

Anselm and Appropriating the Divine Life

Fr. David Vincent Meconi, S.J.
Saint Louis University

Anselm's theology of deification is not worked out in any one contained place but must be traced through his many writings. In significant ways he abandons the traditional Latin nomenclature used hitherto, (e.g., calling Christians "gods" only once) but nonetheless has a robust presentation of one's new life in Christ. This essay lays out the three main areas where Anselm's understanding of the glorified life in Christ shows forth. The first reveals his great appreciation for the human person as an image and likeness of God. The second argues how the Incarnation is what effects humanity's transformation and fulfillment of their divine deformity. Third is Anselm's understanding that the Church is the only locus deificandi, for only here are the channels of grace needed for human divinization are available.

Introduction

At the heart of Christian redemption is humanity's elevation and subsequent transformation into the divine. The deification of the human person, a standard soteriological metaphor in the early church fathers, is again enjoying a rightful place in the study and sermons of Christian professors and pastors. Scholarship abounds: just in the past five years, for example, at least a dozen works have appeared treating deification in the thought of standard patristic figures in both the East and West.¹ Studies have also appeared showing how participation in the divine life is also the central economic principle of theologians whose names have not been traditionally associated with a doctrine of deification, thinkers as diverse as St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Rahner, C.S. Lewis, and John Paul II.²

Such a doctrine has been identified not only in the writings of individual theologians but even in the most authoritative references of the Church. Take section §460 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as an authoritative instance where the insights of Christianity's greatest theologians are enlisted in order to maintain that:

¹ Jules Gross's 1938 *La divinisation de chrétien d'après les pères grecs* has been replaced as the standard work for the Fathers' theology of deification by Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); other helpful surveys include Daniel Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), George Maloney, *The Undreamed Has Happened* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2003). For more on this literature, see my "The Consummation of the Christian Promise: Recent Studies on Deification," *New Blackfriars* 87 (2005) 3-12; see also my *The Whole Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

² Cf. *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, ed., Michael J. Christensen and Jefferey Wittung (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *Union With Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed., Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed., Stephen Finland and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), as well as my "Deification in the Thought of John Paul II," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 71 (2006) 127-41.

The Word became flesh to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4): “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God” (St. Irenaeus, *Adu. Haeres* 3.19.1). “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God” (St. Athanasius, *De Inc.* §54.3). “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men into gods” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusc.* §57-1-4).

The magisterial Church thus understands the main purpose of the Word’s incarnation as an act of human deification: the Son of God has become human in order that humans can become divine.

The purpose of this essay is to examine how this central Christian teaching has been recognized and evaluated in the works of St. Anselm. Indeed, scholars have tried to show how Anselmian soteriology is in line with the deifying arc running through the centuries traced above. Some studies have concentrated on the sanctifying role reason plays in Anselm’s theological macrostructure, while others have focused more on the satisfaction of the *imago Dei* within the human soul. Unfortunately some studies have simply erred in trying to force a clearer theory of deification than is actually present in Anselm.

Take Nathan Kerr’s recently-published, “St. Anselm: *Theoria* and the Doctrinal Logic of Perfection,” for example.³ Kerr’s argument pivots on a key passage which he cites coming from a homily by Anselm. The passage in question reads: “[T]he Father has joined us to his almighty Son as his body and co-heirs with him, and made us who are called in his name to be gods. But God is the one who divinizes; you on the contrary will be the one who is divinized.”⁴ The problem with this beautifully-crafted line quickly becomes apparent. While Anselm may employ the biblical sanction of calling sanctified men and women “gods” (once only, at *Proslogion* §25), he never uses the Latin *deificare*, or any of its cognates, to explain this unity and identification between God and humanity.

Checking Kerr’s citation here leads only to another difficulty: he simply cites this passage as it is found in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s massive work, *The Glory of the Lord*. Thus checking this passage in the second volume of von Balthasar’s *Herrlichkeit* leads to a quoting of the original, here referenced as volume 159 of Père Migne’s *Patrologia Latina*. While this source does indeed yield the above citation, the problem is that volume 159 of the *Patrologia Latina* does not belong to Anselm but to his biographer, Eadmer (d. c. 1126). Tracking this problem down teaches us (not only to check cited sources but) that if we are to find an Anselmian theory of deification, it will not be through the standard metaphors and taxonomy employed fairly consistently up to his time. Yet this can also help us to appreciate the unique contribution St.

