

† Irineu POPA, *Acestea vi le-am spus, ca bucuria voastră să fie deplină. Cuvântări la Praznice Împărătești și Sfinți cu polieleu (I Have Told You These Things so That Your Joy May Be Complete. Sermons on Imperial Feasts and Saints with Polyeleos)*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2025, 574 pp.

Books of sermons, that is, interpretations of Gospel passages, are always needed, especially if they belong to established writers and are written in such a way that they can be used from any pulpit of our Church. It has been said that there are no universal sermons; that every word should be adapted to the audience and addressed to someone in particular. What then do we do with the interpretations of the Holy Fathers on the pericopes of Sundays and Feasts throughout the year? There is only one answer: the substance of the kerygma is not changeable—hence the need for universal sermons—and what changes is the historical and geographical context—hence the (confusing) righteousness of those who deny the existence of universal sermon books.

The book by His Eminence Irineu I have told you these things so that your joy may be complete. Sermons on Imperial Feasts and Saints with Polyeleos, published by the Romanian Academy Publishing House, Bucharest, 2025, (574 pp.) belongs to the unchangeable “Words” that can be spoken in any Orthodox Church, by any cleric! We affirm this for several reasons:

- First, due to its content: each sermon includes a presentation of the history of the feast being celebrated, a dogmatic-liturgical analysis based on the theological coordinates of the Holy Fathers, a lively address to the faithful, and a corresponding biblical-patristic bibliography. Therefore, this book will find its application in every parish: “the message of the sermons is particularly relevant for contemporary man. Through these words, we urge our priests and faithful to lead a pure life in the Church, following the model of the Most Holy Mother of God and the example of the saints” (pp. 16-17);
- Secondly, the words of His Eminence Irineu are revealing for the one who utters them; they are a source of edification for any preacher regarding the content of the Feasts or the life and miracles of the Saints

he discusses. For the clergyman who speaks to the people, the Feast opens up all its meanings, since this book presents the perspective of the liturgical books—especially the Minei, in which the Feast is contained and liturgically expounded.

- Thirdly, the author uses the central theme of the Feast as an opportunity for a broad dogmatic and liturgical excursion, in which he is in his element, explaining Orthodox doctrine in terms accessible to both theologians and non-theologians. We will illustrate this with the teaching about the Mother of God: the birth of the Most Holy was decided in the mind of the omniscient God even before the creation of the world: “the world that was conceived and felt was created for the Mother of God, and She, in turn, was created for our Lord Jesus Christ, and the very creation of the whole world was determined before time began for this purpose (...) through the birth of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, an amazing ‘book’ was thus prepared on earth, which is worthy of bearing not only the imprint of words, but also, in an inexpressible way, the living Word Himself, born before all ages from God the Father, Who can save those who approach Him” (p. 39); “The Mother of God is the person for whom God made the whole world, for from her was born the Creator of creation, the One who freed us from the bondage of death and the devil” (p.101); The Virgin Mary has a nature like ours, born with original sin, but free from personal sin: “The Divine Virgin is both fully human and the Most Holy Virgin. The incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Word of the Father, implies that the Most Holy Virgin Mary, His Mother, is herself like human beings, a true daughter of Eve, but not subject to sin and the inclination to sin. She was born with original sin, but through a gift receiving a special power from God, it was not activated in personal sins or in the inclination to sin called concupiscence” (pp. 29-30); the original sin of the Mother of God is erased at the Annunciation: “The Most Blessed Lady was cleansed of original sin by the coming of the Holy Spirit upon her at the Annunciation. The Annunciation is the mystery through which the Most Holy Virgin Mary became the first human person to be deified. Thus, the body and soul of the Most Holy Virgin were cleansed and prepared for the birth of the Son of God. Therefore, the Word of the Father took on human nature from the most holy body of His Mother without any trace of sin, whether ancestral or personal” (p. 37); The One Born of

