Conclusion of the Conference

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Fr Michel Van Parys

read by MICHEL VAN PARYS in the name of the Scientific Committee

XVI International Ecumenical Conference

La tradizione della paternità spirituale è unica pur avendo volti infinitamente vari

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XVI Internazional Ecumenical Conference
on Orthodox Spirituality
Monastery of Bose, 18-21 September 2008

SPIRITUAL PATERNITY

Bose, 21 September 2008

Conclusion read by Fr Michel Van Parys in the name of the
Scientific Committee of the Conference

Listen to the conclusion of the Conference (in French):

(Original text in French translated into Italian)

Our 16th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox spirituality was dedicated to *Spiritual paternity in the Orthodox tradition.* We are all extremely grateful to the monastic community of Bose for organizing in such a heartfelt and dedicated manner these annual meetings, which are held with the paternal blessing of the ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew I and of the patriarch of Moscow Alexis II. These conferences are truly a gift of friendship to the Churches of the West and also an occasion of encounter and of spiritual experience for the Orthodox Churches.

This year's conference took place in a certain sense at the feet of a spiritual father of our time, metropolitan Emilianos of Silyvria (1816-2008), who fell asleep in the Lord a few months ago. He was a man *retro et ante oculatus,* who turned his gaze on the tradition of God's Word and of the holy fathers and at the same time was a prophet and seer who scrutinized the future of the Church and of today's world. The testimony of bishop Athenagoras of Sinope made him present to us. He would certainly have been happy to see that our discussions reflected his preoccupation about roots and about perspectives.

The topic of spiritual paternity is too vast to be treated adequately in a single conference. It is too vast, so that we were able to present only a few great figures of spiritual fathers and mothers, of the distant past and of times closer to our own. In addition, we had to limit ourselves to a few Orthodox Churches; we were able to meet great spiritual figures of Byzantine, Greek, Russian, Serbian, Romanian, and Georgian Orthodoxy. We would have liked to meet as well spiritual fathers and mothers of Bulgarian, Arabic, Albanian Orthodoxy. We must add, however, that the preceding conferences have already evoked a large number of these spiritual figures.

Spiritual paternity/maternity as obedience to God's Word

Like Jesus, the spiritual father teaches by his life (his example) and by his doctrine (*bios kai didaskalia*; *praxis et logos*). Spiritual father and son together live in obedience to the Word of God, which they confront in Sacred Scripture.

The Bible presents to us models of spiritual fatherhood and sonship: Moses and Joshua, Elias and Eliseus, Jesus and his disciples, Paul and his disciples. Life lived in common is one of its determining dimensions. Where Jesus Christ is at the center of a lived communion, there the Holy Spirit transforms the baptized more and more, conforms him to Christ crucified and glorified. Several times we have been shown how the living tradition of spiritual paternity played a providential role in the Orthodox Churches during the Turkocracy and during the period of communist persecutions.

The Word of God heard together in Sacred Scripture renders fruitful the relation between spiritual father and his spiritual child (St John Chrysostom and St Olympias). St Nil Sorskij reminds us that in a time of crisis and spiritual indigence it is necessary to seek replies in Sacred Scripture, to read and meditate on it continually, to interpret it with the aid of the fathers. St Ambrose of Optina, St Ignatius Brjanchaninov, St Theophan the Recluse in the nineteenth century employ the same approach. Listening to the Word of God and to the fathers requires also a mental exertion: it is necessary to translate, to publish, to study, and to comment. This is the great lesson of St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and of the Optina elders. This has permitted intellectuals, writers, and artists to find or rediscover faith in Christ.

It can be asked whether our congress should not have studies more closely one or more examples of a concrete adaptation of this tradition in a specific spiritual and intellectual context, to draw lessons for us today.
One example: the fathers of the desert in the fourth and fifth centuries were not all Egyptian fellahs without learning. Some of them for the sake of discernment and with the desire to clarify the rules of spiritual combat did not hesitate to adopt the techniques of analysis of psychic life from pagan philosophers (considered as masters of wisdom). They borrowed certain techniques of spiritual guidance from what we today call human sciences. What could we do today in this domain, without betraying the uniqueness of Christian revelation?

The ministry of the spiritual father

Discernment is the heart of the charism of spiritual paternity. The opening of the heart (*exagoreusis*), that is, the confession of thoughts (*logismoi*, cogitations), is the road of discernment. Frequent, if not daily Christian practice of exagoreusis brings the disciple to a lucid self-knowledge and to authentic humility. We were able to hear how much importance a contemporary spiritual father, patriarch Pavle of Belgrade, gives to discernment still today, seventeen centuries after St Antony the Great (according to John Cassian).

The ministry of spiritual fatherhood is a cross. St Benedict and St John Climacus remind us that the spiritual father ought to give his life (offer his soul) for his spiritual children. He is asked to carry the burden of their sins (in addition to his own sins), to care for the maladies and passions of their souls. He will make himself all things to all, to the simple as to intellectuals. He will correct and scold their faults and vices, always loving his spiritual children.

