

2015

Deification In Cassian's *Conferences*: Analysis of John Cassian's writings on unceasing prayer in *Conferences Nine* and *Ten* as a description of deification

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DEIFICATION IN CASSIAN'S *CONFERENCES*:
Analysis of John Cassian's writings on unceasing prayer in *Conferences Nine* and *Ten* as a description
of deification

by
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Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in Theology
At
Providence College
2015

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers Series
CH	<i>Church History</i>
Conf	<i>Conferences</i>
CR	<i>Communication Reports</i>
CSQ	<i>Cistercian Studies Quarterly</i>
EEC	<i>Encyclopedia of the Early Church</i>
EM	<i>Encyclopedia of Monasticism</i>
ER	<i>Encyclopedia of Religion</i>
HT	<i>History Today</i>
Inst	<i>Institutes</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
MS	<i>Monastic Studies</i>
MT	<i>Modern Theology</i>
NCE	<i>New Catholic Encyclopedia</i>
OO	<i>Origenianna Octava</i>
Pref	Preface
RR	<i>Review for Religious</i>
SP	<i>Studia patristica</i>
SVTQ	<i>St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
TODCC	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i>
trans.	translator
TT	<i>Theology Today</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>

Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to analyze John Cassian's writings on unceasing prayer in *Conferences Nine* and *Ten* with the intention to demonstrate that what he describes is a process of deification. Although he never uses the term "deification," it is my premise that, as Cassian writes about unceasing prayer in the lives of monks, he describes deification taking place through progress in the life of prayer, culminating in participation in the Trinity.

Some scholarship has been done on the topic of deification in Cassian's works already. Several scholars have addressed the topic of deification in Cassian's writings.

In his book on early monasticism, William Harmless spends a few pages introducing the reader to Cassian's life and works.¹ In the context of outlining the main themes of the *Conferences*, Harmless addresses unceasing prayer within *Conferences Nine* and *Ten*. After quoting *Conference 10.7.2*, he summarizes Cassian's goal for the life of prayer:

"one does not just say prayers; nor does one simply pray interiorly, purely, undistractedly; nor is prayer a matter of those occasional dazzling graced moments of fiery ecstasy; in the end, one becomes prayer, one's very existence is a prayer and a praying. This is deification: when all that we are may 'be God.'"²

His comment is succinct and forthright. He gives no definition for deification and no explanation of the comment. He simply states that Cassian's understanding of prayer is deification.

This book, the passage Harmless cites from *Conference Ten*, and his succinct statement about deification are the reason this student chose the thesis topic addressed in this paper. The absence of an explanation in Harmless's book as to how this passage constitutes deification

¹ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 373-409.

² Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 398.

ignited the desire to understand more deeply the connection between prayer, as Cassian writes about it, and the concept of deification.

Upon further research, it was discovered that John J. Levko also connects prayer and deification in his extensive publications concerning prayer in Cassian's works. This connection is made in three articles published in three consecutive years. Deification is not the main focus of any of the articles though.

Levko's language is the least explicit in his first article, which is an analysis of Cassian's "incessant prayer."³ Levko does not say that Cassian writes about "deification," but he does say that Cassian writes about "a gradual conforming to the image of God,"⁴ "the oneness with God created by continuous prayer,"⁵ "participation in God,"⁶ and "internal union with God."⁷

Levko's second article, the topic of which is connecting prayer to discretion and spiritual direction in Cassian's writings, describes Cassian as writing about a "process of deification."⁸ Numerous times in the article he uses the phrase "dynamic process [in other places: "journey"] of moving [conforming oneself] from the image to the likeness" of God.⁹ His most complete statement connecting deification and Cassian's understanding of prayer says:

"This ascent or process of deification in the ontological life of God is a continuously dynamic growth in God's life within us, a continuously dynamic inclination toward God and away from disintegration. The continuous and dynamic movement toward God is our gradual conforming to the image of God, Christ, through likeness to Him, and is brought about by means of prayer in the Holy Spirit."¹⁰

³ John J. Levko, "Incessant Prayer and John Cassian," *Diakonia* 28:2 (1995): 71-90.

⁴ Levko, "Incessant Prayer," 71.

⁵ Levko, "Incessant Prayer," 72.

⁶ Levko, "Incessant Prayer," 72.

⁷ Levko, "Incessant Prayer," 74, 90.

⁸ John Levko, "The Relationship of Prayer to Discretion and Spiritual Direction for John Cassian," *SVTQ* 40:3 (1996): 155-71.

⁹ Levko, "Prayer to Discretion," 156, 160, 161, 162, 171.

¹⁰ Levko, "Prayer to Discretion," 162.

In this statement, Levko says that, for Cassian, prayer dynamically changes the human being in a process of deification. Yet he still does not defend why the process that Cassian describes as taking place should be considered deification.

The third article published by Levko to mention deification, does simply that, mention deification, and then says nothing more on the topic. His comment is emphatic: “the transformation through prayer from image to likeness consists in the continual force of deification.”¹¹

Although in Levko’s writings deification is mentioned more times and at more length than in Harmless, sufficient support for why he can claim that Cassian writes about deification is still lacking.

Augustine Casiday’s work provides the most detailed explanation of and defense for the presence of a theory of deification in Cassian’s writings, however his argument is based on Cassian’s work *On the Incarnation*, not the *Conferences*.¹² Nevertheless, he does cite the *Conferences* for additional textual support. Casiday’s work emphasizes the similarities among Cassian’s, Evagrius’s, and Origen’s understandings of deification, and so places him within the Patristic tradition. Because Casiday uses Cassian’s speculative work *On the Incarnation* rather than his monastic, experiential *Conferences*, it is more philosophical and does not address the topic of prayer, much less unceasing prayer or *Conferences Nine and Ten*. Casiday does, however, state at the end of the article that “Cassian wrote a masterpiece of ascetic literature in which he provided numerous examples of the process of deification at work – his

¹¹ John J. Levko, “Inside Prayer with John Cassian,” *Diakonia* 30:2-3 (1997): 165-173.

¹² Augustine M. C. Casiday, “Deification in Origen, Evagrius, and Cassian,” *OO* (2003): 995-1001.

Conferences.”¹³ But again, as with Harmless and Levko, the statement ends there with no further evidence or explanation.

While the primary purpose of this thesis is to explain why Cassian’s writings about unceasing prayer should be considered to be describing a process of deification, a secondary purpose of this thesis is to situate Cassian’s *Conferences Nine* and *Ten* among the Patristic writers who have explained the concept of deification.

My sources include one translation of the entire *Conferences* and three additional translations of *Conferences Nine* and *Ten*. Boniface Ramsey’s translation from 1997 is the primary translation used in this thesis because, to date, it is the only translation in English of the entire *Conferences*. In terms of secondary literature on the *Conferences*, Augustine Casiday and Columba Stewart have written extensively on Cassian and are considered experts in the field; they are consistently cited in the works of others regarding Cassian. Norman Russell’s *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* is the most comprehensive and detailed work on the topic of deification in the Patristic period. His research and notations have been invaluable to this student for locating primary source material on the topic of deification.

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter One is the introduction to the thesis. Chapter Two briefly outlines the development of a definition for deification in early Christianity. Additionally, for the writers who may have influenced Cassian, a systematization of their understandings of deification is attempted. Chapter Three covers Cassian’s life, historical context, writings, and lasting influence. Chapter Four gives background information about the *Conferences*, including a summary of the entire work. Cassian’s understanding of prayer in the *Conferences* is discussed in Chapter Five. Chapter Six will follow progress in the life of prayer as a process of deification through a close reading and analysis of the text. Cassian’s concept of

¹³ Casiday, “Deification,” 1001.

deification is also compared to the writers addressed in Chapter Two. Chapter Seven serves as the conclusion of the paper.

The citation of the primary source material will reference the source material, but also will include the page in the English translation; for example, *Conf*, 14.9.4 (Ramsey, 512). When no translator is listed, the series name will be listed; for example, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.19.1 (ANF, 448).

Chapter 2: Deification

Deification¹⁴ is a popular topic today both among spiritual writers and scholars.¹⁵ The focus of this chapter is deification in the Patristic period with the goal of establishing what Cassian may have understood the idea of deification to be. This will be accomplished by addressing how the definition of deification evolved and its various uses by early Christian writers. Special emphasis will be placed on authors who likely influenced Cassian.

In General

The central tenet of deification in the Christian tradition is that, through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God has called human beings to share in the divine life. Deification includes the

¹⁴ “Divinization” and “deification” are sometimes used interchangeably by scholars.

¹⁵ A sample of the recent scholarship done on the topic of deification: Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “The Retrieval of Deification: How a once-despised archaism became an ecumenical desideratum,” *MT* 25:4 (2009): 647-59; Kenneth Paul Wesche, “The Doctrine of Deification: A Call to Worship,” *TT* 65 (2008): 169-79; Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007); Roger E. Olson, “Deification in Contemporary Theology,” *TT* 64 (2007): 186-200; Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds., *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2006); and Carl Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and The Origin of Christian Deification,” *JTS* 56:1 (2005): 30-74.

understanding that through grace humanity can overcome the effects of the Fall and attain divine attributes, including incorruptibility and immortality.¹⁶

In the centuries it took to develop this doctrine, the word “deification” took on different meanings. The anthropological, theological, and christological premises for deification vary according to the author. “The way they were conceived corresponded to how the divine transcendence was understood.”¹⁷ In a modest way deification language is understood as the believer attaining some of the divine attributes through imitation of God. In a more dynamic way, the use of deification language is understood as the transformation of human nature, or possibly the appropriation of a deified nature.¹⁸

Part 1: Early Writers

Some of the earliest mentions of a Christian understanding of deification outside of the Bible come from authors in the second century, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons. Both writers responded to the audience with which they were dialoging. Justin was dialoguing with the Jews in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, was dialoguing with the Gnostics. This context frames their writings.

*Justin Martyr*¹⁹

Writing in the second century, Justin’s notion of deification is very complex; its ultimate end is to see God.²⁰ For Justin, humanity’s likeness to God is not ontological. The soul has no

¹⁶ E. A. Livingstone, “deification,” *TODCC* 1:467-8.

¹⁷ B. Studer, “divinization,” *EEC* 1:242-3.

¹⁸ Norman Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2-3.

¹⁹ Justin Martyr was a second century apologist born in Palestine. He started as a philosopher studying in the Stoic, peripatetic, Pythagorean, and Platonic schools before coming to Christianity. He was the first Christian to make use of Aristotelian categories in Christian thought and to reconcile faith and reason. He wrote many of his major works in Rome, where he was also martyred sometime between 163-7 CE (R. J. De Simone, “Justin,” *EEC* 1:462-4).

ontological affinity with the divine; it is not innately immortal or alive. These attributes of the soul are only gained through participation in that which is innately immortal or alive, namely God, understood as the *logos*.²¹ It is the *logos* which enables humans to participate in the divine. Justin says that throughout human history the *logos spermatikos*, the “sowing *logos*,” has disseminated truth. Non-Christians, especially philosophers and poets like Socrates and Heraclitus, have participated in the *logos spermatikos*, but this participation is incomplete. Full participation only comes through personal knowledge of the incarnate *logos*, Christ.²²

Incomplete participation in the *logos spermatikos* does not constitute deification.

Deification for Justin is moral: “the majority of men will not [see God in this life] saving such as shall live justly, purified by righteousness, and by every other virtue”²³ which comes through participation in the incarnate *logos*. Therefore for Justin there is a connection between deification and Christology. Participation in Christ is transformative. Slowly the believer becomes conformed to Christ and is restored to the state of Adam, which was divine, according to Justin.²⁴ However, just as important is participation in the sacramental life of the Church, in particular partaking of Baptism and the Eucharist.²⁵ “The full possession of the divine *logos* can only take place through the personal knowledge of the *incarnate logos* that comes by grace, especially via Baptism and the Eucharist.”²⁶

Justin is the first Christian writer to exegete Psalm 82:6, “I have said, you are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High,” as scriptural proof-text support for deification.²⁷ He does so

²⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 2 (ANF, 195).

²¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 5 (ANF, 197).

²² Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 46 (Barnard, 55) and *The Second Apology*, 10, 13 (Barnard, 80-1, 83-4).

²³ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 4 (ANF, 196).

²⁴ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 98. Russell does not cite where in Justin’s works he says that the individual is restored to the state of Adam.

²⁵ Justin, *The First Apology*, 61 (Barnard, 66).

²⁶ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 98, emphasis his.

²⁷ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 99.

in his *Dialogue with Trypho* in response to the claim that Christians are not the children of God. He argues that Christians have supplanted Jews as the true Israel.²⁸ Justin says that Psalm 82:6 was originally addressed to Adam and Eve, because the passage finishes in verse seven by saying “You shall die like men, and you shall fall like one of the princes.” Since deification is a returning to the state Adam and Eve first enjoyed, establishing that the first humans were children of God would be important in order to claim that Christians are children of God. Since Adam and Eve were children of God, and returning to their original state comes through conformity to Christ, Christians who conform to Christ and return to the Adamic state would be children of God. Justin also says Psalm 82:6 “demonstrated that all men are deemed worthy of becoming ‘gods,’ and of having the power to become sons of the Highest; and shall be each by himself judged and condemned like Adam and Eve.”²⁹

For Justin, deification was understood in terms of aligning one’s behavior with the actions of Christ, the role of the sacramental life, participation in the incarnate *logos*, and the exegesis of Psalm 82:6.

*Irenaeus of Lyons*³⁰

As was mentioned above, Irenaeus was writing during the second half of the second century in response to Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a term used for numerous religious and philosophical currents which include a form of special religious knowledge about humanity’s

²⁸ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 123 (ANF, 261).

²⁹ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 124 (ANF, 262).

³⁰ Irenaeus was born between 130-40 CE in Asia Minor. He spent time at Rome and Lyons. Only two of his works survived in their entirety: *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. Fragments exist of two letters he wrote, one to Florinus, the second to Pope Victor. His letter to Pope Victor is the last act of Irenaeus’s life which scholars can date; it must have been written during Victor’s pontificate which lasted 189-98 CE. The date of Irenaeus’s death is unknown (A. Orbe, “Irenaeus,” *EEC* 1:413-6).

true spiritual being.³¹ The Gnostics were not interested in a doctrine that regarded deification as transformation into the divine life. Instead, they taught a return to the divine sphere for those who were similar in nature to God.³²

Irenaeus uses Psalm 82:6 in multiple ways while writing against the Gnostic-Christians, and in the process describes humanity's deification. He says Gnostic-Christians "are gods...but will die like men" because they do not acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God. "Those who assert that He was simply a mere man, begotten by Joseph, remaining in the bondage of the old disobedience, are in a state of death; having been not as yet joined to the Word of God the Father, nor receiving liberty through the Son."³³

Irenaeus, responding to the christological heresy that Jesus was simply human, emphasized the importance of the Incarnation. According to him, Christ, by becoming incarnate, became the mediator between God and human beings, allowing humanity access to the divine. He states, "our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."³⁴ Christ, who is himself human and divine, is the connection between humanity and the divine. This connection is necessary in order for humans to have any chance of becoming divine.

In his treatise *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus also connects Psalm 82:6 to St. Paul's ideas regarding "adoption."³⁵ The connection of these ideas is not found in the early Christian literature prior to his writing the treatise. The Christian becomes a "god" through baptism because that is when the individual becomes connected to Christ. This makes the Christian an adopted son of God. So when the Psalm says, "you are gods and all of you sons of the most

³¹ G. Filoramo, "Gnosis-Gnosticism," *EEC* 1: 352-4.

³² Studer, "divinization," 1:243.

³³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.19.1 (ANF, 448).

³⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5. Pref (ANF, 526).

³⁵ For St. Paul's ideas regarding "adoption," see Romans 8, Ephesians 1, and Galatians 4.

high,” it is referring to Christians who have become “gods” through adoption at baptism.³⁶

“Irenaeus is the first to dwell on the baptismal implications which Justin indicates but does not develop... This interpretation was to become very influential.”³⁷

Irenaeus also wrote that all Christians can obtain incorruption, not just the spiritual elite as the Gnostics claimed, because of the Incarnation and the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. In order for human beings to become divine, not merely be connected to the divine, they must attain divine likeness. By behaving in a way that is similar to Jesus, they can become like him.³⁸ It is through participation in the sacraments that the “rank and file of the Church can attain immortality and become ‘gods.’”³⁹

Irenaeus “worked out the first authentically Christian synthesis of man’s deification,”⁴⁰ emphasizing the Incarnation, the sacramental life of the Church, Scriptural support including in particular Psalm 82:6 and St. Paul’s notion of adoption. For Irenaeus, deification is the human being led back to the eternal vision and to union with God through knowledge of the Son and the Spirit which follows from participating in the sacraments.⁴¹

Part 2: The Alexandrian Tradition

The Alexandrian tradition contributed greatly to the development of the doctrine of deification by adding to its technical vocabulary, the elaboration of its philosophical framework, appropriation of ideas from Hellenism and Enochic Judaism, a broadening of biblical support, and the development of a “correlative Christology.”⁴² Many writers contributed to the doctrine

³⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.6.1 (ANF, 419).

³⁷ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 106.

³⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.38.1-3 (ANF, 521-2).

³⁹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 105.

⁴⁰ Studer, “divinization,” 1:243.

⁴¹ Studer, “divinization,” 1:243.

⁴² Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 115.

of deification in the Alexandrian tradition including Clement, Origen, Didymus the Blind, Athanasius, Apollinarius, and Cyril.

Clement of Alexandria

By the end of the second century CE, Alexandria was the hub of civil and ecclesial power in Egypt; there was also a thriving Platonizing intellectualist tradition that had developed.⁴³ Clement, who lived between 150-215 CE,⁴⁴ linked deification with the Platonic ideal of assimilation to God.⁴⁵ His understanding of deification has humanity “rise from incredulity, through faith and gnosis, to charity, source of impassibility, not forgetting the illuminative role of baptism.”⁴⁶

*Origen*⁴⁷

Important concepts in the Alexandrian theological milieu by the mid-third century included self-transcendence and stories of heavenly ascent that can be found in Jewish, Christian, and pagan writings.⁴⁸ Origen, steeped in this theological milieu, was writing in Alexandria during the first half of the third century against the Gnostics, in particular Valentinus.⁴⁹ His notion of deification is complex and difficult to systematize. It can be summarized as union with God. The union of the Word with the ever faithful soul of Jesus is the model of all deification.⁵⁰

⁴³ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 116.

⁴⁴ M. Mees, “Clement of Alexandria,” *EEC* 1:179-181.

⁴⁵ Livingstone, “deification,” 1:467.

⁴⁶ Studer, “divinization,” 1:243.

⁴⁷ Origen (born c. 185 – died c. 254) was a famous biblical exegete, theologian, and spiritual writer from Alexandria (Livingstone, “Origen,” 1:1200-2). His influence on the Church in the Patristic period is vast. He will be discussed more in Chapter Three and Chapter Five.

