

# Myrrha Lot-Borodine on the concept of theosis<sup>1</sup>

Teresa Obolevitch

THE PONTIFICAL UNIVERSITY OF JOHN PAUL II  
IN KRAKOW  
ORCID: 0000-0002-6834-6142

## ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the presentation and analysis of the views of the prominent Russian-French female theologian Myrrha Lot-Borodine concerning the Eastern Christian conception of theosis. First, I present a history of the appearance of her works in this field. Then, the aspect of theocentrism of Eastern Christianity is discussed as well as its specificity as a tradition which combines both cataphatic and apophatic approaches. The analysis role of body in theosis is also shown. Lot-Borodine was one of the first theologian who dedicated her work on deification, and a brief reception of her publications on this topic is displayed.

**KEYWORDS:** Myrrha Lot-Borodine, theosis, Eastern Christian tradition, patristics, Orthodox theology

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Myrrha Lot-Borodine, teoza, tradycja wschodniochrześcijańska, patrystyka, teologia prawosławna

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Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882–1957) is an outstanding researcher of Patristic heritage, one of the first to respond to the call of Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) to return to the Church Fathers – a call which also transformed her own spiritual life. Her works on deification occupy a special place in the history of Patristic studies. It is assumed that the beginning of studies in this theme was marked by the article of the Russian theologian Ivan Popov (1867–1938) “The Idea of Deification in the Early Eastern Church” published in 1906<sup>2</sup>. Its author wrote: “The idea of deification (*θεοποίησις, θέωσις*), which is completely forgotten in modern theology, was the very core of the religious life in the Christian East”<sup>3</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that in France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Vincent Ermoni (1858–1910) published the article “The Deification of Man in the Church Fathers”<sup>4</sup>. Lot-Borodine picked up the baton and approached the study of deification in Eastern Christian Patristics with her characteristic thoroughness. And although, strictly speaking, Lot-Borodine cannot be considered as having been one of those who initiated the study in this area, it should be acknowledged that her works on the topic have become the most significant, if not classics, in their field.

In addition, Lot-Borodine drew attention of Western readers to the personality and work of many Greek and Byzantine Church Fathers, such as Symeon the New Theologian and Nicolas Cabasilas. In the common

2 I. Popov, *Ideya obozheniya v drevne-vostochnoy Tserkvi*, “Voprosy Filosofii i Psikhologii”, 97 (1906), 165–213. See: J. Pilch, “Breathing the Spirit with both Lungs”: *Deification in the Work of Vladimir Solov'ev*, Leuven 2018, p. 9.

3 I. Popov, *op.cit.*, p. 165.

4 V. Ermoni, *Déification de l'homme chez les Pères de l'Église*, „Revue du Clergé Français”, 11 (1897), p. 509–519. See: N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford 2004.

5 See M. Stavrou, *La Démarche néo-patristique de Myrrha Lot-Borodine et de Vladimir Lossky* [in:] *Les Pères de l'Église aux sources de l'Europe*, D. Gonet, M. Stavrou (eds.), Paris 2014, p. 205–206.

6 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Nicolas Berdyaev from July 6, 1931 [in:] *The Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts* [further as RSALA], F. 1496, Op. 1, Ed. khr. 588.

opinion, Lot-Borodine's studies were not systematic in character, nevertheless it would be more correct to say that her works in the field of Patristics shape a coherent whole. More precisely, they form the spiral-shaped cycles<sup>5</sup> devoted to the problems of deification, to the thought of Nicolas Cabasilas, as well as other issues of Christian spirituality, both Eastern and Western.

## The Doctrine of Deification

The theme of deification is the focus of the first major theological work of Lot-Borodine; it was written after a significant meeting with George Florovsky in 1929 which changed the direction of her enquiries. This took the form of an extensive article entitled “The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Church before the 11<sup>th</sup> Century” (i.e. before the schism of 1054) which was written specifically for the prestigious French journal *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* (“Journal of the History of Religions”). The author presented her plan to Nicolas Berdyaev (1874–1948) in the following manner:

In the article requested to me by *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, I want to reflect upon and partly reveal the Greek mystical doctrine whose origins date back to Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Alexandria. Much has been found in Macarius of Egypt and Evagrius of Pontus, who undoubtedly had an influence on St. Maxim the Confessor, and even in Philo<sup>6</sup>.

Lot-Borodine also wrote to Florovsky about her planned article on deification in the Greek Church, asking for his advice:

I know, this is a blind undertaking, because I can, alas, work only on the base of the second-hand sources, but the French, both Catholics (except

for the Jesuits from *Orientalia Christiana!*) and the non-Christian teachings, are so ignorant of Orthodox thought and mystics that even I can offer them something positive, especially since I have been reading and reflecting on this topic all year round and am surrounded by the research of the “specialists” in different languages. Yet, I do not have everything at hand and something remains generally under a question mark, despite a conscientious study of the sources. For this reason, I dare once again to address to your obliging erudition in order to clarify some points which are still doubtful for me<sup>7</sup>.

It soon transpired that the content of the article was beyond the scope of a single publication. After a year and a half, Lot-Borodine reported:

I am correcting... the second article on *θέωσις*, and there will be a third one, it seems like 50 pages. I even dream [to publish them] as a book!<sup>8</sup>

The same idea can be found in a later letter addressed to Berdyaev: “I have not lost the hope of publishing this piece someday, relating it to other essays on Byzantine mysticism, but I still cannot get down to business”<sup>9</sup>. Lot-Borodine termed her research method concentric<sup>10</sup>: in three of her articles, she returned to the same issues, but always at a new level; even though this led to inevitable repetitions, the thought itself became more refined and renewed.

