

Concluding remarks of the conference

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Bose, 11 September 2010

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XVIII International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox spirituality

Communion and solitude

Bose, 8-11 September 2010

*Concluding remarks read by Br ADALBERTO MAINARDI
on behalf of the scientific committee*

To permit a synthesis of what we have heard during these days — an operation that remains at the liberty of each one to make — we propose some elements to evaluate the fundamental ideas and what seem to be the outstanding results that have emerged from the work of these days, but also possible lacunae and shortcomings and perhaps other roads that can be explored. These concluding remarks, given also in the name of the scientific committee, do not pretend to give a complete picture, but are simply meant to serve a better understanding.

Three years ago, at the conclusion of the conference dedicated to the *transfigured Christ in the Orthodox tradition*, father Michel van Parys underlined the importance for these ecumenical meetings on Orthodox spirituality of *coming together* in a place of reciprocal listening and of friendship, a space of friendship needed to overcome prejudices and to undertake seriously getting to know each other.

The scope of this *coming together* has a precise ecumenical dimension, that of permitting a wide reception of a brother's spiritual search in order to meet, all together, the Christ who comes. The scope, however, also includes a dimension of dialogue with contemporary mankind, its searching and its expectations. "Your face, o Lord, I seek" (Ps 26,8). This psalm verse well indicates the road undertaken to listen to the spiritual tradition of the Churches of the East in the multiform unity of its many traditions (Byzantine, Slavic, Romanian, Armenian, Syriac...).

To discern the face of Christ is in reality an art that is learned in a personal relation of spiritual paternity as initiation to communion, as we reflected at length on this at the conference two years ago. It is an art that requires a hard combat in order to attain to the truth about ourselves and to open the heart to receiving each other. This spiritual combat for the sake of agape was at the center of last year's conference.

During these days we have concentrated on the dynamic that leads from the isolation of individuals to the communion of persons, which necessarily passes through an authentic interior life in liberty. More than once the messages of the heads of the Churches represented here have shown this, pointing out the teaching offered by the monastic experience, where solitude and silence introduce a person “to relations and to being in communion with others” (Bartholomew I of Constantinople), and showing how the dimensions of solitude and communion find a model of harmonious mutual penetration in the life of Jesus himself as it is given us in the Gospel narrative (patriarch Kirill of Moscow and pope Benedict XVI).

Perhaps here we have already traced the basic lines that have guided our reflection. Solitude and communion are constituent elements of being human in the world, but they are illuminated by Christ. In the mystery of the Church, one and multiple, is manifested the christological foundation of solitude and communion and together with it the pneumatological dimension of this fundamental polarity of the spiritual life. “The action of Christ unifies, the action of the Holy Spirit diversifies” (Vladimir Lossky).

This interpenetration of solitude and communion is a constant in Scripture and in the Church’s history. The dimension of “desert” (*eremos*) as a place of trial and of meeting with the living God, a time and place of obedience and of disobedience to the Word, is fundamental for the spiritual experience of Israel, the event that constitutes it as the “holy assembly”. Before the word of communion comes the word of separation: to become in the likeness of God — the biblical definition of man — is to become in the likeness of a God who lives distant, in hiding, a God who calls to communion, not to fusion. Jesus himself deepens the meaning of his vocation in the desert: the knowledge of God in solitude opens us to communion in truth.

In the New Testament the term communion (*koinonia*) indicates essentially participation in the divine life revealed by Jesus Christ, which manifests itself in particular in its Eucharistic dimension, “in the communion of Christ’s body and blood” (cf. 1Cor 10,16). It is in eucharistic community that even the monastic experience is rooted ecclesially, which preserves it from those sectarian deviations that are always possible and which contradict communion.

Thanks to the theological and spiritual reflection of St Basil in the fourth century, which not by chance was the period of the great Christological controversies, the monastic experience too was re-conducted to that fundamental human and Christian balance between the individual’s interior freedom and communion in the company of men. This was perfectly realized in Christ, who for the love of the Father and of men shed his blood in the total abandonment of the cross. “In the absolute solitude of the *cross* Jesus caused communion to be born” (Olav Tveit).

From the first, our conference, thus, renounced reading the coordinates of “communion and solitude” according to a predefined scheme of historical simplification as “eremitism and cenobitism”, which reduce an existential and spiritual dynamic in continual inter-relation (archbishop Ieronimos in his message spoke of *perichoresis*) to the incongruous contraposition of abstract types (cenobites, hermits). Man’s concrete life demands instead that even the community experience be built as a whole according to nature, where the *logikos* seed planted in man (this is still Basil’s idea) leads to the completion of God’s creative work in the beauty and goodness of life in communion. In Basil’s etiology man is naturally a *koinonikos* being, a opposed to the lion, by nature wild and “solitary”, *monastikos*...

Only an authentic Christian anthropology, thus, can lead to a better understanding of monasticism and of the oscillations in Christian spirituality between life in solitude and life in common, with different shades and modes in East and West. The diachronic study of this polarity (communion/solitude) in different contexts, showed clearly the arbitrariness of abstract schemes of classification (hermitage/cenobium) applied to a living spiritual reality.

