

1. Foundations

Jesus said, 'This is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and him whom you sent, Jesus Christ.'¹ Belief in the possibility of Christian deification in terms of direct knowledge of God was inherent in Western theology in the thirteenth century, and it was often described in Latin as 'deiformity'.² To follow Christ, who is 'in the form of God',³ is to be made like him and to become conformed to him. This belief rested upon a number of texts within the New Testament, and it is encapsulated in the potent phrase 'partakers of the divine nature' that occurs in the second epistle of Peter.⁴ This belief is expressed in similar terms in the letter to the Ephesians, where Christians are called 'to be renewed in the spirit of their minds' and to put on the new humanity in Christ, which has been created in righteousness, holiness and truth, 'in conformity with God Himself'.⁵

In the letter to Hebrews, Christians are charged to become 'partakers in the holiness of God'⁶ in fulfilment of the ancient divine command to Israel in Leviticus: 'Be holy, for I am holy.'⁷ Belief that human beings are made in the image and likeness

1. John 17:3.

2. See, for example, N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); D. Spezzano, *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification According to St Thomas Aquinas* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2015); and B. Blankenhorn, *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

3. Philippians 2:6.

4. II Peter 1:4.

5. Ephesians 4:23-24.

6. Hebrews 12:10.

7. Leviticus 11:44-45.

of God is the foundation for this teaching,⁸ as is also the divine calling to become children or 'sons' of God, which was historically the unique vocation of Israel in the Old Testament.⁹ When Jesus defended himself as the Son of God in St John's gospel,¹⁰ he appealed to a verse in Psalm 82 in which God said: 'You are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High.'¹¹ These texts prompted much deep Christian thought about the meaning of deiformity or deification.

Medieval theologians turned to the fourth gospel as much as to the writings of St Paul to elucidate the significance of belief in deiformity or deification. In the prologue of the fourth gospel, the evangelist declared 'that as many as received him [i.e. the Word], to them he gave the right^[12] to become children of God, to them that believe on his name: which were born not blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God';¹³ and so it is 'of his fullness that we have all received, grace upon grace'.¹⁴ In his dialogue with Nicodemus, Jesus spoke of a person being 'born again' or 'from above' by the coming of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ To the Samaritan woman at the well, he promised the indwelling of the divine presence in terms of a 'well of water springing up to eternal life'.¹⁶ Later at the festival of Tabernacles in the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus openly declared: 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink: for someone who believes in me, as Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'¹⁷ These words fulfilled the call of divine wisdom in the Old Testament and the vision of the prophets, for 'the

8. Genesis 1:26.

9. Exodus 4:22, Jeremiah 31:9 and Hosea 11:1.

10. John 10:34.

11. Psalm 82:6.

12. The Greek word *ἐξουσία* signifies not only capacity to become, but also the right to receive, this power that derives from divine authority and is given by God. It signifies adoption as children in order to become by its continuing reception true sons of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

13. John 1:12-13; cf. Revelation 21:7; this is mediated through the sacrament of baptism.

14. John 1:16; cf. Colossians 1:9.

15. John 3:3-8; cf. James 1:18 and I Peter 1:23.

16. John 4:14.

17. John 7:37-38.

wellspring of wisdom is like a flowing stream'.¹⁸ This invitation to drink by Jesus as the Wisdom of God anticipates his command 'to eat the flesh of the Son of Man and to drink his blood' in order to participate in the sacrificial life of God that he is offering: a person who does this 'abides in me and I in him'. This gift of divine life within a person flows from the eternal relationship of the Father and the Son: for 'as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the person who eats me will live because of me'.¹⁹ This life flows into a human person directly through the death of Christ on the Cross.²⁰

The phrase 'abides in me' heralds the central teaching of the final discourses in this gospel when Jesus promised the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter and Spirit of Truth: 'you will know him because he abides within you and he will be in you'.²¹ Obedience to the teaching of Jesus is the expression of true love of God the Father, and eternal life springs from such a relationship with Christ: 'I will not leave you desolate, but I will come to you ... because I live, you will live also. In that day, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you'.²² Jesus concluded with the promise that 'if someone loves me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him; and *we* will come to him and make our dwelling with him'.²³ The implication of the word 'we' is profound: for deification means being conformed to Christ by his indwelling and by being filled with his Spirit; and so it means being drawn within the eternal communion or *koinonia* of love of the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus used the Parable of the Vine to intimate how a person may truly abide in him saying, 'Abide in me and I in you'.²⁴ A Christian is grafted by baptism into Christ, receiving within the hidden sap of the Holy Spirit, so that life may prevail and the fruit of divine love may be borne: for 'a person who abides in me and I in him bears much fruit: but apart from me you can do