## 1. Theocentrism of Eastern Christianity

Lot-Borodine confessed: “My main interest is a rapprochement with the Western medieval doctrine of contemplation as well as a high point of *divergence*”<sup>11</sup>. For this reason, at the beginning of her work she observed

7 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to George Florovsky from August 24, 1931 [in:] Princeton University Library, Rare Books and Special Collections [further as PUL RBSC], Georges Florovsky Papers, Box 27, F. 30.

8 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Nicolas Berdyaev from December 23, 1932 [in:] RSALA, F. 1496, Op. 1, Ed. khr. 588.

9 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Nicolas Berdyaev from November 7, 1934 [in:] RSALA, F. 1496, Op. 1, Ed. khr. 588.

10 See: M. Lot-Borodine, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle: II (suite)*, “Revue de l'Histoire des Religions”, 106 (1932), 525; *eadem*, *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs*, Paris 1970, p. 67.

11 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to G. Florovsky from August 24, 1931 [in:] PUL RBSC, Georges Florovsky Papers, Box 27, F. 30.

12 M. Lot-Borodina, *Kritika 'Russkogo Khristianstva'* [Critique of Russian Christianity], "Put", 52 (1937), p. 51–52.

13 See: Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Jacques Maritain from November 30, 1932 [in:] La Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg [further as BNU], Fonds Jacques et Raïssa Maritain, correspondances.

14 See: M. Lot-Borodine, *Nicolas Cabasilas: un maître de la spiritualité byzantine au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1958, p. 7, 111, 148. Cf. A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition From Plato to Denys*, Oxford 2007, p. 183–84; M. Lot-Borodine, *L'anthropologie théocentrique de l'Orient chrétien comme base de son expérience spirituelle*, "Irenikon", 16 (1939), p. 6–21; *eadem*, *Warum kennt das christliche Altertum die mystischen Wundmal nicht?*, transl. B. Steidle, "Benediktinische Monatsschrift", 21/1 (1939), p. 24; *eadem*, *L'Eucharistie chez Nicolas Cabasilas*, "Dieu Vivant: Perspectives Religieuses et Philosophiques", 24 (1953), 132; *eadem*, *Nicolas Cabasilas*, p. 111, 176.

15 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Semen Frank from March 16–17, 1940 [in:] Archive of Alexander Solzhenitsyn House of Russia Abroad [further as AASHRA], F. 4, Op. 4, Ed. khr. 5, p. 7.

16 See: M. Lot-Borodine, *L'anthropologie théocentrique de l'Orient...*, p. 6–21; *eadem*, *Warum kennt...*, p. 24; *eadem*, *L'Eucharistie chez Nicolas Cabasilas*, p. 132; *eadem*, *Nicolas Cabasilas...*, p. 111, 176.

17 *Eadem*, *Blagodat' 'obozheniya' cherez tainstva na khristianskom Vostoke* [Grace of "deification" through the sacraments in the Christian East], "Vestnik Russkogo Studencheskogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniya", 26 (1953), p. 12.

that Western anthropology emphasized the "ontological nothingness" of creation, while "the Eastern Fathers, by their teaching about man as the virtual divinity of God's intelligible icon on earth, raised the first-created man to such an utmost degree that theosis became the decisive chord not only of the future, but also of the present world"<sup>12</sup>. In a letter to Jacques Maritain, Lot-Borodine proposed her own interpretation of Greek Patristics on deification. She pointed out that the Eastern Fathers emphasized the significance of partaking in the divine, or, more precisely, the divine-human nature of Christ (different from the Western medieval concept of "imitation of Christ") and that this very fact provided a theoretical dogmatic basis for any ascetic practice<sup>13</sup>. According to her, Byzantine anthropology has a theocentric, theandrical and synergetic character<sup>14</sup>. In this connection, Lot-Borodine shared with the Russian philosopher Semen Frank (1877–1950) the following thoughts:

the *gnosis* of nature-given grace *participatio* is inexplicably superior to *visio beata*, where the Divine is just *contemplated*. The medieval mystics of Eckhart's school, whom modern sympathetic to pantheism interpret inside out, are closer to the metaphysics of the Pseudo-Areopagite, whose neo-Platonism undoubtedly goes back to the Patristic tradition and is uniquely completed in the pneumatology of Gregory Palamas, a real Byzantine spirit-seer<sup>15</sup>.

Lot-Borodine stressed out the theocentric character of Eastern Christianity, which it maintains as the basis of all spiritual experience<sup>16</sup>. According to her, deification is the central theme "of Eastern theo- and anthropology", although this term confuses "not only laypeople who have little knowledge of the teachings of the Holy Fathers, but also those who in modern, sort of belittled, Christianity, deviate from such 'maximalism'"<sup>17</sup>.

Drawing on the writings of Greek and Byzantine Fathers of the Church and Philo of Alexandria, Lot-Borodine analyzed the tradition of apophatic theology in detail, as well as key concepts of this tradition, such as the “image” (*εἰκών*) and “likeness” (*ὁμοίωσις*) of God. Man was created in the image and likeness of God, but due to the original sin, this likeness was lost. Nevertheless, the image remained unchanged since this is what defines the human essence. This implies the necessity of incarnation (the acceptance of human nature by Christ) and redemption, or healing of human nature, his mind and will. Likeness – Lot-Borodine reminded – exists in man potentially, while the image actually does so.

