

Grace, Theosis, and the Essence— Energies Distinction

Does Rome Reduce Grace to a Created Thing?

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I. The Word the West Forgot It Knew

Ask an Orthodox Christian what salvation *is*, and the answer will likely be a word many Western Christians have never heard: *theosis*—deification, the creature’s real participation in the life of God. Peter’s astonishing phrase is its charter: that we might “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). And the Fathers pressed the phrase as far as language allows. “The Son of God became man,” Athanasius wrote, “so that we might become God.”¹

From this vision the Orthodox East has built a standing indictment of the West: that Rome, somewhere between Augustine and the scholastics, traded the patristic gospel of transformation for a courtroom—legal categories, merit ledgers, and a doctrine of

“created grace” that hands the soul a created gift in place of God Himself. This essay states that indictment at full strength, with the theology of Gregory Palamas given fairly, and then examines what the Catholic Church actually teaches. The dispute, it will turn out, is narrower and more technical than the indictment suggests—and a growing number of theologians on both sides doubt it need divide the Church at all.

II. The Orthodox Vision: Salvation as Deification

For the Orthodox, theosis is not one doctrine among many; it is what the gospel is. The Word became what we are, the Fathers taught from Irenaeus onward, that we might become what He is.² Salvation is therefore not primarily an acquittal, a changed legal status before an offended judge; it is a real, transforming union with the living God, begun in baptism, nourished in the Eucharist, and perfected in glory, when the saints will shine with the uncreated light the apostles glimpsed on Tabor. The West’s courtroom vocabulary—satisfaction, merit, imputation, penalty—strikes the Orthodox ear as a shrunken gospel: a religion about God’s ledger rather than God’s life.

III. Palamas and the Essence–Energies Distinction

But the vision raises a hard question: how can a creature share the nature of the uncreateable God without either becoming God or reducing God to something shareable? The Orthodox answer was given its classic form by Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century, defending the hesychast monks against the philosopher Barlaam. God is utterly unknowable and unparticipable in His *essence*, Palamas taught, yet truly and immediately participated in His *energies*—His uncreated operations, the very life and glory of God going forth, of which the light of the Transfiguration is the standing instance. The distinction is real, not merely conceptual; and it was vindicated as Orthodox teaching by the councils of Constantinople in 1341, 1347, and 1351, commemorated to this day on the second Sunday of Great Lent.³

By this distinction the East holds both truths at full strength: the God who is beyond every concept really gives *Himself*, not a token of Himself, to His saints. Whatever else is said below, the pastoral achievement should be acknowledged: the essence–energies theology has kept deification at the center of Orthodox preaching, prayer, and monastic life for six centuries.

IV. The Charge Against Rome

Against this the Latin scholastics taught “created grace”—grace as a created quality infused into the soul. To Orthodox critics, from Palamas’s debate with Barlaam to the neo-patristic theologians of the twentieth century, this is the fatal Western move: if what the

soul receives is created, then union with God has been quietly replaced by union with a creature, a packaged effect standing between God and man. Behind it the critics see the Western doctrine of absolute divine simplicity—a God so identified with His own essence that He has nothing communicable to give except created effects. On these premises, they conclude, real deification is metaphysically impossible for the West; the most its God can offer is a created resemblance. The West’s history—satisfaction theories, merit accounting, the disappearance of deification from ordinary Western vocabulary—is read as the symptom chart of that mistake.⁴

V. Theosis Is Catholic Doctrine

The right response begins with gratitude rather than rebuttal: the East has kept this treasure polished and in daily use, and the West has often left its own copy in the attic. But an indictment is a different thing from a treasure, and the indictment rests on a reading of Catholic teaching that Catholic teaching refuses to sit still for.

Deification is not an Eastern distinctive the West lacks; it is defined Catholic teaching, stated in the East’s own boldest words. Paragraph 460 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* strings the classic texts together: the Word became flesh to make us “partakers of the divine nature”; “the Son of God became man so that we might become God,” in Athanasius’s sentence quoted verbatim; and Thomas Aquinas—the alleged architect of the courtroom—teaching that the only-begotten Son assumed our nature “so that he, made man, might make men gods.”⁵ Thomas defines sanctifying grace itself as a *participation in the divine nature*.⁶ And the doctrine is not filed away in a manual: at every Mass, mixing water into wine, the priest prays, “may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”⁷ A church does not pray daily for what its theology renders impossible.

