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Conclusions by the scientific committee

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XXII International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

Bose, 3–6 September 2014

in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches

Conclusions read by Michel Van Parys on behalf of the scientific committee

When a year ago the monastic community of Bose, at the sight of the atrocities committed in the civil war in Spain, chose as the theme of the XXII International Ecumenical Conference of Orthodox Spirituality the verse of Matthew 5,9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called children of God”, it could not foresee the dramatic urgency of the past weeks and days in the Middle East and in Ukraine.

We feel ill at ease, a century after the Armenian genocide, followed by so many others during the twentieth century, in speaking about peace, in realizing our impotence in the face of the sufferings of so many children, parents, grandparents.

How to speak? But how can we not speak, not reflect, and not pray? This is what we have done together, placing ourselves under the gaze of Jesus Christ, our peace.

I will try to conclude, to bring out some main lines of our exchanges, and to suggest some points that might merit further reflection.

Various papers have traced a theological and anthropological reflection on what the Scriptures, especially the Psalms and the Gospel according to John, say about violence suffered and inflicted.

We are aware that since the Enlightenment, Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, has been accused of intolerance. We cannot evade this question. The allegorical interpretation of the holy fathers has been mentioned. This shows that the early Church was fully aware of this problem and developed an exegesis that transposed physical violence to the level of spiritual combat of the Christian against the prince of this world, the devil, father of lies and homicide (cf. Jn 8,44).

Perhaps, however, today we can propose to the people of God a complementary patristic tradition, the typological, which, for example, inserts the Psalms into the history of salvation, reading them in the light of Messianic typology. Could not we Churches still divided seek an interpretation centered on Christ of the Psalms, of the violence that pervades the Bible, from the murder of Abel by his brother Cain to the total eschatological war of which the Apocalypse speaks.

John the Evangelist attests that Jesus the Christ overcame evil and death with love, "he loved them to the end" (Jn 13,1). For example, Psalm 4,5 from the Hebrew can be translated "Struggle not to sin, but preserve silence". The LXX translates: "Be angry, but do not sin". Anger is an impulse necessary for aggression, but the Lord Jesus gives us several examples of indignation, of anger that serve only to neutralize hypocrisy or the hardening of the heart, personal or social.

We can briefly say: the ancient Greek and Latin translations of the Bible already began a rereading of the Hebrew text, an infinite interpretation that is the task of every Christian generation, an interpretation that can make use of everything that human studies can contribute towards understanding the Word of God.

The Biblical stories and the Psalms reflect the pedagogy of the Holy Spirit, they speak of God's patience, which leads us by the hand from where we are to make us enter step by step into the salvation that he offers us freely through the incarnate Word. They speak also, if not more, of our hardening (cf. Ps 94 [95],9), of our resistance to this offer of salvation. The "violent" words speak to us incessantly about the road we still have to travel: from the refusal of a brother to forgiveness of an enemy. To give a name to our passions, to our feelings of hate, to our desires is already a therapy. To give a name signifies to exorcise them, to discern them, to heal them. It is well to give a name to the abysses of the man's heart, a sinner's. The Bible helps us to become aware of this.

The fathers have explored the treasure of peace, God's gift, in Christ and through the risen Christ. Christ Jesus leaves us peace, gives us peace, gives us not as the world gives (cf. Jn 14,27).

Peace has its source in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For us it has the face of the incarnate Son, suffering Servant, meek and humble of heart, who will return as judge of the living and the dead. The peace with God that is given us, reconciliation between angels and men, should reign in God's Church, among the Churches, and in the hearts of the faithful.

The fathers concentrated especially on interior peace, that of the heart. What is the cooperation of the Baptized with grace? How is the long labor of conversion carried out? With great realism they recognized that the soul's virtues, always with the aid of the Holy Spirit, are directed towards the path of love and prepare deification. They turned with discernment to the instruments that non-Biblical philosophical traditions placed at their disposal to teach the way of love, which irradiates peace, and to furnish "arms" against everything that obstructs the growth of love: pride, envy, jealousy, desolation, anger, avarice, evil desires (cf. Mt 15,19; Mk 7,20-23).

