

# ***Unio Mystica* as Ontological Union with Christ in Sanctification:**

## **A Confessional Lutheran Approach**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article's intention is to investigate the connection between *unio mystica*, ontological union with Christ and sanctification in the confessional Lutheranism. It is not my intention to present a complete study concerning this theme, but a helpful study about this important doctrine to orthodox and confessional Lutheranism. The first section will investigate the differences and similarities between the Lutheran view of *unio mystica* and the other Christian traditional views, especially the Eastern Orthodox's notion of theosis, about *unio mystica*. The second section will study the doctrine of the *unio mystica* in the orthodox and modern Lutheranism. The third section will investigate the notion of the *unio mystica* in the contemporary and confessional Lutheranism. This work involves a brief study of the Bible, of the Lutheran Confessions, and of the Lutheran fathers.

### **1- Lutheran View of the *Unio Mystica* and other Christian Traditions**

Since protestantism is almost synonymous with *sola gratia*, Lutheranism, and specifically almost synonymous with justification by faith without the deeds of the law (Eph 2:8-9; Rom 1:17), the Lutheran doctrine of justification - like Calvin's doctrine of justification, in theory teaches that man is justified by a forensic act of God, that is, for Christ's sake the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us by faith. Though the Lutheran Church teaches this, Calvinism doesn't remain with the forensic justification in its practices. To the non-Lutheran world, forensic justification is a distinguishable mark of the entire historical protestantism; this includes both Lutherans and Calvinists. Hence, to talk about deification or theosis out of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic worlds can seem [to be] a return to Roman Catholic doctrine of *gratia infusa*, a pantheistic view of God from eastern philosophy, and a refusal of the Reformation. In fact, these concerns are good but if the doctrine of forensic justification is changed then the Reformation and Lutheranism are

refused. Yes, as Lutherans, we say that anyone's doctrine that denies forensic justification is heretical.

Nevertheless, there is an interesting subject that we didn't mention yet: the relationship between the doctrine of the union with Christ (*unio mystica*) or theosis within sanctification. We can ask: Is teaching any species of theosis, deification, or more than symbolic union with Christ in sanctification necessarily a heresy?

Forensic justification requires a species of forensic sanctification as well, or can we talk about our participation in Christ in sanctification as a consequence of forensic justification? In response to these questions we need firstly, to be reminded of the major controversy about the doctrine from the sixteenth century of the indwelling of Christ in our being. The man that caused this controversy was Andreas Osiander (1498-1552). He denied forensic justification and taught the justification of the indwelling of Christ in our being. John Calvin (1509-1564) condemned Osiander's teachings in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and the Lutheran Church officially condemned these same teachings in the *Formula of Concord*. Despite this controversy, Lutheran orthodoxy always taught a *unio mystica* differently than Calvinism and ever claimed that Calvinism is more rationalistic than Lutheranism. The former doesn't believe that our union with Christ in the believer is a union with the entire Christ; while the latter believes that, if there is in fact a union with Christ in the believer, this union isn't only with a part or a dimension (for Jesus cannot be separated) but a union with the entire Christ. The Formula of Concord states:

Against both parties the other teachers of the Augsburg Confession held unanimously that Christ is our righteousness, not according to the divine nature alone or according to the human nature alone but according to both natures; as God and man he has by his perfect obedience redeemed us from our sins, justified and saved us. Therefore they maintained that the righteousness of faith is forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and the fact that we are adopted as God's children solely on account of the obedience of Christ, which, through faith alone, is reckoned by pure grace to all true believers as righteousness, and that they are absolved from all their unrighteousness because of this obedience. (Formula of Concord, SD III:4, pp. 539-540).

In an interview, the Calvinist theologian Michael Horton (1964-) gave a declaration that was interpreted for some Roman Catholics apologists as a refusal of the characteristic of the Church as the body of Christ. To the critics

(<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2009/09/horton-on-being-made-one-flesh-with-christ/>), Horton showed in his interview that he believes the biblical greek word *sarx*, used to characterize the church as the body of Christ (1 Co 12:27), doesn't refer to a literal body but only the external aspect of the being. By this interpretation, when the Apostle Paul talks about the body of Christ as the nature of the church, he hasn't the intention to talk about a literal body, but, yes, the relationship of the external image and Christ. What he is saying is that the Church must be seen by the world as holy, pure, immaculate, because She "looks like" Christ in a metaphorical sense.