³ Nathan R. Kerr, “St. Anselm: *Theoria* and the Doctrinal Logic of Perfection,” in Christendom, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 175-88.

⁴ Kerr, “St. Anselm: *Theoria*,” *Partakers*, 178.

Anselm of Canterbury made to the Church's theology of deification, and here is the main argument of this essay: there is indeed a theory of deifying humanity in Anselm as well as a uniquely Anselmian way of conceiving of humanity's appropriation of the divine life.

How Anselm conceives of the human person's appropriation of grace lies in his Christological assumptions. For Anselm the human person is undiminishedly human only in perfect union with Jesus Christ, the enfleshed Word. The Son has entered his own good creation so as to unite created persons with the fullness of divinity. To make this point, the following argument pivots on three main Anselmian concerns. First, because the human person is made in the divine image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27), the human person is not only relational but incomplete until united with the Triune God. Anselm relies on this primal thirst to form all of his anthropological concerns: human persons are ultimately real only insofar as they are made like Christ, thus made fully human. Secondly, this configuration to Christ is explained at times in terms of adoption, attachment, or even cleaving to the divine. Such union not only fulfills the *imago Dei* but transforms men and women into new creatures. The third factor involved in this process is Anselm's understanding of ecclesial incorporation: grace is never appropriated individualistically but always within the context of the Christian community. The laetific participation which elevates and deifies the human person is an act involving Christ's Church, Christ's Body, as a whole.

Background to Patristic Soteriology and the Anselmian Difference

To begin, it is essential to remember how Anselm broke from most of the patristic speculation on the purpose of the Son's mission. Recall the aspect of deception with which many of the Church's earliest theologians described the visit of Gabriel to Mary. The Annunciation is depicted as a furtive, covert mission so as to deceive the enemy of our human nature. In his letter to the Church at Ephesus, for example, Ignatius of Antioch writes that, "Mary's virginity was hidden from the prince of this world, so was her child-bearing, and so was the death of the Lord. All these three trumpet-tongued secrets were brought to pass in the deep silence of God."⁵ The main economic events were executed without the enemy's awareness of the purpose of Mary's preserved virginity, of who exactly was being conceived in her blessed womb, and who exactly was being crucified on Good Friday. In this way, Ignatius maintains, the rights Satan may have rightfully incurred over fallen humanity are absolved. In attacking one who had no right to be attacked, the enemy forfeits his ill-gotten claims over sinful men and women.

This same type of reasoning can be found in many Eastern and Western theologians as well. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, likens the incarnation to a fishhook (ἄγκιστρον). The Son's incarnation is concealed from the infernal perspective. From below Christ must look like any other son of Adam, and when the time comes for Christ to expire, Satan forfeits all rights over sinful humanity by taking the life of the only one who deserved no death:

⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians* §19; trans. Maxwell Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, ed., Andrew Louth (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 66.

Since it was not in the nature of the conflicting power to endure the unveiled appearance of God, the divine hid himself underneath the veil of our nature, so that, as with rapacious fish, the divine hook (ἄγκιστρον) would be swallowed whole together with the bait of his flesh. . . . This is thus the way that the one who practices deception (ἀπάτην) is treated in the same way: the one who first deceived humanity by the bait of his concupiscence is himself deceived by God in human form. So just as the enemy ruined humanity through deception, Wisdom himself deceived him for the salvation of humanity.⁶

Knowing Satan's greed for all humanity, the Son of God comes to earth in the most subtle and secret of ways so as to entrap the enemy. Whereas the fishhook may have been the Cappadocian trickery of choice, in similar fashion, St. Augustine employs the image of a *muscipula*, a mousetrap: the cross was the mousetrap and Christ's own blood thereon was the cheese which attracted the rat. Augustine proclaims, "To pay our price, Christ set the mousetrap of his cross (*muscipulam crucem suam*); as bait he placed there his own blood. While the devil, though, was able to shed that blood, he did not earn the right to drink it. And because he shed the blood of one who was not his debtor, he was ordered to release those who were his debtors; he shed the blood of the innocent one, he was required to withdraw from those who are by no means innocent."⁷

