

# Introduction

This book had its beginnings in a personal quest to understand better the key doctrinal trends characterizing the Catholic theological landscape in the decades leading up to the Second Vatican Council. It is published here as the culmination of a lengthy and satisfying, even if occasionally arduous, investigation. Rather than offering a comprehensive or systematic survey, of which there are many, it limits its scope in two unique ways, thereby presenting its readers with an analysis of the period that is at once accessible and atypical.

First, it settles upon the work of three theologians who are widely regarded as representative of three main currents or traditions in the pre-conciliar period. The three theologians concerned are Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange O.P., Karl Rahner S.J., and Henri de Lubac S.J. It is widely acknowledged that the differences between these three figures, and the traditions subsequently associated with them, sometimes run so deep as to defy resolution. All have been designated “Thomists,” but qualifying descriptors are often added that suggest alternative and even competing loyalties, with Garrigou-Lagrange being called a “strict observance Thomist,” Rahner a “transcendental Thomist,” and de Lubac an “Augustinian Thomist.” All belong to that rich period of *ressourcement* in the Catholic Church from which the Second Vatican Council arose as a kind of culminating watershed, but it is especially de Lubac who may be said finally to represent this *ressourcement*, for Garrigou-Lagrange, sometimes despite himself, expressly opposed it, while Rahner sought to craft an alternative to it.<sup>1</sup>

The second way this study limits its scope is through focusing not just on these three theologians in general, but, as the title indicates, in particular on the presence in their theology of the motif of deification or divinization, a theological subject matter whose provenance spans the whole history of Christianity, but which comes to special light in their respective works. In doing so, this book opens a small window upon an oddly surprising case of theological convergence. For as I shall argue, despite sometimes quite far-reaching differences, Garrigou-Lagrange, Rahner, and de Lubac were strangely united in a shared conviction: today’s church urgently needs to renew its acquaintance with an ancient Christian theme, namely, the doctrine of

1. See Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

deification. Only in a self-transcending, supernaturally wrought participation in the life of God do human beings reach their proper fulfillment.

In this way, this book functions as an introduction to the doctrine of deification in modern Catholic theology, as it is expounded by three of its most able and influential protagonists in the twentieth century. It is true that the doctrine of deification has undergone a veritable explosion of renewed interest in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> Far from being a subject of merely peripheral concern, or the quirky whim of a few oriental mystics, deification has been recognized as figuring throughout Christian history as mainstream orthodox catholic teaching, held in common by such epochal and diverse thinkers as Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Newman. Yet it is also true that the doctrine has sometimes suffered a certain eclipse, even disparagement, particularly in the west. Anxieties about it have partly arisen from the fact that in the Scriptures the primal sin consists in consent to the temptation to be “like God” (Gen. 3:5). The proposal that human beings can and should “become God” or “divine” or “gods” may to some sound disturbingly like the old temptation in new guise. But deification really only started coming under systematic criticism following the anti-hellenistic sentiments of nineteenth-century scholars who interpreted it as an alien Greek or Platonic philosophical incursion into the pure Semitic “essence” of primitive Christianity. According to Adolf von Harnack, writing around 1900, once the Christian religion “was represented as the belief in the incarnation of God and as the sure hope of the deification of man, a speculation that had never got beyond the fringe of religious knowledge was made the central point of the system and the simple content of the Gospel was obscured.”<sup>3</sup> This criticism was fueled by suspicion that the doctrine, thought anyway to be unbiblical and more associated with the eastern Christian tradition, lent itself to pantheism and involved a failure to distinguish adequately between the human

2. More recent studies include David Meconi and Carl E. Olson, eds., *Called to Be Children of God: Deification in the Catholic Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius, forthcoming); Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum,” *Modern Theology* 25, no. 4 (2009): 647–59; Paul. M. Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature: Deification and Communion* (New York: Continuum, 2008); M. J. Christensen and J. A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); Roger E. Olson, “Deification in Contemporary Theology,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 186–200; David Meconi, “The Consummation of the Christian Promise: Recent Studies in Deification,” *New Blackfriars* 87, no. 1007 (2006): 3–12; Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006); Jean Borella, *The Sense of the Supernatural* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

3. Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. II, trans. Neil Buchanan (New York: Dover, 1961), 318.

and divine natures, between nature and grace.<sup>4</sup> Misunderstandings have been further compounded by various misrepresentations of the doctrine, making of what the ancients taught about the human person's vocation to become God by grace an affirmation of his becoming God by nature.

