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SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

THE THEOLOGY OF DEIFICATION BY SAINT MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR FROM A MYSTAGOGICAL-LITURGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

Motivation, argumentation and thematic framework

In contemporary society, characterised by strong tendencies towards autonomy, there is an increasingly pressing need to return to authentic existential-human coordinates. All the fundamental notions that define and guide human beings from the very beginning of their existence are currently threatened by the idea *of the social construct.* Human aspirations, which are in turn rooted in human ontology, are directed towards false promises of fulfilment in the earthly realm through technology. In the context of such a world, the very presence of the Church comes to be perceived increasingly as unnecessary, incomprehensible and even disruptive. It is precisely for this reason that the Church's teaching on man—on the origin, nature and meaning of his life—must be brought to the fore. Based on these considerations, I have decided to undertake a study on the deification of man. I have chosen to examine Saint Maximus the Confessor's perspective on this subject, as his work—which centres precisely on the incarnation of God and the deification of man —on the one hand presents a unique synthesis of the subject, whilst on the other hand offers original insights into it. Furthermore, the personality and writings of the Venerable Confessor have long been a personal interest of mine, which has ultimately given rise to a deep fascination.

We are aware that a great deal has been written over the years about the works of Saint Maximus the Confessor, including on the subject of the deification of man. Precisely for this reason, wishing to produce a work that would be relevant to the present day and whose theme had not already been exhausted, I initially set out, as part of my doctoral studies, to investigate the essential analogies and differences between the theology of the deification of man and the autonomy of transhumanism. Due to objective reasons, the direction of my research was reoriented towards a liturgical framework for the same central theme: the deification of man. Like all events or changes that occur in human life, I now consider this reorientation of my doctoral studies to be, for me, a sign of divine providence. Consequently, this research has come to address the subject of the deification of man from a mystagogical-liturgical perspective. The reflection of spirituality in liturgy, and vice versa, has also been a long-standing concern of mine. Evidence of this lies in my undergraduate thesis, which explored the intersection of these two theological fields, though with an emphasis, at that time, on the ascetic-mystical aspect. The title of that thesis was *'Theology and Poetry in Early*

Byzantium: The Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete'. Since the Great Canon is a hymnographic composition which, over time, has come to occupy a central position in the liturgical celebrations specific to the period of Great Lent, its examination within the bachelor's thesis was inextricably linked to the ritual and liturgical framework within which the theological content of the text is expressed. My personal interest in the practical aspect of spiritual life is also reflected in the subject of my dissertation: *The Unseen War in Early Monasticism*. This doctoral thesis thus appears as a continuation and fulfilment of my previous research. The subject of the deification of man is a comprehensive one within the theological sphere of spirituality. The mystagogical-liturgical trajectory which this thesis will follow within the present research places it firmly within the field of liturgy. The theological work of Saint Maximus the Confessor, which masterfully sets out precisely his mystagogical-liturgical perspective on deification, is his work **Mystagogy**. It is precisely for this reason that the focus of our research will lie in the examination of this text. Of course, my aim is not to produce a monographic presentation of **Mystagogy**, but rather an explicit analysis of the liturgical dimension that Saint Maximus imparts to the theme of the deification of man through this text.

The more I have delved into the secondary literature on *the *Mystagogy**, as well as the text itself, the more convinced I have become of the exceptional value of this relatively short work, both as a synthesis and—I dare say now—even as the crowning achievement of Maximus's entire oeuvre. Much has been written about the **Mystagogy**, particularly in other languages, but also in Romanian. We shall return to this in more detail below, focusing on the current state of research from which these aspects will emerge more clearly. Nevertheless, I can state with complete conviction that the subject has not been fully exhausted. For example, no study on the scale of a doctoral thesis has yet been carried out on the mystagogical-liturgical perspective regarding the deification of man, corresponding to the Maxian vision summarised in this text. This is precisely what I have set out to do: to carry out research that sheds light on this connection between the issues of spiritualisation, human perfection and the liturgical dimension of Christian life, in accordance with the vision of Saint Maximus the Confessor.

