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Review of the PhD thesis by Polycarp Opio entitled:

***THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AS A MODEL OF MORAL VIRTUE
ACCORDING TO THE TEACHING OF THE POPES: JOHN PAUL II,
BENEDICT XVI AND FRANCIS***

written under the supervision of Rev. prof. PhD hab. Krzysztof Kietliński,
Warsaw 2023, pp. 287.

One of the most critical tasks of theology is to be concerned with the credibility of the Church's teaching. What is most often said in this context is that the proclamation of the Good News should be evident in the actions of those who evangelise. This is true. However, we can show another area of credibility-building. This area is the proclamation of the gospel so that it responds to the questions and challenges of the contemporary world in a particular place and time. This requires interpreting the content of faith in such a way that the recipient of that content finds help for a better life in it. If the gospel is preached as abstract sentences, faith will become an ideology rather than an everyday way of doing things. This is the conviction behind many texts by contemporary theologians such as Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx. This thought is also evident in official Church teaching. For example, Pope Francis, in the exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, wrote: *Since 'time is greater than space', I would make it clear that not*

all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For 'cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied' (3).

In the context of these challenges in the Church, Polycarp Opio analysed the main Mariological themes in the teaching of the contemporary Church and wrote a 287-page dissertation entitled 'The Blessed Virgin Mary as a Model of Moral Virtue according to the Teaching of the Popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis'.

1. Aim of the thesis

In the introduction to his thesis, the author defines the purpose of the study. At page 7 he states: *this dissertation generally seeks to contribute to the moral theory and practice with Mary's virtue being the center of reference. Specifically, it attempts to discuss the teaching of the popes regarding the virtues of Mary and to identify the similarities and differences (extracting specifics) in their teachings. It also tries to delve into the African situation as reflected in the statement of the Popes and how they make relevant the virtues of Mary to offer avenue for strengthening of the moral fabrics in the African society.*

Seven specific questions are linked to this objective: *a) What is the significance of Mary's attitude as a model of morality for the modern world? b) What are the biblical foundation and the traditional reflections on the virtues of Mary? c) Did Pope John Paul II affirm of the necessity to imitate Mary as a model of Moral Virtue? d) How did Pope Benedict XVI reflect in his teaching the need to embrace Mary's Virtues as a path to moral transformation? e) What are some of the moral challenges of the modern times and how did Pope Francis relate the virtues of Mary as a response to them? f) How did the Popes, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis find solace in the virtues of Mary in*

relation to Africa's moral challenges? g) How do the Popes agree and differ in their thoughts about Mary as model of Moral Virtue?

Having analysed the table of contents of the dissertation and the text itself, I conclude that the objective has been properly formulated and sufficiently achieved. Undoubtedly, the contents of the dissertation match the title: 'The Blessed Virgin Mary as a Model of Moral Virtue according to the Teaching of the Popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis'.

In structure and content, the African context is very often referred to. In my opinion, this is a crucial aspect of the research undertaken. Given this, consider broadening the study's title to emphasise the presence of these local issues.

In order to reach his objectives, the author decides to use a variety of research methods. We read: *The research methods employed to achieve the purpose of this dissertation are analytical, critical, descriptive, comparative and morally inspired* (p. 8). The methods are used accurately and consequently.

2. Structure of the thesis

Polycarp Opio's dissertation consists of a list of abbreviations used, an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography.

In the 7-page-long introduction, the author included background analysis, motivation for the choice of the topic, methodology, sources, scope and limitations, purpose and significance of his research, and theoretical framework. All these elements meet the criteria described in methodology coursebooks. One may need more certainty in the description of the sources used. In describing them, the author first points to the catechism, then to the literature on the subject and finally to the documents of the popes. It seems that the documents of the popes should come after the catechism. Such an option would be more in keeping with the thesis title, in which the doctoral student emphasised that he would be based on these papal documents.

The first chapter 'A VISION OF THE VIRTUES OF MARY IN THE LIGHT OF THE BIBLE, TRADITION AND DOCUMENTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH' was announced as a presentation of *the narratives of the Blessed Virgin Mary that inspires model of morality reflected in the Bible and in the tradition of the Church* (p.

13). The author has fully accomplished this task. The value of these analyses is also the clarification of many concepts and issues needed to understand the other chapters. Moreover, we find many interesting interpretative contexts in the content, mainly from Africa (e.g. the Langi people of Northern Uganda, catechism of Lira diocese) and the context of liberation theology (pp. 37-38). Alongside these African themes, the reference to the war in Ukraine and Poland's role in helping refugees is also interesting. It seems that the references that appear in the text to the teaching of the popes, which will be analysed in subsequent chapters, are redundant (e.g. to Pope Francis on pp. 25 and 28 and to John Paul II on p. 66). There is also a reference to the Gospel of St John on p. 29, although this part of the chapter is devoted to the Gospel of St Mark.