Peace, Christ's gift and fruit of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5,22), should manifest itself in unity and through unity of the Church and of the Churches. We have heard what Clement of Rome and Irenaeus of Lyons wrote. We consider as addressed to us today the problem posed by the concise statement of the bishop of Lyons to pope Victor of Rome: "The disagreement about fasting confirms the harmony of the faith".

Just as Scripture, so also the teaching of the fathers ought to be received by every new generation of believers. We might perhaps amplify the statement of Irenaeus of Lyons and propose it in these terms: Do disagreement about observances and differences in theological formulations confirm our accord in the faith?" We know that at the synod in Alexandria in 362 Athanasius himself confirmed it: diversity of theological formulations is legitimate if the confession of faith is unanimously in agreement.

Basil the Great has been cited in passing. Dissensions in Christ's Church caused him great suffering. He more than other fathers worked for peace and unity in the Church, he tirelessly reflected on it. To recover peace and unity of the Church for which the Lord Christ shed his blood on the cross is possible only on one condition: full obedience by the Churches and by the faithful to God's word. When Basil speaks of love growing cold, he speaks of disobedience to God. Let us listen to a passage from his letter to the Church of Tarsus:

"It is necessary to say to the children of peace what is the good that is peace. Because this great, wonderful thing, which is rightfully sought ardently by all who love the Lord, now runs the risk of being reduced to a simple name, because iniquity has multiplied due to love growing cold among many, I consider that those who serve the Lord in all sincerity and truth would do well to have as the sole aim of their labors to restore to unity the Churches now divided into so many parts and in so many ways... Nothing is more appropriate for the Christian than to work for peace, because the Lord has promised us for this a very great reward".

What is the connection between the unity of the Church and peace in our world? It seems to me that this connection exists and is very close. "The bond of peace" can and should pacify the conflicts and the wars of which mankind is the victim... The Churches have an enormous responsibility in promoting peace in this world.

The Divine Liturgy contains immense wealth in this regard. It tirelessly repeats the gift of peace that the risen Christ gives. Immediately after the benediction of the kingdom of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the eucharistic assembly is invited to "pray to the Lord in peace", to invoke peace with our brothers, even those who have something against us, peace among the Churches of God, peace for the entire world. There is here a possibility of catechesis issuing from the peace announced in the Liturgy, which should inspire the preaching of pastors.

Would it not be proper to remove, to use any more the anathemas present in liturgical books against other Christians? I am thinking of the anathemas of pope Leo against Severus of Antioch. Perhaps they had a certain pastoral usefulness in a certain age, but today do they not serve to enclose us in an exclusive church identity?

All our Churches, when they had the possibility, accepted coercion, recourse to violence, with or without the help of the secular arm, to repress heresy because of its different dogmatic formulation. Politics has exploited the Church, the Churches, just as the Churches have exploited their influence in society. What symphony is there between throne and altar with regard to what is due to God and what is due to Caesar?

Allow me to describe a personal experience. Many years ago I studied the acts and the history of the councils of Ephesus (431) and of Chalcedon (451). I had learned that patriarch Flavian of Constantinople died from mistreatment at the hands of Coptic monks at the synod of Ephesus in 449 (the famous robbers' synod of Chalcedonian historiography). When for the first time I visited the monastery of St Macarius in Scete, I was invited to venerate the relics of bishop Macarius, who died as a result of beatings and wounds inflicted on him by Chalcedonian monks. This was for me a salutary shock. I cannot but hope that the two stories may be the fruit of legend, but they say much about how over the course of history the Churches maintained the memory wrongs suffered from another Church, forgetting the wrongs they themselves inflicted.

The problem that is posed and that remains open is that of the responsibility of our Churches in particular of their pastors and theologians to deconstruct, through an irenic catechesis, the fictitious or real images of another Church. How can these falsified images be deconstructed? One way is by listening to the story of the sufferings of the other, then through humble and patient historical research, finally through conversion, assuming the moral or physical coercion in the past one one's Church or one's nation. To recognize this past as one's own purifies our memory and leads us to ask forgiveness. Is this not one way of loving one's enemies, which Sylvan of Athos had so much at heart?

