

## The Unique Gift of Walking the Christian Path

In the mid-90s, at St. John's Benedictine Abbey in Collegeville, MN, Abbot Timothy Kelly, OSB was in the middle of a homily on the Feast of the Epiphany. He asked "What would the Magi have done if Mary had said, 'Would you like to hold Jesus?'. What would *you or I* have done?"

To hold Jesus in my arms is like becoming a manger. But who am I holding? And how am I changed by this embrace?

What difference does the birth of Jesus make for human life? How has human life changed because of his birth? How will my life and your life be different if we become a manger?

A bold statement about human life in the first creation narrative in Genesis provides important background. "*Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'*" (Genesis 1:26) What does that tell us about our lives? Some of the mystics and theologians of the early Church discerned that "*Let us make humankind in our image*" declares that human beings live in a relationship with God. Our lives are linked with God. We are sacred. But there is more: our link to God is made real "according to our likeness" to God. The "likeness" is the myriad ways we realize our relationship with God in our words and actions. The early theologians described "likeness" as a radiation of the presence of God from within a person. "Likeness" is not a "thing", it is a relationship made possible by the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> That sounds great. But how can we do it? How is it possible? This brings us back to Mary's offer to hold Jesus in our arms.

St. Paul is very clear about who it is that we are holding:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the [assembly whom God has gathered]; he is the beginning, the first born from the dead, so that he might have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, that through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."*

(Colossians 1:15-20)

That sounds great, too! But what does it mean for you and me? How does the birth and life of Jesus of Nazareth change our lives? The answer is very simple. It has been the fundamental message of the Christian community since the First Century. Listen to these words from the Second Letter of Peter:

*"[Jesus Christ's] divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge (i.e. experience) of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature."* (2 Peter 1:3-4)

The birth of Jesus of Nazareth has changed everything for human life! In fact, it has completed the creation of human life. This is the fundamental message of the followers of Jesus. What is the change God has made possible for us through the life of Jesus?

It is a very simple message that begins with the identity of Jesus. Listen to the Evangelist St. John and the Apostle Paul :

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Norman Russell for this insight. See: Norman Russell. *Fellow workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*. Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009, 90-91.

Paul declares: “*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, the through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven...*” St. John adds a major detail: “*And the WORD became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” (John 1:14)

Paul and John, writing in the first century, could not be clearer. The creative energy of God’s being (that we experience and name as the second person of the Holy Trinity, the WORD) was uniquely present in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. Everything that Jesus said and did have its source in his union with God. Jesus, himself, bears witness to this truth. “*Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.*” (JN 14:10)

### **What does Jesus’ unique identity make possible for us?**

Jesus reveals that an authentic human life is a God-filled life. The early theologians of the church called this “theosis.” The source of this theosis is Jesus’ desire to share the unique presence of God the Father in his life with his disciples and all persons who are led to entrust their lives to him. In theosis, we share in those aspects of God’s life that were incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus declares in John 15 that God was present in his human life in a relationship of complete union.

“*I ask not only on behalf of these [disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*” (John 17:20-23)

Jesus declares in this prayer that the presence of God, as the Word made flesh, was incarnate in his human life. This makes it possible for every human being to share in that same God-filled life. We do not cease being human, nor did Jesus cease being human. Jesus said, “*The glory that you have given me I have given them,*”. In Jesus’ Jewish heritage “glory” refers to the presence of God. The presence of the Word of God revealed in Jesus’ life (including his experience of divine light on Mt. Tabor) is what he desires for all persons. This is Jesus’ great promise mentioned in 2 Peter 1:3-4.

**Everything that Jesus spoke and did is now possible for us.**

### **This is good news that is worth summarizing:**

Theosis, also called deification, as experienced and taught in the earliest periods of Christianity, is often misunderstood and held in suspicion. Often, it is rarely, if ever, mentioned in teaching and preaching in local congregations.

Theosis does not declare that humans become God. It expresses a mysterious reality that a human being may share in the uncreated energy of God’s divine life. That energy becomes tangible in creation through the creative activity of the WORD of God. Because God’s WORD became flesh in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, we too can participate in the same divine life that was present in Jesus’ life. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, we become a dwelling place for the presence of God. The mystical gift of theosis is available to everyone. This perception of the *coincidence* of divine and human life is not a recent theological perspective. It is a fundamental part of the earliest message and experience of the Christian communities, having its roots in the words and actions of Jesus, himself.

