

## OPINION

on the thesis of Miloslav Danov Bonov

titled “Intercession of the saints in the prayer sequences of the liturgy from the Byzantine ritual (according to the Slavic sources of the XV-XIX centuries)”

for awarding of the Educational and Scientific Degree of Doctor of Theology (Ph.D.).

in Scientific Field: Human Sciences

professional field: 2.4. Religion and Theology (Liturgic Science)

by Prof. Maria Atanasova Yovcheva (Faculty of Theology)

member of scientific jury appointed by order of the Rector of Sofia University

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**Contents of the work.** The presented thesis covers 237 pages. The text is organized into a preface, an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, appendices, and a bibliography.

**The introductory part** explains the choice of the topic, formulates the subject and object of the study, its aims and objectives. The methodology used is also specified. A bibliographical review of some of the more important writings on the issues under consideration is included, as well as a justification of the structure of the thesis.

**In Chapter I**, Bonov draws arguments for the intercession of the saints from the Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the writings of the most authoritative Christian authors. It is divided into three parts according to the type of sources used. On the basis of a wide range of primary sources of different nature and dating, the understanding of holiness is traced. In the first part, Bonov clarifies the meaning of the concept of "holy" and the moral category of "holiness", as well as the role of the mediator "intercessor / *hodatai*". The aim is to prove that the saints, as imitators of Christ, are part of the Economy of God in the fulfillment of which God the Father sends His Son. In the second part, Bonov examines holiness in the time up to the 4th century AD. C.E. as part of the soteriologic dogma. A brief historical overview is given of the presence of sanctity in the Christian calendar, the emergence and role of the *antimins*, and of the development and place of *Agape* and of the *Proskomedya* (Office of Oblation). In the third part Bonov looks for arguments in the works of the Church Fathers. He also dwells on the shaping of the Church's veneration of the saints, which is made up of three elements: 1. Commemoration of their feat; 2. Prayers to them as intercessors; 3. Veneration of their holy relics.

In **Chapter II** the author examines the place of the saints in Orthodox worship after the fourth century. The first subchapter traces the development of Byzantine ritual up to the ninth century, in particular the history of the Byzantine rite of the eucharistic liturgy. Those components which concern the posed problem of the intercession of the saints are clarified in diachronic terms. The conclusion about the origin of some of the elements of the Byzantine ritual supports a genealogy of the tradition in the cult of the Abrahamic God coming from deep antiquity, which without exaggeration can be referred to as primordial. In the second subchapter Bonov classifies the degrees of sanctity according to the rank of the Liturgy of Preparation and justifies their hierarchy. The author adheres to the order of listing the saints in the modern version of the Byzantine liturgical rite during the preparation of the offerings on the altar. Two significant conclusions are drawn from the analysis of the various sources: 1) the ancientness and persistence of the intercession of saints in Christian liturgy; 2) the steady increase in the number of intercessors, many of whom were added after the writing of the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great and the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. In the third subchapter Bonov discusses the invocation of the saints in these two Byzantine Eucharistic liturgies. Their components (the different types of prayers), in which the intercession of the saints is asked for, are examined with reference to certain peculiarities in the various sources. The author explains the terms related to the rite of *Proskomedy* and the symbolic (allegorical) meaning of its components. The ektenies are presented in detail, since they express the synergism (συνεργία) between man and God most tangibly from the point of view of the believers who are present in the naos during the service.

**Chapter III** is devoted to the cult of saints in Byzantine ritual according to Slavonic sources of the 15th-19th centuries. At the beginning the origins and continuity of Slavonic worship with the Byzantine liturgical tradition are discussed. The origins and continuity of the Orthodox Slavs' liturgy with the Byzantine liturgical tradition are examined first. The main Slavonic primary sources are introduced with detailed codicological information and only a few peculiarities of composition, and an attempt is made to compare the texts in the various Slavonic translations / redactions of the Divine liturgy. The last part discusses the problems of worship service and the continuity of the cult of the saints.

**The Conclusion** attempts to summarise the findings of the individual chapters.

**Contributions.** The work is one of the few studies in Bulgarian liturgical theology that examines the problem, based on Bulgarian, Russian and Serbian Slavonic sources, with their different redactions, which are in use in the Byzantine liturgical rite. Undoubtedly, the topic is current and very ambitious because it discusses the issues taking into account two

discourses: 1) the theological justification for the intercession of the saints according to authoritative Christian sources; 2) the dynamics of the elements in which it is present. The idea of tracing this intercession in the Slavonic tradition in its continuous connection with the Byzantine tradition is also a good one, and the chosen structure suits the theme. According to the testimony of the Slavonic liturgical texts, the apparent attitude for the prayer life of the Church and the invisible attitude to the saints are proven and the importance of the cult to them in the formation of the living relationship between the earthly and heavenly Church is revealed. In this aspect the thesis bears significance for practical theology. It illustrates the continuity and constancy of the nature and structure of the Byzantine and Slavonic divine liturgy from the Middle Ages to the present on the basis of its concrete components (especially the texts reflecting the intercession of the saints as a fundamental part of the Eucharistic canon).

The scientific achievement of the presented aims and objectives suffers from a number of major **shortcomings**.

1. Almost the entire thesis is written in narrative modus, with rudimentary development of the issues and a lack of depth and systematicity. The primary material or secondary sources used are not sufficiently rationalized, but rather are retold (which is unwarranted for a scholarly exposition). The criteria for choosing these manuscript service books remain unclear (what redaction on Slavic soil they reflect and to what extent they correspond to its dynamics in the Byzantine world); changes in the structure and/or content of the liturgy related to those elements in which the intercession of saints is present are not clearly presented. The conclusion does not give an accurate picture of the contributions of the work, but retells arbitrary parts thereof. The three main objectives: 1) to trace the invocation of the intercession of the saints in the two Eucharistic liturgies; 2) to trace whether the position of the prayers with the intercession of the saints is historically and dogmatically stable; 3) to compare the two liturgical orders (the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great and the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom) with respect to the basic problem under consideration, in varying degrees are only partially achieved.

2. The exposition is chaotic and eclectic and shows an imbalance in the different parts. Too much attention is given to extraneous information and to lengthy retelling of historical facts known in scholarship, which have little or no bearing on the subject, and do not fall within the scope of the subject and object of the work. According to the chronological range of the sources, the work should be limited only to the role of the Tarnovo Literary School and of St. Patriarch Evtimius in the emergence of those

translations of the liturgies that have been in use since the 14th century and until today among the Orthodox Slavs.

3. The abundance of spelling mistakes (especially in punctuation and articles) and the poor expression in many places render the text difficult to read.

**The abstract** (34 pages) follows the structure of the thesis and faithfully reflects its content. The lack of well-structured conclusions in the thesis is reflected in the abstract.

M. Bonov has submitted **six publications** on the topic of the dissertation.

So, **in conclusion**, I would like to point out that the thesis meets the minimum requirements for this type of academic work, and to recommend to the esteemed scientific jury to award the Educational and Scientific Degree of Doctor of Theology (Ph.D.) to Miloslav Bonov for his thesis “Intercession of the saints in the prayer sequences of the liturgy from the Byzantine ritual (according to the Slavic sources of the XV-XIX centuries)”.

Prof. Maria Yovcheva

25.04.2024

Sofia