

“Filled with the Visible Theophany of the Lord: Reading Dionysius East and West”

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For the past few years, I have been interested in how the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Areopagite have been read in terms of three frameworks: Neoplatonic, Greek Patristic/Eastern Orthodox, and Medieval Latin Scholastic. In the process, I have found a set of texts that offer a particularly good opportunity to test how Dionysius is interpreted within these frameworks.¹ One of these texts is found in DN 1.4 592B-C:

(T) Then [in the next life]...when we have attained a Christform lot...We shall “always be with the Lord” (I Thess.4:13). In altogether pure contemplations, we shall be filled with his visible theophany which shall shine round about us in most brilliant splendors as were the disciples in that most divine Transfiguration.²

Since my own reading of Dionysius has undergone a decisively “Eastward shift” in the past few years, it might be helpful to explain the basis for this shift. In light of this, I think it will become clear why I think (T) is a particularly apt text for contrasting reading Dionysius in the three framework I mentioned. I was originally drawn to Dionysius the Areopagite’s *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* since I believed that he was following in the Neoplatonic tradition of Plotinus and Damascius Diadochus who developed a non-entitative conception of the One that was still metaphysical in character.³ That is, neither the One (Plotinus and Damascius) nor God (Dionysius) is a being or subsisting essence, yet the One or God is the first cause or principle of all, which is nevertheless an undifferentiated unity. The difficulty, however, with a Neoplatonic reading of the *Divine Names* is that it is very difficult to deal with Dionysius’s own discussion of the divine union and differentiation in *Divine Names* 2.⁴ He calls the divine powers to which the divine names refer—goodness, love, being, peace, etc.—a differentiation of God. They refer to God’s causal activity in producing beings and are the procession of God into beings. Dionysius himself refers in several places to a distinction between the divine union (the divine hiddenness) beyond all being and the divine differentiation, in which God produces and is manifest to beings.⁵

But from a Neoplatonic perspective all distinction implies division, which can refer only to a being that is a whole of parts and not the One beyond being and differentiation. The same conclusion follows for an essentialistic conception of God as an absolutely simple being or substance such that whatever ‘pertains’ to God is identical to the divine essence. On a Neoplatonic interpretation, Dionysius’s own description of the divine powers as the procession of God into being, a procession somehow distinct from the divine hiddenness, has to be interpreted elliptically as the procession of beings out of God. The same sort of interpretation must be given from the perspective of any Christian theism that views God as an absolutely simple being such that whatever is said of God is identical to the divine essence. One of the reasons I was not impressed by Vladimir’s Lossky’s interpretation of the divine energies⁶ when I first tackled the *Divine Names* is that it seemed to compromise the undifferentiated character of God—which I understood as the One in the Neoplatonic tradition.

When I started re-reading Dionysius in the summer 2003, which coincided with the period in which my wife and I were exploring conversion to the Orthodox Church, Fr. Bogdan Bucur, then a graduate student in the theology department at Marquette, shared with me a paper that he was writing on Dionysius. He developed the notion of the divine energies as crucial to interpreting Dionysius. I had many reservations about this reading on philosophical grounds in light of the Neoplatonic framework in which I was reading Dionysius. The energies seemed designed, as it were, to “close the gap” between God and creatures. They were God but somehow distinct from the divine ‘essence’ as around (*pros*) the essence. My problem with this idea was a bit like Berkeley’s problem with the fluxions Newton used in his infinitesimal calculus: Newton gave them an indeterminate value greater than 0 when he divided with them, and then he conveniently reduced them to 0 when it came time to eliminate them from the remainder of the division. Berkeley thought Newton’s ideas about fluxions were simply inconsistent.⁷ The

same seemed to be true for me regarding the notion of divine energies as distinct from God in a way that did not make God a ‘whole of parts’ (that is, equivalent to the one being of the second hypothesis of Plato’s *Parmenides*) For, if we have energies ‘around the essence’ or ‘around God’ that are nevertheless God, how are they distinct from God if God is simple? What exactly is meant by ‘around God?’ Certainly, that would suggest either something other than God or it would make God into some sort of whole of parts.

But the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord takes place on August 6 and through it I encountered the Orthodox understanding of the Transfiguration: Christ’s very divinity was revealed to the disciples as an uncreated light and glory; and the disciples, in and through the Holy Spirit, were themselves transformed so that they could see Christ’s glory, “the everlasting light (τὸ φῶς τὸ ἄϊδιον), “as far as they could bear it.” (*Troparion for the Feast*, Tone 7). Indeed St. Gregory Palamas cites several texts for the feast to support his claim that the light revealed on Mt. Tabor was the uncreated divine light.⁸ I discovered that this was not an isolated teaching but was part and parcel of the Greek patristic teaching that the theophanies in the Old and New Testament were God himself making himself manifest to various people yet at the same time remaining utterly unmanifest and hidden.⁹ This teaching was also in line with the Orthodox understanding of deification: that we were created to participate in the life of the Trinity through the divine energies although the divine ‘ousia’ is utterly unknown and unparticipable by any created being.¹⁰

I also discovered that the distinction between the divine essence and energies was an attempt to give conceptual formulation to this more fundamental experience of God manifesting *himself* to holy men and women. The Church Fathers did not make this distinction for the sake of a purely ‘speculative’ metaphysics but, as it were, “to save the phenomenon” of God’s theophanic presence to human beings.¹¹ This distinction, then, was not a merely nominal distinction which expressed our conception of God in relation to us (*quoad nos*) yet which did not properly apply to God himself since God was assumed to be an absolutely simple divine essence. The distinction between the divine essence and energies – or for Dionysius, the divine hiddenness (mystery) and manifestation of God in his divine powers or names—expressed distinctions without divisions ‘in’ God. The essence-energy distinction implied that there is a fundamentally antinomical or paradoxical character to God himself that is revealed by God.¹²

When I returned to reading Dionysius with this in mind, a number of texts, and indeed the basic thrust of the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*, made a great deal more sense to me. It became possible for the first time, for me at least, to read Dionysius in a way that I could take him to mean what he said: namely, that there are distinctions or differentiations ‘pertaining to’ God which do not divide God or make God into some sort of composite being. This resulted in a fundamental shift in my understanding of Dionysius.

