

Opening speech

28th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality

ST. ISAAC OF NINEVEH
and His Spiritual Teaching

Monastery of Bose, 6-9 settembre 2022
in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches

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Opening speech by br. Sabino Chialà, prior of Bose

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

metropolitans, bishops, monks and nuns, friends, and guests,

it is with great joy that, on behalf of the brothers and sisters of Bose, I welcome you to this twenty-eighth edition of our International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality, dedicated to the theme: “St Isaac of Nineveh and his spiritual teaching”.

Three years have passed since our previous Conference, the twenty-seventh, held in September 2019. Three difficult years for everyone, which have severely tested this world of ours, our Churches and also this Community that welcomes you. First the pandemic, then wars and tensions of all kinds, which have made us and are making us waver and suffer. We have experienced the depth and width of our frailty and helplessness faced with mystery of an evil that afflicts us in different ways. We are all wounded... and often bewildered and lost by what we are seeing in the present and in the future, which appears more uncertain than ever.

The pandemic prevented us from meeting for three long years. Then, towards the end of last year, there was a certain loosening up of all the containment measures and that gave us the courage to consider anew our conferences. When everything was ready to go, other clouds started looming and building up at the horizon: the war in Ukraine. We knew that these painful events would prevent or drastically reduce the attendance of so many friends from that country, as well as from Russia. And meanwhile Syria and Lebanon continued to be plagued by war and instability. What were we to do? Calling off our meeting out of respect for so much pain or daring going ahead, daring sending out a sign of hope? In the end, also after listening to the opinions of some of you gathered here today, we chose to go ahead with the project. And here we are... carrying everything and everyone in our hearts.

The Covid break has given us the opportunity to rethink our conferences. The priority continues to be our meeting between Christians belonging to different Churches and traditions, as in previous years. However, we would like our meetings to take place in a simpler and more familiar way. This is why we have reduced the number of participants to match our accommodation capacity here at the monastery, without resorting to external facilities. It was a difficult choice, but it seemed to us a necessary one. The novelty we have introduced of the “reading sessions in the afternoon” is meant to foster our fraternal exchange and enhanced mutual knowledge. We will assess the outcome of these choices together.

As for the theme of the conference, this year we have turned to one of the great masters of the spiritual life of all times: Isaac of Nineveh, or Isaac the Syrian. A figure who has nurtured generations of Christians from all time, condition and latitude, all Churches and even beyond. A father who, despite belonging to one of the oldest and geographically remotest Churches, has conquered us all, as testified by his writings which – and this is a rather unique case – have been translated into all languages spoken by Christians, even those that are no longer spoken such as Sogdian (which was spoken in the region of present-day Uzbekistan).

So, why Isaac? There are many pearls that we can glimpse at in his writings: his teaching on humility, on prayer, on God's infinite mercy, which we all constantly need. His pages on these topics have been a true balm on the wounds of so many men and women of all times. And there is so much more...

But Isaac is also the harbinger of hope... His was a time of great upheaval, both political and religious, after the expansion of the Arab rule, which in the Middle East was replacing Byzantine and Persian rule. At that historic juncture he was able to discern a glimmer of a positive hope amidst the turns of history, which was so precarious (like our own). And right to the heart of that world, which was so threatened, he announced the God who is the friend of mankind and who does not abandon his creature.

How many times does Isaac call for hope and warn against despair, which he considers the sin par excellence! He, time and again, invites us to have a confident look into the future, not to let ourselves be ensnared by dangers (cf. *First Collection* VI,49-54). Of him whom he considers to be a true believer, he states:

May he never cease from making war until his death, and as long as there is breath in him may he not surrender his soul to defeat, even at the very moment of his defeat! But if each day his ship be broken up and his cargo perish in the deep, let him not cease from acquiring new possessions, trading, and also from borrowing; let him set out in other ships, sailing in hope, until beholding his struggle and taking compassion on his ruin, the Lord sends down upon him His mercy and gives him powerful motivations to enable him to undergo and resist the flaming darts of the enemy (cf. Ef 6, 16). This is the wisdom which is granted by God, and this is the wise invalid who has not cut off his hope. It is more expedient for us to be condemned on account of particular deeds than on account of our abandoning all (*First Collection* IX, 8).

Do not despair! Do not turn your back! Do not be frightened and paralysed by misfortune, sin, contradictions, and the nonsense that we see rampant in us and among us... This is one of the teachings that Isaac gives us and that we want to hear today. And this is also one of the reasons why we deemed him the best guide for this new meeting of ours.