⁴⁸ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 118-9.

⁴⁹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 142.

⁵⁰ Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.6 according to Studer, “divinization,” 243. Studer’s citation of *On First Principles*, 2.6 for Jesus as the model of deification, could not be verified in the translations of that text available for use for this paper.

Origen's use of deification language appears primarily in his biblical commentaries rather than in his speculative work *On First Principles*.⁵¹ He is the first writer to use 2 Peter 1:4⁵² as scriptural basis for deification.⁵³ While exegeting the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), he mentions 1 Thessalonians 5:17⁵⁴ and connects the two biblical passages. In linking "unceasing prayer" and the Lord's Prayer, Origen presents deification as a process in which the intellect becomes more and more conformed to God.⁵⁵

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Origen exegetes the verse John 13:31: "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and in him God is glorified." Origen believes that deification takes place through a spiritual participation in the eternal *logos*. This deification is manifested through a participation in the divine glory. For Origen, such deification can begin in the present life.⁵⁶

Participation is key to Origen's understanding of deification.⁵⁷ Participation is metaphysical not corporeal.⁵⁸ It implies a kinship between the participant(s) and the participated. Although the participated must be superior to the participant, there must be a likeness between them, namely a **similarity** in their natures. Also there must be a likeness among all the participants that participate in the participated; all participants must be of the **same** nature. In short, all participants have the same nature which is inferior to, but similar to, the nature of the participated.⁵⁹ The participants, human beings, participate in the eternal *logos* rather than just in the incarnate *Logos*.⁶⁰ This participation happens at the level of human nature (human beings partake of God by their very nature). But even though this idea can be misconstrued to suggest

⁵¹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 144.

⁵² "become partakers of the divine nature" (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 151).

⁵³ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 151.

⁵⁴ "pray without ceasing" (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 143).

⁵⁵ Origen, *Orations*, 25.2, GCS ii. 358. 21-4 found in Norman Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 143.

⁵⁶ Origen, *On John*, 32.357-8 (Heine, 409).

⁵⁷ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 147.

⁵⁸ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.4.1-2 (Greer, 205-7).

⁵⁹ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.4.9-10 (Greer, 214-6).

⁶⁰ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 144.

that God and humanity have the same nature, the two natures remain distinct, otherwise there would be no relationship of participation.⁶¹ This is what is termed natural participation.⁶² This participation describes how humanity is innately similar to the divine.

However, Origen also speaks of a supernatural participation. Unlike natural participation which is passive, supernatural participation takes place when the human being responds to the actions of the Trinity. Participation in the eternal *logos* (natural participation) and in the Trinity (supernatural participation) take place simultaneously.⁶³

Supernatural participation in the Trinity occurs in the following way. Every person possesses a dormant *pneuma* through which they participate in a limited way in the Spirit. The dormant *pneuma* is awakened at baptism, causing a new kind of participation in the Spirit to occur. Through participation in the Spirit, transformation progresses to higher degrees of perfection.⁶⁴ Participation in the Spirit leads to participation in Christ, through which his attributes, such as wisdom, righteousness, and rationality, are acquired.⁶⁵ Through participation in Christ comes participation in the Father. “In Origen’s writings those who participate in the divine nature do so because they receive a share of the personal life of God through the action of the Trinity.”⁶⁶

Deification is ultimately participation in the Father. Deification is participation in the Father as a result of filiation (participation in the Son) and spiritualization (participation in the Spirit).⁶⁷ In this sense, deification for Origen is a progression that involves the entire Trinity.

⁶¹ Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.3.6 (Crombie, 253-4).

⁶² Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 148.

⁶³ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 149.

⁶⁴ Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.3.5 (Crombie, 253) and Origen, *On John*, 2.21, GCS iv. 78. 2-6 found in Norman Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 149.

⁶⁵ Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.3.8 (Crombie, 255).

⁶⁶ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 151.

⁶⁷ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 149.

The Incarnation is also important for Origen. It is what allows believers to share in the divine attributes: “The Lord by ‘mingling’ himself with beings gives them a share of his divinity and raises them to the right hand of the Father.”⁶⁸ In the Incarnation, Christ takes on flesh in order to bridge the gap between the created and the uncreated. The Logos mediates between God and creation.⁶⁹ “The flesh is deified by the soul, and the soul is deified by the Logos, just as the Logos himself is deified by the Father.”⁷⁰

The progression of participation and attainment of divine attributes occurs through perseverance in the moral struggle and advancement in the life of prayer.⁷¹ This progress has a dynamic aspect. Rather than simply receiving an image of the divine into the human nature through participation, the human nature is actually changed.⁷² Participation in Christ makes the participant an adopted son of God,⁷³ distinct from and still contingent upon the participated, self-subsistent God.⁷⁴ “By proceeding along ‘the steep path of virtue’ they [those who choose to respond to the actions of the Trinity] become through imitation of Christ ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).”⁷⁵ A life of prayer, virtuous behavior, and right belief aid in the transformation of the human being.

Christians take on a new identity through sharing in Christ’s nature. That sharing in Christ’s nature is twofold: in this life the new identity comes by taking on his moral excellence (taking on a likeness of Christ), and, after the second coming, by sharing in his eternal life.

Origen emphasizes that deification may begin in the present life. Central to his understanding of deification is his concept of participation, both natural participation and

⁶⁸ Origen, *On John* 19.4, GCS iv. 303. 5-11 found in Norman Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 143.

⁶⁹ Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.6.3 (Crombie, 282).

⁷⁰ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 152.

⁷¹ Origen, *Orations*, 25.1, GCS ii. 357.9 f. found in Norman Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 142-3.

⁷² Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.3.8 (Crombie, 255).

⁷³ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.4.5 (Greer, 210).

⁷⁴ Origen, *Sel in Psalm*, 135, PG 12.1656A found in Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 152. .

⁷⁵ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 151 quoting Origen, *Fragments*, 302 Matt. 13.33, GCS xii. 135.

supernatural participation. Deification is a progression of participation in the Trinity, starting in the Spirit, moving through the Son, and finally ending with the Father. Through participation with the Son, human nature is changed; adoption takes place. Origen uses the passage from 2 Peter 1:4 to support his ideas about participation and connects deification to unceasing prayer through his exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

Athanasius

During the mid-fourth century, Athanasius simplified Irenaeus's statement "our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself" into "the Word became flesh... that we, partaking of His Spirit, might be deified."⁷⁶ This becomes known as the exchange formula. For Athanasius, the Incarnation definitively restored humanity's primordial resemblance to God in two ways: incorruptibility of the body, and gnosis.⁷⁷

Cyril of Alexandria

At the end of the fourth century and through the first half of the fifth century, Cyril wrote that "we have all become partakers of Him, and have Him in ourselves through the Spirit. For this reason we have become partakers of the divine nature and are called sons."⁷⁸

Part 3: Early Christian Monastic Tradition

Within monastic works written before Cassian's death, the two major contributors to the doctrine of deification were the writings of Evagrius of Pontus and the *Macarian Homilies*. In

⁷⁶ Livingstone, "deification," 1:468 citing *De Decretis*, 14.

⁷⁷ Studer, "divinization," 1:243.

⁷⁸ Livingstone, "deification," 1:468 citing *In Joan*, 9.

the monastic tradition there is a move away from the intellectual language of deification and toward participation language.⁷⁹ Monastic writers in particular did not approach theological topics in a systematic way; rather their primary purpose was to instruct monks on how to grow in the spiritual life.

*Evagrius of Pontus*⁸⁰

Nowhere in his writings does Evagrius use “the technical language of deification.” While he does refer to Psalm 82:6, it is only to emphasize that in Scripture the term “god” refers to humans in a metaphorical way to contrast humans with demons.⁸¹ Evagrius maintains that the human and the divine are altogether different from each other; even human language cannot adequately describe the divine.⁸² Evagrius believed that there is a fixed ontological separation between the created and the uncreated and that Christ bridged this separation. Evagrius uses John 17:21 to support Christ as the bridge.⁸³

In order to approach the divine, one must progress in the spiritual life.⁸⁴ In this path of progression, the first stage is to struggle against the passions and to combat demons. The second stage, which occurs simultaneously with the first, is to struggle for contemplation. This struggle continues through the duration of earthly existence.⁸⁵ One begins by contemplating created things, then moves to incorporeal natures, and finally ends with the contemplation of God

⁷⁹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 235.

⁸⁰ Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345-399) spent time with Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus before seeking instruction from Melania senior in Jerusalem. Around 383 he settled in the desert of Nitria in Egypt. Two years later, he moved to Cellia, where he became well known and his teachings became vastly influential (J. Gribomont, “Evagrius of Pontus (Ponticus),” *EEC* 1:306).

⁸¹ Evagrius, *On the Faith*, 9 (Casiday, 48). Russell says the use of the term “god” in Psalm 82:6 is “metaphorical” (*Doctrine of Deification*, 238), but the way he describes its use sounds more like what he calls the analogical use: use for comparison (*Doctrine of Deification*, 1).

⁸² Evagrius, *Gnostikos*, 41 found in Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 239.

⁸³ Evagrius, *On the Faith*, 21-5 (Casiday, 52-3).

⁸⁴ Evagrius, *Gnostikos*, 41 found in Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 238.

⁸⁵ Evagrius, *The Monk: A treatise on the Practical Life*, 36 (Sinkewicz, 104).

himself. Eventually this contemplation becomes imageless. The result of succeeding in this struggle is the vision of God. This vision is not expressed in words because it cannot be; it is beyond sensory experience. Instead it is purely intellectual. It may be attained in this life through “pure” prayer.⁸⁶ However, the fullness of contemplation, “the knowledge beyond which no other knowledge exists,” comes only on the “last day.”⁸⁷

For Evagrius the final end of humanity’s progression in the spiritual life, which occurs at the end of time, transcends even the state of the angels. His speculation held that all created intelligent beings, which includes Christ, the angels, human beings, and demons, formed a spiritual continuum. All existed before the disobedience of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) and all created intelligent beings will one day be restored to their original state. In the original state and its restoration at the end, there is no differentiation between beings; all are one *nous*. In this line of thinking human beings will ultimately become the same as Christ.⁸⁸ This assimilation to Christ results from the shedding of material being. This ultimate loss of individual identity would be decidedly condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 553.⁸⁹

Though Evagrius never uses the formal language of deification, he speaks of progress in this earthly life which culminates in the vision of God at the end of the present life. His speculative theology also includes a participation which terminates with all intelligent beings being assimilated without differentiation into Christ.

⁸⁶ Both Harmless (Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 350) and Stewart (Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 115) use the word “pure” in relation to Evagrius’s writings about prayer.

⁸⁷ Ps.-Basil, *Ep. 8.7* (trans. Deferrari) according to Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 239

⁸⁸ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 239-40. Casiday disagrees that Evagrius describes a “pantheistic absorption of creatures into the essence of God,” saying instead that, “within the Christological parameters of Evagrius’ teaching, this description means that deification is a consequence of the ‘Holy Unity’ that Christ established between the Creator and the creations” (“Deification,” 998).

⁸⁹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 241.

*Macarian Writings*⁹⁰

In the late fourth century, with language full of rich, poetic imagery, the *Macarian Writings* emphasize the experiential side of the spiritual life and the role of the Holy Spirit. For Macarius the process that culminates in deification consists of three stages. In the first stage, the human soul has turned to God but is still dominated by sin.⁹¹ In the second stage, the heart engages in a fight against sin in order to overcome its domination. In the third stage, through the human will working in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, sin is driven out.⁹²

In the third stage, the Christian is raised to a superior state than Adam originally had. This stage of progress is what Macarius describes as the beginning of deification.⁹³ The person who has overcome the domination of sin “is deemed worthy to possess the good measure of the Spirit,” and, through the divine power, “transcends his very self. For such a one as this is made a participator of the divine nature and made a son of God.”⁹⁴ Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the person is changed. The perfection attained by this process comes through grace. Yet this perfection is provisionally based on the continued struggle against evil until death. Macarius describes the grace as something that ebbs and flows; otherwise the deified would remain continually enraptured and forget to attend to practical necessities. For Macarius, no one enjoys uninterrupted communion with God in this life.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ The *Macarian Writings* are comprised of homilies, Questions and Answers, and a short ascetical treatise. They were written by an unknown author probably in the 380s, perhaps in Mesopotamia or the eastern part of Asia Minor. In the Greek tradition they have always been attributed to an unspecified Macarius (Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 241). They were condemned at the Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431 in connection to the Messalian heresy. Recent scholarship demonstrates that this connection to Messalianism derived mainly from a cultural misunderstanding (A. Golitzin, “Macarian Homilies,” *EM* 2:799).

⁹¹ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 26.1-2 (Maloney, 164). It is not clear if the soul’s turn to God refers to movement toward all three persons of the Trinity or individual persons.

⁹² Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 242.

⁹³ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 26.2 (Maloney, 164).

⁹⁴ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 15.35 (Maloney, 121).

⁹⁵ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 8.4 (Maloney, 82).

The third stage of progress in this life is only the first stage of complete deification, which is fulfilled in the afterlife. The second stage of deification occurs when the soul is resurrected at death. The third stage of deification occurs at the end of time when the body is also resurrected and shares in the glory of the soul.⁹⁶

When likeness to God has been attained in the present life, by becoming “sons,” participation is given as a gift by God.⁹⁷ Macarius seems equally comfortable using participation metaphors of interpenetration and transformation.⁹⁸ He speaks of the soul joining with the Holy Spirit and commingling with it⁹⁹ (interpenetration), but also says, “all are transformed into a divine nature, having become christs and gods and children of God”¹⁰⁰ (transformation). Russell concludes that Macarius’s phrase “becoming gods” should be interpreted as a participation in God, not an ontological mingling.¹⁰¹ All entities retain their individuality.¹⁰²

For Macarius deification included the idea of participation in the divine glory by the soul in the present life.

Macarius uses multiple verses from Scripture to support his theory of deification. In describing the transformation into the divine nature during the third stage of progress, he cites 2 Peter 1:4 (“partakers of the divine nature”).¹⁰³ While he does mention being “made a son of God,”¹⁰⁴ it is not clear if he is referencing St. Paul’s notion of adoption. He also exegetes Ezekiel’s vision of the throne-chariot of God found in 1:1-28.

⁹⁶ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 34.1-2 (Maloney, 203-4).

⁹⁷ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 25.5 (Maloney, 161) and 39 (Maloney, 213).

⁹⁸ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 242.

⁹⁹ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 32.6 (Maloney, 199).

¹⁰⁰ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 34.2 (Maloney, 204).

¹⁰¹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 243.

¹⁰² Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 15.10 (Maloney, 112).

¹⁰³ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 15.35 (Maloney, 121), 39 (Maloney, 213), and 44.9 (Maloney, 226).

¹⁰⁴ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 15.35 (Maloney, 121).

Macarius claims that the vision of Ezekiel, in addition to being a vision physically seen, was a prefiguring of the soul receiving the Lord and becoming his throne of glory. The soul participating in the Holy Spirit becomes a throne and dwelling place upon which Christ sits.¹⁰⁵ The vision of Christ that Macarius describes in his interpretation of Ezekiel's vision is similar to the vision that the disciples experience during the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9).¹⁰⁶ The exegesis of the passage from Ezekiel emphasizes the experiential side of the spiritual life.¹⁰⁷

The ultimate end of deification according to Macarius is union with the divine nature. This union occurs through participation in the divine glory, which can only take place after moral purification. Macarius's understanding of deification includes progress in the spiritual life culminating in adoption, an emphasis on the Spirit, and participation in the divine glory. He does allow that deification begins in the present life, but it is not experienced continuously and is not completed until the end of time.

Part 4: After Cassian¹⁰⁸

It was not until around the turn of the sixth century that the first formal definition of deification was offered by Dionysius the Areopagite: "Deification (θέωσις) is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible."¹⁰⁹ The term deification did not become a theological topic in its own right until the seventh century.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Pseudo-Macarius, Coll II, *Homilies*, 1.2 (Maloney, 37).

¹⁰⁶ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 244-5.

¹⁰⁷ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 244.

¹⁰⁸ In the fifth century certain Greek and Latin terms became important when discussing deification, including *deificare*, *deificatio*, *aphtharsia*, *methexis*, *koinonia*, *enosis*, *glorificatio*, and *profectus ad Deum* (Studer, "divinization," 1:242).

¹⁰⁹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 1.

¹¹⁰ Russell states that Maximus the Confessor is responsible for this discussion (*Doctrine of Deification*, 1.

In western theology, deification became less prominent even though the language remained in liturgical prayers and in the teaching of mystics. Suspicions of pantheism existed.¹¹¹ Additionally, regarding moral holiness, western theologians began to insist more on the elimination of sin as *culpa* over the liberation from mortal corruption more closely associated with deification.¹¹²

In the East, Gregory Palamas (1296-1359)¹¹³ is attributed with formulating the traditional teaching of deification. He held that man can be united with the divine energies, but not with the divine essence.¹¹⁴ Deification came to mean a broad vision of man's restoration to his original state (kinship with God), founded on the Incarnation, and fulfilled in the individual especially by means of the sacraments.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

The authors who preceded and influenced Cassian repeatedly emphasized participation in the divine, deification as a process of spiritual growth, unceasing prayer, and the importance of Scripture to support these claims in their various understandings of deification. Though the authors mentioned in this chapter use varying language – union with God, vision of God, union with the divine nature, God in humanity – consistently, deification was defined as some kind of intimate uniting with God.

¹¹¹ Livingstone, "deification," 1:468.

¹¹² Studer, "divinization," 1:243.

¹¹³ Livingstone, "Gregory Palamas, St.," 1:716.

¹¹⁴ Livingstone, "deification," 1:468.

¹¹⁵ Studer, "divinization," 1:243.

Chapter 3: Background on Cassian

Basics

Some of the most basic details of John Cassian's life are not known; his very name, for instance. While his contemporaries called him "Cassianus,"¹¹⁶ in both the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* he calls himself "John."¹¹⁷ The year of his birth is estimated to be around 360 CE,¹¹⁸ but some scholars have suggested 365 CE.¹¹⁹ His death seems a bit clearer; it is generally dated around 435 CE.¹²⁰ His place of birth is not definitively known either. Some scholars place it in Provence in Gaul, near where he spends the final years of his life; however, most scholars say Scythia, in the Dobruja region of modern-day Romania is more likely his birthplace.¹²¹ What is certain about Cassian is his knowledge of both the Greek and Latin languages. He was apparently skilled enough in Greek to be able to converse with Greek monks in their native language,¹²² but his style and proficiency in written Latin is such that it was likely his native tongue.¹²³ His knowledge of both Greek and Latin defined his career, enabling him to bridge the

¹¹⁶ Gennadius of Marseilles, *De viris illustribus* found in Karl Suso Frank, OFM, "John Cassian on John Cassian," *SP* 33 (1997): 418.

