

REVIEW

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Pavlin Petrov Sabev, PhD

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On a dissertation for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences"

Scientific field: 2. Humanities,

Professional direction: 2.4. Religion and Theology (Medicine, Psychology and Faith).

Author: Assoc. Prof. Stoyan Iliev Chilikov, PhD,

Department of "Theology" at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the "Paisii Hilendarski" University of Plovdiv.

Topic: The Feast of "Dormition of the Theotokos" in the Orthodox Liturgical Tradition (Theological Content of the Feast based on the Hymnographic and Homiletic Texts of the Church).

1. Subject of the Review

By order No. PD 21-521 dated 29.02.2024 of the Rector of the Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" (PU), I have been appointed as a member of the Scientific jury to ensure a procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the *"The Feast of Dormition of the Theotokos in the Orthodox Liturgical Tradition (Theological Content of the Feast based on the Hymnographic and Homiletic Texts of the Church)"* for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" of the Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" in the Scientific field: 2. Humanities; Professional direction: 2.4. Religion and Theology (Medicine, Psychology and Faith).

The author of the dissertation is Assoc. Prof. PhD Stoyan Iliev Chilikov, Department of "Theology" at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the "Paisii Hilendarski" University of Plovdiv. The set of paper materials presented by Assoc. Prof. PhD Chilikov is in accordance with Article 45 (4) of the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of the PU, includes the following documents:

- A request to the Rector of the PU to disclose the procedure for the defense of a dissertation work;
- Curriculum Vitae in European format;
- A copy of the diploma for the educational and scientific degree PhD;

- Protocols from departmental councils related to the opening of the procedure and the preliminary discussion of the dissertation work;
- Dissertation work;
- Author's abstract of dissertation;
- A list of scientific publications on the subject of the dissertation;
- Copies of scientific publications;
- Declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;
- Certificate of compliance with the minimum national requirements;

The candidate has attached the following publications on the subject of the dissertation: 2 studies, 7 articles (one of the articles, in addition to being in Bulgarian, was also printed in Romanian).

No violations were committed under this procedure. The candidate meets the minimum national requirements for the award of the degree "Doctor of Science".

2. Brief biographical data

Stoyan Chilikov is an Associate Professor of Patrology in the Department of Theology at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv and a parish priest - archpriest in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. I mention these two facts because they provide the basis and motivation to study the Feast of the Dormition. As an expert of the patristic texts and the liturgical hymnography, father Stoyan enters into an academic study of a "spiritual land", which he also knows through his ministry as a priest. This side of the scholarly research of academic teaching priests should not be neglected, I even believe that it has a great influence on their work. The Dissertation work of fr. Stoyan proves this statement because he works freely in at least three main areas of Academic Theology: Dogmatics, Historical Liturgy and Liturgical Hymnography. The ease with which the author reasonably analyzes texts and points out connections between them is not only due to his academic training, it is also the result of his ministry as a priest, who reads these texts during divine services and has penetrated into their spiritual essence.

3. Actuality of the topic and relevance of the set goals and tasks

The relevance of the topic of the dissertation and the expediency of the tasks follow from the problem that the author poses in his work, a problem that affects similar to research subjects and sets the contributing and innovative character of his thesis: *whether there is duality, inconsistency or contradiction in the Orthodox tradition about the Assumption of the Mother of God, since in hymnographic and patristic texts there is a clear understanding of her resurrection, which from a dogmatic point of view is not formulated as a dogma in the*

Orthodox Church? If I have understood the author correctly, liturgical tradition precedes dogmatic postulation, which has a discursive character, as opposed to the mystical-experiential character of the liturgical life of the Church; the latter influences the discourse and expands its boundaries. That is why I consider that the conclusion of Prof. Chilikov, after researching this question here, is completely appropriate, moreover, this conclusion reflects his contribution to the methodology of research of such a scale: "Everything said above about the resurrection of the Virgin is disputed today and clarification is imperative. For this purpose, it is necessary to "dissect" an organic whole and show the different layers. They consist of rich source material: apocryphal, hymnographic, homiletic texts, which are complemented by the iconography of the holiday" (p. 20 in the text of the dissertation).

4. Knowledge of the problem

The author has analyzed and presented the theses of the significant studies related to the topic of the dissertation. He has shown the weaknesses and strengths of the researchers before him and stated how he builds on their work. It should be noted that, in addition to an analysis of historiography, the colleague also typified and systematically presented the sources with which he worked in his research (p. 32).

