

## INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

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### I

Jules Gross's *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les pères grecs: Contribution historique à la doctrine de la grâce* is a seminal work, and to researchers in patristic studies, particularly to those concerned with the doctrine of divinization, or deification (Gk. *theosis*), an introduction to it is hardly necessary. Yet for many researchers who are unfamiliar with this aspect of patristic theology a recommendation of Gross's work may be in order. The 1938 work traces the notion of divinization in the writings of the ancient Greek world and especially focuses on the doctrine of divinization that was universally held by the Greek fathers of the early church. It may come as a bit of a surprise to some that deification was so universally accepted in the early church, and because of this, Gross's work finds a necessary place in the survey of research on this period. The eminent modern scholar of historical theology Jaroslav Pelikan also attests to the fundamental nature of this doctrine in the patristic period, even equating salvation itself with deification in his own work on the period: "For the Greek patristic tradition, especially in its mystical forms, the final goal and result of this saving knowledge, this forgiveness, and this rescue from death was 'deification'" (155). Elsewhere, regarding the relationship between salvation and the Holy Spirit as discussed in the fourth and fifth centuries, Pelikan comments simply: "Yet salvation was not merely vivification but deification" (216). It is also interesting to note that in his index to the same volume, under the heading "Deification," Pelikan directs: "See Salvation" (384). For many modern scholars, particularly those working in a Protestant context, deification as salvation is one of the "hard sayings" of the early church, and one which has generally been either ignored or reinterpreted in a more palatable way. It is not uncommon for biblical scholars to summarily discount the notion of human beings becoming God as unscriptural. G. W. Butterworth, for example, writing on deification in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, remarks: "There is nothing in either the Old or the New Testament which by itself could even faintly suggest that man might practice being a god in this world and actually become one in the next" (163). Gross's work, in fact, may seem to be an attempt to reinterpret the

ancient doctrine in a less than Christian light. Following some 50 years after Adolf von Harnack's well-known critique of the doctrine in his *History of Dogma* (III:121-304), Gross's *La divinisation du chrétien* may seem to flesh out Harnack's characterizations of deification as pagan and Hellenic, especially by setting a treatment of the patristic doctrine alongside an extensive treatment of the pagan notion in the Hellenic world.

But a careful reading of Gross's research can yield an effectively opposite conclusion, and this is perhaps where the greater value in the work is to be sought. It cannot be denied that ancient Greek religion held to a variety of deificatory doctrines, and Gross's work substantially details this variety. Indeed, *La divinisation du chrétien* is probably the unique place to look for a thorough treatment of the non-Christian notions of divinization in the Hellenic world. Leaving a more thoughtful evaluation of Hellenic divinization to Gross's reader, we may simply say here that the pagan concept was, like so many religious notions of the ancient world, eclectic and far from well-defined. It bore one quality in this work and another, sometimes even opposite, quality in that work, and thus took on a highly mythical and superstitious character that little deserved universal acceptance even among the pagans. On the other hand, Gross's presentation of "Christian divinization," if we may so term it, shows a striking degree of agreement among the various models, so much so that we constantly feel as if we are reading about one unified thought on the matter, held universally by a number of writers across a period of some 500 years. The effect of Gross's Book One, "The Preparation," on the Hellenic background of deification, is a façade, a dreamy and lofty apprehension for a concept that has no inner workings and thus no actual mechanism for its accomplishment. The effect of Gross's Book Two, "The Doctrine of the Greek Fathers," is a cogent belief system, a full-blown understanding of how humans may become God and, more importantly, how they may not. Contrary to Harnack's sweeping critique, Gross shows in detail how the early Greek-speaking church could hold to a notion which seemed so dangerously pagan but was, to their mind, thoroughly Christian. Far from being under the influence of Hellenic superstitions, the Greek fathers, as Gross depicts them, were deliberate and studied in their advancing of the doctrine, giving to it a viability in Christian thought that has long outlived any theoretical pagan roots. Thus, while not denying a Hellenic precursor, Gross goes far to show that divinization in the thought and teaching of the Greek fathers is thoroughly Christian and highly defensible for Christian faith. While submitting to the constraint of showing fully the pagan and Hellenic context for the doctrine, Gross just as ably demonstrates how non-pagan and non-Hellenic Christian divinization was in the early church.

