Opening address

Discorso di apertura

Conclusions

2nd september 2025
by the prior br. Sabino Chialà

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,
metropolitans, bishops, monks and nuns, friends and guests,
on behalf of my brothers and sisters, and on my own behalf, I would like to welcome each of you to this thirty-first edition of the International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality, which we have chosen to dedicate to the figure and teachings of Antony the Great, 'the father of monks'.

Father of monks... but not only that, as shown by the tradition that has made him an inspiration for Christian life, and as shown by the fact that there are so many monks and nuns in this hall, but not only that... Antony is first and foremost a seeker of God and a disciple of the Lord. In fact, Athanasius, his famous biographer, says: "It was not written works, nor worldly wisdom, nor any art, but only love for God that made Antony famous" (*Life of Antony* = *VA* 93,4). For this reason, in the *Life* he is repeatedly referred to as: "the friend of God" (*VA* 4,4); 'the man of God' (*VA* 70,2; 71,1) and "the servant of God" (*VA* 85,5). He himself, in one of the apophthegms that have come down to us under his name, considers the bond of love with God as the mature fruit of his search, when he says: "I no longer fear God, but I love him because *love casts out fear* (cf. 1Jn 4:18)" (*Sayings* 32).

He arrived at this conclusion through an ever-deepening experience of Christ and the Holy Spirit, of whom he speaks repeatedly in the texts considered authentic (the *Sayings* and the *Letters*).

The figure of Christ, fully God and fully man, is central to Antony's spiritual experience. For Athanasius, he is the living image of the Nicene faith (of which we remember the 1700 years). Faith in God made man, who in his flesh and through the cross heals what Antony repeatedly calls the 'wound' that sin has carved into humanity and into the depths of every being (*Letters* 2:2; 3:2; 4:2.9; 5:2; 6:2). The created being has a wound engraved in its fibers, the pain of which Antony feels especially during the struggles to which the Enemy persistently leads him. God has sought to remedy that wound throughout the entire history of salvation, since the creation of the world. But only now, in the Son who came down into the flesh of humanity, does it find remedy.

Christ is also the one who instills strength in weakness; indeed, it is he who fights in those who remain firmly united to him. Antony experiences this in his weakness: he feels that it is not he who achieves victory, but Christ, to whom he remains bound through the bond of "faith". An expression that often recurs in Antony's writings is "faith in Christ". Here, "faith" does not refer to concepts, but to a profound relationship and trusting abandonment; it is an experience of communion that accompanies every moment of his existence. This is what he entrusts, in his last exhortation just before his death, to the two brothers he wanted by his side so that they could bury him: "Always breathe Christ and have faith in him" (*VA* 91,3). These few words are his testament and the heart of his Christian and monastic experience! Breathe Christ and have faith in him: make him your companion in every moment of your life and entrust yourself to him.

The other way in which Antony comes to learn and experience God's love is through the Holy Spirit. In his *Letters*, he often returns to speak of the Power that dwells and acts in human beings (*Letters* 1:2), which he calls "invisible fire" (*Letters* 3:3). We read in one of his *Letters*: "Lift up to God the hands of your heart, that is, the Spirit that acts in you, and beg God to give you the gift of his great invisible fire so that it may descend from heaven among you... Then you will see above the sea like the footsteps of a man who will bring you spiritual rain, the consolation of the Paraclete Spirit" (*Letters* 4:8).

The acquisition of the Holy Spirit, as Matta el-Meskin recalls, is for Antony the goal of Christian life.

Antony became an expert in all this by struggling... Athanasius recalls this again, recounting one of his many struggles: "Even at this moment, the Lord did not forget Antony's struggle and came to his aid. As he looked up, he saw that the roof was as if open and that a ray of light was descending upon him... Antony felt that the Lord was helping him and breathed a sigh of relief; freed from his pains, he asked the vision that had appeared to him: 'Where were you? Why did you not appear from the beginning to put an end to my suffering?' And a voice came to him: 'Antony, I was here! But I was waiting to see you fight; since you have resisted and not allowed yourself to be defeated, I will always be your help and I will ensure that your name is remembered everywhere' " (*VA* 10:1-3).

Antony will indeed be remembered everywhere, and with the title of "father of monks". But we might ask ourselves: why "father"? Antony is not a "father" because he is a founder or author of a rule. His "foundation" and the "rule" he left behind are his very life. Nor is he "father" because he was the first... In fact, his biographer emphasizes that he learned from others: from a hermit who lived not far from his home village (*VA* 3:3); from some ascetics whom he used to visit (VA 3:4). Jerome also recalls his encounter with Paul of Thebes, who was slightly older than Antony and therefore preceded him. Antony is not a "father", therefore, either because he founded or wrote, or because he preceded... He was a father because he was able to generate, with his life, the desire to follow the Lord in the monastic way. It is his generative

capacity that made him a “father”! A generative capacity that took on various forms.