While Anselm has no problem speaking of Christ's victory over Satan and his nefarious works, he stresses not the ransom Christ wrought (the λύτρον as depicted at Mk 10:45) for our freedom, but the dignity required by the human nature of the one seeking the Father's forgiveness. Anselm refuses to locate any deception in the dominical incarnation, maintaining that *ueritas nullum fallit*—truth cannot deceive.⁸ It is unfitting that confusion and trickery be the result of Truth's own descent into creation. Similarly, Anselm would find punitive retribution unfitting the glory of the God-Man. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, not for the sake of defeating one as petty as the Enemy, but for the sake of perfecting us. The purpose of the Son's incarnation is neither forensic merit nor imputed justification; rather, in God-made-flesh, the human person sees how he has lost his way and how he now stands in need of being re-gathered before God. As we shall see, in assuming human nature, Christ recapitulates all flesh and offers it anew, redeemed and divinized, back to the Father.

So, instead of emphasizing the Son's defeat over the enemy, Anselm instead insists on the debt owed to God which only humanity can pay. In its Adamic pride against the divine, the

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Orations* §24 and §26 (my translation; PG 45.64-65, and 45.67); for more on this, see Nicolas Constatas, "The last temptation of Satan: divine deception in Greek patristic interpretations of the passion narrative," *Harvard Theological Review* 97:2 (2004) 139-63.

⁷ *Sermo* 130.2; Edmund Hill, *Sermons* III/4 in the *Works of Saint Augustine*, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1992) 311.

⁸ *Meditatio* 3, line 34; "Meditation on Human Redemption," trans., Benedicta Ward, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973) 231, line 40.

human race incurred an infinite liability. The Infinite has been affronted and only the Infinite can repair such an offense. Yet the guilty party is, of course, the sinful race of Adam, and, therefore, only a human can be the source of remedy. But where is the human race able to find one of its own worthy and immaculate enough to make amends with God? All men and women are sinful and stand in need of grace; so if humanity is unable to right this wrong, it is left for God to do. The singular and sole solution is, of course, that God become human. What may seem at first glance to be a pessimistic anthropology, that it is in no way within the human capacity to make amends with the divine, turns out in the end to reveal the true glory of humanity, in Jesus Christ.

By emphasizing the work humanity must do, Anselm first shows the dignity of the human creature while, second, always inextricably linking the glory of humanity to the person of Jesus Christ. There is no human greatness without the God-Man. For Anselm the human person is only fully himself in Christ. It is in Christ's ultimate gift of self that all human persons learn not only of God's goodness but of their worth as well. Humanity is called to make a gift of itself to the Father, yet this is possible only in the Son who became human. In steering the soteriological argument away from Satan's deception and consequent "rights," Anselm places the story of human redemption firmly within the human. It is in becoming human that God restores humanity to God.

If creation is to be saved, the human and the divine must be united and accordingly act in unison. This applies first and foremost to the person of Jesus Christ, but he is the only one not by nature in need of this reconciliation. Rather, the union of divinity and humanity in Christ is accomplished precisely as the example and effect of humanity's participation in divinity. Turning to Anselm's writings, we come to see how this is realized in three different ways: (1) in the importance he gives to the *imago Dei*, (2) in his unique understanding of divine conformity, and (3) in the individual Christian's incorporation into Christ's Mystical Body on earth.

Imago Dei in the Thought of Anselm

God created the human person for no other reason than to share his divine life. This is why the Trinity fashioned men and women in the divine image and likeness, establishing humanity as the locus of divine interaction within the created order. In Anselm's metaphysical understanding, the closer an image approaches its archetype, the more that ectype becomes like its model and pattern. While he is of course clear that no creature can ever match the supreme essence in dignity, as a soul approaches God, it becomes more and more godlike. This divine transformation is reserved for the human person alone because, as Anselm writes in the *Monologion*, only the human soul resembles God in this imaged and impressed way. Therefore, he continues, the more the soul resembles God, "the more excellent its nature must be. So such a thing has a double effect: its close resemblance helps bring the inquiring mind closer to the supreme truth, and the excellence of its created nature teaches the mind what to think about its

Creator.”⁹ Because human persons are made in God’s own image, the divine is presented here as having a certain interest in bringing them back to the perfection intended them. Paschal Baumstein sees in this movement a significant variation from any “conventional theology of union,” arguing that Anselm tends not to stress the Holy Spirit’s indwelling but, rather, the soul’s entering God.¹⁰ That is, Baumstein maintains, whereas most theologies of union explain grace as the divine’s habitation within the human soul, Anselm instead stresses how the *imago Dei* is constituted so as to enter God and live a new life therein.