With such critical sentiments boiling around near the turn of the twentieth century, it was all the more remarkable that the winds of fortune ended up taking the Catholic Church toward the recovery and reinstatement of this biblical and patristic insight to its rightful prominence. For all its inner contradictions, the twentieth can go down in history as the century in which deification almost universally rose to the top of the theological and ecumenical agenda. The full scope of this recovery is still to be realized, and new publications on the topic continue to spring up in every circle, but certain definitive outlines have been adumbrated in the christocentric and Trinitarian anthropological vision outlined in Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, and then developed by Pope John Paul II, according to which the mystery of the incarnation, itself the key to human self-understanding, leads the individual human being beyond herself toward the goal of a deifying communion of persons.<sup>5</sup> Without explicitly using the language of deification, the Council Fathers proposed an "ultimate goal" for human beings that lies exclusively in the mystery of God, adopting the famous *cor inquietum* metaphor of St. Augustine: "[O]nly God . . . meets the deepest longings of the human heart, which is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer."<sup>6</sup> These same words were echoed by John Paul II on the occasion of his Bull of Indiction welcoming the Third Millennium. There he proclaimed to the world that supernatural life alone "can bring fulfilment to the deepest aspirations of the heart. . . . Proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth, true God and perfect Man, the Church opens to all people the prospect of being 'divinized' and thus of becoming more human."<sup>7</sup>

The three theologians selected for special focus in this book have each played an important role in that recovery. They of course were not alone

4. See e.g., Ben Drewery, "Deification," in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp*, ed. Peter Brooks (London: SCM, 1975), 33–62.

5. See David Meconi, "Deification in the Thought of John Paul II," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 71 (2006): 127–41; Tracey Rowland, "Deification after Vatican II," in Meconi and Olson, *Called to Be Children of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius, forthcoming).

6. *Gaudium et Spes* 41.

7. *Incarnationis Mysterium: Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000* §2, quoted in David V. Meconi, "Deification in the Thought of John Paul II," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 71 (2006): 127–41, at 133.

in this endeavor, and there are a number of other worthy theologians whose works I could have selected for focus. Mention may be made of Jules Gross's important historical study, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers* (1938), along with key articles by G. W. Butterworth (1916), Otto Faller (1925), Yves Congar (1935), Henri Rondet (1949), and the long multi-authored study on "Divinisation" published in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* under the oversight of Édouard des Places (1957).<sup>8</sup> Yet for all these profound studies, there are good reasons to zero in especially on the seminal contribution of our three figures in particular. Let me give four.

First, deification arguably features as systematically central to their respective theological visions, not just as one theme among many, nor only by way of analysis and commentary on doctrinal history. Each of them explicitly expounded their soteriology using the traditional conceptual instruments and technical vocabulary of *theosis* or graced participation in the intra-Trinitarian intimacy of the divine nature, giving the lie to unfounded claims that deification is an exclusively eastern Christian concept. While studies have brought these features out for each individually, it has recently come to the surface as an implicitly global claim for all three in an article by Peter Ryan, in which he compares the responses of Garrigou-Lagrange, Rahner, and de Lubac to the question how a natural being can find its fulfillment in a gratuitously given supernatural finality.<sup>9</sup>

8. Gross's work, written in French, has been translated into English by Paul A. Onica (Anaheim, CA: A and C Press, 2002); G. W. Butterworth, "The Deification of Man in Clement of Alexandria," *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1916): 157–69; O. Faller, "Griechische Vergottung und christliche Vergöttlichung," *Gregorianum* 6 (1925): 405–35; M.-J. Congar (=Yves), "La Déification dans la tradition spirituelle de l'Orient," *Vie spirituelle* 43 (1935): 91–107; H. Rondet, "La divinisation du chrétien," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 71 (1949): 449–76, 561–88; Édouard des Places, "Divinisation," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1957), columns 1370–1459. Another important contribution came from the Russian Orthodox scholar Myrrha Lot-Borodine. Her articles, first published between 1932 and 1933 in *Revue d'histoire des religions*, were reprinted in the single volume *La Déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), with a Preface by Jean Daniélou.

