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Bose, 12 settembre 2011

XIX International Ecumenical Conference

on Orthodox spirituality

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THE WORD OF GOD

IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Bose, Wednesday 7 - Saturday 10 September 2011

"If God had not wanted to narrate Himself to us, nothing in creation would have been capable of speaking about Him," says Ephrem the Syrian in one of his hymns (*On the faith,* 44, 7). God reveals Himself to man, but remains hidden: He awaits man's response. Scripture reveals God and at the same time initiates the road that man takes in his heart to seek and find God, to listen and respond to His Word; this is also the itinerary of the spiritual life.

"The Word of God in the spiritual life" was the theme on which Biblical scholars, patrologists, theologians, and representatives of the various Orthodox Churches, of the Catholic Church, and of the Churches of the Reform have reflected during the four days of intensive study and fraternal exchanges of the *19th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox spirituality* (Bose, 7–10 September 2011). The symposium, opened by the addresses of the prior of Bose, **Enzo Bianchi,** and of metropolitan **Chrysostomos of Messenia** of the Orthodox Church of Greece (*The Bible in liturgical celebration*) and concluded with the papers of metropolitan **Elpidophoros of Bursa** (Patriarchate of Constantinople) on *Sacred Scripture in the spiritual life* and of metropolitan **Ilarion of Volokolamsk,** president of the Department for External Affairs of the Patriarchate of Moscow, on *The importance of the Bible for Orthodox theology*.

In the Orthodox tradition, as many speakers have acknowledged, the unity of Sacred Scripture and exegesis in the Spirit is fundamental. The prayerful assimilation of the Word of God in the course of Tradition, understood as a continual work of the Spirit, who reveals the mystery of Christ, is brought about in the liturgy, in the Christian's personal prayer, in the various forms of the monastic tradition. The principle of a spiritual reading of the Bible is summed up, as patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople recalls in his message to the Conference, by the monk Mark of the fifth century: "He who is humble in his thoughts and occupied in the spiritual work, when he reads the Holy Scriptures, he applies everything to himself". Taking up a famous image of abba Poemen, the patriarchs expresses the hope that the encounter with the living Word of God, like the water that drop by drop wears away the rock, may verse after verse transform "our existence into living cells of Christ's Body". The problems chosen for discussion this year, observes in his turn patriarch Kirill of Moscow in his message, "ask us to reflect on the very foundations of being Christian," and invite all "to turn our mind's eye to Sacred Scripture," so that, according to the example of the holy fathers, "the reading of Sacred Scripture may reinvigorate the observance of the Lord's commandments and the following of Christ. Obedience to the Word of God contained in Scripture, "loved equally in the East and in the West", is also the way for "renewing the commitment of spiritual communion" among Christians, as pope Benedict XVI expresses it in the telegram sent through the Secretary of State, cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. "The encounter with Sacred Scripture, understood as a spiritual event, hence a true encounter with the Word of the living God," wrote cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian unity, can bring important fruit in the sphere of relations among Christians of different Churches and ecclesial

communities."

Numerous greetings arrived, among them those of patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch, Irinej, patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Daniel, patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, archbishop Hieronymos II of Athens, Karekin II, catholicos of all Armenians, cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, , archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Sluck, bishop Mariano Crociata, general secretary of the Italian Bishops' Conference, Olav Fikse, Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches.

Among the representatives of the various Churches who took the floor during the work of the conference we wish to mention metropolitans **Georges of Mount Lebanon** and **Paul of Aleppo** (Patriarchate of Antioch), bishops **Kliment of Krasnoslobodsk** (Patriarchate of Moscow), **Porfirije of Jegar** (Serbian Orthodox Church), **Grigorij of Veliko T?rnovo** and **Boris of Agatonica** (Bulgarian Orthodox Church), **Serafim** (Orthodox Church of America), cardinal **Angelo Sodano**, former Secretary of State and dean of the Sacred College, bishop **Mansueto Bianchi** of Pistoia, president of the commission on ecumenism and dialogue of the Italian Bishops' Conference, bishop **Gabriele Mana** of Biella, our local ordinary, bishop **Arrigo Miglio** of Ivrea, secretary of the Piedmont Bishops' Conference, don **Andrea Palmieri,** official of the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian unity, father **Constantin Preda** (Romanian Orthodox Church), delegate of patriarch Daniel, father **Ruben Zargaryan** (Apostolic Armenian Church), delegate of the catholicos of all Armenians Karekin II, archimandrite **Athenagoras (Fasiolo)** (Orthodox Archdiocese of Italy and Malta), canon **Jonathan Goodall** (Church of England), delegate of archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, and **Michel Nseir,** delegate of the secretary general of the World Council of Churches Olav Fikse Tveit.
The course of the conference began by letting itself be guided by the spiritual comprehension of Scripture in the fathers. The authority of Scripture in the spiritual life is a constant in authors like John Chrysostom (*The Word for the life of the people of God: saint John Chrysostom,* fr Dimitrij Jurevi?), Ephrem the Syrian (*Saint Ephrem the Syrian, singer of the Word of God,* Sebastian Brock), in the fathers of the desert (*The Bible in the spiritual experience of the fathers of the desert,* Luigi d'Ayala Valva), in Gregory the Great (*Lectio divina as contemplation of the Word: saint Gregory the Great,* Photios Ioannidis), up to an author so imbued with the spirit of the fathers as was Theophan the Recluse (*Exegesis and spiritual life: saint Theophan the Recluse comments the Psalms,* Natalija A. Suchova). Each of these authors — the Greek, Syriac, Egyptian, Latin, and Russian worlds — reminds us of the necessity of meditating on Scripture.