Image (*Eikon*) is morphologically given and henceforth an integral good; likeness (*homoiosis*) – as the perfection of a created icon of the Divine (more precisely, of Logos) – is only projected. Therefore image, albeit in a damaged form, was preserved after the fall and was completely restored by the incarnation; the Son who in his voluntary kenosis became the founder and model of the “royal kin”. The mysterious “exchange” of natures according to Athanasius the Great; the exchange accomplished by the Cross of Redemption and the Easter of Resurrection. This is what the whole pre-Augustinian anthropology, inherited by the Orthodox Church but with times tarnished, kind of obscured in mass consciousness, teaches<sup>18</sup>.

While Augustine understood the image of God in man only as a “distant reflection”, the Greek Fathers taught about the “perfect copy”<sup>19</sup>. Deification is the task and goal of the path leading to the transformation, or rather, restoration of the integrity of human nature achieving thus its unity with God, returning to Him through the divine adoption: “Through Christ man to Christ God” (*per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum*)<sup>20</sup>. For this very reason, St. Maxim the Confessor, often quoted by Lot-Borodine, as well as other Greek Fathers described man as “created God”<sup>21</sup>. Theosis is a renovation of the entire empirical world, *terra nova*, but it cannot be treated

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Eadem*, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, “Revue de l'Histoire des Religions”, 105 (1932), p. 29; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 49–50.

<sup>20</sup> *Eadem*, *Warum kennt...*, p. 27; *eadem*, *De l'absence de stigmates dans la chrétienté antique*, “Dieu Vivant: Perspectives Religieuses et Philosophiques”, 3 (1945), p. 85. Cf. *eadem*, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 34; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 56; *eadem*, *O Evkharistii* [On the Eucharist], “Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniya” [Messenger of the Russian Christian Movement], 40 (1956), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Eadem*, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 23; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 43, 189.

22 See: *eadem*, *Warum kennt...*, p. 25; *eadem*, *De l'absence...*, p. 84; *eadem*, *Mystagogie de saint Maxime*, "Irénikon", 13 (1936), p. 468; *eadem*, *La Béatitude dans l'Orient chrétien*, "Dieu Vivant: Perspectives Religieuses et Philosophiques", 15 (1950), p. 114; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 276.

23 *Eadem*, *O Evkharistii* [On the Eucharist], p. 6. Cf. *eadem*, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XIe siècle: II (suite)*, p. 551; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 99, 219, 252; *eadem*, *L'aridité ou succitas dans l'antiquité chrétienne*, "Études Carmélitaines", 22/2 (1937), p. 205; *eadem*, *La Béatitude dans l'Orient chrétien*, p. 95.

24 *Eadem*, *Blagodat' 'obozheniya'...*, p. 13. See: *eadem*, *La doctrine de la Grâce et de la Liberté*, "Oecumenica", 6/2 (1939), p. 38–39; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 189–191.

25 *Eadem*, *O Evkharistii*, p. 6.

26 *Eadem*, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XIe siècle: II*, p. 19; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 38.

as "apocatastasis", or universal salvation in the meaning of Origen<sup>22</sup>. Deification presupposes a complete harmony of freedom and grace which consisted, according to St. Maximus the Confessor, of "two wings" that carry us toward perfect union with God<sup>23</sup>.

It was here – Lot-Borodine wrote – that the main point of divergence of the East and West, especially the Protestant one, lay. The Reformation, from Luther to Barth, inclusive, preaches about a fundamental damage of human nature and a complete separation of the original *imago Dei* from God. It is a source of *Sola fide* dogma<sup>24</sup>.

On the other hand, "in the Orthodox East there was no fierce debate about *sola gratia* as in the Augustinian West, and the latter even accused it of semi-Pelagianism!"<sup>25</sup> – concluded Lot-Borodine.

## 2. At the Cross of Cataphatic and Apophatic Theology

Lot-Borodine also highlighted the peculiarities of the terms *ratio* (Latin "reason", "intellect") and *νοῦς* (Greek "mind" which is connecting various functions of a human being, first of all – cognition and love). Following Fr. Vasily Krivoshein (1900–1985), she believed that the distinction between the divine essence and energies does not violate the simplicity of God and indicated that this was a distinguishing feature of Eastern Christianity. Divine energies, Lot-Borodine maintained, "Thomism would call 'operations' [*operations*] and regard them as creations"<sup>26</sup>. This results in Western thinkers' misunderstanding of the Orthodox tradition and their condemnation of the latter as an unacceptable violation of the simplicity of God. It is worth adding that the idea of Lot-Borodine echoes the observation of the contemporary American researcher David Bradshaw, who writes:

*energeia* translated as *operatio* and *energein* as *operari*. Although these renderings were probably

the best available, they do not possess the same fluidity of meaning as the original. To think of the divine *operationes* as forces or active powers that can be shared in by human activity would not normally occur to a Latin reader. This is not only because the major works in which the expansion of meaning took place were not translated into Latin; it is also because *operatio* does not share the association of *energeia* with actuality, much less with the fusion of activity and actuality... That is why, when the works of Aristotle were translated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, *energeia* had to be rendered in different contexts by three different terms: *operatio*, *actus*, and *actualitas*. Although this division was inescapable given the resources of Latin, it tended to obscure the unity of the single concept (or family of concepts) underlying these diverse terms. Because of these limitations, the notion of participation in the divine *energeia* made little impression on western thought<sup>27</sup>.

