

Book Reviews

Dr. Hans Bruno FRÖHLICH, *Darul cel unic. Taina Botezului în Biserica Evanghelică și Biserica Ortodoxă. Recunoașterea sa și practica în România (The Unique Gift. The Sacrament of Baptism in the Evangelical Church and the Orthodox Church. Its Recognition and Practice in Romania)*, Honterus Verlag Hermannstadt, Sibiu, 2023, 390 pp.

The work published with exceptional graphic quality represents the doctoral thesis of Mr. Dean Hans Bruno Fröhlich, defended in Sibiu, in German, in 2019.

The Unique Gift is an important achievement of its author, as it addresses a current and often controversial issue concerning the Sacraments of the Church, in this case focusing on the Sacrament of Baptism, viewed in the context of inter-Christian relations. From the very first pages of the thesis, the author shows great passion in approaching this topic, not avoiding some very difficult aspects of it. The author of this work has undertaken diligent, tireless work to analyze the essential aspects of the Christian Tradition concerning the practice of Baptism. In the 'Foreword' of the work, the author demonstrates with particular acuity that there is no reasonable alternative to inter-Christian dialogue. Viewed as a whole, the present work undertakes an interdisciplinary analysis, combining elements of Dogmatics, Canon Law, Biblical Studies, Patrology, Church History, the Study of Christian Confessions, and Ecumenism. The highlighting of aspects that complete the theological picture of the topic only serves to draw a vivid, profound, and complex image, which emphasizes the necessity of constant deepening of inter-Christian dialogue, for which, as the author notes, there is no alternative. The author rightly points out that the Transylvanian space is, par excellence, a space for inter-Christian dialogue, providing in the introductory part of the work a presentation of the relations between Lutherans and Orthodox Christians over time.

Thus, it should be emphasized that the author uses high-quality bibliography, predominantly analyzing ecumenical documents that consider the importance of Baptism in the life of different Churches.

In the actual *Introduction*, the author emphasizes the motivation behind choosing this topic, its limits, and a historical excursus related to it and its purpose. The motivation for choosing the topic is supported by the specific character of Transylvania, where various nationalities and denominations peacefully coexist. Through his analyses, the author seeks to shed light on of the relations between Lutherans and Orthodox Christians during history and nowadays, highlighting both the brighter and less bright aspects throughout the history of these relations.

Another objective of the work is to highlight the ecumenical, universal value of the Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ, to which all Christians must refer, as it lies at the foundation of Christian confession.

At this point in the work, the author demonstrates the stage of research on the topic in specialized literature, showing how the theology of Baptism has been reflected in ecumenical documents, highlighting the convergences, as well as the theological differences between Orthodox and Lutherans regarding this work of the Church. The present work is structured into four chapters, particularly enlightening regarding the analysis of the topic.

Chapter I: The Theology and Practice of Baptism in the Orthodox Church (pp.41-106). In this chapter, the author of the work presents the liturgical acts from the Orthodox Church concerning the birth of a child, preceding the Sacrament of Baptism, such as: Blessing prayers after the birth of the child, the prayer for the postpartum woman, the Baptism itself, the churching of the child, and the entire liturgical structure of the Baptismal service. Also in this chapter, rituals and liturgical acts concerning the reception into the Church of individuals belonging to other confessions and religious denominations are presented. A special place is represented by the deepening of understanding the Sacraments in general, and Baptism in particular, by Father Dumitru Stăniloae. After highlighting the general aspects regarding Father Stăniloae's Orthodox teaching on the Sacraments, the author of this work nuances some theological statements of the Romanian theologian, which were conceived in a period of inter-

confessional confrontations and do not fully reflect the thinking present in Lutheran theology. A point of novelty is the presentation of a case study: the analysis and interpretation of data from the Orthodox Marriage and Baptism registers of the “cathedral” in Sighișoara.

The presentation of the Sacrament of Baptism in Orthodox faith and practice highlights certain formal evolution that coincide with the essential elements of Baptism in the patristic era, but also some elements of differentiation can be noticed in different regions inhabited by Christians. The unified Orthodox vision regarding the Sacraments of Christian initiation: Baptism, Chrismation, and Eucharist is detailed, presenting them in parallel with the developments that can be noted in Western theology and practice.

This work gains value by presenting a general overview of Baptism in Orthodoxy, followed by an analysis of it in dialogue with Western theology and practice regarding Baptism. When viewed in the context of Father Stăniloae’s vision of *Open Sobornicity*, Baptism has certain ecclesiological and canonical implications, both in terms of understanding it and with particular relevance to the intention of this work. The concept of “open sobornicity” has not been satisfactorily explored by theologians to date, as it holds profound complexity, offering a perspective that is hopeful regarding inter-Christian dialogue.

