

R E V I E W

by Lubomir Ignatov, Assoc. Prof., PhD,

on the dissertation work of Ivaylo Evgeniev Vasilev for the award of the ONS
"Doctor" in professional direction 2.4. "Religion and Theology", scientific
specialty "Pastoral Theology"

on a topic:

**"Free will and obedience in the process of spiritual care of the Orthodox
Christian".**

Faculty of Theology of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", Department of "Practical
Theology". Scientific supervisor: Assoc. Dr. Ivo Yanev.

Procedure data.

Following the decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Theology dated March 21, 2024 (protocol No. 10) and an electronic report of the Dean of the Faculty of Theology and by order of the rector of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", No. RD 20-851 of April 16, 2024 with entry No. 70-15-103 of April 1, 2024. Ivaylo Evgeniev Vassilev was expelled from full-time doctoral studies with the right to public defense, effective March 1, 2024.

By order No. RD 38-351 of the SU rector, as of July 2, 2024, a five-member jury was approved, entered in the SU Register for members of scientific juries on June 20, 2024 under no. 28.

At the first meeting of the scientific jury, which took place on July 16, 2024 (protocol No. 1), the chairman of the scientific jury was appointed and which of the

members of the scientific jury were to be reviewers of Ivaylo Vassilev's dissertation work and which were to be authors of opinions, while a public defense date was scheduled.

Curriculum vitae

Ivaylo Evgeniev Vassilev (baptized name John) was born on August 27, 1987 in the city of Plovdiv. He graduated from the Language High School in his hometown, then continued his education at the American University in Bulgaria, studying economics and political science, and subsequently at the London Institute of Economics, obtaining a master's degree and majoring in "Local Economic Development". In the following years, he held various secular positions, as well as church ministries, some of which he performs to this day. In 2018, he was enrolled in the master's program "Church Social Affairs" at the Faculty of Theology of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", graduating with honors in 2020. The following year, he was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in the Department of Practical Theology at the same faculty, earning a doctorate in the field of Pastoral Theology. He was declared eligible in March 2024.

General data for the dissertation

The dissertation is presented within 247 pages, of which 12 are Appendix and 18 are Bibliography. 891 footnotes have been entered and a total of 223 publications

on the topic have been used, of which 79 are source literature, 83 publications related to the dissertation and another 61 publications in English and Greek, again related to the topic of the dissertation.

Overall, the dissertation work of doctoral student Ivaylo Vasilev meets the requirements for a similar kind of scientific works. The statement is scientific, but at the same time light and understandable, despite the complex nature of the matter. The necessary research-supporting methodology was selected and a rich source and research literature was used. The long list of foreign language aids is impressive. All this is again a sign of hard research work, which led to the aforementioned dissertationability of the work and its realization as a truly serious dissertation work, representing an indisputable contribution to this field of theological science. In fact, each of the three chapters of the dissertation has its own contribution. And more: I would define the reading as a modern, updated and timely occultism, like the ancient book of that name, which, despite being written by a person without the experience of a clergyman, would be extremely useful reading as a manual for clergymen and laymen. In this regard, I warmly recommend the publication of the dissertation, and if it pleases God, in due time he will also be honored with the fiery Pentecost of the priesthood, so that his scientific contributions will also become spiritual and life.

Attached to the procedure documentation are three articles having an ideological connection with the topic of the scientific work.

Thematic comments and structure of the dissertation text

Questions related to the spiritual care of the Orthodox Christian have always been an important matter in theological science and in particular in pastoral theology. The countless works that have enriched the theological literary-creative

treasury testify to the relevance and the great interest in this direction. Wise and God-bearing fathers and ecclesiastical writers who lived ages before us set the beginning of this blessed creativity. Pastoral-theological science, however, is vast. Despite what was achieved in a remarkable amount already in the patristic era, as well as by Russian, Greek, Western and Bulgarian theologians of later times, research on the problems of Orthodox pastoral theology continues in our time and there are still too many unlit spaces of its essence, history and mission. So there is a lot of work in this area, and Ivaylo Vassilev's research is a natural continuation of this process.

There is no doubt that the dissertation student Ivaylo Vassilev chose the above-mentioned topic out of a desire to get to know Orthodox Pastoral theology in depth, hoping that what he achieved and reflected in his work "will bear fruit in the hearts of the readers", as he himself states in the last sentence from the Preface. Probably aware that this research field is truly vast, he does not limit himself to researching the problematics indicated in the topic of the research, but also touches on other issues related to this research.

It is evident that the PhD student has put tremendous effort and remarkable diligence into the composition and presentation of his dissertation, which we ultimately find in the form and quality of a serious research paper, with its inherent scholarly contributions. In the proposed text, in a detailed but also in a systematized form, almost everything related to free will and obedience in the process of spiritual care of the Orthodox Christian is presented. The dissertator refers in his essay to the scientific achievements of prominent researchers in this field, using them as a base on which he builds with his own scientific research, which is actually the contributing element of his work. In this regard, I dare to state that I fully agree with

the dissertation's self-assessment of scientific contributions presented in four measurement units.

