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REVIEW
of the doctoral dissertation

**THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AS A MODEL OF MORAL VIRTUE
ACCORDING TO THE TEACHING OF POPES JOHN PAUL II, BENEDICT
XVI AND FRANCIS (Warsaw-Poland 2023)**

by Polycarp Opio written under the supervision of Prof. Krzysztof Kietliński

The thesis that the Blessed Virgin Mary is an icon of the Church and a guide in the faith for every Christian has long had a permanent place in Catholic Tradition and theology. In light of this, making Mary the model of virtues and her activity a model of a virtuous life appear to deepen the existing theological knowledge. This means that the subject and issues of the work Polycarp Opio has written under the scholarly supervision and guidance of an experienced researcher and lecturer, Fr. Prof. Krzysztof Kietliński, fits into the trend of theological studies, complementing them.

Moreover, writing about a virtuous life in today's world, where utilitarianism and egoism often come to the fore (which Pope Francis has been talking and writing about a lot lately), turns out to be very timely and necessary. One could even say that it is somewhat prophetic.

The work seems to be necessary for contemporary moral theology, which (taking into account papal teachings) devotes a lot of attention to social issues (such as caring for the natural environment) and is moving away from issues related to one's personal life. It often becomes a kind of "peripheral theology" that pushes aside issues concerning God and Mary, giving way to psychology, ecology, economics and other social sciences. This PhD student's work is cordially welcomed; he made the Blessed Virgin Mary, her activity and way of life the subject of his reflections.

Moreover, Prof. Kietliński's (the dissertation supervisor's) previous achievements allow us to believe that the preliminary assessments and hopes listed above will be confirmed in the detailed opinions presented below. They consist of two parts: formal issues and

substantive issues. Next, questions addressed to the author will be given. The summary will include brief observations and a final conclusion.

1. Formal Issues

Polycarp Opio's doctoral dissertation is formally correct. It contains all the elements required for this type of thesis dissertation. Its parts include a title page, declaration and approval, abbreviations, table of contents, general introduction, five chapters, general conclusions and bibliography (although it is not mentioned in the table of contents).

All sections of the dissertation were properly organized. Wherever necessary (this applies to all chapters and the bibliography), divisions into smaller sections were made. Each of them contains all the necessary elements. Therefore, it can be concluded that the assessed work has no deficiencies and does not contain serious formal errors.

An important formal requirement is to document the sources of the author's thoughts and analyzes conducted using appropriate notes. In the reviewed dissertation, footnotes serve this purpose, and they are correctly done. The author is consistent in using the adopted style. He uses many abbreviations, meaning that the work is not too extensive and reading it goes smoothly.

The same assessment applies to the bibliographic list. The notations it contains are understandable and unambiguous. One style of describing sources, books and articles is consistently used.

The very idea of dividing the bibliography into smaller sections and their appropriate internal organization should be positively assessed. The author distinguished among Sources, Books and Articles. This division is justified and confirmed in the content of the dissertation.

The language of the dissertation is correct. It is free of serious errors, either communicative or scientific. The author uses professional vocabulary in the field of theological research studies. This proves both Polycarp Opio's linguistic skills and his knowledge of the academic workshop required by a candidate for the academic degree of Doctor of Theology.

Minor linguistic and editorial errors do not reduce the value of the dissertation. They also do not greatly interfere when reading the text.

The advantage of the work is his use of introductions to individual parts (especially chapters), which allows the reader to know where he is in the analysis and proof. Moreover, the dissertation was carefully prepared from the editorial point of view.

A minor drawback is the fact that the list does not mention a bibliography. In fact, it is the final part of the dissertation. Moreover, it is unfortunate that the author did not refrain

from including in the list of abbreviations those that are commonly known (such as abbreviations of biblical books).

2. Substantive Issues

Polycarp Opio's doctoral dissertation is substantively correct. Deserving praise and benefiting the reader is a clear definition of the work's goals and issues. The author presents seven research questions and answers them in the work. The author systematically pursues all research objectives set out in the general introduction. There is no doubt that these problems have been solved and the dissertation's goals achieved.