Anselm’s contribution to the way we conceive of the divine image in the human soul is to have stressed that despite the mud and mire in which the created person currently finds himself, he nonetheless knows that he has been created solely to be “blessedly happy.”¹¹ The Anselmian *imago* is both a purpose and a promise: a purpose because it is what gives all human living its ultimate meaning and capacity to thrive, a promise because here God has pledged his life and entrusts his very being not only to the healing but to the perfection of humanity.

Divine Transformation

Accordingly, the human person is not only reunited with his model, but is actually made like the one in whose image he has been made. Participation in the divine life is not a static or impotent state for Anselm, but an activity that elevates and transforms. The divine image has become “hardened and dulled and obstructed” by the sinful aversion from God inherited in the stain of Adam.¹² Anselm thus begs God: “Raise me up from my own self to you. Purify, heal, make sharp, illumine the eye of my soul so that it may see you. Let my soul gather its strength again and with all its understanding strive once more towards You, Lord.”¹³

In such imploring, the enfleshed Anselm longs to see the invisible God. He is keenly aware that he can do this only insofar as he is rendered godly, for only the divine can gaze upon the divine. A created person is able to give him or herself to God only insofar as he or she has been made like God, otherwise the darkness of sin and the ontological strictures of creatureliness render an encounter with the divine impossible. Anselm prays:

Lord my God, you who have formed and reformed me, tell my desiring soul what you are besides what it has seen so that it may see clearly that which it desires. It strives so that it may see more In truth it is both darkened in itself and dazzled by you. It is indeed both darkened by its own littleness and overwhelmed

⁹ *Monologion* §66, ed., Brian Davies and Gillian Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 72; all translations come from this edition [hereafter, Davies and Evans]. See also *Monologion* §31 where this same theory of assimilation and likeness occurs.

¹⁰ Paschal Baumstein, “Anselm’s Union of Human and Divine Being,” *Cistercian Studies* 26.4 (1991) 295-305; 298-99.

¹¹ *Cur Deus Homo* 2.1; Davies and Evans, 315.

¹² *Proslogion* §17; Davies and Evans, 97.

¹³ *Proslogion* §18; Davies and Evans, 97-98.

by your immensity . . . restricted by its own limitedness and overcome by your fullness. . . . Truly this is more than can be understood by any creature.¹⁴

In coming to understand and thus “see” God, Anselm’s creatureliness is granted new capabilities and new agencies. All teeter between this fullness of being which God longs to grant his faithful and the dark nothingness from which all have been created and which all sinfulness tends. Christian transformation is thus realized as a disciplined asceticism, being weaned from the temporal goods of the created order onto the everlasting majesty of the divine life.

That is why Anselm next exhorts his flock throughout *Proslogion* §25 to “Love the one good in which all good things are, and that is sufficient . . . ,” then continues on to delineate thirteen possible yearnings of the human soul, promising that in God each of these will be realized in superabundance. The list includes the qualities of beauty, bodily perfections (swiftness, strength or freedom), a long and healthy life, the satisfaction of every human longing, the quenching of thirst, the love of melody, the pursuit of pleasure, the love of wisdom, the need for friendship, the desire for peace, the love of power, as well as the attraction to honors and riches. All of these, our author assures us, will be ours in God in their most exquisite and inexhaustible way. But then he utilizes a very common deifying trope to explain how grace shall transform the Christian, drawing from scriptural imagery of “becoming gods” and adopted heirs of the Father’s kingdom. He writes: “If it is honors and riches, God will set his good and faithful servants over many things; indeed they will be called ‘sons and daughters of God’ and ‘gods’ and will in fact be so; and where the Son will be there also they will be, ‘heirs indeed of God and co-heirs of Christ.’”¹⁵ Made one with Christ, the Christian here learns that prayerful participation in the divine life is the only fitting posture of any human life as well.