In light of this, the very brief reference to the Transfiguration in (T) took on a new meaning if it was to be read in context of the Greek Fathers and subsequent Eastern Orthodox theology. It also suggested that this text was an important text to contrast the Eastern Orthodox interpretation of the Transfiguration with the Latin Scholastic interpretation since the latter tradition certainly does not hold, as far as I know, that the disciples in any sense knew or experienced the uncreated light of Christ’s divinity at the Transfiguration.

If (T) provides a crucial text for comparing Eastern Orthodox and Latin Scholastic readings of the Divine Names, (T) is also important since it seems impossible to accommodate (T) within any strictly Neoplatonic interpretation of the *Divine Names*. The reference to the Transfiguration clearly presupposes the Incarnation of Christ as the Son of God and, thus, that God is the Holy Trinity. Yet no strictly Neoplatonic interpretation of God as the undifferentiated One can take seriously the idea that God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and, thus, I cannot see how any Neoplatonic metaphysics can make sense of the Incarnation in any sense that would be compatible with traditional Christianity.

In the first part of the paper, I will briefly comment on some features of (T) in terms of DN 1.4 and Dionysius’s other writings. In the second part, I will consider how (T) was interpreted by St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas. I will also review Aquinas’s views about the sense in which the blessed in the next life can see God in the flesh. In the third, I will develop the interpretation of (T) by St. Gregory

Palamas. Finally, I will make some comparisons between three different interpretations of (T) by these three authors including their different teachings about the knowledge of God we can have in and through the body.

I.

Dionysius makes his first reference to Christ in the *Divine Names* at DN 1.4. He begins this section by noting the various ways in which the divinity is celebrated by the theologians: monad, trinity, cause, beautiful.¹³ But there is a special (διαφερόντως) celebration of God's love for man in the Incarnation of Christ.¹⁴ Dionysius continues by observing that in the present life we learn about God's love for man through the sacred veils of scripture ("the writings" or *ta logia*) and the hierarchical traditions (referring evidently to the sacraments). By way of contrast, in the next life, we will always be with the Lord, filled with his 'visible theophany' in all holy contemplations as were the disciples at the Transfiguration. In the next life as did the disciples at the Transfiguration, Christ's divinity is seen in an unveiled and direct manner. (T) then is especially important because Dionysius clearly implies that there can be a theophanic presence and vision of God in and through our bodies. Moreover, this vision and contemplation is explicitly Christocentric in character.

For Dionysius, no being ever knows the divine hiddenness (κρυφιότης) itself, whatever it is.¹⁵ However, the divine similitude/likeness (ὁμοίωσις)—a divine name, power or energy—returns created things to their cause allowing them to be like God according to an divine image/icon and similitude/likeness (κατὰ θεϊαν εἰκόνα καὶ ὁμοίωσιν).¹⁶ The term 'theophany' refers to "that vision, which manifesting the divine similitude depicted in it as giving form to unformed realities, raises up those who have such visions to what is divine." Theophanies provide a divine illumination for those who receive them and afford some holy initiation to divine things *themselves* (τῶν θείων αὐτῶν).¹⁷ All of the angelic ranks receive divine theophanies.¹⁸ Dionysius calls the appearance of the Angel of the Lord to Manoah a symbolic theophany.¹⁹ In (T), Dionysius refers to the "visible theophany" of the Lord which is received by us as embodied.²⁰

II.

Both St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas comment on (T) in their respective commentaries on the *Divine Names*.²¹ Albert intersperses his own glosses on various texts with questions organized in the style of a disputation. The questions often provide an opportunity for him to develop his own positions on various issues and not simply interpret Dionysius's own position. He raises two questions in connection with this text: (1) whether in the Fatherland we will see God with the eyes of the body and (2) whether there was true splendor when Christ appeared.

Albert claims that in (T), Dionysius is referring to external sensory vision since the reference to the splendor of Christ shining round about the blessed has to refer to the senses and not the intellect, which receives an internal splendor. Moreover, the blessed only see God with the bodily eyes insofar as they see the supposite (the individually subsisting being), in this case Christ, and not the divine nature. Moreover, they only see Christ in terms of his human nature and not his divine nature. Effectively, the external senses both now and in the fatherland perceive only their proper objects. Albert approvingly paraphrases St. Augustine when he says: "If it is not color, the eye says 'it did not enter through me.'"²² For Albert then, no one either in this life or the next sees Christ in his divinity with or through the eyes of the body. This is so even though, as Albert shows in his second question, the splendor which Christ showed in the Transfiguration was a splendor that was caused by Christ's divine nature as it overflowed his soul into his body. But this splendor insofar as it shines round about the disciples as something visible to the external senses has to be a created manifestation of Christ's own properly divine splendor.

It is noteworthy that Albert simply skips Dionysius's own reference to the 'visible theophany' of the Lord.²³ Moreover, for Albert a theophany refers to an illumination descending from God which allows 'the created intellect not to see what God is, but to see him by attaining his substance insofar as he presents himself under such or such a reason.'²⁴ In his CDN, Albert only speaks about the mind or intellect receiving theophanies. He makes no references to theophanies being given to the bodily senses.

God, then, evidently only employs theophanies as a way for angels, saints and selected people to see him in some sense in this life since no created intellect by its natural powers ever knows the essence of God. Of course, the blessed will know the essence of God in the next life albeit only by a supernatural and not a natural power.

Unless Albert has adopted some form of a distinction between the divine essence and energies or an Eriugenistic form of ‘pantheism’ (both of which are highly unlikely!), it is difficult to see how in a theophany, people see God and not some created manifestation of God. In any event, even though Albert does not seem to favor the term ‘visible theophany,’ he can agree with Dionysius that the blessed will have an embodied experience of God like that had by the disciples in the Transfiguration. For Albert, though, this same visible experience is only of Christ in his human nature or glorified humanity.

Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on the *Divine Names* is primarily exegetical and consists of a running commentary on various passages of interest to him. Here is the condensed version of his comment on our text:

After the blessed resurrection....[when] not only our soul will be beatified, but so in its own mode the body will be glorified, then “we shall always be with the Lord.” We, I say, shall be filled with a visible apparition, i.e., by a sensible and corporeal one, of God himself in the humanity of Christ...by Christ himself pouring out around us through his own bodily brightness by the most manifest splendors just as he had done around the disciples in that most divine transformation, i.e., Transfiguration (Aquinas, CDN, 1.2)

This gloss does not, of itself, answer the question Albert posed: Whether in the Fatherland we will see God with the eyes of the body. To answer this question, we have to turn to some of Thomas’s other writings. For him, even in their glorified state, our sensory organs remain the same in species as they are in this life. So just as the proper object of sight in this life is color, so color will be the proper object of sight in the next life.²⁵ If we deny this, we would have to refer to our sensory organs now and in the next life in an equivocal manner. Accordingly, there can never be a direct vision of God through our sensory organs.

Seeing that ...sight...perceives color, it is impossible for the sight to perceive that which is neither color nor magnitude, unless we call it a sense equivocally. Since then sight and sense will be specifically the same in the glorified body, as in a non-glorified body, it will be impossible for it to see the Divine essence as an object of direct vision.²⁶

For Aquinas, we cannot see or know God as God unless we intellectually (noetically) see the divine essence. Such a vision can only be directly had by the beatified intellect because knowing the essence or quiddity of something is proper only to the intellect through the intelligible species residing in it. The beatified intellect has a direct or immediate knowledge of the divine essence. Moreover, since God is identical to his essence and whatever is other than the divine essence is something created, then if we apprehend something other than the divine essence, we apprehend something other than God.²⁷ But Aquinas also argues that God (the divine essence) will be visibly seen by the blessed as an object of their indirect vision. Aquinas, citing Augustine, notes that we do not directly see that someone is living. That is, the bodily eyes do not directly see that someone is living since the proper object of the eyes is color and magnitude. However, by the use of another cognitive power (e.g., reason) which apprehends life, we are able to say that we see that someone is living and not merely that we believe someone is living: “life is not seen with the corporeal eye, as a thing in itself visible, but as the indirect object of the sense; which indeed is not known by sense, but at once, together with sense, by some other cognitive power.”²⁸

Aquinas seems to be employing what is often referred to as the distinction between sensation and perception (a distinction that goes back to Plato). For example, if you close your eyes and I shake the object I have in my hand, you will most likely say that you hear a set of keys. But the ears strictly do not hear the keys, they only provide sensory awareness of certain sounds. A number of other cognitive capacities come into play in virtue of which we recognize that the sounds are sounds of a set of keys. Note also that we typically say that we hear the keys and not that we believe, through some sort of inference, that the sounds we hear are being produced by a set of keys. By way of contrast, for example,

Aquinas believes that in this life we can only derive a belief about God's existence from our sensory experience.²⁹ How then, in the next life, could the blessed visibly see God in an indirect manner?

That the divine presence is known by the intellect immediately on the sight of, and through, corporeal things, happens from two causes---viz. from the perspicuity of the intellect, and from the refulgence of the divine glory infused into the body after its renovation.³⁰

It is, then, only because the beatified human intellect knows the divine essence that the blessed can visibly, albeit, indirectly see God. It is worth noting that for Aquinas we do not see God with the eyes of the flesh but rather that "man existing in the flesh after the resurrection will see God."³¹

For Aquinas, the intellect is able to 'see' the divine essence immediately since it is led to it by the light of glory, which is itself created.³² In the same way, it would seem that the 'refluence of the divine glory' that is infused into the body is also something created. For our purposes, we can ignore the problems that arise with Aquinas's position as to whether some created phenomenon can lead us to an immediate intellectual vision of God. Let's grant Aquinas's view that the blessed existing in the flesh will see God and that this is how Aquinas might interpret Dionysius's claim that in the next life we will be filled with the visible theophany or apparition of the Lord.

Dionysius, however, claims that the saints in the next life will be filled with the visible theophany of the Lord AS the disciples were in the Transfiguration. Dionysius thus seems to claim that there is a continuity between what the disciples visibly saw in the Transfiguration and what the blessed³³ will visibly see in the next life. But it is hard to see how Aquinas can maintain this sort of continuity. In order to preserve the continuity Dionysius maintains, Aquinas would have to hold that in this life the created intellect can know the essence of God. To be sure Aquinas does not categorically deny that humans in this life can intellectually see the divine essence. Aquinas does grant that St. Paul saw the essence of God when he was taken to the third heaven. He also admits that Moses intellectually saw the essence of God in a state of rapture.³⁴ But these are very rare experiences made possible only by divine grace. So far as I can tell, however, he never suggests that with their created intellects the disciples somehow saw the essence of God in the Transfiguration as St. Paul did in his rapture. Indeed, for Aquinas, someone cannot see the divine essence in rapture unless he or she is completely withdrawn from sense experience. Aquinas explicitly denies that the vision of the essence of God in rapture is comparable to the indirect sensory vision of God that will be enjoyed by the blessed.

After the resurrection, in the blessed who see God in His essence, there will be an overflow from the intellect to the lower powers and even to the body. Hence it is in keeping with the rule itself of the divine vision that the soul will turn towards phantasms and sensible objects. But there is no such overflow in those who are raptured, as stated, and consequently the comparison [to the indirect vision of God by the blessed] fails.³⁵

Whatever the disciples saw in the Transfiguration of our Lord, they were certainly not entirely withdrawn from sensory awareness. Hence, for Aquinas, there seems to be a fundamental difference between what the disciples saw in the Transfiguration of our Lord and what the blessed in the flesh will see of God.

For Aquinas, then, it seems that Dionysius can make the comparison between what we will visibly see in the next life with what the disciples saw in the Transfiguration only if Dionysius does not really think that we will in any sense visibly see God in the next life. Conversely, since Aquinas does think after the resurrection the blessed will, in the flesh, indirectly see God (that is, the divine essence), he cannot maintain the very comparison that Dionysius is at pains to make.

III.

