

OPINION

by Prof. Dr. Teodor Bozhidarov Stoychev,

Member of the Jury in a Competition for the Academic Position of “Professor” in the Professional Field 2.4. Religion and Theology (Patrology and Dogmatic Theology), at Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”

In the competition for the position of “Professor,” announced in the State Gazette, issue 96 of 11.11.2025, and on the website of Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski,” for the needs of the Department of Theology at the Faculty of Philosophy and History, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoian Iliev Chilikov from the Department of Theology is participating as a candidate.

The habilitation thesis presented by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoian Iliev Chilikov, entitled “*Eucharist and Asceticism in the Tradition of the Church*,” constitutes a comprehensive theological study devoted to an important topic in contemporary Orthodox theology—the interrelationship between the Eucharistic and ascetical experience of the Church. In my opinion, the choice of topic follows the practical challenges faced by Assoc. Prof. Chilikov in connection with his ministry as a priest. Undoubtedly, he is guided not only by pastoral needs but also by purely theological concerns, as evidenced by the exposition of the monographic study. These two reasons render the chosen topic both theologically and pastorally well-grounded.

The author places at the center of his analysis the question of the organic synthesis between the sacramental and the ascetical life, striving to overcome contemporary dichotomies that have arisen in theological thought in recent decades. Already in the introduction, the central thesis is clearly stated: Orthodox ecclesiology cannot be conceived either apart from the Eucharist or apart from the ascetical ethos of the Church.

The relevance of the work is determined by contemporary theological debates, in which tension is often observed between Eucharistic ecclesiology and therapeutic spirituality. The author seeks to offer a theologically balanced

perspective, grounded in Holy Scripture, the patristic tradition, and contemporary academic dialogue. The study is distinguished by a clear methodological framework built upon conceptual pairings such as “dogma and ethos”, “grace and freedom”, and “essence and energies”, which function as analytical axes of the exposition.

The first chapter, entitled “Asceticism and Eucharist in the Life of the Church”, introduces the problem. The author begins by examining ascetical practices in the pagan world and in Judaism, thereby outlining the cultural and religious context in which the Christian understanding of asceticism emerged. This comparative approach is methodologically justified, as it demonstrates the specificity of Christian asceticism as a striving toward deification rather than mere moral self-improvement.

Particularly noteworthy is the analysis of the New Testament perspective, where asceticism is presented as an eschatologically oriented reality inseparable from the Eucharistic life of the community. The author successfully demonstrates that the apostolic tradition already links the Eucharist with moral transformation and spiritual preparation. This enables a reconsideration of the contemporary debate concerning frequent Communion and the preparation required for it.

In the subsections devoted to Eucharistic ecclesiology (Afanasiev, Zizioulas, Schmemmann), one observes an effort toward critical yet respectful dialogue with contemporary Orthodox thought. The author acknowledges the significance of the Eucharistic model while simultaneously highlighting the risk of reductionism when the ascetical experience is neglected.

The second chapter, “Anthropology and Soteriology”, constitutes the dogmatic core of the work. Here themes such as the image and likeness of God, grace and freedom, and the sacramental life of the Church are examined. The author constructs a coherent Orthodox anthropology in which the human person is understood as a *συνεργός* (co-worker) of grace rather than as a passive participant in salvation.

Particularly impressive is the treatment of synergy between the human will and divine energy. This approach avoids both juridical models of salvation and the extreme individualism of certain modern spiritual currents. The exposition is rich in patristic references and demonstrates profound knowledge of the Byzantine theological tradition.

The third chapter, “The Church and Life in Christ”, is a synthetic section of the work. Here the author discusses the perichoresis between asceticism and the Eucharist, as well as the eschatological dimension of ecclesial life. The subsection “The Church in the Eschaton. The Practical Theology of the Church” presents an understanding of the liturgy as a foretaste of the coming Kingdom and of spiritual struggle as preparation for ultimate deification.

Especially interesting is the analysis of “ecclesiological and anthropological collisions,” where the author addresses the dichotomy between the Eucharistic and the therapeutic model. Here there is a clear effort toward a theological synthesis capable of overcoming the opposition between liturgical and ascetical perspectives. The author argues that the Eucharist and ascetical struggle are not competing realities but mutually interpenetrating dimensions of life in Christ.

In the concluding sections, the themes of salvation and deification are examined, emphasizing the dynamic character of spiritual life and its eschatological orientation. This synthesis demonstrates a high degree of theological maturity and systematic thinking.

The scholarly contributions of the work may be summarized in several principal directions. First, the author proposes a comprehensive theological model for synthesizing the Eucharistic and ascetical dimensions of Orthodox ecclesiology, thereby overcoming existing reductionist tendencies in contemporary Orthodox theology.

Second, the study demonstrates an original methodological approach through the use of theological pairings as a structural framework, enabling an integrated reading of both dogmatic and pastoral aspects of the subject.

Third, the work has clear practical significance, as it addresses issues related to preparation for Holy Communion, the spiritual life of the laity, and the role of asceticism in the contemporary ecclesial context.

Fourth, the author shows an ability to engage in critical dialogue with contemporary Orthodox theology without falling into extremes or ideologizing a particular school of thought.

Alongside its undeniable merits, the work also raises certain questions that may be considered opportunities for further development.

First, the structure of the exposition occasionally exhibits repetition of key ideas, which is likely a deliberate methodological choice but may create an impression of thematic expansiveness. Second, the critique of certain contemporary theological trends could be more systematically articulated in order to avoid the risk of generalizing complex theological positions. Third, the eschatological dimension of ecclesiology, though present, could be developed in greater detail in dialogue with New Testament scholarship.

In conclusion, I would state that the presented habilitation thesis demonstrates a high degree of theological competence, original thinking, and profound knowledge of the Orthodox tradition. The author succeeds in offering a theologically grounded synthesis between the Eucharist and asceticism that possesses both scholarly value and clearly articulated pastoral significance.

After reviewing the materials and scholarly works submitted in the competition, and in view of the analysis of their significance as well as the scientific, scientifically applied, and applied contributions contained therein, I find it well-founded to give my positive evaluation and to recommend that the Scientific Jury prepare a report and proposal to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy and History for the election of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoian Iliev

Chilikov to the academic position of “Professor” at Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski” in: Field of Higher Education 2. Humanities, Professional Area 2.4. Religion and Theology (Patrology and Dogmatic Theology).

27 February 2026

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