The Roman Catholic apologists seem to state that the refusal of ontological participation of Christians in the body of Christ is a refusal of our literal salvation by Christ, for if Christ isn't ontologically in us then He didn't save us literally. Logically, we Lutherans deny the concept of salvation by *gratia infusa* of the Roman Catholics; but does this criticism of these apologists give value to the article of sanctification? Can we say that we do not have an ontological participation with the body of Christ in justification or in sanctification and still believe that Christ in fact lives in us? By logic the response is, "No."

It is impossible to be saved by Christ without any ontological relationship with Him in sanctification, because this non-ontological sanctification would be a symbolic or metaphoric sanctification of Christ in us, but not the real presence of Christ in us. However, confessional Lutherans aren't worried with logical problems to doctrine. We believe that doctrine isn't true because it is logical, but because it comes from God and is biblical. Nevertheless the Bible itself speaks of deification. In this case, we Lutherans must know what the Bible says about it. And the Bible says that we, as Christians, are partakers of the divine nature, temples of God and members of the body of Christ (I Pe 2:14; 1 Co 6:19; 1 Co 12:27). Indeed, we must know what the Lutheran fathers thought about it.

Francis Pieper (1852-1931), in his *Christian Dogmatics* (PIEPER, Christian Dogmatics Vol. II, pp. 409-419) said that we cannot accept the doctrine of the non-confessional Lutherans that believe the Christians in sanctification participate in the essence of Christ. Also, according to Pieper, we must deny the use of philosophical speculation to defend the participation of man in the essence of Christ through the sacraments, for it (i.e. philosophical speculation) conduces Lutheranism changing to the

Roman Catholic doctrine of *ex opere operato* of the sacraments, that is, the idea that in the sacraments anyone can receive salvation, even without faith.

In contrast, the Lutheran Church teaches the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, although it is objective, it doesn't lead men to heaven without faith. We receive salvation by faith. To deny this is to deny the justification by faith alone and return to *gratia infusa*. Despite all this criticism, Pieper confesses that Luther taught the participation of Christians in the body of Christ. However, there are differences between Luther's view of the ontological union with Christ and the modern view about it. Some of these differences are:

1-the modern Lutheran belief in the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is more mathematical than mystical;

2- the mathematical view of this presence is more Romish than confessional Lutheran;

3- the grace given *ex opera operato* by this mathematical presence contradicts the doctrine of the reproof of those who eat and drink without faith;

4- despite Luther's rejection of the receptionist idea of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, his view of this presence is more mystical than mechanical or mathematical, and doesn't intend to satisfy human reason;

5- Luther's view is according to the doctrine of justification by faith and the refusal of grace to those who reject faith in the use of the Lord's Supper;

6- Luther's view rejects *ex opera operato* and the idea of the physical change in the body of the communicants as the cause of *gratia infusa*.

Although these differences are very important, a fact must be stressed here: Luther's rejection of the doctrine that the Lord's Supper changes our body physically by the presence of Christ, that is related with the Romish concept of *ex opera operato*, and *gratia infusa*, Luther didn't reject the idea that by faith we have the species of an ontological union with the literal Christ present in the Lord's Supper. His rejection was his concern for this kind of union, because the Aristotelian-Thomist rhetoric of the Roman church could lead to the idea that the union *ex opera operato* and the literal union is a union of essences, namely, the mix between the human essence and Christ's essence.

Luther's doctrine of the *unio mystica* was a half-term between Romish doctrine and Calvinist and Enthusiast doctrines. To the former there is a species of union in the Lord Supper that is dangerous to the preservation of the human and Christ essences and the latter is dangerous to the doctrine of the union between us and Christ. If the Roman Catholic's teaching of *gratia infusa* leads to confusion between us and Christ, the Calvinist's and Enthusiast's symbolism leads to a gnostic refusal of union between God and matter and Christ and us. It is a biblical doctrine that we are participants of the divine nature. Luther believed in the Apostle Paul's words the we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, but interpreted it to mean that not only the Holy Spirit dwells in us but the Holy Trinity. We know the Holy Trinity includes the Person of the Son and we know too that Luther believed the Person of the Son has both the divine and human natures, and that wherever the divine nature is, there the human nature is also. Therefore, if there didn't exist any kind of ontological union between us and the entire Christ, then Luther himself would have had to deny his own teaching.

