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PROJECT:

NARRATE: DIGITAL RECORDING AND DOCUMENTATION OF ECCLESIASTICAL CULTURAL TREASURES IN MONASTERIES AND TEMPLES¹

(the Project Activities in Bulgaria)

The project was initiated by a group of scientists from the *Aristotle University of Thessaloniki* in 2022. It was later joined by scientists from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski,” the Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Turkey, the Hellenic Open University, and the German IT company Cognitiv Ex. The project’s activities are focused on the region of Thrace, which spans Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece. Since Late Antiquity, this region has been the object of the mission of the Church, resulting in a vast Christian cultural heritage.

The head of the project is the professor of innovation at the University of Thessaloniki and its deputy rector, Prof. Efstratios Stylianidis. Associate Professor Svetoslav Ribolov, Deputy Dean of the Theological Faculty of Sofia University, is in charge of the Bulgarian group, and Prof. Eva Sharlak, Dean of the Department of Archaeology of Koch University, is the head of the Turkish group.”

From the very beginning, the organizers of the project focused on a

¹ See <https://www.narrateproject.eu/>

completely new concept in the digitization of cultural church heritage. Instead of this process being carried out by civil servants, academics, and museum workers, the **aim of the team's work** is to train and prepare church employees to digitally process the heritage themselves and to decide what and which elements of the church heritage under their guardianship should share online. **Second**, but no less important, is the electronic cataloguing of ecclesiastical artifacts so that they are not subject to theft and raids by treasure hunters and antiquity dealers.

To achieve the set goal, the project started with a survey and engagement of the church officials themselves in the identified dioceses in Thrace. In Bulgaria, these are three dioceses: Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, and Sliven. Assoc. Prof. Ribolov led the effort in the Plovdiv diocese, Assoc. Prof. Naydenov, Dean of the Theological Faculty, in the Stara Zagora diocese, and Assoc. Prof. Karavalchev in the Diocese of Sliven. In Bulgaria alone, about 100 people were surveyed. They had to indicate in the detailed questionnaire how they envisioned an electronic platform for the digital description of church values. The total number of questions was over 50, and the possibilities to choose different types of artefacts exceeded 150. The list was compiled by Professor of Liturgical Theology Fr. Chrysostom Nassis and completed by team participants.

At a later stage, the construction of the electronic platform was started by the German company Cognitive Ex. An international conference was organized in Sofia under the leadership of the Faculty of Theology, bringing together more than 40 participants working on different aspects of the digitization of ecclesiastical values from the Orthodox world. Scholars from Bulgaria, Greece, the USA, Italy, Turkey, Germany, and Lebanon met and exchanged valuable ideas and experiences in this new field of theological scholarship.

Training manuals in electronic form are currently being developed to assist church workers who wish to train themselves to digitize church valuables and to work with the electronic platform developed by the project. This activity is under the direction of Principal Assistant Dr. Polina Spirova. In September, an online seminar is planned to train 90 church employees and clerics to acquire basic skills in capturing in a photograph, describing, and processing electronic data on such objects.

The aim of the project is to increase e-literacy among the clergy and to

support the dioceses in preserving and protecting their inherited church artefacts. They may also, at their discretion, display church relics on the Internet. If certain ethical obstacles arise, they may decide for themselves whether or not to proceed with such promotion. This depends entirely on their local ecclesial context and the discretion of the local bishop.

Putting such electronic tools and skills in the hands of the clergy will free them from a number of conflict situations with museum workers and other Ministry of Culture officials.