Let me, then, turn to the interpretation of (T) by St. Gregory Palamas. All of Palamas's citations of or references to (T) occur in the *Triads*.³⁶ I am particularly interested in his stress on the analogy that Dionysius draws between the experience of Christ in the next life with that had by the disciples at the Transfiguration. Let me present, in a skeletal form at least, Gregory's general understanding of deification—that is, our participation in the life of the Trinity.

Commenting on the text from 2 Pet. 1:4, "precious and very great promises have been granted to

us, that through these you may become partakers of the divine nature”(physis), St. Gregory of Palamas observes that: “Two things have been handed down to us by the venerable theologians: the divine essence (ousia) is unable to be participated yet, in a way, able to be participated. We participate in the divine nature (physis) and we do not partake in it in any way. Therefore, we must guard both of these things and establish them as the measure of piety” (*Theophanes* PG 150 932D). Palamas, makes this observation immediately after providing several texts from the Church Fathers—SS. John Chrysostom, Athanasius, Basil, and Maximus the Confessor—in which he observes that each of them effectively makes a distinction between the divine essence or ousia (which is unknown and incompressible to any created being) and energies (energeiai) (which can be ‘known’ and in which we participate in being deified).

Our deification is made possible only by and through the Holy Spirit, since it is only through receiving the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit that we can be united with Christ and, in particular, see the unapproachable Light.³⁷ Palamas is quite clear that we can never experience or see God through the natural powers of our intellectual or perceptive capacities.³⁸ Nor could we ever experience or see God through the mediation of any created entity.³⁹ Consequently, the grace and energy of the Holy Spirit which deifies us in any sense must itself be uncreated and not created.

In the next life, then, we can only see God ‘face to face’, see the unapproachable light, if both our sensory and intellectual capacities are transformed beyond their natural capacities. Gregory cites the following text of St. Maximus the Confessor to make this point: Those who attain the Kingdom of God, ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13)

“become god by participation in divine grace, ceasing from all activity of intellect and sense, and at the same time suspending all the natural operations of the body. For the body is deified along with the soul through its own corresponding participation in the process of deification. Thus God alone is made manifest through the soul and the body, since their natural properties have been overcome by the superabundance of His glory.” (*Centuries on Knowledge*, II.88 quoted at *Triads* I.3.37)

Christ himself, prior to taking Peter, James and John up to Mt Tabor, promised that “there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” (Mk 9:1) Palamas understands Christ’s Transfiguration on Mount Tabor as the keeping this promise and he identifies the Kingdom of God with the ‘divine and ineffable Light.’⁴⁰ He makes a point of criticizing Barlaam for thinking that it was some created light which somehow traveled through the air in order to illuminate the disciples.⁴¹ It is for this reason, hence, that **(T)** is so important for Palamas: it stresses the continuity between what the saints will experience in the next life—the visible theophany of the Lord—with what the disciples experienced in the Transfiguration. Indeed Palamas cites **(T)** along with texts by St. Marcarius/St. Symeon Metaphrastes and St. Gregory the Theologian as support for this continuity.⁴²

In other words, Palamas does not regard **(T)** as an isolated view of Dionysius but as part of the testimony of the Church Fathers. Conversely, if we grant the continuity between the light manifest on Tabor with that manifest in the next life, and that the former is a created light, then so too will be the light in the next life. In that case, the promise of seeing God ‘face to face’ will be eternally frustrated. “For indeed if even in heaven there are still to be symbols, mirrors, enigmas, then we have been deceived in our hopes, deluded by sophistry; thinking that the promise will make us acquire the true divinity, we do not even gain a vision of divinity.”⁴³

Now Aquinas might argue that even if the uncreated light of Christ’s divinity had shown forth from Christ’s body, the disciples would not have recognized it as such since they had no intellectual knowledge of the divine essence. But how then were the disciples able to see God (the uncreated light) at the Transfiguration? Only, says St. Gregory, because they had first received eyes “they did not possess before.”⁴⁴ That is, they could see the divine light radiating from Christ only because they experienced an inner illumination and transformation.

In one of his sermons on the Transfiguration, Gregory expresses the matter this way:

This light [of Mt. Tabor], then, is the light of the Godhead, and it is uncreated. According to the theologians, when Christ was transfigured He neither received anything different, nor was changed into anything different, but was revealed to His disciples as He was, opening their eyes and giving

sight to the blind. Take note that eyes with natural vision are blind to that light. It is invisible, and those who behold it do so not simply with their bodily eyes, but with eyes transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵

Moreover, this transformation or deification involves both the intellect and the senses. In *Triads* I.3.25 Palamas quotes (T) along with the text that follows it to make this point: “We shall participate in his intellectual gifts of light with a passionless and pure intellect. We shall share in the unity beyond intellect...in a more divine imitation of the super-celestial intellects.”⁴⁶ Indeed, he goes on to insist that the power of the Holy Spirit could only be received by the senses of those beings who have the power of a rational soul since it is only such a power that can receive the ‘power of the Holy Spirit.’ The divine light which illumines the intellect is the very same light which illumines the eyes, yet this light can be received by the intellect (nous) and the senses only so far as they are transformed beyond their nature by the holy spirit:

[The] visible theophany is not only beyond the senses but also beyond the intellect. The intellect and sensation receive one and the same light, each according to its logos (*analogos*), but in a manner that surpasses sensation and intellect. The realities that the great Dionysius here calls ‘visible theophany’ and ‘union surpassing/beyond intellect’ scarcely differ from each other.⁴⁷

Gregory also deals with an objection of Barlaam that if the light radiating from Christ on Mt. Tabor is eternal and divine, then it must be identical with the divine essence.⁴⁸ Gregory appeals elsewhere to the Greek patristic distinction between the divine essence (ousia) and energies, but he also notes that the divine light (as well as all of the divine energies) are enhypostatic. That is, none of them have an ‘independent existence’ but are properly called “enhypostatic.” For what is enhypostatic is not contemplated by itself, nor in essence, but in hypostasis.⁴⁹ Palamas is here following a distinction between ousia, hypostasis, and energy that St. John of Damascus draws:

But observe that energy (ἐνέργεια), capacity for energy (ἐννεργητικόν), the product of energy (ἐννεργημα), and the agent of energy (ἐννεργών) are all different. Energy is the efficient and essential motion of nature. The capacity for energy is the nature from which proceeds energy. The product of energy is that which is effected by the energy. And the agent of energy is the subsistence/person (ὑπόστασις) that uses the energy.⁵⁰