Likewise, Luther supported the patristic idea that the Lord's Supper is a medicine unto the resurrection and believed that our body, with our five senses, must worship God. (Pieper, *Ibid.* pp. 409-419). But Luther himself also believed that we cannot worship God without grace. Hence, not only our soul receives grace, but our entire being, namely, our soul and body: He says:

This is one of those apposite, beautiful, and (as St. Peter says in 2 Pet. 1) precious and very great promises given to us, poor mis-erable sinners: that we are to become participants of the divine nature and be exalted so high in nobility that we are not only to become loved by God through Christ, and have His favor and grace as the highest and most precious shrine, but also to have Him, the Lord Himself, dwelling in us in His fullness. Namely (he wants to say), His love is not to be limited only to the removal of His wrath from upon us, and to having the fatherly heart which is merciful to us, but we are also to enjoy this love (otherwise it would be wasted and lost love, as it is said: "to love and not to enjoy ... "), and gain great benefit and riches from it (LUTHER apud BRAATEN, *Union with Christ*, pp. 33-34).

For definition, it is impossible for the material entity to receive literally something that doesn't have any literal or ontological contact with the essence of the entity itself, i.e. the matter. If Jesus saves our soul and body, He must be in contact with the material constitution of the our body.

## **2- *Unio Mystica* in Lutheran Orthodoxy and in Modern Lutherans**

But, as we said above, Luther doesn't intend to satisfy the human reason. Yes, it's true. However, it is one thing to have a rationalist view of the world, and another thing to have the idea that the irrationalist view of the world is intrinsically correct. Luther rejected the exaggerations of the rationalist view of the world, but doesn't appreciate the irrationalism itself or make a condemnation of reason itself. He used reason in the principle of non-contradiction many times. For example, to explain the doctrine of *genus idiomaticum*, *genus maieastaticum* and *genus apotelesmaticum* it is impossible to explain this doctrine without a moderate use of reason in the principle of non-contradiction. Luther was not an enemy of reason and the principle of non-contradiction, but a Christian theologian and pastor that desired to put reason and the principle of non-contradiction under the authority of the Bible. The Bible taught it and Luther not only believed in the Bible, but showed the inner coherence of this doctrine.

Until now we have been stressing the investigation in the notion of forensic justification and the union with Christ in sanctification by use of the Lord's Supper. We did it to avoid the objection that in the doctrines of absolution, preaching of the Gospel, and Baptism, the Lutheran Church doesn't teach there is a material-celestial substance united with the earthly substance as condition of the gift of the grace and salvation. In the preaching the Gospel, the Lutheran Church teaches that Christ saves man by preaching, but hasn't a formal doctrine of the a special physical presence of Christ in the preaching of the Gospel. Also in the Absolution, Christ saves by the words of the pastor, but in the Lutheran Church there isn't a formal doctrine of a special physical doctrine of Christ in the words of absolution of the pastor. Even in Baptism there is a dispute about this issue: Some Lutherans theologians have a particular view that the body of Christ is united with the word and the water in baptism; others have the particular position that the body of Christ isn't united with the word and water in baptism. The official position of the Lutheran Church is that we only need to know (to have a valid sacrament of baptism) that in baptism the Trinitarian words of Christ are united with the water. However, personal theological speculation never was prohibited in the Lutheran Church if this personal theological

speculation doesn't contradict the official or formal dogma of the Lutheran Church, derived of simply the words of the Bible (I Pe 2:14; 1 Co 6:19).

In this personal view of the relationship between us and Christ in other spheres of Christian life, we can understand how Luther and the orthodox Lutheran fathers thought. For example, if the Holy Trinity is present in the words and water of Baptism and is received by faith, it is reasonable to speculate that (by faith) in baptism we receive the human nature as well as the divine nature of Christ because the natures cannot be separated from the Person. If by faith in the preaching of the Gospel, or by faith in the words of absolution, we receive the Holy Trinity, we then become temples of the Holy Spirit and the all Holy Trinity. So it is also reasonable to speculate that by faith in the preaching of the Gospel, or by faith in the words of the absolution, we receive the human nature of Christ as well, because it cannot be separated from the Person of the Son.

The words of Luther and that the orthodox Lutheran fathers show that they believed in a substantial, but not mechanical or mathematical, union with Christ in all Christian life. Luther says that in Christ he is nothing, namely, in his non-self Christ "is" because the Christian life and sanctification is the dwelling of Christ in the self of the believers. All of Luther's Theology of the Cross shows that the believers don't live in themselves, but in the "other" i.e. Christ, firstly and then his neighbour because Christ's love is in themselves. If there isn't a substantial dwelling of Christ in us then, for Luther, these notions would be impossible, for the works of Christ in us wouldn't be real but only metaphorical and the good works would actually be of ourselves; sanctification would be, in fact, works of men.

