Concluding Remarks

28th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality
ST. ISAAC OF NINEVEH
and His Spiritual Teaching

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in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches

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Concluding Remarks by br. Sabino Chialà, prior of Bose

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

metropolitans, bishops, monks and nuns, friends and guests,

We have now come to the end of this twenty-eighth International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality dedicated to “Saint Isaac of Ninive and his spiritual teaching”.

These have been intense days, for several reasons. This was a meeting awaited for a long time and that remained uncertain almost until the last moment and the context in which we have lived these days is complex and uncertain under various aspects.

The joy of coming together after a pause of three years, the rich variety of those present have made this meeting truly special. I believe I can say, having listened to many of you, that the choice of reducing the number of participants has created an atmosphere of intimacy, although the absence of some persons on account of the war in Ukraine has saddened us. The reading groups have likewise contributed to this atmosphere of intimacy and, as far as I have heard, have been appreciated by all.

This success, however, is due above all to “our” Isaac, to whose exceptional guidance we have entrusted ourselves during these four days of the conference. He has shown us once again his ability to break down every kind of barrier and to create communion. He is an ecumenical saint, as Sebastian Brock has brilliantly reminded us, the son of an epoch just as complex as ours, as we have realized from the account of the historical and ecclesiastical context in which he lived given by Paolo Bettiolo.

With this equipment we have begun to traverse Isaac’s writings, following a few of the most important and evocative strands of his thought. Bishop Benedict Vesa asked us to rediscover the theme of God’s infinite mercy for all of creation, which certainly constituted the heart of all of Isaac’s teaching, a love that man is not able to demean, to extinguish, to annul. It is Isaac’s firm conviction that our sin will never be stronger than God’s love. At times it will induce him to silence, because the God of the Bible respects our liberty, but it can never destroy or lessen the vehemence of that infinite love, which is expressed even by the Last Judgment.

Redemption and the cross, about which father Porphyrios Giorgi has spoken, are an eloquent reflection of this. The cross was motivated solely by love. Of course, God could have saved us in a different manner. But, for Isaac, he did not find a more eloquent manner of indicating how great is his love for mankind — this is the reason for the cross. This is why he allows his Son to suffer and die on the cross, so that those who who contemplate this mystery may understand to what point God loves his creature and desires its life in fullness.

Bishop Mar Emmanuel Yosip has spoken about the cross, central in the liturgy of the Syro-Oriental Church even today, the cross that, in the new economy, is the place on which the Shekinah reposes. God’s presence, which at one time reposed in the temple of Jerusalem, now reposes on the sign of the Father’s love manifested on the cross by the Son.

Maksim Kalinin led us into the interior geography of the human being as described by Isaac and into the united efforts of interior and exterior that characterizes his teaching. This vision, in obedience to Scripture, radically questions every dualistic vision that depreciates creation. The body is at the service of the heart and the heart is at the service of the body. The exterior cooperates with the interior that Isaac explores with great mastery, guiding us to the discovery of the interior senses.

In this vision, even the limits and the fragility that characterize the body contribute towards the spiritual journey. This was highlighted by Valentina Duca, who drew our attention to the grace of weakness to which Isaac frequently refers, a statement that may seem senseless, at least until the moment when we have personal experience of this. For Isaac,

grace works in a marvelous way especially in fragility, if this recognized, and leaves a gift of blessings. He invites us, therefore, to recognize it without fear, to live with it, not to cover it with the lie of our presumed force and perfection.

For this we need humility, which for Isaac, as Nestor Kavvadas has indicated, is nothing other than adhesion to our status as creatures. Humility is the reconciliation with one's limits, a pacified acceptance of our own finiteness. Not he who despises himself is humble, but he who ceases to pretend, who does not usurp the divinity that does not belong to him. That man is humble who lives reconciled to his status as creature, in the image of Christ who humbled himself upon becoming man.

Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony led us to discover another of the central themes in Isaac: the way of prayer, which through bodily efforts arrives at the free gift that the human being simply accepts full of wonder. This culmination is that Isaac calls, with a daring expression, "non-prayer". In this expression the negative "non" indicated that there is no longer human effort, but pure gift. The fruits of the struggles of prayer — necessary and indispensable struggles — are wonder and revelation, that is, the intuition by pure grace of the face of the Beloved.

A visible sign of the Spirit's gift during prayer are tears, about which father Agapie Corbu has spoken, guiding us through Isaac's reflections about this: from tears that flow from the conscience of those who suffer for having sinned against love, to those of joy, that overflow from a silent body, incapable of expressing in a different way the fullness that pervades it.

Marcel Pirard illustrated what Isaac recommends as the most important thing to his brothers in solitude: a way of asceticism through which the human being seeks to make his own the sentiments of God, in particular his love for every creature. The solitude of the cell is authentic not when it shows the bitter zeal of judging others, relying on its own supposed perfection, but when it shows a tender heart, becoming compassionate towards all of creation, that creation that is a sign of God's goodness, the first book that God offered man, and which awaits the final redemption, as Pablo Argárate has shown.

Finally, Chrysostomos Stamoulis has brought us to the topic of the importance of Isaac's message for today.

More than once during these days we have heard the question arise: what is the cause of Isaac's success today. How can a solitary wrote or dictated for other solitaries appear so contemporary for so many generations and in so many contexts and how can he be so eloquent for us and for our world? Perhaps it is because he speaks about his real experience, perhaps because he avoids every literary device, perhaps because his teaching is an act of conscious love on his part towards those who would read him and who feel welcomed in the bosom of his words of life… I believe that Isaac would agree in saying that only the words that arise from love are eloquent and always efficacious.

We have surely seen the power of communion that this father has been able to generate though the centuries and that we have seen also among us. The composition of our assembly has never been as variegated as this year: together with various representatives of the Catholic Church, there are persons of the Orthodox Churches, of three Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church, the Churches of the Reform, and the Anglican Church. And there are young persons and persons not so young… Isaac has been able not only to draw us here, but also to help us to discover the fraternity that unites us in spite of our divisions.

We can continue to ask about the reasons for the eloquence of his words… In the meanwhile, however, we cannot fail to see its effects on us, and note again how the words said by a solitary to solitaries remain eloquent for human beings of all times, conditions, and lands.

For this, as for many other things, at the end of the days of our conference, the sentiment that is uppermost in us is thanksgiving, first of all to the Lord, in whose name we have come together.

These thanks, then, are also to you, who have made our meeting possible, everyone through his part: the speakers for their wisdom and passion in making us participate in the treasures their research has uncovered; the representatives of the Churches who have made us experience the catholicity of the Church of Christ; the monks and nuns; those who are younger, to whom we confide the task of continuing to study and to love Isaac's wisdom; and each one of you…

And last, a very special thanks to those who have facilitated our mutual understanding: the interpreters who have worked hard, without giving up. A special thanks to Gavriil Pentzikis and Giovanni Bonavia, who have been giving their precious contribution for over twenty years now and have become a stable part of our conferences. Thanks too to Daniela Codarin, who has been helping us likewise for several years.

Together with them, heartfelt thanks to the technicians of Pass Audovideo, to Luciano Panzica and his collaborators, who are part of our conferences for about fifteen years by now, with laudable readiness and professionalism.

We hope to offer to you soon the Acts of this conference. In the meanwhile, we are thinking already about the theme of our next conference…

Once again, thank you and a safe trip back home.