Put simply, the vision of the unapproachable light manifest on Mount Tabor and also seen by the saints in the next life is personal in nature, it is *not* the vision of some subsistent light. It is most certainly not a vision of the divine essence. But, this vision of the light of Mount Tabor is a direct vision: it is the vision of God ‘face-to-face’.⁵¹ Gregory holds that Paul, in his rapture, and the Protomartyr Stephen, at his death, had the same sort of vision.⁵² Palamas might agree with Aquinas that our visible seeing of God is an indirect seeing at least in the sense that our senses in and of themselves cannot perceive God. But for him, the Holy Spirit made possible a visible and direct seeing of the divinity of Christ in this life at the Transfiguration. Aquinas denies any such possibility since no created intellect can apprehend the essence of God unless, in rapture, in it completely withdrawn from all sensory experience. Indeed, Palamas’s view that the vision of God had by Paul in his rapture was like that of the disciples at the Transfiguration contrasts markedly with Aquinas’s position.

In any event, for Gregory, when Dionysius talks about a mystical knowledge in which the intellect stands away from all of its intellectual activities, he is not referring simply to a state in which the mind prescind from all of its concepts (or intelligible species – to use a Thomistic term) to be left in a ‘darkness of unknowing’ in which it knows nothing. For while it is true that the intellect stands away from all of its intellectual concepts in deification (noëta), it is nevertheless led by the Holy Spirit to a vision of the light of, who is, Christ.

The explicit role that St. Gregory gives to the Holy Spirit in explaining this transformation of the disciples contrasts rather sharply, it seems, with St. Thomas (as well as St. Albert). Of course, St. Thomas, and St. Albert, certainly hold to a Trinitarian understanding of God. Brian Shanley argues that indeed Aquinas himself would have developed in the uncompleted last part of the *Summa theologiae*, a beatitude of divinization in which Christ becomes the sole mediator of our return to God such that “each

person will be drawn up into the light of God's own glorious life to find perfect happiness."⁵³ Moreover, finding such happiness is one of the purposes of Incarnation.⁵⁴

But it is not clear how Aquinas's discussions of the beatific vision, which stress the primacy of an intellectual knowledge of the divine essence for beatitude, is connected with a Christological and, presumably, pneumatological interpretation of beatitude. St. Thomas, so far as I know, never explicitly qualified his various discussion of the beatific vision in strictly intellectual terms by suggesting that these discussions were fundamentally incomplete and that, properly speaking, it is only through Christ or the Holy Spirit that God becomes a form for the intellect in the beatific vision. But, in fairness, he clearly indicates that grace is required for humans to know the essence of God⁵⁵ and indeed that it is through the "light of Glory" that the intellect is able to know God 'face to face.'⁵⁶

IV.

But what about Dionysius? One might think that, when all is said and done, Dionysius really does not have a developed or significant Christology. It is true that if one reads only the *Divine Names*, Dionysius does seem to have a kind of thin and mechanical Christology and teaching on the Incarnation. The *Divine Names* contains no reference to the biblical story of creation, no mention of the Fall, no discussion of sin—we're given only a discussion of evil in a metaphysical sense in DN 4—and no salvation history of the Incarnation as a 'response' to sin and as the means of our salvation from sin.

Two brief comments here: one does find clear references to these themes in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.⁵⁷ If one considers the traditional order of the Dionysian Corpus in which the *Divine Names* comes after the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*,⁵⁸ as well as the fact that Dionysius quotes the Divine Liturgy in DN 1,⁵⁹ then it could be argued that Dionysius is taking the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* as the background and context for the *Divine Names*. But even if we stick solely to the *Divine Names*, it should be remembered that there is a teaching in the Christian tradition that the Incarnation was embedded in the very meaning and purpose of creation. St. Maximus held this view as did Blessed John duns Scotus. Bogdan Bucur has shown, very clearly in my view, that the same sort of view was held by a more than a few patristic Church fathers including Dionysius.⁶⁰ As he points out, for Dionysius, the Incarnation of Christ constitutes one sense of the differentiation of God towards creatures independently of any consideration of the Incarnation as a response to human sinfulness.⁶¹ If we accept this view, then we would not expect Dionysius to refer to the traditional elements of salvation history to 'make sense' of the Incarnation especially since he had already done so in more traditional terms, however briefly, in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

My greater concern, especially in aligning Dionysius with the Eastern Orthodox tradition, is the *sotto voce* role that he gives to the Holy Spirit, especially in the *Divine Names*. As Christopher Veniamin shows, many of the Church Fathers gave a prominent and decisive role to the Holy Spirit in accounting for how the disciples were able to view the light of Mount Tabor, which these Fathers along with Palamas take to be an uncreated divine light.⁶² Dionysius provides no such account. But, in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius does see the Holy Spirit as the source of our perfection and deification.⁶³ There are also two important references in the *Divine Names* that might bear on understanding (T): the Holy Spirit unites us with ineffable and unknown spiritual realities in mystical union with God;⁶⁴ Christ reconciles us to himself through the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵ If we read the *Divine Names* in the context of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, then we can assume, I think, that Dionysius does have a pneumatology that complements his Christology but it does seem quite understated in comparison with many other patristic Christian writers.

But what about the light which is manifest to the disciples at the Transfiguration and which will illuminate the saints in the next life? Dionysius, it seems to me, clearly describes the light (or ray) as a 'divine reality': it is 'beyond being,' 'apart from all [and] and beyond unknowing [or, supremely unknown (ὑπεράγνωστον).'" It is that to which we are united when we cease all of our intellectual activities."⁶⁶ Given the continuity Dionysius asserts between what the disciples experienced in the Transfiguration and what the saints will experience in the next life, it is hard to see how, for Dionysius, the light which radiates from Christ at the Transfiguration is not the uncreated light of his divinity. Of course, this sort of reading only makes sense if one accepts a distinction between the divine essence and

energies: that is, that the divine light of Christ is not simply identical with the divine essence. But, as I have argued elsewhere, I think Dionysius is best read in light of this distinction.⁶⁷

To summarize: Dionysius clearly maintains that there is a connection, and presumably a continuity, between the disciples' embodied experience of the theophany at the Transfiguration and the embodied experience of God's visible theophany in the next life. Both St. Albert the Great and St. Gregory accept this connection but understand it in quite different ways. For St. Albert, humans, whether now or in the next life, have an embodied experience only of Christ in his human nature and not of his divinity. For St. Gregory, we are able both now and in the next life to have an embodied experience of God's visible theophany – the very uncreated light of Christ's divinity.