Polycarp Opio takes care to explain methodological issues in detail. To this end, he details the methods he uses in his explorations. They are properly selected and allow achieving the intended effect. Unfortunately, there is no mention of the historical-critical analysis that he uses and is clearly visible in the content of the dissertation.

The author conducted a proper research query. The result is properly selected literature. Both the sources and literature on the subject are representative of the discipline and appropriately selected for the research being conducted. Yet, at this point, it is worth asking about other papal statements that were not used. Such a question will be formulated in the appropriate place, meaning the next part of this review.

There is some dissatisfaction with the very limited use of non-English literature. However, this is not an error. It can be said with full responsibility that the literature is representative, and the work is free from substantive errors.

The structure of the work is correct. The individual elements of the dissertation substantively and logically relate to each other. The presence of each of them is justified. The work constitutes a coherent whole that fully corresponds to its title. The reader has no doubts about where the author is heading.

The first chapter is more Mariological than theological or moral. It constitutes an interesting and necessary theological and historical foundation for the analyzes contained in the following chapters.

In chapters two, three and four, Mary's virtues are analyzed in detail. They mention, among others, her Faith, Humility, Obedience, Patience and Self-Denial. Every chapter also presents the specificity of each pope's teaching about Mary. These are the author's original reflections.

Chapter five is a summary of the results of previous analyses. Polycarp Opio compares the teachings of three popes with mathematical precision. The contents present here are unique. They may be interesting not only for theologians, but also for philologists. This chapter fully realizes what the title of the dissertation states, that it is *a comparison of the teachings of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis*.

As can be seen from the short presentation above, Polycarp Opio's dissertation is characterized by originality. It is a contribution to theological research studies.

What is surprising is the fact that Fr. Opio did not include in his research the teachings of Pope Paul VI, who devoted much of his teaching to the Blessed Virgin Mary. An important document is the encyclical *Marialis Cultus* (which the author mentions on the first page of the introduction). Starting the analysis with this pope's teachings would allow for a more complete understanding of the issue in question. In my opinion, it would be worth abandoning the teachings of Francis in order to study the teachings of Paul VI. This solution is also supported by the fact that the teachings of Francis are not yet closed, and those of Paul VI are closed. As it stands, we only have a partially explored problem. Dealing with the teachings of Paul VI would make it possible to exhaust the topic.

3. Questions and Issues for Discussion

As part of the discussion with the author, I would like to ask three questions.

1. According to the title of the dissertation, its source material is generally understood papal teachings. Why are homilies, reflections on the Angelus and other "smaller" forms of papal teaching used so sparingly? Has the papal message been narrowed or distorted in this way?
2. Can you identify any of Mary's virtues that are only mentioned by one pope? If so, what are these virtues? Are there any virtues about which a certain pope is silent, even though another pope has drawn attention to them?
3. Why was the teaching of Paul VI not included in the study? What was the criterion for selecting the research area?

4. Summary and Conclusions

Polycarp Opio's dissertation is a mature scholarly work. It contains the ordering, creative deepening and development of the thoughts of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis on Mary, Mariology and moral theology. This seems valuable in the present situation characterized by a shift away from thinking about a virtuous life. The dissertation is a set of academically certain statements - properly justified and verified.

The author of the dissertation demonstrated appropriate knowledge and quite advanced research skills for a doctoral candidate, allowing him to achieve all the goals he precisely indicated in the introduction. As a result, an interesting and necessary monograph was created. In addition to moralists, it may also be of interest to dogmatic and spiritual theologians, maybe even liturgical researchers. In this way, the assessed dissertation

appears to be a contribution to the development of research in an area larger than just moral theology.

Based on a thorough analysis – and taking into account all the positive aspects and noted shortcomings – I conclude that the doctoral dissertation by Polycarp Opio is an original and creative study of the issue, and it is also characterized by originality. In this sense, the reviewed dissertation is a **novelty in moral theology and an original and creative contribution to theological studies.**

Without a doubt, the reviewed dissertation by Polycarp Opio meets all the requirements (formal and substantive) that Polish state law places on doctoral theses and their authors. Therefore, **I evaluate it positively and I hereby request that its author be admitted to the next stages of the doctoral program.**

Mieczysław Wysocki