Thus, the theology of deification was not developed in Western tradition since it was based on the Eastern Christian distinction between the divine essence and uncreated energy, which was rejected by Latin thinkers. Lot-Borodine, in tune with her youngest friend Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958), noted in this connection that only Meister Eckhart from among all of the medieval Western philosophers was a “distant pupil of the Areopagite”<sup>28</sup>, however, exactly for this reason he was unjustly and wrongly accused of pantheism.

At the same time, Lot-Borodin did not share the thesis of the Russian patrologist Sergey Epifanovich (1886–1918), according to whom the only difference between cataphatics and apophatics is that the former investigates divine energies, “which are the properties or activities of Logos”, while the latter “essentially cognizes God in the

27 D. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, Cambridge 2004, p. 153–54.

28 M. Lot-Borodine, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XIe siècle*, p. 19. Cf. Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Semen Frank from March 16–17, 1940 [in:] AASHRA, F. 4, O. 4, Ed. khr. 5, p. 7; M. Lot-Borodine, *Herma Piesch. – Meister Eckharts Ethik*, “Le Moyen Âge”, 8/3 (1937), p. 209.

29 M. Epifanovich, *Prepodobnyy Maksim Isповедnik i vizantiyskoe bogoslovie* [The Venerable Maxim the Confessor and Byzantine Theology], Kiev 1914.

30 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to George Florovsky from October 7, 1931 [in:] PUL RBSC, Georges Florovsky Papers, Box 27, F. 30.

31 M. Lot-Borodine, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XIe siècle*, p. 17. Cf. *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 55–56, 254; *eadem*, *La Béatitude dans l'Orient chrétien*, p. 97.

32 See: *eadem*, *Nicolas Cabasilas...*, p. 18.

33 *Eadem*, *Blagodat' 'obozheniya'...*, p. 14.

34 *Ibidem*.

mysterious vision of God”<sup>29</sup>. There is something wrong here. [...] And yet how easily the borderline between the positive and negative theology is erased when both of them have to do with mysteries incomprehensible to mind, accessible only through contemplation in spirit<sup>30</sup>.

According to Lot-Borodine, “The ultimate mystery [...] lies at the intersection of the double axis of theology, negative and affirmative”<sup>31</sup>, which suggests the internal dialectic of speculative and mystagogical theology<sup>32</sup>. She emphasized that the transcendence of God does not exclude His immanence in both Western and Eastern spirituality, and this is precisely where the mystery of the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) lies<sup>33</sup>. Lot-Borodine considered it important to accentuate that the Orthodox concept of deification consists of paths that “run along a furrow and sometimes intersect in the spiritual experience of the faithful”<sup>34</sup>:

The first path, obligatory for all the sheep of Christ's flock, is more passive, initially cathartic or cleansing. God's initiative is evident in it. On this ecclesial path, the descending theurgic Energy manifests its sovereign power; it sculpts from clay which it inspired, it creates living members of the mystical Body, the head of which is the second, the “heavenly” Adam. This is the conciliar-individual path of *theosis*, in which all stages are symbolically-really confined to imitation (*mimesis*) of Christ in His earthly ministry.

The second, and ultimately personally final, path is ascending: a response of the intelligent creature, bestowed with grace, to the heavenly call. The dominant note here is selfless, ascetic: the absolute surrender of oneself, humble – not as a slavery humiliation, but as a devout filial love, abandonment of the egocentric self, and a flaming prayer. Due to its unearthly renunciation it is difficult to achieve in the world. In the

monastic (angelic rank) it can reach the summit of knowledge of God by experience – God-likeness<sup>35</sup>.

Let us remind here that Lot-Borodine was one of the first authors who introduced, albeit partially in a polemical manner<sup>36</sup>, the concept of deification to Western readers, something which was “the royal way” (*via regis*) of Eastern Christianity for her. Her pioneer works in this field initiated numerous studies in the circles of both Orthodox and Catholic researchers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. The Role of Body in Theosis

Lot-Borodine tried to reveal the true nature of theosis and the entirety of mystical experience, but, at the same time, she did not neglect the significance of its bodily aspect nor deny the so-called *visions imaginatives* typical of the Western tradition. In her letter to Fr. Basil Krivoshein, Lot-Borodine expressed the following reflections:

The “auxiliary techniques” of Palamites are the weakest point of the whole doctrine as they bring together their contemplation with the non-Christian practice, first and foremost, Indian yoga. Unfortunately, the holding of breath during a contemplative prayer became the central point of the reciprocal knowledge of God in Russian spirituality, distorting its nature and cutting off all threads connecting it with the *theologia mystica* of the first centuries<sup>37</sup>.

In this regard Lot-Borodine claimed: “How poor is our native mysticism compared with the Orthodox East, with Byzantium!”<sup>38</sup>. On the whole, the role of body in mystical experience remained a mystery to her. In her letter to Fr. Krivoshein she wrote:

35 *Ibidem*.

36 See: L. Ayres, *Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa*, “St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly”, 49/4 (2005), p. 375.

