

# Achieving Our Potential – Theosis

## There Is Greatness In Us

Holy Scriptures tell us that it was God who formed us in our mother's womb. When He formed us, He placed within us the highest possible potential: **θεωσις** (*theosis* = union with God). Part of man's tragedy is that this great potential remains often only a potential and is not fully developed. Every person is indeed a frail creature, but he or she is endowed by God with great potential. All of us are born equal. Our job is to outgrow this equality by reaching out in order to achieve our potential in Christ. There is greatness in each one of us!

## Your Best Friend

Your best friend is a person who brings out of you the potential that lies within you.

- That makes Christ your best friend.
- That makes the Church your best friend.
- That makes the Bible your best friend.

For their purpose is to help you achieve the great potential God has placed within you. With God, your potential becomes heaven itself where *“our eye has not seen what things God has prepared for those who love Him”* (I Corinthians 2:9).

The tragedy for most of humanity is that many die before being fully born. We die with so much un-lived life in us. We have a hundred acres of possibilities and only about one-half acre under cultivation. We are a picture of un-fulfillment.

## Missing The Mark

In the New Testament, the Greek word for sin is **αμαρτια** (*hamartia*). It however does not mean “to break a rule”. It means rather *“to miss the mark, the target, the bull's eye”*. That is the great tragedy of sin, which occurs when a person does not measure up to his or her full potential and fails to become all that God has created him to be. Thus, sin is **to miss the target**, i.e. to fail claiming and developing the great potential God has placed in us. For we are not only hell-bent, but the potential God has placed in us makes us also – and even more so – heaven-bent. St. Paul writes in Romans 5:20, *“Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.”*

## Theosis: Our Potential

Orthodox theology calls the potential, for which God created us, theosis. It is a very simple concept; namely the core of the good news of Orthodoxy that we are called to share in the very life of God. Thus, salvation becomes much more positive. It means not only justification and forgiveness of sins; it constitutes even more so the renewing and restoration of God's image in us, the lifting up of fallen humanity through Christ into the

very life of God. Christ forgives us and frees us from sin and death that we may proceed to fulfill our potential, which is to become like God in Christ and to share in His life. Christ came to save us from sin in order for us to participate in the life of God. In other words, we are saved from sin for theosis, which is our great potential. Jesus came to earth to tell us:

- ✓ You give me your time, and I will give you my eternity.
- ✓ You give me your weary body, and I will give you rest.
- ✓ You give me your sins, and I will give you forgiveness.
- ✓ You give me your broken heart, and I will give you healing.
- ✓ You give me your emptiness, and I will give you my fullness.
- ✓ You give me your humanity, and I will give you my divinity.

### **Theosis: Positive Aspect Of Salvation**

Theosis is the positive aspect of salvation. To describe theosis we can use the following words:

- ❖ transfiguration of man
- ❖ putting on Christ
- ❖ restoration of the image of God in us
- ❖ restoration of communion with God
- ❖ participation in the life of God
- ❖ participating in the kingdom of God
- ❖ incorruption
- ❖ receiving the Holy Spirit
- ❖ becoming temples of the Holy Spirit
- ❖ ascending to the throne of God
- ❖ being by grace what God is by nature

### **Therefore, we can say:**

- Jesus came to lift the fallen all the way from the gutter of sin to the throne of God in theosis.
- Theosis is what God wants for us who are created in His own image: to become like Him, in whose image we are made.
- Theosis is a personal sharing in the life of God through faith, prayer and the sacraments.
- Theosis is the rich potential God has placed in each baptized person.
- Theosis is the name for the process of salvation, initiated in baptism, by which we are sanctified, i.e. united to Christ and changed into His likeness.
- Theosis is the transfiguration of our life-style, implying concern for our neighbor, mutual sharing, love, stewardship of ourselves, our possessions and of the earth.

- Theosis means no more than an intimate communion of human persons with the living God. To be with God means to dwell in Him and to share His perfection.

## **Saved For Theosis**

Christ came to redeem us from sin that we may proceed to acquire the gift of theosis, which He offers us by grace. Salvation does not end with the forgiveness of sins; it begins there. It is at baptism that our journey to God, to theosis, begins. Salvation is not only a quest for salvation, but also a matter of deification and a growth process in Christ.

We are saved from sin for theosis. The original sin against God was not simply an erroneous choice but rather a refusal to ascend toward God and the failure to aspire to holiness. Salvation is an ongoing process that leads from initial salvation in baptism through sanctification and on to deification by grace.

## **From Egypt To The Promised Land**

What does it matter being saved from death, from hell, if it is not to lose oneself in God. St. John Chrysostom writes, *“It is not enough to leave Egypt (sin and death), one must also enter the Promised Land (theosis). Between Egypt and the Promised Land lies desert.”* Hence the need for ἀσκησις (askesis – struggle, discipline, war against the passions) in our journey through the desolate desert of sin and death towards theosis (the Promised Land).

Theosis may sound like a beautiful path, but what does it say to those who are trying to cope with a illness, or are struggling in a sour marriage, or are burdened with anxieties and cares? Theosis has everything to say to struggling humanity. It tells us that we have the capacity through the presence of God within us to transcend and overcome any difficulty in life, including the greatest one of all: death. Theosis tells us that we are not paupers or beggars, but sons and daughters of God, sharing His glory, partaking of His nature, destined to inherit His eternal kingdom. Theosis tells us that *“yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us”* (Romans 8:37). Theosis tells us to persist, no matter how hard the struggle or the temptation, because God has great things in store for us, as St. Paul emphasizes, *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”* (Romans 8:18).