5. Research methodology

The author uses the methodology of philological and historical knowledge to study the distribution, influence and content of Byzantine and Old Bulgarian hymnographic sources for the holiday, having indicated the connections and differences between original and translated texts. The historical-critical methodology, combined with philological analysis and theological hermeneutics, make it possible to clearly distinguish the main components of the holiday and to understand the theological logic of the later liturgical sequences related to the holiday. Without analyzing this liturgical tradition, it is impossible to make sense of the overall theological understanding of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary (expressed through hymnography and iconography). The creatively constructed synergy between these research methods allows achieving the set goal and obtaining an adequate response to the tasks that the colleague has set.

6. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation work

The structure of the dissertation is well balanced and enables the author's thesis to be consistently developed in the course of the presentation: to build basic information from facts, to develop argumentation and to offer generalizations and conclusions. This sequence is realized in the following structure of the text: preface, introduction, three chapters,

conclusion; appendices and lists of used manuscripts, sources and cited literature are added to them. The total volume of the text of the dissertation is 362 pages.

Chapter One "History, Structure, and Narratives of the Feast", provides the foundation upon which the author rests his argument. The history of the holiday is presented with references to the sources. The author presents the so-called "narratives of the feast", which according to the exposition (p. 83 ff.) include apocryphal texts (typed as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ethiopian, etc. traditions) and patristic homilies (Greek tradition, Slavic tradition etc.).

The second chapter "Theotology of the Feast of the Dormition" raises the important question of liturgical hymnography as a source for the theology of the feast, a general presentation of the Church's dogmatic teaching about the Mother of God and an analysis of the theological content of the feast of the Dormition based on hymnographic and homiletic sources, represented by the two main traditions – Greek and Old Slavic. Finally, it is shown how the iconography of the holiday reflects its theological content.

Chapter three "Liturgical Services and feasts in connection with the Feast of the Dormition" presents the liturgical evolution of the holiday, which gave rise to liturgical Services - analyzed by the author historically and theologically in their connection in general with the teaching of the Church about the Mother of God and specifically with the theological content of the holiday of her Dormition.

The *Conclusion* summarizes the results of the analyzes in the three chapters and the conclusions to each of them. The author draws the following conclusions from his research: 1. "The sequence of the chants of the Most Holy Mother of God, the prayer canons, the elevation of the Panagia, illustrate the development of the Feast. Each of the researched liturgical Services, as well as the feasts of Laying the Garment of the Mother of God in Blacherna and Laying the Girdle of the Mother of God in Chalcopectria, have their specific features, but are united by their connection with the feast of the Dormition. They are extremely important for the development of the holiday and for the state of the modern liturgical rite of the Dormition" (p. 293).

2. In the early sources (hymnographic, homiletic and iconographic) "the emphasis is not on the resurrection, but on the Dormition of the Virgin" (p. 296) with "the development of the Feast, however, hymnographers, preachers and icon painters seem to want to express the opinion of God people that the secret of the resurrection of the Mother of God is kept in the bowels of the Church" (p. 296).

3. Any comparison of the resurrection of the Mother of God with that of the Lord Jesus Christ is deeply wrong. The death of the Mother of God and her resurrection are a path to eternity, a foretaste of the Kingdom, coming to life before us on the example of the first creature deified in Christ. This is the meaning and message of the Feast of the Dormition. The ancient structure of the Feast reflects this message of joy, merriment and celebration of the death of the Virgin. The development of the Feast and its related liturgical Services, especially according to the Slavic tradition, expand the message of the Dormition of the Mother of God with her resurrection" (p. 296-297).

The conclusions drawn in the Conclusion are based and argued through the analysis of sources and summaries that the author has made in each of the chapters of his study.

7. Contributions and significance of the development for science and practice

I accept the contributions formulated by the author as a real self-assessment based on the results of his research. In order not to comment on each of them separately - this is not necessary, because of my positive evaluation - I will allow myself to paraphrase in summary his formulations of the contributions through my critical view of a reviewer.