Chapter II: The Theology and Practice of Baptism in the Evangelical Church (pp. 107-150). The author undertakes a welcomed exploration into the theology of Baptism from the perspective of the Evangelical Church. The Evangelical belief about Baptism, as defended and analyzed by Martin Luther, is brought to light. A significant aspect of Baptism lies in the fact that through it, the believer receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In this chapter, the author corrects certain deficiencies in the presentation of Lutheran teachings about Baptism by some Orthodox theologians, who have oversimplified the presentation of Lutheran theology in the dialogue between Orthodox and Lutheran theology. For Lutheran theology, Baptism signifies three things simultaneously: sign, content, or its meaning, and faith (see pages: 108-111). In this chapter, the author elaborates on the vision of Baptism as reflected in the works of Martin Luther and the

theological documents of the Reformation, on one hand, but also does not forget to present more recent developments related to Baptism by illustrating the thoughts of representative theologians in this ecclesiastical space: Edmund Schlink and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Both for Ed. Schlink and W. Pannenberg, Baptism cannot be conceived apart from Christ and the Holy Spirit. The presentation of Martin Luther's theology about Baptism brings some theological clarifications, especially considering that it has sometimes been viewed in a reductionist manner by some representatives of Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology. By emphasizing that the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit is present in Baptism, this has direct implications for the work of salvation for humanity. Also within this chapter, various liturgical rituals and emphases regarding Baptism present in various Evangelical Churches are discussed: the Evangelical Church in Romania, in Austria, and in other Evangelical Churches. The structure of the Baptism ritual is analyzed with concrete examples, as well as its significance in the perspective of personal salvation.

Chapter III: Documents and Ecumenical Studies Regarding the Mutual Recognition of Baptism (pp. 151-301). In this chapter, the author analyzes the ecumenical documents that emerged in the last century, starting with the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to engage in ecumenical relations with representatives of other Churches and confessions. In this regard, several very important documents are highlighted, namely: the Synodal Encyclical of Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III, as well as the responses given to this Encyclical by the Synods of some Local Orthodox Churches: the Russian Orthodox Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church. Additionally, another document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is analyzed: "To the Churches of Christ Everywhere". Rightly so, the author notes that these ecumenical documents are based on the negative experiences of the First World War, as well as on the fact that "the Ecumenical Patriarchate was of the opinion that the Church would be able to respond to the growing challenges of the world not in a state of division, but only together" (p. 151). Remarkable is the tone of the pastoral letter from the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Metropolitan Dorotei, in January 1920. This document clearly proposes concrete steps towards a

real reconciliation among Christians, aiming to achieve that “communion of Churches”.

In this subsection, the author undertakes an analysis of great importance regarding the bilateral theological dialogues between the Orthodox and Western Church. Briefly, the author also touches upon the bilateral dialogue between the Local Orthodox Churches and the Evangelical Church in Germany. The final documents of the bilateral theological dialogues between the Russian Orthodox Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the Evangelical Church in Germany are highlighted, as well as the international dialogues of Orthodoxy with the World Lutheran Federation. Additionally, this chapter presents attempts at theological rapprochement between Western Churches themselves: the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Churches. Clearly, special attention is given to those theological dialogue sessions that specifically address the Sacrament of Baptism.

Another significant point of the work is the spotlight placed on ecumenical convergence documents that also address Baptism.

The author first provides an overview of these documents and emphasizes their importance both in the context of inter-Christian relations overall and, especially, regarding the approach of Baptism by the Churches and the specificity of this approach.

Chapter IV: The Theology of Recognition (of Baptism) (pp. 259-301). The author identifies the theological difficulty of the concept of recognition of Baptism and analyzes it from various perspectives: linguistic, philosophical, theological, and ecclesiastical. To understand the significance of recognizing the Sacraments in general, and Baptism in particular, the author seeks concepts that illustrate both the confessional identity of the Churches and bridges of communication and recognition between them. Several ecclesial realities are highlighted: the humanistic environment of Orthodoxy, self-perception and external perception of Orthodoxy, what Orthodoxy can and should do regarding recognition, etc. Before presenting annexes containing relevant documents regarding Baptism, the author concludes the last part of the work, specifically: *Summary and Perspectives*.

The work concludes with an *Appendix* containing the final statements of theological dialogues conducted by the Orthodox Church or Local Orthodox Churches with Western Churches, which have theological and practical relevance for the theme analyzed by the author of this work.

From the facts presented in the final part of the work, it emerges an exceptional potential for dialogue between Orthodox theology and Western theology on the topic of Baptism, which should not be ignored but rather leveraged in a world that aspires to dialogue and cooperation among individuals, states, and peoples.