37 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Fr. Vasily Krivoshein from January 20 – February 2, 1937 (“Pis'ma M. Lot-Borodinoy monakhu Vasiliyu”) [The letters of Lot-Borodine’s to monk Vasily] [in:] *Afonskiy period zhizni arkhiepiskopa Vasiliya (Krivosheina) v dokumentakh* [The Athos period of life of Archbishop Vasily (Krivoshein) in documents], Svyataya Gora Afon: Izdanie Russkogo Svyatopanteleimonova monastyrnya na Afone, 2014, 495.

38 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to George Florovsky from October 7, 1931 [in:] PUL RBSC, Georges Florovsky Papers, Box 27, F. 30.

I am confused not by the possibility of bodily participation in spiritual life not on its top (which is a temptation only for the non-initiated), but by quite another thing: for me, I confess, the very idea of complete transfiguration of the flesh is not clear. After all, “small resurrection” is the image of the coming great one when the “soul body” will become, according to the apostle, a spiritual body. All Holy Fathers, starting with St. Irenaeus of Lyons, maintain that the ultimate goal of creation is the complete spiritualization of matter. But what does this mean? If the margin *entre l’intelligible et le sensible, qui en est le signe symbole ici-bas* is to disappear, be erased, then the transformed nature (of the whole cosmos?) becomes not only spirit-bearing but merges with the spiritual body, thus, the real world – a reflection of the ideal one – should no longer differ from the latter. Here, too, there should be some kind of antinomy, not solvable, in my opinion, cataphatically, even though it is here, as you correctly perceive, that the watershed between Platonism and Christianity lies. [...] As for the denial of “*vision imaginative*”, I know how deep its roots are in the asceticism of the East, and also that it does not interfere with the bodily apparition of the Mother of God and saints, but these apparition do not constitute the essence of mystical vision... The Orthodox Church, besides, of course, early [Christian] sources, gave much thought to the Jesus prayer – insightfully rejecting as a “delusion” any type of heavenly contemplation. As a result, our mysticism is now focused exclusively on liturgical mystagogy. Nevertheless, the Catholic West, although it largely broke with a true joy, has so much preserved in the wondrous treasury of vision that it is impossible to insist, at least with

regard to John of the Cross (*S. Jean de la Croix*), on the “figurative” mystique!<sup>39</sup>

Lot-Borodine explained the meaning of Christian suffering and ascetics in detail in agreement with the teachings of the Church Fathers who continued the Platonic tradition of philosophy as “meditation on death”<sup>40</sup>. She reminded that suffering is not a goal in itself, but only a means to achieve salvation; the mortification of the flesh helps to deaden passions, to restore the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is the body itself, to prepare for contemplation. The Russian scholar stressed that in the early Church a greater significance was attached to spiritual rather than physical suffering. She believed that Eastern Christianity looks more soberly at human flesh, negating all sorts of manifestations of suffering and unnatural, unhealthy ascetics. Spiritual “dryness” (*siccitas*), “apathy” or “acedia”, characteristic of the mysticism of the Patristic period, which is nothing else but the imitation of God’s impassivity and immutability, is relayed to this<sup>41</sup>. The realism of Eastern Christian mysticism is incompatible with the phenomenon of “mystical wounds” or stigmata, which for this reason was unknown in the early Church. At the same time, Lot-Borodine did not doubt the value of both Christian traditions – the Eastern, dating back to Greek Patristics which emphasized the value of spiritual suffering, and the Western, in which, starting with St. Francis of Assisi, there exists the phenomenon of stigmata. “How is it possible to say no to those who want again to experience the suffering of Christ?”<sup>42</sup> – she exclaimed. Warning about the danger of sensual illusions, Lot-Borodine underlined that the Catholic Church never canonized anyone as a saint solely on the basis that they had obtained stigmata. Even though stigmata are still unknown in the Eastern Church, the goal of both traditions is the same – so that God may be “all in all” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28)<sup>43</sup>.

Lot-Borodine was also the author of a pioneering study on the “gift of tears” (*διακρύων δῶρον*) in the Eastern

39 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Fr Vasilii Krivoshein from April 1, 1937 (“Pis’ma M. Lot-Borodinoy monakhu Vasiliyu”) [The letters of Lot-Borodine’s to monk Vasily], p. 497–498.

40 Cf. M. Lot-Borodine, *La doctrine de la déification dans l’Église grecque jusqu’au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle: II (suite)*, p. 555.

41 See: M. Lot-Borodine, *L’aridité ou siccitas dans l’antiquité chrétienne*, p. 191–205; *eadem*, *Nicolas Cabasilas...*, p. 165; *eadem*, *La Béatitude dans l’Orient chrétien*, p. 106; *eadem*, *La déification de l’homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs*, p. 266, *eadem*, *Le mystère du ‘don des larmes’ dans l’Orient chrétien*, p. 145, 151, 164.

42 *Eadem*, *Warum kennt...*, p. 32; *eadem*, *De l’absence de stigmates dans la chrétienté antique*, p. 89.

43 See: *eadem*, *Warum kennt...*, p. 32; *eadem*, *De l’absence de stigmates dans la chrétienté antique*, p. 89.

44 See: A. Torrance, *Repentance in Christian Late Antiquity with Special Reference to Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, and John Climacus*, Oxford 2010, p. 20.

45 *Présentation* [in:] J. Clément, B. Bobrinskoy, É. Behr-Sigel, M. Lot-Borodine, *La douloureuse joie*, Abbaye de Bellefontaine 1993, p. 10.

46 *Ibidem*.