9. Peter F. Ryan, "How Can the Beatific Vision both Fulfill Human Nature and Be Utterly Gratuitous?" *Gregorianum* 83, no. 4 (2002): 717–54. I analyze elements of Ryan's critique in the conclusion. For individual studies see Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Francis J. Caponi, "Karl Rahner: Divinization in Roman Catholicism," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. M. J. Christensen and J. A. Wittung (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 259–80; John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Aidan Nichols, *Reason with Piety: Garrigou-Lagrange in the Service of Catholic Thought* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia, 2008).

Second, as already suggested, each has proven to be an especially influential theologian in the twentieth century, not only in the period between the so-called *nouvelle théologie* controversy and the Second Vatican Council, but also in the postconciliar period right up to the present day.<sup>10</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange continues to be heralded by a vanguard of mainly North American Neothomists as the faithful champion of a rigorous scholastic method and commonsense philosophy in a world that has lost its reason. Rahner, having held sway in seminary curricula around the world for decades, is increasingly becoming passé, but continues to hold attraction for all kinds of revisionist trends in theology, education, and ethics, and is still especially beloved among promoters of popular liturgies, egalitarian ecclesiologies, and women's ordination. De Lubac appears most influential in circles of the younger orthodox generation who, hungry for theological and liturgical substance, want to drink from the sources of the church's deepest and most longstanding spiritual wellsprings. His famous insistence on the primacy of paradox echoes true for a generation simultaneously skeptical of totalitarianizing claims to truth and convinced by the absolute trustworthiness of the gospel of the crucified and risen God-man, Jesus Christ.

Third, each may be taken as foundationally representative of three distinct "streams" of Catholic theology in the twentieth century, whose respective emphases continue to shape and inspire their witting or unwitting heirs in the postconciliar Church, and whose commitments and sensibilities have come to be recognized as standing in a certain tension with and even antithesis to one another.<sup>11</sup> One way to characterize them would be to identify their respective emphases: Garrigou-Lagrange represents an emphasis upon reason, Rahner upon relevance, and de Lubac on revelation. Another way would be to identify the way they deal with theological difficulties. Garrigou-Lagrange relies on systematization, Rahner on resolution, and de Lubac on paradox.

10. On the emergence and meaning of the term *nouvelle théologie*, see Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010); Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Brian Daley, "The *Nouvelle Théologie* and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols and the Science of Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 4 (2005): 362–82; Aidan Nichols, "Thomism and the *Nouvelle Théologie*," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 1–19; A. Darlapp, "Nouvelle Théologie," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 7 (Freiburg: Herder, 1963): 1060.

11. See Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003); Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Joseph A. Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 579–602.

These are generalizations to be sure, but they help to classify certain features that characterize still-pertinent convictions and commitments among their respective devotees.

Fourth, and this is a very practical reason, the major theological writings of all three figures have been translated into English and therefore have exercised greater impact on the English-speaking theological world than the lesser-known works of their contemporaries.

What we find as we study their works is that, despite striking disparities in circumstance, formation, vocation, method, and theological output, despite also their more or less direct criticisms of one another, their lives strangely intersected and aspects of their thought converged in their common invocation of deification as the fundamental and ultimate goal of fulfilled human existence. While showing how each expressed this central Christian doctrine in his own particular way, it will be intimated in various comparative comments that the approach of Henri de Lubac, with its roots more deeply in biblical and patristic theology, and with its more explicit and determinative christocentrism, ecclesiocentrism, and theology of the *imago Dei*, best coheres with the theological anthropology that subsequently has been formally corroborated in the Catholic Church's magisterial teaching.

