

Comparative view between the Christology of Saint Cyril of Alexandria and of Pope Leo

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Abstract:

Leo's Christological teaching was articulated as a response to various Christological heresies that he wished to fight. By closely examining the Latin formulas of Pope Leo, it is clear that the theology expressed through them is not the same as that of Saint Cyril of Alexandria. While the teaching of Saint Cyril of Alexandria laid emphasis on the unique Person of Christ, the Christology of Pope Leo and the Latin theology, in general, stressed more the two natures of the Saviour. Nevertheless, we notice that the insistence of Leo on the personal unity of Christ does not essentially contradict the thought of Saint Cyril.

Keywords:

Pope Leo I, Christology, consubstantiality, substantiae, unity of the person

Introduction

In order to thoroughly assess the Christology of Pope Leo (400-461), we should take into consideration not only his famous Dogmatic Letter or Tome¹, addressed to Flavian and, at the same time, to the Council of Ephesus in 449 but also his entire corpus made up of letters and sermons².

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¹ Although, apparently, it was a letter addressed to Flavian, the Tome was actually a treatise that synthesised the Christological Doctrine on the Incarnation for the Roman churches. Susan Wessel, *Leo the Great and the spiritual rebuilding of a universal Rome*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, Leiden, Brill, 2008, p. 41.

² *Ibidem*, p. 211.

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The Pope's Christology, resulting from his correspondence and preaching, reveals a sound knowledge of the entire Western tradition, pertaining to Latin theologians such as Tertullian and Augustine³. He integrated the Latin theological teachings of his forerunners in the past, creating a combination which gave his Christology a new dimension. This way, he developed a nuanced understanding of the integrity of the human nature of Christ, his Christological thought being different from that of Blessed Augustine⁴. Leo's Christological teaching, as A. Grillmeier states, "was articulated as a reponse to various Christological heresies that he wished to fight"⁵.

He did not mean by that to solve the problem between the two rival theologies, Antiochene and Alexandrine, nor did he take an intermediary stand for conciliation purposes between the two ways of thinking. Without claiming to develop an original theological structure, against the heresy of Eutyches, he presented the common Latin faith with firmness and accuracy, with reference to the baptismal creed and to Holy Scripture⁶.

The Tome to Flavian represents the most thorough presentation of Pope Leo's Christology. This letter played an important role in Christian antiquity and was constantly regarded as a document having dogmatic authority, equal to that of Saint Cyril's works, in the debates at the Council of Chalcedon⁷. By reproducing the doctrine of Tertullian and Augustine⁸, the letter contained a simple, almost schematic Christology, without the originality and depth of Cyrillian Christology, but accurate and categorical⁹.

Western theology, as expressed in Pope Leo's famous Tome to Flavian, had the obvious advantage, as compared to the Alexandrine and Antiochene systems, of insisting on the complete reality of the two substantiae in Christ, without being Nestorian at all¹⁰.

³ P.T.Camelot, *Histoire des conciles oecuméniques*, Editions de l'Orante, Paris, 1962, p.96.

⁴ Susan Wessel, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁵ Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian tradition. From the apostolic age to Chalcedon (451)*, vol.I, John Knox Press, London, 1975, p.532.

⁶ P.T. Camelot, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁷ J. Tixeront, *Histoire des dogmes dans l'antiquité chrétienne, t. III : La fin de l'âge patristique (430-800)*, Éditeur Gabalda, Paris, 1922, p.86.

⁸ Harnack states that Leo's dogmatic letter comprises a paraphrase of the Christological section of Tertullian's work, *Adversus Praxeam* (cf. Novatian De Trinitate), being in accordance with his teachings, and partly, from the point of view of language, with Ambrose and Augustine. But he takes a step forward, beyond what was accepted by then in the West yet this document did not contain anything new. Adolph Harnack, *History of dogma*, vol.IV, Boston, 1898, p. 203.

⁹ Prof. Fr. Ioan G. Coman, *Și Cuvântul Trup S-a făcut*, Mitropolia Banatului Publishing House, Timisoara, 1993, p. 156.

¹⁰ John Meyendorff, *Hristos în gândirea creștină răsăriteană*, translation by Nicolai Buga, EIBMBOR Publishing House, Buc., 1997, p. 21-22.

