

BOOK REVIEWS

Ierotheos, Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, traducere din limba greacă Mănăstirea Diaconești și Tatiana Petrache, Editura Bonifaciu, 2019, 602 pp.

At the end of last year, Bonifaciu publishing house in Bacău printed the voluminous work of Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos, entitled *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică* (*The Feasts of the Theotokos – A Historical and Theological Perspective*).

As the author states in the prologue of his work, this research project was started in 1995, before being elected metropolitan, and thus he wished to continue the Christology work published in the same year, entitled *Praznicele împărătești. Introducere la cele douăsprezece praznice împărătești și la Hristologia ortodoxă* (*The Great Feasts. Introduction to the Twelve Great Feasts and the Orthodox Christology*). This work “refers to the stages of the Son and the Word of God incarnated and depicts the royal feasts from the Annuciation of Our Lady to Pentecost” (p. 17). The reason for a work dedicated to Orthodox Theotokology, in the continuation of a work dedicated to Christology, is claimed by the fact that “the Theotokos became the instrument of salvation, since the Son and the Word of God assumed the human nature through her, so Christology is closely linked to the theological teaching about the Mother of God” (p. 17). In the continuation of the prologue of his work dedicated to Virgin Mary, Metropolitan Hierotheos explains that in the chapters of this book is presented “the history and theology of the Theotokos’ feasts”. They contain “all the data, both historical and theological, which the Church assumed and recorded in Synaxaria, hymnography and the homilies of the Holy Fathers” (p. 19). Summarizing the entire message of his work, the author shows that “he who speaks of the Theotokos, must necessarily theologize. The book is a theological biography of the Virgin Mary” (p. 19).

The prologue of the work itself is followed by a prologue to the Romanian edition of this work, in which the Metropolitan Ierotheos notes that “the whole book is a record of the saints’ longing for the Theotokos, but also of the Church love for the one who gave her body to the Son and the Word of God to become man” (p. 22).

The prologue of the work is followed by an Introduction, in which the author brings more details of a biblical, patristic, and liturgical nature, but also on the homiletical contributions of the Holy Fathers of the Church regarding the veneration of the Theotokos and the worship brought to her in the Orthodox Church, even from the beginning of the Christian life. In the introductory part, it is discussed the historical context of convening the 3rd Ecumenical Council, which completed the Orthodox teaching about Virgin Mary. The period of the 5th century, immediately following the works of this Ecumenical Council, is the time when the worship of the Theotokos and her veneration were crystallized and widespread throughout the Christian world. This was materialized by the feasts dedicated to her, as well as by the whole worship of the Mother of God developed in the Church. In this introductory part it is pointed out the scarcity of biblical elements regarding the grounds of the Theotokos worship, much of the information recorded in the liturgical tradition of the Church being developed on the background of the apocryphal writings, which explicitly and extendedly refers to her life and activity. In this regard we mention: *Protevangelion of James* or *The Account of St. John the Theologian of the Dormition of the Theotokos*, which are writings belonging to the end of the 5th century or the beginning of the next century. Nevertheless, in this regard it is very important the author's clarification that "in her hymnography, iconography and homilies of the Fathers - the Church selectively took certain aspects of the Virgin Mary's life from the apocryphal writings, but not the fiction, thus covering the lack of information in the New Testament regarding on this topic" (p. 23). In this chapter, the author presents the patristic contributions on the Theotokos' theme starting with the second century, continuing with the third century, then with the Fathers of the golden age, and until the fifth century, the golden age of the Virgin Mary. He concludes with the observation that "after the fifth century, the next century called «the century of the Virgin Mary» par excellence was the fourteenth century, as the writings of Saints Gregory Palamas, Nicholas Cabasilas and Theophanes of Nicaea clearly show" (p. 28).

The work is divided into six parts, each part being dedicated to a feast of the Theotokos, except for the fifth part which refers to the Virgin Mary in the New Testament. In the case of each feast, the approach has a historical perspective, the author using two works of some consecrated Greek liturgists, as bibliography for documentation. One is the work by Georgios Philia, *I Theometorikes stin latria tis Eclisias (The Feasts of the Theotokos in the Church Worship)*, Grigori Publishing House, Athens, 2014 and the second is written by the liturgist Ioannou Foundouli, *Loghiki latria (Speaking Worship)*, Thessaloniki, 1971. Further theological and spiritual meanings are developed for each feast of the Theotokos and the homilies and works of the Holy Fathers regarding the feast or respective event in the life of the Virgin Mary are used for this purpose.

Thus, the first part deals with the history and theology of the feast of the Conception by Righteous Anna of the Most Holy Mother God. After the historical elements regarding this Feast, several theological and spiritual directions are developed, as well as: the God pleasing marriage; the names of the Theotokos' parents; the successive cleansing of the Virgin Mary's ancestors; the curse and the blessing; the conception as work of God's providence; the existing soul from the moment of conception; "the good smell scent within the womb" and "the new heaven in the womb". Another subchapter refers to the heresy of the immaculate conception, combating this wrong teaching with theological arguments.

The second part deals with the historical and theological aspects of the feast of Theotokos' Nativity. From the theological and spiritual aspects, we emphasize the following used for the Theotokos: the joy of the whole world; joy and pain; the Sun of justice's sunrise; the feast of redemption; "Mystery of the day"; very-sweet daughter of Anna; "the caress of the Virgin Mary"; "worthy daughter of God, the beauty of human nature"; the birthday of the Virgin Mary; the nourisher of our life; the secret heaven and the new Adam; the book of the Word of life; sheep gate; the fortress and river banks; "Gift of birth".