¹¹⁷ *Inst*, 5.35 (Ramsey, 137) and *Conf*, 14.9.4 (Ramsey, 512).

¹¹⁸ Bordonali (F. Bordonali, "Cassian, John," *EEC* 1:149), Casiday (John Cassian, *Saint John Cassian on Prayer* (trans. A. M. Casiday; Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 2006), 1), Chiovaro (F. Chiovaro, "Cassian, John (Johannes Cassianus)," *NCE* 3:205-7.), and Ramsey (John Cassian, *The Conferences* (trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P.; New York: Paulist, 1997), 5) put his year of birth around 360.

¹¹⁹ Chadwick (Cassian, *Conferences*, (trans. Colm Luibheid; New York: Paulist, 1985), 1.) and Christou (Panagiotis C. Christou, "Cassian, John," *ER* 3:1447-8.) put his year of birth around 365.

¹²⁰ Casiday (Cassian, *Cassian on Prayer* (trans. Casiday), 1.), Chadwick (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Luibheid), 1), Chiovaro (Chiovaro, "Cassian," 3:205), Christou (Christou, "Cassian," 3:1447.), Quasten (Johannes Quasten. *Patrology*. (ed. Angelo di Bernardino; trans. Placid Solari, O.S.B.; Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1995), 513.), and Ramsey (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 5.) all place his year of death around 435.

¹²¹ Gennadius of Marseilles writing toward the end of the 5th century placed Cassian's birth in Scythia (Frank, "John Cassian on John Cassian," 418.). Bordonali (Bordonali, "Cassian," 1:149.), Casiday (Cassian, *Cassian on Prayer* (trans. Casiday), 1.) and Quasten (Quasten. *Patrology*. 512.) admit there is debate over where Cassian was born. Chadwick (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Luibheid), 1), Chiovaro (Chiovaro, "Cassian," 3:205.), Christou (Christou, "Cassian," 3:1447.), Luibheid (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Luibheid), xi.), and Ramsey (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 5.) cite Scythia as Cassian's likely place of birth. None of the scholars I found cite Southern Gaul alone as his birth place, nor do they cite by name the scholars who do.

¹²² Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: University, 1968), 10.

¹²³ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Luibheid), 1.

growing gap between Greek East and Latin West. Although his skill with languages is one of the few basic characteristics we know of him, the events of his life are less ambiguous.

Bethlehem

As a young man, Cassian travelled with his good friend Germanus, about whom we know almost nothing.¹²⁴ However, we do know that he was slightly older than Cassian.¹²⁵ Around 380 CE, they made their way to Bethlehem, where they spent about five years as monks¹²⁶ in a monastery near the cave of the Nativity.¹²⁷ Nothing is known about the motives that prompted them to travel so far from home and pursue the ascetic life.¹²⁸ While at this Palestinian monastery, Cassian and Germanus met Abba Pinufius. Pinufius was the leader of a large monastic community in Lower Egypt near Panephis, but came to the monastery in Bethlehem disguised as one seeking to become a monk. He was trying to flee the fame and popularity that had developed around him as the leader of a large monastic community. Having asked to enter as a novice, he was assigned to share the cell of Cassian and Germanus. Months later, when pilgrims came to visit the monastery, they recognized Pinufius as the famous Egyptian monk missing from his community and escorted him back to Egypt.¹²⁹ But Pinufius' influence on Cassian and Germanus already had been significant. The young ascetics were determined to see monastic life in Egypt.

¹²⁴ The only Germanus I found in any encyclopedias who was a contemporary of Cassian is a Germanus of Auxerre (378-488). However nothing is mentioned about him journeying with Cassian, which makes me think he is a different Germanus. Additionally his death date does not match.

¹²⁵ Cassian, in the written voice of Germanus, describes himself as the younger of the two saying, "especially you, John, who should be more heedful of what I am going to speak of, since you are somewhat younger" (*Conf*, 14.9.4 (Ramsey, 512)).

¹²⁶ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 375-6.

¹²⁷ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 10.

¹²⁸ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 375.

¹²⁹ For the story of Cassian's and Germanus's encounter with Pinufius at the monastery in Bethlehem see the *Inst* 4.30.2-5 (Ramsey, 94-5) or *Conf* 20.1-2 (Ramsey, 693-4).

Egypt

Having asked for and received permission from their monastic superiors, Cassian and Germanus left Bethlehem, promising to return soon.¹³⁰ In approximately 385 CE they ventured to Egypt,¹³¹ where they spent the next fifteen years. By this time, monasticism had been a growing force in Egypt for nearly 150 years. It was widespread, and there were varying ways of living the ascetic life to be found.¹³² Cassian and Germanus first visited monasteries near the Nile Delta, close to Panephrisis, but eventually made their way southwest to Scetis.¹³³ It does not seem as though they traveled any farther south than this. During his time at Scetis, Cassian made trips across the desert to Cellia, the other great anchoritic site, where he met notable monks like Theodore and Evagrius.¹³⁴ These encounters with the ascetic masters in Egypt profoundly impacted Cassian and his future work. The ideas of Evagrius, especially, would reappear in Cassian's writings, although he never cites Evagrius by name. Some of the masters Cassian met in Egypt would later appear in his *Conferences* as the *abbas* to whom he appealed for instruction. Cassian and Germanus spent approximately fifteen years in Egypt, with only a short trip back to their original monastery in Bethlehem to settle the matter of their promise to return.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Christou, "Cassian," 3:1447.

¹³¹ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 14.

¹³² For more information on the early establishment of monasticism, see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, Part I - II.

¹³³ In *Conf*, Pref 2.2 (Ramsey, 399), Cassian says that *Conferences Eleven* through *Seventeen* include three *abbas* they met before they met the *abbas* who were noted in *Conferences One* through *Ten*. The fathers of *Conferences One* through *Ten* lived in Scetis, while the fathers of *Conferences Eleven* through *Seventeen* are from the Delta. Therefore, Cassian and Germanus must have traveled to Scetis after meeting the *abbas* of *Conferences Eleven* through *Seventeen* in the Nile Delta region.

¹³⁴ Scetis and Cellia were great monastic settlements west of the Nile Delta. Scetis, or Skete, now Wadi al-Natrun, was founded in the 330s by Macarius the Egyptian. A monastic community formed around him and became a center of enormous importance (T. Orlandi, "Scete, Desert of," *EEC* 2:759). There were four monastic "congregations" at Scetis. Cassian and Germanus were members of the one led by Abba Paphnutius (Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 376). Cellia, or Kellia, was northeast of Scetis. It was founded by Amoun (Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 18). Both sites were highly sought after for monastic instruction.

¹³⁵ Christou, "Cassian," 3:1447.

Egypt Under Persecution

Cassian and Germanus permanently left Egypt around the turn of the fifth century¹³⁶ during the anti-Origenist persecution.¹³⁷ Their close associations with Origenist monks like Evagrius of Pontus made this departure necessary.

In his annual festal letter of 399 CE, which announced the date of Easter, Theophilus, patriarch of Alexandria, declared anthropomorphism¹³⁸ a heresy. One of the keys to the anthropomorphism debate is the interpretation of Scripture. For example, those who interpret the words of Genesis 1:26 (man is made in the “image and likeness of God”) literally, believe that the human body is made to resemble God’s body, and thus, God must have a body. Those who espouse this belief became known as anthropomorphites. An allegorical interpretation of the same passage proposes that our likeness to God is not in bodily form but rather in spirit. One important allegorical interpreter of Scripture was Origen. With respect to the persecution in Egypt at the end of the fourth century, the proponents of an allegorical interpretation of Scripture, like Evagrius of Pontus, became known as Origenists.¹³⁹

When Theophilus’s festal letter was distributed, it caused great uproar. Leaders in three of the four monastic congregations refused to read it to their congregations,¹⁴⁰ because they disagreed with Theophilus’s condemnation of anthropomorphism. Paphnutius is the only leader

¹³⁶ Harmless says Cassian fled in 399 or 400 (*Desert Christians*, 376). Ramsey says they left around 400 or 401 “when the Anthropomorphite movement became violent” (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 9).

¹³⁷ Origenism is said to have had six successive movements the first of which started with Origen himself, after whom it is named. The third movement involved the monks of Egypt and Palestine in the late fourth century. This movement was expounded mainly by Evagrius of Pontus. The fourth movement was really an anti-Origenist movement in the fourth and fifth centuries. Notable names involved include Theophilus of Alexandria and Jerome (H. Crouzel, “Origenism,” *EEC* 2:623-4). The third and fourth movements are most relevant to Cassian’s situation in Egypt. For more information about the influence of Origenism on the fourth and fifth century writers, see Susanna Elm, “What the Bishop Wore to the Synod,” *Adamantius* 19 (2013):156-169; György Heidl, *The Influence of Origen on the Young Augustine* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009); and Gerrit K. Van Andel, “Sulpicius Severus and Origenism,” *VC* 34 no 3 S (1980): 278-287.

¹³⁸ Anthropomorphism is the imagining of God in human form (B. Studer, “Anthropomorphism,” *EEC* 1:46.) or attributing to God human characteristics, feelings, and situations (Livingstone, “anthropomorphism,” 1:76).

¹³⁹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 359.

¹⁴⁰ *Conf*, 10.2.3 (Ramsey, 372).

to read the letter to his congregation, presumably because he was an Origenist and agreed with the letter, but some of the monks in his congregation were angered by the letter.¹⁴¹ Cassian was among those who witnessed the reading of Theophilus's letter by Paphnutius. He recorded the reactions of the monks in *Conference Ten*.

The anthropomorphite monks were so enraged by Theophilus's letter, many of them marched on Alexandria¹⁴² and even threatened to take his life.¹⁴³ What was Theophilus's response to the mob who came after him? "When I see you, I see the face of God."¹⁴⁴ The monks replied by demanding Theophilus anathematize Origen's theology.¹⁴⁵ The monks took issue with Origen's exegesis and Evagrius of Pontus's doctrine of pure prayer.¹⁴⁶ Theophilus complied with their request, condemned Origen, and took up the anthropomorphite cause.¹⁴⁷

Having changed sides on the anthropomorphite debate, Theophilus proceeded to campaign against Origenism. He gathered local synods of bishops to issue formal condemnations of Origenism, wrote letters to other church leaders around the empire telling them to do the same, and even led a violent attack on monasteries in Lower Egypt.¹⁴⁸ Theophilus traveled with an armed force to Nitria, where his former friends, the Origenist Tall Brothers, were monks.¹⁴⁹

As a result of this persecution, the Tall Brothers and more than 300 other Origenist monks fled from Egypt.¹⁵⁰ The Tall Brothers, as well as others, went to Constantinople where

¹⁴¹ *Conf*, 10.2.3 – 3.1 (Ramsey, 372).

¹⁴² Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 360

¹⁴³ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., "The Anthropomorphic Controversy in the Time of Theophilus of Alexandria," *CH* 7 no 3 S (1938): 263-273.

¹⁴⁴ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 360.

¹⁴⁵ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 360.

¹⁴⁶ Studer, "Anthropomorphism," 1:46. Origen's exegesis said that God does not have a body. Evagrius of Pontus's writings on pure prayer said that one should not imagine God in human form while praying to him.

¹⁴⁷ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 360.

¹⁴⁸ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 360.

¹⁴⁹ Shepherd, "The Anthropomorphic Controversy," 264.

¹⁵⁰ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 361.

they were welcomed by the bishop, John Chrysostom.¹⁵¹ Cassian and Germanus also left Egypt in the first years of the fifth century, because of this persecution,¹⁵² but it is not known if they were among the 300 who fled with the Tall Brothers. Cassian was definitely on the side of the Origenists¹⁵³ and also went to Constantinople possibly because he knew he would be welcomed there as had the other Origenist monks.

Even though Chrysostom handled the welcoming of Origenist exiles with tact, he still incurred the wrath of Theophilus.¹⁵⁴ Theophilus's dislike of Chrysostom was probably exacerbated by historic tension between the Sees of Alexandria and Constantinople.¹⁵⁵ In 403, Theophilus convoked the Synod of the Oak, where Chrysostom's local enemies, including the Empress Eudoxia, testified against him.¹⁵⁶ Chrysostom was condemned and removed from his see. Days later, he was recalled by the court when an earthquake was interpreted as a sign of divine disfavor with his expulsion.¹⁵⁷ But his reinstatement did not last long. He continued to insult the Empress Eudoxia, and as a result she and his enemies secured his lasting deposition in

¹⁵¹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 361. Chrysostom (c. 347-407) was the bishop of Constantinople and is considered a Doctor of the Church. He was fond of asceticism, having lived some years as a monk (c. 373 - c. 381). He highly valued the ascetical life and held the monks in high esteem. As bishop of Constantinople he worked to reform the corruption of court, clergy, and people which had flourished under the laxity of his predecessor, St. Nectarius. His honesty, asceticism, and tactlessness were especially offensive to the Empress Eudoxia who understood, not without reason, Chrysostom's moral reforms to be attacks on her personally (Livingstone, "Chrysostom, St. John," 1:345-6).

¹⁵² Christou, "Cassian," 3:1447.

¹⁵³ In *Conf*, 10.2-3 (Ramsey, 371-3), Cassian includes the story of an anthropomorphic monk's adverse reaction to Theophilus's letter condemning anthropomorphism. In the *Conference*, it is explained to the monk that God cannot have a body. Cassian is espousing Origenist exegesis while writing about the promulgation of Theophilus's letter of 399 CE.

¹⁵⁴ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 361.

¹⁵⁵ Constantinople had become known as "New Rome." The Council of Constantinople in 381 had declared that as "New Rome" it should enjoy precedence second to "old" Rome. This was resented at both Rome and Alexandria. The Alexandrians consistently wanted weak and ineffective bishops at Constantinople. When the See of Constantinople became vacant in 397, Theophilus tried to get it filled by his own candidate, but Chrysostom was installed instead (Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church, revised edition* (London: Penguin, 1993), 187).

¹⁵⁶ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 361-2.

¹⁵⁷ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 189.

404 CE on the charge of unlawfully reassuming the duties of a see from which he had been canonically deposed.¹⁵⁸

By 405 CE, Theophilus had changed sides again and supported the teachings of Origen.¹⁵⁹ It should be noted, however, that the fifth-century historians who wrote of the events of this persecution (Socrates and Sozomen) were biased against Theophilus and portray him in the worst light in their writings.¹⁶⁰

Constantinople

Depending on their date of departure from Egypt, Cassian and Germanus could have been in Constantinople with Chrysostom for up to four years before Chrysostom was deposed at the Synod of the Oak. During that time, Chrysostom ordained Germanus a priest and Cassian a deacon.¹⁶¹ Additionally, both men were placed in charge of the cathedral treasury.¹⁶²

In Constantinople, Cassian's proficiency in both Greek and Latin again proved to be useful. At the beginning of 405 CE, Cassian and Germanus were sent to Rome on behalf of Chrysostom to deliver a letter to Pope Innocent I.¹⁶³ The letter was an appeal to the pope from the clergy of Constantinople, asking for Chrysostom's reinstatement.¹⁶⁴ It detailed the mistreatment of Chrysostom and explained that the charges were trumped up against him by his

¹⁵⁸ Livingstone, "Chrysostom, St. John," 1:345-6.

¹⁵⁹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 360. For the story of how Theophilus was allegedly convinced to abandon anthropomorphism, see Shepherd, "The Anthropomorphic Controversy," 264-5. He cites this story as coming from a Coptic fragment of the *Life of Aphou*.

¹⁶⁰ For a detailed and nuanced explanation of the situation and context of Theophilus's letter of 399 CE, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Mark DelCogliano, "Situating Serapion's Sorrow: The Anthropomorphic Controversy as the Historical and Theological Context of Cassian's Tenth Conference on Pure Prayer," *CSQ* 38:4 (2003): 377-421.

¹⁶¹ Christou, "Cassian," 3:1447.

¹⁶² Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 31-2.

¹⁶³ Christou, "Cassian," 3:1447.

¹⁶⁴ Chiovaro, "Cassian," 3:205.

enemies.¹⁶⁵ Cassian's language skills and first-hand knowledge of the events in Constantinople, made him the natural choice to seek support for Chrysostom in Rome, while others were sent to Milan and Aquileia.¹⁶⁶

Rome

After delivering his letter in Rome, it is believed Cassian spent some time there. During his stay, he became friends with the future Pope Leo I and suffered the loss of his dear friend Germanus. It was Pope Leo I who ultimately would ask Cassian to write against Nestorianism.¹⁶⁷ This resulted in one of Cassian's major works, a treatise against Nestorianism called *On The Incarnation*. While in Rome he also was ordained a priest.¹⁶⁸ The length of Cassian's stay in Rome is not known. There is some suggestion that he might have spent some time in Antioch.¹⁶⁹

If he did remain in Rome for at least five years, he would have witnessed the sack of Rome by the Germanic Visigoths. Their leader, Alaric, led at least three attacks on the city. In 408 CE, he besieged the city until the Roman Senate paid him to go away. In 409 CE, he attacked again. This time they were successful enough to set up even a temporary emperor, Priscus Atallus.¹⁷⁰ The worst attack came in 410 CE.¹⁷¹ Houses were set on fire, Romans who resisted were killed, and women were raped; but buildings, monuments, and sacred sites were

¹⁶⁵ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 377.

¹⁶⁶ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 190.

¹⁶⁷ Nestorianism is named after the theological position of Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople (b after 351; d after 451). The heresy is marked by two interrelated, controversial positions. The first is the denial of Mary as *theotokos* (God-bearer), preferring the title *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer). The second is its Christology which says there are two persons in Christ as well as two natures and that only the man was born of Mary. The oneness of Christ is spoken of as a conjunction rather than a union (M. Simonetti, "Nestorius – Nestorianism," *EEC* 2:594).

¹⁶⁸ Bordonali, "Cassian," 1:149.

¹⁶⁹ This idea comes from references in Cassian's *On the Incarnation* and two letters from Pope Innocent I. (Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 14-15).

¹⁷⁰ Richard Cavendish, "The Visigoths sack Rome," *HT* vol. 60:8 (2010): 8.

¹⁷¹ Myron W. Lustig, "Lessons from Andalusia," *CR* vol. 11:1 (1998): 97-99.

preserved. The Visigoths, being Arian-Christians, respected Christian sites and treasures. The invaders stayed in the city for only three days before moving south to continue their plundering, but their actions would be remembered as the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.¹⁷²

Southern Gaul

Cassian reappears in the historical record about 415 CE, by which time he had moved to present-day Marseilles.¹⁷³ Because so little is known about his activities from 405 CE to 415 CE, his motive for the move is unknown.¹⁷⁴ We do know he spent the last twenty years of his life in southern Gaul.

When Cassian arrived in Gaul, he would have found a region where the Church was expanding, monasticism was still quite new, and the people were engaged in a political conflict that had been going on for ten years.