It's true that we believe we have personal responsibility by our acts and that our faith is the faith of ourselves and that it isn't Christ, or the Holy Spirit, that believes for us. It is necessary that all of the Christian's life be passive, in as much as Christ's works are active in us. For these reasons – and for another reason that we haven't time to explain in the article – we defend the thesis that *unio mystica* in sanctification is more than symbolic or metaphoric. As a more than symbolic union, *unio mystica* can be described as an ontological union despite that we reject, along with Pieper, the error of the idea that between us and Christ exists a mix of essences. Luther says:

Just as the word of God became flesh, so it is certainly also necessary that the flesh may become word. In other words: God becomes man so that man may become God. Thus power becomes powerless so that weakness may become powerful. The *Logos* puts on our form and pattern, our image and likeness, so that it may clothe us with its image, its pattern, and its likeness. Thus wisdom becomes foolish so that foolishness may become wisdom, and so it is in all other things that are in God and in us, to the extent that in all these things he takes what is ours to himself in order to impart what is his to us. LUTHER apud BRAATEN, *Ibidem*, p. 11).

Quenstedt (1617-1688) says: “the mystical union does not consist only in the harmony and mixture of feelings...but in true, permanent, and very close union” (QUENSTEDT, *Ecthesis*, p. 623). This same notion is present in David Hollaz (1648-1713): “[the mystical union connects] On the one hand is a. the entire substance of the Holy Trinity, b. the substance of the human nature of Christ, c. on the other side is the substance of regenerate man, c. considered in body and soul”: (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/justandsinner/a-translation-of-david-hollaz-on-mystical-union/>). Also Johann Gerhard (1582-1637): “[God] He personally united His Son with our nature” (GERHARD, *On Christ*, p. 144). Abraham Calov (1612-1686) states:

The form (of the mystical union) is the joining together with God, not relatively, but truly; not merely outwardly, but inwardly, not by mere assistance, but by innermost immanence; not only the working of grace, but at the same time the approach of the divine substance to believers with the mystical *pericoreosis*; nevertheless short of mixing or transforming the essence of man [...] Therefore two things belong to its form: 1- true and real *adiastasia* or nearness through the approach of the divine substance to the believers, by which the triune God comes to us and makes his home in us (Jn 14:23); which then is not only mere grace and working without the approach of the essence of God, but the divine substance approaches closer to us so that it is in us and God [still] remains with his substance; 2- gracious *energia*, because He comes to us so that He dwells in us and fills us with all fullness of wisdom, holiness, goodness and spiritual power (Eph 3:18), and of other divine gifts *κατα το μετρον της δωρεας περιχώρησις* (Eph 4:7). This also introduces the mystical *perichoresis*, by which God remains in us through the grace, we are really in God on whom we confidently depend, so that nothing can separate us who are united to God from God (Rom. 8:28, 29) (CALOV, *Theol. Pos.*, p. 503).

We believe that Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, the fathers of Lutheran orthodoxy, and the fathers of the renewal of the confessional Lutheranism between the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century supported this idea.

### **3. *Unio Mystica* in Contemporary Lutheranism: A Confessional Evaluation**

In the the twentieth century, a new theological thought arose among some Lutheran scholars in Finland. This new idea was called the New Finnish Interpretation of Luther. In the leadership of this theological school were men such as Tuommo Mannermaa (1935-2015). Mannermaa and others scholars defended that there was a brake between Luther and the Lutheran Confessions (BRAATEN; JENSON, *Union with Christ*, 1998). To them, Luther didn't teach forensic justification. Forensic justification was a dogmatic modification of Luther's thought by later Lutheran confessions. Luther, to them, taught Theosis, the doctrine in which God became man into man become God – but doesn't become God in essence. This Finnish school tried to show that the mystical theology of Luther gave the notion of the dwelling of Christ in the being of man as the central idea of reconciliation between God and mankind. Moreover, they believed that to Luther "Christ present in faith" (the title of a book by Mannermaa), that faith cannot be outside of Christ. In this sense, justification isn't forensic but it is by the dwelling of Christ in our being; our faith is in Christ in the sense that we cannot use that faith outside of Christ. Some of the criticisms that the Finnish school have been receiving arise from the accusation that they are renewing the Osiandric heresy. To some critics, they are Osiandrics. We agree with this accusation. If there isn't forensic justification, it isn't possible to separate the faith of Christ and indwelling of Christ (that is in faith) in our being in the case of forensic justification, so they are in some sense Osiandrics.