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Although its distinctive contribution consisted in articulating the teaching of the complete humanity of Christ, it was found that the Tome was not entirely original. Many of its passages are similar to previous works of the Pope, which leads to the conclusion that his adviser, Prosper of Aquitaine, gathered excerpts of his sermons and letters and compiled them in order to obtain a composite Christological presentation¹¹. While its purpose was to clarify the Christological doctrine, the Tome was not immediately accepted in the East as a final dogmatic statement.

The doctrine of the double consubstantiality

The dogmatic core of Pope Leo's Christology consists of the doctrine of the double consubstantiality (ὁμοουσιότης)¹² of our Saviour Jesus Christ, with God and with humankind, which is essentially soteriological¹³.

Against the presumed Docetism of Eutyches, who claimed that the body of Christ would not be of the same nature as ours, Pope Leo develops the doctrine of the double consubstantiality (*gemina in Christo natura*)¹⁴ in his Tome to Flavian.

Even if, in his dogmatic letter, he does not employ the Eastern formula *consubstantialis patri-consubstantialis matri*, that he will subsequently adopt, Leo's argument focuses on this twofold idea that Christ is begotten of God the Father and that He was born of the Virgin Mary¹⁵: „The same eternal, Only-Begotten of the eternal Begetter was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary"¹⁶.

In his sermons, Leo repeatedly proclaimed this teaching, considering it as a genuine statement of faith. In a letter addressed to the empress Pulcheria, taking

¹¹ N.W. James, "Leo the Great and Prosper of Aquitaine: A Fifth Century Pope and His Adviser", in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 44 (1993), p. 554–584; J. Gaidioz, "Saint Prosper d'Aquitaine et le tome à Flavien", in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 3 (Paris, 1949), p. 270–301. In his article, Gaidioz shows that Prosper of Aquitaine probably compiled the Tomos to Flavian upon the request of Pope Leo, while living in Rome, and the Pope only made the final revisions.

¹² The doctrine of the double consubstantiality is first met at Apollinaris of Laodicea, who apparently endorsed it, with the purpose of emphasising the humanity of Christ. Apollinarie, *De unione*, 8, cf. Hans Lietzmann, *Apollinarius von Laodicea und seine Schule*, Tübingen, 1904, p.188. This was considered as an anti-Arian theme of Apollinarist origin. B.Studer, "Consubstantialis patri – consubstantialis matri, une antithèse christologique chez Léon le Grand", in *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes*, 18 (1972), p. 100.

¹³ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 4, *The golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature, from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, Ed. by Angelo di Berardino. Augustinian Patristic Institute, Rome, 1986, p.603.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Leo, *Letter 28, 2*, Tomos to Flavian, in Migne, P.L. 54, col.759A. Translation into English at T.H.Bindley, *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith*, London, 1899, p.279-292.

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over the terminology employed at Nicaea, he will add to it the antithesis of the double consubstantiality:

“For if the New Man had not been made in the likeness of sinful flesh, and taken on Him our old nature, and being consubstantial with the Father (consubstantialis patri), had deigned to be consubstantial with His mother also (consubstantialis matri), and being alone free from sin, had united our nature to Him the whole human race would be held in bondage beneath the Devil’s yoke, and we should not be able to make use of the Conqueror’s victory, if it had been won outside our nature”¹⁷.

In another sermon, Pope Leo presents the theme of the two births, stating that the Only-Begotten, the Son of God, also becomes the Son of Man *“because He who is God, of one essence with the Father (ὁμοούσιος) and even of one substance (unius substantiae), the Same is also true man, consubstantial with His mother according to the flesh”¹⁸.*

It is surprising that the Tome to Flavian, insisting on both births of Jesus and speaking especially of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, does not employ the expression “consubstantialis matri” in order to underscore the reality of the Incarnation¹⁹: “It was not actually in His Divinity, whereby the Only-Begotten is co-eternal and con-substantial with the Father, but in His weak human nature that He suffered these things”²⁰.

Following the Latin tradition, Pope Leo wanted to emphasise, by means of the formula of the double consubstantiality, the distinction between the two natures in Christ, underscoring at the same time the personal unity (*unitas personae*)²¹. This formula was a way of expressing the double union of Christ with the Father and the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and with humanity, on the other hand, making Himself an intercessor between God and mankind²². Consequently, Christ performed the divine acts because He was fully God, and, at the same time, He performed the human acts and suffered, because He was fully human²³.

Indeed, precisely due to this unity, Christ had the power to accept the redeeming death in freedom and complete obedience because He was God and man at the same time.

