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Theosis and Martyria—The Spiritual Process of Deification and Its Implication for the Mission of the Church

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Abstract: This article analyses the role of the spiritual path of theosis in the mission of the Eastern Orthodox church. It evaluates the main directions in which the church could have a fundamental role in the world, such as peace, human dignity or the ecological crises, and does so through the lens of the deification process. The spiritual exercise of deification contributes to a fundamental change in the way that we act, think, and understand reality and this plays an essential part in missionary work as understood by the Eastern Orthodox church. Because of this approach, the theological term martyrion/witness is considered more suitable than the term mission, in order to describe the process of transformation of the human persons and, through those who engage on the path of deification, the transformation of the entire creation. The article presents two different perspectives: one offered by two official, programmatic documents of the church (“The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World” and “For the Life of the World. Social Ethos Document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate”), and addressed to communities, and another one represented by the writings from the Philokalia, which are apparently dedicated to individuals and their personal spiritual journey. In the view presented here, the two perspectives are not different, but in fact complementary.

Keywords: theosis; metanoia; human dignity; freedom; peace; human sexuality; ecological crisis



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1. Introduction

Because of its contemplative characteristic, theosis has rarely been associated with mission. One of the few works that relate deification to mission is Bijesh Philip’s *Theosis and Mission: An Orthodox Perspective of Christian Spirituality in the Age of Globalisation* (Bijesh 2004). Additionally, because of the communities that practice hesychasm, the deification path was often understood as a way dedicated exclusively to contemplative monks, and therefore with no missiological implications. Having in mind this specificity of Orthodox theology and life, my paper will seek to answer several questions. To what extent can we find theological inputs for mission in theosis as a spiritual practice? What are the consequences of theosis for missionary practice? Who can approach it?

In order to provide answers to these questions, I will briefly describe the document on mission issued by the Council of Crete, 2016, as well as “For the Life of the World. Social Ethos Document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate”, 2020. Then, I will interpret the main goals of the documents through the lens of the doctrine of theosis, founded in Philokalia and in the philokalic movement. The Council of Crete was a synod of the recognised autocephalous Eastern Orthodox Churches held in Crete from 19 to 26 June 2016. The synod issued six main documents, one of them dedicated to Christian witness and entitled “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World”. As a follow-up to the Council of Crete, the Ecumenical Patriarchate adopted in 2020 an official document presenting the social teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Philokalia, on the other hand, is an anthology of spiritual texts selected from the manuscripts belonging to the libraries of various monasteries from Mount Athos, compiled by St Nicodemus together with metropolitan Macarius Notaras of Corinth. Printed in Venice in 1782, Philokalia of the Neptic Fathers

became a landmark for explaining deification. It was translated into Slavonic, then into other vernacular languages of the local Orthodox churches (Russell 2006, pp. 310–11). The Philokalia became so influential that its teachings shaped a way of living in the Church, not only in monasteries, but also in parishes. Nowadays, there are many theological works that integrate monastic spirituality into the life of urban parishes (see Siladi 2018, 2020).

As far as methodology is concerned, I will use the methods specific to comparative study and, following the excellent work of Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, I will approach theosis from a realistic perspective, considering the philosophical category of participation as central to the discussion. According to Russell, the concept of theosis may have different approaches. First, there is the nominal approach, found in the Bible, according to which the word ‘god’ can be applied to human beings as a title of honour. Secondly, there is the analogical approach, which is a development of the nominal: someone being called a ‘god’ by others through analogy. The last approach is metaphorical, and it follows two directions, an ethical one and a realistic one. The ethical sees deification as a way of imitating divine attributes. The realistic approach accepts that “human beings are transformed by deification” (Russell 2006, pp. 1–2). As Russell continues, we see that behind the realistic approach lies the model of participation in God. According to this approach, theosis or deification is the transformative process of human nature, and its aim is to attain the human being’s union with God by grace.

If we look at mission from a similar perspective, we notice that mission also involves a type of ontological transformation. In fact, mission is the result of a spiritual experience. It is martyrria of joyful participation in the life of Christ to the world. Thus, martyrria/witness becomes a technical term to describe a new understanding of mission (see Bria 1980). In the ancient Greek world, martyrria (μαρτυρία) “signifies the deposition of a witness in a court of justice strictly, though the word is applied metaphorically to all kinds of testimony” (Kennedy and Wayte 1890, art. martyrria). In Christianity, it means that someone can give witness after an experience that they had, in this case, the experience of meeting God. So, as a missionary category, martyrria involves giving testimony of the participation in God to the world.