The dissertation composition consists of the usual structural elements of a scientific text presentation: Preface, Introduction, scientific presentation in three parts (chapters), Conclusion, Bibliography, followed by an Appendix.

The preface is presented in the usual (classical) form. It contains a brief introduction to the subject of the dissertation and thanks to persons who assisted in successfully bringing the scientific work to the desired completion.

In **the introduction**, a brief introduction to this part of the dissertation is presented again, as well as the main parameters of the research: object, subject, goal and tasks of the research, research hypotheses, methodology, in which, in accordance with the nature of the researched topic, the appropriate circle is selected for use research methods, in connection with which the dissertation states that the methodology is "borrowed from the traditions of theological science and the holy fathers". The research approach in the process of scientific work, as well as the relevance and significance of the topic, are also presented. At the end of the introduction, a comprehensive history of research and publications on the topic is provided. In general terms, the introduction follows the usual and generally accepted plan for composing an introductory part to written presentations of scientific research.

The first part (or first chapter) deals with preliminary and general questions related to free will and obedience. After delving into the content of this chapter, one really comes to the conclusion, which is undoubtedly one of the main goals of the dissertation, that in the doctrine of the Orthodox Church the presumption is laid that every person is spiritually cared for and guided on the path of his soul salvation by

a mentor with already acquired and demonstrated experience, recognized by the Church and accepted in its quality of pastoral ministry. By his God-given free will, each passom has the right to choose his own spiritual leader, whose instructions he should follow with filial obedience. The synergy of free will with obedience is seen as decisive for the spiritual elevation of the Orthodox Christian, which the dissertation synthesizes in the phrase "free will for obedience."

The sole purpose of spiritual guidance is precisely the achievement of Christian values and, accordingly, soul salvation, and the cooperation between a spiritual mentor and a mentored child is the very essence of pastoral ministry. The words of the author of the dissertation text presented in the Abstract are significant here, that "just as the role of the physical father is invaluable for the child, so is the role of the spiritual father for the Orthodox Christian". We find a similar sentence in the Autoreference, spoken in connection with the third chapter, namely: "One should not listen to one's own will, but trust those more experienced."

I believe that Ioan Vassilev has done an excellent job and the theological-scientific goal set in the first chapter has been achieved, and our native theological science is enriched even with this part of the scientific work presented.

The second part (or second chapter) engages the reader already with essential questions on the subject - the process of spiritual care and the resulting spiritual genesis and confirmation in faith. More precisely, it examines the circumstances in which the will is manifested, as well as the characteristics that obedience has in the various stages of spiritual care.

I dare to express my opinion that it is precisely in this part of the dissertation, presenting two of the four stages of the process of spiritual care, that the essence of

this scientific work is contained, naturally continued in the next chapter. I admire what is written in point Communion and prayer.

The third part (chapter) presents the fruitfulness of spiritual care and the issues related to it. Here, the subject of research continues to be man's free will and obedience, as a necessary condition for his spiritual progress on the way to the salvation of his soul. Accordingly, the adverse consequences of disobedience are also subject to debate.

At the end of the presentation, the author of the dissertation notes that with the tasks set in the research and their fulfillment in the process of scientific research, "the stated goal of the scientific work is to investigate and establish the place of man's free will and his obedience for soul salvation and eternal life in the various periods of his spiritual life and care has been achieved and fulfilled". I also agree with this statement.

The conclusion follows the usual way of presenting this part of scientific works. In general, it is a farewell to the reader, an attempt is made to take stock of the work done, accompanied by confirmation and additional theological clarification of the results achieved.

The bibliography, as already indicated, contains a total of 223 publications, of which 79 are source literature, 83 editions in Cyrillic and 61 foreign language manuals.

The appendix placed at the very end of the work includes a table named "Table of Equality" according to St. Maximus the Confessor, followed by a total of 22 extracts from works of holy fathers of the Orthodox Church, giving additional clarity and arguing the scientific presentation.

It is with great satisfaction that I find that the dissertation text has been revised and the ambiguities and oversights in the text identified by me and my colleagues during the internal discussion have been removed. I am convinced that with this the contribution nature and quality of the composition is more categorically emphasized, and the presentation acquires an even more impeccable appearance.

Here I will repeat an observation made during the internal discussion, namely that in some places the composition acquires the appearance of an instructive speech, and the place of this church genre is by tradition and right the church pulpit and not so much the university rostrum, BUT in view of the nature of the composition I find such an author's approach justified, also referring to what the author said on page 6, that "the essay aims not only to meet the scientific criteria for a dissertation, but also to bring practical benefit".

Conclusion

Based on the wonderful impressions gained and the contributing nature of the dissertation work, I strongly recommend to the members of the esteemed jury to join Mr. Ivaylo Vassilev to the community of doctors of theology, giving a positive assessment of his scientific work. I also give such an assessment with great satisfaction and admiration, with a recommendation that the author show good will and do what is necessary for the publication and popularization of the content of his excellent and timely dissertation. Its merits are in the necessary sufficiency for it to be well accepted among the working "Churches and Fatherland for the benefit" of our priests, the rest of the clergy and the entire Bulgarian church performance.

Sofia, 09/10/2024

Assoc. Prof., PhD Lubomir Ignatov