

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

DOCTORAL THESIS
- Summary -

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Academic Supervisor:

His Eminence Prof. Dr. Andrei **ANDREICUȚ**

Cluj-Napoca,

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*Deification of Man in the Theology of
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Keywords

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The Deification of Man in the Theology of Saint Sophrony the Athonite

SUMMARY

Contemporary society is undergoing a profound crisis of spirituality and values, characterized by terms such as “post-Christianity” and “post-postmodernism,” which reflect transformations and ambiguities in the realm of religiosity, especially in the Western world. Secularization has resulted in a destabilization of personal faith, leaving modern man vulnerable to egoism, hedonism, and confusion, leading to loneliness and apathy. In this context, the Church has the mission to apply theology to everyday life, promoting the teaching of deification as the real solution to the conflict between materialism and spirituality. By his very nature, man is in search of meaning, and this quest defines him as a person; however, secularism has failed to offer a satisfactory replacement for the religious answer to this fundamental need.

Orthodox theology reaffirms deification as the supreme goal of human life, and in the face of the crisis of values and ideological pluralism, the Church must remind society that true fulfillment is found in holiness and communion with God. Deification, as grounded in the tradition of the Holy Fathers and Holy Scripture, describes the process of man’s transformation towards union with God by grace, being a work of the entire Holy Trinity, accessible through man’s free cooperation and the influence of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of this teaching lies the hypostasis, as the ontological act of union with Christ, and a theology of spiritual experience, not merely abstract dogma. The real process of deification involves the struggle with sins, personal knowledge of grace, the essential role of prayer, and the practice of virtues, especially love and obedience. Thus, this work reveals that Saint Sophrony represents a living and relevant model for the contemporary world, offering hope and an authentic path of life in Christ for modern man, in a world marked by many spiritual challenges.

The work on the uncreated light describes the unseen yet real union of man with the Most Holy Trinity, a pure synergy between the work of grace and human effort, thus realizing salvation as a lived and transformative experience of the whole being. This divine vision, supported by the teachings of the Holy Apostles and Fathers, is perceived as the supreme

revelation, in which man experiences a knowledge that surpasses rational limits, accompanied by a paradoxical perception: “to see without being seen” and “to understand in an incomprehensible way.” The work of the Holy Spirit is essential in this process, bestowing gifts of knowledge and revealing to people the truths of liturgical and saving life, adapted to the soul and the age. Although knowledge of God is possible through grace, it remains limited in this earthly life, and Saint Maximus the Confessor compares it to a mirror that reflects only fragmentarily the future reality. Man, through reason and acceptance of the order created by God, gradually ascends towards the supreme meaning of existence: life, love, and communion, which reflect the divine nature and the unity of the Holy Trinity. Deification is therefore the process and goal of human existence, through which the being rises and unites with God by the uncreated grace that sanctifies, purifies, and enlightens, accompanied by prayer, repentance, struggle against passions, and communion in the Church. This “life in the Spirit” transforms man into a Seer and Knower of God, offering a mystical-personal experience that simultaneously reflects a profound ecclesiological and cosmological vision of the ultimate purpose of creation and the relationship between man, God, and the community of the faithful.

The deification of man, as biblically grounded in Genesis 1:26-27, expresses the creation of the human being “in the image and likeness” of God, which bestows upon humanity a divine ontological mark reflecting both its unique nature and its vocation to reach full likeness with God. This condition is not the result of human effort, but a gift granted by God that is continually actualized through conscious dialogue and a dynamic relationship between man and his Creator. The freedom and capacity for dialogue, embedded in the personal and hypostatic nature of man according to the image of the Logos, enable one to progress spiritually toward perfection with the help of the Holy Spirit. This perfection is fully manifested in the Person of Christ, who has restored human potential and dignity lost through the fall. Genesis 2:7 and John 20:22 highlight the moment of divine breath, transforming man into a living soul open to deification, marking a unique union between the earthly and the divine in the human person. The process of deification, meant to recover the divine likeness lost through sin, is consolidated through the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit, as emphasized by Church Fathers such as Saint Gregory Palamas and Saint Gregory of Nyssa. The human being is a personal and dialogical “you,” capable of responding to God, and Scripture points to expressions such as “partaking of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) and “the prize of the high calling” (Philippians 3:14) as the ultimate goal of Christian life: complete deification in communion with Christ, the Son of God. This fulfillment takes place in the mystical Body of the Church, through the work

of the Holy Spirit and the administration of the Holy Mysteries, with the Church being the essential environment for receiving the grace needed for sanctification and spiritual growth. Thus, deification is an ontological and practical vocation of humankind to participate in the divine life, thereby fulfilling the very purpose of its existence in both history and spiritual reality, through grace and communion within the Church.

