The wisdom of the desert

29th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality
THE WISDOM OF THE DESERT:
The Sayings of the Fathers and Mothers

Monastero di Bose, 5-8 september 2023
in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches

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We are happy to announce this year's conference. The *Sayings* or *Apophthegmata of the Desert Fathers* are well known. Numerous editions and translations into European languages, as well as important studies and books on spirituality have made them known and appreciated.

Many persons, from all kinds of cultural and confessional background, come to them for their teachings and spiritual nourishment and admire their wisdom and their profound humanity.

Like the writings of Isaac of Nineveh, to whom last year's conference was dedicated, the *Sayings* have always been dear to the entire monastic tradition, and we too, from the beginnings of our community in Bose, have read, studied, translated, and commented them, and continue to do so, finding in them stimulus and nourishment for our life. So it was natural for the idea to arise to dedicate a conference specifically to the *Sayings,* so as to discuss them together and to share their riches with others.

Profound human wisdom and acute spiritual discernment emerge vividly from these sentences, which originally arose not as written texts, but as concrete words that spiritual fathers and mothers addressed to their disciples in the Egyptian desert. These words were pronounced in response to specific questions about salvation, which still arise in today's men and women. "Father, tell me: how can I be saved?" "Father, what should I do? I have fallen." "what should I do to please God?" "What is a monk's work?" "Pray for me!"

Short, incisive, profound, but also practical, as well as being often paradoxical or humorous, the *Sayings* are meant not so much to explain as to suggest. "Like the parables, they are explosive, and the place where the single fragments land after the explosion is different every time that the stories are recounted or read" (Columba Stewart).

Abba Anthony "said, 'A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, 'You are mad, you are not like us.'" ('Anthony 25)

Every time the abba's word sends the disciple, and with him the reader, to look deeper inside himself, so as to arrive gradually at personal discernment.

A brother asked Abba Poemen, "Is it better to speak or to be silent?" The old man said to him, "The man who speaks for God's sake does well; but he who is silent for God's sake also does well." (Poemen 147)

He also said, "A man may seem to be silent, but if his heart is condemning others he is babbling ceaselessly. But there may be another who talks from morning till night and yet he is truly silent; that is, he says nothing that is not profitable." (Poemen 27)

Amma Syncletica said, "In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire; at first they are choked by the smoke and cry, and by this means obtain what they seek (as it is said: *Our God is a consuming fire* [Heb. 12.24]): so we also must kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work."

As in the Bible, so also in the *Sayings* there are styles, ways of life, and modes of thought profoundly diverse, yet equally admitted.

The Scripture says, Abraham was hospitable and God was with him; Elijah loved h?sychia and God was with him; David was humble and God was with him. So whatever you observe your soul wishing to do for God, do it—and watch over your heart. (Syst. I,18)

For the desert fathers every act, every situation, every observance, every virtue, every practice have value not in themselves, but according to the “measure” of a person’s spiritual progress and interior motives, that is, according to the measure that everything is judged to be in conformity with God’s will and lived “knowingly”.

The *Sayings,* hence leave to each person the trouble of resolving and composing the tensions that are found in them and are also found in the life of every Christian and every monk. They are intended to be models to which the monk and the reader are to conform themselves, and rather than being a trove of experiences to make use of, they are like the pieces of a mosaic never fixed for good, but continually being recomposed in one’s life.

The place of origin of most of the *Sayings* is Egypt, the land that from the times of Anthony saw the first flowering of Christian monasticism. There these words were preserved by the first generations of disciples. When the barbarian incursions at the beginning of the fifth century and perhaps also a certain decadence led many monks to quit those regions, the fear of losing this precious inheritance persuaded some to put it in writing. In this way, in Palestine, arose the large Greek collections (the Alphabetic and the Systematic series), which later were translated into other languages and spread throughout various regions and ecclesiastical traditions, being at the same time enriched with new texts.

Our Conference, which as always tries to view its subject both from the academic and from the ecclesial and monastic perspective and from both a historical-literary and theological and spiritual approach, intends to explore some of the main themes of the spiritual teachings of the *Sayings* (the role of Scripture, prayer, spiritual paternity, charity, spiritual discernment, hospitality…). This should cause to emerge not only the common lines, but also the various perspectives that constitute the wealth and fecundity of these texts.

The presentation of several representative figures (Abba Poemen, Amma Syncletica) will permit one to catch the particular tone of some voices of this diverse chorus.

The talks will also examine why this synthesis of human wisdom and evangelical radicalism has survived the centuries in a constant and uninterrupted manner and why even today it is able to stimulate and to inspire, always in a fresh and vivid way, especially monastics (and among these, particularly the monks who still live in Egypt in the Coptic monasteries, direct heirs of the fathers of the desert), but also generally the men and women of our times.

This year again we will continue the experiment begun last year, and, apart from the talks, there will be an entire afternoon session dedicated to a reading of texts in small groups. The participants, thus, will have a chance to read and discuss some of the *Sayings* under the guidance of moderators in various languages.

We hope that this Conference, which will host scholars, bishops, monks and nuns, and laypeople from various countries and Churches, besides delving into the spiritual treasures of the Orthodox tradition, will be an occasion of meeting, sharing, and fraternal communion among all Christians.

The brothers and sisters of the Bose Monastery

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The conference is open to all. Also this year, due to the difficulties of movement from some Eastern European countries, simultaneous translation will be ensured only in Italian, English and Greek. **Arrivals are expected on Monday, 4 September; departures on Friday 8 September in the afternoon or Saturday, 10 September in the morning.** Accommodation will be at the Monastery of Bose. **To register for the Conference, it is necessary to call the Secretariat and send the registration form via email before the 1st of June and by 25 August 2022**, until all places have been filled. The Secretariat is available for any further information.