Incidentally, right here in Bose just over twenty years ago (between the 30 June - 1 July 2001), a small group of scholars and friends of Isaac gathered for a very first seminar on this father. There were about fifteen participants (some of whom are here with us again today): Sebastian Brock and Paolo Bettolo, a very young Fr. Hilarion Alfeev, Fr André Louf (whom we would like to remember, confident that he is looking down on us from heaven; we have here behind us his icon, the work of iconographer Joris Van Ael, who is also among us), Fr Gabriel Bunge, Simonetta Salvestroni, and other friends including Pablo Argarate and Vittorio Berti, also here with us today.

For this conference too, we have secured the support of Isaac's leading scholars, including some young scholars who have dedicated themselves to his work with great results in recent years. We will listen to them with interest and sure benefit. I would like to thank them from the bottom of my heart. Together with them I would like to thank those who will lead the reading groups, helping us savour the words of Isaac.

We are also particularly grateful to the heads of the Churches who have wished us well and sent official representatives. I shall start by mentioning the Assyrian Church of the East, the Church of Isaac... The Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III sent us his message and appointed Mar Emmanuel Yosip, Assyrian Bishop of Canada, to represent him. This is reason for great joy!

For the Orthodox Churches, we have with us Metropolitan Athenagoras of Belgium, on behalf of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos, who has followed and sponsored our conferences from the very beginning. Bishop Amvrosij of Bogorodsk represents the Patriarchate of Moscow. Bishop Siluan of the Romanian Orthodox diocese of Italy is the delegate of Patriarch Daniel of Romania. Archimandrite Amphilochios Miltos is the delegate of the Church of Greece. Igumen Panteleimon represents the Orthodox Church of Poland. Bishop Asti of Bylis is the delegate of Archbishop Anastasios and the Orthodox Church of Albania. Bishop Alexander belongs to the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). There are also members of the other Orthodox Churches: Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, Moscow Patriarchate, Patriarchate of Serbia and Patriarchate of Georgia.

We would also like to greet with much affection and gratitude the ancient Eastern Orthodox Churches, who have sent us their messages and representatives: the Coptic Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, Tawadros II, represented by Abuna Markos of St. Macarius; the supreme catholicos of all Armenians, of Echmiadzin, Karekin II, represented by Fr. Tirayr Hakobyan. Also with us is a representative of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, Fr Saliba Er.

We also received messages from the acting Secretary General of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, Fr Joan Sauca, and from the new Secretary General, Pastor Jerry Pillay; as well as from Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, represented here by the Under-Secretary of the same Dicastery, Msgr Andrea Palmieri.

We also rejoice for the many monks and nuns, from East and West, who wished to be with us, testifying to the importance that the teaching of Isaac still holds today, particularly in monastic life: from the Greek Orthodox monastery of Saydnaya (Syria), of St Macarius (Egypt), of Buna-vestire (Romania), of Suprasl (Poland). And also from Slovakia, Germany (Skite S. Spiridon), Belgium (Chevetogne), France (En Calcat and Solesmes), Switzerland (Eremo S. Croce) and Italy (Coptic Monastery of Lachiarella, Benedictine monasteries of Dumenza and S. Giustina in Padua, the Orthodox monastery of Pantokrator in Arona, the monastery of S. Barbara in Montaner, the Poor Clares of Sant'Agata Feltria, the Cottolengo nuns of Pralormo and Montezago).

Our heartfelt thanks go to them all, as well as to the various Orthodox academic institutions that have sent us messages or are represented here. I am thinking in particular of the Ecclesiastical Academy of Crete, the Centre for Ecumenical Studies "Metropolitan Panteleimon Papagheorghiou" of Thessaloniki, the Theological Academy of Volos, the Theological Academy of Moscow, the Aristotle University of Thessalonica and the Theological Faculty of Balamand (Lebanon).

Before concluding, I ought to clarify one thing: you may have noticed that this year there is no simultaneous interpretation into Russian. This choice has been motivated by one reason only: due to the war, it became immediately clear that many friends from Ukraine and Russia, who are regular visitors to our conferences, would not have been able to come.

However, we are grateful to the few who were able to join us, for whom we wanted to provide a reading group in Russian. Our fraternal thoughts and intense prayers go out to all the others, as well as to Syria, Lebanon and all the other war-torn lands. May the Lord grant us peace soon! His peace!

Lastly, I would like to spare a thought, as a way of giving thanks to the Lord, for our dear Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, a guest and invaluable presence at our conferences, as well as a figure who was loved and appreciated by so many Christians of East and West, who only a few days ago preceded us to the Father of Mercy. A friend and brother whom we commend to God.

Thank you to each and every one of you for being here with us and may this be a fruitful conference for us all.