Further, Gross attempts to show that there is indeed a biblical basis for the doctrine in his few chapters relating to the Old and New Testaments. Here

again one may possibly see in his treatment an attempt to show that even Scripture had been Hellenized, something Harnack attempts to alarm us with, but Gross's obvious respect for the individuality of the biblical writers argues against this. Rather, he tries to show that on a deeper level the biblical authors are referring to something more than an ethical Christian life, to something more mystical than moral, and that by their various modes of expression they are indeed referring to divinization. Certainly there is room for argument in this matter, but Gross finds a refreshing set of meanings for the more mystical expressions in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, and sees in them hints at divinization. If nothing more, he gives us cause to reflect on what may be time-worn concepts and introduces us to the possibility of viewing biblical truth in a new way. If Butterworth is correct and there is indeed nothing in the Scriptures which "could even faintly suggest" that human beings may become God, then Gross has merely ventured upon a study in possibilities. But if his contentions hold, and well they may, he has provided us with yet another unique catalog of deification texts from ancient sources, sources of considerably more weight than his others. In any event, the value of Gross's work as a repository of materials with even the slightest hint of divinization in them cannot be disputed.

The doctrine of divinization did not maintain its prominence throughout the Christian church beyond the first five centuries, but that is not to say that it has lost its place altogether. Certainly in the East, in Orthodoxy, the doctrine has survived and holds a key position in the general notion of salvation for that tradition. After the first five centuries of the church, divinization theology took on a sophisticated and elaborate structure in the Eastern churches. In the fourteenth century, particularly through the labors of Gregory Palamas (d. 1359), the doctrine obtained its current Orthodox form, which is now highly intertwined with the theology of the sacraments. Yet even in the West the doctrine can hardly be seen as having been sidelined. A number of Catholic writers, particularly those of the mystical tradition, mention or even emphasize deification. (In the second part of this essay we will refer the reader to other studies that detail the post-patristic development of the doctrine in the Western church.) And even recently the doctrine has gained at least a nominal standing once again in Catholic theology, as exhibited in the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, where we are told that the Word became flesh that we might become God (§460), repeating Athanasius's famous aphorism of the fourth century. Even in Protestantism the doctrine has lately received more than merely negative attention, as a small number of scholars, like F. W. Norris and Robert V. Rakestraw, have attempted to examine it for a Protestant relevance.

These more modern indications of interest hopefully portend a "renaissance" for the ancient doctrine. And for such a renaissance a translation of Gross's work is most opportune, especially when the doctrine is more often misunderstood

than properly understood. There is indeed a certain amount of “shock value,” as Rakestraw (266) terms it, in the notion of human beings becoming God, but the Greek fathers can hardly be accused of sensationalism when one understands not only their times but also their handling of the notion. Gross is excellent in his ability to draw out the nuances of the Greek fathers, who came to the doctrine of an assimilation to God with much the same concern that we moderns have, that is, the integrity of the otherness of God. Contrary to the natural suspicions which arise when one first considers deification (and which, unfortunately, Harnack seems to have fallen prey to), the Greek fathers steered ably between this theological Scylla and Charybdis to present a notion of human deification which properly respects God’s transcendence while acknowledging the mystical character of His incarnation. One should not dismiss, or for that matter approach, the topic of deification without a careful reading of the Greek fathers, and Gross provides the complete and authoritative catalog of their opinions.