A first step in this direction would be to renounce reactivating the memory of past wrongs. It is not a question of denying them, because the wounds remain on Christ's risen body. The Churches are called upon to discern "the spirits that inhabit the celestial regions" (Eph 6,12) and not to allow themselves to be seduced by ideological propaganda that manipulates public opinion, to transcend nationalistic passions of identity.

Our Churches are called to become laboratories of God's peace, to seek with impatience to purify themselves so as to receive from the Lord the gift of unity. This is the absolutely necessary condition for the credibility of their testimony of God's love and of the peace that he gives them, "so that they may become one, as we are" (Jn 17, 11).

We have also spoken about witnesses of peace.

The saints, canonized or not, comfort our hope: we too can become "operators of peace" (Mt 5,9). Seven figures of peacemakers were evoked for us: Francis of Assisi, Nerses of Lambron, Sylvan of Athos, Stefan Zankov, André Scrima. To these should be added Nikolaj Nepluev, whose fraternity made "[social] justice and peace embrace (Ps 84 [85],11), and finally patriarch Athenagoras, to whom all of us owe immense thanks. With Paul VI he was an operator of peace, abolishing the anathemas between the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople. On 7 December 2015 we will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of this event. I have a dream... Next year, why not canonize Paul VI in Rome and patriarch Athenagoras in Constantinople in Fanar on the same day? It would be a sign that their holy friendship continues to bear fruit in the Spirit, peace in our Churches. Hope does not deceive.

I end with a story of the desert fathers that speaks of humble operators of peace, who at their risk and danger continue to act and hope. This story makes us think I cite it as a conclusion.

There was an anchorite, a man of great discernment, who wanted to live in Celle, but could not find a cell. Another elder, who had an empty cell and who learned of the anchorite's wish, asked him to come to live in this cell until he should find another. The anchorite went and settled there. Some elders of that place began to visit him, since he was a guest, and each one brought him what he could. He received and welcomed them. But the elder who had given him the cell began to be envious and to speak evil of him. He said: "I've been here for so many years, living in severe fasts, and no one came to me; this impostor, however, has been here for a few days, and everyone comes to him". He said to his disciple: "Go and tell him: 'Go away from here, because I need the cell'". But the disciple went to the elder and said to him: "My abba asks how you are". The other answered: "Tell him to pray for me, because I have a stomach ache". When he returned, the brother said: "The elder said: 'I saw another cell and will go away'". Two days later the elder said again to his disciple: "Go and tell him that if he doesn't go away, I will come with a stick to drive him away". The brother returned to the anchorite and said to him: "My abba has found out that you are sick; he is very sorry and has sent me to visit you". The other answered: "Tell him that thanks to his prayer I am well". The disciple returned to his elder and said to him: "He said: 'Wait until tomorrow and, if God wills, I will go away'". Sunday came, and the anchorite did not leave his cell. The elder then took a stick and left, intending to beat him and drive him away. As he was leaving, his disciple said: "I will go first, in case there are other brothers there who will be scandalized". The elder let him go. The brother then ran ahead and said to the anchorite: "My abba is coming to visit you and to welcome you in his cell". The other, seeing the elder's love, came out to meet him and bowed before him, saying: "I am coming to your holiness, father. Don't tire yourself out". God, then, seeing the young disciples work, moved the abba to compunction, who threw away his stick and ran to embrace the anchorite. He embraced him and led him to his cell, as if the latter had not heard anything of what he had been supposed to hear. He then said to his disciple: "Didn't you repeat to him anything of what I told you?". The disciple answered: "No". And the elder at these words was filled with joy and understood that envy came from the Enemy and left

the anchorite in peace. He then fell at the feet of his disciple and said to him: "You are my father and I am your disciple, because thanks to what you have done, our two souls are saved".