

## Book Reviews

**Sfântul Preot Mucenic Ilarion FELEA, *Spre Tabor*, vol. 1: *Pregătirea*, 367 pp.; vol. 2: *Curățirea*, 371 pp.; vol. 3: *Luminarea*, 463 pp.; vol. IV: *Desăvârșirea*, 331 pp.,  
Introducere de Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel Ioja și Prof. Drd. Alin Florin Ciotea, Editura Universității “Aurel Vlaicu” din Arad, Arad, 2025**

The Year of Grace 2025 represents for the Romanian Orthodox Church and for the entire Romanian nation not only an anniversary year – celebrating a century since the elevation of our Church to the rank of Patriarchate – but also the “Commemorative Year of the Romanian Orthodox Spiritual Fathers and Confessors of the Twentieth Century”, but also the blessed time in which some of the most precious fruits of our righteous Church of this period, the 16 saints were highlighted/canonized.

Among these confessor/martyr fathers, the Holy Martyr Priest Ilarion Felea (1903-1961) is in a place of honor. This glorification produced a lot of spiritual emotion and joy, and sealed an expectation that was required to be fulfilled for the faithful and the Orthodox Church in the parts of Arad, as well as for our entire Church. In this context, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Arad, which honorably bears his name, considered it a duty of conscience to publish the complete work of the great theologian, confessor and martyr Ilarion Felea who went to his most desired God and Lord and settled in the victorious Church in Heaven, after having served wonderfully in the fighting Church on earth, from the cross of the passions in the lively prison of Aiud.

From this theological work of the Holy Martyr Priest Ilarion, a true testament of his life and activity, 10 volumes have been recovered and edited so far, and, according to the editorial plan, another 10 volumes are estimated to be published.

A separate body within the entire work of the great confessor – and, until its dissolution in 1948, Rector of the Theological Academy of Arad –

is the work *Spre Tabor* in four volumes, edited and released on September 18, 2025. About this work, that saw the light of day only 72 years after its origin, the Holy Father Ilarion said in his *Personal Diary* on March 28, 1953: “Here is the culmination and the conclusion of the work of my life”<sup>1</sup>.

The iron curtain of communism behind which Romania remained captive for more than 40 years, through the censorship and terror it applied, especially to the cultural and religious environment, did not allow the printing of the monumental work *Spre Tabor*, as well as other theological works of the Holy Martyr. The manuscript of the work *Spre Tabor* was hidden, protected, and kept in various clandestine locations to be protected from the rapacious and fierce arm of the communist Securitate that tried on many occasions to confiscate and destroy it. We believe that this was certainly done, in the first phase, up to the arrest and the last imprisonment, by the Holy Confessor Ilarion himself.

Of the seven priests from Arad arrested by the communist power in 1958, two – Cornel Caceu and Dimitrie Gornic – were arrested in February, and the other five, including Ilarion Felea, were arrested in September. Probably, this interval of several months was the time when the manuscripts were hidden, thus being saved from the house search on the night of the arrest. The manuscript of the work remained in the care of the family and those close to him, both during the period of its author’s imprisonment and after his martyrdom in the prison of Aiud, on September 18, 1961<sup>2</sup>.

After the fall of communism in Romania, in 1994, through the care of Father Tudor Demian, the book of Saint Ilarion Felea, *Religia Culturii* was published posthumously by the Orthodox Diocese of Arad Publishing House. But it took years for this confessor’s masterpiece, *Spre Tabor*, to see the light of day, first in 2007-2009.

The work was printed through the intervention and involvement of Father Crăciun Opre de la Cinciș, to whom the manuscripts were entrusted by Father Demian Tudor, a disciple, friend, and fellow sufferer with Saint Ilarion in communist prisons. It was printed through the editorial effort of

<sup>1</sup> Arhiva Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă Arad (AFTOA), Pr. Ilarion V. FELEA, *Opera vieții mele. Ziar personal*, III, 1944-1956, f. 126.

<sup>2</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere. *Spre Tabor* – o culme a teologiei românești de la mijlocul secolului al XX-lea”, in: Sfântul Preot Mucenic Ilarion FELEA, *Spre Tabor*, vol. IV, *Desăvârșirea*, Editura Universității “Aurel Vlaicu” din Arad, Arad, 2025, p. 8.

the nuns of the Paltin monastery in Petru-Voda. It took almost 20 years after the fall of the communist regime for it to be finally printed.

This latest edition of the work *Spre Tabor* in four volumes: “Pregătirea”, “Curățirea”, “Luminarea”, and “Desăvârșirea”, which we have in front of us, is the result of the assiduous and zealous work of an editorial team coordinated by Rev. Prof. Dr. Cristinel Ioja. Along with the Dean, the team includes: Protos. Lect. Dr. Nicolae Tang, Rev. Lect. Dr. Filip Albu, Drd. Alin Florin Ciotea and theologians Prof. Alexandru Obrad and Georgiana Costescu.

The four volumes of the work were published by the Publishing House of the “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad and with the high blessing of His Eminence Dr. Timotei Sevcicu, Archbishop of Arad, who supported the initiative and blessed the edition of the complete works of the Holy Martyr Priest Ilarion Felea.

The note on the edition assures us that the text of the main work of the Patron Saint of the Faculty of Arad, *Spre Tabor*, as well as of the other works published so far, has been fully revised and adapted to the orthographic and punctuation rules in force, with grammatical corrections where required. The obsolete lexical forms, archaisms, and regionalisms have been replaced in places by the variants of today’s literary language. Some words have been explained in parentheses, as editors’ notes. The theological terms used in the interwar period were replaced by those used in current Orthodox theology, as were the liturgical terms.

