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GOD'S WORD AMONG HERMENEUTICS, EXEGESIS AND HOMILETICS

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Abstract: Review of Pr. Ioan Chirilă, *Scara cuvântului. Eseuri omiletice* [*The Ladder of the Word. Homiletic Essays*], (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Școala Ardeleană, 2017).

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“Our creature is built in such a way that, through listening, we are able to sense the happiness of complete communion. I begin with this idea because I am convinced that we all experience this feeling, that we all understand it and that there is hardly anyone among us who has not yet experienced the burden of loneliness. Thus, if we have conceived and felt such a sensation, we easily understand this word, as a statement that is rather related to anthropology, the study of man, than to theology. Simply because it is an applied affirmation and yet, it has its origin in the biblical text [...] God's Word, the song of the Liturgy, the uttering of prayers, of the right words. All these will banish loneliness. This is because they make us hear something which is beyond our hearing ability.”

Ioan Chirilă, *Scara cuvântului. Eseuri omiletice* [The Ladder of the Word. Homiletic Essays], 166-167

In 2017, Ioan Chirilă, an Orthodox priest, a professor and a doctor in theology, chooses to publish a book entitled *Scara cuvântului. Eseuri omiletice* [The Ladder of the Word. Homiletic Essays] in which he gathers, as mentioned at the beginning of his volume, 33 Vespers 'meditations' correlating with the 33 years of the Savior's life. As expected, the chapters in this book are the written form of the evening sermons addressed by the priest to the Romanian Orthodox community gathered at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Cluj-Napoca. Nevertheless, beyond the apparent simple set of 33 symmetrical chapters in this book, there is an intricately continuous discourse in all these parts that brings them together into one consistent volume, trying to enlighten readers about the Word of God. The blurb on the back cover of the book, signed by the author, comprises the whole paradigm of such a discourse: “The words of the Gospel are addressed to the whole creature and they are the subject of various interpretations and disputes over their context and objectives. This is why, (especially) in our vespers meditations, we have chosen to bring these words before us because we need them for their spiritual and pedagogic force, and by comprehending them, we will be able to make them take shape, and by embodying them, we should all get to a unity with Christ, within the Word. This unity will make us see the fulfillment of God's words in our lifetime, which means we will unite with Him in action. This unity provides us with the gift of resemblance in what we are as beings and in what it is around us, and this resemblance is a spring of heaven.” The book is thus relevant especially for those readers who value the divine service and are pleased to literally read a sermon, not only listen to it, who are eager to be given some elevated teachings about the scripture, or who expect new meanings about specific pericopes at the celebration of a certain Christian day, along with serenity, the sense of communion and

accomplishment.

Only that there is something more in these apparently ordinary homiletic essays, for the discourse of the priest betrays the academic. A simple reading of another text of Doctor Ioan Chirilă reveals the same interwoven philosophical, theological and philological treatise consisting of elevated explanation and observation, of profound analysis and interpretation and of dexterous critique and persuasion. Here is what the author mentions in “Telosul omului: contemplație sau pragmatism” [“Man’s Telos: Contemplation or Pragmatism”]: “Philosophy appears to be an interpretation of the world and of life and it shares no revelation and no faith, whereas theology, on the contrary, is the expression of a concept about the world and about life based on faith, and, in our case, based on Christianity. This could accuse philosophy of being a pure theoretical manifestation incarcerated in immanence, and theology of being a theoretical exposition that easily hides behind the transcendent, with no trace of any epistemic argument in its exhibiting of ideas. And in order to get out of this bellicose sphere of subjective acts, I will mention P. Ricoeur’s *Hermeneutics*. He observes that every word is in fact a definition, a result of some analyses resulting from a series of facts structured in three distinct and yet united organic parts: text, action and history [...] the human telos can be identified in its integrality when man finds himself in prayers, and the acme of prayers is the Liturgy in which we not only see but also feed with Him” (Chirilă 2002b, 136, 142).

Following these beliefs, the compositions in *Scara cuvântului. Eseuri omiletice* [*The Ladder of the Word. Homiletic Essays*] are reflections of a sophisticated mind able to go into the depth of words and to construct and conceive significance, skillfully handling hermeneutics, while also performing some thorough analyses and critical explanations of the scripture, like an exegete. Moreover, beyond erudite, dignified and elegant rhetorical discourse, one also discovers a peculiar ability to address the many, by adapting the biblical texts and their essence to the current context while at the same time inserting in speech some traces of ancient wisdom, in sentences that mix ordinary speech with less modern Romanian words that, nevertheless, fervent parishioners are used to. As the author himself admits, what he offers in these sermons is, to a certain degree, different from what listeners would expect to receive: “At the end of today’s pericope, from *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1 Corinthians 9, 2-12), I heard a word full of wisdom and it powerfully reverberated the ears of my soul: *but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ* (1 Corinthians 9, 12) and I thought this could be the first word of today’s meditation. Here is how we interpret the word ‘gospel’. When we hear it, we have in mind a sum of facts, experiences, acts, accomplishments, situations that our Savior Jesus Christ experienced as a servant of our times, all the events related by the evangelists. But this is not the plenary meaning of the word; it is rather the word ‘evangelizo’ which means to

