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Deification of believers in eternal life, according to father Dumitru Stăniloae

ABSTRACT

Deification is a central theme in Orthodox theology, with strong meanings and implications for everything that represents the process of spiritual life. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae pays special attention to the theme of deification, and his entire theological approach is based on this teaching of the church. This article analyses the whole conception of Father Dumitru Stăniloae regarding a more restricted topic that is hardly treated in theology, namely deification in eternal life. In this sense, this analysis discusses a number of aspects related to the presentation of deification in two stages or plans (deification in the broad sense and deification in the narrow sense): the dogmatic foundation of deification and the dynamic and endless aspect that deification will know in eternal life. In eternal life, the deification that began in earthly life continues indefinitely.

1. INTRODUCTION

Deification is an essential topic in the work of Father Dumitru Stăniloae¹ and defines how a human person and the whole of creation attain their completion



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1 The priest professor Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993) is one of the great Christian Orthodox theologians of the 20th century. He is certainly the greatest Romanian theologian. He was a professor at the Theological Academy in Sibiu and at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, where he taught Dogmatic Theology and Orthodox Spirituality. He is the father of the Romanian *Philokalia* in 12 volumes and the author of a series of volumes and studies of Orthodox theology. Among them, *Dogmatic Orthodox Theology* in 3 volumes occupies an important place. He is a *Doctor Honoris Causa* of the Theological Faculties of Thessaloniki (1976),

by participating in the divine life and communion with God. In the process of deification, humanity establishes its substantial and essential identity. According to Father Stăniloae, the human being along with creation cannot be conceived outside deification. Deification is the key element that underlies his approach and that presents the whole dogmatic reality of the church: creation, anthropology, triadology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and so on. God created the world and man with a view to keeping them in loving and life-giving union and communion with Him, to deifying them. Since man has become alienated from God and is under the bondage of the prospective isolation of sin and death, God became incarnate when His Son assumed a human nature; He came closer to humanity, in order to elevate man to share in the divine life; in other words, to deify him:

The incarnation of Christ represents, at one and the same time, both the descent of God to full communion with humanity and the highest ascent of the latter. God became man so that man might become God (Stăniloae 1996:29; 1998:25).

Therefore, by the deification that was made accessible through the whole redemptive work of Christ and the sacred work of the church, the human being has the unique possibility to make the most of his God-given existence, by participating in the absoluteness, eternity, and holiness of God (Stăniloae 2013a:83-84). Deification helps the human being commune and be united with God and share in His eternal blessedness and holiness:

We are called to become an absolute by grace through our participation in the one who is personal Absolute by nature. The one who is personal Absolute by nature wishes to grant the human person a share in his absolute character, inasmuch as he himself becomes man (Stăniloae 1996:31; 1998:28).

Deification assumes a synergistic relationship between God and humanity. It is unlikely that this relationship exists without the presence of one of these two realities. Being a deified person means being assimilated to God, participating in Godhead, that is, in the life and work of God. God is the One Who works for the deification of man inasmuch as man wants, seeks, opens, and puts all his effort into assimilating this sanctifying and divine communion. In this respect, Father Stăniloae states that deification qualifies as a "paradoxical union of contraries", in which God awakens man and draws him toward the beauty and joy of sanctity, whereas man desires to attain the likeness of God and be drawn toward absolute deification (Stăniloae note 163 to Maxim 1983:140-141).

Belgrade (1982), Athens (1991), the St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris (1981), and the University of Bucharest (1992).

2. SOME TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATIONS

Defined by Father Stăniloae as the greatest possible union of man with God, with God crossing and getting through the whole human being by using His uncreated energies (Stăniloae 2002:425; 2003:362), deification appears to be a dynamic, active and continuous process (Stăniloae 1996:190; 1998:238; 2014:31-32) that is in permanent progress, living and developing in this earthly life, but mostly in the eternal life. Accordingly, Father Stăniloae mentions two stages in the act of deification, namely deification in a broad sense and deification in a restricted or narrow sense.