But in addition to the theological perils of the doctrine, there is the stigma of hellenization, which we also suspect a translation of Gross’s work into English will help to dispel. Unfortunately, much earlier scholarship on the patristic period fails to credit the writers then with the sophistication that they actually possessed. Contrary to modern natural expectations, the Greek fathers were not completely oblivious to their Hellenic background. Further, they can hardly be accused of being so thoroughly influenced by the world of ideas that surrounded them that they could not transcend those influences, any more than a nineteenth-century Harnack (or a twenty-first-century critic of Harnack) could be accused of being unable to transcend his own world of surrounding ideas. Unlike some modern analysts, the fathers easily identified the influences that bore upon them and met them squarely in their extensive writings. We suspect that they would take great umbrage at the modern criticism of a pervasive Hellenic influence and would strenuously counter that indeed they were advancing something that transcends their human and social background, particularly in the matter of human beings being made God. It is easy to confuse Christian theosis with some of the very pagan notions that preceded it, such as apotheosis, and to therefore dismiss the former because of the undesirable nature of the latter. But the fathers of the early church were not so easily confused, probably because they were so close to the sources of confusion and were therefore forced to clearly enunciate the differences. Only a careful reading of how they approached this subject will reveal how thoroughly unconfused they really were, and here again the value of Gross’s work suggests itself. Our earnest hope is that the reader will read for these differences and at least try to hear how the fathers saw in deification a decidedly Christian doctrine. Perhaps the bugaboo of hellenization can finally be dispelled from the notion of deification as held by the Christian church.

Yet for all their theological richness, the Greek fathers should not be considered as having the final word on the matter, and our intention in presenting Gross's work to English scholarship is not to suggest a wholesale return to patristic theology in this or any other matter. Indeed, there are basic differences between the thought of the ancient Christian church and that of the modern which rightly motivated the Reformers to turn away from much of the patristic tradition. The fundamental complaints regarding the patristic period which have been raised over the past five centuries cannot easily be overlooked. Here we are not referring to what is probably the leading objection to the doctrine of deification, at least by modern Protestant theologians, that is, the seeming confusion of the Creator and the creature that the doctrine, viewed superficially, may invite; this complaint, we feel, is ably met by the fathers in their own presentation of the doctrine, for, as we have said, they too shared the concern. Rather, we are referring to other characteristics of the patristic church, which colored not only the doctrine of deification but much of what they believed and taught. Chief among these is the pervasive mysticism that developed in the early church. Jules Gross details the similar development of a mysticism related to the doctrine of deification, and this will at once repel many modern Protestants. But as Gross notes, the mystic embellishments are not uniform among the proponents of deification in the patristic period, and a mysticism of deification is more incidental than defining. Because of this, we need not dismiss the core doctrine altogether on account of mysticism.

A second complaint regards the relationship of the sacraments to deification. Many of the patristic advocates of deification tie the efficacy of the doctrine to the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. Eastern Orthodoxy has gone far to develop this notion, and to this day the sacraments are understood to provide the major practical mechanism for divinization for Orthodox Christians. This, of course, runs counter to the attitude of many Protestants and touches a fundamental difference that to this day divides the Christian church. Yet the same theological solutions that reformation and post-reformation theologians have advanced to account for the sanctifying actions of the Spirit without recourse to sacraments would obtain for deification as well. Hence, the sacramental quality of patristic deification also appears to be highly extrinsic, and because of this it appears that the doctrine of deification need not be sacramental to survive theologically. This gives us hope that deification could become more universally Christian than it is mainly Eastern Orthodox now.

But beyond the classic complaints against the fathers, we may identify particular shortages in the patristic view of deification, which, to our knowledge, have yet to be voiced by modern analysts, and which further thought may remedy. First, while the fathers are emphatic regarding the fact of deification, they are weak and nebulous regarding the actual practice of deification, even when they propose the sacraments as a practicality. It is unfortunately true that

patristic deification is a tremendously lofty theological construct with few stairways into it, and we suspect that this is one reason the notion eventually lost its appeal in the West. There did not seem to be much for the common (and Latin-speaking) Christian in all these theological structures. It would take the intellect of the Christian East to make the doctrine palatable in practice, and this was done both by developing more fully the sacramental aspects of the patristic concept, as we have noted, and by providing a fresh mechanism through hesychasm, advanced in the fourteenth century. Yet even so, the doctrine of deification in modern Orthodoxy is more theological than experiential. Hopefully, a fresh examination of deification would overcome the historical weakness of the Christian church to simply theologize and not provide practical guidance into the experience.