## **Our Rebirth**

At baptism we sing the beautiful words of St. Paul, *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (Galatians 3:27). The fact that at baptism we have *put on Christ* has tremendous implications. If we have put on Christ, then we have put on His love, His forgiveness, His peace, His joy. If we have put on Christ, we have put on His servant-hood: *“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought*

*to wash one another's feet*" (John 13:14). If we have put on Christ, then we shall suffer as Christ suffered; we shall be persecuted for the truth as Christ was persecuted.

If we have put on Christ, we shall be resurrected as Jesus was. We shall be glorified as Christ was glorified; we shall ascend to the Father as He ascended to the Father. We shall sit at the right hand of the Father with Jesus. We shall partake of His divine nature and share in His life and glory becoming "*gods by grace*" as He is God by nature and essence.

Thus, theosis began for us in baptism. When we were baptized we put on Christ, i.e., we received the life of Christ within us, the same life that enabled Christ to walk this earth for 33 years without sinning. Thus, on the day of our baptism, we became new persons with a brand new potential: theosis or union with God.

### **It Has Already Happened**

Theosis is not something new. It has already occurred at the Holy Transfiguration when the human body of Jesus was transfigured and has shone more brightly than the sun. Here we see the great potential of human nature in Christ. Here we see the potential spirituality of man in its highest form! Here we see the dust of the flesh transfigured into God's likeness in divine glory! Here we see the human body as God originally created it to be: radiant, resplendent and glorious. Here we see what human nature can again become in Christ by God's grace.

### **The Human Excuse**

How often we hear people trying to excuse their sins and failure by saying, "*I'm only human!*" Yes, we are human, but God became human in Christ to show us what it really means to be human. To be human means to be able to share in God's life. To be human means to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in our bodies, making them temples of God. To be human means to have the Lord Jesus sitting on the throne of our heart, making us palaces of God's presence. To be truly human means to be able to transcend human weaknesses and frailties and to become like Christ in whose image we were created.

### **Spiritual Dwarfs**

All of this presupposes askesis, the struggle and constant growth in the life of Christ.

There is a method of stunting trees so that they never grow higher than a couple of feet. It is done by tying off the taproot so that the tree is forced to live off its surface roots. These trees beautify unique little gardens making them places of supreme beauty, but perform little service beyond that. They are rather useless in terms of supplying lumber for building or for shelter against raging typhoons. They become potted plants instead of the forest giants they were originally intended to be.

A baby in a crib is a beautiful sight to behold, but if that creature, plagued by some crippling disease, remains a crib-baby after twelve or fifteen years, it becomes a tragic and pitiful sight indeed.

Even more tragically, though of far less concern to people, are the moral and spiritual dwarfs who have never attained to the height and stature they are destined for and who are potted plants instead of forest giants because their taproots are tied off; they have never gone deep into an intimate relationship with God to draw on divine sustenance and strength.

Created to be giants, we end up as dwarfs when the taproot, designed for an in-depth relationship with God, is cut off and we live on the surface of life.

### **Our Aim in Life**

It is no wonder that the Orthodox Church considers our aim in life to be *union with God* or theosis. We were created to share in God's life. This is what makes us different from animals. This is also what makes Orthodox Christianity different from all other religions.

We were created to be receptacles of God's life, without which we cease to be truly human. Hence, the main emphasis of the Orthodox Church can be summed up in one word: *theosis*.

It is said that the greatest compliment God ever paid us was when He said to us, "*be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48).

### **Let Loose The Slumbering Christ Within You**

Every person has a capacity to let loose in him or her the *risen Christ*. This process within us will be the beginning of a personal transformation and transfiguration that will be nothing less than theosis.

### **Two Caterpillars**

Two caterpillars were watching a butterfly flying overhead. After some time, one caterpillar remarked to the other, "You wouldn't get me up in one of those things for a million dollars!" Of course, the unsuspecting caterpillar was little aware that he was gazing upon his own destiny. We are destined to share in Christ's glory. His victory over death was our victory over death. His Pascha, His resurrection has become our Pascha, our resurrection. His transfiguration our transfiguration; His ascension our ascension; His glorification our glorification.

### **The Seedling's Strength**

The strength exerted by a tiny little plant, as it pushes its stem above the surface of the ground, is about 450 pounds per square inch. Four hundred and fifty pounds of pressure in those delicate little plants pushing their way above ground!

We can be amazed what the power God has placed even in the tiniest of His creations. How much more energy must each one of us have that is still untapped?

Indeed, God has placed untapped reservoirs of strength within us in order to enable us to attain theosis and union with Him. We think of prayer, the Bible and all the sacraments, especially the holy Eucharist. These all are ways for us to achieve union with God.

### **You Have a Rendezvous with Glory**

We live much of our lives as if in a shell. We are forever like the chick in its shell – though just within an inch of true life and living.

God has placed the capacity for unlimited growth in each one of us. It is our privilege to give birth to this new potential, this new life by breaking out of our ego-shell.

It is important that we keep the spark alive in us. A person at prayer is like a bed of coals, As long as a single spark remains, the great fire can be kindled, but without that spark, there can be no fire.

*Always remain attached to God, even in those times when you feel unable to ascend to Him. You must preserve that single spark – lest the fire of your soul be extinguished.*  
(Hasidic Saying)