Deification in a broad sense is inaugurated by the sacrament of baptism and by the other two sacraments of initiation (confirmation and the eucharist). It proceeds and develops through the process of synergistic completion, providing that the human being opens up and communes with his whole being with the divine grace. This stage of deification thus assumes the purification of passions and the acquisition of virtues as well as illumination. It also refers to the practical aspect of synergism, where the believer uses his natural powers to incessantly grow in the Lord. Deification develops the human powers and possibilities to do good and share in the divine grace. These can be improved by self-determination, reaching the upper level of their definition and realisation. At this stage, man becomes the location of God's grace and his whole life moves and breathes only with the aim of deification.

Since deification is endless in both this earthly world and the eternal one, it is also lived and shared after man has reached the upper limit of his human powers. This is the stage of deification in a restricted or narrow sense, in which man participates by opening up more widely and deeply. An intimacy is created between the believer and God, an incessant and endless growing in the divine sanctity. At this supreme stage, the human being participates in the deification, not through practical work, but through spiritual work, openly accepting and suffering the sanctity or holiness. This dynamic manner of man involves his growing desire to receive the divine grace. Man is gradually opening up to embrace and assimilate more of the divine grace in his being and this is obvious in all his endeavours. The more man advances in this open embrace, the greater the spiritual potential offered by the presence and the work of the divine grace to open up and receive God's holiness. Man continuously strives to attain likeness to God, an eternal and endless ascent upward to God, an inner tension striving to assimilate more of the divine grace. Thus, in complete openness and unconditioned cooperation, the human being will live deification as a permanent reality of new and endless progress of spiritual development (Stăniloae 2002:426-432; 2003:363-367).

At this level, the divine grace will dwell in, and overwhelm with his whole affluence the human being, lifting him up beyond his limits and workings to the level of continuous spiritual development. It is a wide process of holiness whereby divine grace enhances the spiritual capacities of man to open up increasingly more with a view to assimilating divine grace with new and greater strength and intensity. As such, man undergoes a spiritual transformation in that he thoroughly understands the meaning of his likeness to God; nevertheless, man does not lose his original identity and his ontological status as a created being. Man becomes like God without changing into God. Man communes and partakes of the uncreated energies and the divine praise, without ceasing to be a human being. Even if the workings of the human being are penetrated and covered by the praise of the divine workings, human nature being placed beyond its limits and borders (Stăniloae 2002:432-434; 2003:368-370),² man does not for a moment lose his essential characteristics; neither does he become or dissolve himself into God. Through the process of deification, man becomes God by grace and not by being. This means that he partakes of all the riches of God's grace, without identifying himself with God in a pantheistic sense:

This overwhelming doesn't mean that man becomes insensible. He himself lives his new state of 'god by grace', conscious at the same time of his creatureliness by nature. He tastes a divine bliss, but with the gratitude of a creature; he experiences in himself divine power, but with the amazement of one who realizes that they don't come from him. In other words, he is god, but he doesn't stop being man at the same time; he is god by the things that he does, by his functions, but conscious that he is a god by the mercy of the one and great God ... He is as God, yes even god, but not God. He is a dependent god, to say in another way that he is a 'god by participation'. The consciousness of this dependence excludes the pantheistic identification of man with God. Deification is the passing of man from created things to the uncreated, to the level of divine energies. Man partakes of these, not of the divine essence. So it is understood how man assimilates more and more of the divine energies, without this assimilation ever ending, since he will never assimilate their source itself, that is, the divine essence, and become God by essence, or another Christ. In the measure in which man increases his capacity to become a subject of ever richer divine energies, these energies from the divine essence are revealed to him in a greater proportion too (Stăniloae 2002:438-439; 2003:372-373).

It is significant to note that, according to Father Stăniloae, there is not for one moment any interruption or structural or identity modification between the

2 See, in this respect, Father Stăniloae's references to St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Gregory Palamas and St. Gregory of Nyssa.

two stages of deification. It is one and the same process of deification, which, once started, permanently progresses into eternity (Stăniloae 2002:428; 2003:364). In other words, the process of deification that has started on earth through the sacraments of initiation will continue *ad infinitum* in the eternal life. On the other hand, while the stage of deification in a broad sense refers exclusively to the holiness that the believer works on and receives in this earthly life, the stage of deification in a restricted or narrow sense defines the deification that is lived and received in eternal life. The latter belongs to eternity and to eschatology and here, on earth, it is experienced only sporadically, while appearing to anticipate the absolute union with God that man will live in eternity (Stăniloae 2002:431-432; 2003:366-367).

