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**DEIFICATION AS A THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM
BETWEEN CONTEMPLATION AND MERCIFUL LOVE:
A COMPARATIVE-HERMENEUTICAL STUDY ON RELIGIOUS
ANTHROPOLOGY IN PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA AND SAINT BASIL
THE GREAT**

– SUMMARY –

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INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Topic and Research Context

Reflection on deification constitutes one of the central loci of Christian theological anthropology, insofar as it articulates the ultimate vocation of the human person to participate, by grace, in divine life. Within the Eastern patristic tradition, this reality is not conceived as a mere doctrinal formula, but as an existential horizon that orients the entirety of spiritual experience. Deification thus designates the ontological transformation of the human being through communion with the Most High—a process in which contemplative knowledge and the transfiguration of existence become inseparable.

Throughout the development of theological reflection, the interpretation of this reality has often been approached through the accentuation of distinct dimensions of the ascetical path: either by emphasizing the contemplative itinerary of divine knowledge, or by foregrounding ascetical discipline and the ethical demands of Christian existence. Such a fragmentary approach, however, risks obscuring the organic unity of the patristic vision, in which orientation toward the Absolute and responsibility toward the neighbor do not constitute parallel registers, but complementary expressions of the same inner transformation.

In the contemporary context of theological research, interest in the relationship between contemplative experience and the social responsibility of faith has intensified significantly, particularly within studies devoted to patristic spirituality and the historical forms of organization of Christian communities. Nevertheless, the relation between orientation toward divine reality and the concrete manifestation of merciful love has not always been examined as a structural unity of Christian anthropology, but has often been treated within distinct analytical frameworks. In this regard, an investigation into the manner in which early tradition articulates this convergence becomes essential for a coherent understanding of the ideal of deification.

Within this hermeneutical framework, the present study seeks to demonstrate the way in which early Christian tradition articulates an intrinsic relation between theological knowledge and the concrete manifestation of merciful love. From this perspective, the approach to divine reality is not exhausted in the interior exercise of contemplation, but is verified through a configuration of existence that becomes visible in service to the other and in responsibility toward the community. Thus, the spiritual itinerary does not remain confined to an individual experience, but acquires an ecclesial and social dimension.

To capture this dynamic, the study advances a comparative analysis of three significant moments in the development of Christian spirituality: the Alexandrian reflection on the contemplative life, the crystallization of the monastic ideal as a mode of organizing existence oriented toward communion with the transcendent, and the theological synthesis articulated by Saint Basil the Great. From this perspective, the *Basiliad* emerges as a historical embodiment of a theology in which orientation toward the transcendent is translated into concrete forms of solidarity and service, thereby indicating that the maturity of spiritual life is authenticated by the capacity to transform communion with the Source of life into active responsibility toward the world.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of the present research is to elucidate the manner in which the doctrine of deification—understood as the ultimate vocation of the human person within Christian theological anthropology—is articulated in early patristic tradition as an organic unity between contemplative orientation toward the transcendent and the concrete manifestation of merciful love. The analysis seeks to demonstrate that human participation in divine life, as conceived in Eastern theological thought, cannot be interpreted exclusively within the register of spiritual interiority or contemplative experience, but presupposes an integral transformation of existence. From this perspective, spiritual advancement becomes recognizable in the way orientation toward God is translated into responsibility toward the neighbor and into concrete service within the ecclesial community.

Within this conceptual framework, the study aims to show that patristic tradition does not operate with a separation between contemplative experience and the active dimension of Christian life, but rather conceives these as belonging to the same dynamic of the person's transfiguration. Union with God is reduced neither to the intellectual exercise of contemplation nor to the mere moral practice of external acts, since both dimensions receive their full meaning only within the horizon of a unified theological anthropology. Thus, interior illumination and the self-giving of love emerge as complementary expressions of the process through which the human being is called to participate in divine life and to reflect this calling within concrete existence.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues several analytical objectives intended to clarify how this perspective is configured across different moments of early Christian tradition. A first objective consists in examining the intellectual and spiritual context in which the Alexandrian milieu prepared the articulation of a contemplative vision of human perfection. In this context, particular attention is given to Philonic reflection on the inner itinerary of the soul, to ascetical discipline, and to the

contemplative orientation toward divine reality, highlighting the manner in which these elements contribute to the development of a theological understanding of human transformation through the approach to God.

A second objective of the research is to investigate how this spiritual matrix is reconfigured within monastic experience and finds a synthetic expression in the thought and action of Saint Basil the Great. In this context, particular attention is given to the manner in which communal organization, ecclesial discipline, and philanthropic practice become visible criteria of spiritual maturity. From this perspective, the Basiliad may be interpreted not merely as a social initiative, but as a historical embodiment of a theology in which likeness to God assumes concrete form, and communion with the transcendent is verified in active responsibility toward the world.