From about 405 CE to 418 CE, Gaul experienced some political upheaval. Due to the fluidity of the northern border, Germanic tribes had been migrating into Roman Gaul. These Germanic invasions caused destruction and civil wars, which had a dramatic impact on those who witnessed the events.¹⁷⁵ In 418 CE, Roman General Constantius III was able to establish a kingdom for the Germanic Visigoths in southern Gaul under their own ruler,¹⁷⁶ allowing the region to maintain some stability for the next fifty years.¹⁷⁷ Cassian, having arrived in Gaul by 415 CE, would have witnessed some of these events.

¹⁷² Cavendish, "The Visigoths sack Rome," 8.

¹⁷³ Quasten, *Patrology*, 513.

¹⁷⁴ Richard J. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian: aristocrats, asceticism, and reformation in fifth century Gaul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁷⁵ Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 12.

¹⁷⁶ M. Forlin Patrucco, "Constantius III," *EEC* 1:198.

¹⁷⁷ Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 18.

In spite of the political situation in the region, the Church in Gaul experienced tremendous growth the century before Cassian's arrival. In 300 CE there were twenty six bishoprics; by 400 CE, there were seventy.¹⁷⁸ The first monastery in Gaul was founded near Poitiers by Martin of Tours in 360 CE.¹⁷⁹ The tradition of monasticism in the area was as old as Cassian himself – a vast difference from what he experienced in Egypt, where monasticism had been thriving for generations.

During his time in southern Gaul, Cassian founded two monasteries: one for men and one for women. These monasteries are traditionally associated with St. Victor and St. Salvator.¹⁸⁰ While in Gaul, he wrote his major monastic works, the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*. These two works would have a lasting influence on Western monastic life. By writing the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* in Latin, Cassian's works were accessible to those desiring to live the monastic life in the West, where Latin monasticism was still coming into its own. Moreover, given his time in Egypt and his proficiency in both Latin and Greek, he was able to share the profound Eastern monastic thought and practice he experienced.¹⁸¹ Cassian made available Eastern thought and practice in the Latin language for people in the West.

¹⁷⁸ Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church* (London: Longman, 1992), 38.

¹⁷⁹ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 39.

¹⁸⁰ Quasten, *Patrology*, 513. Attempting to learn more about these saints proved difficult. Quasten does not cite his source. Bordonali uses the name St. Saviour instead of St. Salvator ("Cassian," 1:149). No religious encyclopedia I had access to mentioned any St. Salvator or St. Saviour. There are many Ss. Victor, because, in addition to being a name, "Victor" was often used as a title for martyrs of the early Church since it describes that they conquer, or have victory over, death through the resurrection. The St. Victor for whom Cassian's monastery was named was martyred at Marseilles in 290, and his feast is July 21 (P. Rouche, "Victor, Ss." *NCE* 14:477). For more information on the Monastery, see P. Delhaye, "Saint-Victor in Marseilles, Abbey of." *NCE* 12:590-1.

¹⁸¹ Boniface Ramsey, O.P. "Cassian, John," *EM* 1:248-9.

Writings and Lasting Influence

The *Institutes* was written first, sometime between 419 and 426 CE.¹⁸² It is the shorter of his two great works. Dealing with the communal life of the monk, Cassian divided the *Institutes* into twelve books. The first four regard the basics of monastic communal life: monastic dress, the hours of prayer in a monastery, and the virtues of humility and obedience, which are particularly important to communal monastic life.¹⁸³ Each of the remaining eight books is devoted to one of the so-called eight evil thoughts: gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, *acedia*,¹⁸⁴ vainglory, and pride.¹⁸⁵ Scholars believe Cassian learned about this system of thoughts from Evagrius of Pontus,¹⁸⁶ though Evagrius's name is never mentioned, to avoid association with Origenism.

Cassian's other great work, the *Conferences*, was written between 426 and 429 CE.¹⁸⁷ Whereas the *Institutes* focus on the communal life of the monk, the *Conferences* focus on the private life of the monk. The work is structured as a record of twenty four conversations with fifteen Egyptian spiritual masters. Although the final corpus of *Conferences* contained twenty four conversations, Cassian originally intended to write only ten.¹⁸⁸ The work was meant as a complement to the *Institutes*. Nevertheless, the first ten were very well received, so Cassian, realizing he had more to say, continued writing. Two more sets of *Conferences* were produced:

¹⁸² Ramsey, "Cassian," 1:248.

¹⁸³ Ramsey, "Cassian," 1:248.

¹⁸⁴ According to the *NCE*, *acedia* is more commonly called sloth due to its most notable effect, which is a disgust with the spiritual because of the effort involved (U. Voll, "acedia," *NCE* 1:66-67.). Cassian himself describes *acedia* in the *Institutes* as "a wearied or anxious heart... akin to sadness... it makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell, and also disdainful and contemptuous of the brothers who live with him or at a slight distance, as being careless and unspiritual... it renders him slothful and immobile in the face of all the work to be done within the walls of his dwelling..." (*Inst*, 10.1-2 (Ramsey, 219)). *TODCC* goes into more detail about the evolution of the word *acedia* (Livingstone, "accidie," 1:10.).

¹⁸⁵ Ramsey, "Cassian," 1:248.

¹⁸⁶ Quasten, *Patrology*, 514.

¹⁸⁷ Ramsey, "Cassian," 1:248.

¹⁸⁸ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 8. According to Casiday, this claim is controversial because Cassian promises to discuss certain themes that are not addressed in the first ten *Conferences* (*Tradition and Theology in St. John Cassian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 184, footnote 144).

Eleven through Seventeen, and *Eighteen through Twenty-four*. It is important to note that Cassian did not start writing this account until at least two decades after leaving Egypt.

These two great works are Cassian's legacy to future generations; they had a lasting impact in the West, in spite of their author's relative obscurity. St. Benedict himself, in the sixth century, listed Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences* as prescribed reading for monks in his Rule.¹⁸⁹ Cassiodorus recommended *The Institutes* to his monks at Vivarium¹⁹⁰ in the second half of the sixth century.¹⁹¹ Other great Western thinkers who were influenced by Cassian include Gregory the Great (d. 604), Alcuin (d. 804), Rhabanus Maurus (d. 856), Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129), and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).¹⁹² Cassian is the only Latin-speaking author whose sayings appear in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.¹⁹³

Theological Controversies

During his life, Cassian would be caught in the crossfire of a number of ecclesiastical battles. He was forced out of Egypt because of the persecution of Origenists. He fled to Constantinople, where he was welcomed by Chrysostom, who was already dealing with the influx of Origenist monks to the city. This eventually brought Cassian to Rome with a letter of appeal on Chrysostom's behalf. His trip to Rome ultimately would be the cause of his involvement in the Nestorian controversy. Eventually, Cassian would be drawn into the Pelagian controversy as well.

¹⁸⁹ In Chapter 42 of the *Rule*, Benedict prescribes that the *Conferences* be read aloud to the monks. In Chapter 73, the last chapter of the *Rule*, Benedict lists both the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* among texts that will help monks pursue monastic life (*The Rule of St. Benedict* (ed, Timothy Fry; New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 43, 69).

¹⁹⁰ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 7.

¹⁹¹ M. L. Angrisani Sanfilippo, "Cassiodorus," *EEC* 1:149-150.

¹⁹² Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 7.

¹⁹³ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 403.

Cassian's legacy was tarnished because of accusations that he supported some of Pelagius's¹⁹⁴ teachings. As a result, his name is not well known in the West, in spite of his lasting influence on Western monasticism. Pelagianism is a school of thought which teaches that humanity can take the initial and fundamental steps toward salvation by one's own efforts, apart from the grace of God. It was condemned at the council at Carthage in 411.¹⁹⁵ The accusation of Cassian's writings as semi-Pelagian¹⁹⁶ was based on *Conference Thirteen*.

In that *Conference*, although Augustine is never mentioned by name, Cassian takes issue with his contemporary's theology of divine grace. The implications of Augustine's theology of original sin include the idea that a human being cannot initiate any good works whatsoever without the assistance of grace.¹⁹⁷ In *Conference Thirteen*, Cassian contends that, at the very least, some good works can originate from a person's own initiative without the intervention of God, but that they cannot be completed without that intervention. "When he [God] notices good will making an appearance in us, at once he enlightens and encourages it and spurs it on to salvation, giving increase to what he himself planted and saw arise *from our own efforts*."¹⁹⁸ The relationship between grace and free will was especially important in monastic circles because an overemphasis on grace, at the cost of human initiative, which was one characterization of Augustine's theology, seemed to deplete the value of the whole monastic project. If everything

¹⁹⁴ Pelagius was a British ascetic who lived and taught in Rome in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Differentiating Pelagius's actual teachings from the thinking which is named after him is difficult. While Pelagianism is denounced at numerous local and regional councils, Pelagius himself was condemned, restored, condemned again, and disappears in obscurity (S. J. McKenna, "Pelagius and Pelagianism," *NCE* 11:60-3).

¹⁹⁵ Livingstone, "Pelagianism," 1:1257-8.

¹⁹⁶ Recent scholarship has moved away from the term "semi-Pelagian," primarily because it insinuates only two options: Augustinian or Pelagian. The full range of positions on grace is neglected by the term. It disregards other influences on and purposes for Cassian's writings about grace (Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 8-9).

¹⁹⁷ Ramsey, "Cassian," 1:249.

¹⁹⁸ *Conf*, 13.8.4 (Ramsey, 474), emphasis added.

depended on God's initiative, there would be no reason for one to choose to live the challenging life of a monk, for God's grace could save anyone, regardless of ascetical practices.¹⁹⁹

One of Augustine's disciples, Prosper of Aquitaine, criticized Cassian's view on grace in *Conference Thirteen* and his apparent disagreement with Augustine's theology.²⁰⁰ The Council of Orange in 529 CE condemned Cassian's teaching on grace found in *Conference Thirteen*.²⁰¹ It should be noted here, however, that in many ways Cassian was an Eastern theologian living and teaching in the Latin West. His seminal monastic formation was all conducted in the East, leaving him deeply influenced by Eastern theology. Therefore his teaching must be judged by Greek theological criteria. With this in mind, he was perfectly in agreement with the Eastern tradition.²⁰²

What was called the semi-Pelagian controversy damaged Cassian's reputation and is the reason he is not widely recognized as a saint in the Latin West. He is, however, celebrated as a saint in Orthodox churches in the East and locally in Marseilles.²⁰³ In Marseilles, his feast is celebrated on July 23. In the East, the feast is generally celebrated on February 29.²⁰⁴

Chapter 4: The Text

Through the *Conferences*, Cassian is able to bring Eastern monastic thought to the West. While Cassian presents this work as a series of conversations with fifteen masters, it should not be thought of as transcriptions of conversations from his time in Egypt. Having been written more than two decades after his time with these spiritual masters, it is far more plausible that the *Conferences* are, instead, his synthesis of what he learned during his time with these men.

¹⁹⁹ Ramsey, "Cassian," 1:249.

²⁰⁰ Christou, "Cassian," 3:1448.

²⁰¹ Aherne, "Orange, Councils of," *NCE* 10:620.

²⁰² Christou, "Cassian," 3:1448.

²⁰³ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 378.

²⁰⁴ Christou, "Cassian," 3:1448.

Composed of twenty-four individual stories, the *Conferences* is an extensive work. It was not originally intended to be such. Cassian originally intended to write only ten conferences. However, when they were disseminated, the response was so positive and his friends so encouraging, he decided to continue writing. Eventually, he added two more sets of conferences, totaling twenty-four. Additionally, it would seem even the first ten conferences are longer than he anticipated.²⁰⁵

Audience

Cassian's first work, the *Institutes*, clearly is written for cenobitic monks.²⁰⁶ As he begins his second work, the *Conferences*, he states that he is moving on to address the interior life of a monk.²⁰⁷ The *Conferences* more specifically apply to anchorites; these monks are also sometimes called solitaires.²⁰⁸ It is clear that Cassian, at least at the beginning of the *Conferences*, considers the anchoritic lifestyle superior to the communal. "The solitary life is greater and more sublime than that of the cenobia, and the contemplation of God – upon which those inestimable men were ever intent – than the active life that is led in communities."²⁰⁹ However, his thinking seems to have changed by the time he wrote the final conferences.

It is certainly true that the first ten conferences, called the First Part, are intended for anchorites.²¹⁰ This is known not only because Cassian states it in the preface to the First Part,

²⁰⁵ Cassian says as much at the beginning of *Conference Nine*: "Excuse the length of the book thus far. It is longer than we had intended, even with our efforts not only to compress what must be told into a few words but also to pass over numerous things in silence" (*Conf*, 9.1 (Ramsey, 329)).

²⁰⁶ For another perspective on who the audience of all of Cassian's writings might have been, see Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 9. He argues that Cassian is actually writing to the wealthy Roman aristocrats in Gaul.

²⁰⁷ "Consequently, let us proceed from the external and visible life of the monks, which we have summarized in the previous books, to the invisible character of the inner man" (*Conf*, Pref 1.5 (Ramsey, 30)).

²⁰⁸ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 27.

²⁰⁹ *Conf*, Pref 1.4 (Ramsey, 29-30).

²¹⁰ "The ten conferences that follow apply not to monks in general but to anchorites in particular, even if these latter are not specifically indicated" (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 27).

but also because the content contained within these conferences is more directly applicable to the solitary life. However, it seems that anchorites do not remain the exclusive audience in Parts Two and Three. Cassian states he is writing Part Two to help instruct the monks of a cenobium.²¹¹ Moreover, Cassian states explicitly that the conferences in Part Three are appropriate for anchorites and cenobites.²¹² So, while Cassian's initial audience seems to be anchorites, by the time he wrote the Third Part, he seems to be writing to all monks, including cenobites.

For all the *Conferences*, the audience would have been familiar with the Latin language. Cassian wrote in Latin.²¹³ His goal was to convey Eastern monastic thought to a new audience.²¹⁴

Based on the people to whom he dedicates his writings, it seems most of the Latin-speaking monks for whom Cassian was writing lived in Gaul. The sees of the bishops mentioned in the preface to the First Part are both in Gaul. Additionally, one of the priests to whom he dedicates Part Three is the leader of a monastery in Gaul. Referring to the *Conferences* of the Second Part, Cassian says, "But if even these are unable to satisfy your holy and zealous longing, there are seven other conferences [anticipating Part Three] that are to be sent to the brothers who live on the Stoechadian Islands, and I think that they will meet your ardent desire."²¹⁵ It seems he refers to the same islands again, when, in the preface to the Third Part, he tells the four priests to whom the Third Part is dedicated that the *Conferences* of the Third Part "are appropriate to

²¹¹ *Conf*, Pref 2.1-2 (Ramsey, 399).

²¹² *Conf*, Pref 3.2 (Ramsey, 625).

²¹³ "Thus, while explaining those things as holily and as completely as we received them, we may be able to put before you those very same men, embodied somehow in their own institutes and (what is more) speaking in the Latin tongue" (*Conf*, Pref 1.6 (Ramsey, 30)).

²¹⁴ Cassian also cites "remov[ing] the obligation of a dangerous voyage," as one of his reasons for writing the *Conferences* (*Conf*, Pref 2.2 (Ramsey, 399)).

²¹⁵ *Conf*, Pref 2.3 (Ramsey, 400). The Stoechadian Islands are located off the Southern coast of Gaul.

both professions [anchorites and cenobites] which, thanks to you, flourish among immense bands of brothers not only in regions of the West but even in the Islands.”²¹⁶

Important Members of the Audience

Castor, who seems to be the person who prompted Cassian to write, was a bishop in Gaul.²¹⁷ Cassian wrote the *Institutes* in order to help Castor establish a monastery in his diocese.²¹⁸ However, Castor died before Cassian finished the first ten *Conferences*.²¹⁹ Cassian mentions he would have liked to have known Castor’s opinion on the *Conferences*.²²⁰

Part One is dedicated to two people: Pope Leontius and Helladius.²²¹ Leontius was related to Castor²²² and is believed to have been bishop of Forum Iulii in Narbonensis Secunda, now Frejus in the department of Var in France.²²³ Helladius was a priest when Cassian finished Part One but later became a bishop.²²⁴ Cassian describes him as one who desired to be instructed in the traditions of the anchorites.²²⁵

Part Two is dedicated to Honoratus and Eucherius.²²⁶ Both are priests.²²⁷ Cassian says the following about these two men, though it is not clear which description applies to which man.

²¹⁶ *Conf*, Pref 3.2 (Ramsey, 625).

²¹⁷ “Castor held the See of Apta Iulia in Narbonensis Secunda, now Apt in the Vaucluse in France, not far north of Marseilles.” Cassian calls him “Pope Castor,” because it was not uncommon at this time to give a bishop the title of pope (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 33, note for 1 praef. 1).

²¹⁸ *Inst*, Pref. 2 (Ramsey, 11).

²¹⁹ Referring to Castor: “Now, however, since in the meantime the aforesaid bishop has left us and gone to Christ...” (*Conf*, Pref 1.2 (Ramsey, 29)).

²²⁰ *Conf*, Pref 1.1 (Ramsey, 29).

²²¹ *Conf*, Pref 1.2 (Ramsey, 29).

²²² Referring to Leontius, Cassian says “one of you, united to the aforementioned man [Pope Castor] by family affection and priestly dignity and still more by the fervor of holy zeal, claims his due as a brother by hereditary right” (*Conf*, Pref 1.3 (Ramsey, 29)).

²²³ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 33, note for 1 praef. 2.

²²⁴ In *Conf*, Pref 1.2 (Ramsey, 29), Cassian calls Helladius “brother” which indicates equality of rank with Cassian (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 33, note for 1 praef. 2), but in *Conf*, Pref 2.2 (Ramsey, 399) he is called “bishop.” It is not known what his see was (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 33, note for 1 praef. 2).

²²⁵ *Conf*, Pref 1.3 (Ramsey, 29).

²²⁶ *Conf*, Pref 2.1 (Ramsey, 399).

One “presides over a large cenobium of brothers [and] desires his community... to be instructed... in the precepts of these fathers”²²⁸ while the other “wished to come to Egypt in order to be edified by the bodily presence of those same men.”²²⁹ Cassian declares his intention in writing these conferences is to help the one in instructing his “sons” and to remove the obligation of the other to travel so far.²³⁰

Part Three is dedicated to four people: Jovinianus, Minervus, Leontius, and Theodore, all of whom were priests.²³¹ Theodore founded a monastery in the Gallic provinces.²³² Cassian says the others “by [their] instruction not only inspired monks to long for a cenobitic profession in the first place but also to desire the sublimity of an anchoritic way of life.”²³³

Individual Structure

The *Conferences* each have three participants in the dialogue: Cassian, Germanus, and the spiritual father from whom they are seeking instruction. Additionally, each conference follows a similar structure, with the three individuals maintaining the same roles throughout. The first speaker is Cassian, who introduces the reader to the situation of the friends and gives information about the *abba*, who in turn, is giving the instruction in that conversation. The conversation’s main participants are Germanus and the *abba*. Cassian, as the writer, employs

²²⁷ Both Honoratus and Eucherius are called “brother” in the dedication (*Conf*, Pref 2.1 (Ramsey, 399)). See footnote 224.