¹⁷ Leo, *Letter* 31, 2, To Pulheria, in Migne, P.L.54, col. 792B.

¹⁸ Idem, *Sermon* 30, 6, On the Feast of the Nativity X, Ibidem, col. 233 C.

¹⁹ B.Studer, *art.cit.*, p.93. B. Studer states that the term “consubstantial” is always employed with a Trinitarian meaning, in reference to the Godhead of the Word or to the divine nature. Ibidem, p. 92.

²⁰ Leo, *Letter* 28, 5, *op. cit.*, in Migne, P.L. 54, col. 771A.

²¹ Bernard Green, *The Soteriology of Leo the Great*, Oxford, University Press, 2008, p.51.

²² *Ibidem*, p.52.

²³ Leo, *Sermon* 25, 2, On the Feast of the Nativity V, in Migne, P.L.54, col.209C.

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Thus, the dogma of the double consubstantiality essentially receives a soteriological meaning, becoming even clearer if regarded in a “kerygmatic” context²⁴.

The Duality of the natures and the unity of the person

Pope Leo clearly underscores the distinction between the two natures in Christ, without neglecting the unity of Christ. Based on the apostolic symbol of faith, Pope Leo showed that Christ is begotten of God the Father and He was born of the Virgin Mary and, consequently, He had a divine nature and a human nature, each with its attributes and acts, being united into a single person²⁵. In stressing this aspect, Leo employs formulas related to the Antiochene ones, sometimes even of Nestorian echo²⁶, in his Tome to Flavian: “*Whereas the distinction between the two natures and substances is preserved, they both meet within a single person*”²⁷. Thus, duality characterises the natures or *substances*²⁸, and the unity in Christ characterises the Person. By closely examining the Latin formulas of Pope Leo, it is clear that the theology expressed through them is not the same as that of Saint Cyril of Alexandria²⁹. While the teaching of Saint Cyril of Alexandria laid emphasis on the unique Person of Christ, the Christology of Pope Leo and the Latin theology, in general, stressed more the two natures of the Saviour³⁰. Several critics of

²⁴ J. Quasten, *op. cit.*, p. 603.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 208.

²⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Definiția dogmatică de la Calcedon”, in *Ortodoxia* (1951), 2-3, p. 384.

²⁷ Leon, Sermon 28, 3, in Migne, P.L. 54, col. 763A; *Salva igitur proprietate utriusque naturae et substantiae, et in unam coeunte personam.*

²⁸ The fact that Leo avoids using the word “*substantia*” in the Tomos to Flavian is outstanding, even if the word frequently appears somewhere else in his sermons. On the other hand, the word *nature* is probably chosen out of respect for those in the East who used the word *physis*. However, it seems that the use of the word *substantia* is the result of the work of Prosper of Aquitaine who tried to bring the Tome in accordance with the definition of Chalcedon, because *substantia* was used to translate hypostasis. A. Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p. 538. J. Gaidioz indirectly states that using the word *nature* instead of *substance* seems inappropriate, given that the Tomos to Flavian was written in response to the accusations of Eutyches, who would have denied our consubstantiality with Christ. The heretic claims that he is unjustly accused of teaching about a “*unius substantiae*” in Christ and that “*ex Maria corpus factum Domini non esse nostrae substantiae*”. J. Gaidioz, *art. cit.*, p. 283.

²⁹ The Latin formula included by Pope Leo in the Tomos to Flavian: “Each nature works with the communion of the other what is proper to it” seems to be contradictory to the fourth anathematism of Cyril of Alexandria, where he shows that it is necessary to assign the acts of Christ to a single person, and not to two different persons or hypostases. Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Explanation of the 12 Anathematisms*, in P.G. 76, col. 293-312; ACO, 1,1,5, p. 15-25; cf. John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria. The Christological Controversy Its History, Theology, and Texts*, Supplements to *Vigilae Christianae* 23 (Leiden E J Brill, 1994), p. 286.

³⁰ P.T. Camelot, *op. cit.*, p. 103. A. Grillmeier states that the Cyrillian language does not dare to speak of a duality of the natures in Christ (*in Christo*), but only *extra Christum*, with reference to

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Leo suggested that, in this respect, like the Antiochenes, he stressed the separation of the natures too much, which caused the bishops of Illirycum and Palestine to worry about the apparent dualism (dyophysitism) in the Tome to Flavian³¹.