First of all, that of care. Athanasius insists on this aspect (*VA* 15:1). He says that his words were like medicine (*VA* 56:2) and affirms: “Truly God had given him to Egypt as a doctor!” (VA 87:3). Antony behaves as a doctor and comforter, and for this reason he is capable of great humanity. This he had learned from Christ, traces of which are preserved in one of his apophthegms: "There was a man in the desert who hunted wild animals. One day he saw Abba Antony joking with his brothers and was scandalized. The elder, wanting to make him understand that sometimes one must indulge one's brothers, said to him, ‘Put an arrow in your bow and draw it.’ And he did so. He said to him, 'Draw it again', and he drew it. He said to him again, 'Draw it'. The hunter replied, 'If I draw it too far, the bow will break'. The elder said to him, 'So it is in the work of God. If we draw the bow too far with our brothers, they will soon break. It is therefore necessary, from time to time, to yield to our brothers'. At these words, the hunter was overcome with remorse and left, having received great benefit from the elder. And the brothers also returned to their dwellings strengthened" (*Sayings* 13).

He then shows his generative capacity by focusing on and pointing out what subsequent tradition will help to establish as the three pillars on which a healthy and balanced monastic life rests: *work, prayer and reading the Scriptures* (the triad of Benedict). Athanasius says again: "He worked with his own hands, for he had heard: “The sluggard shall not eat” (cf. 2 Thess 3:10). Part of his earnings he used to buy bread, part he distributed to those in need. He prayed continually, having learned that one must pray in private (cf. Mt 6:6), without ceasing (cf. 1 Thess 5:17). He was so attentive to his reading that he did not let anything from the Scriptures fall to the ground (cf. 1 Sam 3:19), but remembered everything, and his memory took the place of books" (*VA* 3,5-7).

He shows his fatherhood in the perseverance with which he sustained the struggle until his last breath, without backing down, without failing, fighting against all the suggestions of the Evil One, starting with the one that, significantly, the collection of *Sayings* places at the beginning of the series: the struggle against acedia, the evil par excellence of the monk (*Sayings* 1). He thus came to understand that temptation is not only unavoidable, but is the way to salvation (Sayings 5); and that the real struggle is fought within, in what biblical tradition calls “the heart”: "He said again: "Those who dwell in the desert and seek quiet are freed from three wars: that of the ear, that of the tongue, and that of the eyes. Only one remains: that of the heart" (Sayings 11).

He shows his fatherhood in his ability to start over every day, as Athanasius insistently says in the *Life* (*VA* 7,11-13; 18-19). The freedom to start again! Because it is a question of freedom... Inner freedom, which the reading of Scripture digs into Antony's heart. This is why he goes so far as to say that we monks ‘have the Scriptures and the freedom given to us by the Saviour’ (VA 26,4).

Freedom that he was able to demonstrate in various ways and on various occasions. Freedom in relation to his own choices and freedom in relation to the powerful.

In the first case, Antony chose the desert in an increasingly radical way, as his biographer recounts: from his home village to the tomb, to an abandoned fort, to the external desert and finally to the internal desert. But when the need arose for the good of the Church, Antony did not hesitate to go to Alexandria (*VA* 46; 69). In this way, he avoids making his choice absolute and shows himself to be free from that desire for solitude that will never abandon him.

He was also free from political authorities, at a crucial time when Christians still had to learn the right distance from political power. Athanasius recounts that the emperors (Constantine and his sons) “wrote to him as to a father and begged him to reply. But Antony did not think much of their letters, nor did he take pleasure in receiving them”. And, the biographer continues, "When they brought him the letters, he called the monks and said, 'Why are you surprised that an emperor writes to us? He is a man! Be surprised rather that God wrote the law for men and spoke to us through his Son' " (VA 81,1-3). In one of the *Sayings* attributed to him, the story is told in another way: "Once Abba Antony received a letter from Emperor Constantius inviting him to go to Constantinople, and he reflected on what he should do. So he said to his disciple, Abba Paul: 'Should I go?'. He replied: 'If you go, you will be called Antony; if you do not go, Abba Antony' " (*Sayings* 31).

His freedom and critical ability to reject any exploitation that could obscure the light of the Gospel is a message that is particularly relevant in our time!

In these days, we want to listen again to this teaching, having come here from all over, fulfilling the prophecy of Athanasius when he says: "People came to visit him even from foreign regions. And they, like all the others, after having benefited from his teaching, returned home as if accompanied by a father. Indeed, since his death, everyone, like fatherless orphans, finds consolation only in remembering him and in keeping his admonitions and exhortations" (*VA* 88,3).

We too are an expression of this universality: gathered here to listen again to Antony's message, for our present day, for our lives. Before giving the floor to the speakers, whom I thank on behalf of all of us for what they will share of their research, I would like to remember and thank all of you and the Churches which, through you, are present here to enrich our fraternity.

