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Dear Colleagues,

Report on Pavol Bargár, *Embodied Existence: Our Common Life in God* (Cascade, 2023) for Charles University, Prague

Pavol Bargár’s monograph, *Embodied Existence: Our Common Life in God* interweaves six concepts – story, body, imagination, transformation, relationality, and feast – in order to fill out a vision of the corporate and corporeal divine “kin-dom” or “comm/unity.” The author argues that the gospel of Jesus Christ intends that “our common life in God” is both material and spiritual and that it includes not only God and humanity but the whole creation. Each of the six chapters develops one of these concepts and at the same time illustrates it with reference to contemporary film and fiction. In successive chapters, the reader is introduced to recent shifts in both theology and missiology: the narrative turn in which theological propositions are secondary and constrained by the biblical story; the turn to the body as shown in both a holistic and a communal understanding of salvation; the post-structural attention to culture as something created by human imagination and at the same time challenged by the gospel; the expansion of the transformation brought by the gospel to include whole context and the whole creation – not only humanity; the interest in relationality and identity that links trinitarian theology and human personhood; and the affirmation of diversity to which the response is hospitality and inclusivity.

The first main chapter lays down a method of inter- rather than intra-textuality on the basis that God is creator of all, including every culture and community. Therefore, other stories, besides Christian ones, constitute Christian identity and image of God. That the gospel is constantly rethought and reinvigorated by interaction with diverse stories, is the justification for including stories from secular literature and versions of the gospel that are contextualized for non-European cultures. The result is an intercultural theology that includes insights from Latin America (Isasi-Diaz, Segundo, Costas, De La Torre), Asia (CS Song, Manchala), and Africa (Tutu, Jennings).

That the Christian story is acted out in the flesh by Jesus himself and in ritual and habitual practices justifies another aspect of the method, namely, the book’s attention to drama, in fiction and film, to show how the gospel is embodied in the lives of individuals and communities. These range from the German “Wings of Desire” to “The Lord of the Rings,” and the recent Korean movie *Parasite*. In this way, the work integrates incarnation as affirming the contemporary material reality in all its dimensions – good or bad – with resurrection – the imagined future

bodily hope – by centering embodiment, as in the title, as definitive of human experience, and by expanding embodiment in terms of the divine invitation to live in global community and commune with all life. Much theological material on embodiment is from a philosophical, psychological or spirituality perspective; it may be concerned with personhood, ritual, or ethics. However, this work expands embodiment to both the global community and the creation, making it social and inclusive of the non-human. Its dual use of contextualization and imagination, together with its introduction of a world Christianity perspective, foregrounds some of the socio-political, economic, and ecological issues of the majority world. It includes the whole body of Christ, attends to material needs, and has a sense of mission that is liberational and integral. Suffering and pain, disability, torture, vulnerability, and woundedness are all included in the image of God that is the human body. Both incarnation and resurrection are woven together in the image of the feast that brings out key themes of the book in that the feast is relational, bodily, hospitable, egalitarian, life-giving, and a sign of joy in this world and the world to come.

The theological approach is postmodern in its use of story rather than foundations, its interculturality, its holism, and its focus on identity and diversity. It continues a Protestant and European trajectory of philosophical and theological development. However, its Protestantism is ecumenical. Although leading Protestant theologians are cited (e.g., Moltmann, Ford, Gorringer, Tanner, Lindbeck), the author practices what he preaches about the strengths of diversity by receiving from theologians in diverse ecclesial and geographical contexts; moreover, the work is inclusive with respect to gender. It does well to reference both the countercultural and orthodox as well as the progressive and liberal wings of contemporary Western theology. Important influences from other traditions are Catholic (including Bevens, Loughlin, Cavanaugh) and Orthodox (including Zizioulas). Two documents from the World Council of Churches – “Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology” (Faith and Order, 2005) and “Together toward Life” (WCC, 2013) – are employed to flesh out the author’s ecumenical vision.

Part of the original contribution of this book is that two Central and Eastern European voices less often heard are introduced and used extensively: the Czech, Milan Balabán, and Daniela Augustine, originally from Bulgaria. From Balabán, an Old Testament scholar, the author derives his theology of transformation that involves exercise of imagination, courage and affirmation of life through faith in the God of Truth who represents both unity and diversity. Augustine’s Pentecostal approach to hospitality and flourishing is cited throughout the volume as she portrays creation as an expression of God’s love and brings together Spirit and matter for social transformation. An addition to these two sources, the work is distinctive in its inclusion of perspectives from missiology and intercultural theology (e.g., Bevens, Gruber, Kirk) and in its explicit use of the word “mission” in describing the way Christians participate in the furtherance of “our common life in God.”

The book is carefully crafted. Key words are clearly defined and the themes of each chapter are integrated throughout the text. The argument is sustained and brought to a satisfying conclusion. The receptive ecumenism of the work is impressive in that it shows wide reading and willingness to hear diverse voices. However, the interaction borders in places on the eclectic. In his desire to affirm others, the author tends to synthesise rather than engage and critique. His inclination to

inclusivity makes him over-eager in places to coopt others for his point of view. For example, when propounding an open theological approach, it is not clear if this openness is to the future, and therefore some form of process theology, or whether the openness is to others in the present. However, criticality is in play in the treatment of George Lindbeck's work that, while useful for the author's embrace of story, does not suit his emphasis on the inclusion of diverse views. Greater critical engagement elsewhere would enhance and deepen the meaning of diversity by highlighting differences and theological challenges. As far as the argument is concerned, the ecological dimensions of the theme of embodiment, the work of Christ, and the common life could be more fully developed, especially as these are hinted at in several places where human-non-human unity is referred to. However, the above shortcomings are minor when the achievement of the book as a whole is considered. It integrates a wide range of sources – philosophical, artistic, and theological – to make a compelling case for the material interconnectedness of human life in community and with diverse others, and to ground this theologically in the image of the body of Christ as revealed in incarnation and resurrection. The result sets an agenda for further attention to the bodily dimensions of human existence in the church and its mission.

On the basis of this substantial work, I have no hesitation in recommending that the candidate be allowed to proceed with the habilitation.

Sincerely,

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