47 See: M. Lot-Borodine, *Le mystère du 'don des larmes' dans l'Orient chrétien*, p. 147.

48 See: *eadem*, *La Béatitude dans l'Orient chrétien*, p. 85, 91; *eadem*, *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs*, p. 239, 259.

Christian spiritual heritage – a theme essentially ignored prior to her work<sup>44</sup>. In the “extensive and profound”<sup>45</sup> article entitled “The Mystery of the ‘gift of tears’ in the Christian East”<sup>46</sup>, she outlined the understanding of this gift in Greek Patristics over the period from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, revealing its significance for conversion (*metanoia*) and purification of the heart (*catharsis*) – active and passive which lead to the contemplation of God. In this article Lot-Borodine most fully represented the “philosophy” and “theology of the heart”, tracing various semantic shades of the Greek concept of *καρδιά* from ancient philosophers up to Simeon the New Theologian. The gift of tears is a gift of “holy sorrow” about one’s sins, repentance and the subsequent change of life, humility, the transformation of the “heart of stone” into a “new heart” (cf. Ps. 6:6; 2 Cor. 3:3). Spiritual tears – in words of Evagrius of Pontus (345–399) which Lot-Borodine used – suppress earthly thoughts interfering with a pure prayer, a prayer of the heart, or contemplation<sup>47</sup>. This “new baptism” by washing with tears and cleansing from sins is a path to the illumination of mind and, finally, to the union with God, i.e. deification. In other words, the ultimate fruit of the gift of tears is the eternal spiritual joy of being with God.

The theme of deification is related to the question of the meaning of beatitude (*μακαριότης*), or of happiness – “the sacrament of hope”<sup>48</sup>, which is also addressed by Lot-Borodine. She traced developments in the understanding of happiness in thoughts of Greek philosophers, starting with the “prince of classical thinkers” Aristotle and gradually turning to the Christian interpretation of beatitude. In Boethius, who was still heavily influenced by Platonism, beatitude as *Summum Bonum* has a purely anthropocentric and eudemonic character. Later, Lot-Borodine wrote, a kind of bifurcation in interpreting beatitude took place: the Christian East remained loyal to the Patristic tradition, whereas the West aimed at rationalizing theological concepts. Latin theologians

taught about *visio beatifica*, the “ontological”, “face to face” vision of God by man after death, as an act of knowledge (Dominican school of theology led by St. Thomas Aquinas), or an act of love (Franciscan school led by St. Bonaventure). In their turn, Greek theologians did not divide these two acts as one cannot love God without knowing Him as well as knowing Him without love<sup>49</sup>, and what is more, this knowledge can be only achieved through divine uncreated energies, not through His inconceivable essence. This is what distinguishes Christian mysticism from all other forms of mystical experience, especially the so-called philosophical *amor Dei intellectualis*, “intellectual love of God”, as Spinoza puts it. According to Lot-Borodine, love of God is inextricably linked with works of mercy to one’s neighbor. In the Christian East (unlike in Western scholasticism), loving God and knowing Him is one and the same: the mind and the heart as the “organs” of God’s knowledge converge. Unlike in the Western Catholic theology, in the Christian East – Lot-Borodine emphasized – the dichotomy between “natural” and “supernatural”, “mind” and “love”, “grace” and “free will” is erased<sup>50</sup>. Hence, the Orthodox concept of deification involves more synergy, the collaboration of God and man, the Creator and the creation. Here the way of knowing God is, at the same time, a way of being, i.e. likening to God, *perihoresis*, *interosculation*, ascension, and partaking in the Holy Trinity<sup>51</sup>, but it is not a type of pantheistic merging of the created and uncreated. The apophatic contemplation of God is the summit of theology (*θεολογία*), but it can be only achieved through God himself as from Him proceeds love leading to Him<sup>52</sup>.

Instead of *visio beatifica* (impossible even after death), the Greek Fathers of the Church taught about participation in the Kingdom of God (*Βασιλεία τοῦ εὐ*), or the deification which begins here on earth with the contemplation of the divine light and ends up in the eschatological resurrection of the body. In other words,

49 See: *eadem*, *La Béatitude dans l’Orient chrétien*, p. 88; *eadem*, *La déification de l’homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs*, p. 243; *eadem*, *Et. Gilson. – La Théologie mystique de Saint Bernard*, “Le Moyen Âge”, 7 (1936), p. 124.

50 See: A. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present*, London 2015, p. 107.

51 See: M. Lot-Borodine, *La doctrine de la déification dans l’Église Grecque jusqu’au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle: II Les voies de la contemplation-union et la Θεωσις (suite)*, p. 34–35; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 158–59.

52 See: *eadem*, *La doctrine de la déification dans l’Église Grecque jusqu’au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle: II Les voies de la contemplation-union et la Θεωσις (suite)*, p. 21–22; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 142.

53 See: *eadem*, *La Béatitude dans l'Orient chrétien*, p. 91, 103; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 246, 262; Hilarión (Alfejev), *The Deification of Man in Eastern Patristic Tradition (With Special Reference to Gregory Nazianzen, Symeon The New Theologian and Gregory Palamas)*, "Colloquium", 36/2 (2004), p. 116.

54 K.S. Robichaux, P.A. Onica, *Introduction to the English Edition* [in:] J. Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, transl. P.A. Onica, Anaheim, CA 2002, XIV.