Archimandrite Sophrony the Athonite offers an original perspective on deification, emphasizing “perfect humility like God” as the final and essential stage of the salvation process. He introduces the concept of “kenosis-theosis” or “deification through kenosis,” starting from the mystery of Christ’s abandonment on the Cross as an absolute self-emptying, which becomes the supreme expression of the deification of the human nature assumed through the Incarnation. The Christian is invited to follow this path of profound self-emptying, reflected in the kenotic life, in order to receive salvation—not merely as a passive participation in divine energies, but as an active, continuous, and humble union with God, accompanied by ascetic effort and spiritual experience.

The life and work of Saint Sophrony, marked by personal searches, wanderings, and returns to faith, authentically reflect this teaching, connecting patristic tradition with the realities of the contemporary world. As a disciple of Saint Silouan the Athonite, Sophrony developed a theology of salvation centered on union with God through deification, with kenotic humility as the core of human transformation. His biographical journey—from a devout childhood in Russia, through spiritual crises and Eastern mystical influences, to a profound return to deep Orthodoxy and to monastic life on Mount Athos—illustrates the practical living of this way of deification in Christian life, where humble self-emptying and cooperation with grace become essential paths to spiritual fulfillment.

Thus, Saint Sophrony serves as a vital bridge between patristic tradition and the challenges of modern humanity, emphasizing that authentic Christian living and true deification are inseparable from a deep experience of kenosis exemplified by the Savior Christ on the Cross, realized through unceasing prayer and asceticism. The cultural context in which Sophrony was raised—especially his exile in Paris in the 1920s, marked by the collapse of traditional values and the spiritual crisis of the era—formed the background for a profound inner transformation, leading him to the revelation of the personal Absolute and to the resolve to dedicate his entire life to serving Christ. His theological formation, shaped by contacts with great intellectuals and academic studies, ultimately proved secondary to his need for a practical

and authentic spiritual life, which led him to seek the monastic life on Mount Athos to cultivate kenosis and live deification in the spirit of prayer and repentance.

Saint Sophrony Saharov matured his spiritual life under the guidance of Elder Silouan the Athonite on Mount Athos, where prayer, asceticism, and contemplation brought him into deep intimacy with Christ. After more than two decades, due to declining health, he returned to the West, where despite difficulties he continued the mission to spread hesychastic teachings and the tradition of the Holy Fathers, contributing to the spiritual renewal of the Orthodox Church in Europe. Collaborations with theologians such as Boris Stark and Vladimir Lossky strengthened his intellectual standing, and through his writings and monastic activity in England, where he founded the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, he became a pillar of modern Orthodox spirituality. His life and work reflect a profound transformation from a young artist seeking the absolute to a consecrated spiritual father and theologian, whose teaching and example remain influential. He highlighted the inner struggle of modern man, characterized by a godless life leading to spiritual impotence, emphasizing that the true battle takes place in the heart, the source of change through prayer and repentance. Saint Sophrony stressed the importance of patience, asceticism, and embracing the suffering of the Cross as essential means toward salvation and perfection, in full communion with God and fidelity to the Gospel. He also demonstrated the vital role of the family in spiritual formation, promoting early religious education and a life lived in the spirit of prayer and holiness. He proposed a return to Christ as the only true path to eternal light and deification, accessible through sincere repentance, unceasing prayer, humility, and ascetic life, lived as a profound mystery in the heart of every believer.