the Most Holy resides in human nature: "The incarnation of the Savior Jesus Christ is accomplished without sin by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, being a restoration, a recreation of nature or of the nature subject to death and decay. Through the Incarnation, the Son of God united in Himself the divine nature with the human nature in an inseparable bond, stronger than death and hell" (p. 312); through her Birth, the Mother of God is made the living Church and Mother of mankind: "as Mother of our God, our Lady represents us before the Father through the human nature she offers to her Son. Therefore, by becoming the Church of the Most High Son, She is also our Mother in the mystical Body of the Lord" (p. 193); "That is why we call her the mystical Church and the speaking Heaven. Therefore, the Mother of God, being the symbol of the Church, is the one who welcomes all believers who are baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity and clothe ourselves in the Savior Jesus Christ, her Son, into her love. In a word, the most holy Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ embraces us in her love and shares with us the grace she has received from the Holy Spirit, she being full of grace" (pp. 108-109); In connection with her Son, the Most Holy One lifts the curse of the world: "Adam, who had subjected all creation to death and decay, now rejoices in his daughter who, through the words 'be it unto me according to your word,' has brought joy and hope of salvation. The Mother of God lifts, through the One conceived in her, the curse of all creation. Thus, she is the one who, at the moment of the Annunciation, brings unspeakable joy to the world; not only to humans, but to all creation, since through the Birth of her Son, reconciliation and the lifting of the burden and suffering brought about by the ancestral sin come to all creation" (p. 321); The Virgin freely responds to God's initiative: "God Almighty works with His creation, the Most Holy Virgin Mary, freely, with great respect and love. What the Mother of God has in common with her Son is that both she and her Son, God the Word, are free persons. The Savior Jesus Christ is a divine and free Person, and the Mother of God is also a free human person, because man was created in the image of God" (p. 325); The Mother of God continues to work for the salvation of mankind even after her assumption into heaven. The death of the Most Holy shows that she had the same nature as ours, but because she offered her blood to the divine Word, she did not experience decay: "Through this assumption of the Mother

of God into heaven, after she passed through common death, that is, after she submitted to the law of human nature, it was revealed to us through the grace of the Holy Spirit that our Queen is alive and truly the Mother of life. The fact that she was resurrected and taken up with her body into heaven in glory shows us that her human nature, from which the Son of the Father formed His human nature, is free from corruption. Therefore, the body of the Most Holy Virgin, from which the Son of God was incarnated, is that through which the Lord conquered death through the Resurrection and ascended into heaven in glory” (p. 538); between the Mother of God and her Son there remained an eternal, indissoluble unity, so that the Most Holy Mother is present in all the salvific acts of her Son: “The Mother of God is always present in the life of the Savior Jesus Christ, through the human nature taken from her, a nature that he preserves eternally in His Person. Thus, the human nature, appearance, and human feelings of Christ the Savior are those of the Mother of God. And when we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ the Savior, we always think of the Most Holy Mother of God from whom the Lord took His body and blood. Therefore, by partaking of the Holy Mysteries, we become, on the one hand, children of the heavenly Father, and on the other hand, children of the Mother of God in her Son, Christ the Savior. And when we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ the Savior, for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life, we carry in our souls the Mother of God, who is always present in her Son, Christ Jesus the Savior. Even though the Mother of God does not give us her body to eat, nevertheless, when we partake of the Body of Christ the Savior, we cannot help but think of her. In this way, our Mother helps us to draw even closer to her Son, Christ the Lord, by offering us His grace. As such, we carry in our souls our Mistress, who was taken up into heaven with her body, saying: “Rejoice, O full of grace, who, in your sleep, do not leave us!” (p. 545);

- Fourthly, it should be noted that The Sermons on the Royal Feasts and on the Saints with Polyeleos are the occasion that the Author uses to express another Orthodox doctrinal truth. Namely, that of liturgical realism. In The Foreword, His Eminence Irineu presents the perspective of liturgists with regard to liturgical prayer. This fulfills four functions: anamnestic (remembrance), latreutic, pedagogical, and soteriological. Without neglecting any of the four aspects of wor-

ship, the author insists in each sermon on the soteriological aspect or liturgical realism. According to him, the Gospel text read during the Feast explains what God offers to the liturgical synaxis in terms of worship—namely, specific gifts and graces. The author of the book recalls the history of the feast—the anamnestic part—in order to then insist at length on liturgical realism. Worship being a movement of God’s descent into our world, it fulfills human freedom, which enables it to receive the gift (grace) specific to the Feast, to multiply it, and then to raise the horizontal of history to the vertical of God’s eternity. In this sense, the consistency of creation, the laws that give consistency to creation, are themselves transparent to grace, that is, each feast is a vision (p. 329) with the spiritual eye of what God gives to creation and expects from it: “The theology of our Orthodox Church emphasizes that in the Word of God Incarnate, heaven and earth are brought together. The place of worship is the architectural and iconographic expression of this union wrought through the Incarnation. Here, God the Word becomes tangible as a man born of the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary and communicates Himself to people in His Body and Blood” (p. 10); There is complete unity between the Lord’s work of salvation and the Blessed Virgin’s work of intercession, since “all the spiritual states of the Mother were transmitted to the Savior Child, and, conversely, all those of the Child were transmitted to His Mother. Therefore, this beauty and purity of the Mother of God was also communicated to the Infant Jesus the Savior, His image being in the image and likeness of His Mother, the Most Holy Mother of God. Of course, there is no longer a shared image between the Son of the Father and the Son of the Mother, and it is one and the same heavenly and earthly Person of our Savior Jesus Christ. Therefore, He Who is of one essence with the Father now becomes of one essence with His Mother, the Most Holy Mother of God. That is why the Most Holy Virgin Mary is called the Mother of God, as Elizabeth, her relative, called her, because our Lord Jesus Christ has a Father in heaven, the heavenly Father, and a Mother on earth, the Mother of God, to whom we are related through her kinship with God. The Mother of God is, therefore, the one who permanently connects us to God” (pp. 323-324). Thus, The Sermons on the Nativity, the Covering, the Presentation in the Temple, the Synaxis of the