55 See: A. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present*, p. 106.

56 M. Lot-Borodina, *O Evkharistii*, p. 3–15; *eadem*, *O Evkharistii II* [On the Eucharist II], "Vestnik Russkogo Studencheskogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniya" [Messenger of the Russian Christian Movement], 40 (1956), p. 8–15.

57 *Eadem*, *O Evkharistii*, p. 4. Cf. *eadem*, *Nicolas Cabasilas...*, p. 103, 105, 117.

58 *Eadem*, *O Evkharistii*, p. 4–5, 9–10.

according to the Greek tradition, beatitude is the destiny of a Christian in all three phases of his existence: *in via* (here, in earthly life), *post mortem* (after death) and *post resurrectionem* (after resurrection, *in patria*, in the heavenly fatherland)<sup>53</sup>. Beatitude is inextricably linked with holiness.

In her articles, Lot-Borodine identified and analysed three stages or ways of deification in detail: (1) "the transfiguration of human nature by uncreated divine energies through the deifying action of the Holy Spirit", (2) the continuation of this process in the sacramental life, and (3) "the ultimate expression of the process of divinization"<sup>54</sup> – a mystical union with Christ. Hence, deification for Lot-Borodine is the accomplishment of the "purifying love" which she analyzed in her early works<sup>55</sup>.

Lot-Borodine attached particular significance to the sacrament of the Eucharist to which she dedicated two brilliant essays related to the works of Fr. Nicolas Afanasyev (1893–1966)<sup>56</sup>. She wrote: "our sacramental system is thoroughly charismatic, like a battery of divine energies, and it leads a person through the sacraments to *theosis*"<sup>57</sup>. At the Lord's Meal our mortal being really and concretely unites with the Savior's *deified human nature*, and thus the "exchange of natures", which is the cornerstone of the Patristic teaching of deification (*theosis*) – an absolutely orthodox teaching having nothing in common with *the deification of the creature* – is existentially confirmed. [...] If in His incarnation the Son virtually deified *our nature* as such, in the Eucharist *He effectually deifies the individual person, the living person in the outpouring of His Love*, Love, which was once and forever testified by Him in the unique sacrificial act of Crucifixion and which is continuously, until the end of this world, communicated to us in the Blood of the Eucharistic Chalice<sup>58</sup>.

As a consequence, Lot-Borodine praises contemplative asceticism as the "royal way" of deification, but admits that for many believers this may be too difficult. Therefore, the Church dispenses a deifying grace to all via its

sacraments. She regards the strictly personal and the ritualistic way of theosis as two forms of mysticism, which are, however, united in their roots and are harmoniously complementary<sup>59</sup>.

In her last article on deification, Lot-Borodine emphasized the role of prayer as “the pillar of asceticism, the *alpha* and *omega* of the militant and triumphal life”<sup>60</sup> and noticed that there exist a variety of prayer practices and aspects. She drew special attention to the Jesus Prayer and briefly traced the history of invoking and praising the name of God in the Byzantine East and in the Latin traditions.

It is worth mentioning here that Lot-Borodine was the first researcher to translate into a modern European language (namely, French) and commented upon fragments from the “Mistagogy” of St. Maximus the Confessor<sup>61</sup> on the connection between the mystical and liturgical aspects, the unity of knowledge and contemplation, and theurgy. St. Maximus – as Lot-Borodine recalled – wrote: “Man should become by grace what God is by nature”<sup>62</sup>.

Immediately after the publication of series of articles on deification, enthusiastic responses began to appear, and Lot-Borodine informed Berdyaev of this:

Just imagine, from all sides they ask me for reprints of the articles on *θέωσις*, and in the Catholic academic press interesting comments about them begin appearing. For me, this is a great joy as until now I have always been working as if in the dark. I have finally broken up with *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* and therefore I cannot, alas, finish, as I wanted, my work on *Esprit et Liberté*, but there one is just “a voice crying in the desert”<sup>63</sup>.

Reviews on Lot-Borodine’s articles were published in the “*Irénikon*” magazine and in other publications. One of the critics, the Belgian Benedictine from the Eastern

59 H. Zorgdrager, *Reclaiming «Theosis»: Orthodox Women Theologians on the Mystery of the Union with God*, “Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift”, 104 (2014), p. 228.

60 M. Lot-Borodine, *La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église Grecque jusqu'au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle: II Les voies de la contemplation-union et la Θεωσις (suite)*, p. 8; *eadem*, *La déification...*, p. 126.

61 *Eadem*, *Mystagogie de saint Maxime*, p. 466–68; Maxime le Confesseur, *La Mystagogie*, transl. M. Lot-Borodine, “*Irénikon*”, 13 (1936), p. 468–472, 596–597, 717–720; 14 (1937), p. 66–69, 182–185, 282–284, 444–448; 15 (1938), p. 71–74, 185–186, 276–278, 390–391, 488–492.

62 M. Lot-Borodina, *O Evkharistii*, p. 6.

63 Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Nicolas Berdyaev from November 2, 1933 [in:] RSALA, F. 1496, Op. 1, Ed. khr. 588.

64 See: F. Mercenier, *M. Lot-Borodine, La doctrine de la déification dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, "Irenikon", 13 (1936), p. 483–484.

65 See: Letter of M. Lot-Borodine to Jacques Maritain from December 22, 1932 [in:] BNU, Fonds Jacques et Raïssa Maritain, correspondances.