Second, the very individual nature of patristic deification requires reconsideration. The fathers are not without numerous references to Christian love among the believers, and this no doubt demonstrates their understanding of a corporate dimension of the Christian life. But these references never attain to the exceptional descriptions of the life of the Body of Christ expressed by Paul. In the particular discussions on deification in the fathers there are similar references, here and there, to Christian love, but these are far outweighed by the more pervasive descriptions of individual deification, by the more common attitudes regarding deification as a journey of the individual mystic. Somehow the corporate nature of the Christian life, the life of the believers as members of the Body of Christ, needs to overarch any identity they have as human beings who have been made God. In fact, there should be a single view that holds the believers at the same moment both as corporate persons and as deified persons, and this we would expect to see in a modern apprehension of deification.

## II

We expect that Gross's work will enlighten the modern reader concerning this very central ancient doctrine, and our hope is that in reading Gross many will come to treasure the notion of deification and no longer view it as a bygone curiosity. We also hope that his work will serve as an introduction to other equally able studies on the doctrine. Like Gross's *La divinisation du chrétien*, most of these works were done in French, the principal language of patristic studies, and our hope is to provide some of these as well in translation to English scholarship in the future. In the sixth chapter of René Laurentin's *L'Esprit Saint, cet inconnu*, published in 1997, under the section entitled "Divinisation," is a footnote which lists four works which are recognized as more or less authoritative on the subject of deification. Gross's book is listed first followed by *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque*, by Myrrha Lot-Borodine (to which we will return momentarily), then by a 1935 article by Y. Congar, "La déification dans la tradition spirituelle de l'Orient" (*VSpir* 43),

and finally by the 1957 article, “Divinisation,” by various contributors in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*. In his own brief section, Laurentin traces the teaching of deification and its implications in the New Testament, in the Greek fathers through Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c. 500), and in Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), Pope Leo XIII (d. 1903), and Pope John Paul II. Laurentin deals with the apparent conflict between our real experience of divinization, as indicated in the Bible and in the church fathers, and God’s transcendence and our own consciousness of humility.

Lot-Borodine’s book, mentioned second by Laurentin, was subsequently and posthumously enlarged under the title, *La déification de l’homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, being composed in its final form of three major articles, published over the period of 1932-1950. The first two articles were thus contemporary with the work of Gross, whom Lot-Borodine appreciates for his vast documentation but criticizes for restricting the range and significance of the Greek doctrinal synthesis, especially in relation to the originality of the physical theory of redemption as the basis for theosis (212-213). Unlike Gross, Lot-Borodine’s approach to the overall subject is experiential as well as scholarly. Reflecting her own (Russian) orthodox roots, she views deification as the transfiguration of the human nature by the uncreated divine energies through the deifying action of the Holy Spirit. This has been realized in the transfigured humanity of Christ. Such an accomplished divinization, according to her view, is continued in the believers in the sacramental life. The spiritual energies contained in the glorified humanity of Christ are communicated in the rites of Christian initiation. And, finally, it is the mystical life that is the top expression of the process of divinization. Lot-Borodine goes farther chronologically than Gross in her treatment of the subject, extending her investigation to Gregory Palamas and Nicolas Cabasilas (b. c. 1322). And unlike Gross she also touches on the writings of some Latin fathers—Ambrose, Augustine, and John Cassian. In addition, in his brief Angelus prayer message of August 11, 1996 entitled, “Eastern theology has enriched the whole Church,” Pope John Paul II, in speaking of the past defense of hesychasm in the East, noted its emphasis on “the concrete possibility that man is given to unite himself with the Triune God in the intimacy of his heart, in that deep union of grace which Eastern theology likes to describe with the particularly powerful term of ‘theosis,’ ‘divinization’”. Shortly thereafter the Pope notes as “worthy of mention” the “study of the doctrine of ‘divinization’ by the Orthodox scholar, Loth Borovine.”<sup>1</sup>

A third major authoritative source noted by Laurentin is the article “Divinisation” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*. This article by seven different contributors is composed of five major, chronologically arranged sections—ranging from antiquity to the late seventeenth century. Herein lies its virtue. The first section deals with the concept of divinization in the religious thought of the ancients.

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<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly a transcriptional error for “Lot-Borodine.”