In the third part, the Feast of Theotokos' Presentation is historically and theologically evaluated. In this part, after referring to the historical events and the transfiguration of the body and history, the author develops the following theological and spiritual aspects: the Temple, the Holy and the Holy of Holies; the before-sign of God's goodness; "the Saviour's most-clean church"; "seen as a baby, but understood as a divine workshop"; the entrance into the divine rest - the Sabbath; the living Old Testament; the Holy of Holies as a foretaste of the Virgin; the most beautiful of men and the glory of the Emperor's daughter; the beauty of the Virgin attracted the love of God to people; Mary's love for God; dwelling in the Temple and spiritual service; the method of knowing God; the hesychia of the mind and the sight of God; food from the angel; "the most beautiful ornament among the most beautiful".

The fourth part of the work is dedicated to the historical, theological and spiritual presentation of the content of the Annunciation Feast. Thus, the presentation begins with the history of the Annunciation Feast, with special reference to the Synaxarion of the Feast, to the patristic interpretation of the event and to its iconography. Then, there is the dialogue between the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary in the interpretation of Saint Germanos, the Patriarch of Constantinople and the theological content of the Annunciation feast. The next part analyses the meeting of Virgin Mary with Elizabeth according to the account of St. Apostle and Evangelist Luke, and the analysis of the Theotokos' singing according to Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite's presentation. Another part of this chapter refers to the Mystery of conception and the bearing in the womb by the

Theotokos, the moment of the Annunciation being presented as “a pre-Pentecost”. Then there are references to the super-natural and without-seed conception, as well as the birth without damage and pain of the Theotokos. The Theotokos is presented as the ever-Virgin Mary, the Birth-giver to God and the All-Holy, her Son’s conception being presented as “the only new thing under the sun”, like a mystical marriage of God with man, according to the teaching of Saint Symeon the New Theologian. Then, there are short references on the mystery of Virgin Mary’s silence and on the discovery made by the angel to Joseph. Then it follows the analysis of the eight tones dogmatics, highlighting each of them theological dimensions, in expressing the ever-virginity of the Theotokos and her qualities as Birth-Giver of God and Most-Pure. The last part of this chapter includes patristic comments on the Annunciation Feast that theologically develop the content of this event in the life of the Virgin Mary and of all humanity.

The fifth part of the work presents the image of the Virgin Mary, according to the New Testament accounts, with all its texts referring to the Theotokos. Patristic exegesis of these texts is also presented from the homilies and exegesis of Saints John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory the Theologian, Theophylact of Bulgaria, Nicholas Cabasilas or Gregory Palamas.

The sixth part of the work and the last one refers to the Feast of the Theotokos’ Dormition, under the same historical, theological and spiritual aspects. Thus, after the presentation of the historical evolution of the feast, its synaxarion is presented, as well as the narration of the event of Dormition according to the teaching of the Church Holy Fathers: Dionysios the Areopagite, Modest of Jerusalem, Andrew of Crete, John of Damascus, Germanos of Constantinople, Gregory Palamas and Nicodemus the Hagiorite. Another sub-chapter of this last part refers to the Mother of the Lord in the Holy Liturgy, with special reference to the readings of the Apostle and the Gospel, as well as the mention of the Theotokos’ name in the Divine Liturgy. Other subchapters refer to the Virgin Mary in hymnography and iconography. Regarding the Virgin Mary’s iconography, the author presents the iconographic representation of the events, the Church’s Mystery and the analysis of Saint Theophanus of Crete’s icon. This part ends with the exposition of the patristic teaching about the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, developing the main theological and spiritual nuances regarding this Feast.

The work of Metropolitan Ierotheos ends with an Epilogue that includes a theological and spiritual mediation on the word of Revelation 12, 1-2: “a woman clothed with the sun ...”, as a contemplation and revelation of the heavenly image of Virgin Mary, in the rest of her Son’s kingdom.

This work, dedicated to Virgin Mary’s feasts from a historical and theological perspective is a very interesting and useful one, especially for the faithful of the Church, who can better penetrate the theological and spiritual teaching of

the Church regarding the Theotokos by reading this book. Although it is not a scientifically written book, with a critical apparatus and bibliography, which could have increased its value and importance, the work presents with great depth the entire biblical, patristic, hymnographic, iconographic and theological teaching regarding who is the Theotokos, the Birth-Giver of God and the Virgin Mary for us the Christians.

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Dr. Matthew LEVERING, *The Indissolubility of Marriage: Amoris Laetitia in Context*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2019, 220 pp.

A new, meticulously-researched book, *The Indissolubility of Marriage: Amoris Laetitia in Context* by Dr. Matthew Levering¹, explains why the Catholic Church continues to teach marital indissolubility and addresses the numerous contemporary challenges to that teaching.

It surveys the patristic witness to marital indissolubility, along with Orthodox and Protestant views, as well as historical-critical biblical exegesis on the contested biblical passages. It also surveys the Catholic tradition from the Trent (1545 – 1563) through Benedict XVI (2005 – 2013), and it examines a Catholic argument that the Catholic Church's teaching can and should change. Then it explores *Amoris Laetitia*², the papal exhortation from Pope Francis (2013 – present) on marriage (dated 19 March 2016), and the various major responses to it, with the issue of marital indissolubility at the forefront. Finally, it retrieves Aquinas's theology of marital indissolubility as a contribution to deepening current theological discussions

In this book, the author cannot give a full answer to the question of why the Catholic Church hold spouses to the obligations pertaining to a valid and consummated marital commitment. Such an answer would require exploring not

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² https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/pa-pa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf