Research project and scientific committee

Print
Print

leteore, GR (fresco, Dormition of Saint Ephrem, detail)

Bose, 4-7 September 2013

The ages of the spiritual life

XXI International Ecumenical Conference

in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches

The parable of the sower and the seed can illustrate what in the last analysis remains the mystery of God's love for his Church and its children

---

XXI International Ecumenical Conference
on Orthodox spirituality

THE AGES OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Bose, Wednesday 4 - Saturday 7 September 2013
in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches

Almost fifty years ago the famous Russian émigré philosopher & theologian Paul Evdokimov published in Paris a book that marked all those in the West who wanted to know and understand better the spirituality of the Orthodox Church. This was *Les âges de la vie spirituelle, des Pères du désert à nos jours* (Paris 1964). The 21st International ecumenical conference on Orthodox spirituality, which will be held in Bose on 4–7 September 2013, has chosen this title for its theme.

Life in Christ is the gift that God the Father gives to those who believe in his Son Jesus, Christ and Lord, and who accept the graces of the sacraments of Christian initiation. The believer, pilgrim towards the Kingdom, moved by the Holy Spirit, enters into a dynamism of spiritual growth and interiorization. This dynamism carries him towards the accomplishment that saves him from sin and death and lets him taste already in this life the joy of salvation. The gift of divine life, however, requires the believer's synergy.

The parable of the sower and the seed can illustrate what in the last analysis remains the mystery of God's love for his Church and its children (cf. Mk 4,1–20; Mt 13,1–23; Lk 8,4–15; Jn 12,23–25). The seed is the Word of God. Jesus Christ is the sower who sows generously, without excluding anybody. The ground, however, is not all of the same quality. The believer must work to purify the ground of his heart. He must consent to live with Christ on the cross and to lose his life for the love of God and of his neighbor. He is called to follow Christ in his passage to the Father. The spiritual struggle in an ever greater obedience to the Word of God is the daily bread that he eats with patience (cf. Lk 8,15).

The coming conference will help us to examine more deeply some essential aspects of this road along the stages of Christian conversion.

The Old Testament prophets Moses and Elias follow the tortuous roads of their mission, of their calling to the vision of God, with abandonment to God's will and contestation of this will. The apostle St Paul, seized by the risen Christ, runs towards him in order to become conformed to him (cf. Phil 3). Christ must live in him, and every Christian is called to grow in his existence towards the full maturity of Christ (cf. Eph 4,13).

The great tradition will be called on to give its testimony on the stages of the spiritual life and on the trials to which it is exposed. Gregory of Nyssa discerned in the figures of Moses and of the spouse of the Song of Songs examples of the infinite progress of the Christian faithful and ascetic, at the same time firmly anchoring spiritual ascension in the sacramental life. John Climacus in the seventh century recapitulates the already traditional teaching on the three stages of monastic conversion: beginners, those progressing, and the perfect. He orders them according to the three forms of monastic life, cenobites, anchorites, and hermits, while at the same time pointing out their relative nature. Isaac the Syrian, in the heart of the Syriac spiritual tradition, likewise traces the monk's way towards purity of heart and contemplation. In the West, in the Latin world, St Benedict of Nursia presents the life of the monk in a community of brethren as kenosis, following Christ, abasement that opens the door of paschal beatitude. The Philocalia of Nicodemus

of the Holy Mountain and of Paisij Velychkovs'kyj brings together a large florilegium of spiritual writings from past centuries and thus sketches symphonically the stages of spiritual growth. It is nevertheless necessary to recall that the Fathers of monastic life (Antony the Great, Theodore Studite…) recognized that certain married men and women living the Christian life in the world were more holy in God's eyes than they.

After recalling the intrinsic and always valid good of the spiritual life and of the Church's sacraments, it will be necessary to examine the concrete ways of initial monastic formation today, of the long years of perseverance with their ups and downs, of the monk on his way to deification. It will not be possible to do this without also looking at the ecclesial and personal trials that we are called upon to traverse. The correspondence between John Chrysostom in exile and the deaconess Olympias speaks eloquently to us of the struggle against discouragement (*athumìa*). Tixon of Zadonsk reflects on the physical weakening provoked by age and the renewal of the interior man. Can the Orthodox monastic tradition provide us with useful indications on the relation between the successive ages of human life (cf. Jm 3,6) and the ages of the spiritual life? What relation is there between youth and spiritual fervor (cf. Diadochus of Photica), between middle age and service to one's neighbor (cf. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, II), between old age and Christian hope, in sickness and death? These are so many questions that will require attention.

The great Biblical and patristic tradition ought to guide us still today. But we cannot but ask ourselves how and by whom it can and should be transmitted to our contemporaries who believe and/or are seeking sense and God.

Bose, 5 November 2012

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE:

Enzo Bianchi (Bose)**, Lino Breda** (Bose)**, Sabino Chialà** (Bose), **Lisa Cremaschi** (Bose), **Hervé Legrand** (Parigi) **, Adalberto Mainardi** (Bose)**, Antonio Rigo** (Venezia)**, Luigi d'Ayala Valva** (Bose), **Michel Van Parys** (Chevetogne)

INFORMATION