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## FOREWORD

# THE MISSION OF THE FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AT THE SOFIA UNIVERSITY “ST. KLIMENT OF OCHRID”<sup>1</sup>

Your Eminences, Esteemed Reverends, Honored Professors, Distinguished Administrators, Respected Students, and Dear Friends, today, I am honored to address you on the topic: *‘The Mission of the Theological Faculty at the University of Sofia St. Clement of Ochrid.’* In my presentation, I will endeavor to speak slowly and clearly, aiming to facilitate the work of our exceptional interpreters.

The Theological Faculty of Sofia University was founded in 1923 on the initiative of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria. The main actor was Metropolitan Simeon of Varna and Preslav, who had been pushing for the establishment of a higher theological school in the country since the end of the 19th century. For the last 100 years our faculty has realized a number of achievements. The Department of Biblical Studies has produced remarkable scholars of Bulgaria and Europe such as Ivan Markovsky, Boyan Piperov and many others; in the field of practical theology researchers such as Fr. Ivan Goshev have left a remarkable archive of archaeological discoveries, some of which have not yet been published. In the sphere of Church law has worked the universally recognized author in Europe as Fr. Stefan Tsankov. He is the only professor of theology who has been elected Rector of Sofia University. In the field of Church history have worked remarkable scholars such as Ivan Snegarov and Patriarch Cyril of Bulgaria, known for their publications throughout the Orthodox world. It should not be overlooked that the Bulgarian church historian Todor Saber reached the leadership of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which is a high calling for theological science in Bulgaria. Also, in the field of systematic theology are universally recognized achievements of Ivan Pančovsky and Totyu Koev.

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<sup>1</sup> Opening speech delivered on November 23, 2023, at the opening of the international conference on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Theological Faculty of Sofia University.

*What are all these remarkable men so committed to?* In the European academic tradition, we call their disciplines by the common name “theology”. So that as a theological faculty, it is almost self-evident that our institution imparts knowledge in the field of ‘**theology**’. Here, individuals aspiring to serve in various capacities within the Church, such as priests, deacons, chanters, and others, undergo preparation. We offer a program traditionally termed ‘**theology**’, while those leading a more secular life pursue a ‘**religion**’ program. Nevertheless, both groups, based on my experience, seek distinctive spiritual dimensions of education that set us apart from other faculties within our university. Tomorrow, these individuals will emerge as church servants, educators, journalists, public servants, and community leaders, all of whom will carry a profound respect for the spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Church in our country.

However, let us first clarify **what the term “theology” means and why we engage in its study** within a secular university like ours. To comprehend this, we must address the fundamental question: **What is theology?** The term “theology” is conspicuously absent in both the Old and New Testament. Christ’s apostles would scarcely have identified themselves as “theologians.” At least in the sense that we nowadays put it. In the early Christian Fathers, the word was considered more characteristic of Middle Platonist thinkers than an integral part of the Christian tradition. It was not until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that Clement of Alexandria and Origen introduced the term into the Church. The Catechetical School in Alexandria, perhaps owing to its inclusive nature towards various visitors, assimilated the concept of “theology” from pagan philosophy. In contrast, representatives of the Antiochian school embraced this concept much later—only a century afterward. This is because it adopted a more conservative and narrowly biblical interpretation. In the majority of Greek Fathers, “theology” initially denoted the doctrine of *the divine Trinity* rather than an academic discipline. So, it has nothing to do with the university, especially a secular university. The Cappadocian Fathers gradually developed the understanding that a spiritually elevated person, dedicated to a life of prayer, could articulate insights about God—a notion intrinsically linked to the concept of “theology.” Illustrative of this is St. Gregory the Theologian’s “Five Theological Orations.” In this work he unfolds his arguments about who can and who should not speak about God. Evagrius of Pontus, a disciple of St. Gregory, further elucidates this concept by stating, “The person who consistently dedicates his initial

thoughts to God achieves perfect prayer” and “If you are a theologian, you pray truly; and if you pray truly, you are a theologian.” So that the Fathers sow theology not just as an intellectual commitment but they sow theology as a personal commitment to God through prayer.

St. Gregory Palamas in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, in his book *Triads*, summarizes this teaching by classifying three kinds of theologians according to their abilities and inspiration.

First and foremost, **‘theologians’** in the truest sense are those whom the Church venerates as saints. These individuals are considered genuine theologians due to their firsthand experiences in communion with God. Their deep commitment and devotion to God has enabled them to have the wonderful prayer of the friend of God. Such are the excellent theologians.

However, there exists a second kind of ‘theologians’ who, while not recognized as saints and lacking personal experiences of God, earnestly believe in the testimony of the saints and strive to replicate their teachings. Despite lacking personal encounters, they can still be acknowledged as commendable and authentic theologians. I would emphasize that, even without personal experience, they serve as competent guardians of the Holy Tradition, bearing witness to the truth. They are faithful to the saints.