²²⁸ *Conf*, Pref 2.1 (Ramsey, 399). This seems to be about Honoratus. S. Pricoco says Eucherius “retired to the asceterium of Lerins soon after its foundation by Honoratus between 412 and 420” (“Eucherius of Lyons,” *EEC* 1:295).

²²⁹ *Conf*, Pref 2.1 (Ramsey, 399). This seems to be about Eucherius. Pricoco says Eucherius, “according to Cassian... was on the point of making a journey to Egypt, home of the great ascetics, but never did so” (“Eucherius of Lyons,” 1:295).

²³⁰ *Conf*, Pref 2.2 (Ramsey, 399).

²³¹ All were called “brothers” (*Conf*, Pref 3.1 (Ramsey, 625)). See footnote 224.

²³² *Conf*, Pref 3.1 (Ramsey, 625).

²³³ *Conf*, Pref 3.2 (Ramsey, 625).

Germanus as the questioner as well as the one who moves the conversation along with follow-up questions. The *abba* acts as the voice of wisdom, answering the questions posed to him.

The Abbas

Fifteen *abbas* appear in the twenty-four conferences. These are likely to have been real men from whom Cassian actually sought advice. While many of the fifteen individuals are no more than names to us today, they all would have had prominent reputations among the monastic communities in Egypt during Cassian's time there. Several of these *abbas* appear in other sources, usually in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* or Palladius's *The Lausiatic History*. The realism with which they are portrayed adds to the likelihood that these men are not mere fabrications. The *abbas* themselves tend to be men of moderation rather than flamboyant wonder-workers. And they are placed in a realistic context with Cassian describing places and customs which indicate first-hand knowledge of their situations.²³⁴

The *abbas* in Part One are anchoritic spiritual masters from the Scetis region, where Cassian spent his later years in Egypt.²³⁵ Cassian's first years in Egypt were spent in the Nile Delta region, from where the *abbas* of Part Two come.²³⁶ There is disagreement about where the *abbas* in Part Three come from, but both cities listed, Dioclos and Panephrisis, are in the Delta region near the coast.²³⁷

²³⁴ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 9. For examples of the places and customs described by Cassian, see *Conf*, 1.23.4 (Ramsey, 64), *Conf*, 11.1 (Ramsey, 409), and *Conf*, 11.3 (Ramsey, 410).

²³⁵ *Conf*, Pref 1.2 (Ramsey, 29) and *Conf*, Pref 2.2 (Ramsey, 399).

²³⁶ Quasten lists the *abbas* of Part Two as coming from Panephrisis (Quasten, *Patrology*, 515.). Ramsey says these *abbas* come from Thennesus (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 7).

²³⁷ Quasten separates the *abbas* of Part Three into two groups, saying the *abbas* in *Conferences Eighteen* through *Twenty* come from Dioclos and those in *Conferences Twenty One* through *Twenty Four* come from Panephrisis (Quasten, *Patrology*, 515.). Ramsey does not subdivide Part Three and says all *abbas* come from Dioclos (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 7).

The first *abba* Cassian references is Moses; he is the spiritual master from whom Cassian and Germaus seek advice in both *Conferences One* and *Two*. He may be the same Moses who is mentioned in *Institutes* 10.25. He is not, however, Moses the Ethiopian, who was famous at this time,²³⁸ because Abba Moses states in *Conference Two* that he entered monasticism at a young age.²³⁹ The Ethiopian was a reformed criminal who joined a monastery as an adult.²⁴⁰

The next *abba* encountered by readers is Paphnutius, who appears in *Conference Three*. It is within this conference that we learn he is also called “the Buffalo” because he resided so far away from all other anchorites that they would only rarely encounter him.²⁴¹ Boniface Ramsey states it is probable that he is the same Paphnutius mentioned by Palladius in *The Lausiatic History*.²⁴² The reasons given include the old age of both men, that both are priests,²⁴³ and that both make distinctions between divine will and divine permission.²⁴⁴

Daniel is the *abba* of *Conference Four*. Ramsey thinks he is not the Daniel of *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* but does not explain why, stating that Abba Daniel of the *Conferences* is otherwise unknown.²⁴⁵ Cassian says Abba Daniel was ordained to the priesthood quickly after being ordained deacon, due to his virtue.²⁴⁶

The *abba* of *Conference Five* is Serapion. This is probably the same Sarapion mentioned by Cassian in *Conference 2.11*. It is unknown if he is the same Serapion who appears elsewhere in early Christian literature.²⁴⁷

²³⁸ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 35.

²³⁹ *Conf*, 2.11.1 (Ramsey, 91).

²⁴⁰ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 35.

²⁴¹ *Conf*, 3.1.3 (Ramsey, 119-120).

²⁴² *The Lausiatic History* 47.3ff found in Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 113).

²⁴³ *Conf*, 4.1.1 (Ramsey, 155); *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, de abbate Eudaemone.

²⁴⁴ *Conf*, 3.20.1 (Ramsey, 137); *The Lausiatic History* 47.5.

²⁴⁵ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 149.

²⁴⁶ *Conf*, 4.1.1 (Ramsey, 155).

²⁴⁷ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 117.

Conference Six is led by Abba Theodore. While Cassian mentions a Theodore in the *Institutes* (5.33ff), it does not seem to be the same Theodore as the one who appears in the *Conferences* because of their differences in language skills and approaches to giving advice. The Theodore of the *Institutes* is said not to have known Greek well and to reflect on difficult questions for seven days before giving an answer. On the other hand, the Theodore of the *Conferences* would have spoken to Cassian and Germanus in Greek, and he responded immediately to their question rather than waiting to reflect.²⁴⁸

Abba Serenus is the master in both *Conferences Seven* and *Eight* and may be the same Serenus who is mentioned in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.²⁴⁹

Conferences Nine and *Ten* are led by Isaac, who is said to have been a personal acquaintance of Antony's.²⁵⁰ He is also known as the "priest of Kellia," was renowned for his learning and hospitality, and is cited more than ten times in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.²⁵¹ Ramsey connects this Isaac to one of the two Isaacs who are mentioned by Palladius (*Dialogue of the Life of St. John Chrysostom*, 17) because they are both priests, had numerous disciples, and were persecuted by Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria.²⁵² Augustine Casiday also mentions Isaac as having been persecuted by Theophilus, explaining that this references Theophilus driving out monks who allegorically interpret Scripture – in other words, Origenists – from Egypt.²⁵³

²⁴⁸ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 211.

²⁴⁹ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 241. The only Serenus mentioned in any theological encyclopedia to which I had access is Serenus of Marseilles from the sixth century (V. Saxer, "Marseilles," *EEC* 1:530).

²⁵⁰ *Conf*, 9.31 (Ramsey, 349).

²⁵¹ Cassian, *Cassian on Prayer* (trans. Casiday), 3.

²⁵² Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 323.

²⁵³ Cassian, *Cassian on Prayer* (trans. Casiday), 2.

Chaeremon is the master cited in *Conferences Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen*. He may be the same man as the Chaeremon whose death is very briefly alluded to by Palladius (*The Lausiaca History* 47.4), but there is no way of knowing for sure.²⁵⁴

Nesteros is the master cited in *Conferences Fourteen and Fifteen*. Ramsey indicates he could perhaps be the same as Nisteros the Great of the *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cassian's Nesteros is probably not Nistheros the Cenobite of *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* because he is referred to in the conference as an anchorite (11.3.2).²⁵⁵

The *abba* of *Conferences Sixteen and Seventeen* is Joseph. It is possible that he could be the Joseph of Panephrisis mentioned in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Bishop Archebius, who introduces Cassian and Germanus to Abba Joseph in *Conference Sixteen*, is the bishop of Panephrisis. From Cassian we also learn that Abba Joseph is from a distinguished family in Thmuis, Egypt, and that he was fluent in both Greek and "the Egyptian" languages.²⁵⁶

Piamun is the *abba* of *Conference Eighteen*. He was also mentioned by Cassian in *Conference Seventeen*.²⁵⁷ Ramsey asserts that he also appears in *History of the Monks of Egypt* (25) and in Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History* (6.29).²⁵⁸

Abba John of *Conference Nineteen* is the first cenobitic *abba* mentioned by Cassian as one of the principle participants in a conference. He resided with more than 200 others in the cenobium of Abba Paul.²⁵⁹ Ramsey points out that Cassian's John is not likely the John of the *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* because that John is likely to have been an anchorite.

²⁵⁴ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 403.

²⁵⁵ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 499.

²⁵⁶ *Conf*, 16.1 (Ramsey, 557).

²⁵⁷ *Conf*, 17.24 (Ramsey, 604)

²⁵⁸ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 629.

²⁵⁹ *Conf*, 19.1.1 (Ramsey, 669).

The *abba* of *Conference Twenty* is Pinufius, who Cassian and Germanus first encountered while in the monastery in Bethlehem.²⁶⁰ All that we know about Pinufius is what Cassian tells us. He was the leader of a large cenobium near Panephrisis and was well known for his virtue. He feared his popularity would make him vain, so he ran away from his own monastery and joined another as a novice under a pseudonym. Once discovered to be the famous Pinufius, he was escorted back to his own monastery. He did this multiple times. It was during one of these periods of pretending to be a novice that he encountered Cassian and Germanus for the first time.²⁶¹ Ramsey points out that the story about Pinufius is similar to one told about Macarius of Alexandria in Palladius's *The Lausiatic History* (18.12ff).²⁶² The content of *Conference Twenty*, however, does not come from the time the three spent together in Bethlehem. Rather, once Cassian and Germanus went to Egypt they sought out Pinufius at his monastery near Panephrisis.

Theonas leads three conferences: *Conferences Twenty-One*, *Twenty-Two*, and *Twenty-Three*. His conversion to the monastic life is recounted in the first nine paragraphs of *Conference Twenty One*. The conversion is unusual in that he was married, and when his wife would not agree to live without “conjugal relations,”²⁶³ Theonas left, saying, “It is safer for me to be divorced from a human being than from God.”²⁶⁴ Cassian's Theonas is definitely not the

²⁶⁰ *Conference Twenty* actually describes the monastery as being in Syria. However, in Ramsey's notes to the text for *Conference Eleven*, he explains that Syria is understood to include the smaller region of Palestine and therefore Bethlehem as well (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 425, note 11.1). In *Conf* 11.5, Cassian clearly states this monastery was in Bethlehem. I used Bethlehem here to avoid confusion since I stated in Chapter Three that Cassian and Germanus met Pinufius while in Bethlehem.

²⁶¹ *Conf*, 20.1 (Ramsey, 693-4) and *Inst*, 4.30.2-5 (Ramsey, 94-5).

²⁶² Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 687.

²⁶³ *Conf*, 21.9.1 (Ramsey, 724).

²⁶⁴ *Conf*, 21.9.7 (Ramsey, 726).

Theonas of *History of the Monks of Egypt* (6), which says nothing of the noteworthy conversion and contains other discrepancies.²⁶⁵

The last *abba* Cassian references is Abraham, who appears only in *Conference Twenty Four*. He may be one of the two Abrahams mentioned in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, but it is not certain which one, if indeed he is either of them.²⁶⁶

Style

The *abbas* referenced by Cassian were likely real men with whom Cassian and Germanus actually spoke. Yet it is unlikely that we will ever know how much of what is included in the *Conferences* was genuinely said by those *abbas*. Like many other ancient dialogues, determining historical authenticity is a challenge. One consequence of *The Conferences* being written nearly a quarter century after Cassian's time in Egypt is that his writings would have been influenced by his own experiences during the interim years. *The Conferences*, if actual conversations, certainly would have been elaborated upon and contain traces of those experiences. When demonstrating this point in Cassian's writings *Conference Thirteen* is frequently used.²⁶⁷

Conference Thirteen is meant to reflect a conversation that took place before 400 CE. However the conference is certainly an intentional response to Augustine's position on grace, which was not produced until the 420s.²⁶⁸ Abba Chaeremon originally may have proffered the teaching on the relationship between grace and free will, and Cassian simply reproduced it at the opportune time in response to Augustine. However, it is also possible that this is really Cassian's

²⁶⁵ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 711.

²⁶⁶ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 819.

²⁶⁷ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 10.

²⁶⁸ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 10.

original teaching, which has little or no basis in a real conversation with an *abba* even though the teaching is based on Eastern ascetical thought.²⁶⁹ Whether *Conference Thirteen* has historical basis in an actual conversation or was simply based in general on Eastern thought, what is certain is that “the synthesis of the whole and the emphasis on certain themes rather than on others are Cassian’s.”²⁷⁰

Cassian used the dialogue form in order to bring to life the men he encountered in Egypt. By writing in the form of a dialogue he allowed the monks to “[receive] the very authors of the conferences into their cells, along with the books of the conferences, and as it were [speak] with them by way of daily questions and answers.”²⁷¹ Thereby, the reader would enter into the text as if a participant in the conversation and learn the disciplines of monastic life offered by it.

By writing the *Conferences* in the style of a dialogue, Cassian joins a long list of ancient writers who also used this style. Dialogue as a literary style was perfected by Plato.²⁷² In religious writings, the dialogue form can be traced back to Rabbinic debates on the interpretation of Scripture.²⁷³ The use of dialogue for texts interpreting Scripture continued in Christianity. The oldest Christian dialogue is a debate between Papiscus the Jew and Jason the Judeo-Christian on the interpretation of the Old Testament, written about 140 CE by Aristo of Pella. Other theologians who wrote dialogues include Justin, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Chrysostom, Sulpicius Severus, and Gregory the Great.²⁷⁴

While *The Conferences* do belong to the dialogue *genre* in general, the work more specifically fits into a subset *genre* called *quaestiones et responsiones*. This *genre* is different than a true dialogue because the answer given by the master is definitive and exhaustive, not

²⁶⁹ For more about unnamed influences on Cassian’s work see Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 10.

²⁷⁰ Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 11.

²⁷¹ *Conf*, Pref 3.3 (Ramsey, 625).

²⁷² H. Musurillom, “Dialogue (literary genre),” *NCE* 4:728.

²⁷³ P. F. Beatrice, “Dialogue,” *EEC* 1:233-4.

²⁷⁴ Beatrice, “Dialogue,” 1:233.

lending itself nor leaving room for a discussion or counterpoints, which characterizes genuine dialogues.²⁷⁵ *Quaestiones et responsiones* was frequently used as a style for Biblical commentaries.²⁷⁶

An additional element of Cassian's style is his extensive use of analogies and examples as literary devices. He frequently uses commonplace items, such as a building, pillow, or feather, in analogies that explain complex spiritual matters. In almost every *Conference*, Cassian includes at least one story of a monk performing a task well or poorly to illustrate the point being made within the conversation. In *Conferences One* and *Nine*, there are examples of monks who were influenced by demons to excessive fasting and work. *Conference Two* includes the story of a monk hoarding bread. *Conference Nineteen* gives the example of a monk with extraordinary patience. Cassian's employment of analogies using commonplace items and examples of real situations monks would face, underscores that this text is a monastic work, written out of Cassian's own experiences, for those who are not necessarily highly educated but who need to understand the complex principles being communicated by him.

Themes

The themes Cassian chooses to emphasize address the interior life of the monk.²⁷⁷ Recurring themes include purity of heart, discernment, moderation, single mindedness, and prayer.²⁷⁸

Purity of heart is addressed most explicitly in *Conferences One, Two, Nine, and Ten*, as the goal of the monastic life. While purity of heart is discussed overtly in these conferences, it

²⁷⁵ Beatrice, "Dialogue," 1:234.

²⁷⁶ C. Curti, "Quaestiones et Responsiones on Holy Scripture," *EEC* 2:727-8.

²⁷⁷ For a study on the impact of the structure of the conferences on the themes, see Adalbert de Vogüé, O.S.B. "Understanding Cassian: A Survey of the Conferences," *CSQ* 19 (1984):101-21.

²⁷⁸ This list originated with Ramsey (Cassian, *Conf* (trans. Ramsey), 6, 18-20), and was modified.

must be understood to be underlying the entire message of the *Conferences*. Yet Cassian never gives a single succinct definition of it. While the modern reader may think “heart” implies emotions, the impression Cassian gives the reader is that purity of heart means something more akin to purity of living: purity of emotions, thoughts, actions, intentions, etc. All of one’s efforts are directed toward reaching this goal of purity of heart; all instruction is meant to help in that effort. The focus of the *Conferences*, as a whole work, is the attainment of purity of heart.

In *Conference Two*, Cassian asserts that discernment is the virtue which most will help a monk attain purity of heart.²⁷⁹ While *Conference One* introduces the idea of discernment, *Conference Two* is completely devoted to the topic. Discernment is mentioned again in *Conference Six*, the Preface to Part Three, *Conference Eighteen*, and elsewhere. Cassian describes discernment as,

“that which would lead the fearless monk on a steady ascent to God and would always preserve the aforesaid virtues undamaged; as that with which the heights of perfection could be scaled with little weariness; and as that without which many of those who labor even with a good will would be unable to arrive at the summit... is the begetter, guardian, and moderator of all virtues.”²⁸⁰

Discernment not only allows the monk to distinguish good from evil and to perceive which choice or path is best; it also is employed when a younger monk presents himself to an elder for spiritual direction. For Cassian, presenting oneself before an elder, seeking advice passed down through generations is also considered discernment. In addition to Cassian describing discernment throughout the *Conferences*, it also is modeled by the participants in the conversations as Cassian and Germanus seek advice from the desert *abbas*.

²⁷⁹ Throughout this thesis I will use the word discernment, even though the translation I am working with has translated the Latin word *discretio* as discretion. The *NCE* defines the Latin term (*discretio*) and Greek (διάκρισις) as spiritual discernment (J. Pegon and R. Studzinski, “Discernment, Spiritual,” *NCE* 4: 765-7). Additionally, Luibheid’s translation uses “discernment” (*Conf*, 2 (Luibheid, 60)).

²⁸⁰ *Conf*, 2.4.4 (Ramsey, 87).

Cassian stresses the importance of moderation throughout the *Conferences*. His teaching on moderation in one's actions is succinctly summarized in 21.14.2-4. The root of this teaching is that anything done properly is good and useful, but anything done improperly or to extremes is harmful and dangerous. Notable examples of specific directions for moderation are found in *Conference Two*, concerning the number of biscuits to be consumed daily- not so many as to cause lethargy and not so few as to cause weariness²⁸¹ and *Conference Seventeen*, in which Cassian says that lying and breaking promises are sometimes permissible. Moderation, for Cassian, means following the spirit of the law, rather than the letter of the law.