St. Thomas, on the other hand, seems to deny this connection. The blessed in the next life will enjoy an embodied experience of God – but it is only an indirect experience consequent upon the beatified intellect's knowledge of the divine essence. The interpretations that Thomas and Albert provide in this matter are a direct consequence of their view that God is an absolutely simple essence as much as their epistemology. Gregory's view of course reflects the traditional Greek Patristic distinction between the God's essence and energies as well as an epistemology in which the Holy Spirit can transform our sensory and intellectual capacities beyond their ordinary mundane capacities.⁶⁸

As to the epistemological difference between Aquinas and Palamas. I'll offer this only as a very brief suggestion which we might discuss further in the remainder of the session today. Recall Aquinas's assertion that "it is impossible for the sight to perceive that which is neither color nor magnitude, unless we call it a sense equivocally. Since then sight and sense will be specifically the same in the glorified body, as in a non-glorified body, it will be impossible for it to see the Divine essence as an object of direct vision."⁶⁹ Palamas, however, clearly holds that when illumined by the Holy Spirit, the eyes of the disciples were transformed so that they saw the divine, uncreated light of God.

It is likely, I suspect, that Aquinas would claim that Palamas is using the term 'eyes' equivocally and that effectively the Holy Spirit, according to Palamas, at times here and in the next life, transforms the senses (and the intellect) to be different kinds of things than they otherwise are. The problem with this might be, and I'm speculating here, is that if our sensory and intellectual capacities are changed in nature, then it seems we would be changed in nature as well such that in the next life we would be different kinds of beings than we are in this life. If this were the case, could we preserve any sense of personal identity in our beatitude: that the souls and bodies of the blessed are the self-same soul and body which the blessed had in this life?

Of course, there is a long-standing Greek patristic tradition that adheres to St. Athanasius's dictum that "God became man so that we might become god" as a fundamental, but brief, expression what deification involves. While Palamas clearly denies that we ever become God by nature, we are transformed so that the divine light which illumines Christ by nature will illumine us by grace. Palamas is quite clear that our deification is not simply a perfection of our rational nature because such perfection by itself "cannot make them gods," that is, able to receive and be united with the uncreated divine light of the Trinity.⁷⁰

On the one hand, then, the disciples were able to see the uncreated light only because "they received eyes they did not possess before."⁷¹ On the other, "The [uncreated] light, then, became accessible to their eyes, but to eyes which saw in a way superior to that of natural sight, and had acquired the spiritual power of the spiritual light."⁷² So, in a sense that seems paradoxical, we can never see God with the eyes of the body, but, when transformed by the Holy Spirit, in a way we can. The spiritually transformed eyes with which we see God are in a way the same eyes and in a way not (since they are eyes we have not yet possessed). Does this amount to an equivocation on the term 'eyes' and, more generally, 'senses'? Or is it that we ourselves, being created in the image of God⁷³ have 'embedded' within us a capacity for this spiritual transformation which the Holy Spirit accomplishes through his uncreated grace by which we attain to the likeness of God?

In any event, persons—both in body and soul— seem to be glorified in quite different ways for Aquinas and Palamas. Hence, different anthropologies likely undergird the difference between Palamas's (and the

general Greek patristic) interpretation of what the disciples experienced in the Transfiguration and the interpretation offered by Aquinas and Albert.

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And Dionysius? Well, as he says, we are created as icons of God whom God will restore to his likeness (DN 9.6) by initiating us into divine things (*ta theia*) *themselves* (CH 4.3) and brought to a communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit and with the Father through Christ (DN 11.5).

NOTES

(The notes for this paper have been kept deliberately brief.)

NOTE to readers: The reference to DN 9.6 in fn 65 in the earlier version should have been DN 11.05 953A10.

¹ Some other texts are found at: DN 1.4 589D-592A (celebration of divinity as monad and Trinity) , DN 2.3-5 640B-644B (all of the texts dealing with the divine union and differentiation); DN 4.1 693B (dealing with the analogy between the production of things by the good and the illumination of things by the sun); DN 5.1 816 (cf. DN 1.5-6 593B-596A and 13.3 981A-981B) (the understanding of the God as *ousia hyperouios*);, MT 1.3 esp. 1001a (Moses' union with God). All PG column references to Dionysius are to PG 3.

² For the Greek text of the last part of (T): τῆς μὲν ὁρατῆς αὐτοῦ θεοφανείας ἐν πανάγνοις θεωρίαις ἀποπληρούμενοι φανοτάταις μαρμαρυγαῖς ἡμᾶς περιανγαζούσης ὡς τοὺς μαθητὰς ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ θειοτάτῃ μεταμορφῶσει. Sarracen's translation of this passage, which both Albert and Thomas used, is: "uisibili quidem ipsius dei apparitione in castissimis contemplationibus adimpleti, manifestissimis circa nos splendoribus refulgente sicut circa discipulos in illa diuinissima transformatione." There is an alternate translation of a key phrase: "filled with all pure contemplations of his visible theophany which shone round about the disciples..." Both Alexander Golitzin ("Dionysius Areopagita: A Christian Mysticism?" *Pro Ecclesia* 12(2002)2, 190) <http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/Lumxida.html> and Christopher Veniamin (*The transfiguration of Christ in Greek Patristic literature: from Irenaeus of Lyons to Gregory Palamas* (Oxford Univ. unpublished dissertation, 1991), p. 156) use this version.. The Greek seems to allow for both translations. Theophanies, for Dionysius, are visions and, thus, seem to have an 'interior' and 'exterior' 'dimension' for those who receive them. Of course, 'exterior' and 'interior' cannot be understood in any ordinary spatial sense since, e.g., the uncreated light of the Transfiguration is not a material light.