For the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we have among us Bishop Antony of Sinnada (from Boston), official representative of His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew, who has also sent us a message (available for reading); Metropolitan Kyrillos of Krinis, who will give us a presentation; and Bishop Athenagoras of Terme, of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Italy. We also have Bishop Damaskinos, auxiliary of Tallinn, Orthodox Church of Estonia, among us.

For the Patriarchate of Antioch, we have Fr. Porphyrios, of the Archdiocese of Beirut, who will offer us a report. The Patriarchate of Moscow is officially represented by Bishop Peter of Portugal. For the Church of Serbia, Patriarch Porphirje has delegated Protosyncellus Beniamijn Kova?i? and Archimandrite Nikifor Milovi? to represent him, while Monks Kosma and Theodosije have been sent by Metropolitan Irinej of Ba?ka. The Patriarchate of Romania is officially represented by Bishop Benedict, whom we greet in his new role as Bishop of S?laj, and together with him we greet our other friends from the Diocese of Ia?i and Timisoara who are with us. For the Church of Greece, we have with us Archimandrite Amphilochios Mîltos, to whom the Holy Synod has entrusted a message for the conference (available for reading), while Archimandrite Ioìl is representing Metropolitan Ignatios of Dimitriados. Metropolitan Asti, a faithful participant in our conferences, whom we welcome this year in his new ministry as Metropolitan of Berat, Vlora and Kanina, represents the Church of Albania and its new Archbishop Ioan (to whom we wish a ministry of grace, while we still remember Archbishop Anastasios with thanksgiving). Igumen Pantelejmon represents the Church of Poland and Archbishop Sawa.

In a conference dedicated to Antony the Great, a representative of the Coptic Church could not be missing. The Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, Tawadros, has appointed Fr. Kyrillos el-Makari to represent him; and together with him we greet Fathers Joseph Stéphanos and Abraham Shenouda. For the Armenian Apostolic Church of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, also faithful to our conferences, this year we have the joy of welcoming Fr. Avetisyan, head of the department of intra-ecclesial relations, and Fr. Ghevond, dean of the Armenian seminary in St. Petersburg. We also welcome Fr. Goitom Yainu Sequar, representing the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and its Patriarch Abuna Matthias.

We rejoice in the presence of various members of the Western Churches: the Lutheran Church of Sweden; the Anglican Church, in particular Bishop Michael Augustin, together with other friends including the faithful Canon Hugh Wybrew; the Catholic Church, in particular I greet Bishop Giorgio Demetrio Gallaro, former Eparch of Piana degli Albanesi, Bishop Derio Olivero, of Pinerolo, president of the Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue of the Italian Episcopal Conference, and Fr. Jaromír, representing the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

To these I would also add the Churches to which the members of our community belong: the Reformed Churches of Switzerland and France, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the Assyrian Church of the East.

The presence of nuns and monks is particularly rich and varied, and we are deeply grateful for this. They come from: Greece (Asomaton Petraki and Panagia ton Vryoulon in Athens); Romania (Copou and SS Pietro e Paolo in Ia?i); Serbia (Kovilj); Russia (Sretenskiy in Moscow); Egypt (Deir Abou Maqar); Germany (San Spiridione); Switzerland (Eremo S. Croce); United Kingdom (Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield); Spain (Montserrat); France (Community of Taizé and Community of Bethléem); Belgium (Monastery of Chevetogne); Italy (Monastery of Pantrokrator in Arona; Abbey of Praglia; Monastery of Vitorchiano; Monastery of Dumenza; Monastery of Germagno; Poor Clares of Sant'Agata Feltria; Contemplative Brothers of Jesus; Hermitage of Montecorona).

This list... remains just a list, and one that is missing many names! In the coming days, I hope we will have the opportunity to get to know each other better and deepen our fraternity. And speaking of fraternity and friendship, I would like to remember a respected theologian and dear friend, a regular attendee at our conferences, Prof. Chysostomos Stamulis, who a few weeks ago returned to the Father's house, leaving us dismayed and saddened. We want to remember him above all for his smile and the open and joyful Christianity he always preached and taught.

Finally, we cannot fail to remember the tragedies that are taking place around us, especially in Ukraine and the Middle East, particularly in Gaza. We do so by remembering and bringing everything into our prayers. I want to think that our being together these days is a counterpoint to the abomination of such tragedies. A small seed, but not insignificant, because every seed of brotherhood sown in the ground sooner or later bears fruit, which is for the benefit of all humanity. A “mad” counterpoint... but it is again Antony the Great who, in one of his most poignant sayings, warns: "A time will come when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying, 'You are mad!', simply because he is not like them" (Sayings 25).

Ours is precisely the time to continue to hope, to sow thoughts of peace and brotherhood, even at the cost of seeming mad... just poor deluded fools!