The modern *missio Dei* confirms this participatory approach. According to the *missio Dei* model, God is the One who initiates mission, and his missionaries participate in the work that has already been initiated by God. In this context, transformation, as a missionary process, is the continuous response of the human being to the calling of God. It is the process/work initiated by God, who is waiting for a response, which is, in fact, the participation of the human being in His initiative. It presupposes change, moving from unbelief to belief, from darkness to light, or from spiritual death to life. Not only does it involve change, but it is also a moment of high intensity which renews, reinforces, and reorganises the entire inner life.

2. Theosis and Metanoia

The spiritual process of theosis creates the conditions for an existential transformation. In the Orthodox tradition, the meaning of this transformation is related to metanoia. The Greek term metanoia, also understood as repentance, denotes a change of mind, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of outlook, of man’s view of the world and of himself, and a new way of loving others and God. In the words of a second-century text, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, it implies “understanding” (Hermas 2004, p. 22) discernment. It involves admitting past wrongs, as well as accepting the fact that human beings’ understandings of the world and themselves are “darkened” by sin, by our separation from God.

Metanoia and the spiritual effort to reach theosis have resulted in a fundamental change in the way we think about and understand reality. Nellas calls this the christification of the intellect, or reaching the mind of Christ (Nellas 1987, p. 134). The immediate effect of the christification of the intellect is the christification of the will. God’s will becomes the human person’s will, and from that moment on, human actions accord to the will of God (Nellas 1987, p. 138).

The destruction and the suffering in the world are brought by sin, which is perceived as a spiritual illness. According to “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World” (MOCT), “sin is a spiritual illness, whose external symptoms include conflict, division, crime, and war, as well as the tragic consequences of these. The Church strives to eliminate not only the external symptoms of illness but the illness itself, namely, sin” ([The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016](#), sec. C4).

In order to achieve spiritual “health”, a human being needs to go through catharsis and repentance, to experience a type of conversion, a beginning or a new beginning. As a “new beginning, repentance is such that it can be called ‘cognisant’ and it describes the moment of coming to oneself” ([Torrance 2012](#), p. 29).

And this coming to oneself can be caused by what Nikitas Stithatos calls the seducing power of theosis. For those who reach theosis, this conversion is “transmittable”. It changes those who encounter a person who has the real experience of the Holy Spirit.

“By means of these three stages, all intellects are brought, in a way that accords with their own nature, into unity with themselves and with Him who truly is. They can then illumine their fellow-intellects, initiating them into divine realities, through celestial wisdom perfecting them as spirits already purified, and uniting them with themselves and with the One”. ([Nikitas 1995](#), para. 32)

God’s saints who have the experience of seeing the uncreated light become a source of illumination for others. They are the ones to whom He says: “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5: 16). In the Philokalia the likeness of God is not just an eschatological promise that will be fulfilled in an eschatological future. It is an eschatological reality fulfilled in God’s saints, and this becomes evident to those who encounter them.

“Those who as a result of their purity and their knowledge of things divine participate in this dignity are assimilated to God, ‘conformed to the image of His Son’ (Rom. 8:29) through their exalted and spiritual concentration upon the divine. Thus, they become as gods to other men on earth. These others in their turn, perfected in virtue by purification through their divine intelligence and through sacred intercourse with God, participate according to their proficiency and the degree of their purification in the same deification as their brethren and they commune with them in the God of unity. In this way all of them, joined together in the union of love, are unceasingly united with the One God; and God, the source of all holy works and totally free from any indictment because of His work of creation, abides in the midst of gods (cf. Ps. 82:1. LXX), God by nature among gods by adoption”. ([Nikitas 1995](#), para. 34)

In this sense, theosis has a missionary role as well, as it converts those who are far from God or those who do not know Him. From now on, they can participate, according to their gifts and their ascetical efforts, to the same deification, becoming gods by adoption.

This has important consequences for missionary practice. For orthodox missiology, it is essential to how we are when we are involved in missionary work, so spirituality plays a very important role. It is the frame for all other aspects of the mission. One cannot talk about God without knowing God, and one does not simply know God as a result of an intellectual quest, but through His divine energies. Thus, theosis produces a real transformation at the personal level of believers. This is called a change of mind, a metanoia, which allows a new Christlike understanding of human existence and of the immediate reality. Therefore, theosis becomes the force behind all the believers’ activities in Church.