The next three chapters follow a similar structure and deal with the teachings of three popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. The author answers questions c, d and e from the introduction to the dissertation. The analyses are carried out very competently and based on relevant sources. The biographical contexts of the popes are also meaningful, showing their relationship to Marian devotion. The doctoral student has not only presented the main issues from the papal teaching but has interestingly systematised them. The models from the documents described have been presented interestingly and innovatively. Special mention should be made of the passages dealing with the African context. Polycarp Opio has not only presented the words of the popes spoken in Africa but has also shown their relationship to the challenges on the continent. In the case of Benedict XVI's teaching, he did not find texts from Africa that were directly relevant to the purpose of the work. However, he was able to interpret selected passages of the pope's words in such a way as to bring out issues of interest.

The fifth chapter is entitled: 'SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE TEACHING OF THE POPES: JOHN PAUL II, BENEDICT XVI AND FRANCIS ON THE MORAL ASPECTS OF MARY'. The tables included, showing similarities and differences in the popes' texts, are a very good illustration and summary of the previous analyses. Despite the different social challenges, the author has shown that Mary is a universal model for the human being who wants to live the gospel. The chapter is edited very well.

The whole dissertation concludes with a general conclusion. This part is followed by conclusions stemming from the contents of particular chapters. Finally, the author presents research perspectives.

The last section of the thesis is the bibliography. Its division meets the methodological criteria. One may wonder whether such a detailed division of papal documents is necessary. It also seems that it would be more in keeping with the theme of the work to divide papal documents by author than by type of document.

3. Content-related and formal assessment

While talking about the strong points of Polycarp Opio's doctoral thesis, one needs to stress the importance of the issue discussed by the author. In describing Mary as a model of moral virtues, the doctoral student presented the teachings of the Church and showed its links to the challenges of the people of Africa. Thus, the author has not only described Mariological issues but has accomplished this purpose in a way that emphasises the credibility of the Church's teaching. Pointing out the relevance and universal character of the gospel and papal documents seems to be one of the most important tasks of contemporary evangelisers. In my opinion, the dissertation is an example of very good contemporary theology, combining tradition with the questions of modern man.

In many places, the dissertation is interdisciplinary. We find in it not only biblical and patristic themes and topics from contemporary theology. In contexts and interpretations, we also read about themes from cultural anthropology, history and the social sciences. On the one hand, this is due to the author's broad horizons and wide interests. On the other hand, we see the methodological maturity of the doctoral student, who could use data from different sciences correctly and not mix research methods.

A third strength of the dissertation is the use of many sources. The issue under discussion required the consideration of a very extensive literature. Documents published by Popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis have been appropriately selected and used. One can find many books and articles in Mariology that deal with the subject of Mary's virtues, which need to be added to the bibliography. However, those included are sufficient to answer the research questions competently.

The literary style of the dissertation is undoubtedly its strong point. Inconsistent use of lowercase and uppercase letters and linguistic errors sometimes occur.

It is worth stressing once again, that both the introduction and the conclusion include all necessary elements, and the thesis structure constitutes a coherent research project.

However, there are a few disputable issues. I would like to discuss two of them.

I have already mentioned the title of the dissertation. Once again, I suggest adding the African context to the current formulation, as it is a precious element of the analyses undertaken.

I found that a critical analysis of papal teachings needs to be improved in the text. The author has highlighted the qualities of the words of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis very well, but it is challenging to find shortcomings of this teaching in the dissertation. Although the analyses dealt with the official statements of the popes, they did not always fully respond to the challenges of African society. Certainly, there are such criticisms in the literature and the reflections of the doctoral student.

4. Questions for debate

I would like to pose two questions for discussion.

The first question is related to the above comment on the critical analysis of the pope's texts. In which issues can we see a lack of sufficient reflection by the popes on the problems in Africa? What elements of Mariology could be emphasised more in the statements for Africa? Which of the issues mentioned are the most important and topical? If a doctoral student were to become pope, what would his first speech for Africa be about?

The second question is related to the first but is not about papal teaching but about contexts. The doctoral student has described many models of Mary as an image of moral virtues. Which of these models is most difficult to receive in Africa because of culture and social change? Which issues are most problematic in presenting Mary as a model of family and marital morality, which in presenting Mary as a model for priests, and which in presenting Mary as a model of social morality?

5. Final conclusion

Summing up, I would like to stress that the dissertation reviewed is a very successful attempt at a scientific analysis of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a model of moral virtue. The thesis contains many additional considerations, inspired by the topical issue, which the author brings out, develops and comments on. Thus, it can be an important contribution to the endeavours of theologians concerned about the credibility of Catholic theology in the context of an encounter with African cultures. From the formal point of view, the dissertation is well-edited and contains a lot of logical inferences and justified conclusions.

I am convinced that the dissertation by Polycarp Opio meets the criteria defined for a doctoral thesis and can serve as the basis of further registration and conferment procedure for a doctoral degree.

I put forward a proposal to admit Polycarp Opio to further stages of the registration and conferment procedure for a doctoral degree.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Damian Wąsek". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.