Nevertheless, we notice that the insistence of Leo on the personal unity of Christ does not essentially contradict the thought of Saint Cyril³². Like him, Leo compared this personal union between the divine and human nature of Christ with that of the body and soul that took place in the human beings³³.

In the fifth section of the Tome, Leo speaks of a “unity of the Person”, characterising “both natures”: *“In consequence of this unity of person which is to be understood in both natures, we read of the Son of Man also descending from heaven, when the Son of God took flesh from the Virgin who bore Him. And again the Son of God is said to have been crucified and buried”*³⁴.

In another sermon, Pope Leo states, on the one hand, that: *“no sort of division ever arose between the Divine and the human substances (divinam humanamque substantiam) of Christ”*, and on the other hand, he asserts that *“neither do His Divine acts affect His human, nor His human acts His Divine, since both concur in this way and to this very end that in their operation His twofold qualities be not absorbed the one by the other, nor His individuality doubled”*³⁵.

Pope Leo explains that the Lord Jesus Christ is One, and that, indeed, His divine and human nature form one and the same person and that the cohesion of the union is so tight that there is no division between the acts of Christ because: *“without the manhood the divine acts, and without the Godhead the human acts were not performed”*³⁶.

the effects of His activity, both divine and human. On the other hand, Leo boldly speaks of the duality of the natures and about the principles of the actions (*forma*). Aloys Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p. 534-35.

³¹ J.N D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Adam & Charles Black, London, 1968, p. 340; John A. McGuckin, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

³² John Meyendorff, *Hristos în gândirea creștină răsăriteană*, translation by Nicolai Buga, EIBMBOR Publishing House, Buc., 1997, p.25.

³³ For a critique of this analogy regarding the union between human body and soul, see G. O’Collins, *Christology. A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus Christ* (Oxford, second edition, 2009), p.189. He shows that Origen presents the personal union of Christ in a way that reminds of the Aristotelic theory of the union between matter and form. *Contra Celsum* (3 41). Somewhat nuanced, but more clearly stated, this analogy is encountered in a letter of Saint Augustine: “Just as in any man the soul and body form one person, in the same way the Word and Man form one person in Christ.” A few years later, Cyril of Alexandria employed the same analogy in his letter to the monks of Egypt, showing that “just as the Word took flesh and was born of a woman according to the flesh, in the same way the soul of man is born, together with his own body”. Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Epistula Cyrilli Alexandrini ad monachos*, in P.G. 77, col. 9-40; ACO 1.1.1 p. 10-23.

³⁴ Leo, *Letter* 28, 5, *op. cit.*, in Migne, P.L.54, col.771A.

³⁵ Idem, *Letter* 124, 6, To the Monks of Palestine, *Ibidem*, col.1065D.

³⁶ Idem, *Letter* 124, 7, *Ibidem*, col. 1066C.

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But Leo's view of the divine-human working of Christ shows that Leo was inwardly a long way from the Alexandrian conception of the unity in Christ³⁷.

The Communication of Attributes

The doctrine of Pope Leo on the communication of attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*) is encountered in his Homilies as well as in the Tome to Flavian. As A. Grillmeier remarked, Leo's propensity both to the antithetic formulas and the rhythmic parallelism has extensively contributed to understanding this teaching of faith. Thus, "in one clause he speaks of the divine properties, in the other of the human nature. The rhythm of his language swings to and from like a pendulum, from the divine side to the human side, from the transcendence of God to the immanence of our earthly history"³⁸. Leo presented this doctrine the best in the Tome to Flavian. But precisely what is more praised in the letter is expressed in a way that is closer to Nestorianism³⁹: "*For each nature does what is proper to it with the co-operation of the other (agit utraque forma cum alterius communione quod proprium est); that is the Word performing what appertains to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what appertains to the flesh (Verbo scilicet operante quod Verbi est, et carne exequente quod carnis est)*"⁴⁰.

In the Christology of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, which became the Christology of the Eastern Church, one cannot speak of a parallel working, of the Word and of the body⁴¹, but the acts, passions and attributes that belong both to Godhead and humanity are attributed to the Person of the Word incarnated⁴².

In Leo's letter, the body seems to have an autonomy within the union and he speaks of a separation between the form of God and the form of a slave: "*Both natures retain their own proper character without loss: and as the form of God did not do away with the form of a slave, so the form of a slave did not impair the form of God*"⁴³. Saint Cyril had more clearly expressed the collaboration that takes place between natures and their acts⁴⁴.