3. Theosis and Witness (Martyria)

So how, then, is theosis related to the martyria of the Orthodox Church? Partially, the answer can be found in the document on mission issued by the Holy and Great Council in Crete in 2016 and in “For the Life of the World. Social Ethos Document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate” (SED). According to these documents, the Church’s responsibility

is to contribute to the realisation of peace, justice, freedom, and the elimination of racial and other types of discrimination. The theological principals that nourish this work are the love of God for the entire world and the Church as the living “presence” of the Kingdom of the Triune God in history, foretasted in the Divine Eucharist as the new creation of a transfigured world, and “also experienced by the Church in the countenance of her saints who, through their spiritual struggles and virtues, have already revealed the image of the Kingdom of God in this life” ([The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016](#)). Therefore, the realisation of the values of the Kingdom of God is “not a utopia, but the substance of things hoped for (Heb 11:1), attainable through the grace of God and man’s spiritual struggle” ([The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016](#)). This can be carried out not through force or proselytism, but in a state of kenosis, respectful towards “the identity of each person and the cultural particularity of each people” ([The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016](#)).

The Church becomes a place where one can participate in the life of communion with God. The document on mission from Crete mentions several directions in which the Church should play a fundamental part. Out of all the topics considered, I will mention here the dignity of the human person, freedom and responsibility, peace, the issue of human sexuality, and the ecological crisis, because the transformative role of theosis is more evident when it comes to these specific aspects of human existence.

3.1. *Theosis and the Dignity of the Human Person*

MOCT talks about the unique dignity of the human person ([The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016](#), sec. A1). The beginning of the section dedicated to this topic sets the theological frame. Human dignity is a category which concerns the human person, not the human being. This personalist approach comes from the belief that human persons are created in the image and likeness of God, and they have a role in God’s plan for humanity and the world. Quoting from St. Gregory the Theologian, the document in section A1 highlights that “He placed him, great in littleness on the earth; a new Angel, a mingled worshipper, fully initiated into the visible creation, but only partially into the intellectual; King of all upon earth [. . .] living creature trained here, and then moved elsewhere; and, to complete the mystery, deified by its inclination to God” ([Gregory 1995](#), p. 425). This passage is a description of the ontological dignity that human persons receive by creation. They belong to a different world, but are still part of the material reality, with an important destiny, just like an angel in a kenotic state. They have a composite nature which allows them to contemplate the visible while being at the same time deified in God through attraction. The dignity of a human person consists of their capacity to be deified. It is then emphasised that the purpose of the incarnation of the Word of God is the deification of the human being, and because the entire human race was contained in the old Adam, it is now gathered in the new Adam. This is where the ontological participation in God is affirmed. MOCT concludes that “this teaching” (deification) “is the endless source of all Christian efforts to safeguard the dignity and majesty of the human person” ([The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016](#), sec. A1).

As far as human dignity is concerned, SED recognises the “special democratic genius of the modern age” and considers it a blessing that, from the perspective of human history, in many countries today, freedom, civil rights, human rights and democracy are realities that citizens can trust. Up to a point, these societies grant human beings the fundamental dignity of freedom to pursue their goals and dreams for themselves, their families, or their communities. The Orthodox Christians who live in countries where such values are universally accepted should not take them for granted. Rather, they should openly support them, and they should not fall prey to nostalgia for an often-imagined golden age. This tendency can easily turn into a distorted form of righteousness, which mistakes the ephemeral political forms of the past (such as the Byzantine Empire) for the essence of the Church of the Apostles. The document admits that often “the Orthodox Church has allowed for the conflation of national, ethnic, and religious identity, to the point that the

external forms and language of the faith—quite evacuated of their true content—have come to be used as instruments for advancing national and cultural interests under the guise of Christian adherence” (Hart and Chrysavgis 2020, para. 10).

Paragraph 10 of SED establishes the framework for the issue of human dignity and human rights: on the one hand, there is the political organisation of society, which has always been imperfect, and the ideal of the Gospel, on the other hand, which can easily be altered and distorted when trying to identify it with a political establishment that calls itself Christian.