VI. What “Created Grace” Actually Names

The charge that Rome hands the soul a created token in place of God mistakes what the term is for. Catholic theology teaches *both* uncreated grace—which is God Himself, the indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the soul, as Jesus promised: “we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23)—and created grace, which names the *effect* of that indwelling in the creature: the real change wrought in me when God arrives.⁸

That effect must be created for the plainest of reasons: *I* am created, and what happens in me happens in a creature. Created grace is not a courier standing between God and the soul; it is the burn the fire leaves, affirmed precisely so that the fire’s presence is real transformation rather than legal fiction. Notice the irony: the doctrine the Orthodox

critique attacks as a substitute for deification was built to *secure* deification—to insist, against every purely forensic account, that grace changes what a human being is. The critique, at its strongest, corrects theologians who spoke of the gift and forgot the Giver—a correction some Latin manuals genuinely earned—but it lands on a distortion of the doctrine, not the doctrine.

VII. The Vision of God, and What Palamas Was Protecting

Read Palamas fairly and he is guarding two truths every Christian must hold: God really gives Himself, and God is never comprehended. Catholic theology guards the same two truths with different instruments. The blessed *see* the divine essence—Scripture’s own promise: “we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2); “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8)—while even in that vision the finite mind never *comprehends* the infinite God.⁹ The West says: seen, never comprehended. The East says: participated, never seen in essence. Each formula exists to protect the other side’s concern.

Whether the uncreated energies are “really distinct” from the essence, or the distinction lies rather in our creaturely mode of receiving the one simple God, is a genuinely technical question—and it is worth noticing that it divides schools within Orthodoxy and within Catholicism, not merely East from West. A dispute in which each side affirms what the other is protecting is consistent with two theological idioms; it is very weak ground for two churches.

VIII. The Symptom Chart, Reread

As for the courtroom: the West’s legal vocabulary is real, and at its best it protects something the East also confesses—that sin is not only sickness but offense, and mercy not only medicine but pardon. But the same West produced the doctrine of sanctifying grace as participation in God; the mystics from Bernard of Clairvaux to John of the Cross, for whom union with God is the whole itinerary; and a liturgy that asks for a share in Christ’s divinity every day. If the metaphysics of the West made deification impossible, the West failed to notice for twenty centuries.

The fairer verdict is symmetrical: two idioms, each with its characteristic temptation—the West’s to bookkeeping, the East’s to mist—each correcting the other inside the one tradition both inherited. The Second Vatican Council said as much of Eastern theology generally: the legitimate variety of East and West, far from harming the Church’s unity, belongs to her fullness.¹⁰

IX. Two Lungs

This is why a growing number of theologians on both sides—Orthodox scholars who read Aquinas on participation, Catholic scholars who read Palamas without the old polemics—have concluded that the essence–energies question, pressed carefully, need not divide the Church: each tradition affirms what the other’s formula was built to protect.¹¹ No shared dogmatic statement settles it yet, and this essay claims none. But if grace is not the wall, the ground of separation shrinks back to the question examined in this essay’s companions: authority—who speaks for the Church, and how the Church knows.

John Paul II gave the whole matter its lasting image: “the Church must breathe with her two lungs!”¹² The gospel of deification belongs to both. The East has kept its vocabulary alive; the West has kept, in its doctrine of grace, the same treasure under other names. Neither lung breathes fully without the other—and the God who became man so that man might become God is not honored by the held breath.

Endnotes

1. 2 Peter 1:4 (RSV); Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54, as quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 460.
2. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, preface.
3. Gregory Palamas, *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*; the Constantinopolitan councils of 1341, 1347, and 1351.
4. The Palamas–Barlaam controversy, 1330s–1340s; for the modern restatement, Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, chs. 4–5.
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 460, quoting 2 Peter 1:4, Athanasius, and Thomas Aquinas (*Opusculum* 57).
6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 112, a. 1.
7. *The Roman Missal*, the prayer at the preparation of the chalice.
8. John 14:23 (RSV); on uncreated grace as the divine indwelling and created grace as its effect in the soul, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 110.
9. 1 John 3:2; Matthew 5:8 (RSV); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1028; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 12.
10. *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), §§14–17.
11. Representative of the convergence literature: A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union—Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford, 1999).

12. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), §54.

For Further Reading

On the Incarnation, by St. Athanasius—§54 for the sentence the *Catechism* quotes. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm>.

Gregory Palamas—The Triads, edited by John Meyendorff—the defense of the hesychasts in Palamas’s own words.

The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, by Vladimir Lossky—the classic modern statement of the Orthodox critique.

The Orthodox Church, by Timothy Ware (Kallistos)—theosis in Orthodox faith and practice.

Ut Unum Sint, by Pope St. John Paul II (1995)—§54 for the Church’s “two lungs.” Free online at <https://www.vatican.va>.

Unitatis Redintegratio, Second Vatican Council (1964), §§14–17 on the legitimate variety of Eastern theology. Free online at <https://www.vatican.va>.

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“...that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.”

—2 Peter 1:4

*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of grace and deification*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church

Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.