

## Homily for Christmas Day 2021

### *Deification*

This Christmas morning I want to introduce a term that might be new for most of you. It is the word “deification”. Here is what I mean by this term, “deification”. We are made in God’s image and likeness; not in the image and likeness of the earth, not made to become like our riches, created not to become like our careers or even our spouses, as essential as family and romance are to a full human life. We are made to become godly and only God can fulfill the human thirst for perfection. And what true perfection is for the Christian is to grow in intimate and transformative union with God himself.

So captured were the early Church Fathers (2<sup>nd</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century) by our deification that they wrote the following:

St Irenaeus who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century stated: “the Son of God “became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.”

St Clement of Alexandria, another 2<sup>nd</sup> century theologian declared: “The Word of God became man so that you too may learn from a man how it is even possible for a man to become a god”

A little more than a century later, St Athanasius of Alexandria who was the main theologian at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and lived until 373 famously declared: “God became a man so men and women could become God” This is the most succinct formula of Christian deification we have.

Each of these writers celebrated that the human person has the capacity to freely and personally receive God’s own life so as to live by the promptings of the Holy Spirit. They wonderfully saw how we are frontier creatures, like the angels in our immortal souls, like the brute beasts in our bodies. St. Gregory Nazianzus, another 4<sup>th</sup> century Father named us all hybrid worshippers. For like the creatures of earth we can move and enjoy material creation, but because we are joined to the angels in heaven as well we can resemble the divine in how we think and conduct our lives.<sup>1</sup>

More recently on January 11<sup>th</sup> 2004 Pope St John Paul II summarized what we mean by deification when he said that at Christmas we celebrate the great event of the Incarnation, where we are invited to keep our gaze fixed on:

*Jesus, the human face of God and the divine face of man.*<sup>2</sup>

This is the heart of the Christmas Story that in Jesus we see the human face of God so that in the words of St. John in today’s Gospel:

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<https://media.wordonfire.org/institute/courses/deification/scripts/Meconi%20Augustinian%20Deification%20Script%202.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/2004/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_ang\\_20040111.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_20040111.html)

***But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.***

Here in this verse from John 1.12 we have the biblical basis for the teaching of deification. God became Man at Christmas to declare to us that by his mercy and grace you and I can become gods. But here is the great risk that God in Christ is willing to take: we can choose to reject the Lord's invitation to know our true identity and destiny. This is why St John also states that Jesus came to those who were his own and they received him not. They could not imagine that the human face of God would be made known in Jesus Christ nor that those with whom Jesus chose to associate, the outcasts and sinners, would share in the divine face of Jesus.

The Gospel message is one that is almost beyond our comprehension because it seems just too fantastic and the world too desolate for this to ever be realized. So inspired was Isaiah that today's first reading sings joyfully these words:

***Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices,  
together they sing for joy;  
for in plain sight they see  
the return of the LORD to Zion.  
9 Break forth together into singing,  
you ruins of Jerusalem;  
for the LORD has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>***

Can you hear the exuberance in the melody of the chorus? Zion, Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God, and the city that is in ruins, will be redeemed and comforted. These words were spoken to a people who felt defeated. Jerusalem was literally in ruins and the lives of God's people were beaten down. But the prophetic voice wants to declare that your deification has not been forgotten by God. For the text begins by stating:

***How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."<sup>4</sup>***

It is this theme that we celebrate at Christmas. Because our deification is not dependent primarily on us but on God we can celebrate "Our God reigns" Because in Jesus we see the human face of

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<sup>3</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#). (1993). (Is 52:8–9). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#). (1993). (Is 52:7). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

God and the divine face of man, the Church's Collect for today's Mass celebrates our deification with these words:

***O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it, grant we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.***

So intrigued by our deification was the 20<sup>th</sup> century author Lewis that in his vivid prose he considered:

*"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."*<sup>5</sup>

This my beloved brothers and sisters in the message of Christmas as we celebrate the great event of the Incarnation, where we are invited to keep our gaze fixed on

*Jesus, the human face of God and the divine face of man.*

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*