We have perhaps spoken too little about the responsibility of spiritual children. Let us point out, however, that they should be honest and transparent, imitating the obedience of Jesus to the Father. They are asked to pray so that the Holy Spirit places in their spiritual father's heart words that serve towards their salvation. The duty of conscience (*sovest'*, *syneidesis* ; see Isaias of Scete) has been mentioned several times. It is an element of the freedom of God's children, also in spiritual relations, which ought to be treated more fully.

One traditional with an infinite variety of faces

Spiritual fatherhood is a tradition with many faces. Let us name a few:

- The tradition of the desert fathers, who had one or more disciples.
- The tradition of St John Climacus, who in his Ladder presents the cenobium as the place of humble obedience (Step 4).
- The cenobitic tradition: St Benedict and St Theodore Studite, who are at the same time the fathers of their communities as such and of each monk individually.
- The tradition of the spiritual direction of laypeople, represented by St Nilus the Ascetic, St Isidore of Pelusium, St Benedict…
- The tradition of married priests as spiritual fathers: St John of Kronstadt, St Alexis Mechev…, in which one sees appearing the image of a "monastery in the world" (which doubtless could have inspired Father Paul Couturier and his idea of an "invisible monastery" in view of prayer for Christian unity).
- Should a person have one or more spiritual fathers? Providential meetings are often God's visitations that put one on the road towards the Father, as is seen, for instance, in the apophtegmata (which present both the figure of spiritual children of one father or the practice of consulting several fathers).

Sacraments and spiritual paternity

A fundamental question was posed during the conference: the relation between the sacraments of Christian initiation (baptism, chrismation, eucharist), as also the sacrament of confession, and spiritual fatherhood. Spiritual fatherhood, in the Spirit, of a bishop or a priest as mystagogues should bear and carry the charism of spiritual fatherhood.

This relation, which potentially can lead to conflict, has often been harmonized in the course of the history of the Church by identifying spiritual direction with sacramental confession. St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, in a time of pastoral crisis, is one example of this. It was no different in the Latin West.

This confusion, if it is confusion, is already present in the first exposition that we have of a systematic nature on the priesthood. St Gregory the Theologian in his Second Oration (in 362), in sketching the portrait of an ideal priest, sketches in fact the portrait of a spiritual father. He barely alludes to the liturgical aspects of the priestly ministry. Twenty-five years later St John Chrysostom in his treatise On the Priesthood to a great extent will follow the same way. Perhaps we should not separate, but accept the work of the Holy Spirit in both charisms. But this only brings back the question: what is the place of spiritual paternity within the church koinonia? Attention has been drawn to the danger of individualism, atomization in the relation of a father and his spiritual children to the detriment of ecclesial communion.

Doubtless this reproach can be made with regard to a certain ambiguity in the way the people of God look upon the charisms of spiritual fatherhood. Dostoevsky presents a good fictional example of this in his Brothers Karamazov with its contrasting figures of starec Zosima and starec Ferapont.

Spiritual formation

A question has been posed: how can the crisis of spiritual formation be remedied? The testimony of Russian and Georgian nuns, women who are often simple and feeble, has shown us that the Holy Spirit transmits the faith and tradition through what is fragile and despised in the eyes of the powerful of this world. They love, they have compassion, they show themselves to be infinitely patient in carrying the cross.

We have been reminded that monastic life is not only liturgical prayer, the canon of the cell, and asceticism. The task of spiritual fathers and mothers is to initiate their spiritual children to interior asceticism, to open a way of continual prayer and charity. To this must be added formation in reading Sacred Scripture and the fathers.

The dangers of spiritual paternity

Ever since St John Cassian and St Nilus the Ascetic the fathers have warned against “self-proclaimed or improvised spiritual fathers”. Patriarch Alexis II and bishop Savvatij have reaffirmed these warnings.
The spiritual father himself is on the road of being healed, a sick man whom the physician Christ heals through the Spirit. He has to bear and assume his limits and his misery. He is only an instrument that the living Word wants to use.
Up to what point does the authority of the spiritual father reach, on the consciences of his spiritual children, in the Church? What can be said of certain spiritual fathers who arrogate to themselves an anti-ecumenical and apocalyptic magisterium? Does not the veneration that surrounds certain spiritual fathers border on a cult of personality, on sectarianism?

Crisis of fatherhood?

Are we living in a society, in a modern (or post-modern) culture that is prey to a crisis of authority, and in particular of paternal authority? How does this crisis affect the practice of spiritual paternity? What can spiritual paternity learn from natural paternity? Can natural paternity renew itself by considering the model or models of spiritual paternity and, beyond that, of its source, the paternity of God the Father?
The father: he who dispossesses himself, who empties himself for his children; he is the kenotic father, humble love. We can consider the example of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. He loses his younger son, but he respects the latter’s freedom. He is patient, he loves, he has already pardoned. Is he also going to lose his elder son? this last, will he accept to enter the house? Jesus in the parable leaves the question open.
It is up to us to respond today… We conclude with this portrait of a contemporary spiritual father, heard in one of the talks in these days: a man “of high spirituality and of a very warm humanity”.

Fr Michel Van Parys