³⁷ A. Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 531.

³⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *art. cit.*, p.385.

⁴⁰ Leo, *Letter 28, 4, op. cit.*, in Migne, P.L.54, col. 767AB.

⁴¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *art. cit.*, p.385.

⁴² Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De recta fide ad reginas*, in P.G. 76, col. 1353; Idem, *Quod unus sit Christus Dialogus*, in P.G. 75, col. 1309, cf. Hubert du Manoir de Juaye, „Dogme et spiritualité chez Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie”, in *Etudes de Theologie et d'Histoire de la Spiritualité*, Paris, 1944, p. 148.

⁴³ Leo, *Letter 28, 3, op. cit.*, in Migne P.L. 54, col. 765A; Idem, *Sermon 23, 2, On the Feast of the Nativity III*, *Ibidem*, col. 200C.

⁴⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *art. cit.*, p. 385.

At the same time, in Leo's letter we can find a clear concept regarding the communication of attributes that was precisely the stumbling block of all the theologians of Antioch belonging to the Nestorian party. The unity of the person allows one to say that "*the Son of God was crucified and buried, although it was not actually in His Divinity, whereby the Only-Begotten is co-eternal and con-substantial with the Father, but in His weak human nature that He suffered these things*"⁴⁵. It is in this matter that Saint Cyril argued against Nestorius. God, without ceasing to be God, made human nature His own to this point of mortality⁴⁶.

The doctrine on the communication of attributes also acquires for Pope Leo a soteriological significance. It is the foundation for understanding the deification of humanity through the Incarnation of Christ and for the extension of the work of salvation of the Son of God to His Mystical Body, which is the Church⁴⁷.

He explains this in a sermon, saying that "*the Son of God elevated our nature to a new, divine destiny above the heavens, seated at the Father's right hand, when He assumed our human nature [...] He united us to Himself, becoming Son of Man in order that we could become children of God*"⁴⁸. Therefore, we share the communication of attributes with Christ, who unites us to Himself and shares His ultimate destiny (Incarnation and deification) with us. Thus, Christ's ascension becomes the foundation for our deification⁴⁹.

Pope Leo also approaches this doctrine about the communication of attributes when he speaks of the Passion of Christ on the Cross. This aspect is remarked in the way he explains Christ being forsaken by God the Father (Matthew 27:46): "*When Jesus was fixed upon the wood of the cross, the power ('Omnipotence') of the Father's Deity had gone away from Him; God's and Man's nature were so completely joined in Him that the union could not be destroyed by punishment ('supplicium') nor by death*"⁵⁰.

In this sermon, Pope Leo underscores the indestructible union between the two natures of the Saviour and, at the same time, the interpenetration of attributes. While the humanity of Christ suffers and dies, His Godhead remains impassible. Nevertheless, says Leo, even in death the union of Christ's natures remains intact⁵¹.

⁴⁵ Leo, *Letter 28*, 5, *op. cit.*, in Migne, P.L. 54, col. 771A.

⁴⁶ John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p.23.

⁴⁷ Philip L. Barclift, *Pope Leo's soteriology: sacramental recapitulation*. A dissertation submitted to the Marquette University Graduate School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 1992, p. 84.

⁴⁸ Leo, *Sermon 77*, 5, in P.L. 54, col. 414B.

⁴⁹ Philip L. Barclift, *op. cit.*, p.84.

⁵⁰ Leo, *Sermon 68*, 1, in Migne, P.L. 54, col.373A.

⁵¹ Philip L. Barclift, *op. cit.*, p.85.

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Thus, through articulating the doctrine on the communication of attributes, Pope Leo wanted to protect the impassibility of the divine nature in Jesus and to assert His complete human nature as well⁵². Nevertheless, a fully developed theology of the communication of attributes cannot be encountered in his work⁵³.

The Kenosis of the Son of God

The kenosis of the Son of God is another aspect that Pope Leo approaches. This teaching was, in fact, a key aspect of the Christology of Saint Cyril of Alexandria. Like other Holy Fathers, he regards the Incarnation as a kenosis (*kenosis* = *emptying, depletion*) of God who pleased to become like us, accepting the limits specific to the human nature. “*The whole mystery of the economy, says Saint Cyril, consists of the depletion and lessening of the Son of God*”⁵⁴. The excerpt from the Letter to Philippians 2:6-11 holds a special place in the argumentation of kenosis. This passage, says Jaroslav Pelikan, seems “to have been emblematical and a crux of interpretation at the same time. Emblematical because it speaks of what was *bestowed* on man that the Word assumed, making His earthly life and obedience the subject for an exhortation to imitate Him; a crux of interpretation because in it, as in other passages, the apostle speaks as though of one person and combines into one those things that by the division of natures are different in force”⁵⁵.