Single-mindedness, the ability to think about only one thing at a time, is a theme addressed in *Conferences Seven, Nine, and Ten*. In *Conference Seven*, the wandering of the mind is attributed to the work of evil spirits. In *Conferences Nine and Ten*, single-mindedness was addressed for its impact on prayer.

Prayer is an overarching theme throughout the entire work, but is specifically addressed in *Conferences Nine and Ten*. The topic of prayer will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Outline of Entire Work

Cassian outlines the interrelationship between the major themes of the entire work in the first conference. The topic of *Conference One* is the end (telos) of the monk, which is the kingdom of heaven. Cassian explains that to reach this end, one must strive for purity of heart, which he calls the goal (scopos) of the monk. To attain this goal, one must practice discernment. Discernment, in addition to leading to purity of heart, also leads to moderation.

Conference Two is a more detailed explanation of how cultivating discernment can help one attain purity of heart. Abba Moses relates a discussion he witnessed as a child among the

²⁸¹ *Conf*, 2.23.2 (Ramsey, 102).

desert masters, including Antony, about the virtue that would protect one from the temptations of the devil. While others proffered options such as fasting and vigils, contempt for all things, solitude, or duties of love or hospitality,²⁸² Antony argued that discernment “avoids excess of any kind and teaches the monk always to proceed along the royal road and does not let him be inflated by virtues on the right hand ... nor let him wander off to the vices on the left hand...”²⁸³ According to Moses, the others come to agree with Antony, as do Cassian and Germanus.²⁸⁴

Conference Three is concerned with the different callings to the monastic life and the renunciations monastic life entails. Three ways of being called to the monastic life are given, and for each one, a similar story from the Bible is cited as an example. The first type of calling comes directly from God.²⁸⁵ The second type is by seeing the example of another who lives the monastic life and wanting to do the same.²⁸⁶ The third type of calling comes out of need, such as the judges in the Old Testament who were called because the Israelite people needed them.²⁸⁷ *Conference Three* also lists three things that must be renounced in the monastic life: (1) all wealth and resources of the world, (2) past behavior, vices, and affections of the soul and body, and (3) to call the mind away from everything that is present and visible and contemplate only what is to come and desire those things that are invisible.²⁸⁸

The three causes of wandering thoughts are addressed in *Conference Four*. These causes are a person’s own negligence, an attack of the devil, and the design of God.²⁸⁹ It is said that

²⁸² *Conf*, 2.2.2 (Ramsey, 84).

²⁸³ *Conf*, 2.2.3 (Ramsey, 85).

²⁸⁴ In this conference, Cassian not only writes about discernment, he models it using wisdom passed down through the ages and generations of masters: from Antony in discussion with others (with liberal use of Scripture) to other elders, who passed it on to Moses, who passed it to Cassian, who conveys it to the readers.

²⁸⁵ The biblical example cited in *Conference Three* of one being called directly by God, although not to the monastic life, is Abraham (*Conf*, 3.4.1 (Ramsey, 121)).

²⁸⁶ A similar calling as this in the Bible is the example Moses is for the Israelite people. The Israelites are called to conversion by the example of Moses’s faithfulness (*Conf*, 3.4.3 (Ramsey, 121)).

²⁸⁷ *Conf*, 3.4.4-5 (Ramsey, 121-2).

²⁸⁸ *Conf*, 3.6.1 (Ramsey, 123).

²⁸⁹ *Conf*, 4.3 (Ramsey, 156).

God permits the wandering in order that a person might not grow proud of his accomplishment and think it all his own work, and also as a test of steadfastness.²⁹⁰ Cassian then uses the third cause, the design of God, as a segue to discuss conflict between spirit and flesh. He says that the flesh does not allow the spirit to have unreasonable desires for virtue, nor does the spirit let the mind be dragged into unrestrained wickedness. A proper equilibrium results from the struggle between them.²⁹¹ This conflict helps the monk to practice the virtue of moderation.

Conference Five addresses the eight principle vices: gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. These vices are found in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus.²⁹² In the *Conferences*, Cassian makes detailed associations between and among the vices, categorizing them as natural or unnatural, dividing them by kinds of operation, and labeling them as carnal or spiritual.²⁹³ Most people, according to Cassian, struggle with one vice more than the others.²⁹⁴ The monk is instructed to overcome the vices one at a time.²⁹⁵

Conference Six poses the question why would God let bad things happen to holy people? This question leads to a discussion about the nature of the events in a person's life, and the ability of the monk to discern the value of each event.

The initial topic of *Conference Seven* is mental distraction, which was previously addressed in *Conference Four*. In *Conference Four*, the second cause for wandering thoughts is an attack of the devil. *Conference Seven* explores the topic of evil spirits, and (1) how they interact with humans, (2) whether or not they can understand human thought, and (3) the specific actions of demons. *Conference Eight*, which is led by the same *abba* as *Conference Seven*, continues the discussion on demons. However, in this conference, the discussion is focused

²⁹⁰ *Conf*, 4.4.1 (Ramsey, 156).

²⁹¹ *Conf*, 4.12.5 (Ramsey, 163).

²⁹² T. Spidlik, "Virtues and Vices," *EEC* 2:872.

²⁹³ *Conf*, 5.3-4 (Ramsey, 183-4).

²⁹⁴ *Conf*, 5.13 (Ramsey, 194).

²⁹⁵ *Conf*, 5.14 (Ramsey, 194-5).

more on the demons themselves (i.e., origins, hierarchy, appearance, titles, functions, assignments) rather than their interactions with humans.

Conferences Nine and *Ten* both address prayer and are led by the same *abba*. The general information about prayer given in *Conference Nine* lays the foundation for the discussion of unceasing prayer in *Conference Ten*. *Conference Nine* explains that by ridding oneself of vices, cultivating virtues, and being single-minded, the soul is better equipped to enter into prayer and ascend to higher forms of prayer.²⁹⁶ Four types of prayer are also discussed: supplication, prayer, intercession, and thanksgiving.²⁹⁷ By way of explaining the types of prayer, Abba Isaac exegetes the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13).²⁹⁸ Also included in this conference is a discussion of compunction in prayer²⁹⁹ and knowledge of prayers having been heard.³⁰⁰ *Conference Ten* continues the discussion of prayer but deepens the conversation by describing in more detail a loftier, purer type of prayer: unceasing prayer. *Conference Nine* alludes to this prayer, but *Conference Ten* describes what it will look like and feel like when this is achieved, and how to achieve it.

This concludes the First Part, namely the ten conferences Cassian originally intended to produce. The remaining conferences address, as Cassian himself says, "those things concerning perfection which were perhaps treated rather obscurely or passed over in our previous works."³⁰¹

The focus of this thesis concerns the content of *Conferences Nine* and *Ten*.³⁰²

²⁹⁶ *Conf.* 9.3-7 (Ramsey, 330-5).

²⁹⁷ *Conf.* 9.9-17 (Ramsey, 336-40).

²⁹⁸ *Conf.* 9.18-25 (Ramsey, 340-6).

²⁹⁹ *Conf.* 9.29 (Ramsey, 347-8).

³⁰⁰ *Conf.* 9.34 (Ramsey, 349-53).

³⁰¹ *Conf.* Pref 2.2 (Ramsey, 400).

³⁰² The conferences of Abba Chaeremon, *Conferences Eleven* through *Thirteen*, cover perfection, chastity, and grace. In *Conferences Fourteen* and *Fifteen*, Nestoros discusses spiritual knowledge and divine gifts. Joseph leads discussions on friendship and making promises in *Conferences Sixteen* and *Seventeen*. *Conferences Eighteen* and *Nineteen* address the differences between cenobitic and anchoritic monks even though they are led by different *abbas*. Pinufius talks about the assurance of forgiveness in *Conference Twenty*. Theonas leads *Conferences Twenty One*, *Twenty Two*, and *Twenty Three*, which cover repentance during Lent and always, nocturnal illusions, and sinlessness. The final conference, *Conference Twenty Four*, is about mortification and is led by Abraham.

Chapter 5: Prayer

Part 1: Prayer in the *Conferences*

Columba Stewart has said that “affixing [Cassian’s] ideas to schematic or thematic grids degrades his kaleidoscopic vision to a single optic or exaggerates his dependence on sources.”³⁰³ Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, a systemization of his writings on prayer in the *Conferences* is necessary.

The importance of prayer for Cassian cannot be understated. Not to belabor the point, his audience consisted of people who had dedicated their lives to prayer. “Monastic Christians have resolved to accept the challenge [to pray constantly] as their very way of life, but they too have been daunted by the awesome implications of that one word, ‘always.’”³⁰⁴ Cassian’s principle intent was to guide and teach monks the practices that would form and transform their interior lives. This transformation comes with God’s help by means of prayer.³⁰⁵

Cassian understood prayer to be an encounter with God, a conversation with him in which, “not only does the Christian address God, but God also addresses the Christian.”³⁰⁶ These encounters with God involve all three persons of the Trinity.³⁰⁷ Since prayer is a privileged encounter with God, though it has many personal benefits, the encounter is desirable in itself.³⁰⁸

The principle influences on Cassian’s understanding of prayer seem to be Origen, Evagrius, and the *Macarian Homilies*. Like Origen in his treatise *On Prayer*, Cassian addressed the four varieties of prayer named by St. Paul in 1 Timothy 2:1 and gives a detailed analysis of

³⁰³ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 37.

³⁰⁴ Columba Stewart, “John Cassian on Unceasing Prayer,” MS 15 (1984): 159-77.

³⁰⁵ Levko, “Inside Prayer,” 166.

³⁰⁶ Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 183.

³⁰⁷ Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 161. For more about the Christological aspects of prayer in Cassian, see Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 194-7. For more about the Pneumatological aspects of prayer in Cassian see Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 209-12.

³⁰⁸ Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 182.

the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13).³⁰⁹ Although Cassian and Evagrius differ on the relationship between prayer and emotions, Cassian specifically uses the Evagrian term "true prayer" in the *Conferences*.³¹⁰ The emotional richness and vivid description of the sensation of prayer in Cassian's writings have led some scholars to suggest that he may have been influenced by the *Macarian Homilies* and other documents associated with the Messalian movements.³¹¹ This suggestion is, however, controversial.³¹²

In his writings, Cassian addresses both communal prayer, which he calls "canonical prayer," and private prayer. Communal prayer is mainly addressed in the *Institutes*, whereas the *Conferences* focuses on private prayer.³¹³ Cassian's "personal preference was undisguisedly for private prayer."³¹⁴ The reason expressed for this preference is that voluntary prayer is more desired than prayers prayed out of obligation at fixed times.³¹⁵

Scripture is central to Cassian's teaching about prayer. "The practice of prayer is nourished by memory filled with Scripture and good thoughts and is conditioned gradually to arrive at continual recollection of God in order to develop a God-centered internal disposition."³¹⁶ In Cassian's writings, a two-fold relationship exists between prayer and Scripture. Firstly, Scripture gives examples of prayers said by others. Cassian abundantly cites examples of prayers said by Jesus, addressing in particular the Lord's Prayer and Jesus's prayer

³⁰⁹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 106. For more information on Origen's influence on Cassian's understanding of prayer, see Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 106-108.

³¹⁰ Cassian uses "true prayer" (*oratio vera*) three times: *Conf*, 9.31, 10.9.2, and 23.18.2 (Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 208, in endnote 3 for Chapter 7). For more information on the complexities of the similarities between Evagrius and Cassian, see Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 147-153, 207-209 and Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 85-116.

³¹¹ Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 161.

³¹² For more information about this scholarly debate, see Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 207-209 and Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 115-116.

³¹³ For more information about communal prayer in Cassian's writings, see Catherine Chin, "Prayer and *Otium* in Cassian's *Institutes*." *SP* 35 (2001): 24-9.

³¹⁴ Kilian McDonnell, "Prayer in Ancient Western Tradition," *Worship* 55:1 (1981): 34-61.

³¹⁵ *Inst*, 3.2 (Ramsey, 59).

³¹⁶ Levko, "Inside Prayer," 173.

in John 17.³¹⁷ Secondly, Scripture itself can be used as a prayer. Cassian prescribes the Psalmic verse, “O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me,” be used as a prayer because it is appropriate for every circumstance in life.³¹⁸ For Cassian, the Bible and prayer were inseparable.³¹⁹ “In Cassian’s world prayer simply could not exist outside of a biblical environment. His map of progress in prayer leads from multiple forms and words to simple forms and fewer words and finally to wordless ecstatic prayer. At each stage, however, the basis of prayer is biblical.”³²⁰

Development of Prayer Life

Because Cassian’s goal was to teach monks the practices that would transform their spiritual lives, one of the overarching themes of his writings on prayer is the development of the prayer life. Cassian explains that similar to a child who must learn letters before pronouncing whole words, “there are also certain fundamental elements of instruction belonging to this most sublime discipline” of prayer.³²¹

These “fundamental elements” can be broken into three steps. The first step is to purge that which will prevent the mind from ascending to the heavens. All vices, including those things that have the appearance of good but cater to ambition or power, must be purged.³²² Additionally, distractions must be purged through withdrawal from worldly thoughts and practicing single-mindedness. The second step is to cultivate virtue and prayer, which are interdependent. Prayer cannot be perfected without virtue; neither can virtue achieve completion

³¹⁷ For examples, see *Conf*, 9.17 (Ramsey, 339-40).

³¹⁸ Psalm 70.1 as quoted by Cassian in *Conf*, 10.10.2 (Ramsey, 379). For more on the use of this verse, see page 60-1.

³¹⁹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 101.

³²⁰ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 105

³²¹ *Conf*, 10.8.3 (Ramsey, 377).

³²² *Conf*, 9.6.3 (Ramsey, 334).

unless one perseveres in prayer.³²³ Formation in prayer is directly proportional to the degree of purity.³²⁴ To cultivate prayer, Cassian recommends the monk progress through four kinds of prayer. The third step is to continue making progress to purify prayer until reaching the perfection of prayer. The believer makes progress in purifying prayer resulting in perfect prayer.

Withdrawal from worldly thoughts is necessary in step one because those thoughts weigh down the mind. A weighted mind cannot easily ascend to God. The more withdrawn a person is from worldly thoughts, the easier it is for the mind to reach higher forms of prayer.³²⁵ This is why the monk removes himself from society. According to Cassian, Jesus taught by his own example that “if we too wish to address God with purity and integrity of heart, we should likewise draw apart from all the turbulence and confusion of the crowd.”³²⁶

Removing distraction is also crucial to progress in the purification of prayer.³²⁷ Cassian powerfully says that, “whoever is distracted by any sort of wandering of heart, even on bended knee, never prays.”³²⁸ In order to purify prayer, distracting thoughts must be removed.³²⁹

Distracting thoughts are removed by being in the same state of mind outside of prayer as one would be during prayer. By maintaining a prayerful state of mind outside of prayer, the mind is contemplating always that which is worthy to be thought in prayer. In this way, if the mind does wander during prayer, it will wander to another prayerful thought, not a thought that would distract from prayer.³³⁰

³²³ *Conf*, 9.2.2 (Ramsey, 329).

³²⁴ *Conf*, 10.6.1 (Ramsey, 374).

³²⁵ *Conf*, 9.4.2 (Ramsey, 331).

³²⁶ *Conf*, 10.6.4 (Ramsey, 375).

³²⁷ For more on the topic of distractions in prayer, see Kenneth C. Russell, “Pray Always: John Cassian on Distractions,” *RR* 53 Mr-Ap (1994): 263-272.

³²⁸ *Conf*, 10.14.2 (Ramsey, 386).

³²⁹ *Conf*, 9.3.3-4 (Ramsey, 330-1).

³³⁰ *Conf*, 10.14.2 (Ramsey, 386-7).

Single-mindedness during prayer also is critical to the development of pure prayer. One must be cautious about letting the mind wander. Even allowing one biblical text to prompt the mind to wander to another biblical text is objectionable. Experience demonstrates that the mind “thoughtlessly and stupidly” wanders between passages of Scripture. One text calls to mind another, “whirling from psalm to psalm, leaping from a gospel text to a reading from the Apostle, wandering from this to the prophecies and thence being carried away to certain spiritual histories, tossed about fickle and aimless through the whole body of Scripture” without really retaining any meaning.³³¹ “Such intellectual vagabondage by the ‘mobile and wandering mind’ is the antithesis of Cassian’s goal.”³³²

Although Cassian details the development of prayer and different levels of prayer, in general, the level of prayer is not as important as the internal disposition of the person before and during prayer.³³³

Four Kinds of Prayer

There are as many ways to pray as there are conditions of the soul and number of souls, according to Cassian.³³⁴ However, he addresses at length St. Paul’s list of the four kinds of prayer found in 1 Timothy 2:1: “I urge first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made.”³³⁵

Supplication is a petition for pardon regarding past or present misdeeds.³³⁶ Prayer is a vow to God, usually regarding the renouncement of earthly things.³³⁷ Intercession is made on

³³¹ *Conf*, 10.13.1 (Ramsey, 385-6).

³³² Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 105, quoting *Conf*, 10.13.2.

³³³ Levko, “Inside Prayer,” 167.

³³⁴ *Conf*, 8.1 (Ramsey, 335).

³³⁵ 1 Timothy 2:1 as quoted by Cassian in *Conf*, 9.9.1 (Ramsey, 336).

³³⁶ *Conf*, 9.11 (Ramsey, 337).

³³⁷ *Conf*, 9.12 (Ramsey, 337).

behalf of others or the whole world.³³⁸ Thanksgiving is an offering of “unspeakable ecstasies” when one recalls past benefits from God, present benefits, or even when one looks forward to the great things which await in the future.³³⁹ Cassian specifically remarks that everyone should pray all four kinds of prayer, and that they may be prayed separately or together.³⁴⁰

The order in which St. Paul listed these also is remarked upon by Cassian; he believes it “seems quite absurd” that they would be listed by St. Paul in an “inconsequential manner.”³⁴¹ He states there is a purpose to the order given by St. Paul. Cassian concludes that the order follows a person’s maturation in prayer. Supplication is beneficial for beginners; prayer (vows) for those who have made some progress; intercession for those who have fulfilled their vows; and thanksgiving for those “free from care, [who can] consider with a most pure mind the kindnesses and mercies of the Lord.”³⁴² However, beginners can experience “pure and intense” prayer, as well.³⁴³ Still, it is preferred that the kinds of prayer be pursued in the order listed by St. Paul, for the mind must be “slowly and gradually brought forward through the series.”³⁴⁴

Assurance of Being Heard (Answered)

Cassian gives assurance that prayers are heard. In these *Conferences*, it seems that a prayer being “heard” means answered or granted, not simply received by God. Cassian specifies different reasons for prayers being “heard”: (1) if there is the agreement of two people; (2) for possessing abundant faith; (3) if the prayer is constantly repeated; (4) as the fruit for having

³³⁸ *Conf*, 9.13 (Ramsey, 337-8).