3. THE DOGMATIC SUPPORT OF THE DEIFICATION OF THE HUMAN BEING IN ETERNAL LIFE

In Father Stăniloae's terms, the reality of the deification of the human being in eternal life is provided first and foremost by God's eternity and the eternity of man. As a personal Being, God alone exists through Himself and contains within Himself the ground of His existence, being beyond time and eternity. He cannot be defined by any temporal notion, since there is no past or future about Him; there is only a permanent present, an "infinite fullness that is continuously present". God contains within Himself the ground of His existence and it was not generated by someone or something. According to Father Stăniloae (1996:124; 1998:153),

The eternity of God derives from his fullness and from the fact that God is not part of any system of references, that he transcends existence.

He breathes the breath of life into other beings to share in His eternity and plenitude, because He is beyond any dependence, conditioning, perfection, becoming, and temporality:

Only because he is in himself the fullness that transcends all determination and becoming, all increase and decrease, could God have created a world destined to participate in his eternity, understood as fullness of interpersonal communion (Stăniloae 1996:124; 1998:153).

On the other hand, the human being, who is finite and whose life is temporally determined, is destined for eternal life. As Father Stăniloae has shown in his work *The immortal image of God*, the human being is an immortal image of God. Or, as he confesses in another work, it is because of our self-consciousness that we contain in us the perspective of eternal life, aspire to

the transcendental reality of the divine existence, and desire to attain eternal and permanent communion with God (Stăniloae 1996:14-17; 1998:5-9), because

[o]nly the eternity of a personal communion with a personal source of absolute life offers to all human persons the fulfillment of their meaning and affords them, at the same time, the possibility of an everlasting and perfect communion among themselves (Stăniloae 1996:18; 1998:10).

The human being was created for deification. God permanently calls him to reach this lofty goal. Ever since God decided on creating the human being, or, in other words, the eternity of the eternities, He wanted the deification of man, so that He would never part from His creature, but give Himself away and imbue it with His sanctity:

He decided to create people over the course of history in order to lead them to Himself, either to adoption or deification, while elevating man in communion with God, or in deification in the eternal afterlife (Stăniloae 1990:13).

Jesus Christ, Our Redeemer, initiated the deification of humanity and this is possible even in this life. By His incarnation, the Son of God bestows on humanity the full potentiality of sanctity, helping it not to remain frozen in the eternal cycle of history, but to reach a metaphysical status to a transcendent world. Jesus Christ Himself endows the human being with the existential vocation of deification, which started in this life only to continue and endlessly perfect in the eternal life (Stăniloae 1990:13, 154).

Bringing man to permanent communion with Him, God is attracting us to His eternity. He redeems us from our transitory existence into eternal time, in order to dissolve any possible border between us and Him. God's love does not last only for a limited period of time; it lasts for eternity. This is the reason why He takes us to His eternal time, to eternalise the love between us and Him, to impart His holiness to us, and to show us the infinite progress of *epektasis* in the process of deification (Stăniloae 1997a:246; 2012:154-155).

At the same time, the reality and dynamics of deification have always been supported by God's infinity and, more precisely, the difference between the limited status of man and the limitless nature of God. The ontological difference between the Creator and His creature persuades the human being to get closer to and live in God's intimacy. Father Stăniloae insists that not even the Cherubim and Seraphim, who stand upon the highest step of created beings and were ranked highest in the heavenly order, will ever be able to complete the process of deification. The deification of the creature will continue endlessly, from one eternity to another, like an incessant spiritual

growth in the likeness with God, the Infinite and the Inexhaustible (Stăniloae 2002:420-421; 2003:357-358). Deification is infinite because God is infinite and offers infinite possibilities and powers towards perfection and growth in Godlikeness. Supporting a finite deification would mean denying God's infinity. It would mean that the human being has exhausted the whole work of likeness to the Lord and became like the Lord; that is, God is no longer an ideal to reach for or to attain; He has become an equal, a being that cannot offer anything new (Stăniloae note 81 to Grigorie 1982:108).