For Leo, the kenosis, as presented in the Letter to Philippians 2:7, must be interpreted as “*the bending down of pity, not the failing of power. He who while remaining in the form of God made man, was also made man in the form of a slave*”⁵⁶. “*Without detriment therefore to the properties of either nature and substance which then came together in one person, majesty took on humility, strength weakness, eternity mortality*”⁵⁷.

Following Saint Augustine, Pope Leo understands the Incarnation of the Saviour as a voluntary emptying, through which He voluntarily emptied Himself of His Godhead to receive the form of a slave, and that this voluntary action was necessary for people who did not have the capacity to receive His Godhead⁵⁸:

⁵² G. Dunn, “Divine Impassibility and Christology in the Christmas Homilies of Leo the Great”, in *Theological Studies*, 62 (2001), p.73.

⁵³ P.T.Camelot, *op. cit.*, p.102.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, translation from French by Fr. Vasile Răducă, Bonifaciu Publishing House, Bucharest, p. 56.

⁵⁵ J. Pelikan, *Tradiția creștină. O istorie a dezvoltării doctrine*, vol.I: *Nașterea tradiției universale* (100-600). Translation by Silvia Pălade, Polirom Publishing House, 2004, p.267.

⁵⁶ Leon, *Letter 28*, 3, *op. cit.*, Migne, P.L. 54, col.765A-766A.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, col. 763A.

⁵⁸ Susan Wessel, *op. cit.*, p. 253

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“But the form of a slave (forma servi) (Philippians 2:6-11), by which the impassible Godhead fulfilled sacramentum magnae pietatis, is human weakness, which was lifted up into the glory of the divine power”⁵⁹.

This emptying of Himself, whereby the Invisible made Himself visible, was the bending down of pity, and an acknowledgement of God’s mercy towards human infirmities⁶⁰.

The Deification of Man

The teaching of deification plays an important role in the Christology of Pope Leo. His Christology actually serves as a support for soteriology. The doctrine of the two natures of the Saviour becomes a doctrine of the deification of man, even though Leo is here far more restrained than Saint Athanasius the Great⁶¹. A. Grillmeier shows that, alongside Saint Irenaeus and Saint Athanasius, “he is one of the most significant representatives of the so-called “mystic doctrine of redemption”, which sees the foundation of redemption already laid in the “being” of Christ, not merely in His “acts”. The being of Christ already represents redeemed man”⁶².

Pope Leo builds his doctrine on redemption (*sacramentum salutis*), by using the Adam-Christ paradigm, which he expands to show that we participate in the life of Christ through the life of the worshipping Church. Baptised believers do not merely receive the fruits of Christ’s recapitulation, they participate in it through the liturgical celebration of the Church. Christ is truly present therein and the believers truly share in the power of Christ as if they were present with Him when He accomplished the historical deeds in His earthly life⁶³.

Thus, for Leo, the deification is closely connected with the Augustinian teaching of the mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, through which He prolongs His earthly presence in union with our human nature⁶⁴. In a sermon, he makes a connection between the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and Christ’s birth of the Virgin Mary and the birth of a Christian of the water of baptism through the action of the Holy Spirit⁶⁵. Our Saviour Jesus Christ “*became like one of us so that we can become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). He placed in*

⁵⁹ Leo, *Letter* 124, 7, To the Monks of Palestine, Migne, P.L. 54, col.1066C.

⁶⁰ Leo, *Sermon* 23,2, On the Feast of the Nativity, Ibidem, col. 201A; Susan Wessel, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

⁶¹ A. Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p. 531.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ Philip L. Barclift, *op. cit.*, p.86.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ Daniel A. Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, p. 263.

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*the font of baptism that very origin which He had assumed in the Virgin's womb: He gave to the water (through the Incarnation) what He had given to His mother. "The power of the Most High" and "overshadowing of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:35) that caused Mary to bear the Saviour makes the water regenerate the believers"*⁶⁶.

Thus, the water of baptism was interpreted as a mystical washing, being an image of the Virgin's womb and the virgin conception made Christ's human nature free from sin. This water was filled with the same power of transforming human nature as that offered to the Virgin Mary⁶⁷.

