

Book Reviews

Arhim. Dr. Arsenie HANGANU, Sărbătoarea Adormirii Maicii Domnului în tradiția ortodoxă. Aspecte istorico-liturgice și teologico-duhovnicești (The Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Orthodox Tradition: Historical-Liturgical and Theological-Spiritual Aspects), Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2024, 302 pp.

In 2024, the Doxologia Publishing House in Iași released a work by Archimandrite Father Arsenie Hanganu titled *Sărbătoarea Adormirii Maicii Domnului în tradiția ortodoxă. Aspecte istorico-liturgice și teologico-duhovnicești* (*The Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Orthodox Tradition: Historical-Liturgical and Theological-Spiritual Aspects*). As the title suggests, the book is a significant contribution to both Mariology and Liturgical Theology. The work is essentially the author's doctoral thesis, defended in 2022 under the careful guidance of Father Professor Dr. Viorel Sava, a professor of Liturgics at the "Dumitru Stăniloae" Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Iași.

In the introduction, the author mentions that his approach focuses on the historical-liturgical and theological-spiritual aspects of the Feast of the Theotokos' Dormition, the most important celebration dedicated by the Church to the one through whom God became incarnate. The author evaluates not only the liturgical and cultural heritage of the Church but also certain contemporary scholarly observations, both Eastern and Western. The ideas from these two scholarly fields are not positioned as antagonistic but are presented with minor critical observations where the author deemed necessary. As the author testifies, "the present work primarily includes ideas derived from the two apocryphal traditions of the Dormition, translated into Romanian, studied alongside Orthodox hymns from service books, and patristic literary works" (p. 20). The author's aim is to demonstrate the existence of a historical thread regarding the veneration of the Theotokos, encompassing two theological elements: "First, that the emergence and

dynamics of Theotokology, latent until the 5th century, are grounded in Scripture and Tradition, even if not officially authenticated. The second concerns the development of Mariological veneration from its origins to its crystallization as a consequence of the tacit post-factum approval of apocryphal writings known to the Church Fathers” (p. 13). Among the objectives proposed by the author, a central focus is on understanding the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God as a means of expressing piety, “which manifests in two dimensions: one ecclesiastical and the other popular, with special attention to the Romanian tradition” (p. 14).

The work is divided into four chapters. It begins with an overview of the veneration of the Mother of God and all feasts dedicated to her, then delves in detail into the Feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos and its multiple meanings, concluding with a discussion on certain aspects of how the feast is reflected in Romanian popular tradition.

In the first chapter, the author highlights the foundations of the veneration of the Theotokos, starting with biblical arguments, continuing with those of the Church Fathers, and complementing them with a brief presentation of hymnographic sources. Each scriptural foundation is supported by examples from the Church Fathers and the Church’s hymnography. Following a logical progression, the author first refers to the Old Testament, demonstrating how King David and the major prophets speak directly or indirectly about the Virgin Mary, presenting several archetypal biblical symbols such as the “burning bush”, the “holy ground”, “Jacob’s ladder”, the “new Eve”, the “golden Ark”, and others. All these prophetic symbols from the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the New Testament through the person of Jesus Christ and His Mother. Although the New Testament provides limited details about the person of the Mother of God, the few references are well presented and evaluated by the author. Based on these scriptural foundations, the Church’s entire teaching about the perpetual virginity of the Theotokos has been established — another element addressed by the author in the concluding section of this first chapter.

The second chapter highlights the specific ways in which Christians highly venerate the Mother of God, primarily through feasts. After Christ the Savior, the Theotokos has the most feast days in the Orthodox liturgical year. The author begins by presenting details about the presence of the

Virgin Mary in hymnography and services, therefore in the Church's worship. He then provides a chronological and concise overview of the major feasts of the Mother of God: *the Nativity of the Theotokos*, *the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple*, and *the Annunciation*, offering insights into their history, meaning, and liturgical specifics, with service books serving as the primary source of information. The final section of this chapter highlights the minor feasts of the Theotokos as well as certain mentions in Synaxaria that center on the Virgin Mary. The entire second chapter serves as a synthesis of the public and private manifestations of devotion to the Mother of God.

The central focus of the work is the third chapter, which extensively addresses the last of the feasts dedicated to the Mother of God in chronological order: *the Dormition of the Theotokos*. This chapter opens with an exploration of the history of the feast. The author considers not only documentary attestations within the Orthodox Church but also those from the Roman Catholic Church and the non-Chalcedonian Churches. In describing the event of the Dormition of the Mother of God, the author uses two types of texts: on the one hand, New Testament biblical texts referring to the life of the Virgin Mary after the Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord, and on the other, apocryphal texts that provide numerous details about the latter part of her life, particularly her Dormition. The author also addresses two other questions: the age of the Mother of God at the time of her Dormition and the location of her tomb. Another topic explored is the fast preceding the Feast of the Dormition and the key liturgical days from the Forefeast to the Leavetaking. A special focus is given to the hymnographic elements of the feast as well as other specific services: the Akathist, the Paraklesis, and the Lamentation of the Mother of God. The chapter concludes with some personal reflections by the author, who asserts, among other things: "After the Resurrection, God reveals to humanity yet another possibility—to dwell with Him in eternity with a glorified body. This model is fully manifested in the Dormition of the Mother of God. The undeniable contribution of Orthodox liturgical creators was precisely in preserving a perfect balance between the knowable and the mysterious" (p. 241).

The final chapter examines how the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God is reflected in Romanian popular tradition, a tradition that,

according to the author, “has expressed itself with natural gentleness and a much greater sentimentality than that of other Christian peoples” (p. 242). The Romanian people’s devotion to the Mother of God originates in the knowledge transmitted through Church services. The author synthesizes the particularities of Romanian popular tradition related to the Dormition of the Mother of God and highlights the forms of its manifestation, both in private and in public or solemn contexts. Regarding private contexts, the author considers laments, incantations, certain religious-legendary writings, and folk beliefs associated with the Feast of the Dormition. While the Church’s role is minimal in private contexts, it is essential in public expressions. Patronal feasts, pilgrimages, and processions are notable examples of public manifestations. The author highlights the most well-known pilgrimages and processions held at Romanian monasteries on the occasion of the Feast of the Dormition. Folk artistic creations are also acknowledged, such as poems dedicated to the Mother of God and religious songs (*pricesne*), which are described as “born from the heart of the Romanian people, imbued with the Church’s love for Christ and His Mother” (p. 262).

The work concludes with several final reflections by the author, summarizing key ideas from each chapter.

Over the past two millennia, the Orthodox Church has maintained a balanced stance regarding the veneration of saints in general and of the Mother of God in particular, remaining faithful to the words of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition. This work dedicated to the Mother of God is not only highly interesting but also essential, not just within the academic theological sphere. Within this realm, the research deserves further development, and discussions on this subject remain open. The Orthodox Church’s worship is vast; therefore, specialized works explaining it from historical and theological-spiritual perspectives should become more numerous and carefully crafted. Archimandrite Arsenie Hanganu’s book is part of this effort to rediscover the Church’s liturgical treasures, offering a valuable contribution to this field.

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