The deification of a human being, both in this life, but mainly in the next one, is endless, since He who offers sanctity and leads the human being to new stages of deification is the infinite God, who is also Self-Giver. Since creating man, God has kept leading him to the upper stages of life: from the gift of existence to the good existence, to the eternal good and perpetual happy existence, so that he will always be with Him and partake of the divine life. The way in which the limited human life takes part in, and partakes of the limitless existence without losing identity and the characteristics of its limitation, while at the same time enjoying the whole reality of divine life, represents the paradox of God's love and infinity:

The limited existence, though aware of and in communion with the endless existence, or the created existence supported by the endless one strives after the endless existence and, with the help of the latter, it can reach its endlessness while realizing that this infinity, which deifies it without turning it into God, comes from God (Stăniloae 1990:28).

At the same time, deification in this life and in the afterlife is possible, due to the paradox of the human being who was created by God both as a limited being and as the subject of divine life, as an existence that is limited in itself, but that partakes of the infinite through God (Stăniloae 1990:163-164). The thirst for and yearning after infinity and deification are deeply rooted in the human being. Therefore, the human being feels fulfilled only if he abides by the process of deification:

In the spirit thus created there is a gateway to the divine infinity. It is the mystery of the person made to be able to live infinity, to be inexhaustible, by its close relationship with divine infinity (Stăniloae 1990:184).

Father Stăniloae trenchantly rejects Origen's position, according to which all souls will be saturated by God in their next life, desiring to regain their body shape, in order to taste new life experiences. Father Stăniloae embraces and assumes Saint Gregory of Nyssa's teachings, which encourage the infinite progress of the human being toward a communion with God. The person who holds communion with God arduously seeks Him, wishing to saturate with God, but he cannot, since God is infinite. However, at the same time,

God permanently attracts the human being to His infinity, in order to discover newer means of giving and sharing. This makes the human being desire to penetrate God's love and holiness even more. This is an infinite process of love and holiness, in which God continuously gives Himself to us, whereas man continuously accomplishes his deification:

God is infinite in His sweetness and the soul desires to further indulge in this unlimited and inspiring sweetness of His Love, for he Himself is capable of an unlimited permanent love. Only a soul which is limited in its ability to know and love reaches saturation and wishes to descend to embark again in his ascension toward God, after missing Him again. Only a God who becomes monotonous, and hence, limited in His offer in terms of human love can bore someone engaged in this loving relationship with Him. The ability of the soul to partake of God and progress in this process is based on the teachings concerning the difference between God's being and His energies. The presence of the infinity of the being where God's living energies stem from exists in these energies, along with the ability to the endless and incessant progress in partaking of them (Stăniloae note 27 to Grigorie 1982:126).

These ideas are also found in the explanatory notes that Father Stăniloae added to the work entitled *Ambigua*, written by Saint Maximus the Confessor. Father Stăniloae mentions that the Origenist conception of man is saturated with God and is bored and disinterested in deepening the relationship and communion with God, due to God's inability to provide something new to stimulate man's desires. Accordingly, by virtue of the teachings of Saint Maximus the Confessor concerning the creature's continuous progress towards God and the rest God provides to those who are in communion with Him, Father Stăniloae asserts that there is a mystical force of attraction between God and man, whereby He has given Himself continuously, while man desires increasingly more to receive Him. Being infinite, God draws man in this infinity, although man will never be able to exhaust this reality. As a result, man wishes even more to embrace God, ardently partaking of His presence and His work:

God is neither ugly and unpleasant, nor limited, above Whom a higher nature rules. On the contrary, He deserves eternal appreciation and He endlessly intensifies the desire and affection of those who partake of Him. This principle involves a sort of a stable movement or eternal growth for those who became embodied in God and have been embraced by His dispassionate kindness and goodness. Persistence of desire means persistence of its movement and progress. Consequently, it is impossible that those who come to know God are saturated with Him. To become saturated with Him is to limit Him (Stăniloae note 63 to Maxim 1983:92).