The texts of Holy Scripture have also been replaced by those of the last synodal edition of Holy Scripture, and the liturgical texts have been improved after the last editions that appeared. The critical apparatus was revised and completed where necessary, including the full names of the cited authors and their works. There was also the introduction of the author’s handwritten notes into the edited works, either on the margins of the manuscript or inserted between its lines<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the editorial team has done a laborious job to give “ready for print” to this exceptional edition.

In the author’s view, the title of the work *Spre Tabor* has a profoundly spiritual and soteriological significance. The work is the result of a cycle of sermons delivered in the Cathedral of Arad, prepared within an extensive

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<sup>3</sup> “Notă asupra ediției”, in: Sfântul Preot Mucenic Ilarion FELEA, *Spre Tabor*, vol. IV, *Desăvârșirea*, pp. 34-36.

preaching plan, revised, annotated, and enriched, divided and organized into the four volumes that the Holy author hoped to print.

Here is what St. Ilarion himself testifies:

“Tabor is the summit of purification, enlightenment and perfection of the soul, and this book wants to be our guide to its heights of light and holy joy, the guide, the typikon, the rectory according to which the preparation for the journey, the purification, enlightenment and sanctification of the soul is made, to reach the height of the heights of religious life, to union and happy living with God”<sup>4</sup>.

For this, the structure of the work also follows the spiritual ascent specific to the Orthodox Tradition: the four volumes, “Pregătirea”, “Curățirea”, “Luminarea”, and “Desăvârșirea”, which constitute the cardinal points of the spiritual life<sup>5</sup>.

Just as the Gospel and the preaching of the Apostles is unitary, calling man to salvation – “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near” (Matt 4, 17) – in his work *Spre Tabor*, St. Ilarion shows that *Christianity is the religion of spiritual improvement and perfection, it is the religion of salvation, salvation that is realized in the Church, in the unity of dogma, spirituality and worship*:

“first of all *Spre Tabor* would be a synthesis of Dogmatics with Morals and Liturgical (Mysticism), as they were from the beginning in the Gospel. The separation was made only for the sake of study and systematization. In the background of religious life, Dogmatics, Morals, and Liturgics are one. The Christian creed cannot be separated from Christian worship, doctrine from Christian life, knowledge (theory) and prayer from good deeds, dogmatic teaching from the moral law, and liturgical life”<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 13.

What inspires him in this huge effort to unify theology is, in the opinion of Rev. Prof. Cristinel Ioja, the coordinator of the editing team - an opinion that we also share -, the Liturgy he celebrated almost daily and the ecclesial experience in general<sup>7</sup>. This unification of theology is emphasized and put into practice through homiletic syntheses of preaching, which offer answers to modern man's spiritual and existential searches.

According to the author's testimony, he aims - and we believe that he succeeds abundantly - in making *Spre Tabor* be:

“a) a synthesis of Dogmatics with Morals and Liturgy as they were at the beginning in the Gospel; b) to consecrate, following the patristic spirituality, the three stages of perfection: purification, enlightenment and perfection, as a complement to the Pauline division: faith, hope and love; c) to be a spiritual guideline, a way, a method for the perfection of man, the method, experience and teaching of the saints for the formation of the spiritual man in Christ; d) an anthropology of perfection, a psychology and pedagogy of the religious-moral life; e) a book of spiritual exercises and habits in which theory is united with praxis, science with virtue, mind with heart, divine grace with man's struggles”<sup>8</sup>.

In these homiletic syntheses contained in *Spre Tabor*, which is “a pinnacle in the unification of theology”<sup>9</sup>, St. Ilarion makes special use of the philokalical writings, a part appearing in the first four volumes of the *Philokalia* translated at that time by St. Dumitru Stăniloae, and another part being investigated in manuscripts in translation procured through St. Arsenie Boca, nun Teodosia Lațcu, or from the fund of Paisian philokalical manuscripts. Here are the words of St. Ilarion:

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<sup>7</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 16.

“From these books, especially from the *Philokalia*, I have squeezed everything that seemed to me best and most useful to man from the great multitude of believers on the way to the purification, enlightenment, and perfection of the soul. I have chosen in particular questions (problems) that give food for thought, that awaken the conscience, correct life, and please the human heart”<sup>10</sup>.

In particular, along with Christ and the Church, the author always refers to, calls, and exhorts the saints, because “No one has greater authority in the Church than the saints”<sup>11</sup>.

All these findings regarding the masterpiece of the Holy Priest Martyr Ilarion Felea, *Spre Tabor*, - “the culmination and conclusion of the work of my life” - highlight and impose this event of re-edition, following a laborious editorial work, as an exceptional one.

We are not only considering here the work of improving the text, the up-to-date arrangement of the critical apparatus, the extensive and well-structured presentation of the work in the Introduction signed by Rev. Prof. Dr. Cristinel Ioja and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin Ciotea, the Chronology and Note on the edition, but also the format of the books, the printing, the special quality of the paper, the hard covers and the dust jacket that bears the icon of the Saint.

The editing of the work *Spre Tabor* and of the other works of Saint Ilarion, partly published, and another part still in progress, made with the legal consent of Mrs. Bianca Darian-Felea, his rightful heir, within the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Arad, which bears his name, represents for the entire theological academic community of Arad a tribute and an honor to its protector. It is a necessary academic, ecclesiastical, and cultural restitution, and a making available to theologians, intellectuals, good believers, and all those interested in the fiery words of the “Spirit of Truth”, of one of the greatest confessing theologians of the twentieth century<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristinel IOJA and Prof. Drd. Alin Florin CIOTEA, “Introducere...”, p. 37.