bring good news, to give the good news to all of us [...] allowing the Word of redemption to reach us all, sent by our Father in Heaven [...] That is why I am offering you another perspective on the words of today's Gospel (*Matthew 18, 23-35*), a little different from the classical ones" (Chirilă 2017, 125-126). And what follows here, in this homily, is the reference to the parable of the unmerciful servant and to the one of the bags of gold, as examples meant to preach on the idea of doing good by seeding and multiplying what is good, by sharing and giving what is good to our fellows, for goodness conceives goodness (Chirilă 2017, 126-130). Shortly put, this is what the word 'gospel' is *made* to mean in sermon XXII, a *quod erat demonstrandum* essay, which seems to leave no place for doubt or for further remarks or comments. As a matter of fact, this sense of a fulfilled rhetorical act, perceived by the reader at the end of each homiletic essay, is a characteristic of Ioan Chirilă's demonstrative statements, in general. This is also the case with a study on tolerance (meant to provide a 'Christian interpretation' and also a scientific approach to the concept of tolerance), in which priest Chirilă starts from a strong consideration: "One cannot find 'the proper being' as long as within one's self it has not become clear that 'what is yes should be yes' and 'what is no should be no, as long as one is the slave of 'maybe' and 'perhaps'" (Chirilă 2002a, 65). And there is no bigotry in the affirmation for, at the end of this study, the author explains: "I listen, I share my faith, I do not try to impose it, but I let the person choose and, *in extremis*, I am not a heretic, I pray for that person. Religious tolerance in our era should proceed, as said before, from a reconsideration of the term of Christian Church" (Chirilă 2002a, 70).

Coming back to *The Ladder of the Word. Homiletic Essays*, one of the most eloquent examples of such a hermeneutic foray is sermon XXIX, about the beauty of creation perceived in the Sky. The words in this meditation construct a vivid picture of the divine spirit sensed in the splendor of the sky, merging biblical passages with poetic descant, sometimes encrypting meaning and turning the text into hermetic speech. Hence, the orator is able to alternate intricate exposition with deciphered instances and illustrations, which makes the enunciation more revelatory. Here is a sample of such an endeavor: "Within creation there are many things that astonish, wonder and fill our souls with joy. Many of them are understood in their beauty and harmony and yet, there are some that enchant, make us happy, engulf us in serenity and leave us in mystery as well. From among these, I am trying to bring one to you today: the sky. How marvelous the skies are, how bright, and yet so hidden...and even if they are unknown to us, they utter the glory of God. We the humans are able to comprehend, express and share this glory. *For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made*, says Paul the apostle -, *even his eternal power and Godhead (Romans 1, 20)* [...] I recall two cultural testimonies. One is written on the cross on Kant's grave, mentioning that this philosopher of the imperative

was fascinated by the sky. And this seduction reverberated in him and in us; this echo is nothing else than the moral consciousness that we need to follow in our life, without dissimulation [...] Today we do not have to count our steps; today, more than ever, we have to walk towards the mystery of being, into the beauty of those embodiments that speak about God [...] Eminescu's *Lake* with the blue sky, blue like the color of the monastery Voroneț, with the stars sparkling in our way, just like the bright star that showed the way. The sky embraces us with its fire which, nevertheless, does not burn us, but it illuminates us, cleaning, warming and blessing us" (Chirilă 2017, 162-164).

What more could there be, beyond the assertion "through listening, we are able to sense the happiness of complete communion"? The fragment chosen as a motto for the present review elaborates on the meaning of an important word that Ioan Chirilă chooses to insist on and which, on a metalingual level, comprises the principle of the whole book: *listening*. Sermon XXX is an essay that defines 'listening' as a key to happiness and fulfilment through the union with God. Listening is apparently defined as a simple act of communication: "a communion which comes to life between the one who hears and the one who utters the word" (Chirilă 2017, 169). Nevertheless, this type of unification is not a simple or ordinary one as it springs from the "sharing of meaning among the one who hears, the one who sends sense and the one who is given significance" (169). Obviously, in front of the Christians gathered together to listen to the evening divine service, the preacher is nothing more than the embodiment of the principle defined here. "Can you see what the Word of Life is?", asks the priest, explaining further on: "*listening* to the command of God, obeying His word!" (170). It is precisely this act of listening which redeems, concludes the orator.

The present volume, a mere compilation of essays, is given an audacious title, probably chosen with modesty. The book is (about) the ladder of the Word, a sort of stairway of Jacob, made up of words, connecting the earth and the mortals with heaven and God. Hence, a beautiful metaphor lies between the two simple white covers of the book gathering together 33 *collections of words* as steps to take in order to make communication and the 'communion' possible.

References

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