The spiritual father, as portrayed by Archimandrite Zacharias Zaharou and Saint Sophrony Saharov, is a prophetic and grace-filled spiritual presence through which the Holy Spirit works inwardly in the disciple's life, often surpassing rational understanding. He is a knower of the mysteries of transformation toward deification in each person and, with discernment gained through ascetic experience, helps to distinguish authentic grace from the deceptions of evil spirits, supporting the disciple to remain on the path of salvation. For Saint Sophrony, the supreme goal of man is deification—a conscious and free participation in the divine life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and adoption by God. This requires a conscious exercise of freedom, faith, and ascetic effort, by which a person humbly chooses to move toward likeness to God; without this cooperation between grace and free will, life becomes burdensome and dark. Deification is a personal, hypostatic relationship between man

and God, reflecting the free communion among the Persons of the Holy Trinity. It involves a contemplative life and spiritual struggle in the human heart, with alternating periods of intense presence of grace and apparent absence, culminating in sanctification and eternal life.

The spiritual father is thus a spiritual parent, inspiring grace and wisdom so that the disciple may fulfill his existential purpose of becoming like God, living in personal and living communion with Him through the Holy Spirit. Saint Sophrony warns against spiritual confusions caused by the mistaken perception of the person as a mere isolated individual, emphasizing the character of divine life as a living “I-Thou” relationship and insisting that salvation is an ontological transformation in which man becomes a partaker of the Holy Spirit, and hypostatic prayer is the true and living encounter between the created person and the Divine Person. He calls each individual to a progressive and personal work of deification, which begins from the womb and continues toward rebirth in the Kingdom of God, embracing all creation in order to reflect the “new Adam.” This involves accepting suffering and bearing the cross, which paradoxically reveals closeness to eternal life.

To attain likeness to God, man must practice faith, asceticism, and humility, rejecting all that opposes God and accepting the continuous transformation of life under the commandments of the Gospel, within his heart, through deep spiritual struggle and constant prayer, where the personal experience of God's presence is more important than rational understanding. Saint Sophrony's theology is thus a living theology, grounded in spiritual experience that calls for an authentic life in communion with God, not merely intellectual knowledge. He reaffirms the hypostatic nature of man, showing that salvation is the work of the person in free and living communion with God in the unity of the Holy Trinity and the divine image in man. Distinguishing clearly between person and individual, Saint Sophrony emphasizes the hypostatic unity of humanity in Christ, which restores the human race broken by sin. The entire path of deification is a work of grace in the free person, concretely lived through prayer, asceticism, and holy living. He calls us to have a real, personal, and dynamic experience of deification as a hypostatic union with Christ, through which man, raised by grace, becomes an eternal and immortal participant in divine life, fulfilling his destiny as a person and manifesting the light and love of God in the world.

The withdrawal of God from man's life, whether as a consequence of human responsibility or as a divine hiding from the one “dead to the world,” represents in the theology of Saint Sophrony Saharov an essential ascetic stage that expresses God's love and invites to

“total kenosis”—a profound self-emptying to follow Christ and attain likeness to Him. Self-hatred thus becomes a state of authentic humility that facilitates the knowledge of God through prayer. The stages of spiritual life involve alternating between receiving grace, losing it, and regaining it, with the soul oscillating between light and darkness. Authentic love, manifested in moving beyond selfishness and loving one’s neighbor, is the sign of deification, while asceticism purifies the soul and opens it to grace. Obedience, especially toward the spiritual father, plays a fundamental role, eliminating selfishness and enabling a living connection with God. Saint Sophrony also emphasizes the universality of the call to deification: salvation is offered to all, regardless of cultural origins or spiritual state, with each person having inestimable value in God’s eyes. Christ’s call transcends all boundaries, stressing that all humanity is like a single tree, each Christian called to bear within themselves the universal history and destiny of mankind, living with a cosmic vision of faith. Saint Sophrony highlights the importance of the experience of the uncreated light—a healing and purifying divine presence that grants man peace, humility, certainty, and mystical union with God. Distinguishing this light from other “lights” or delusions is essential, achieved through the teachings of Holy Scripture, the Holy Fathers, and Church Tradition. Saint Sophrony himself experienced the uncreated light as a consuming and healing fire, living states of communion and joy, a deep silence, and a peace that cannot be fully expressed in words. The call to deification is universal, and true spiritual life involves passing through oscillations, acquiring virtues, cultivating love and obedience, and encountering God in contemplation, humility, spiritual discernment, and perseverance in the spiritual struggle.