18. Proverbs 18:4 and Isaiah 55:1.

19. John 6:53-58.

20. Cf. John 19:34.

21. John 14:16-17.

22. John 14:18-20.

23. John 14:23; cf. Revelation 3:20.

24. John 15:1-10.

nothing'.²⁵ In Galatians, St Paul described the fruit of the Spirit as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control'.²⁶ Such fruit is the sign of the inner presence of the Holy Spirit. It is not a human achievement, but it is the work of divine grace perfecting human nature; and it bears all the hallmarks of divine life and love as revealed in the person of Jesus: it results in Christlikeness. In the great prayer of Jesus in St John chapter seventeen, he asked the Father that 'they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you: that they also may be in us; ... and that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them and you in me, so that they may be perfected into one.'²⁷ To be a Christian is therefore to become enfolded within the love of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and this is the deep meaning of deification, even as Jesus prayed to his Father, 'that the love with which you love me may be in them, and I in them'.²⁸ The Holy Spirit brings about this perfecting of a human person throughout a lifetime – a perfecting into unity with God, and also with other Christians within the Body of Christ, the Church.

The first letter of John unfolds this mystery further, asserting that divine love has made us children of God: 'we are already the children of God, but it is not yet revealed what we shall be. But we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is'.²⁹ Purity of life and diligent prayer constitute the path to the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus in the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'.³⁰ Love is the sign that a person belongs to God: for 'a person who does not love does not even know God: for God is love'.³¹ Moreover, 'No-one has seen God at any time;[³²] but if we love one another, God abides within us, and His love is being perfected in us'.³³ The sense of the Holy Spirit within us confirms that 'we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit'.³⁴ The truth is that 'God

25. John 15:5.

26. Galatians 5:22-23.

27. John 17:21-23.

28. John 17:26.

29. I John 3:1-2.

30. Matthew 5:8.

31. I John 4:8.

32. Cf. John 1:18.

33. I John 4:12.

34. I John 4:13.

is love, and a person who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.³⁵ In the book of Revelation, this is intimated by the cryptic symbols of 'the hidden manna' and 'the white stone', upon which is written 'a new name that is unknown to all apart from the person that receives it'.³⁶ For in the words of St Paul: 'your life is hidden with Christ in God'.³⁷

It is in the writings of St Paul that the meaning of becoming Christlike or deiform is explicitly revealed through his own experience of conversion and its aftermath. His authority as a spiritual father was second to none as 'the Apostle', so often cited in patristic and medieval theology. To pursue the meaning of deiformity or deification in his letters is to come very close to the heart of Paul's own spiritual experience of being 'in Christ'.³⁸ A pivotal testimony is in his letter to Romans, where he said that 'you are no longer in the flesh but in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God dwells within you: ... and if Christ is within you ... the Spirit is life because of righteousness; ... for as many as are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God; ... and the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God'.³⁹ Central to Paul's thinking was adoption through Christ as children of God and becoming 'fellow-heirs' with Christ.⁴⁰ He invited Christians 'to put on the Lord Jesus Christ',⁴¹ and to be sacrificially transformed by 'the renewing of the mind'.⁴²

The moral and pastoral implications of this belief become clear in his two letters to the Corinthians. At the heart of Christian ethics is the belief that each human person with their body is called to become a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit.⁴³ Each human being, made in the divine image and likeness, is therefore of unique value and significance from the moment of stable conception until the moment of natural death and beyond. This belief is the foundation of all Christian ethics in terms of

35. I John 4:16.

36. Revelation 2:17.

37. Colossians 3:3.

38. See D.J. Dales, *Living through Dying: The Spiritual Experience of St Paul* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1994).

39. Cf. Romans 8:9-17.

40. Ephesians 1:5.

41. Romans 13:14.

42. Romans 12:1-2.

43. I Corinthians 6:19.

chastity and belief in the sanctity of individual life. Each person is capable of becoming indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and therefore deified in this life and perfected in eternal life, which is their destiny. The coming of the Word of God in human flesh⁴⁴ has sanctified forever actual human physical and spiritual existence; and by his ascension, Christ has revealed its eternal destiny by taking human nature in himself into God.⁴⁵ Holy Communion is therefore participation in the Body and Blood of Christ, and this communion or *koinonia* is at the heart of the Church's life.⁴⁶ Life in Christ is also the basis for belief in the resurrection of the human person including the body: 'For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.'⁴⁷

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a transforming experience, restoring blinded sight, so that 'we all with unveiled faces, reflecting as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord the Spirit'.⁴⁸ For 'if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: old things have passed away and everything is becoming new'.⁴⁹ This transforming experience and vision is, however, wrought at great cost – by bearing the Cross of Christ,⁵⁰ which means 'Always bearing about in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body, ... in our mortal flesh: thus death works in us, but life in you'.⁵¹ At the end of his letter to the Galatians, Paul affirmed in his own handwriting that, 'I bear branded on my body the marks of Jesus': and the Greek word he used was *stigmata*,⁵² which is the word also used in the Latin text of the Vulgate.