SED advises that Orthodox Christians should support the discourse about human rights, not necessarily because it is in full accordance with God’s will for human beings, but simply because it preserves a certain understanding of the unalienable uniqueness of every person. Additionally, the purpose of the human rights movement is to heal the divisions in the communities in which people of different faiths and religions must coexist. Human rights discourse encourages a general ethos that honours the dignity of each person (a dignity which, of course, the Church considers to be a consequence of the image of God that every human being carries) (Hart and Chrysavgis 2020, para. 12).

3.2. *Peace and Theosis*

MOCT speaks frequently of peace. The term is mentioned 37 times in a relatively short document, it is associated with the dignity of the human person, and it is part of the theological binomen “peace and justice” and the “peace and the aversion of the war” to which the document dedicates an entire section. The source of peace is found in the restoration of all things in Jesus Christ and “the revelation of the human person’s dignity and majesty as an image of God, the manifestation of the organic unity in Christ between humanity and the world [. . .]. The reign of all these Christian principles on earth gives rise to authentic peace” (The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016, sec. C1).

We notice here that peace has a Christological foundation. All things are recapitulated in Christ, human beings, along with the entire material world. This universalistic understanding of salvation and redemption is today challenged by other faiths and by non-believers. How can this principle be accepted if the person of Christ is not recognised as a universal Saviour by all? The answer can be found in the Patristic teaching on theosis. Macarius (295–392 AD), also known as Macarius the Egyptian, one of the Egyptian desert fathers, when asked to say something about himself, replied by referring to a personal experience of the sign of the cross, “which appeared as light and penetrated the inner man” (Macarie Egipteanul 1992, vol. 34, p. 127). The grace of God penetrates the heart, St Macarius notes, bringing peace and love for the entire world, “including Greeks and Jews”. When immersed in grace, the human being is shown the “many chambers” in the house of God and is allowed to enter them and enrich himself, and the more he is enriched, the more new and wonderful things he sees (Macarie Egipteanul 1992, vol. 34, p. 129). When interpreting this passage, Russell sees it as a process of *epektasis*, “the never-ending progress into the mysteries of the spiritual life that [. . .] is towards an ever-increasing perception of divine light” (Russell 2006, p. 244). In Macarius, we see the realisation of peace as an extension of the inner peace received in a personal spiritual experience. The divine light, the grace of God, enlightens those who are on their way to deification to see all other personal existence as part of a unique family restored in Jesus Christ.

This approach to the realisation of peace reflects the Trinitarian way of existence, which can be replicated by humanity in history as an anticipation of the eschatological peace of the Kingdom of God. Perfect trinitarian harmony is the source of peace in the world. As Nellas emphasises: “The demand for justice and peace is [. . .] the reflection of the triadic archetype of humanity, and, at the same time, as the conscious or unconscious nostalgic attempt by humanity to attain the wonderful mode of life of that archetype, in the image of which it has been formed and in which alone it can find its peace and rest. The whole man, soul and body, a personal existence in a natural relationship with all other human existence

and an organic union with the world, tends from his structure to surpass his limitations, to become unbounded and immortal" (Nellas 1987, pp. 28–29).

3.3. Freedom as Fulfilling the True Nature of the Human Person

Another fundamental existential topic that needs attention, according to the Synod from Crete, is freedom. MOCT dedicates a short section to "freedom and responsibility" (*The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World* 2016, sec. B). In the attempt to find the role of theosis in mission, we should note that the document defines freedom as the human capacity to progress "toward spiritual perfection" (*The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World* 2016, sec. B1), which is the same as deification. Here SED offers a theological definition of freedom. The theological principle at the basis of human dignity is that God created human beings in His image. He thus gave every man, woman, and child full spiritual dignity, shaped in conformity with the three Persons of the Trinity: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When He created human beings, God created a new order of existence, the remarkable space of human freedom. According to the Orthodox tradition, human beings are mediators in creation, as they exist simultaneously in a material and a spiritual realm, preserving both characteristics and having the ability to unite them. Thus, "humanity is the priestly presence of spiritual freedom in the material causality, sharing the light of rational freedom with the entire material cosmos and offering the world back to God" (Hart and Chrysavgis 2020, para. 62). The document states that true freedom is achieved when human beings fulfil their nature in their final vocation, which is the ability to develop all aspects of their humanity fully. This involves freely searching to gain union with God. To be free means to live according to one's own nature, as we were created, the true human nature we all desire (Hart and Chrysavgis 2020, para. 62). To live according to one's nature and in union with God has moral consequences. Freedom, in this sense, means that humankind was liberated from the imprisonment of evil and is now free to do the will of God, which is characterised by perfect goodness.