There is, however, a third kind of theologians. It comprises individuals who are neither saints nor possess personal experiences of God, and regrettably, are not even faithful followers of the saints. According to the teachings of the Holy Father, these individuals are deemed as bad theologians. I would go so far as to assert that such individuals, who not only lack personal experience but also do not follow and are not faithful to the saints, disrupt the harmony of the Church, may even face exclusion from it. Some of them we even sometimes call heretics.

If we now shift our focus to the mission of our faculty, I must acknowledge that I am uncertain whether theologians from the first kind carry out mission within it. However, this remains a mystery for now, and will perhaps only become clear on the Day of Judgment. However, I am confident that the theologians in the second kind constitute the majority of our faculty members. They are devoted to personal spiritual practice, diligently studying the experiences and testimonies of the saints. As faithful disciples, they impart to our students the living testimony of communion with God left by these holy men and women; i.e. those who have seen God, and those who have glimpsed the divine. So, they teach the testimony of the excellent theologians.



In this context, a significant contributor to their theological journey is the active participation in our **academic chapel**. Here, students, professors, staff, and guests gather daily, both in the morning and evening, for prayer. The spiritual aspect of our education holds a distinctive place in our **curriculum**, making it particularly appealing to older individuals who have already pursued secular higher education. Following the transformative events of 1989, our bachelor's programs underwent a shift towards catechism, responding to the heightened interest and the absence of religious education in primary, middle and high schools. In some ways, we resembled the Alexandrian school, albeit to a certain extent.

Our master's programs also follow this orientation, attracting individuals with established positions in Bulgarian society. However, all of these students share a common goal—not merely seeking education but aspiring to delve deeper into the spiritual experiences of theologians belonging to *the first kind*, formulated by St. Gregory Palamas. As *theologians of the second kind*, we endeavor to impart to them, our understanding of the profound testimonies of the *theologians from the first kind*.

It is not a coincidence that in recent years, our Faculty of Theology has initiated several research projects dedicated to the aspect of theology that revolves around the divine revelations witnessed by the saints.

The colleagues from the Department of Biblical Studies are actively engaged in exploring *non-canonical biblical literature* as a unique heritage of the Church—a constellation of writings situated around the core of the Biblical collection, known as *canonical books*. They are also preparing translations of leading contemporary theologians into Bulgarian in the coming years.

The Department of Church History directs its research focus towards examining the role and contributions of Bulgarian theologians to the development of spiritual life in the country during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Both the Departments of Systematic and Practical Theology have jointly committed to dedicating their research endeavors in the upcoming years to the theological dialogue—spanning inter-Religious, inter-Christian, and inter-Orthodox discussions.

Our doctoral students and post-docs are carrying out a project exploring the impact of Orthodox dogma on iconography.

In this context, all involved parties have turned their attention to the rich experiences of the saints within the Church, recognizing their testi-

monies as a source of inspiration for our students preparing for ministry in the Church.

Our academic publications, notably our journal ‘Forum Theologicum,’ are dedicated to exploring the phenomenon of holiness and exploring the legacy of theologians again *from the first kind*. I sincerely believe that this focus will not hinder our periodical from being included in the Web of Science or Scopus database starting next academic year.

In the realm of international engagement, our faculty, in line with established European practices, has fostered collaborations with neighbouring theological faculties in Greece, Romania, and North Macedonia. Additionally, we maintain enduring connections with universities in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Slovakia and Norway. Notably, our faculty members are actively involved in a collaborative project for the preservation of church cultural heritage, working alongside colleagues from Greece and Turkey.

Despite being part of a secular institution like the University of Sofia “St. Clement of Ochrid”, colleagues from the Faculty of Theology are actively working to establish a bridge between the Church and diverse segments of Bulgarian society, many of whom may perceive the Church with either mistrust or misunderstanding.

In this endeavour, the testimony of *the first kind of theologians*, formulated by St. Gregory Palamas, holds significant importance. **Why is it crucial?**

Because the aim of theological education is not merely to instruct students on what to think and how to think, but rather to open their eyes to the profound encounter between God and humanity, referred to in the Church as **sacraments**. Consequently, the mission of our theological education extends beyond imparting knowledge. It challenges students to introspect, observe the world around them, and be captivated by its beauty—a beauty ordained by God’s wisdom. So, we do not stay away from environmental issues either.

However, this can only occur if the person contemplating God’s creation, whether within oneself or in the surrounding world, does so *through the exercise of free will and the power of choice*. **Salvation is not achieved through coercion**. As Christ declares in the *Gospel according to John* (8:32), “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Perhaps this is where freedom belongs in a secular university. It gives everyone a responsibility towards his salvation.

*In conclusion*, we can summarize that education within our programs serves as an invitation to marvel at and appreciate creation, fostering an environment for free expression and the cultivation of meaningful relationships with both fellow humans and God. This, naturally, presupposes the formation of a communal bond among the students within our faculty. Beyond the academic chapel, their shared identity as students creates a community not solely grounded in common interests, as seen in Law or Business Departments, but also rooted in shared perspectives on the world and the meaning of life.

This shared ethos extends to virtues such as morality, devotion, and solidarity—a dedication to their colleagues, sisters, and brothers. In essence, it embodies Christ’s teaching that “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s soul for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

Thank you for your attention.

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