I can state that the aim of this doctoral thesis is to take the academic study of Saint Maximus's mystagogical-liturgical vision of the theology of deification one step further. More specifically, however, we shall indicate that its aim lies in *elucidating the formulation of the theology of deification as integrated into the mystagogical-liturgical dimension of Maximus's corpus, with a view to highlighting its relevance for contemporary liturgical theology.*

The general objectives of the research, which also determine the approach the doctoral

thesis will follow in order to achieve its aim, are as follows:

- To analyse the historical, political and theological context in which Saint Maximus the Confessor formulated his mystagogical-liturgical vision of deification.
- To investigate the theological, Christological, anthropological, ascetic-mystical and ecclesiological foundations of Saint Maximus's liturgical perspective on deification.
- To correlate Saint Maximus's theology of deification with the mystagogical-liturgical dimension of his work, which is synthesised and most fully contained in his treatise **Mystagogy**.
- To demonstrate the essential, indispensable and integral role of the presence of texts corresponding to the mystagogical-liturgical vision within the Maximians' corpus for an authentic understanding of his distinctive applied theology of deification.
- To assess the relevance of the teaching on deification, as seen from the perspective of Saint Maximus the Confessor, for contemporary liturgical theology.

Of course, the achievement of all these established objectives can be traced to the greatest extent through the titles of the chapters and subchapters of the work and can be confirmed by reading its contents in full.

Research methodology

In order to complete this doctoral thesis, I have employed several research methods and analytical tools, whilst taking into account a number of established criteria for approach within the field of theological research.

Firstly, I have outlined the context in which the theological thought of Saint Maximus the Confessor emerged. To this end, I have referred to the historical and political contexts in which Saint Maximus the Confessor lived. I have employed the method of critical research into historical sources to identify the sequence of events, the most plausible dating and contextualisation of key moments, and the emergence of texts within the context of Saint Maximus's life.

For the hermeneutics of Maximus's texts, I employed the comparative method, drawing on internal parallels within the Saint's body of work as a whole, verifying their possible sources of inspiration, and examining their correspondence with the general doctrine of the Church and with the patristic theological vision preserved in the ecclesial tradition regarding all the subjects addressed.

Since the aim of my thesis lies in correlating the theology of deification with Maximus's mystagogical-liturgical vision, and since, as a rule, academic research proceeds from the general to the particular, I first analysed all the data relating to the context in which Maximus's thought emerged, before then focusing strictly on the teaching on deification, as it emerges from the body of Saint Maximus's writings, and finally bringing together all the information gathered in a liturgical analysis, in accordance with the way it is treated in the work **Mystagogy**.

To elucidate the meanings of Maximius's concepts, I have also employed the philological method. Thus, I have analysed a series of terms and formulations used by Saint Maximus, drawing on the original Greek text. Often, studying the origins of words, their etymologies, and their usage across different historical periods and literary genres can help decipher their specific usage. We have compared the various translations and shall endeavour to identify the most plausible interpretative solutions.

Another method I have employed is the symbolic-mystagogical approach. As is well known, Saint Maximus, following the Alexandrian exegetical tradition, favours allegorical, mystical and anagogical interpretation. With regard to the liturgical aspects highlighted by Saint Maximus, the perspective remains the same. All liturgical manifestations, as well as the space in which they take place—the Church—conceal in every detail the most precious of the mysteries of salvation. Thus, we cannot engage with the main text we have analysed, *the *Mystagogy**, without employing the symbolic-mystagogical method, since the author himself sets out his ecclesiasticalliturgical vision using this very method. Likewise, the other texts we have drawn upon, taken from other writings by Maximus, can only be analysed in the light of the approach in which they themselves were composed, typically the anagogical/allegorical/mystical approach.

Apart from the points listed above, I am aware that the true exegesis of a sacred text, be it scriptural or patristic, can be achieved most accurately by placing oneself in the spirit of the holy author. This truth is highlighted by Saint Maximus himself in the prologue *to the Mystagogy*, where, with great humility, he expresses his inability to convey anything of the spiritual matters he heard from that 'blessed elder', unless God Himself were to guide him. The Spirit in which all the holy authors spoke is none other than the Spirit of the Lord. Therefore, apart from the academic methods specific to theological research which I have employed, I hope that what I have set forth has also been guided by the Spirit of God.

