**St. John of Damascus Adult Religious Education Program
at the Nativity of the Theotokos Antiochian Orthodox Church** (Hunt Valley, MD)
**Reading Sacred Scripture
Theosis: St. Paul and the Early Fathers**

**Zoom link: Will be Provided after registration**

**Instructor: Najeeb T. Haddad, Ph.D.
Class times: Tuesdays, 7:00pm-8:30pm February 25 – April 29 (8 Sessions)**

**Course Description:**

This course explores the concept of *theosis* (deification) in the Pauline epistles and the writings of the early Church Fathers. We will examine how St. Paul’s theology—particularly in Galatians, Romans, Ephesians/Colossians, and Philemon—sets the stage for key themes of Christian transformation, such as baptism into Christ, crucifixion with Christ, the virtuous life, and the new creation. We then trace how these themes were received and developed by select early Fathers, who articulated theosis as the central goal of human existence.

By engaging biblical exegesis, patristic texts, and contemporary Orthodox theological scholarship, participants will gain a deeper appreciation of how the doctrine of theosis emerged from the heart of Pauline theology and shaped the early Christian and modern Orthodox Christian vision of salvation.

**Course Objectives**

1. **Identify** the key Pauline passages that inform the doctrine of theosis.
2. **Analyze** how Paul’s themes of baptism, crucifixion with Christ, virtue, and new creation contribute to the concept of theosis.
3. **Examine** how early Church Fathers—such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nyssa—drew upon Pauline theology to articulate their understanding of theosis (deification).
4. **Evaluate** the continuity and development of theosis within early Christian thought.
5. **Synthesize** biblical exegesis and patristic teaching into a coherent understanding of theosis as understood in the Orthodox Christian tradition.

**Required Texts**

1. **The Holy Bible** (Orthodox Study Bible is fine).
2. **Irenaeus of Lyons. *Against Heresies*** (Book V particularly) – various editions available. (I will provide excerpts, but feel free to buy if you prefer).
3. **Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation***. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press or other reputable edition (I will provide excerpts, but feel free to buy if you prefer).
4. **Gregory of Nyssa. *The Life of Moses* or *On the Christian’s Perfection*** – Paulist Press or other reputable edition (I will provide excerpts, but feel free to buy if you prefer).

**Recommended Secondary Readings (I use some information from these books)**

* John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (Fordham University Press)
* Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (SVS Press)
* Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Eerdmans)
* Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford University Press)

**Tentative Schedule**

**Week 1 (Feb 25): Introduction to Theosis in Orthodox Theology**

* **Topics**:
	+ Overview of theosis in the Orthodox tradition
	+ Biblical and patristic foundations of deification
	+ Overview of Pauline theology’s influence on patristic thought
* **Readings**:
	+ Selected passages from Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (on deification)

**No Meeting March 4, First Week of Great Lent**

**Week 2 (March 11): Theosis in Galatians**

* **Topics**:
	+ Justification vs. participation in Christ
	+ “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:19–20)
	+ Baptismal identity and new creation (Gal 3:27–29; 6:15)
* **Readings**:
	+ Galatians (entire epistle, with focus on chapters 2–3; 5–6)
* **Discussion/Activity**:
	+ Reflection: How does dying with Christ relate to being deified?

**Week 3 (March 18): Theosis in Romans**

* **Topics**:
	+ Union with Christ through baptism (Rom 6:1–11)
	+ Life in the Spirit and transformation (Rom 8:1–17)
	+ The eschatological dimension of theosis
* **Readings**:
	+ Romans (recommended focus: chapters 5–8)
	+ Excerpts from John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Romans* (for patristic insight)
* **Discussion/Activity**:
	+ Class debate: “Is Paul’s theology of baptism primarily juridical or transformative?”
	+ Group analysis of how the Spirit’s indwelling contributes to deification.

**Week 4 (March 25): Theosis in Ephesians & Colossians**

* **Topics**:
	+ Divine mystery and participation in Christ (Eph 1–3)
	+ Ethical exhortations as means of theosis (Eph 4–6)
	+ Christ as the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15–20) and believers’ transformation
* **Readings**:
	+ Ephesians and Colossians (read in full)
* **Discussion/Activity**:
	+ Compare/contrast Ephesians and Colossians regarding the "new self" and cosmic scope of theosis.

**Week 5 (April 1): Theosis in Philemon**

* **Topics**:
	+ Christian fellowship and mutual participation in Christ (Phlm 1:6)
	+ Social implications of theosis: Unity and brotherhood
	+ The practicality of deification in everyday relationships
* **Readings**:
	+ Philemon (entire epistle)
	+ Short patristic commentary excerpts (e.g., St. John Chrysostom or Theodoret)
* **Discussion/Activity**:
	+ Round-table discussion: “How does the brief Letter to Philemon illustrate the transformative power of theosis in social contexts?”

**Week 6 (Special Meeting Time Monday April 7): Irenaeus and Athanasius**

* **Topics**:
	+ Irenaeus of Lyons: Recapitulation and the restoration of the image of God
	+ Athanasius of Alexandria: “God became man so that man might become god”
	+ The connection between Pauline themes and the Fathers’ soteriology
* **Readings**:
	+ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Book V selections)
	+ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (focus on Chapters 1–5, 54)
* **Discussion/Activity**:
	+ Link specific Pauline texts to key patristic statements on deification.
	+ Reflect on how baptism and the cross figure in the fathers’ articulation of theosis.

**No Meeting April 15, Holy Week**

**Week 7 (April 22): Gregory of Nyssa and Further Developments**

* **Topics**:
	+ Gregory of Nyssa’s vision of progressive ascent (e.g., *The Life of Moses*)
	+ Virtuous living and transformation into the divine likeness
	+ Continuities and distinctions between Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Gregory
* **Readings**:
	+ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* or *On the Christian’s Perfection* (selections)
* **Discussion/Activity**:
	+ “How does Gregory’s metaphor of ascension parallel Paul’s call to continual transformation (2 Cor 3:18)?”

**Week 8 (April 29): Synthesis and Contemporary Reflection**

* **Topics**:
	+ Synthesis of Paul’s letters with patristic interpretations of theosis
	+ Contemporary implications of deification in Orthodox theology and spirituality
	+ Final reflections and course wrap-up
* **Readings**:
	+ Optional: Short readings on modern Orthodox perspectives (Lossky, Zizioulas)
* **Discussion/Activity**:
	+ Class discussion on how theosis remains central in contemporary Orthodox thought and practice

Glory to God!