We notice that, in MOCT, freedom is placed at the level of the person, following the same approach as in the case of the dignity of the human person. SED, on the other hand, talks about freedom as an ontological condition of human nature, while the achievement of freedom is realised at a personal level. According to Nellas, who analyses the relational meaning of freedom in Patristic theology, freedom refers to the completion of personal harmony with God, humankind, and the world. In this personal relationship, love has a fundamental role. For Nellas, "love is freedom" (Nellas 1987, pp. 70–71). Being so, "freedom does not fight the law but regards it with love; it broadens the law with love, clarifying its limits and transforming it" (Nellas 1987, pp. 70–71).

Ioannis Zizioulas, when referring to topics such as freedom and ontology, talks about the relationship between nature and personal communion. In his works, we find the same positive perspective on freedom. Since the Persons of the Trinity differ from each other, and at the same time coexist eternally, this makes the existence of one person inconceivable without the other two persons. Thus, the "common" being is not antithetical to personal differentiation. Person and being do not clash, and therefore freedom is a positive and affirmative position and is identified with love (Zizioulas 2016, sec. 3). Freedom offers human persons the possibility to turn towards God, to fulfil God's will and to be saved. If we see salvation not only morally but also ontologically, as overcoming corruption and death and not only as overcoming social injustice, hunger or oppression, then it is obvious that we need to discover modes of existence for human beings to reach the incorruptibility and immortality that normally characterise God alone. Thus, according to Zizioulas, it is a requirement of soteriology to search for the way in which human beings can acquire incorruptibility and immortality, and this search is theosis. This soteriological need for deification can be satisfied only by following the path of the person. The path of being or nature cannot lead to deification since human beings cannot break through the barrier of nature, the created and the uncreated, and cannot deify nature (Zizioulas 2016, sec. 6.1).

Zizioulas argues that Baptism brings an ontological change in human beings, making them ecclesial hypostases or persons. This rebirth “from above” confers an ontological freedom because the limits of biological existence no longer constrain it. Such an ecclesial being is eschatological, which means that it is a paradoxical “already” but “not yet”. This rebirth from above culminates on the day of resurrection when the body is no longer subject to death. This dialectic of “already and not yet” contributes to the mysterious character of the meaning of the person. The person is an eschatological reality, but in the Church, he or she can foretaste the truth. If this happens in history, it is a correct application of ecclesiology. It is the nature of the Church to offer people a taste of the eschatological communion (Zizioulas 2016, sec. 8).

3.4. Sexual Desires and Theosis

The issue of gender and sexuality attracts a lot of attention in contemporary society and, consequently, both documents tackle it, though only briefly. MOCT makes a general statement against discrimination for various categories of people differentiated by skin colour, religion, race, sex, ethnicity, and language, mentioning that all are “created in the image and likeness of God, and enjoys equal rights in society”, and to discriminate any of these categories would “presuppose a difference in dignity between people” (The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016, sec. E2). It is not clear what is meant by “sex”, but we can assume that it is a reference to gender (male and female) and that the Church is against discrimination of all kinds, including here sexual categories.

SED also recognises that the nature of individual sexual desires, understood as a basic psychological and physiological fact, is not simply the result of one’s personal choice. Still, many of the inclinations and bodily desires are born with us, and they are either fed or suppressed from an early age. The Church does not, however, understand human identity as mainly residing in one’s sexuality or any other human trait, for that matter, but in the image of God in all of us. Nevertheless, every person has the fundamental right not to be persecuted for a specific sexual orientation by a political or civil authority (Hart and Chryssavgis 2020, para. 19).

Some may consider this paragraph to be a challenge for Orthodox theology. What is, instead, very clear is the position of the Synod from Crete regarding the Christian family. In MOCT, family is a divinely granted institution founded on the Sacrament of Marriage as a union between man and woman. Furthermore, it adds that “this is especially vital in light of attempts in certain countries to legalise and in certain Christian communities to justify theologically other forms of human cohabitation that are contrary to Christian tradition and teaching” (The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World 2016, sec. F14).