Paul's letter to the Galatians contains his momentous testimony: 'I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me.'⁵³ He reminded his hearers that 'you are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ: for as many of you

44. John 1:14.

45. Cf. the words of the Latin creed, *Quicumque Vult*.

46. I Corinthians 10:16-17.

47. I Corinthians 15:22.

48. II Corinthians 3:18.

49. II Corinthians 5:17; cf. Revelation 21:5.

50. Mark 8:34.

51. II Corinthians 4:10-12.

52. Galatians 6:17.

53. Galatians 2:20.

as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ, so that you are all one humanity in Jesus Christ.' This new humanity in Christ transcends being Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.⁵⁴ The purpose of his writing to them was so that 'Christ may be formed in you'.⁵⁵ In his letter to the Colossians this teaching was further developed, and it can be summed up in the phrase 'Christ within you, the hope of glory'.⁵⁶ Paul said that 'in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and in him you are being fulfilled'.⁵⁷ In Baptism, Christians 'have put on the new humanity [in Christ], which is being renewed by knowledge of God in whose image it is created'.⁵⁸ In the letter to Ephesians, the writer prayed that his hearers 'might be strengthened with power through the Spirit within you: so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, and that you may be rooted and grounded in love'.⁵⁹ Christians are called to 'be renewed in the spirit of the mind and to put on the new human nature, which is being created in God's likeness in righteousness, holiness, and truth'.⁶⁰

In his very personal letter to the Philippians, Paul said that 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain'.⁶¹ He regarded 'being in Christ' as more valuable than anything else in his own religious formation or experience, and he relied entirely upon faith and divine grace at work within him. For him, therefore, to be made like Christ meant coming to know him personally and experiencing the power of his resurrection already at work within him. This entailed sharing in the sufferings of Christ and becoming spiritually conformed to his death. This is the meaning of Christian baptism and also the hope of final resurrection in Christ. Paul regarded this work of divine grace within him as a lifetime's process of inner transformation, a 'perfecting in the midst of imperfection', to use a phrase dear to St Gregory the Great. Paul's hope was that he would be able to 'apprehend that for which I was first apprehended by Jesus

54. Galatians 3:26-29; cf. Colossians 3:11.

55. Galatians 4:19.

56. Colossians 1:27.

57. Colossians 2:9-10.

58. Colossians 3:10; cf. Romans 12:1-2.

59. Ephesians 3:16-17.

60. Ephesians 4:23-24.

61. Philippians 1:21.

Christ' on the road to Damascus and subsequently.⁶² For the goal of his life was simply 'the prize of the heavenly calling of God in Jesus Christ'.⁶³

The letter to Hebrews also contains teaching that is fundamental to the Christian vocation to deification. The foundation of this is the incarnation of Christ and his suffering and death on the Cross, where he 'tasted death for every human being'. He came in order 'to bring many sons to glory', and the bond of his union with them is the measure of his sufferings, by which he was 'perfected' within the confines of sinful human existence. 'For he that sanctifies and they that are sanctified are all one'; and Jesus called us his 'brethren' in the closing words of Psalm 22, a psalm that was on his lips as he died, and by reference to which he summoned his disciples after his resurrection.⁶⁴ By his incarnation in human flesh, Jesus overthrew the power of death and evil, abolishing fear⁶⁵ by 'being made like his brethren in all things'. He was tempted but victorious, and so he is able to respond empathetically to all those who turn to him for help in their need.⁶⁶ Christians are called to become 'partakers of Christ',⁶⁷ and to be 'enlightened with the heavenly gift [through baptism] and so be made partakers of the Holy Spirit, by tasting the goodness of the word of God'.⁶⁸ It is by 'looking unto Jesus'⁶⁹ that they become 'partakers of his holiness'.⁷⁰ Throughout this letter, that reflects so profoundly upon the spiritual worship of the Church,⁷¹ being a Christian means 'offering up a continual sacrifice of praise to God through Jesus Christ'.⁷² The words of Jesus himself in the gospel intimate this when he said to his disciples that 'the Kingdom of God is within you'.⁷³ For he also

62. Acts 9:1-9.

63. Philippians 3:9-14.

64. Psalm 22:22; cf. John 20:17; and Matthew 28:10.

65. Cf. I John 4:18.

66. Hebrews 2:9-18.

67. Hebrews 3:14.

68. Hebrews 6:4-5; note the highly liturgical language used here.

69. Hebrews 12:2.

70. Hebrews 12:10.

71. Cf. John 4:24.

72. Hebrews 13:15; cf. Romans 12:1-2.

73. Luke 17:21.