Scope of the research

The scope of my research corresponds precisely to the wording of the thesis's title and to its aim, as set out above. Although I have had to refer to the general context in which Saint Maximus's thought emerged, the focus will be on the issue of the deification of man, first considered within the entirety of Maximus's corpus, and then explicitly in the work **Mystagogy**, which, as I have highlighted in the preceding remarks, contains the essence of Saint Maximus's mystagogical-liturgical vision. This mystagogical-liturgical perspective relates, in the Reverend's work, particularly to the interpretation of the Divine Liturgy and the Church as both a building and a community. In addition to these, his work also contains specific references to the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Baptism, which I have analysed from the perspective of liturgical theology in my thesis.

The scope I have set for this work places it within the theological field of Liturgics; however, I anticipate that the findings of my work could serve as a basis for further research in other areas of theology. I am aware that, regardless of the results of my study—which will be set out in the body of the thesis and subsequently summarised in its conclusions—further academic research may be undertaken on certain aspects of these findings, given the complexity and depth of the thought of Saint Maximus the Confessor.

Summary of the content

Saint Maximus the Confessor's theology of deification occupies the most prominent position within his body of writings. The title he bears, that of 'the Confessor' ( ), recalls his struggle for the truth, which aimed to preserve the efficacy of the Son of God's salvific work upon humanity, being fully aware that this depends on the preservation of the true faith. Without the Trinitarian and Christological dogmatic principles correctly preserved, the very possibility of individual salvation is jeopardised. This, according to Maximus's view, cannot be understood in any other way than within the framework of deifying ascension. Only a full incarnation of God the Word has the decisive capacity to bring about the full deification of man. Likewise, only an unadulterated union of the divine with the human can safeguard freedom and hypostatic identity. It can therefore be firmly asserted of the great Confessor of the seventh century that he is not merely an apologist for truth in itself, but also a champion in defence of the meaning of existence. To decipher the meaning of existence, one must know the fundamental truths; hence the importance of preserving the framework of revelation unaltered. The ultimate meaning of creation, according to Saint Maximus, is union with God.

In order to fulfil the eternal divine plan, humankind must follow the path of Christ, who was the first to fulfil it through obedience. This path can be none other than the ecclesial one, and the Church's journey is pre-eminently a liturgical one. Thus, the theology of deification can truly be understood only within the communal-liturgical framework. This correlation is masterfully elucidated in the works of Saint Maximus the Confessor. The Byzantine saint's liturgical vision can be glimpsed in passages scattered throughout his entire collection of writings, but it is found in its most condensed and fully developed form in his work, **Mystagogy**.

The present study has sought to shed light on Maximus's mystagogical-liturgical perspective on the vast and much-discussed issue of deification. We have demonstrated that this plays an essential and fulfilling role in the authentic understanding of the dynamics of man's union with God. In the current social context, characterised most strikingly by the phenomenon of secularisation, the relevance of the subject addressed to the field of contemporary liturgy is evident. The Church's liturgical expression fulfils a transformative role in the lives of those who partake in it—the faithful—ultimately manifesting itself through them, even outside the Church, in their interactions with the world. Human beings' existential aspirations, ontologically rooted within them, find their fulfilment through active and conscious participation in liturgical life. In this way, it also fulfils a missionary function that is so necessary in the contemporary world.

Chapter I

All aspects of the process of man's deification, as well as its eschatological implications, are presented by the Venerable Confessor in his writings from a mystagogical-liturgical perspective. However, in order to arrive at an adequate understanding of these, it was necessary to explore the broader context of this vision's emergence on the stage of universal theological thought. Firstly, I have outlined the author's dilemmatic origins. Although the publication of the Saint's Syriac hagiography by Sebastian Brock in 1973 aroused great enthusiasm in academic circles, it raises numerous points of doubt. The most reliable details concerning the Venerable One's life come to us precisely from his writings recognised as authentic, as well as from the trial records. All of this reveals a personality deeply rooted in the patristic tradition, with an astonishing capacity for insight and synthesis, a combative, fearless and dynamic nature, as well as a thorough knowledge of the culture of the time. Wherever he worked—in Chrysopolis, Cyzicus, Crete, Cyprus, Carthage, Rome, Constantinople, or in the region of Lazica where he was exiled and spent the final years of his life—he instilled the Orthodox faith in those around him, not only on an intellectual level but also in

practice, to the point of self-sacrifice in its defence. The theological controversies of the time—monoenergism and monotheletism, both of which had their origins in the heresy condemned by the Council of Chalcedon—were largely fuelled by political crises and, in turn, gave rise to such crises themselves. Against the backdrop of such a world, ravaged by profound social upheaval, the Venerable Confessor fought for the only viable solution capable of truly lifting the world out of crisis: Orthodoxy.