Against that error of the Finnish school, the traditional and confessional Lutheran views of the ontological union in sanctification were defended for confessional Lutherans of the twentieth century. For example, the prominent Lutheran theologian Kurt Maquart (1934-2006) supported this confessional view (MAQUART, *Luther and Theosis*, pp.182-205). In the twenty-first century, other confessional Lutheran theologians have been writing about an ontological union: Rev. Jordan Cooper (1987-). Cooper coined a new name for this doctrine: "christification". In his book *Christification: A Lutheran Approach of Theosis*, he points to the resemblances and differences between the Eastern Orthodox concept of theosis and the Lutheran concept of the differences between the confessional Lutheran use of the concept of theosis in justification and the bad use of this notion by non-confessional Lutherans that deny forensic justification.

First, the Eastern Orthodox idea of theosis is related with the doctrine of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). Though they could claim that this doctrine came from Christ and had been taught since the beginning of the Church and that ever was present in the Church's devotion, was with Palamas, that some formal aspects of this doctrine arose. To Palamas and to Neo-Palamites, as Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), the Christian participates in God's energy or action but doesn't participate in God's essence. Secondly, Cooper shows that the Lutheran notion of theosis isn't related with the use of the sophisticated philosophical categories and that this Lutheran approach is more simple (related with biblical sentences) and more theological (in opposition to the philosophical approach). Thirdly, he states that the confessional Lutheran view of theosis, which he calls "Christification", is an ontological union with Christ after the forensic justification and rejects the non-confessional view that confuses justification and sanctification. To Cooper, forensic justification leads the Christian to a life in a growing sanctification, that is the same ontological union or improvement of our being according to Christ's image, without a mix between our essence and Christ's essence.

Sanctification is actually Christ in action in the being of the believers by faith because Christ is actually present in faith. Cooper claims that the title of this doctrine sometimes was *unio mystica* (Lutheran Orthodoxy era) and sometimes was called theosis (Maquart) and that his coined title "Christification" doesn't lead to a new doctrine, but it is only is a new title for the same confessional Lutheran doctrine of an ontological union in sanctification. He also states that this doctrine is not only confessional and present in the Lutheran Orthodoxy era, but is biblical as well.

Beyond Jordan Cooper and Kurt Maquart, other important contemporary confessional Lutheran theologians support this view. C. F. W. Walther (1811-1887) relates the *unio mystica* with the restoration of God's image in Christian thought. (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/justandsinner/the-restoration-of-the-divine-image-through-christ-a-sermon-by-c-f-w-walther-on-mark-731-37/>). Adolf Hoenecke (1838-1908) claims that:

The essence of the mystical union is that God according to his substance in a miraculous way is close to the substance of humans and permeates their substance with his essence (Jn 17:21-23), and, dwelling in the believers, he so Works in them

that they are filled with knowledge and all fullness of God (Eph 3:17-19). When we describe the mystical union as a presence of the divine substance with the human substance, we express its intimacy [...] [our confessions] expressly rejects as a false doctrine ‘that not God, but only the gifts of God, dwell in believers’ (HOENECKE, Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics- Vol. III, pp. 386-387)

and Franklin Revere Weidner (1851-1915) claims the same:

The mystical union, the result of the indwelling grace, is the spiritual conjunction of the triune God with the justified man in whom as a temple hallowed to Himself God dwells by a special presence, not presence of separated gifts, but of substance bringing gifts and operating by gracious influence in Him (WEIDNER Apud COOPER, Lecture on Mystical Union: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=709JVr7Egdc>).

We claim that the title of this doctrine is an adiaphoron. Anyone can call it Christification, theosis, or merely *mystical union*. If someone rejects one of these titles but teaches the correct doctrine about it then this person isn’t wrong. The important thing is – although Christ and we are separated persons with our own essences – we teach that in sanctification, our participation in Christ or the dwelling of Christ in us isn’t only symbolical or metaphorical but real. We are the body of Christ not because our faith reminds us of Christ but because this faith unites us with Christ, our real Savior.

## CONCLUSION

This article studied the connection between *unio mystica*, ontological union with Christ and sanctification in confessional Lutheranism. We did a brief investigation of the historical and confessional Lutheran notion of this doctrine, its biblical foundation, and the differences and similarities between the Lutheran view and other Christian views, especially the view of the Eastern Orthodox Church concerning *unio mystica*. Our conclusion is that the doctrine of *unio mystica* as an ontological union with Christ in sanctification, in accordance with the exposition in the article’s scope, is biblical, orthodox, and confessionally Lutheran. Therefore, although this article is short and incomplete, we think that it can be helpful to understanding this important Lutheran doctrine.

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