The uncreated light, present at the Transfiguration of the Lord and spiritually inherited by the faithful who live in Christ, is, in the theology of Saint Sophrony Saharov, the source of eternal life and true knowledge of God. This supernatural illumination is not permanent; it reveals itself and withdraws unexpectedly, generating within the soul a burning longing for God and resulting in an unceasing quest through prayer. The vision of the uncreated light is a gift from God manifested in spiritual life as a divine energy—the presence of the Holy Trinity—which permeates the believer’s being and transforms him, offering mystical knowledge and an experience of life according to the image and likeness of God. Only through sincere repentance, ascetic effort, and the purification of the heart with humility can one open themselves to this light, avoiding pride—which can disperse the light and lead to deception. For Saint Sophrony, prayer is the “art of arts,” the central means of human communion with God and the true school of theology, through which one is deified by truly living the grace of

the Holy Trinity, transforming oneself and inwardly coming to know life according to the divine image and likeness.

This light helps to live love for one's neighbor and to build communion with others, reflecting the perfect love of the Trinity, while love and obedience become indispensable virtues for any authentic spiritual life. Saint Sophrony strongly recommends deep prayer, focused on "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!" anchored in rhythmic breathing, as a practice that eliminates all mental noise and directs the whole being towards God in a personal and living dialogue. Prayer is the essential means of communication between man and the living God and serves as a measure of the depth of the Christian life, stimulating spiritual tears, authentic love, and communion with Christ and others. Saint Sophrony emphasizes the importance of maintaining prayer and repentance as preparation for the passage to eternal life, and his experience on Mount Athos, praying for the world during the war, led him to the awareness of the ontological unity of the person with all humanity. He observes the drama of the modern world, where people, limited intellectually and caught up in daily activities, have abandoned prayer, and because of this, monks are called to pray for the whole world, underscoring the vital role of prayer in building both personal and communal salvation.

The prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, is described as a natural, hesychastic way of consciously assimilating the presence of God, practiced since the time of the apostles; this prayer is considered a divine energy, a source of spiritual life, strengthening the soul even in times of trial or joy. Beyond personal prayer, Saint Sophrony emphasizes the importance of the liturgy and communal services as spaces for communion with Christ and spiritual growth, with the liturgical language serving to carry the believer toward the divine realm and the communion of hearts with God.

The ideal of prayer is the purity of heart and the lifting of the mind towards God, a care-free state that allows spiritual balance and the reduction of passions. Prayer is the supreme art of spiritual transformation and communion, and "spiritual weeping" is the profound testimony of this closeness to God. Thus, the entire life of the Christian becomes an unceasing prayer, not merely intellectual discourse or exercise, but a lived reality that brings power, peace, and holiness, making each heart a true temple of the divine presence.

The conclusions of the work emphasize that deification is the fundamental purpose of human creation, representing the union and likeness of man with God through a synergy between the human being and divinity. Saint Sophrony the Athonite, through his experience

and theology, succeeds in bringing this ancient theme into contemporary relevance, deeply linking his teaching to the patristic tradition and Holy Scripture, as well as to the context and challenges of the modern world, such as secularization and materialism. In his vision, deification is not a theoretical idea but a living experience that involves spiritual journeys including questions, wanderings, returns to Christ, prayer, and the practice of virtues, especially love and obedience. Human life is one of continuity between mystical experiences, spiritual struggles, and liturgical communion, all oriented toward becoming a partaker of the life of God within the Church. The emphasis on hypostasis explains the uniqueness of the person and the importance of personal experience, and Saint Sophrony's empirical theology, born from his ascetic and spiritual life, reaffirms that true knowledge of God comes through experience and grace, not merely intellectual learning. Moreover, the universality of the call to deification is a central theme, with Saint Sophrony rejecting nationalist or cultural limitations and affirming that Christ is the Savior of all humanity, and every person, from any time or place, is called to unite with God. Thus, Saint Sophrony represents a holy model and authentic theologian who embodies the message of the Orthodox tradition in a lively and applicable way for the contemporary world, while offering real hope through the experience of life in Christ for both today's and tomorrow's man.

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