

Message from Bartholomeos I, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople

Bartholomeos I

15th International Ecumenical Conference

The Transfiguration of the Lord, therefore, can constitute for all a beginning so that we transform

*The Very Reverend Father Enzo Bianchi,
Prior of the Monastic Community of Bose,
The Grace, Peace and Mercy of our Saviour Jesus Christ!*

It is with great paternal joy that we were informed of the organization of the XV Conference which will be held at Bose in the month of September, on the subject of the Transfiguration of our Saviour in Orthodox spiritual tradition. It is a continuation of the long and arduous endeavour which your dearest Community has undertaken to examine in depth various subjects of Orthodox spirituality and to make use of the treasures of this tradition, with the goal of mutual edification and spiritual profit.

For this reason, through the representative of our Mediocrity and of our most Holy Church of Constantinople, the Very Reverend brother Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, we hail the start of this Conference praying that the Transfigured Lord may bestow upon it His blessing and may lead it to a good conclusion and may grant to all the distinguished participants the plenitude of His Light, without which it is impossible to comprehend an event like His Transfiguration, which is divine and strikes fear.

The choice of topic for your Conference this year appears all the more felicitous, since the Transfiguration occupies a central position in the life of our Church and since its spiritual exploration can be decisive for understanding the truths of our faith and for the spiritual path of each believer towards God.

At the same time our Mediocrity wishes to focus on two dangers that lurk in any attempt to approach and touch the Transfigured Lord.

The first danger lies in our arrogant assurance and our bold desire to see the Transfigured Lord and the uncreated light that shone on Mount Thabor. The desire to embrace the mystery of the Transfiguration and to penetrate its depths as if it were an object of scientific understanding or intellectual knowledge. In this case it is not possible to encounter the Lord in the inaccessible light of His Divinity, since this gift cannot be granted to us without our participation in His suffering. St Paul could proclaim that "the sufferings we now endure bear no comparison with the splendour, as yet unrevealed, which is in store for us" (Rom. 8:18), because he devoted all his life "suffering for Christ".

There is no other way for us, as Church Fathers constantly tell us, but to relive inside us all that happened in the life of the God-man who undertook all our likeness in Him except for sin. If He was persecuted, we too shall be persecuted; if the Lord was crucified, we too need to be crucified, so that we may be glorified as He was glorified, be transfigured as He was transfigured, be resurrected as He was resurrected. If we want to follow in the footsteps of His three select disciples who went up on Mount Thabor, we must follow the footsteps of the Master who walks towards Calvary. "Those who fervently wish to obtain the divine charisms and thirst to partake in the expectations prepared for the saints," writes St Cyril of Alexandria in his Homily on the Transfiguration, "gladly accept the struggle for the love of Christ" and instead of unrewarded procrastination prefer a life of glory.

"Come, therefore, let us also climb up the mountain where Christ shone, to see things from there on high!" orders the fervent herald of Grace and Light, St Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica (Homily on the Transfiguration of the Lord). But he hastens to add: "Or rather, if we are ready and have become worthy of such a day, He himself, the Word of God will lift us there at the opportune moment". All the might of our desire should, according to Father Sofronij Sacharov of blessed memory (Discourse on the Transfiguration of the Lord), be oriented solely in "obeying irreproachably and without fault the orders of God" (1 Tim. 6. 14). This is the way to understand the marvellous and supernatural event of the Transfiguration which is described with such simplicity in the Gospels. It is not we, who with our own mind can understand the mystery of the "transformation of mortals" but it will be the Lord who, if we renounce the works of darkness, will introduce us to His marvellous mysteries.

The second danger which often emerges is that we let ourselves be overcome with fear before we even start out on the path that leads to Mount Thabor. The greatness of God's gift should not discourage us. The false modesty which makes us say that "these things are not for us" goes against the promise of the Lord who says: "the man who comes to me I shall not turn away!" (John, 6. 37). We should not therefore consider the manifestation of the "splendour" of the Godhead on Mount Thabor as something solely reserved for the select, but we must retain that all of us without exception, independently of age, sex, social class, inheritance and provenance, are invited to the same perfection as that to which the Lord invited his three disciples. We are all asked to observe the same commandments that the Apostles obeyed and we must recognize that the Lord "to this very day has not ceased nor will He ever cease to bestow the very same gift to all who follow Him with all their hearts" (Fr Sofronij).

The Transfiguration of the Lord, therefore, can constitute for all a beginning so that we transform our life in a life that is incorruptible and divine. Until we have made ourselves worthy of the vision of the magnificent glory of the Godhead, remorse will not cease, as the Church Fathers assure us. But if we grieve and repent, if we recognize our insignificance and cry like St Gregory Palamas: "Lord, illuminate my darkness!", we are sure that we shall be heard and that the inaccessible light "will shine on us sinners".

It is therefore with these reflections and sentiments that we congratulate the beloved brothers of the Holy Community of Bose for offering this occasion to examine in depth the marvellous event of the Transfiguration, we bestow upon them our paternal good wishes and our patriarchal blessings and furthermore, firmly believing that the ongoing organization by the said Community of conferences like the present one fruitfully contributes to the realization of the unity of all Christians, we express justified praise and pray that the munificent Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who on Mount Thabor illuminated us with the inaccessible light of the tri-solar Godhead, be with all dearest participants of this conference. Amen.

Constantinople, 6 August 2007

Bartholomeos I, fervent suppliant to God