Metropolitan Kallistos reminded us that in eastern monasticism a clear line of demarcation does not exist between life in community and eremitical life and that this very fluid and porous boundary is a sign of “enrichment and blessing”. The indissoluble circuit between the two dimensions, as we have heard in the first days of this conference, is in fact at the very heart of Byzantine and Russian monasticism. The tie between personal search of God and openness to a cosmic community is even central in a father who is fundamental for Christian spirituality of the East as of the West: St Isaac the Syrian.

The continuous inter-relation between solitary life and the community dimension, between desert and cenobium, finally, is valid for the West, where cycles of renewal of the spiritual life alternate, characterized by either an accent on the eremitical life or on a reform of cenobitic life.

An exceptional witness of this interaction was the historic experience of Optina Pustyn’, which significantly placed at the center of the dynamic between cenobium and anachoretism the life of prayer, personal and common. Here, of course, we touch on a very profound and ample topic, which by itself could constitute the subject of a conference.

It is just here that we come to the question that modernity poses to the Christian experience. If the great modern parabola can be described as a passage from heteronomy to autonomy — the exit from a hierarchical, closed world towards an open universe based on the principle of equality, in which everyone is theoretically the maker of his own future — the paradoxical result is a radical solitude of the individual, of which the anonymous character of the crowd is only the hidden face.

The challenge of community on the postmodern horizon is perhaps that of having communities that are capable of instilling hope, not a utopia of a completely transparent relation, but concrete common life with manifold relations. The modern suspicion of every coercion of the self paradoxically risks annulling the free gift of meeting the other in collective ideology or in the indifference of individualism. An authentic dialectic between communion and solitude demands instead to be realized in confidence and gratitude towards the other: in an ever new thanksgiving, in *eucharistic* practice.

Koinonia not only defines the horizontal plane of relations between persons, but opens a glimpse on the life of the divine Persons. “To be signifies life, and life signifies communion” (Zizioulas). Without person there is no communion, but without communion there is no person.

Theological thought that allows itself to be guided by the Spirit, hence, is called to a creative asceticism in order to overcome the sterile and abstract opposition between tradition and modernity, each of them prisoners of a history that self-sufficiently is wrapped up in itself: in an idealized past or in a present that is not awaiting transfiguration.

How can one discern in the tradition of the fathers (but up to where does this reach?) what is authentic reception (obedience) to the Word of God and what is not? The problem, which was that of St Basil of Caesarea, has been voiced very clearly from many angles. A monasticism, a church that no longer await the Lord of history have lost their flavor. Thus, there always lurks the temptation to have ecclesial communion coincide with self-sufficient isolation, a sectarian closure that seeks *to be different* by isolating itself instead of opening itself by *integrating* and interpreting diversity, becoming in this way a live stimulus —the yeast of the evangelical parable — which announces the transfiguration of human relations and of the cosmos itself.

The authentic “ecclesial” dimension of the dynamic between solitude and communion opens instead in

God's today the irruption of eschatological newness: the definitive communion of God "all in all", which inscribes communion in the center of the personal relation between man and God. This is all the more present in postmodern times of the atomization of the subject. The Christian notion of "person" — the names of Berdjaev and Bulgakov, as well as of Zizioulas and Yannaras were mentioned — constitutes a point of encounter and of overcoming the potentially destructive opposition between the antagonistic impulses of the subject and the aspiration towards oneness by the collectivity.

What the is the person? A wonder that is gratefulness, a marvel that trusts. It is a liberty that gives oneself, the profound liberty, disconcerting at times, that is born of love and only of love, the freedom acquired at great price by authentic inhabitants of today's desert, such as father *Cleopa of Sihastria*, "a man for other", or father *Porfyrios of Kafsokalyvia*, who was used to burn every stiff habit of him in the fire of his love. In their solitary struggle against evil, moral, physical and spiritual, the depth of the love of God embraces the solitude and desperation of every man. It is the energy of hope that shines even in the hell of isolation and of being far from God, as saints like Seraphim of Sarov or Silvan of Mount Athos have shown.

A gap in the topics treated this year was perhaps the absence of a reflection on the contribution of human sciences concerning this very complex tension between the isolation of the I and opening to relations with others and, in parallel, of an accurate reflection on the aids to maturity, human and spiritual, that permit one to learn to live solitude and to practice communion.

Nevertheless, we have been able to listen to monks and nuns of East and West speak of the concrete daily *living in communion* and *living in solitude*, the search of God in the silence of the cell, discernment of the face of God in the meeting with one's brother and sister.

Solitude is an art that needs to be learned, it requires an apprenticeship that isolation avoids. It is always a *solitudo pluralis*. For this reason the fathers required that the arduous path of solitary life, in which, as we have heard the expression of St Seraphim of Sarov, the monk does battle against lions and tigers, be undertaken only after a long initiation to common life.

Silence and contemplation make room for the life of the Word in the community of brothers and sisters, in listening to one another. Then it is learned that solitude is an art, friend and teacher on the way of love, a love of living concretely, daily, as a horizon towards which one tends within the monastic fraternity, but also and above all within the Church and among the Churches and for all the human community. Solitude is the depth of common life, communion is the fruit of interior purification, but the end is always *agape*.

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in the name of the scientific committee of the Conference

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