Through his recently released book, its author demonstrates a profound understanding of both Western and Orthodox theology, with the capacity to perceive their articulations in a unified, coherent, and contemporary vision.

The timeliness of the chosen topic, as well as the manner of its presentation, has afforded the author of this work the opportunity to highlight what the apostolic divine Tradition, a universal criterion for legitimizing all Christians, holds more vividly, presently, and valuably within it, for the work and mission of the Church today, as well as for its ability to engage in fruitful dialogue with the world in general. Once again, we are reminded of the immense theological potential of dialogue inherent within the framework of the Churches and Christian denominations.

Bringing the Christian Tradition regarding Baptism to the forefront, as reflected by both Eastern and Western theological thinking, emphasizing its biblical, apostolic, and patristic roots, along with a generous openness to general Christian thought, has allowed the present author to demonstrate with arguments the complexity of this Sacrament of the Church, its lights, and its significance, grounded in the divine economy that aims at the salvation of all humanity.

In order to achieve the intended goal, the author has made good use of a rich, varied, and valuable bibliography, interpreting the statements of various authors correctly and competently, demonstrating genuine analytical and synthesis skills. In doing so, the author continues to draw attention to significant theological figures from both the East and the West, presenting them in a fruitful dialogue for contemporary audiences.

The importance of this work becomes even more evident when considering that the twentieth century was perceived as the century of ecclesiology or the teaching about the Church, and of efforts towards Christian unity, with many reverberations into the twenty-first century. Indeed, the vision of the Churches regarding their own teachings of faith should not be presented triumphantly or arrogantly, but rather as a dialogue with the doctrinal positions of other Churches and denominations, with the expressed desire for closer understanding of the Revelation of the same Christ, as faithful as possible. When we refer to Baptism, which is the focus of the present work, then this theological effort to present such a thematic theological vision in dialogue is even more valid, with the evident aim of rediscovering everyone in the same ethos of faith and its liturgical practice. This work provides a qualified, reasoned, and convincing response regarding the multiple significance of Baptism. The author succeeds in presenting Baptism not only theoretically and abstractly but also practically, including questionnaires that seek to practically highlight in the consciousness of the faithful the importance of Baptism and how the faithful themselves relate to it.

Although the author demonstrates a definite ecumenical openness, he does not overlook the sometimes differing views that Churches still hold regarding the Sacrament of Baptism. However, at the same time, he also perceives the possibility of exploring some uncharted paths on the road of inter-Christian dialogue, such as the concept of *open sobornicity* proposed by Father Stăniloae.

The present work holds significant practical value as it assists the Churches in updating their message of salvation by bringing attention to both the Orthodox theology and practice of Baptism on one hand, and the Lutheran evangelical theology concerning the same work of the Church on the other hand. It highlights what these perspectives have that is brightest and most beneficial for a divided and prideful world in need of cohesion, communion, and unity.

On the other hand, this work aims to be a plea for a more thorough understanding of Orthodox and Western theologians and theology, in order to constantly bring them into dialogue, deepen that dialogue, with the aim of all finding the same sense and experience of saving faith.

I would recommend to the author to also translate this work into English, which would further facilitate and encourage inter-Christian dialogue, inviting theologians to a continuous analysis and deepening of the foundations of faith in the same Christ - the Savior of all humanity.

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Chrysostomos A. STAMOULIS, *Holy Beauty. Prolegomena to an Orthodox Philokalic Aesthetics*, translated by Norman Russell, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 2022, 236 pp.

The English translation of the book *Κάλλος το άγιον. Προλεγόμενα στη φιλόκαλη αισθητική της Ορθοδοξίας* as *Holy Beauty. Prolegomena to an Orthodox Philokalic Aesthetics* represents a major academic event in the English speaking Western theological world, Orthodox and non Orthodox. Through this translation, the book fits in the academic frame where naturally it belongs, building bridges between the Eastern and Western Christianity around the topic of beauty. After a great impact in the Greek and the Romanian theology¹, it promises to stir a debate in the Western Orthodox and non Orthodox world with its fresh vision of how holiness and beauty may relate in a postmodern culture and time.

Such a relationship is promoted by an original theologian and thinker. Although Chrysostomos A. Stamoulis is a professor of Dogmatics, he is as well a reputed musician. He teaches Dogmatics at the Faculty of Theology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, holding the chair of the renowned professor Nikos Matsoukas. The author is a lover of beauty: conservatory

¹ Hrisostom STAMOULIS, *Frumusețea sfințeniei. Prolegomene la o estetică filocalică a Ortodoxiei*, trans. Nicușor Deciu, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011. In this book review I will resume a few thoughts on the book published under the title “Frumusețea teologiei sau în căutarea unei viziuni a unității”, in: *Orizonturi teologice*, no. 2/2011.