial role in our salvation. She was the trailblazer whose role was not only fundamental, but also necessary and irreplaceable, both transcending and blessing the first transgression.

According to St Nicolas Kabasilas of Thessalonike, the great 14th century lay theologian, this role underpins all Orthodox theology. For had the Theotokos in her obedience, not offered her freedom to God—had she not said “yes” to God, the second Person of the Trinity would not have incarnated. Without this pure, all-holy maiden offering her freedom, her will, all of herself to God, salvation would be unknown to us and we would, even now, be perishing in our sins and struck down forever by our mortality. This is why the Ever-Virgin Mary is praised by the Eastern Churches as “more honourable than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim” and celebrated in countless icons and miracle-related feasts.

The Orthodox Church revels in the icons of the saints of deified people. These are our guides along this difficult path, being now “en-godded” they are potent witnesses to our full potential. They are the Christians who became gods by grace because God became man and these saints call us to at least attempt the ascent. This is why in Orthodox churches are depicted not only the incarnate God, Christ, and His Mother, the Theotokos, but also the Saints of every era and region. Typically, the Saints proceed around the walls of the Church, upholding and indicating the Christ Pantocrator in the dome. In churches, chapels, Christian homes and public spaces we celebrate with a plethora of icons the results of God’s Incarnation. Our sainted companions accompany us on our life's journey, encourage us and signal to us our hoped-for destination of deification.

Deification and The Church . . . with Its Living, Dead and Repenting Members

Those of us who wish to receive the Holy Spirit, to unite *with* Christ, and to unite *in* Christ with God the Father, recognise that this union can be achieved in the arena prepared for this great work. We believe that this is best realized in the body of Christ, which we hold to be the Orthodox Church. Remembering St Gregory Palamas, we hasten to add, as noted earlier by St Basil, that this is not a union with the Divine essence, but rather with the deified human nature of Christ. However, this union

with Christ is neither external, nor simply moral, and certainly not about the correct implementation of guidelines, say in the “Pedalion” or some other Christian manual. That is not to say that the rules and regulations promulgated by the Church at various points in its historical sojourn cannot prove a good starting point.

We are not followers of Christ in the way that the Ancient Pagans followed an enlightened philosopher or righteous teacher. Rather, we are members of Christ's Body, the Church. The Church is the Body of Christ—the real body, definitely not a moral, social or political movement, as has occasionally been assumed. Despite our unworthiness and sinfulness, Christ takes us Christians and incorporates us into His Body. He makes us members of Himself. And so we become real members of the Body of Christ, not just morally. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “We are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones” (Ephesians 5:30). Archimandrite George sounds a timely warning:

Certainly, depending on the spiritual state of Christians, they are sometimes living members of Christ's body, and at other times dead. Yet, even as dead members, they do not cease to be members of Christ's body. For example, someone who is baptised has become a member of Christ's body. If he does not confess, does not take Communion, does not live a spiritual life, he is a dead member of Christ's body. But when he repents, he immediately receives divine life. This permeates him and he becomes a living member of Christ's body. He does not need to be rebaptised. Someone who has never been baptised, however, is not a member of Christ's body, even if he lives a life which is moral by human standards. He needs to be baptised in order to become a member of Christ's body, to become incorporated into Christ.

It is because we are members of Christ's body that Christ's life is offered to us and, thus, becomes our life. Thus we are enlivened, saved, and deified. We could not be deified, had Christ not made us members of His Holy Body.

Inside the Church in which we unite with God, we live this new reality which Christ brought to the world—the new creation. This is the life of the Church, the life of Christ, which becomes ours as a gift from the Holy Spirit. Everything in the Church leads to deification. The Holy Liturgy, the Mysteries, divine Worship, the Gospel sermon, the fasting; they all lead to deification. The Church is the sole place of deification.

It is possible that we weak and sinful people go through crises and difficulties from time to time within the Church. It is possible even for scandals to happen in the bosom of the Church. All these happen in the Church, because we are as yet on the way to theosis; and it is very natural that human weaknesses still exist. We are becoming gods, but not yet. So, no matter how often these things occur, we will not leave the Church, because within the Church we have the possibility to unite with God.

In the Orthodox Church of Christ, we can achieve deification because, according to the teachings of the Holy Bible and the Fathers of the Church, the grace of God is uncreated. God is not only essence, He is also energy. We should remember that many Western Theologians have viewed God primarily in terms of essence, strangely echoing Muslim teaching. If God were only essence, we could not unite with Him, could not commune with Him. This is because the essence of God is awesome and unapproachable for any human being, in accordance with the Biblical warning: “Never will man see My face and live” (Exodus 33:20).

Understanding the Energies and Essence of God

According to the Orthodox theological view, God is both One in a Trinity and a Trinity in One. As St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, and other holy Fathers taught, God is filled with a divine love, a divine “Eros” for His creatures. Because of this infinite and ecstatic love of His, He comes out of Himself and seeks

to unite with them. This is expressed and realised by means of His energy or, better, His energies.

Echoing both St Basil and the Hesychast writers, Archimandrite George asserts the following:

The energies of God are divine energies. They too are God, but without being His essence. They are God, and therefore they can deify man. If the energies of God were not divine and uncreated, they would not be God and so they would not be able to deify us, to unite us with God. There would be an unbridgeable distance between God and men. But by virtue of God having divine energies, and by uniting with us by these energies, we are able to commune with Him and to unite with His grace without becoming identical with God, as would happen if we united with His essence. We unite with God through His uncreated energies, and not through His essence. This is the mystery of our Orthodox faith and life.

A great upheaval in the Church in the fourteenth century was provoked by a Greek monk from Italy, Barlaam. He reacted against the current teachings, largely emanating from Sinai and Athos, on theosis. He was shocked by the then current hesychastic debates that centred on the idea that Christians after much struggle, cleansing of the passions, and much prayer, could be transformed and be worthy to unite with God, even to have experience of God, to see God. It was proclaimed that such persons could experience the Uncreated Light which the holy Apostles had seen during the Transfiguration of our Saviour Christ on Mount Tabor.

However, influenced by Western teachings of the day, Barlaam upheld a rationalistic view and dismissed the hesychast teachings entirely. Entering into polemics with the hesychast Fathers he cast doubt on the authenticity of any experience of the divine and came to ridicule the Athonite monks in particular, as deluded. The

polemics that followed his attack were complicated by both political concerns and the ongoing schism (and attempts to overcome that schism) between the Eastern and Western Churches. The emerging humanist thinkers of both East and West, alongside those Byzantines who favoured Union with Rome as a means of revitalising “Christendom” argued that it was impossible for anyone to see God. This view arose from the absence of the necessary distinction to be made between the essence of God and His uncreated energies which accommodates both the unknowability of God and His testified self-manifestation or theophanies. The polemics initiated by Barlaam served to alienate the Eastern and Western Churches further, to strengthen “Uniatism” and compromise the position of Orthodox Christians in territories dominated by the Franks.

On the other hand, Barlaam also provoked a timely and eloquent Orthodox response from St. Gregory Palamas, the Archbishop of Thessaloniki. Bringing his towering intellect, cultural sensitivity and personal spiritual experience to the debate he successfully defended the position of the Hesychasts. In accordance with both the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church the Hesychasts proclaimed that the light of God is uncreated—that it is God Himself. From this position, it followed that, deified men see this light as the ultimate, the highest experience of theosis, and that they are seen within this Light of God. St Gregory Palamas taught that this is the glory of God, His splendour, the Light of Mount Tabor, the light of Christ's Resurrection and of Pentecost, and the bright cloud of the Old Testament. For St Gregory Palamas this is the real Uncreated Light of God, whereas for the Barlaamites and many other thinkers to the present day, this is at best a rather poetic or purely symbolic metaphor for a sense of “oneness” with the Divine.

St Gregory Palamas and his followers (the so-called Palamites) affirmed and deepened the Orthodox teachings on theosis. St Gregory declared that a Christian is not a Christian simply because that person is able to talk about God, rather a particular person is a Christian because of being able to have experience of God.

As with our beloved companions on our earthly sojourns, we experience much more than a simple external relationship. Theosis follows the acquisition of the Holy Spirit as the mystical union of God and man.