By stressing the co-heredity of Christians in Christ, Anselm is able to highlight the ecclesial nature of receiving the divine life. The Father longs to extend his paternity and in Christ he finds the effect and example of making created persons into his own sons and daughters. The theory of Anselmian adoption thus signals not only God’s generosity in bringing created persons into the divine family, but also the communal nature of the Christian pursuit of holiness. The same section of the *Proslogion* thus ends with this reminder of the communal nature of true charity:

Indeed, to the degree that each one loves some other, so he will rejoice in the good of that other; therefore, just as each one in that perfect happiness will love God incomparably more than himself and all others with him, so he will rejoice immeasurably more over the happiness of God than over his own happiness and that of all the others with him.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Proslogion* §14; Davies and Evans, 95-96.

¹⁵ *Proslogion* §25; Davies and Evans, 102.

¹⁶ *Proslogion* §25; Davies and Evans, 103.

It is impossible for the Bishop of Canterbury to see how one could become holy on one's own. Appropriating grace and the subsequent divine transformation it entails is always an ecclesial process. Let us now turn to this third and final dimension of Anselmian deification, humanity's incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ.

Ecclesial Incorporation

Before the Sacred Body and Blood of the Eucharistic Christ, Anselm pleads that he be incorporated into the Savior's own body, the Church. Such a union is explained as a mutual indwelling: the recipient in Christ and Christ in those who bear his name, thereby becoming one with him. The effects of such a transformative union, however, are never fully realized *in spe* but only *in patria*. That is, Anselm concludes his "Prayer Before Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ" with the hope,

. . . that I may remain in you and you in me.
Then at the Resurrection you will refashion
the body of my humiliation
according to the body of your glory,
as you promised by your apostle,
and I shall rejoice in you for ever
to your glory¹⁷

The incarnation of Christ is once again represented as the pattern and the promise of what the faithful shall too become.

The Church for Anselm is the *locus deificandi*, the place where God descends into humanity so as to elevate each to himself, the place of refashioning, the inchoate gathering of the new creation whose consummation and ultimate identity will be revealed fully in heaven before the Father. Anselm's many letters on the sacraments and his understanding of the liturgy reveal how this Benedictine and bishop embraced the work of Christ's Church as the only way to renovate and purify the children of God on earth.

This is why his preferred image for the ecclesia is freeborn bride. For Anselm, this virginal spouse is no docile maid, however; she is rather the foe of all kings and the transformer of all nations. Accordingly, it is only in her freedom that human persons realize their dignity as children (*filios*) of their heavenly Father and coheirs (*cohaeredes*) along and with his Son the Christ.¹⁸ The opponent of all temporal coercion and the mother to all who love, the Church is where and how God dispenses his manifold graces to all those who seek true freedom.

¹⁷ "Prayer Before Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ," *Meditation* 3; Ward, *op. cit.*, 102.

¹⁸ Ep. 249 (dated before 1100) to Clémence, Countess of Flanders, as in Yves-M. Congar, O.P., "L'Eglise chez saint Anselme," *Spicilegium Beccense* 1 (Congrès international du IXe centenaire de l'arrivée d'Anselme au Bec) 371-99; 391.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that in Anselm's thought there is a strand of standard deifying theology but not always in the ways found in earlier thinkers. Anselm would of course see himself in line with the soteriology of Irenaeus, the Cappadocians, Augustine and Leo, but whereas in these Fathers of the Church are found numerous references to grace rendering creatures "gods" and to grace turning Christians into Christ, Anselm's theology of human divinization and the creature's appropriation of divine grace is much more subtle.

The elevation and subsequent transformation of the human person is found in Anselm's understanding of the *imago Dei*, in his notion that only the divine can approach the divine, and in his understanding of the Church as the bride and mother of Christ's new creation. The passages provided here are representative of a much wider body of work, but the themes remain constant: the human person is created so as to enter God's own life. However, this cannot be done as long as the creature remains an autonomous other; a divine transformation must occur because only God can dwell within God. In Christ, therefore, the divine life is communicated to humanity, and in Christ human persons appropriate the grace and the glory, which transforms them into children of the same heavenly Father. This process is essentially ecclesial in nature: Christian charity binds not only humanity to the divine but humans to humans as well.