1. The relief outline of the author's thesis is impressive through the fact that he found, already in his years of study at the Faculty of Theology, a discrepancy between the dogmatic discourse of Prof. Dyulgerov and the actual liturgical practice of the Church. This prompts the author to research the ancient rite of the feast of the Dormition and its development over time. The research of Prof. Chilikov shows that the main message and theme of the feast of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary has been expanded with the understanding of the transfer of the body of the Mother of God to the spiritual world, and subsequently of its resurrection, which raises important theological questions. Therefore, says the author, the feast of the Dormition should be studied not only as origin, history, narratives and sources, but above all as a theology, based on hymnographic and homiletical texts, which also influenced the iconographic holiday subjects. Through the comparative analysis of these building blocks, the author successively unfolds his thesis, which emerges more and more clearly in the context of the theological content of the holiday, defined by Prof. Chilikov as the subject of his research, a subject that he disciplinedly keeps in his view in the course of the study.

2. Working with manuscripts is a serious certificate for the research, which has a huge weight in the assessment of the scientific value of the dissertation. The author has researched the most ancient manuscripts that present the Byzantine and Slavic hymnographic traditions for the holiday (Sin. Gr. 631 and Sin. Gr. 630 – the Byzantine tradition and Ta and C 168 –

the Old Bulgarian). This not easy work turns out to be very fruitful, because it contributes to the clarification of some peculiarities in the Old Bulgarian texts (translated and original). They, the author argued, show a different, compared to their modern use, arrangement of hymnographic texts and speak of the completion of the main hymnographic corpus for the holiday in the 12th-13th centuries.

3. The author argues with reason that the narratives of the feast are apocryphal texts and shows how they influence later hymnographic and homiletic texts, as well as (indirectly) iconographic subjects. Here the author's thesis receives its real argumentation, which shows that the holiday covers in a single whole the ascension of the Mother of God, the transfer of her body to the Heavenly/Spiritual world and her resurrection. This development is traced on the basis of homiletic and hymnographic texts.

4. The evaluation of apocryphal texts that the colleague makes is not only theologically relevant, it has a contributory character. This I claim, based on my work with New Testament Apocrypha. Father Stoyan Chilikov says: "The congregational consciousness of the Church creates and defines the parameters and criteria with the help of which church life is regulated. It has sufficient sensibility to determine unmistakably the truths of faith, to judge what is true and what is not, and therefore it retains certain details which we first find in the Apocryphal texts and uses them in the hymnography of the feast. We cannot completely deny the apocryphal writings dedicated to the Dormition of the Mother of God" (p. 289). They, the colleague claims, "contain a 'grain of truth', which the Church, through its seers of God, perceives and retains, giving it the importance not of a dogma, but of a mystery of piety, which we cannot penetrate rationally" (p. 289).

5. Although some of the hymnographic texts (the canon of St. Cosmas of Mayum) speak of the resurrection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, this fact, according to Assoc. Professor Chilikov, rather testifies to the awareness of "a secret before which we worship" (p. 292). The Slavic translations, the author tells us, convey this vision of St. Cosmas in the same way - "clearly, calmly, without unnecessary imposition and artificial emotionality" (p. 292). Only after the 15th century there was a development on this theme again in the hymnographic texts of the hymns of the Mother of God, which are structured as an imitation of the hymns of the Lord Jesus Christ. The assessment of Assoc. Prof. Chilikov of this development from a dogmatic point of view is negative: it leads to the praise of the holy Mother of God as a "co-redeemer from sin and comparing her to the Lord Jesus Christ as a victor over death, who preceded the resurrection" (p. 292). This finds expression in later iconographic images as well. Father Stoyan categorically states: "Any comparison of the resurrection of the Mother of

God with that of the Lord Jesus Christ is deeply wrong." Along with this, however, it is clearly stated that "the secret of the resurrection of the Mother of God is kept in the bowels of the Church ... The death of the Mother of God and her resurrection are a way to eternity, a foretaste of the kingdom, coming to life before us on the example of the first a creature deified in Christ" (p. 296).

I would summarize the eight contributions that the author formulated as *methodological, textological, historical-liturgical and theological*. I see the latter realized through a successfully maintained balance between hymnography, historical liturgy and dogmatics, focused on the theology of the feast, which is presented on the basis of manuscript hymnographic traditions (Greek and Old Bulgarian). Thus, *the author's thesis about the transition from Assumption/death to the ascension of the body of the Mother of God to the Heavenly/Spiritual world and from there to the resurrection of the Mother of God*, is clearly and coherently argued through an examination of the building blocks of the feast of Dormition.