Deification in eternal life gives meaning to this world's existence, while showing that the human being is invited to grow in love and sanctity. The human being is not left adrift, either in this earthly life, or in the eternal one, but called to partake of God's perfection and infinity. Consequently, life on earth does not have a meaning, unless it relates to eternity, to deification in eternal life, as it can be embraced and understood as a vestibule to something superior and eternal (Stăniloae 1990:14).

4. THE ETERNAL *EPEKTASIS* OF DEIFICATION

The deification in eternal life belongs to those who have been united with God ever since their earthly life. By universal resurrection, they will be arranged in a stable holiness that will open up their path to spiritual progress. They can only grow in deification. In turn, sinners will become incorruptible, and this will keep them within the passive, limited, and inferior existence they have chosen:

Those who participate in the uncorrupted life of the future age remain forever in it, while, at the same time, they progress toward their renewed interest in reconstruction. They are in a continuous progress to attain accomplishment. The divine life they embody updates itself to new powers and these help those who desire to progress toward resurrection. This contributes to increasing their glow. The divine life that dwells inside them, which is embodied by a human visible figure, exhibits a spiritual glow that illuminates outside of them ... All of them will be resurrected and will enter the state of incorruptibility, but this is not similar to the deification by grace. Those in Hell will rise themselves and their bodies will become incorruptible, which will not allow them to move on from their minimal and totally helpless existence. Those resurrected to happiness will reach an even higher status (Stăniloae notes 415-417 to Maxim 1983:330-331; Stăniloae 1997b:294-305; 2013b:195-209; note 529b to Chiril 1991:467).

The process of deification that started in earthly life continues and deepens in eternal life. In this state, man does not work on deification; he simply receives and lives it. Deification now becomes a stable reality that man enjoys with his entire being and work in accordance with his spiritual capacity that he has built up until then (Stăniloae note 34 to Maxim 1983:77). Man's body and soul, which will be more united than they are in earthly life, will be deified together and will partake together of God's work, which will fill them with divine glory. Both in his soul and body, man becomes divine by grace and is overwhelmed in the integrity of his being by God's uncreated energies (Stăniloae notes 286-287 to Maxim 1983:221-222; Stăniloae 2013a:760).

As a living and dynamic reality, deification materialises and develops by the establishment of the human being in God's holiness. Human nature ascends beyond itself and becomes the mediator of divine works. Man thus becomes Godlike through divine grace, which means that he spiritually partakes of the divine attributes (Stăniloae note 156 to Maxim 1983:137-138). In this ephemeral life, man lives in time, but through deification, he places himself in God's eternity. He who tastes deification lives in eternity, even in this earthly life. In other words, deification is understood in terms of an inaugurated eschatology, while man, in his whole being and his entire social context accommodating his activity, becomes part of divine life: "Time is filled up with God's presence, that is, with eternity; what is beyond nature goes into nature" (Stăniloae note 161 to Maxim 1983:139).

Unlike ephemeral life, in eternal life the human being will no longer feel any internal or external constraint that might in any way endanger the process of personal deification. Neither death nor disposition, nor anything or anybody else will ever be able to restrain him. In eternal life, man will live in an "unrestricted openness of our subject toward the infinite" (Stăniloae 1997b:296; 2013a:196).

In eternal life, the human being will enjoy even more of God's grace and presence (Stăniloae 1997b:296; 2013a:197). This grace and divine holiness will be shared increasingly more by people, attracting them incessantly to new steps in deification. It will become a greater and deeper union with God, an endless *epektasis* whereby man, as a limited and created being, keeps running with a view to finding his rest in God's infinity. As it is impossible for the human being to embrace God wholly in himself, he searches for Him incessantly and never relinquishes Him, since He draws man into a greater joy and happiness. God is becoming increasingly present in man's nature, which makes man seek and desire Him all the more, to have Him and feel Him more intensely. God's love and holiness make the human being live "an infinite tension" when seeking and desiring more love and holiness (Stăniloae 1997b:296-297; 2013a:197-198):

Even the fact that human nature is made in order to participate in God and that God has no end shows that, through desire or in its growth, it has no end ... Human nature eternally travels the distance between the finite and the infinite, and it is urged on, by desire and a sort of experience of its current finitude, toward the highest infinity, without comprehending this infinity's essence itself. What it has obtained is never the whole, but it is the beginning of the whole (Stăniloae 1997b:298; 2013b:199).