This sacramental participation and the Adam-Christ allegory that he uses are essentially important for Pope Leo's Christology⁶⁸.

In his biblical commentaries, Saint Cyril of Alexandria also prefers to use the language of *participation*, frequently making reference to (2 Peter 1:4) "partakers of the divine nature", a text that Cyril cites more than any other Church writer. Indeed, for Cyril, the expression *participation* replaces that of *deification* as a means of expressing the goal of human life; *participation* is the key to understanding our relationship with God⁶⁹.

For Saint Cyril, the teaching of deification is very important because it is connected to the Mystery of the Holy Trinity and because we discover in it the true calling of man as son of God by grace. Cyril's teaching of deification represents a considerable step forward as compared to Saint Athanasius. First and foremost, the deified Christian has a tighter relationship with the entire Holy Trinity. Through his understanding of the Trinitarian dimension regarding the way in which the human being can participate in the divine nature, Cyril brings the doctrine of deification, as several modern commentators said, to full maturity⁷⁰.

Also, Leo gives a soteriological value to the virginal birth of the Saviour from the Virgin Mary and sees in this wonderful exchange (*commercium mirabile*) between God and man the model of the restoration of man or the beginning of our victory over the devil⁷¹. But the Pope reminds that redemption attains its maxi-

⁶⁶ Leo, Sermon 25, 5, in Migne, P.L. 54, col.211C.

⁶⁷ Leo, Sermon 24, 3, Ibidem, col.206A, cf. Susan Wessel, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁶⁸ Philip L. Barclift, *op. cit.*, p.87.

⁶⁹ Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, p. 194.

⁷⁰ Many scholars suggest that Saint Cyril represented the pinnacle in the development of teaching on *theosis*. Cyril's doctrine on sanctification and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the souls recapitulates, in this respect, the whole Greek theology of *theopoiesis*, deification. See at Daniel A. Keating, *The appropriation of divine life in Cyril of Alexandria*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, p.11.

⁷¹ J. Quasten, *op. cit.*, p. 604.

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mum value in the Death and the Resurrection of Christ. The physical birth of the Saviour had His Passion as its goal so that we humans could attain eternal life⁷². “For there was no other reason for the Son of God to be born than that He could be fixed to a cross. Our mortal flesh was taken up in the womb of the Virgin. The ordering of His Passion was completed in our mortal flesh. It was brought about in the ineffable wisdom of the mercy of God (*misericordiae Dei*) that He should be for us the sacrifice of redemption, the destruction of sin (*abolitio peccati*), and the beginning of the resurrection to eternal life (*ad aeternam vitam initium resurgendi*)”⁷³. The Mystery of the Holy Baptism plays an essential role in the salvation of man. Leo explains that by receiving this Mystery the believers participate in the Resurrection of Christ and “the bodies are reborn and become the flesh of the Crucified (*fiat caro Crucifixi*)”⁷⁴.

In some sermons, Leo gets very close to the Latin view, that regards the redemption of man in juridical terms, based rather on the idea of sacrifice and reconciliation than on the Eastern concept of deification⁷⁵. This aspect is confirmed by Leo’s doctrine regarding the Sacrifice of Christ. According to Leo, the Sacrifice of the Saviour marked the fulfilment of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament⁷⁶. His Sacrifice was capable of reconciling the entire mankind with God⁷⁷.

Thus, while for the Eastern churches the goal of the Incarnation of the Saviour was that of making deification possible for human beings, for Pope Leo, the goal of the Saviour was that of lifting human beings, by accepting His humility, to their primordial state. In this respect, he shows that just as Christ underwent human sufferings and fear like a true human being, in the same way ordinary Christians have to imitate His authentic response to suffering and to answer each one separately to His compassion (mercy) so as to be deified⁷⁸.

⁷² Philip L. Barclift, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁷³ Leo, Sermon 48,1, in Migne, P.L.54, col.298A.

⁷⁴ Idem, Sermon 63, 6, Ibidem, col.357A.

⁷⁵ John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁷⁶ Pope Leo shows that this was effected by God through the transition from the Law to the Gospel, from the synagogue to the Church, and from many sacrifices to the one Victim. Leo, Sermon 68, 3, col. 374 C.

⁷⁷ J. Quasten, *op. cit.*, p. 605.

⁷⁸ Susan Wessel, *op. cit.*, p. 257.