³ See the introduction to my translation of the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* (1980) for my discussion of these themes in Dionysius.

⁴ This same difficulty plagues the scholastic interpretation of God as an absolutely simple being or subsisting essence since, as far as I am concerned at least, the theistic understanding of God as an absolutely simple being is basically an essentialistic, and frankly somewhat distorted, variation of the Neoplatonic understanding of the One as utterly undifferentiated. See my article, "An Absolutely Simple God? — Frameworks for Reading Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite," *The Thomist* 69.3(July 2005): 371-406, which provides an extended discussion of the topics I am considering in this section of the paper.

⁵ Cf. *Divine Names* 1.5 593C-D, 2.2-4 640D-641A, 5.1 516B.

⁶ *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, pp. 67-90. This book has been reprinted and is currently available through St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. For a good general discussion of the essence-energy distinction in the Eastern Orthodox tradition see Kallistos Ware, "God Hidden and Revealed: the Apophatic Way and the Essence-Energy Distinction," *Eastern Churches Review* 7(1975), 132-36.

⁷ Berkeley, *The Analyst* XXXV. "And what are these Fluxions? The Velocities of evanescent Increments? And what are these same evanescent Increments? They are neither finite Quantities nor Quantities infinitely small, nor yet nothing. May we not call them the Ghosts of departed Quantities?"

⁸ For example, the Exapostalarion from Matins (*Triads* III.1.12), the last verse of the Aposticha for Vespers of Aug. 7 (the afterfeast) (III.1.12), the third sticheron of the Lite at the Vespers for the feast (*Triads* III.1.15).., etc.

⁹ For an excellent discussion of this theme see Bogdan Bucur, "Theophanies and Vision of God in Augustine's De Trinitate: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective," *Saint. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 52 (2008): 67-93. See also, Harry Boosalis, *Knowledge of God* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2009), 66-87.

¹⁰ This participation in God, in which we attain a likeness to God, is called deification (*theosis*) in the Orthodox Church. Deification is a union of ourselves—body, soul, and spirit—with God so that "all that God is, save for an identity in essence, we become when deified by grace" (St. Maximus the Confessor, *De ambigua* 41 (PG91, 1308B)). Deification is a *process* that begins in this life by which the divine image in us is restored and we begin, through grace, to achieve a likeness to God. Deification is the process of our fulfilling the vocation for which we were created: to become perfected living icons of God. And for the next life: "We will be like an image ascending to its archetype...since it has taken hold of the divine *energeia*, or rather has become God by deification. There will then be one single *energeia* through all things, that of God and of those worthy of God, or rather that of God alone, that of a whole benignly interpenetrating the whole of the worthy." (ibid. 7 (PG 91, 1076B-D)). For readers interested in the Orthodox understanding of deification with reference to 2 Peter 1:4 "precious and very great promises have

been granted to us, that through these you may become partakers of the divine nature”), see Norman Russell, “‘Partakers in the Divine Nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4) in the Byzantine tradition” at http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/Russell_partakers.html.

¹¹ But this distinction does a good deal of epistemological and metaphysical work as well, especially against the conception of God as an absolutely simple being: e.g., how we can have knowledge about God while the divine ‘essence’ remains utterly unknown to all created beings (cf. St. Basil, Epistle 234) and how we can account for God’s free creation of the world (cf. the excellent piece by Fr. Georges Florovsky, “Creation and Creaturehood,” in *Creation and Redemption, The Collected Works of George Florovsky* (Belmont: Nordland, 1976), 43-78 (http://jbburnett.com/resources/florovsky/3/florovsky_3-3-creation.pdf)).

¹² See my article, “*An Absolutely Simple God*,” pp. 387-88.

¹³ 589D-592A.

¹⁴ 592A.

¹⁵ CH 4.3 180C, DN 5.1 816, 13.3 981B, etc.

¹⁶ DN 9.6 913C.

¹⁷ CH IV.3 180C. My emphasis.

¹⁸ CH 7.1 205B, cf. CH 5 196C).

¹⁹ DN 1.6 596A. Judges 17:13.

²⁰ Judging by a search of the on-line TLG, the phrase ‘visible theophany’ (ὄρατῆς θεοφανείας) is used only once in Greek patristic literature prior to Dionysius in *De occursu domini*, a spurious work attributed to St. Gregory of Nyssa. The phrase is cited once each by St Theodore Studite and Germanus I. St. Gregory Palamas cites it several times, as do several authors after him.

²¹ Albertus Magnus, *Super de divinis nominibus*, ed. P. Simon (Aschendorff, 1972), Lectio 1 (pp, 26-27); Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus expositi*, ed. C. Pera, Marietti, Taurini, 1950, Ch 1, Lectio 2 [Marietti paragraph 65]. The entire discussion of St. Albert is taken from this question unless otherwise noted.

²² Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.10.17 (PL 32,786; CSEL 33 p.239 v.lsq.).

²³ Sarracen, by the way, consistently translates *theophaneia* as ‘apparitio Dei’ while Eriugena transliterates the terms as *theophania*. But while Albert uses Sarracen’s translation, he is aware of Eriugena’s. Indeed, throughout his commentary, Albert uses the term *theophania* several times but never uses the phrase ‘*apparitio Dei*.’

²⁴ Albert, CDN, Lectio 1, p. 11. Albert’s position here is somewhat unclear. The divine substance, essence, and any divine attributes are identical in God since God is absolutely simple. A theophany cannot lead the mind to the divine essence since no created mind can apprehend the divine essence. A theophany, then, leads the mind to the divine substance (presumably God as a being (ens)) under some ratio or aspect. It’s not clear what specific meaning *ratio* has in this context, but presumably refers to some particular ‘form’ in which the divine substance is manifest. Implicit in this idea is that the divine substance is somehow distinct from the divine essence. But this distinction can only be *quoad nos* (from our point of view) if the divine essence is utterly simple. It’s not clear, at least in Albert’s *Commentary on the Divine Names*, whether Albert believes that theophanies do lead the mind to God himself or to God himself through some created manifestation of God.

