

The Feast of Transfiguration
August 6, 2017

Theosis is a basic concept. The word is not used in the Bible, though the teaching is implicit in the words of St. Peter (2 Peter 1:3-4): "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature..." A classic summation of this idea is attributed to St. Athanasios: "God became man so that man might become god."

The story of the Transfiguration, which we celebrate today, begins with these words: "Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening" (Luke 9:28-32).

The Lord's Transfiguration is special because it gives us insight into theosis. When Jesus' face was altered and when his clothing became as white as light, was this his human nature or his divinity? The Church's answer is that it was his human nature that was being transformed. His humanity, his human body was sanctified and revealed with the glory that was intended for us all.

The Orthodox Church teaches that the glory that surrounded the Lord on Mount Tabor was a glory meant for us all, and attainable in this life. The divine light that surrounded Jesus was a light accessible to humanity. I am not saying that it happens every day or to everyone, but it happens. We see this phenomenon in an episode from Moses' life.

"When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him... When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant" (Exodus 34:29-35).

In other words, Moses' contact with God was so intimate and powerful that it changed his appearance. He began to shine as if he were a human light.

We see something similar in the martyrdom of St. Stephen, told in Acts 6:15: "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." St. John Chrysostom in his comments about this passage writes, "'They saw His face,' it is said, 'as it had been the face of an angel.' For this was his grace, this was the glory of Moses" (NPNF, "Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles," Homily XV, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf111.vi.xv.html>).

There is a vivid account from the life of St. Seraphim of Sarov, a Russian mystic of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, told by Nicholas Motovilov. He engages the saint in a conversation about living in the Holy Spirit. Then he looks up to the saint's face. His account goes like this:

“Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: ‘We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don't you look at me?’

“I replied: ‘I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain.’

“Father Seraphim said: ‘Don't be alarmed... Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am...’

“After these words I glanced at his face and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. (“Conversation With Nicholas Motovilov,” <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx>).

What a powerful tale of human transformation!

Do I expect you or me to light up like Moses or St. Stephen or St. Seraphim of Sarov? Probably not. But the knowledge of what we could do should inspire us in our own lives to never accept mediocrity when we could strive for excellence.

Men have walked on the moon. Do I think that I will ever walk on the moon? Probably not. But the knowledge that I could do something amazing should inspire me to take what God has given me and use His blessings to the fullest extent that I possibly can. The concept of theosis tells me that my destiny is to be a child of God. In the service of Holy Baptism, we pray that the person who is about to be baptized become “a child of Light” and “an heir of God's Kingdom.” .

Revelation 22:4-5 tells us that in the kingdom of heaven, “They shall see [God's] face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.” Imagine a world in which we don't need light bulbs or lamps, because people will reflect God's light in every time and place! With this promise in mind we live, we love and we serve.

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