8. Evaluation of publications on the dissertation work

Two studies (published in indexed publications abroad) and seven articles (three of them published in indexed publications abroad) are presented as publications on the topic of the dissertation. The presented publications contain studies of issues (historical and liturgical) directly related to the topic of the dissertation, and testify to the precise critical approach of the author to various aspects of the problem he explores in the dissertation. Citations of the publications are 13 in number in monographs and peer-reviewed journals. One of the citations (of the article "The Christological Theotocology of the Virgin Akathist. In: Church Studies 12, Niš, 2015, pp. 169 - 184") is in a scientific edition, referenced and indexed in world databases with scientific information (De Medio Aevo).

These data testify to the visibility in the academic scientific exchange of ideas of colleague Chilikov as a researcher of a wide range of issues related to the feast of the Dormition.

9. Personal involvement of the author

The presented dissertation is an original author's study by Assoc. Prof. Chilikov, in which critically are analyzed scientific theses, historical facts and sources (patristic texts and liturgical hymnography). Therefore, I responsibly state that the research has all the qualities of a dissertation work for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences": a clearly stated thesis that does not repeat known and available in scientific circulation statements; innovative

and actual methodology used in the text; textological work with sources (manuscripts); significant research findings.

10. Author's abstract of dissertation

The abstract is precisely made according to the requirements. Within 63 pages, he fully presents the research, the main results and scientific contributions. Therefore, it can be accepted as fully conforming to the academic standard for an author's summary presentation of a dissertation work.

11. Critical remarks and recommendations

I don't have critical remarks and recommendations to the set of materials provided by the dissertation. I don't have fundamental disagreements with the thesis, argumentation and conclusions in this study.

My only note is about the scope and content of the concept of "narrative", which could be briefly clarified at the beginning of the text. The author says that only the Apocrypha are "narratives" in note 12 on p. 17: "The feast narratives are apocryphal texts. They influence the hymnographic and homiletical texts that appeared later, as well as the iconographic subjects". However, the reader may be misled by the wording of 1.6. *Narratives of the feast*, because the sub-points seem to include to the narratives and patristic homilies: 1.6.1 The apocryphal texts of the feast of the Dormition; 1.6.2. Holy Father's words and sermons of church writers for the feast " Dormition of the Virgin. In general, for me, the concept of "narrative" remains unclear here: whether it has a more general semiotic scope or should be understood in the narrower sense as a chronologically ordered narrative or something else - the modern discourse on narrative expands the meaning of the concept.

12. Personal impressions

My personal impressions of Stoyan Chilikov date back to our student years at the Faculty of Theology of the SU: devoted to the study of theology with ascetic diligence and concentration on the problem he is researching. As a fellow teacher, I would add more qualities: his collegiality, academic integrity and openness. The peer-reviewed dissertation, as well as all his research, reflects these qualities in two aspects: 1. The understandable and unpretentious language in which they are written; 2. Fidelity to the spiritual tradition of Orthodoxy, which in this case does not contradict its scientific objectivity, but rather provides sobriety that protects against extremes in the conclusions drawn and keeps it in the field of theological discourse.

13. Recommendations for future use of the contributions

My recommendations for future use of the contributions of the dissertation research concern the influence of the Christian Apocrypha on worship. The dissertation has analyzed this influence specifically on the feast of the Dormition and this is an indisputable contribution of his research. The scope of a study of this nature could be extended to other Feasts of the Virgin and Lord, as well as to the Triod and Pentecost. In this regard, the dissertation could ask his question about a possible divergence ("duality", as he politely put it) between the content and that of other liturgical hymnographic texts (e.g. hymnography with enhanced theopaschal content from the Triod, or the theme of the descent of Christ in hell) and the dogmas of the church.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation contains scientific results that represent an original contribution to theological knowledge and meet all the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski". The presented materials and dissertation results fully correspond to the minimum national requirements, adopted in connection with the Rules of the PU for the application of the ZRASRB.

The dissertation shows that Assoc. Prof. PhD Stoyan Chilikov possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty 2.4 Religion and Theology, demonstrating qualities and skills for conducting research with obtaining original and significant scientific contributions.

Due to the above I confidently give my positive assessment of the conducted research, presented by the peer-reviewed dissertation work, abstract, achieved results and contributions, and I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" to Assoc. Prof. PhD Stoyan Iliev Chilikov in Scientific field: 2. Humanities, Professional direction 2.4. Religion and Theology (Medicine, Psychology and Faith).

4.04.2024

Reviewer:

Assoc. Prof. Pavlin Sabev, PhD