Saint Maximus demonstrates, through the theological legacy he bequeathed to posterity —in addition to the points mentioned above—his creative capacity and his ability to open up new horizons which in no way contradict ecclesial knowledge; on the contrary, they clarify it and broaden its boundaries. He is not merely a systematiser, but a true Church Father, capable of providing the Church with original perspectives. The significance of Saint Maximus's legacy for posterity can be understood from the authority his writings command in matters of faith. Both in the West and in the East, Saint Maximus and his work are regarded as a benchmark. Furthermore, in the present day, the wealth of studies conducted on the Maximius corpus attests to its value.

The hermeneutics of Saint Maximus's writings requires contextualisation, patristic parallels, linguistic knowledge, and also an alignment with the author's spirit. With regard to the ' ' terminology employed, I have highlighted the importance of uncovering the broader meanings of words as derived from their usage over time, as well as from their etymologies, with a view to correctly assimilating the messages of the texts.

Chapter II

Maximian Christology, rooted in the decrees of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, presents itself as an inalienable premise of the theology of the deification of man. The Saint's most fervent concern, as evident from his writings as a whole, is the alternation of movements of mutual drawing near between the Divine and the human. To the same extent that God becomes man, man may become god by grace. The mutual self-giving transforms this reciprocal relationship into a liturgical one. This emerges with complete clarity through the expression of Saint Maximus's mystagogical-liturgical thought in various passages scattered throughout his entire body of work and most fully in *the *Mystagogy**.

The path of man's ascent towards God comprises, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed, either two or three stages. Creation, natural contemplation and deification—or, simply,

creation and knowledge alone—ensure, through the gradual nature of union with God that they entail, the acceptance of this union in complete freedom. Furthermore, through man's involvement in his dichotomous wholeness, the value of the body is highlighted in each of these stages. The rest into which man will enter by attaining deification entails the passivity of human works, the taking over of activity by God Himself, and the free and conscious stabilisation of man within the static movement of direct divine knowledge.

Chapter III

The grace of deification is received in its fullness through the Sacraments of initiation in a virtual sense. The Holy Eucharist represents the crown of all the Sacraments and the symbolic counterpart of the stage of perfection. In order to understand the content *of* Maximus's *Mystagogy,* which encapsulates the Saint's liturgical vision, it was necessary to set out the Church's mystagogical view of the Divine Liturgy as it emerges from the writings of the Church Fathers of the first seven centuries of Christianity. By presenting the Church's understanding of the mystery of the Divine Liturgy, from the Book of Revelation—which appears to illustrate a liturgical celebration—to the commentary on the Holy Synaxis composed by Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, I have shown that all three interpretative dimensions—Christological, eschatological and ascetic-mystical—which appear in Maximus's **Mystagogy** are also represented in * *. The issue of deification, which has been the focus of my present research, lies within the ascetic-mystical dimension of theology; I have demonstrated that this is also addressed in the liturgical contemplations preceding Saint Maximus's commentary. We have no evidence that *the Mystagogy* was directly inspired by earlier interpretations of the Divine Liturgy, apart from Saint Dionysius the Areopagite's view of it, which is known to have exerted an influence on Saint Maximus's commentary. We can, however, state that Saint Maximus drew upon the Church's tradition all the exegetical and liturgical insights which he subsequently developed with great mastery. The relationship between the thought of the Venerable Confessor and that of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite is a wholly privileged one. Both are characterised by an anagogical approach to liturgical moments. Saint Maximus, however, is more strongly oriented towards the individual's inner life, in contrast to Saint Dionysius, who places greater emphasis on the communal aspect.

The structure *of the *Mystagogy**, whilst appearing chaotic at first glance, reveals its organic composition upon closer analysis. The first seven chapters present themselves as a mystical contemplation of the ecclesial space, intended to provide a typological framework to which those entering into the liturgical dynamic must conform. The effectiveness of the sacramental celebration

for every participant depends on their placement within the order indicated or reflected in the symbolic structure of the church. The Holy Synod that is constituted within the church plays a unifying role with cosmic resonances. The union envisaged is both internal and universal.