Conclusion: Moving Toward Deification

The Patristic writers are definite that we can and should attain *theosis* within the Church. Yet this is a gift from God—like everything else. Archimandrite George clarifies the challenge that confronts us:

It is not something that we can achieve whether by 'passing tests' or on our own merit. Naturally, we must want, struggle, and prepare ourselves so that we are worthy, capable, and receptive enough to accept and guard this great gift from God, since God does not wish to do anything to us without our freedom. Nevertheless, *Theosis* is a gift of God. For this reason, the holy Fathers say, on the one hand, that we 'suffer' deification and on the other hand, that God [Himself] actuates *theosis*.

We can also discern certain necessary qualifications on the path of humanity to deification—most notably ceaseless prayer, all-encompassing love, deep humility, true asceticism and watchfulness (guarding the *nous*/mind). Furthermore, participation in the Holy Mysteries and common worship are also necessary in that they strengthen our resolve and open us up to the gifts and insights of the Holy Spirit.

Every prayer of the Church helps to cleanse the heart, but the so-called prayer of a single phrase, also known as noetic prayer or prayer of the heart, is particularly helpful. This is the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer, which has been handed down amongst monastics for centuries, has the benefit of being both brief and bringing a certain immediacy, intimacy even. As it is a single sentence, this helps us to concentrate our minds and focus our being. The

teaching of the Athonite monks remains consistent: by concentrating our *nous*, we immerse it in our heart, and are thereby enabled to give our full attention to make sure that our heart is not busy with other things and ideas, good or bad—but busy only with God.

This practice of “prayer of the heart” is central to hesychasm and upheld as the means to attain the “ceaseless prayer” spoken of by St Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and by many others after him. Over the centuries, Orthodox monastics developed an entire “spiritual science” or “sacred art” relating to The Jesus Prayer or “Prayer of the Heart.” The major writings devoted to this subject are collected in *The Philokalia* and can readily be consulted in excellent English translations.¹⁴

Reading through *The Philokalia*, it is impressed on us that despite our various concerns and daily activities we are still helped by what is sometimes called “Christian meditation” - simply, regular breaks to touch base and enter prayer in stillness. Of course, all tasks and duties dedicated to God can sanctify us and even be prayerful, but we also need to develop our prayer life and make prayer habitual.

Archimandrite George warns us that:

While we have been called for this great purpose; to unite with God; to become Gods by grace; and to enjoy this great blessing for which our Maker and Creator made us, we often live as if this great and noble aim does not exist for us. Because of this, our life is filled with failure.

¹⁴ *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, 4 vols. compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain & St Makarios of Corinth, edited by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard & Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1983-1998) and *Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart*, edited by E. Kadloubovsky & G. E. H. Palmer (London: Faber & Faber, 1975). See also Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain: Discussion with a Hermit on the Jesus Prayer*, tr. Effie Mavromichali (Levadia-Hellas, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1991); Bishop [now Metropolitan] Kallistos Ware, *The Jesus Prayer*, new ed. (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2014); and Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus* (Lake Worth, FL: Ibis Press, 2007).

He declares: “God, as Love, has moulded us for theosis. If we are not deified, then we have failed to reach our full potential as humans.”

Our failures in the field of prayer and our inability to conceive of, let alone attain deification, is consistently attributed by Orthodox Elders to the following: our overwhelming attachment to the worldly or just the basic cares of life, a sterile and often judgemental moralism—that is, Pharisaic in essence—and a surrender to current ideologies or trends of thoughts that turn their back on *theosis*. For the Athonite Fathers in particular, the Orthodox position endures—that there can be no greater progress for humanity than reaching loving union with God.

A prayerful member of our congregation reflected recently: “In our lives we are often moving in the right direction and gradually put things in order. However, the expected change does not materialise. The Lord has us in His hands. We are His; and it is beautiful to behold.” Such a perspective indicates how we rightly seek the Lord, but deification can only reach fruition through grace. May this E-Quip lecture be a further step in preparing each of us for that grace set out so clearly by many Patristic and Athonite Fathers.