In eternal life, deification will take the shape of a "permanent ecstasy" when the human being will be captivated by new stages of knowledge and

communion with God (Stăniloae 2002:375; 2003:322-323). By His grace, God “may by all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28), covering in light and holiness all those who embraced Him (Stăniloae 2002:395; 2003:338). Paraphrasing Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Father Stăniloae states that, in eternal life, we will all be wearing Christ’s clothes and living in the divine tabernacle, which is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ Himself is the One who, with His humanity, permeated the saint of saints, beyond the iconostasis. He places His assumed human nature in the bosom of the Holy Trinity, where He locates us in order to cover us, the human beings, with the spiritual clothes of Divinity. It is through Him and His uncreated grace that we “will enter His divine infinity” along with everything that we have and all that we are, that is, with our complete and whole being (Stăniloae 2002:412-413; 2003:351-352).

Deification in eternal life is perceived as an eternal rest in God, as a mysterious and indescribable work that man constantly lives. This is the rest that the deified person enjoys through God’s rest in him and his rest in God (Stăniloae 2013a:442; note 420 to Maxim 1983:333-334). He is united with God and nobody and nothing can ever separate the two of them. For that reason, under these circumstances, the process of deification is described as a “stable movement” and a “mobile stability” that help man grow incessantly in holiness (Stăniloae note 134 to Chiril 1992:84):

The life to come will be an endless Sunday, or paradise found and eschatology inaugurated, the moment of the dawn with its wonderful suddenly and the unfading light of the eighth day in which God will be all in all. This shows that the end or eternal life is not a simple return to the beginning, a return to a point from which the temporal cycle can begin again, but rather an advancement in the same infinity. It does not mean an advancement in an endless linear time, for it happens at the end of time, but into an infinity that is continually tasted but that never satiates. If the life to come is movement, it is not a movement that transforms beings, St. Maximus the Confessor says, but a static movement or a mobile stability, a movement that eternally maintains the beings in that which they are and in Him who is, strengthening them and making them grow at the same time. For it is a direct movement around their unmoved first cause, of which they increasingly partake, and thus they cannot be corrupted (Stăniloae 1997b:299; 2013b:200-201).

Therefore, in eternal life, God is in everything and all of these will find their way and their reason through God’s wisdom. The deified mind will be able to contemplate the whole creation only in God and will know in depth the reasons of every element of creation. Whatever has been known in this earthly life in a limited and hidden way will be fully discovered in eternal life, and all creation will display its specific reasoning in an illuminated way (Stăniloae 2002:416; 2003:354).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In Father Stăniloae's view, deification is a major theme that orchestrates both his analysis and his comprehension of the entire doctrine of the church. Deification means knowledge of God and communion with God, the partaking of heavenly divine works as well as of God's life, which is eternal and beyond human nature. In other words, deification illustrates the possibility and the paradoxical reality of those human beings who, by living a pure life and by accomplishing virtue, become divine by grace.

By presenting deification against a background that reflects an ample process of continuous fulfilment in both earthly and eternal life, Father Stăniloae speaks of deification in a broad sense and in a restricted sense. In a broad sense, deification is defined as that stage in spiritual life which is promoted by the mysteries of initiation and which is continued through synergism, in order to receive more spiritual cleanliness and illumination, the presence and work of God, which becomes increasingly prominent and active. In turn, the stage of deification in a restricted sense defines the process of completeness, which involves receiving divine grace in an increasingly intense form, as an incessant progress of a deeper communion with God, in an everlasting love and devotedness.

Among the dogmatic foundations to support the reality of permanent deification in eternal life, Father Stăniloae reminds us of the following: God's eternity and the human being's eternity, God's love and permanent devotion to the created human being, and the divine infinity.

In eternal life, deification will be an endless growth, increasingly profound and desired, in God's sanctity. It will be an endless *epektasis* of the continuation of deification that started in earthly life and it will be incessantly followed by the restricted human being, who will continuously seek rest in the light of God's infinity.

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