Methodological Framework

The analytical approach of the present study is constructed through the articulation of multiple interpretative registers capable of accounting for the complexity of the subject under investigation. The study does not limit itself to the description of authors, contexts, or historical institutions, but seeks to configure a coherent framework in which textual analysis, theological reflection, and contextual inquiry converge toward a unified interpretation of the paradigm of deification. From this perspective, the methodological approach integrates historical, exegetical, and theological-philosophical dimensions within a common interpretative grid, designed to test the central hypothesis of the thesis and to enable a coherent interpretation of the sources under examination.

A decisive role is played by the hermeneutical and exegetical-analytical reading of the texts, applied primarily to the Philonic corpus and subsequently extended to relevant patristic sources. The interpretative interest does not concern exclusively the doctrinal content of these texts, but also the manner in which their hermeneutical structure enables the articulation of an anthropology oriented toward transfiguration. In this sense, the reading is conducted simultaneously in both contextual and theological keys, so that the fundamental concepts are understood both in relation to the Judeo-Hellenistic milieu in which they emerge and in relation to the ways in which they are received and reinterpreted within early Christian tradition.

At the same time, the study adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, required by the very nature of the subject. The analysis brings into dialogue fields such as the history of religions, ancient philosophy, biblical exegesis, and patristic theology, avoiding both the strict confessional isolation of the material and its reduction to a merely thematic analysis. The

comparative dimension does not aim at establishing simplified lines of historical dependence, but at identifying structural convergences, differences of emphasis, and shifts in meaning among three distinct spiritual configurations: the Philonic horizon, monastic experience, and the Basilian theological synthesis.

A complementary methodological principle is the balance between diachronic and synchronic analysis. On the one hand, the investigation traces the development of key themes and structures of meaning from the Alexandrian milieu through Christian monasticism to the ecclesial-philanthropic expression found in the work of Saint Basil the Great; on the other hand, each of these moments is examined in its internal coherence, so as to avoid reducing them to a merely evolutionary scheme. Such a dual perspective enables the identification of both continuities and significant differences, while providing the interpretative framework within which contemplation, ascetic practice, and philanthropy may be understood as convergent dimensions of the itinerary of deification.

Current State of Research

The question of deification has generated sustained interest within contemporary theological scholarship, being addressed in a privileged manner in studies devoted to patristic anthropology and early Christian spirituality. In recent decades, numerous works have highlighted the centrality of this concept within Eastern theological thought, emphasizing the way in which patristic tradition has understood human participation in divine life as the ultimate telos of Christian existence. Within this framework, reflections on the relationship between ascetic practice, contemplation, and the inner transformation of the person have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how the ideal of perfection was both conceived and lived in the early centuries of Christianity.

In parallel with these developments, studies dedicated to the intellectual and spiritual milieu of Alexandria have extensively examined the contribution of Philo of Alexandria to the articulation of a horizon of reflection in which the contemplative dimension of existence occupies a central place. Scholarly literature has shown how Philo's thought integrates elements drawn from the biblical tradition and Hellenistic philosophy into a coherent vision of the soul's inner itinerary, oriented toward the knowledge of divine reality. At the same time, recent research has emphasized that this reflection must be interpreted within the broader context of the Judeo-Hellenistic environment, in which religious experience and philosophical elaboration intersect in an original manner.

Another major field of contemporary research concerns studies dedicated to the emergence and development of Christian monasticism. Historical and theological analyses of this phenomenon have underscored the decisive role of ascetical experience in shaping a form of life oriented toward spiritual perfection.

Within this perspective, scholarly work has examined both the communal dimension of monasticism and the manner in which ascetical disciplines, the practice of prayer, and the organization of common life were integrated into a coherent process of spiritual maturation. With regard to the work and activity of Saint Basil the Great, recent scholarship has underscored his decisive contribution to the organization of monastic life and to the articulation of an ecclesial vision in which contemplative experience and responsibility toward the neighbor are integrated within an original synthesis. Studies devoted to the institution of the Basiliad have highlighted the innovative character of this initiative, often interpreted as one of the earliest forms of the institutionalization of Christian philanthropy within the ecclesial community, as well as the manner in which this achievement reflects a coherent theological understanding of the relationship between spiritual life and the concrete service of the other.

Despite the richness of these contributions, contemporary research has generally approached these domains in isolation, privileging either the analysis of the Philonic tradition, the study of monasticism, or the examination of Basilian thought. Only rarely has the structural relationship between contemplative reflection, ascetical experience, and the institutional expression of merciful love been investigated from an integrative perspective. It is precisely in this direction that the present study is situated, seeking to demonstrate the convergence of these dimensions within a unified theological reading of the ideal of perfection.