So, both documents condemn discrimination against sexual minorities and recognise the union between man and woman as the unique way of cohabitation that the Church can bless. It is interesting to note that by mentioning “the other forms of cohabitation” the Synod from Crete was aware of the issue of LGBTQ inclusion that is challenging the Church today. As a follow-up of the position of MOCT on this issue, SED has a more pastoral approach. Affirming that sexual desires are psychological and innate is a proof of pastoral care and understanding. If pastoral care is desirable, the anthropology that supports it is unclear or at least insufficiently discussed in the Orthodox Church.

According to SED, sexual desires are not simply personal choices. They are innate. This means that they characterise human nature. Being part of human nature, they are not to be condemned. Yet homosexual relations are considered sins in the Orthodox Church. In order to answer these questions, we must first understand what is meant by “human nature”. When addressing the issue of sexuality, the Church Fathers speak of a postlapsarian man. Synthesising Greek patristic thought on the subject, Nellas states that sexual union and pleasurable attraction did not exist before the fall. They are “forms of corruption” (Nellas 1987, p. 73). Thus, we have the primordial man, before the fall into sin, on whose sexuality the Church Fathers remain silent, as in a form of “anthropological apophaticism” (Nellas 1987, p. 75). At the same time, in maintaining that the nature of

the human being is theological, the church Fathers did not wish to define it in biological categories (Nellas 1987, p. 75). There is, however, another approach to the nature of the prelapsarian human being, that it was androgynous, and that erotic attraction, in its spiritual understanding, would contribute to the restoration of that state (Mos 2018, p. 259). Another position is that after the fall into sin, the division of the primordial man occurs, resulting in the two sexes, the “garments of skin” being the metaphor used to describe this reality (Nellas 1987, pp. 43–91).

John Behr offers a good analysis of the ontology of gender. He argues that scripture leaves no room for a different interpretation. Human beings are male and female, this is how they were from the beginning, and God has always intended it to be so. The basis for an alternative position can be found in specific passages from the Fathers (notably St Gregory of Nyssa and St Maximus), which have been interpreted and systematised by various modern scholars. Here Behr criticises the method of these modern theologians, who have taken statements from various works of the Fathers to construct a “patristic theology of sexuality”. He points out that those specific statements were written in the context of particular works, and we are not free to take them out of their contexts. He gives as an example the works *On Virginity* and *On the Making of Man* by St. Gregory of Nyssa and various works by St Maximus Confessor that belonged to different genres. These are works belonging to the rhetorical genre and were not intended as a systematisation of the faith (Behr 1998, p. 367). He then draws attention to the difficulty of conceptualising how we should think about sexual differentiation. This, says Behr, is not only a modern problem but one that has never been adequately resolved. Men and women are certainly different, but does this mean they are different species of the same gender, the human being? If we are not different species, then at what level is the difference? Aristotle’s solution was to say that there is no difference, and that woman is, in fact, just an imperfect male—i.e., he understands that man is the species and woman subsumes it. V. Karras has drawn attention to a similar problem (see Valerie Karras 1996). Both men and women are equally human; human nature is the same. Therefore, one cannot locate sexual differentiation at the level of nature. However, neither can sexual differentiation be located at the level of person or hypostasis because it is a property that different men and different women have in common, while personal properties are precisely those that serve to differentiate rather than unite. Thus, if sexual differentiation is to be accepted as an integral aspect of being human, a level between nature and hypostasis must be postulated. Moreover, this is one of the dangers Karras sees in a dogmatic insistence on sexual differentiation regarding the “nature of being” (Behr 1998, pp. 368–69). Behr concludes by rhetorically asking whether we can understand that God has given us our biological existence as the best way to achieve the ultimate purpose of our lives, given that sexual difference has often been misused to legitimise almost anything. He then adds that at this level of analysis, the debate could degenerate into excessive love or dissatisfaction with our bodies. Therefore, he concludes by saying that any theological reflection requires asceticism when the subject is us. It requires more than ever a divine apatheia (Behr 1998, pp. 371–72).

Ch. Yannaras gives a positive understanding to sexual desire, by noting that the overcoming of otherness is the true function of the erotic impulse. The erotic impulse is placed in nature for its natural end and purpose. “It serves the imaging in nature of the triadic mode of life—the personal co-inherence of life within limits of created nature. It intends finally the deifying union of man with God” (Yannaras 1991, p. 72).

Commenting on Yannaras’s position, Russell claims that this is our true relationship with God.