The conference then posed the question how the exegesis of the fathers, who used the instruments of analysis and comprehension of the text of their times can be rethought today and integrated with the historical-critical approach, without being prejudiced in advance. This highly topical problem was taken up from various angles in the papers of Daniel Ayuch (*The fathers and Biblical hermeneutics*), John Fotopoulos (*Historical-critical exegesis and of the Bible and Orthodoxy*), Anatolij A. Alekseev (*Spiritual renewal and Biblical studies in Russia at the turn of the nineteenth century*). This is not a matter of academic discussion, but a question vital for the future of the various Churches, as became clear during the ample debate, presided by father Michel van Parys, dedicated to *The Bible in Orthodox tradition yesterday and today,* which offered a key to the ecclesial, missionary, and eschatological reading of the Bible (with bishops Porfirije of Jegar, Boris of Agatonica, Kliment of Krasnoslobodsk, professor Petros Vassiliadis, and dr. Michel Nseir as participants).

The relation between exegesis and spiritual life was developed and compared in the round table on *The Bible in monastic experience today,* presided by br Adalberto Mainardi, with contributions by hegumenos **Iakovos of Petraki,** archimandrite **Sergij of New Valaam,** igumen **Petr Meš?erinov** of the Danilov monastery in Moscow, fr **Cesare Falletti,** prior of the Cistercian monastery *Dominis Tecum,* fr **Christopher Savage** of New Skete in the United States. The presence at the conference of numerous Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant monks and nuns, who came from monasteries in Greece, Russia, Syria, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Finland, Mount Sinai, Ukraine, Armenia, Ethiopia, Egypt, United States, Belgium, England, France, and Italy, was an encouraging sign for measuring the urgency of a renewed presence of Scripture not only in the monk's and Christian's personal piety, but in every area of community life. A real and true "pedagogy" for discerning the Word of God is needed, which is often very difficult because of the lack of authentic spiritual guides.

Many of the problems raised in the course of the discussions found an echo in the two presentations of the final day, which traced an ideal synthesis of the conference's work. "There can be no true and authentic spirituality and Orthodox conduct of life," declared metropolitan Elpidophoros of Bursa, "if it is not based on Sacred Scripture and inspired by it; Sacred Scripture constitutes the fount, the principle, and the foundation of what is called 'Orthodox spirituality'. Orthodox spirituality does not consist in fine ideas, sublime thoughts, and pleasing reflections; it is rather a balanced and authentic ecclesial ethos, a pure style of life, an upright behavior, a definite attitude and conduct of life… Spirituality is the grace of a life in the Holy Spirit; it is a life purified by the Holy Spirit after a struggle that aims at purity." From this derives a particular mission for the Church: that of "approaching human being amiably in order to teach them how to love and how to be loved. Each one of us, we read in the *Sayings* of the desert fathers, is called to become 'as fire', to touch the world with the mystical power of the Word of God, so that… the world too may say, 'someone touched me' (Mt 9,20)."

This requirement to join listening to the Word of God to listening to contemporary humanity found ample convergence in the talk of metropolitan Ilarion of Volokolamsk, who declared "clearly erroneous" the opinion according to which "the Orthodox Christian should refuse Biblical criticism because it derives from the studies of the Protestant world". "Historical-critical studies help to reconstruct the historical context of Scripture, so understand better how the words of Scripture were understood by its first readers and hearers." "If at the base of the postulates themselves of modern biblical scholarship the spiritual interpretation of Scripture, fundamental for the holy fathers, remains outside the field of vision, "it is necessary to recall that the historical-critical method and spiritual Biblical hermeneutics "look at the Bible from two different points of view," but "these points of view are not in contrast one with the other". "Orthodox Tradition understands Scripture as a foundation," continued metropolitan Ilarion. "The Orthodox Christian should know the Bible and live by it. To be an Orthodox Christian without knowing the Bible is absurd and misleading." From this arises the need for the Russian Orthodox Church of a new translation that "takes into account the results of modern scholarship and uses "the entire range of means of Russian classical literary language to transmit the beauty and variety of Biblical texts… without departing from church tradition."

The conference program was drawn up in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches by a scientific committee presided by the prior of Bose, **Enzo Bianchi,** and having among its members fr. **Hervé Legrand** (Paris), fr. **Michel van Parys** (Chevetogne), and **Antonio Rigo** (University of Venice), with the intent of favoring the encounter between different Churches and spiritual traditions of East and West. A fruit of this encounter was the possibility "to bring to light some tesserae," as br Sabino Chialà put it in the name of the scientific committee, "of a mosaic that remains to a large extent hidden: the mosaic of Scripture", in which, however, "is revealed to us the face of Him whose disciples we say we are and wish to be: the Son of God, whom the Father has sent to us to make us in our turn sons in the Holy Spirit."

The 20th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality, the topic of which will be announced after the meeting of the scientific committee in November 2011, will be held from 5 to 8 September 2012. It is foreseen that in June 2012 will be published the Acts of this 19th Conference, while those of the 18th, *Comunione e solitudine,* are already available.

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