The next section deals with the teaching in the Greek fathers, although mention is also made of Gregory Palamas and Simeon, the New Theologian (d. 1022). Thus far, the scope of the material covered is more or less equal with that of Gross. The final three sections, however, which amount to almost eighty percent of this book-length article, go far beyond the bounds of Gross's study. Indeed, the third section deals with the teaching of divinization in the writings of the Latin fathers, from Tertullian (d. c. 225) to Gregory the Great (d. c. 604). The fourth section, the lengthiest of all and comprising well over one-half of the article, is on the period of the Middle Ages. There are three sub-sections, which cover the monastic writers of the twelfth century, the theologians of the thirteenth century, and the Rhenish-Flemish school of the fourteenth century and beyond. Over thirty, mostly Latin-writing authors are surveyed. The fifth and final section scans the writings on divinization in the western tradition to the latter part of the seventeenth century, through the French missionary-scholar, Louis Laneau (d. 1696). Primary and secondary sources are referred to and quoted throughout, albeit the latter obviously only up to the early 1950s.

In addition to Laurentin's work and the seminal studies to which he refers, two recently published dictionaries of Christianity in the English language reflect the increased interest and attention being given to the matter of deification by scholars today. First, the third edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, published in 1997, now features an article on "deification," with Gross's book being the initial entry of some otherwise recent and pertinent bibliographical sources, whereas in the second edition such an article was completely lacking—there being only a brief paragraph on "apotheosis." And this short piece dealt mainly with the pagan roots of the concept, and, of course, there was no reference to Gross's work. The current article on deification very briefly traces the doctrine's development in the Eastern tradition, but does make the interesting point of how, in the West, through the patristic revival in the Oxford Movement (1833-45), the concept of deification was recovered. A second and even more recent English work that reflects the same tendency toward the renewed study of deification is the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, published in 1999. In the first edition there was no article at all on deification, divinization, or any related concept. But in the newer edition there are now nearly three pages on "Divinization," with a very ample bibliography of both primary and secondary sources, the latter group being headed by Gross's book. This article suggests that the real sources of the doctrine are found in the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—before briefly tracing its development among the Greek fathers up to Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), with a notation on the eventual and crucial contribution of Gregory Palamas. A short survey of the western development of terminology and doctrine is also presented, ranging only from Tertullian to Leo the Great (d. 461).

Finally, mention should be made of at least two very recently published monographs, both in 1999 and in English, on the subject of deification, and both of which owe much to Gross's pioneering work while venturing beyond his chronological boundaries. The first is A. N. Williams's *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas*. In the first chapter, devoted to the history of the doctrine, the author calls theosis, from the third century onward, "the dominant model of the concept of salvation" (27). In the survey of the doctrine's development that follows, Gross's book, primarily, and Lot-Borodine's, to a lesser degree, are drawn upon. As the title might indicate, this book is presented in the hope of resolving, by highlighting common ground, long-standing differences between the Eastern and Western churches concerning the doctrine of God and the nature of salvation—tied together in the doctrine of deification. This then is to be the author's vehicle for producing an increased receptiveness, by readers from either tradition, to ecumenical rapprochement. Williams points out that this doctrine, while remaining in the forefront in the East, was thought to have all but disappeared from Western theology by the Middle Ages. But by a careful examination of the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas she endeavors to show that this was not the case, and by a comparison of the *Summa* with the *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts* and *Capita Physica* of Gregory Palamas, she further endeavors to show "the consonance of their doctrines of deification" (33). The second 1999 monograph on deification that should be briefly noted is Emil Bartos's *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Stăniloae*. Focusing on the doctrine of deification, which affords the theoretical basis for how Eastern Orthodox theologians in general, and the Romanian theologian Stăniloae in particular, understand the major doctrines of the Christian faith, the author examines the major doctrines of anthropology, christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology as they relate to deification in Stăniloae's scheme. In doing so Bartos, of necessity, traces the history and development of the doctrine, and is thus at least somewhat indebted to Gross's seminal study. As with A. N. Williams's book, Bartos's work also embraces the goal of contributing to ecumenical dialogue between Eastern and Western theologians by using the doctrine of deification—long neglected but now being studied again in the West—as a useful and mutually acceptable vehicle.

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