³³⁹ *Conf*, 9.14 (Ramsey, 338).

³⁴⁰ *Conf*, 9.15.1 (Ramsey, 338). “Everyone” is used in the *Conference*, but it is not clear if it is supposed to mean every lifestyle of Christian (monk, lay, etc) or every type of personality among monks. Casiday’s translation uses “everybody” (pg 20). “All men” is used by both Luibheid (109) and Owen Chadwick (*Western Asceticism*, 220).

³⁴¹ *Conf*, 9.10 (Ramsey, 336-7).

³⁴² *Conf*, 9.15.1 (Ramsey, 338).

³⁴³ *Conf*, 9.15.3 (Ramsey, 339).

³⁴⁴ *Conf*, 9.16 (Ramsey, 339).

given alms; (5) for emending one's life and doing works of mercy; (6) for fasting; and (7) in response to the magnitude of one's distress.³⁴⁵ No one should fear that prayers will not be "heard." At the very least, if one can claim none of the other reasons, prayers can be made with constant repetition.³⁴⁶ The caveat is that prayers will be granted only if the prayer is in conformity to God's will. God will not answer prayers that may be asked which would be contrary to one's salvation.³⁴⁷

Part 2: Unceasing Prayer in *Conferences Nine and Ten*

Usually, when scholars refer to the highest state of prayer in Cassian's writings, it is simply called "unceasing prayer." However Cassian uses numerous and varying descriptive words when referring to this state, including pure, incorruptible, wordless, true, lofty, ardent, fervent, fiery, rich, intense, abundant, sublime, unceasing, perpetual, continuous, constant, and uninterrupted.³⁴⁸ From these adjectives, two dimensions to this state of prayer can be inferred: unceasing prayer and pure prayer.³⁴⁹ Cassian writes about this state of prayer as the fulfillment of St. Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing."³⁵⁰ Since the unceasingness of prayer is the overarching dimension of this state of prayer, it becomes the name of the entire state of prayer. The highest form of prayer is made from a heart cleansed of all vices and a mind free from distraction; it is unceasing in duration and at times reaches such a purity itself that it becomes

³⁴⁵ *Conf*, 9.34.1-3 (Ramsey, 349-50).

³⁴⁶ *Conf*, 9.34.4 (Ramsey, 350).

³⁴⁷ *Conf*, 9.34.9 (Ramsey, 352).

³⁴⁸ All these descriptive words are found in Ramsey's translation.

³⁴⁹ Owen Chadwick makes a similar distinction between the "life of virtue" and the "life of contemplation" in Cassian. Regarding this distinction he says it is made for clarity but that "in Cassian's ideas the two lives are entangled beyond hope of unravelling" (Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 93). The same could be said about the distinction being made here regarding purity and unceasingness in the highest state of prayer.

³⁵⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (first quoted in *Conf*, 9.3.4 (Ramsey, 331)).

perfect prayer. While Cassian admits that few people experience it,³⁵¹ the goal of the life of every monk is perfect prayer.³⁵²

A note about the terminology used from this point forward: “unceasing prayer” refers to the state, after an initial purging of vice and cultivation of virtue and prayer, during which one is perpetually in a state of prayer. Within the state of unceasing prayer, the believer can continue to make progress to completely purify prayer. This state of working to purify prayer which is already unceasing is called “purified prayer” or “purified, unceasing prayer.” Both terms mean the same thing; “unceasing” has been added when referring to this state of prayer in Chapter Six in order to distinguish an initial purifying of vice from the more advanced state of purifying prayer which has already become unceasing. “Perfect prayer” refers to the highest state of prayer which is both unceasing and cannot be purified any further.

Unceasing Prayer

Cassian begins his writings on prayer in the *Conferences* by saying that unceasing prayer is the goal of the monastic life: “The end of every monk and the perfection of his heart direct him to constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer.”³⁵³

To aid in the effort to progress in purifying prayer and possess “the perpetual awareness of God,” the verse “O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me” should be repeated constantly.³⁵⁴ Cassian chose this verse because it is useful in every circumstance of the human condition, whether in need of God’s assistance or for those “enjoying spiritual successes

³⁵¹ *Conf*, 9.25 (Ramsey, 345).

³⁵² In *Conf*, 9.6.5 (Ramsey, 334), Cassian quotes two biblical verses, one emphasizing unceasing prayer, the second emphasizing purity.

³⁵³ *Conf*, 9.2.1 (Ramsey, 329).

³⁵⁴ *Conf*, 10.10.2 (Ramsey, 379).

and are glad of heart.”³⁵⁵ It should be repeated at all times, even to the point that it is repeated while sleeping.³⁵⁶ Cassian instructs the monk to:

“write this on the threshold and doors of your mouth, you should place it on the walls of your house and in the recesses of your heart, so that when you prostrate yourself in prayer this may be your chant as you bow down, and when you rise from there and go about all the necessary affairs of life it may be your upraised and constant prayer.”³⁵⁷

The repetition of this verse will lead to the fulfillment of the steps in the development of the prayer life. It will protect against the attack of demons, purge every vice, keep the mind on prayerful matters, and “lead you to the theoria of invisible and heavenly realities, and raise you to the ineffably ardent prayer which is experienced by very few.”³⁵⁸

It is important to note that while Cassian does prescribe “O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me” to be repeated constantly, this serves to keep the mind focused and in a prayerful state. The state of unceasing prayer, however, is not simply the same prayer repeated over and over. “It is absolutely certain that no one’s prayers can be uniform.”³⁵⁹ While the Psalm prescribed by Cassian helps keep the monk in a constant prayerful state, the prayers said by the monk may diverge from it. Ultimately, prayer is meant to be purified and become wordless.

Purified Prayer

Within a life that has been made one unending prayer, the prayer of the believer continues to be purified. Occasionally prayer reaches such a state of purity that it becomes perfect prayer. Purity of thought aids purity of prayer. The result of purity of thought is that

³⁵⁵ *Conf*, 10.10.4-5 (Ramsey, 379).

³⁵⁶ *Conf*, 10.10.15 (Ramsey, 383).

³⁵⁷ *Conf*, 10.10.15 (Ramsey, 383).

³⁵⁸ *Conf*, 10.10.14 (Ramsey, 382).

³⁵⁹ *Conf*, 9.8.2 (Ramsey, 335).

“whatever they [the thoughts] take in, whatever they reflect upon, and whatever they do will be most pure and sincere prayer.”³⁶⁰ Purity of thought allows all the efforts of the mind, either passive (whatever is taken in) or active (whatever is reflected upon and done), to be prayer. In this way pure thoughts allow pure prayer to occur more often.

Purified prayer is wordless. It is not distinguished “by a sound of the voice or a movement of the tongue or a pronunciation of words.”³⁶¹ Purified prayer cannot be attained through the use of any images or words:

“This [incorruptible prayer] is not only not laid hold of by the sight of some image, but it cannot even be grasped by any word or phrase. Rather, once the mind’s attentiveness has been set ablaze, it is called forth in an unspeakable ecstasy of heart and with an insatiable gladness of spirit, and the mind, having transcended all feelings and visible matter, pours it out to God with unutterable groans and sighs.”³⁶²

Instead of words, groans and sighs are offered, but even these are not audibly produced. No sound at all is made in pure prayer.

Purified prayer is transcendent. During this state of prayer, the monk does not know himself or even what is being prayed.³⁶³ Instead, the Holy Spirit works in the one praying to make these prayers:

“These [wordless prayers] the Spirit itself makes to God as it intervenes with unutterable groans, unbeknownst to us, conceiving at that moment and pouring forth in wordless prayer such great things that they not only – I would say – cannot pass through the mouth but are unable even to be remembered by the mind later on.”³⁶⁴

The transcendence of this state of prayer causes the one praying to be unable to remember what was prayed. In this state of prayer, human understanding is suspended. When that happens, the prayer “gushes forth as from a most abundant fountain and speaks ineffably to God, producing

³⁶⁰ *Conf*, 9.6.5 (Ramsey, 334).

³⁶¹ *Conf*, 9.25 (Ramsey, 345-6).

³⁶² *Conf*, 10.11.6 (Ramsey, 385).

³⁶³ *Conf*, 9.31 (Ramsey, 349).

³⁶⁴ *Conf*, 9.15.2 (Ramsey, 339).

more in that very brief moment than the self-conscious mind is able to articulate easily or to reflect upon.”³⁶⁵ Purified prayer, through the aid of the Holy Spirit, produces more than conscious prayer ever could.

During this state of prayer, one is able to speak familiarly with God.³⁶⁶ Moreover, like Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9), the one praying even can see God in his divinity:

“They alone see his Godhead with purest eyes who, mounting from humble and earthly tasks and thoughts, go off with him to the lofty mountain of the desert which, free from the uproar of every earthly thought and disturbance, removed from every taint of vice, and exalted with the purest faith and with soaring virtue, reveals the glory of his face and the image of his brightness to those who deserve to look upon him with the clean gaze of the soul.”³⁶⁷

In prayer, according to Cassian, it is possible to see the Godhead. The glory of his divinity may be revealed to those with a clean soul. While Cassian uses the phrase “the glory of his face,” this should be interpreted to mean an imageless vision of his divinity, not a human face.

Seeing God is not even the highest state of prayer, because it ends, as it did for the apostles at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9). Cassian’s description of the purest prayer, perfect prayer, is, according to William Harmless, “one of the most extraordinary passages in desert literature.”³⁶⁸

The attainment of perfect prayer, is the fulfillment of Jesus’s prayers: “that the love with which you [Father] have loved me may be in them, and they in us” and “that all may be one, as you Father in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us.”³⁶⁹ Not only will the love shared between Father and Son be in the person praying, but the person in prayer also will be one with

³⁶⁵ *Conf*, 9.25 (Ramsey, 345-6).

³⁶⁶ *Conf*, 9.18.1 (Ramsey, 340).

³⁶⁷ *Conf*, 10.6.2 (Ramsey, 375).

³⁶⁸ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 398.

³⁶⁹ *Conf*, 10.7.1 (Ramsey, 375), quoting John 17: 26 and John 17:21.

God in the same way as the Son is one with the Father. The person praying will enter into the unity of the Trinity.

Cassian recognizes the difficulty of maintaining prayer that is both unceasing and constantly pure. He describes being able to experience this state of perfect prayer for short periods of time and remarks on what can prompt an experience of it. It can come out of the four kinds of prayer mentioned,³⁷⁰ by singing a psalm,³⁷¹ from a brother's pleasing voice and the seriousness with which he leads prayer,³⁷² from the wisdom in a conversation with a spiritual master, out of the sorrow felt due to the downfall of another monk or friend, and by remembering one's own lack of commitment to the work of the spiritual life.³⁷³

“This, I say, is the end of all perfection – that the mind purged of every carnal desire may daily be elevated to spiritual things, until one's whole way of life and all the yearnings of one's heart become a single and continuous prayer.”³⁷⁴

In Conclusion

Cassian's writings on prayer emphasize a progression in the spiritual life. Cassian first describes that a purifying from the vices is necessary before development in prayer truly can begin. Once the foundations of the spiritual life are prepared, Cassian begins with four kinds of prayer, which themselves should be progressed through as maturity of prayer develops. From the multiple kinds with many words, Cassian synthesizes one prayer with few words: “O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me.” This should be repeated unceasingly. Cassian describes the prayer life becoming a perpetual, unceasing prayer with the help of the

³⁷⁰ *Conf*, 9.15.1 (Ramsey, 338).

³⁷¹ *Conf*, 9.26.1 (Ramsey, 346).

³⁷² *Conf*, 9.26.1-2 (Ramsey, 346).

³⁷³ *Conf*, 9.26.2 (Ramsey, 346).

³⁷⁴ *Conf*, 10.7.3 (Ramsey, 376)

constant repetition of this scriptural verse. Then during this state of unceasing prayer, Cassian describes periods of a loftier state of wordless, pure, perfect prayer. The life of prayer, as described by Cassian, is a process to attain purified, unceasing prayer.

Chapter 6: Thesis

Several scholars have addressed the topic of deification in Cassian's writings. Augustine Casiday wrote briefly about the concept of deification in Cassian's writings, mainly using language from *On the Incarnation* but also citing the *Conferences*. John J. Levko, in his extensive work on John Cassian's understanding of prayer, has mentioned that for Cassian prayer is deification; but Levko does not make the case for why prayer should be considered deification, or where Cassian fits into the tradition of writings about deification. While explaining the theme of unceasing prayer in the *Conferences*, William Harmless states that what Cassian describes in *Conference Ten* is deification, but does not expand on this statement or explain it.³⁷⁵

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that although Cassian never uses the term "deification" in *Conferences Nine* and *Ten*, his writings describe deification taking place through progress in the life of prayer, culminating in participation in the Trinity. The chapter begins with comments about the structure of *Conferences Nine* and *Ten* regarding Cassian's remarks about unceasing prayer. The second part is an explanation of the progression from prayer to participation. It is then explained how this progression constitutes deification based on the definition given in Chapter Two. Following that is an analysis of the elements of Cassian's formulation of deification. The final part compares the elements that contribute to Cassian's understanding of deification to the elements included by the authors mentioned in Chapter Two.

³⁷⁵ See Chapter One, pages 1-4.

Cassian's Structure

The way Cassian structures his writings on prayer, *Conference Nine* serves to lay the foundation for *Conference Ten*, which describes unceasing prayer in detail. *Conference Nine* provides the general framework for prayer by including details about the development of the life of prayer, maturation in prayer, and the various kinds of prayer.³⁷⁶ He lays the framework first because the “principal end” of prayer cannot be properly dealt with “if everything that should be either rejected or acquired in order to obtain it has not first been set out and discussed in an orderly way.”³⁷⁷ While *Conference Nine* provides the framework for prayer, it also occasionally mentions unceasing prayer. Unceasing prayer is described as the goal of the monastic life:

“And when the mind has been established in tranquility and has been freed from the bonds of every fleshly passion, and the heart’s attention is unwaveringly fastened upon the one and highest good, it will fulfill the apostolic words: ‘Pray without ceasing.’ And: ‘In every place lifting up pure hands without anger and dissension.’ For, if we may speak in this way, when the thoughts of the mind have been seized by this purity and have been refashioned from earthly dullness to the likeness of the spiritual and the angelic, whatever they [the thoughts] take in, whatever they reflect upon, and whatever they do will be most pure and sincere prayer.”³⁷⁸

Although the loftier state of purified, unceasing prayer is mentioned in *Conference Nine*, it is not addressed fully until *Conference Ten*. At the beginning of *Conference Ten*, Cassian and Germanus say to Isaac:

“the desire aroused by the previous conference, which had for its subject the state of prayer – was drawing us to leave everything else behind and hasten to your blessedness... we ask to be taught how we may attain to the level of prayer that you were discussing at great length and so magnificently. For that wonderful conference only had the effect of stirring up our dull minds, but it did not show us how we could accomplish it or grasp it.”³⁷⁹

³⁷⁶ See Chapter Five.

³⁷⁷ *Conf*, 9.2.2 (Ramsey, 329).

³⁷⁸ *Conf*, 9.6.5 (Ramsey, 334).

³⁷⁹ *Conf*, 10.4.1-2 (Ramsey, 373).

Here Cassian explains that *Conference Ten* will be a continuation of the topic begun in *Conference Nine*, with an emphasis on how to attain purified, unceasing prayer. *Conference Ten* goes on to describe the results of the purest form of prayer and how this state of prayer can be attained and maintained.

Progression in Prayer Culminates in Participation

The whole of Cassian's writings on prayer in the *Conferences* is about the individual's progress and development. In outlining the framework of prayer in *Conference Nine*, Cassian explains there are steps to the development of the prayer life. These steps include (1) purging vice and distraction, (2) simultaneously cultivating virtue and prayer, and (3) perfecting prayer through continual purification of prayer. While the whole process of developing the prayer life takes place via a progression through three steps, in each step of that process a progression also takes place.

The first step, purging vice and distraction, requires daily attention so that progress can be made in ridding those obstacles to the prayer life. Distractions must be eliminated because they weigh down the mind of the individual who prays, preventing the mind from ascending to God. Distractions can be eliminated by withdrawing from worldly thoughts altogether and practicing single-mindedness, which takes time to accomplish. Purging vices is also a process that takes time. As vices are purged, though, a greater number of virtues can be cultivated.

The second step in Cassian's progression of prayer is to cultivate virtue and prayer. To cultivate anything takes time. Although it is step two in the overall process of developing the prayer life, this cultivation is a process as well. Virtue is essential to the prayer life. Cassian describes virtue and prayer as interdependent: a person cannot achieve perfection in one without

the other. The cultivation of virtues, moral progress, is necessary to maintain a basic prayer life. Cassian describes the cultivation of prayer using the four kinds of prayer mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:1. In explaining the four kinds of prayer, Cassian says each represents a phase of maturity in the life of prayer. The believer progresses from supplications to prayers (vows), from prayers (vows) to intercessions, and from intercessions to thanksgiving.

Further development in the spiritual life and the perfection of prayer results from the purification of prayer. The third step in Cassian's process of developing the prayer life is to perfect prayer. Prayer develops in stages: first one prays with many words; then one progresses to prayers with fewer words, finally ending with wordless prayer. From prayers that incorporate many words, the believer progresses to prayers with fewer words. At this stage, Cassian recommends Psalm 70:1 be repeated constantly. As progress in this stage occurs, the prayer life also becomes more automatic, with less conscious initiation, until prayer is constant, occurring even during sleep. When prayer becomes automatic, the thoughts of the mind become a constant state of prayer. This is unceasing prayer.

Once unceasing prayer has been achieved, then progress in the prayer life continues with the purification of that unceasing prayer until it is made perfect. Purified prayer is wordless and transcendent. In it, "thoughts of the mind have been seized by this purity and have been refashioned from earthly dullness to the likeness of the spiritual and the angelic."³⁸⁰ The progress made by purifying unceasing prayer results in the human person becoming like the angels. Most notably, Cassian uses Jesus's words in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) to defend that humans can become like angels: "For what does it mean to say: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' if not that human beings should be like angels."³⁸¹

³⁸⁰ *Conf*, 9.6.5 (Ramsey, 334).

³⁸¹ *Conf*, 9.19 (Ramsey, 242).