Chapters VIII–XXIV of *the Mystagogy* deal with the celebration of the Divine Liturgy from three perspectives: the general, the particular and the parenetic. These interpretations complement one another and demonstrate the author's focus on the applicability of the content of the liturgical rites and symbols to both the inner spiritual life and the outward expression of human behaviour. They also reveal the transformative function of liturgical dynamics. The potential nature of deification, through liturgical participation, is realised only to the extent that the process is embraced synergistically. The renewing capacity of the Holy Synod with regard to each individual believer is concealed in Maximus's commentary through his use of the terms *eikon*, *typos* and *symbolon*. Analysing these has helped us to decipher Maximus's vision of the forms employed in the Sacrament, as ways of bringing divine realities—which would otherwise remain distant—into concrete and accessible form. For Saint Maximus, liturgical celebrations are not merely commemorations, but a sharing in the heavenly mysteries. The reality communicated to all participants in the Synaxis, regardless of the stage of spiritual progress at which they m ely find themselves, is intended to serve as a driving force in their lives, bringing this reality to life. It constitutes a magnet drawing one towards perfection and a renewing foretaste of it. The Saint's preference for the terms *'synaxis'* and *'symbolon'*, which I have highlighted in this work, lies in the etymological structure of these words. Both express the integration of certain movements into the communal sphere. For union with the loving Trinity, it would have been unthinkable to employ means of solitude or terms denoting such solitude.

Baptism and the Eucharist are the only Sacraments which Saint Maximus deals with explicitly in his writings. Both represent types of spiritual births that are absolutely necessary for the fulfilment of the human existential purpose: deification. The realisation of this, whilst it cannot be achieved without partaking of these Sacraments, is conditional upon the application of personal effort. All liturgical services are instruments provided for humankind with a view to preparing it for the eschatological communion of the saints. The deification of humankind is in itself a liturgical act which cannot be realised without Eucharistic-liturgical communion.

This thesis may be considered original for:

a) The breadth of its approach to the subject, being the first doctoral thesis in Romanian theology to establish the correlation between the theology of deification and St Maximus's mystagogical-liturgical vision;
b) Its demonstration of the unifying role of Saint Maximus's liturgical vision within his theology;
c. The systematisation of texts from Saint Maximus's works relating to deification;
d. To demonstrate the lineage of Saint Maximus's mystagogical-liturgical thought within the tradition of liturgical contemplation preceding him;
e. To provide an explanatory correlation between the etymologies of several terms specific to Maximius's terminology and the body of the Saint's writings, particularly his work **Mystagogia**;
f. To suggest solutions to the dilemmatic use of the terms *typos*, *eikon*, *symbolon* and *synaxis* in the work **Mystagogia**;
g. To offer possible explanations for the seemingly enigmatic structure of the work **Mystagogia**;
h. To identify and analyse in detail the three interpretative approaches to the **Mystagogia**;
i. Highlighting the relevance of the topic addressed and its value for modern society.

Apart from these, there are also other, minor elements that can be found in this paper. Of course, whilst making no claim to have exhaustively covered the line of research I have undertaken, I believe I have made a contribution to it. I propose, as a possible continuation of the findings of this research, a comparative analysis of these findings with the transhumanist 'liturgy' of confinement within the confines of selfish autonomy. Such a comparison could shed light on the antisymmetry of Christian theology's doctrine of deification, as opposed to the promises of human fulfilment through transhumanism. The liturgy of human deification, which has been analysed in this paper, finds its parallel in what is envisaged as the religion of the future: transhumanism.

Saint Maximus the Confessor's mystagogical-liturgical vision of the deification of man completes our understanding of it. If I were to choose a single word to encapsulate the relationship I have identified in this paper between the theology of deification and liturgical theology—a word that would also define both—it would be *'offering*'. From this perspective of the unity of meaning

between the two theological dimensions of Maximus's thought, I conclude by affirming that deification constitutes a liturgy of the self, that is, an offering of the self, with a view to its transformation and ineffable union with the One who, in turn, offers Himself.

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