Before launching into the first chapter, some readers may find it useful to know what rationale I have followed in my adoption of certain terminology. In the main I have relied on translated works of the authors studied. However, to gain a more critical understanding of certain terms or ideas I have also consulted many of their works in their original languages. The question therefore arises as to what terminology they themselves used to designate deification. The English word "deification," the term used in the title of this book and in the main preferred throughout, has its origins in the Latin noun *deificatio*, whose verb *deifico* was not infrequently used by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>12</sup> It is not, strictly speaking, a biblical term, although this is not to say the idea has no biblical foundation.<sup>13</sup> The *locus classicus* for the doctrine of deification in the New Testament speaks of human beings becoming θεϊκῶν κοινωνοὶ φύσεως,

12. See R. J. Deferrari, *A Lexicon of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Dover, NH: Loreto Publications, 2004), 278.

13. See the excellent syntheses of the biblical foundations of the theology of deification in Gregory Glazov, "Theosis, Judaism, and Old Testament Anthropology," in Finlan and Kharlamov, *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, 16–31; Stephen Finlan, "Second Peter's Notion of Divine Participation," in Finlan and Kharlamov, *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, 32–50; Al Wolters, "Partners of the Deity: A Covenantal Reading of 2 Peter 1:4," *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990): 28–40; Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, 80–92.

participants or sharers in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). This idea fits hand-in-glove with two other central New Testament soteriological motifs: divine adoption and mutual indwelling. These mysteries were explored by the earliest Church Fathers using a number of Greek terms, including θεοποίησις, θεοποιεῖν, ὁμοίωσις τῷ Θεῷ, μετουσία, or μέθεξις τοῦ Θεοῦ, with a formal definition of the term θεώσις as “assimilation to God as far as possible” finally appearing in the late fifth or early sixth century in the pseudonymous writings of Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>14</sup> In the Latin tradition, Augustine expounded a clear doctrine of deification, providing an orthodox foundation for the further development of the term *deificare*. Ultimately, for Augustine, God is the *deifactor* who through adoptive grace enables those who worship him to become gods themselves: *Deus facitque suos cultores deos*.<sup>15</sup>

When we come to the native language of the three theologians under consideration in this book, the terminology they use for deification does not appear to depart from these basic terms in Christian tradition. The preference for Garrigou-Lagrange and de Lubac seems to be for the French noun *divinisation* and the verb *diviniser*, and although one sometimes gets the impression that the term *deification* raises for Francophones connotations of impious human hubris, de Lubac uses it interchangeably with *divinisation* with no indication of any change in meaning, explaining them variously as “l’union divine,” “la participation de la vie trinitaire,” “la vision de Dieu,” and “l’élévation surnaturelle de la creature.” In Rahner’s German, the primary term is the noun *die Vergöttlichung*, which has been in existence at least since Luther.<sup>16</sup> Rahner often uses it adjectivally in such formulae as “die vergöttlichenden Gnade”

14. See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–15, 248–61.

15. See David V. Meconi, “Becoming Gods by Becoming God’s: Augustine’s Mystagogy of Identification,” *Augustinian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2006): 61–74; Robert Puchniak, “Augustine’s Conception of Deification, Revisited,” in Finlan and Kharlamov, *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, 122–33; Gerald Bonner, “Augustine’s Conception of Deification,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 369–86; “Deification, Divinization,” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 265–56; “Deificare,” in *Augustinus-Lexicon*, vol. 2, ed. C. Mayer (Basel: Schwabe, 1996), 265–67.

16. See Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification*, trans. Kirsi Irmeli Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); B. D. Marshall, “Justification as Declaration and Deification,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4 (2002): 3–28; Paul D. Lehninger, “Luther and Theosis: Deification in the Theology of Martin Luther,” Ph.D. Dissertation (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1999); Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); S. Peura and A. Raunio, eds., *Luther und Theosis: Vergöttlichung als Thema der abendländischen Theologie* (Erlangen: Martin-Luther, 1990).

and “die vergöttlichenden Teilnahme an der gottliche Natur,” phrases that are almost always accompanied by discussion of “die Selbstmitteilung Gottes” (the self-communication of God). Along with “the supernatural elevation of the creature,” this last formula represents an interpretative move beyond the traditional terms. The significance of such shifts will become apparent in due course.