Scope and Delimitations of the Analysis

From a thematic standpoint, the present study does not aim at an exhaustive treatment of the entire patristic tradition concerning deification, but rather focuses on those key reference points that allow for the elucidation of the relationship between the contemplative orientation of existence and the concrete expression of merciful love. In this regard, particular attention is given to Philonic reflection, early monastic experience, and the Basilian synthesis, since these three configurations make it possible to trace a line of development in which spiritual perfection does not remain confined to interiority, but acquires communal and institutional expression. The selection of this

thematic core thus responds to a hermeneutical need for focus rather than to any intention of substituting for the breadth of the entire patristic field.

From a chronological perspective, the investigation is circumscribed to the interval extending from the Hellenistic Alexandrian milieu to the fourth century of Christianity, a period in which the work and activity of Saint Basil the Great confer upon this dynamic an ecclesial and philanthropic form of considerable theological density. The delimitation of this temporal framework allows for the tracing of significant continuities and reconfigurations without dispersing the argument within an excessively broad historical panorama. In this way, the proposed trajectory remains sufficiently comprehensive to capture the genesis and maturation of a particular vision of perfection, yet sufficiently rigorous in its delimitation to avoid diluting the central problematic.

From a methodological and conceptual standpoint, the present study does not seek to constitute either a complete history of monasticism, or a general inventory of Christian philanthropic institutions, nor an exhaustive survey of all patristic formulations concerning deification. Rather, its principal aim is to interpret those texts, experiences, and forms of spiritual organization that make it possible to discern a structural convergence between contemplation, ascetic practice, and service to the neighbor. This hermeneutical orientation also establishes the fundamental limit of the study: what proves decisive is not the breadth of the material considered, but its relevance for demonstrating the internal unity between the inner transformation of the person and its ecclesial, communal, and philanthropic expression.

Structure of the Dissertation

The study is organized according to a tripartite architecture, preceded by a comprehensive methodological introduction and followed by the general conclusions. The introduction establishes the conceptual framework of the research, presenting the problematic context of the topic, the epistemological delimitations, and the formulation of the theological objectives of the study. At the same time, it discusses the current state of research, the methodological principles guiding the analysis, and the working hypothesis through which the relationship between contemplative experience and the concrete expression of merciful love is examined. This section thus prepares the ground for the analytical trajectory of the subsequent chapters, clarifying the theological and hermeneutical direction of the entire investigation.

The first part of the dissertation, entitled *Alexandria — The Genesis of a Spiritual Civilization between Judaism and Hellenism*, investigates the historical and religious context in which the Judeo-Hellenistic cultural synthesis takes shape. The analysis follows the development of

the Jewish community in Alexandria and the manner in which the religious identity of the diaspora is configured in dialogue with the intellectual environment of the Hellenistic world. It examines the constitutive elements of Jewish identity—the Torah, the Temple, and the observance of the Sabbath—as well as the way in which these function as markers of spiritual cohesion within the cultural pluralism of the Alexandrian metropolis.

Continuing this line of analysis, the chapters devoted to the intellectual milieu of Alexandria highlight the role of cultural institutions and of Greek philosophical tradition in shaping a space of encounter between Judaism and Hellenism. Within this framework, the contribution of Philo of Alexandria is examined, whose work represents one of the most significant attempts to articulate a synthesis between biblical exegesis and philosophical reflection. Through his allegorical interpretation of Scripture and the contemplative orientation of his thought, Philo outlines a spiritual vision that would influence, directly or indirectly, the subsequent development of Christian tradition.

The second part of the dissertation, entitled *The Community of the Therapeutae and Christian Monasticism — An Exegetical-Ascetical Analysis of Spiritual Dynamics*, investigates the configuration of a mode of life oriented toward ascetic struggle and interiorization. The analysis begins with the description of the Therapeutae community in Philonic writings and examines the ways in which these contemplative communities may be interpreted in relation to the development of Christian monasticism. It further discusses practices of renunciation, the discipline of interiority, and ascetical models present in the biblical tradition, including the prophetic figures of Elijah and John the Baptist, which provide essential reference points for understanding the anchoritic vocation. Continuing this section, the study analyzes the transformation of the Egyptian desert into a privileged space of monastic experience and the manner in which ascetic life is structured around a dynamic that integrates labor, prayer, and contemplation. The daily structures of monastic life are examined, from the organization of dwelling and dietary discipline to the practice of biblical exegesis and continuous prayer. Through this analysis, it becomes evident how monastic experience configures a spiritual anthropology oriented toward inner transformation and ecclesial communion.