Saint Maximos, the Confessor, born around 580, was one of the greatest mystical theologians of the Eastern Church. He was influenced by the teaching of the desert Abba Evagrius Ponticus and Origen of Alexandria. They, in turn, focused their teaching on the life of Jesus in the

four canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These early prayer-filled theologians spoke of God's constant desire for each person to share in God's unique presence in Jesus of Nazareth. Maximos' audacious claim declares that God's incarnation in Jesus proclaims that the sanctity and ultimate purpose of human life is to share in the life of God. It is not an option for a select few. Nor is it something we strive to achieve. Theosis is a gift of grace, made possible through the life of Jesus and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Maximos said, "For the Word of God, who is God, wills always and in all things to work the mystery of his embodiment."

Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, Evagrius, Origen, Maximos, and later Gregory Palamas, a monk of Mt. Athos who became Bishop of Thessaloniki, all emphasize the desire of Jesus to share his life with each person who is willing to entrust her or his life to Jesus. Jesus was very clear that his intimate relationship with his Abba was the source of his words and actions. Toward the end of his ministry Jesus proclaimed to his followers that they "will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12) The audacity of theosis has its roots in Jesus!

St. Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022) wrote, "What is the purpose of the Incarnation of the Divine Logos, which is proclaimed throughout the Scriptures, about which we read and yet we do not recognize? Surely it is that he has shared in what is ours so as to make us participants of what he is."

Simeon stands on the shoulders of the early desert fathers and mystical theologians in bearing witness to the essential biblical roots of theosis as the natural state of human life. He ties theosis directly to the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. The presence and union with the WORD of God, the creator of all life, in the human life of Jesus makes it possible to be "participants of what he is." The result is also "to possess this kingdom within ourselves so that our life is not our creation but lived 'with Christ in God'". The good news in this truth is that because this kingdom is within us, we are given the opportunity to manifest that same kingdom in the desires, words, and actions of our daily lives.

### **Now we are back to Mary's invitation to hold Jesus.**

Now we know **who** we are invited to hold and why holding him will transform and complete our lives.

In St. John's Abbey Church there is a small chapel that displays a 13<sup>th</sup> century wooden statue of the Virgin Mary with Jesus sitting on her knees blessing the world. The statue is unique because Mary and Jesus are not carved from two separate pieces of wood. The statue proclaims the presence and union of God, the creator of all life, in the human lives of Mary and Jesus in a single piece of wood. Mary is our mentor in giving birth to Jesus. Like Mary, we can ponder all these things. Where and when have we received annunciations to give birth to God's presence in our lives?

### **Embracing Jesus Today**

Eventually, we are invited to embrace an adult Jesus of Nazareth, who is the way, the truth and the life. We are reminded by St. Paul that "...in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, that through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven..."

Jesus, too, invites us to share the life of God's WORD present in his life: "*As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*"

There are two primary ways we can embrace Jesus of Nazareth today.

First, theosis is not a “thing” or a theological construct. It is a relationship. In the same way that Jesus spent time every day in prayer with God, his Abba, he invites us to enter a constant pattern of personal prayer with God.

Second, in addition to Jesus’ intimate prayer with God, he participated in the corporate prayers of his Jewish faith community. We can embrace Jesus in the prayer life of our faith communities. The primary gift of Jesus’ presence is given in the Eucharist, Holy Communion. In this mystical gift, consecrated by the Holy Spirit, we are invited to hold Jesus and take his life into our lives so that we become his presence in the way we live.

Father Dumitru Staniloae, a Romanian Orthodox 20<sup>th</sup> century mystical theologian describes the primary consequences of human theosis or deification:

“The most shining demonstration of the action of grace within us is in our sympathetic awareness of our neighbor. By grace we long to make those who are in need at home with us, as we wish God at home with us. Nothing contributes so much to our growth in righteousness, to our drawing close to God, to our deification, as compassion showed to those in need.”