Progress does not stop with a likeness to the angelic state. According to Cassian the highest state of prayer, perfect prayer, brings about a union between the human being and the Trinity which fulfills Jesus's prayer recorded in John 17: "that all may be one, as you Father in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us,"³⁸² and "that the love with which you [Father] have loved me may be in them, and they in us."³⁸³ In both passages purified, unceasing prayer results in the fulfillment of Jesus's desire for the believer to be united with him and the Father in the same way Jesus himself is united to the Father. Cassian also describes the unity in this way:

"When that unity which the Father now has with the Son and which the Son has with the Father will be carried over into our understanding and our mind, so that, just as he loves us with a sincere and pure and indissoluble love, we too may be joined to him with a perpetual and inseparable love."³⁸⁴

Here Cassian says humans can be united with love to the Father and Son in the same way Father and Son are united to each other. Cassian goes on to say that the fulfillment of this prayer "can in no way be rendered void."³⁸⁵

Being united to the Father and Son in the same way that the Son is united to the Father is participation in the Trinity. The Son's union with the Father is intimate and mysterious. However, Cassian says the human being can be united to them in the same way they are united to each other. To be united with them, to "be one in" the Father and Son as Jesus said, is to participate in the unity of the Trinity. According to Cassian, using Jesus's own prayer for

³⁸² John 17:21 as found in *Conf*, 10.7.1 (Ramsey, 375). The full pericope is as follows (John 17:20-26):
 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

³⁸³ John 17:26 as found in *Conf*, 10.7.1 (Ramsey, 375).

³⁸⁴ *Conf*, 10.7.2 (Ramsey, 376).

³⁸⁵ *Conf*, 10.7.1 (Ramsey, 375).

support, humanity can participate in the unity of the Trinity. Progress in purifying prayer eventually results in participation in the Trinity. Participation in God is the perfect prayer, the ultimate end of progress in prayer, because for the monk, “even a brief separation from the highest good must be believed to be immediate death and utter ruin.”³⁸⁶

Participation

For Cassian, participation in the Trinity involves at least the Father and the Son: “as you Father in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us.”³⁸⁷ The goal of prayer is participation in the communion of love between the Father and Son. According to Cassian, purified unceasing prayer will raise one to such communion with God that the human being is able to take part in the Trinity. One can be so united to the Father and the Son in prayer that the human being is invited to take part in the union of the Trinity. Moreover, the human being’s union with the Trinity is not tangential or subordinate to the union shared among the persons of the Trinity itself. “As you Father in me and I in you,” expresses that the human being’s participation in the Trinity is identical to the participation of the persons of the Trinity.

While in his writings specifically on this union Cassian only mentions the Father and the Son, it should not be understood that the Holy Spirit does not take part in the union. In fact, the Holy Spirit is that which enables the believer to participate in the Father and the Son, because it is through the Spirit that the believer is able to make the purified prayers which open one to the union of the Father and Son in the first place. Cassian mentions the Holy Spirit intervening in order to make pure prayers on behalf of and with the believer: “These [wordless prayers of the purest vigor] the Spirit itself makes to God as it intervenes with unutterable groans, unbeknownst

³⁸⁶ *Conf*, 9.6.4 (Ramsey, 334)

³⁸⁷ John 17:21, as found in *Conf* 10.7.1 (Ramsey, 375).

to us.”³⁸⁸ In that way, it may be said that the Holy Spirit’s participation in the believer’s prayer aids in the believer’s attaining participation in the Father and Son. Therefore, Cassian’s highest state of prayer, ultimately results in participation with the entire Trinity.

The individual will not only experience the presence of God. By participating in the unity of God, one’s breathing, thinking, and speaking *will be God*. Perfect prayer is characterized when “every love, every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought of ours, everything that we live, that we speak, that we breathe, *will be God*.”³⁸⁹ Cassian says that everything one feels, thinks, and does *will be God*; all that constitutes humanness will not become godly – it *will be God*. This is more than transformation into a *likeness* to God. The believer will be “so united with him [God] that whatever we breathe, whatever we understand, whatever we speak, may be God.”³⁹⁰ The product of all human activity- every emotion, effort, and thought, everything lived, spoken, breathed, and understood- *will be God*. The believer will experience not only the presence of God, but will participate in the Trinity so fully that all human activity is transformed into God.

This state is the goal of the monastic life. This unity with God is the goal of every monk.

“This must be his whole intention- to deserve to possess the image of future blessedness in this body and as it were to begin to taste the pledge of that heavenly way of life and glory in this vessel. This, I say, is the end of all perfection that the mind purged of every carnal desire may daily be elevated to spiritual things, until one’s whole way of life and all the yearnings of one’s heart become a single and continuous prayer.”³⁹¹

All one’s efforts must be directed toward experiencing heaven in this life. This state of perfect prayer allows the monk to glimpse heaven while still in this body. The experience of heaven, according to Cassian, is being united with God. Then Jesus’s prayer to the Father will be

³⁸⁸ *Conf*, 9.15.2 (Ramsey, 339).

³⁸⁹ *Conf*, 10.7.2 (Ramsey, 375-6). Italics mine.

³⁹⁰ *Conf*, 10.7.2 (Ramsey, 376).

³⁹¹ *Conf*, 10.7.3 (Ramsey, 376).

fulfilled: “Father, I wish that those whom you have given me may also be with me where I am.”³⁹² Jesus desired that humanity be with him where he is. Cassian interprets “where I am” to mean heaven. While Cassian is using a prayer from Jesus’s life on earth, he is applying “where I am” to mean wherever Jesus is at any time. Therefore the fulfillment of this prayer after Jesus’s ascension would unite the believer to him in heaven. Cassian says humanity can meet and be with Jesus in heaven while still living the earthly life. The goal of the monastic life is to pray purely and unceasingly, which will allow the monk to experience Jesus and to be united to him where he is – in heaven – while still in this life.

Deification: Comparing Cassian to Previous Definitions

As stated in Chapter Two, in the Patristic period before Cassian, deification was consistently defined as an intimate uniting with God: Irenaeus and Origen say it is “union with God,” Evagrius says “vision of God,” and Macarius says “union with the divine nature.” If an intimate union with God is the standard which must be met in order to be considered “deification,” Cassian’s writings on unceasing prayer certainly meet that standard.

Progressing in the life of prayer until achieving purified, unceasing prayer, as described by Cassian in *Conferences Nine and Ten*, culminates in the person participating in the Trinity. Taking part in the union of the Trinity is being united to God. Therefore, participation in the union of the Trinity is deification. Cassian’s definition of deification is progress in life of prayer until purified, unceasing prayer culminates in the believer participating in the Trinity.

The state of perfect prayer is also said to allow the monk to glimpse heaven during this life. Humanity meeting Jesus in heaven is also a way of being united to God. Being with him where he is located is equivalent to being united to him. Additionally, Cassian explains that the

³⁹² *Conf*, 10.7.2 (Ramsey, 376), quoting John 17:24.

product of all human activity will be God. There is no other way for a human being's emotions, thoughts, even breath to *be God*, except for that person to be intimately united to God.

Cassian's writings do not simply have a passing connection to deification because he describes something that can be said to be similar to deification. He clearly articulates no less than three ways – participation in the Trinity, glimpsing heaven, product of human activity being God – in which purified, unceasing prayer, the end result of progress in the life of prayer, unites the person to God. Union with God is not an arbitrary, vague definition for deification to serve the purposes of this paper. It is the definition ascribed to the word by numerous theologians who lived before and concurrently with Cassian, including Irenaeus, Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, and Macarius.

Since *Conferences Nine* and *Ten* detail a progression in the life of prayer which culminates in deification, in the end the whole of the writings about this progression can be said to be about a process of being deified.

Analysis of Elements

In keeping with the monastic writers who came before him, Cassian's concept of deification uses experiential language of participation rather than speculative language of deification. Cassian is writing with an emphasis on the experiential side of the spiritual life. The *Conferences* not only reflect Cassian's own experiences but those of the *abbas* with whom he dialogues.

While Cassian is writing from experience, his argument is scriptural.³⁹³ First Thessalonians 5:17 is the basis for all that is said about prayer in *Conferences Nine* and *Ten* because to pray without ceasing is the goal. Cassian also makes an allusion to the Transfiguration; in discussing the purest state of prayer, he explains that one can see God in his divinity just as Peter, James, and John did on “the lofty mountain of the desert.”³⁹⁴

More importantly for Cassian, though, praying brings about deification. Therefore the main scriptural texts he uses to make his point are Jesus’s prayers, namely “that they also may be one in us” (John 17:21) and the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). In describing how progression in the prayer life results in deification, Cassian supports this claim with Scripture verses that are themselves prayers.

As with his predecessors discussed in Chapter Two, Cassian’s language for the process of deification is metaphorical: the believer becomes like God by attaining divine attributes through imitation of God. Cassian describes the appropriation of perfection which he believes is the most important divine attribute to be attained with regard to deification. He says that another part of Jesus’s prayer is fulfilled: “that all may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they themselves may also be made perfect in unity.”³⁹⁵ Through the highest state of prayer the believer is united to Jesus and to the Father. By way of this unity with the Father and the Son, one attains the divine attribute of perfection. Perfection results from the union experienced in prayer. In *Conference Nine* Cassian separates “all the perfect” and “all the sons of God.”³⁹⁶ Since Cassian makes a distinction between the groups and because immediately before this

³⁹³ According to Casiday’s article about the concept of deification in Cassian’s *On the Incarnation*, it seems Scripture is fundamental to Cassian’s arguments there as well, relying on both St. Paul’s “adoption” and Ephesians 3:16-17 (“Christ inhabits the inner man”) (Casiday, “Deification in Origen, Evagrius and Cassian,” 995-6).

³⁹⁴ *Conf*, 10.6.2 (Ramsey, 375).

³⁹⁵ John 17:22-23 found in *Conf*, 10.7.2 (Ramsey, 376).

³⁹⁶ *Conf*, 9.19 (Ramsey, 342).

distinction he claims the believer can be called an adopted child of God,³⁹⁷ it could be understood to mean that all believers are children of God, and only those who progress through prayer to purified, unceasing prayer are made perfect. Therefore the development of prayer into pure, unceasing prayer appropriates for the believer the divine attribute of perfection. In addition to union with God, appropriation of divine attributes is another way deification is described in the Patristic period.³⁹⁸

Comparing Cassian's Use of Elements to His Predecessors

What Cassian has written about unceasing prayer is not only in line with the way others have defined deification, he even uses the same elements in his description as others used. In writing about deification, Cassian, like his predecessors and influences, used Scripture, progress, participation, and prayer. However, he defines and approaches these elements in different ways than the theologians before him.

For Origen, Evagrius, Macarius, and Cassian, fostering virtue and eliminating sin is important to progress in the spiritual life. Cassian's stages of progress are most like Evagrius's. Cassian's stages include purging vice which is similar to Evagrius's stage for overcoming passions. Cassian also instructs the monk to cultivate virtue and prayer simultaneously in the same way Evagrius says that the struggle for contemplation happens concurrently to combat against demons. Both writers also describe the ongoing purification of contemplation (for Evagrius) or prayer (for Cassian). For Evagrius, the highest level of progress is imageless

³⁹⁷ *Conf*, 9.18.2-3 (Ramsey, 341). See footnote 399 for more details.

³⁹⁸ See Chapter Two, Justin Martyr, immortality of the soul (page 6-7), Irenaeus, incorruption (page 10), Origen, wisdom, righteousness, and rationality (page 13), Athanasius, incorruptibility of the body and gnosis (page 15), and Macarius, perfection (page 18).

contemplation, but for Cassian progress in prayer continues to the point of participation in the Trinity.

Like some of his predecessors, Cassian's understanding of deification involves a kind of participation in the divine. Yet, Cassian's use of participation has little in common with the ideas of earlier writers. Participation on some level with each of the Trinitarian persons makes Cassian's notion of participation similar to Origen's idea of participation; however Cassian does not speak of a natural participation as does Origen. Cassian does not use philosophical language at all. There is no mention of the *logos*- eternal, incarnate, or *spermatikos*. Although Cassian uses participation in a way different from his predecessors, he does incorporate participation as an element of deification, which keeps him connected to the tradition which came before him.

Furthermore, he is not alone in connecting deification to prayer. Origen and Evagrius both mention prayer in connection to deification. Origen connects deification to the believer's transformation into further conformity to God through prayer, virtuous behavior, and right belief. In doing so, he mentions 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Evagrius describes an imageless contemplation that comes through true prayer. Cassian's prayer is imageless like Evagrius's.

As with his predecessors Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, and Macarius, Cassian's basis for arguing that deification is possible is scriptural. Origen is the only writer discussed in Chapter Two to have used 1 Thessalonians 5:17 in his writings as does Cassian. Like Macarius, Cassian makes a reference to the Transfiguration. Even though Evagrius is the only other writer to make use of John 17:20-26 to support an understanding of deification, Cassian interprets the passage differently. Cassian uses the passage to describe deification as participating in the unity of the Trinity, whereas Evagrius uses John 17:21 to support Christ as a bridge between the created and the uncreated.

Interestingly, while many earlier writers interpret 2 Peter 1:4 as essential for any understanding of deification, Cassian does not; though it would support his particular concept of participation in the Trinity. Likewise, his predecessors looked to Psalm 82:6 as an important justification for deification; again, Cassian does not include this passage for support. For scriptural support of deification, Cassian depends heavily on the Gospel of John. He also differs from earlier writers in that, while he mentions the topic of adoption in relation to deification, he does not reference St. Paul as does Irenaeus.³⁹⁹ Instead, Cassian looks to the Lord's Prayer to discuss the topic of adoption. While Cassian realizes the importance of Scripture to support his concept of deification, he departs from the tradition by utilizing two scriptural passages that are rarely used in discussions of deification. And, more interestingly, both scriptural passages are prayers themselves.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to analyze John Cassian's writings on unceasing prayer in *Conferences Nine* and *Ten* with the intention of demonstrating that what is described is deification. In writing about the life of prayer, Cassian clearly expresses a progression in the spiritual life which culminates in participation in the Trinity. This participation is justified through the use of Scripture. Participation in the Trinity is what makes Cassian's understanding of prayer a process of deification. Because deification was frequently understood by others to mean a uniting to God, participation in the Trinity could be nothing less than union with God, and therefore deification.

³⁹⁹ In *Conference Nine* through his exegesis of the Lord's Prayer, Cassian claims the believer can be called an adopted child of God. His justification is the words "our Father." "When, therefore, we confess with our own voice that the God and Lord of the universe is our Father, we profess that we have in fact been admitted from our servile condition into an adopted sonship." Cassian continues to use the language of adoption throughout his exegesis of the Lord's Prayer. He calls the adoption "noble," and describes it as an advancement "to the rank and status of sons" (*Conf*, 9.18.2-3 (Ramsey, 341)).

By starting the paper with Cassian's predecessors' understanding of deification in Chapter Two, the framework for an understanding of deification was established. The traditional methods and elements used in defining, describing, and defending deification are made clear. The analysis of Cassian's predecessors allowed for Cassian's writings to be placed in their historical context and compared to the patristic tradition with which he would have been familiar. A study of the entire *Conferences* in Chapter Four explains Cassian's writing style and situates his writings on unceasing prayer in his thematic schema.⁴⁰⁰ The systematization of his concept of prayer in Chapter Five makes obvious his understanding of the purpose and goal of the monastic life: the practice of unceasing prayer that leads to unity with the Trinity. As a result of these analyses and the comparison of Cassian's writings to his predecessors, it can be stated that Cassian understands prayer as a method of deification.

Not only is his writing consistent with earlier theologians' definitions of deification, the elements he uses to make his argument are also consistent with earlier theologians. None of the elements Cassian uses in his concept of deification are unique to him. Cassian was writing within a specific tradition. He incorporated within his explication of the deification process the same elements as his predecessors: prayer, progress, participation, and the use of Scripture as validation, including 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and John 17:20-26. He has situated himself within the patristic tradition, both in its speculative and monastic aspects.

Cassian uses the same elements in his description of deification as do his predecessors, yet he brings these elements together in a unique way. No other writer addressed in this paper has progress result in participation. Participation and progress are typically separate ideas both related to deification. Movement from progress in the life of prayer to participation in the divine, as Cassian describes it, is unlike his predecessors.

⁴⁰⁰ See "Themes" and "Outline of Entire Work" in Chapter Four, pages 47-52.

Scholars have published works on the topic of deification in Cassian's writings previously. Casiday provides a context to Cassian's understanding of deification using his christology from *On the Incarnation* and comparing it to Origen and Evagrius. Casiday also connects the language Cassian uses in *On the Incarnation* to other statements made in the *Conferences*, but no attention is devoted to deification through progress in the life of prayer. Although Levko states Cassian's understanding of prayer is deification, no justification for such a statement is given. Harmless specifically says in one brief statement that Cassian's unceasing prayer is deification, citing *Conference Ten*, paragraph seven, but no further explanation is given. This paper has provided an analysis of *how* Cassian's writings, specifically on unceasing prayer in *Conferences Nine* and *Ten*, fit into the broader Patristic understanding of deification. This paper has explained *how* Cassian's concept of progress in the life of prayer is a process of deification.

For a comprehensive understanding of Cassian's concept of deification, further study should include work on the connection between deification as described in *Conferences Nine* and *Ten*, Cassian's ideas on christology described in *On the Incarnation*, and his understanding of grace from *Conferences Eleven* and *Thirteen*. According to Casiday, in *On the Incarnation* Cassian makes a clear ontological distinction between Christ and the believer. "All who believe in God are sons of God by adoption, but the Only-begotten Son is such by nature."⁴⁰¹ Christ is God, whereas the believer is a "God-receiver."⁴⁰² The Christian "receives God" by being inhabited by Christ. The way Casiday describes this habitation,⁴⁰³ it sounds very similar to Origen's understanding of natural participation.⁴⁰⁴ Cassian's *On the Incarnation* could provide

⁴⁰¹ *On the Incarnation*, 5.4.2-3 found in Casiday, "Deification," 996.

⁴⁰² Casiday, "Deification," 996.

⁴⁰³ Casiday, "Deification," 995-6.

⁴⁰⁴ For Origen's understanding of natural participation, see Chapter Two, page 12-3.

the philosophical framework for his understanding of deification which is not found in his monastic writings.

Additionally, Cassian's teachings about grace are related to his concept of deification. The accusation against Cassian of being semi-Pelagian was based on his writings in *Conference Thirteen* which state that a human being can initiate good works without the intervention of God.⁴⁰⁵ This ability to initiate good indicates an understanding of fundamental goodness in humanity and a propensity toward the good. This is tied to Cassian's metaphorical understanding of deification as the appropriation of divine attributes. Cassian writes about grace in *Conference Thirteen* and perfection in *Conference Eleven*. All these ideas – deification through prayer in *Conferences Nine and Ten*, a philosophical framework from *On the Incarnation*, grace in *Conference Thirteen*, and perfection in *Conference Eleven* – need to be considered together and systematically for a comprehensive understanding of Cassian's concept of deification.

The research done for this thesis served to introduce this student to the doctrine of deification in the Christian tradition. In the future, the connection of deification to christology and sacramental theology is of interest: specifically, the transformation and elevation of human nature by the Incarnation, and the individual's appropriation of this deified humanity through baptism and Eucharist. The implications this has for the role of the laity in the Church is of particular interest.

⁴⁰⁵ For more about this accusation, see Chapter Three, page 34-5.

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