Conclusions of the Conference

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XV International Ecumenical Conference

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XV International Ecumenical Conference
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THE TRANSFIGURED CHRIST
IN THE ORTHODOX SPIRITUAL TRADITION
Conclusions
read by Michel Van Parys
in the name of the
Scientific Committee of the Conference

Listen to the Conclusions

The 15th International Ecumenical Conference organized jointly by the Bose monastic community and the patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow had for its topic: “The transfigured Christ in the Orthodox spiritual tradition”. We note first of all the wide diversity of the participants who have come from all the Christian Churches.

This 15th Conference brought an innovation: up to now the Bose conferences were held in two turns, a Greek section and a Russian section, each dedicated to a different topic. This conference on the transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ has integrated the two sections around one single theme, a theme at the heart of all Orthodox spiritual tradition, be it Greek, Russian, Romanian, or Serbian. In this way we could be present at an Orthodox symphony, one in its inspiration and diverse according to historical periods and cultural contexts. Two testimonies from Latin monasticism, that of Guy II the Carthusian and of Peter the Venerable, have rendered this symphony more ample, thus underlining that the Christian East and the Christian West are invited to sit together at the feet of Jesus to listen to the word of the Gospel (as br. Enzo Bianchi has aided us to do) and together to ascend the mountain to contemplate his glory, to follow him then in his exodus of suffering for the salvation of mankind. Christ is the living exegesis of the mystery of God and of the economy of salvation.

The Italian word convegno (from the Latin convenire, to come together) aptly expresses what the Bose conferences are: meetings. They are characterized by friendship among Christ’s disciples. We get to know each other. We listen to each other with sympathy. This sympathy, so necessary to overcome fears and to dispel prejudices, is accompanied by scholarly rigor. The scholarly quality of the papers, concerned about historical objectivity, about philological exactness, and mindful of the evolution of liturgical, doctrinal, iconographic traditions, maintains the climate of mutual friendship.

The Western Churches come to the school of Christ, the beloved Teacher of Orthodox spirituality. The Orthodox Churches come to the school of Christ, the beloved Teacher of the spiritualities of the Christian West. In more theological terms: we must intensify with discernment our reception of the marvels of holiness and of love of Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit has worked and continues to work in our respective spiritual traditions.

I would now like to note briefly some elements, which during the conference seemed to me especially fruitful or which can give rise to further reflection. Such notes are inevitably subjective and incomplete, and I beg pardon for this in advance.

Like the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, his transfiguration reveals to us the mystery of the Holy Trinity: the love of God the Father for the only-begotten Son, sealed by the God-Love who is the Holy Spirit.

The revelation of the Holy Trinity shows that Jesus Christ is the center, the heart of the history of salvation, of our salvation. The law and the prophets attest that Jesus is the Messiah of the Jewish people and the Savior of the pagan nations. He is the suffering Servant and the risen Lord who will come again in the glory of God the Father. The simultaneous presence of Jesus, the prophets, and the three chosen apostles, the Father’s voice, the cloud of the Holy

Spirit reveal to us the mystery of the Church and of God's kingdom. Every baptized person is invited to communicate in the glory of the transfigured Christ. In this life wee dispose ourselves for this communion by asceticism and prayer, carrying our cross, repenting of our sins. In eternal life we shall communicate in Christ's glory by being made like him.

Byzantine Orthodoxy, especially since the hesychast renewal of the fourteenth century, has set great store by the contemplation of the uncreated light manifested by the transfigured Christ. Latin monasticism has been more attentive to the injunction of the Father's voice: "listen to him" in the Word. Both, however, urge the monk and the Christian to enter into the experience of meeting Christ (Guy II the Carthusian, Gregory of Sinai, Silvan of Athos).

All the great spiritual masters of the East and of the West are also in agreement in considering the transfiguration of Jesus and our communion by grace in this experience as far as it is possible in this life as an anticipation of future or eschatological glory. "When it is revealed we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is" (1 Jn 3, 2). Saint Simeon the New Theologian was the singer of the mystical certitude that the fire of love becomes the light of God.

Several questions could be developed further in a more historical approach.

What are the patristic sources of this mysticism of light? The influence of St Gregory the Theologian has been cited. How and by what stages did the feast of the Transfiguration of Christ (6 August) spread in the Byzantine East? Did it first become diffused in Palestine and from there spread to the Byzantine empire?

Finally, why did the Byzantine Orthodox East see especially the vision of Christ's luminous glory on Tabor as the paradigm par excellence of the Christian mystical experience? Some elements towards an answer have been suggested when a parallel was attempted between St Antony the Great and St Seraphim of Sarov, when the bond between prayer and the orthodoxy of faith as established by St John Damascene was recalled.

We have all noted how hesychast spirituality from the beginning of the fourteenth century until today has enriched the cultures of Orthodox nations among the Slavs, in Greece, and in Romania. It seems to me that here wee are in the presence of a very important fact for the Church of today: a solid spirituality, inspired by the Gospel and by Tradition, acts as a yeast in the dough of sanctity. The role played by St Gregory of Sinai and his influence in Greece, in Bulgaria, and in Romania has been recalled. We have heard various references to St Paisij Vely?kovs'kyj and the Optina monastery. We have listened to talks about the hesychast renewal in Romania, which promoted a theological renaissance (father Dumitru Staniloae) and which became the soul of resistance to the totalitarian communist ideology. I consider that the question posed almost a hundred years ago by archimandrite Ilarion Troickij, "progress or transfiguration", illustrates two alternative models of civilization.

The message of the ecumenical patriarch warned us not to separate the glory of the transfiguration from the cross. The spiritual teaching of St Ignatius Brjan?aninov has recalled this. St Silvan of Athos proposes to us his kenotic "blessed humility" as the road leading to the glory of Christ transfigured.

Finally, — and this is not the least merit of the conference — we were able to see again how iconography is a theological topos. Mystery is expressed by beauty, by its artistic interpretation. For the modern West the symphony of Olivier Messiaen dedicated to the transfiguration of Christ could have been cited.

I would like to end these rapid conclusions with a big thanks to the Bose community, which archbishop Christodoulos of Athens in his message has called to philergon monastyrion, a hard-working, diligent monastery, which gives due honor to work. I think that all of us have benefited from the work carried out before the conference, during the conference, and which will continue after the conference, even to clean all these rooms, but also to prepare the publication of all the papers we have heard read here. I believe that I express the feelings of all the participants of this conference in acknowledging our appreciation to all the brothers and sisters, to those we see and to those who humbly behind the scenes carry out such a great work.