The third part of the dissertation, entitled *Almsgiving as a Paradigm of Love for the Neighbor in the Work of Saint Basil the Great, within the Horizon of Deification*, explores the ecclesial and social dimension of spiritual perfection. The analysis focuses on the theological reflection of the Cappadocian Fathers, particularly on the manner in which merciful love is interpreted as an expression of participation in divine life. In this context, the ontological and

soteriological foundations of service to the neighbor are examined, along with the relationship between the anthropology of communion and the practice of philanthropy.

The final section of the analysis is devoted to the work and activity of Saint Basil the Great, interpreted as the concrete expression of a theology in which contemplative life and responsibility toward the neighbor converge in a coherent synthesis. Particular attention is given to the charitable institutions established by the Cappadocian bishop, especially the complex of the Basiliad, considered one of the most significant forms of organizing Christian philanthropy in Late Antiquity. Through this analysis, the study highlights the manner in which almsgiving becomes the concrete criterion for verifying participation in divine life and the expression of a theological anthropology oriented toward communion.

Original Contributions of the Research

The present study aims to clarify the relationship between the contemplative dimension of spiritual life and the communal expression of active love within the theology of deification. Through the comparative analysis of the noetic, ascetical, and ecclesial-philanthropic registers, an integrative perspective on Christian perfection is articulated—one capable of moving beyond both interpretations that privilege exclusively the interior dimension of spiritual life and readings that reduce philanthropic experience to a merely social or institutional dimension.

A primary outcome of the analysis consists in the formulation of an integrative hermeneutical framework that correlates Philonic reflection on the relationship between the soul and the Logos, the ascetical experience of monastic tradition, and the ecclesial-philanthropic articulation realized in the work of Saint Basil the Great. In this perspective, the three registers are interpreted not as successive historical stages, but as convergent theological expressions of the same spiritual finality. Such a correlation makes it possible to overcome the thematic fragmentation characteristic of much of the secondary literature and provides an interpretative framework through which the structural unity of the itinerary of deification becomes more clearly intelligible.

A major interpretative direction of the study concerns the re-evaluation of dominant readings of the work of Philo of Alexandria. In contrast to approaches that reduce Philonic thought to a philosophical-moral synthesis of a Platonic-Stoic type, the present analysis highlights the role of allegorical exegesis as a formative mechanism of spiritual interiority. Allegory thus appears not as a conceptual ornament of a philosophical system, but as a hermeneutical practice oriented toward the transformation of existence and the configuration of the believing subject in relation to the divine Logos.

A further methodological gain of the study consists in the reformulation of the comparative approach between the traditions under examination. Instead of positing a direct filiation between the community of the Therapeutae and Christian monasticism, the analysis proposes a comparative reading oriented toward identifying convergences of spiritual finality. This perspective allows similarities to be interpreted without transforming analogy into historical dependence and without obscuring the confessional or contextual differences between the traditions considered.

The principal outcome of the dissertation lies in the formulation of a theological criterion for discerning deification. Participation in divine life is not assessed exclusively through the intensity of contemplative experience or through individual ascetical performance, but through its capacity to generate a stable form of communion and ecclesial responsibility. In this light, philanthropy does not appear as a mere moral extension of spiritual life, but as an ecclesiological verification of *theosis*, in which active love becomes the concrete expression of participation in divine life.

Conclusions

The investigation undertaken in this study has sought to clarify the relationship between the contemplative orientation of spiritual life and the communal expression of active love within the theology of deification. The comparative analysis of Philonic reflection, monastic experience, and Cappadocian synthesis has demonstrated the existence of a functional convergence between distinct registers of spiritual tradition. This convergence is not explained by direct causal succession or by historical dependence, but by a shared orientation toward a spiritual finality in which the inner transformation of the person is articulated together with communal and ecclesial responsibility.

The central theological result of the research consists in the formulation of a criterion for interpreting deification that transcends the opposition between contemplative experience and communal engagement. Participation in divine life cannot be assessed exclusively through the intensity of interior experience or through individual ascetical performance, but through its capacity to generate stable forms of communion and ecclesial responsibility. In this perspective, philanthropy does not appear as a mere moral extension of spiritual life, but as an ecclesiological expression of participation in divine life and as a concrete verification of spiritual maturity.

By correlating the noetic, ascetical, and ecclesial-philanthropic registers, the dissertation proposes an interpretative model capable of overcoming the artificial separation between contemplative interiority and the communal responsibility of faith. Deification thus becomes

intelligible as an integrative process of existence, in which personal transformation and ecclesial communion are mutually confirmed and confer theological coherence upon Christian life.