Mother of God, the Annunciation, and the Dormition of the Most Holy are a complete Mariology.

- Fifthly, the interpretation of Feasts and Holidays belongs to liturgical or sacred time. Fitting life into the rhythm of the Calendar is the only way to escape the insignificance of Kronos (time flowing relentlessly towards death) and enter the time redeemed from blindness, Kairos, which directs creation and man towards Resurrection. Time, from a flow towards death, becomes a time of salvation; “liturgical living” presupposes this (p. 20). The interpretation of the Feasts as real moments of salvation, beginning on September 1 (when Saint Simeon the Stylite, 390-459, is celebrated, whose life announces that fasting and uninterrupted prayer are the foundation of closeness to God) and ending with the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (August 29, a feast that confirms that the existence of Christians in history is relative, that we have no lasting city here, and that fasting and prayer are the only ways that anchor us “here” and “beyond”, and time is a “already and not yet” of the Kingdom) represent the ends of the Church Year that frame our lives. Integration into the truth of the Feasts saves human life from loss on the horizontal plane of existence. Only the attachment of the human mind to Revelation—to the work and Truth of God—brings the life of the creature into the horizon of divine life, which is, in fact, the meaning of earthly existence: “God is above time, He is the Creator of the ages and reigns over time and space. The words “above time” and “beyond time” teach us what we should call eternity, which is nothing other than the presence of God in our lives. (...) The time created by God is connected to our lives and our existence in this world. Because of this, time, which includes the calendar, is part of God’s plan and has no other purpose than to tell us about God’s wonderful deeds. (...) The Savior, in order to show His greatness and eternity, says: «Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am» (John 5, 8). Obviously, the present that the Lord speaks of confirms a reality that does not precede a certain moment in time, but goes beyond time itself. (...) As such, by honoring the Church New Year, without reducing eternity to time, we make the time of our lives a place of encounter with God. The transfiguration of time implies movement, change, the constant transition from one state to another, which our Orthodox teaching frames as the spiritual ascent towards perfect communion with God in love” (pp. 26-27).

- Sixthly, His Eminence Irineu's book is a constant exhortation to believers to "step out" of modern life without abandoning modernity—that is, to step out of sleep and the darkness of sin without abandoning this life. Modern man deceives himself by seeking "freedom" in the world and society—but this is dependence on creation. Only dependence on God's independence ensures complete freedom for the creature, because God is the only Absolute Person in whom all dependence is overcome (p. 12).
- Seventh, this Book of Sermons is "a moment of spiritual peace in the midst of an unbelieving and directionless world" (p. 12). The author urges the reader to awaken to spiritual reality: "To wake up from the sleep of sin and return to the love of God and neighbor means, without a doubt, to turn away from the world and the time of sinful pleasures. Those who realize this dark reality overcome the state of spiritual death and boldly walk the path of virtue toward liberation from the dream that prevents them from seeing their true vocation as beloved children of the heavenly Father, created in the image of the Logos. It is clear that the holy services and hymns of the Lord, of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, and of the saints, which we hear every time in the Holy Church, can become guiding lights that show us the way, that make us look up to recognize that there are greater possibilities than those of money, power, and worldly pleasures" (pp. 13-14).

Here are a few reasons why we welcome with joy and gratitude this Book of Sermons, which is, in fact, just an opportunity for the Author to liturgically proclaim the dogma about how mediation between man and Christ the Savior is achieved through the Mother of God and the Saints within the Church. The exhortation of Blessed Augustine remains: "Let no one separate you from God, let no one separate you from the Church, let no one separate you from God the Father, let no one separate me from the Church, our mother. Let no one separate you from the Mother of God. Let no one turn you away from the saints of God. The unbelievers will always want to separate you from God, pretending to be benevolent and helpful, but they are servants of justice and error" (p. 17).

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