“Because we are in the image of God, we can either respond to the erotic call of God, which is life, or reject it, which is death. Our being in the image of God has further implications. Not only does it imply the potentiality to respond to God’s call, but also the potentiality to live with the life of Christ: For man to be an image of God means that each one can realise his existence as Christ realises life as love, as freedom and not as natural necessity”. (Russell 2006, pp. 318–19)

In his Triads, Gregory Palamas notes that it is not by mortifying the soul that we achieve impassibility, but by “directing its energies towards divine things and the impassable man is one who no longer possesses any evil dispositions, but is rich in good ones, who is marked by the virtues, as men of passion are marked by evil pleasures”. Then he continues: “it is thus not the man who has killed the passionate part of his soul who has the pre-eminence, [...] but rather, the prize goes to him who has put that part of his soul under subjection, so that [...] it may ever tend towards God, as is right, by the uninterrupted remembrance of Him. Thanks to this remembrance, he will come to possess a divine disposition, and cause the soul to progress towards the highest state of all, the love of God” (Palamas 1982, p. 54).

Thus, our transfigured passions and our erotic impulses must be offered to God so that we become united with Him and then, in Him, we may finally find true union with others as well.

3.5. The Holistic Dimension of Deification

The spiritual path of theosis includes the relation of the human person with non-human beings and with creation. In this respect, the spiritual process of deification becomes a theological foundation for eco-theology. MOCT dedicates special attention to the ecological issue. “The Orthodox Church emphasises the protection of God’s creation through the cultivation of human responsibility for our God-given environment and the promotion of the virtues of frugality and self-restraint” (*The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World* 2016, sec. F10). Theosis presupposes an organic relation of the human being with creation. According to St Maximus the Confessor, “deification, briefly, is the encompassing and fulfilment of all times and ages, and of all that exists in either. This encompassing and fulfilment are the union, in the person granted salvation, of his real authentic origin with his real authentic consummation. This union presupposes a transcending of all that by nature is essentially limited by an origin and a consummation” (Maximos the Confessor 1979, para. 19). Following St Maximus, Doru Costache observes that the human being and creation are simultaneous, through the human body, *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. Thus, those who want to conquer the world, that is, to reach the authentic and doxological knowledge of God through creation (Maximos the Confessor 2006, para. 13), must conquer themselves, must rationally convert their natural movements into virtues, unify themselves in God. He then argues, following N. Berdiaev, that only the Hesychasts, the mystics, whose psychology is always a cosmic one, understand that everything that happens in the human being has a resonance and a universal meaning, bringing order or disorder to the cosmos (Costache 1995, p. 95). The saints lived in the world without reducing it to the fulfilment of their pleasures, but they managed to pay attention to the meanings of things that they knew from pure contemplation, the supreme Reason, in which they found eternal rest and joy (Maximos the Confessor para. 64).

When St Isaac the Syrian was asked what a merciful heart is, he replied saying that “it is a burning heart for the entire creation—for humanity, for birds, animals, even for the enemies of truth and for everything that exists. [...] And the heart is touched and cannot watch or hear about any suffering, not even a mild one. So, he then offers to all, even those who cause him suffering, his unceasing prayers and tears [...], following God’s example” (Isaac Sirul 1981, pp. 393–94).

St Sophrony Sakharov also talks about the love for the entire creation. Following the will of God, the divine love “connects our mind with the mind of our Holy Father, and thus our mind will be able to embrace the entire creation in a single act, borderless and beyond time” (Saharov 2003, p. 98). We can see here a development of the topic of the experience of eternity, specific to St Silouan’s theology, the spiritual father of St Sophrony. “When God offers the human being the gift of grace, the latter becomes not only immortal in the sense of a continuous prolongation of one’s life, but also becomes

without a beginning (*anarchos*), participating in the life of God, Who is without beginning and without an ending” (Saharov 1999, pp. 135–36).

The result of the experience of “seeing God” through the works of divine grace is an irreversible transformation of the human being. The process of deification implies a transformation of the way in which the human person relates to the entire creation.