66 See: Y. Congar, *La déification dans la tradition spirituelle de l'Orient*, "La Vie Spirituelle", 43 (1935), p. 91–92.

67 M. Lot-Borodine, *La déification...*

68 See J. Daniélou, *Introduction* [in:] M. Lot-Borodine, *Le déification...*, p. 11.

Rite monastery in Chevetogne, Fr. Feuillen Mercenier (1885–1965), outlined her main theses, focusing on the comparison of the Eastern Christian concept of deification with Western trends, starting with St. Augustine and St. Bernard of Clairvaux<sup>64</sup>. Jacques Maritain, to whom the Russian scholar sent the prints of her articles<sup>65</sup>, also was familiar with her works on deification. Finally, in 1935, Fr. Yves Congar wrote his own article "The Deification in the Spiritual Tradition of the East According to Recent Studies" on the basis of the works of Lot-Borodine and other Orthodox thinkers. He noted that in recent years many works on the Christian East had appeared and that against this background, Lot-Borodine's articles were set apart by their depth and breadth of interests<sup>66</sup>.

#### 4. Concluding Thoughts

In 1970, Lot-Borodine's articles on theosis (with minor amendments) together with two other later works ("Teaching on Grace and Freedom in the Eastern-Greek Orthodoxy", 1939 and "Beatitudes in Eastern Christianity", published posthumously in 1959) were printed by the prestigious French publishing house "Serf" as part of the "Ecumenical Library" series in a separate book entitled *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs*; the second edition appeared in 2011<sup>67</sup>. The introduction was written by Fr. Jean Daniélou who admitted that in the works of Lot-Borodine the line between her personal experience and the experience of the authors she referred to, is erased, and this permits her to provide the reader with something more than just an erudite account<sup>68</sup>. As he noticed:

What was exceptional in the work of Myrrha Lot-Borodine was not simply her learned research, but the way she gave vivid expression to the mystical heart of the Byzantine tradition. Her work was nourished by reading of great

Greek and Byzantine spiritual writers and theologians. One finds here the echo of the Gregories and of Evagrius, of Maximus the Confessor and Pseudo-Dionysius, of Simeon the New Theologian and Nicholas Cabasilas. She mentions these authors frequently, but not by means of citation. Her articles have a minimum of the apparatus of erudition. That makes them difficult to use. The boundaries between the experience of the author and that of her sources are difficult to trace<sup>69</sup>.

This posthumous publication made a significant, yet not widely known contribution to the conversion of Western theology to forgotten Patristic sources<sup>70</sup> and had a tremendous resonance<sup>71</sup>. At the same time, there were critical reviews along with the favorable ones. For example, Didier Baer found the book of Lot-Borodine too tendentious, accusing her of attempting to show Orthodoxy's superiority<sup>72</sup>. Another opinion was held by the Jesuit René Marichal, who, on the contrary, maintained that Lot-Borodine's apology for Orthodoxy was quite "moderate" in its nature, compared to the works of, for example, Vladimir Lossky<sup>73</sup>.

It is worth highlighting here the review of Fr. Tomáš Špidlík (1919–2010). He pointed to the simplification of certain aspects of Lot-Borodine's ideas, in particular, about differences between Eastern and Western traditions; however, in his opinion, this reflected the author's desire to perceive the fundamental truth of Christianity – love for spiritual experience, which, as Lot-Borodine believed, had been forgotten and which should be revived<sup>74</sup>. And most recently, Jacques Schamp stressed once again that in its day Lot-Borodine's "inspired pages contributed to the discovery of Byzantine mysticism in the West"<sup>75</sup>.

69 *Ibidem*. Transl. from A. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present*, p. 94–95.

70 See I. Boris-Vildé, *Deux Fontenaisiens éminent parmi d'autres: Ferdinand Lot et Myrrha Lot-Borodine*, "Bulletin Municipal de Fontenay-aux-Roses", 2 (1979), p. 20.

71 See Cm. D.O. R[ousseau], *M. Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme*, "Tréikon", 43/2 (1970), p. 295; R. Marichal, *M. Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, 1970, "Recherches de Science Religieuse", 59 (1971), p. 281–83; G. Philips, *M. Lot-Borodine. 'La déification de l'homme'*, "Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses", 47 (1971), p. 240; D. Baer, *M. Lot-Borodine: La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, "Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie", 22 (1972), p. 52; T. Špidlík, *M. Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, "Orientalia Christiana Periodica", 38 (1972), p. 272–273; J. Mahey, *M. Lot-Borodine. 'La déification de l'homme'*, "Kyrios", 12 (1972), p. 243; A. Guillaumont, *Lot-Borodine: La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, "Revue de l'Histoire des Religions", 187 (1975), p. 110–11; J. Schamp, *Myrrha Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs, 1970* [2011], "L'Antiquité Classique", 82/1 (2013), p. 366–67; K. Levrie, *Myrrha Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs (Collection Orthodoxie)*, "Byzantion", 82 (2012), p. 508–10; J.M. Auwers, *Myrrha Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs. Préface du cardinal Jean Daniélou (coll. Orthodoxie)*, 2011, "Revue Théologique de Louvain", 44/4 (2013), p. 603–604.

72 See: D. Baer, *M. Lot-Borodine: La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, p. 52.

73 See: R. Marichal, *M. Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, 1970, p. 281.

74 T. Špidlik, *M. Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, p. 273.

75 J. Schamp, *Myrrha Lot-Borodine, La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, 1970 [2011], p. 366.

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