²⁵ Aquinas, *In sententiarum* IV,49,2,2,res. See a basically identical, albeit shorter discussion, at ST I.12.3.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Aquinas, *In sententiarum* IV.49.2.1.res.

²⁸ ST 1.12.3.ad2.

²⁹ Cf. all of the proofs for the existence of God.

³⁰ ST 1.12.3.ad2.

³¹ ST 1.12.3.ad1.

³² Brian J. Shanley, *The Treatise on the Divine Nature: Summa theologiae* I, 1-13, p. 312).

³³ Dionysius would refer to those who are deified rather than ‘the blessed.’ Albert and Thomas also refer to ‘deification’ but it would take another paper to compare and contrast Eastern and Western Christian uses of this term.

³⁴ ST II.II.175.4, *De veritate* 10.11.ad1.

³⁵ ST II.II.175.4.ad1.

³⁶ *Triads* I.3.35, 38; II.3.23,25 (2x); III.1.10.

³⁷ *Triads* I.3.34.

³⁸ *Triads* I.3.35, 39.

³⁹ *Triads* III.1.11; III.2.18-19. Cf. Norman Russell, “Theosis and Gregory Palamas: Continuity or Doctrinal Change?” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 50:4 (2006), p. 368.

- ⁴⁰ *Capita* 146.
- ⁴¹ *Triads* III.3.11. As we saw earlier, Albert seems to have held such a view when he argues that Dionysius is talking about sensible perception since the light that illuminated the disciples was external to them.
- ⁴² *Triads* III.1.10. For Marcarius/Symeon Metaphrastes see, *de elev. mentis* 1, PG CXXXIV, 889, 2 892A-B. For St. Gregory the Theologian see *Ep. CI ad Cleodonium*, PG XXXVII, 181AB.
- ⁴³ *Triads* III.1.11.
- ⁴⁴ *Triads* III.3.22. The discussion of this matter continues through section 24.
- ⁴⁵ “Sermon on the Transfiguration I”, *Saint Gregory Palamas: The Homilies*, edited and translated from the original Greek, with an introduction and notes by Christopher Veniamin, Mt. Tabor Publishing, 2009, p. 272.
- ⁴⁶ DN 1.4 592C.
- ⁴⁷ *Triads* II.3.25.
- ⁴⁸ *Triads* III.1.24.
- ⁴⁹ *Triads* III.1.9.
- ⁵⁰ *On the Orthodox Faith* III.15.
- ⁵¹ *Triads* III.1.28. Num. 12:8; where Moses is said to see God ‘in sight’ and not in enigmas.
- ⁵² *Triads*, II.3.37, 38.
- ⁵³ Brian J. Shanley, *The Treatise on the Divine Nature: Summa Theologiae I, 1-13* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 2006), p. 177-78.
- ⁵⁴ *Compendium of Theology*, 201.
- ⁵⁵ ST I.12.5.res.
- ⁵⁶ ST I.12.5.res.; *Compendium of Theology*, 105. After completing the main body of the paper, I found two relevant texts from Aquinas: ST II.II.2.8.ra3: The goodness of God can be understood in this life without the Trinity, but when God is seen in himself by the blessed, he “cannot be understood (*intelligi*) without the Trinity of persons.” “It is the mission of the divine persons that leads us to beatitude” (*ibid.*); cf. *Commentary on Boethius’s de Trinitate* 3.1.res. for the same two points.
- ⁵⁷ EH 3 P3.11 440C-441C.
- ⁵⁸ Alexander Golitzin, *op. cit.* 168-69.
- ⁵⁹ DN I.8 597 B. The phrase is “holy things for the holy” (τὰ ἅγια τοῖς ἁγίοις) which occurs in all ancient Greek and Byzantine divine (Eucharistic) liturgies and is chanted just before communion. The phrase is only used prior to Dionysius by other Christian writers and always in a Eucharistic context.
- ⁶⁰ “Foreordained from All Eternity The Mystery of the Incarnation According to Some Early Christian and Byzantine Writers,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 62, 2008.
- ⁶¹ Bucur, *ibid.* 200-202 for the discussion of Dionysius. Cf. DN 2.3 640C.
- ⁶² Cf. Veniamin, *The Transfiguration of Christ*, p. 189 ff. for St. Maximus the Confessor, p. 220-27 for St. Andrew of Crete, p. 247 for St. Symeon the New Theologian. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses* 4.20-5-6; St. John of Damascus, *Oration on the Transfiguration 2* (In John McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (p. 226).)
- ⁶³ EH 2 P3.8 404C, 3 P1 424C, 3 P2. 425D, 3 P3.5 432B, etc.
- ⁶⁴ DN 1.1 565B
- ⁶⁵ DN 11.05 953A10.
- ⁶⁶ DN 1.4 592D-593A.
- ⁶⁷ “Absolutely Simple God” pp. 399-406.
- ⁶⁸ Of course, this distinction between God’s essence and energy/energies is incomplete as it stands. The distinction is properly between the divine essence, hypostases (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and the divine energies. It is the hypostases that subsist, not the essence. And the energies are, as St. Gregory says, enhypostatic: they must be understood as dependent upon the persons of the Trinity (*Capita* 136).
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ *Triads* III.1.30.
- ⁷¹ *Triads* III.1.22.
- ⁷² “The light has sometimes also been seen by the eyes of the body, but not with their created and sensory power; for they see it after having been transformed by the Spirit. For in the age to come, this same body will endure forever, gazing upon the divine light, but it will have become spiritual.” Palamas, *Answer to Akindynos*, 3.2.3, *Works* 3, p. 162. Quoted in Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), p. 100, n. 48

⁷³ Or, in a slightly different formulation: we were created “according to the icon of God (κατ’ εικόνα θεού)—namely, the Son who is the natural icon of the Father (cf. St. John Damascus, *Three Treatises on Divine Images*, I.9, III.18-19, cf. Col. 1:15, Heb. 1:3, Jn 14:8-9. The Son is the natural icon (or image) of the Father since he ‘shows (or manifests) the Father in himself.’ We are icons who created to become by grace “god-bearing (*theophoros*) fathers and mothers,” as the Orthodox venerate their saints.