4. Conclusions

Over the course of this article, we have tried to find theological inputs for mission in theosis, to identify the consequences of theosis for missionary practice, and to find out who can approach it and whether it is reserved for certain categories of people or not. The challenge was to read two of the programmatic documents issued by the Orthodox church (MOCT and SED) through the lens of deification, as a spiritual practice founded in *Philokalia* and in the philokalic literature. At first glance, the official documents considered here have little to do with the purely spiritual, often ancient texts that are addressed to individuals as support for their personal journey. Yannaras notes that although composed of ancient, pre-modern writings, the *Philokalia* is, in fact, a modern project (Yannaras 2013, pp. 191–92). In his view, the collection encourages an emphasis on subjectivity and a lack of focus on community life. Some of the fundamental topics discussed in the documents, such as human dignity, freedom, peace, the issue of human sexuality, and the ecological crisis do indeed mostly refer to the life of Christian communities. However, the path of deification is still present in each of these topics, perhaps in less obvious ways. In fact, the personal process of spiritualisation and deification implies an internalisation of the entire life of a community, of a certain time in history and, in a sense, of the entire humanity and creation. The person that follows the path of theosis identifies himself or herself with the entire community. St Isaac the Syrian seems to confirm Yannaras’s view when he says: “Love the ease of solitude rather than satisfying the hunger of the world and the converting of the multitude of heathen peoples from error unto adoring God. Let it be more excellent in thy eyes to detach thyself from the bonds of sin, than to detach the subdued unto liberty from those who subject their bodies” (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, p. 32). This seems to be entirely against our concerns today with issues such as human rights, human dignity or world peace. However, if we look more carefully at the philokalic writings, we notice that the path of theosis is simultaneously an ascending and a descending one. Unlike our tendency today to place ourselves above the world and concern ourselves almost exclusively with large-scale issues, the *Philokalia* recommends a descent, with Christ, into one’s hell to discover one’s true self and unite with God. In doing so, the entire Adam, the universal self, and the rest of creation begin to be restored. Rather than placing themselves above creation, the true saints struggle to see themselves as “beyond every creature” and thus, in humility and, together with Christ, they begin to carry the entire world on their shoulders on their path to deification.)

In the case of human dignity, theosis refers to the realisation of personal dignity by reaching freedom, understood within the frame of theosis as liberation from all sins and passions. Peace is synonymous with the extension in the community of the hesychia, while the sexual impulse is seen as a way to recover and redirect the soul’s erotic attraction towards God. As for the preservation and care for the entire creation, as seen through the lens of theosis, we underlined the holistic effects of the spiritualisation of human life on the created world.

Finally, we conclude that theosis constitutes a model for both monastics and laypeople in the contemporary world. Purity of the heart and peace are conditions to receive the Holy Spirit and anybody can and should strive to achieve them. Russell remarks that even though “archimandrite Sophrony discusses the doctrine of deification [. . .] in the language of the hesychastic monastic tradition, [. . .] the desire of human beings to transcend their finitude is not only monastic; it is universal” (Russell 2006, p. 312). Thus, anybody can approach theosis, regardless of gender, social status, or position in Church. If one wants to engage in

it, one should follow Theoliptos's advice: "Act in the same manner, whether in church or in the solitude of your cell" (Theoliptos, Metropolitan of Philadelphia 1995, p. 183).

It is perhaps interesting to note here that both in the Greek and the Romanian Philokalia, the writings of Theoliptos, the Metropolitan of Philadelphia, are, in fact, letters addressed to Irina Chumnos, a former byzantine princess who became a nun after she was widowed at the age of sixteen. In both languages, the text was, so to speak, masculinised and then used by monks without any reference to the fact that the text had been initially written for a woman. Dumitru Stăniloae, the Romanian editor of Philokalia, chooses to keep the masculine form of the nouns and adjectives. However, in his introduction, he talks about the historical circumstances of the writings. We find it relevant that a letter addressed to a nun in the 14th century was copied and used by monks for centuries without any other change apart from the grammatical form of some words. This means that in the *Philokalia*, women and men follow the same path to deification, and the masculine is simply the generic form.

Additionally, St Gregory of Sinai was very much involved in mission as he prepared monks and then sent them off to teach the practice of the unceasing prayer or the prayer of the heart to clergy or groups of lay people. St Gregory Palamas also had a famous debate with an Athonite monk who insisted that this practice belonged to monks. However, Palamas firmly denied it and explained that it was for everybody (Stăniloae 2007, pp. 74–75).

So, apparently written by monks for monks, these texts can be used by all those willing to follow the path of theosis, men, women, monks, clergy, and laity alike. There is only one condition for reaching deification: "Every person who has been renewed in the Spirit and has preserved this gift will be transformed and embodied in Christ, experiencing the supernatural state of deification ineffably" (Grigorie Sinaitul 2007, p. 98).

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