The wisdom of the desert - Conclusions

29th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality
THE WISDOM OF THE DESERT:
The Sayings of the Fathers and Mothers

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Here we are again this year at the end of the days of our conference, in which we listened to the “wisdom of the desert” as witnessed by the *Sayings* of thefathers and mothers. A theme rich in its themes and implications for the Christian life, and only apparently easy.

In organising this year's conference, our initial intention was to continue the discourse begun last year with the conference dedicated to *Isaac the Syrian and his spiritual teaching*, a figure of sanctity whose teaching contributed to shape the spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Churches and at the same time received unanimous acceptance in all other Christian traditions. With the *Sayings* ofthe Fathers and Mothers, we are faced with a similar case. Here, however, we are not dealing with a single figure of sancity, but with a crowd of saints, and not with the work of a single author, but with a heterogeneous set of texts whose authorship and origin is difficult to discern precisely. This is another reason why, as I said, it is only an apparently easy subject.

In dealing with such a theme at a conference of this kind, certain risks had to be avoided - I think we were aware of these from the outset, but I do not know if we managed to avoid them completely -: the risk, on the one hand, of a purely scientific or historical-literary approach that would get lost in the maze of the infinite number of problems that texts of this kind pose for scholars. On the other hand, the opposite risk of a purely theological-spiritual approach that would not take into the slightest consideration the acquisitions of research relating to the complex process that gave rise to the texts; or even the risk of an approach that I would call naive or devotional, which would limit itself to seeing in the *Sayings* a gallery of edifying stories, without grasping their profound wisdom and without recognising the aporias and challenges that, behind their apparent simplicity, they still pose to the men and women of today.

First of all, we sought to better understand the context that somehow 'generated' these texts, the history behind them, and (insofar as it is possible to know them) the intentions of those who collected them and consigned them to posterity as a written text. Professor Ewa Wipszycka has offered us a masterful synthesis of a lifetime of research dedicated to investigating the spaces and structures of Egyptian monasticism. Her rigorously historical approach based on the systematic comparison of literary sources with documentary and archaeological sources helps us to 'keep our feet on the ground', to know first of all *what we are talking about* when we speak of Egyptian monasticism. At the same time, it helps us realise that literary texts are first and foremost driven by the intent to transmit a spiritual discipline and tend to idealise, to simplify, to create models, and thus inevitably to alter historical reality (to which they still refer) in function of this intent. Let us think of what professor Wipszycka told us about the mobility of the monks, the jobs they practised, their relationship with property, their social background and degree of acculturation, their freedom in doctrinal discussions, the multiplicity of forms of monastic life they led. All these aspects deviate, at least in part, from what we read in the *Sayings* and other monastic sources, giving us a much more varied and lively picture of the Egyptian monastic world. Acknowledging this is not only honouring historical truth, but also a valuable service to a better understanding of these texts.

Samuel Rubenson's paper, in some ways complementary to the first, summarising the most recent scholarly acquisitions (and research still in progress) essentially confirmed the same perspective, this time from a historical-literary approach. The collections we possess from ancient manuscripts that have been (partially) edited and translated into the various modern languages are the result of a long process of formation. Contrary to what was thought until recently, they are not the result of the simple transcription, collection and selection of oral traditions that would reproduce, almost 'live', the voices and lives of the fathers who lived in Egypt in the 4th and 5th centuries. It increasingly appears that their character is essentially literary (and originally Greek rather than Coptic, as their dependence on classical models also indicates) and their purpose essentially pedagogical. Formed in all likelihood in Palestine between the 5th and 6th centuries, these

collections are also the fruit of the controversies that swept through this region: the Origenist crises and the Christological disputes. Not in the sense that the *Sayings* directly reflect these controversies in their content, but in the sense that it was precisely these events that prompted the monks to try to preserve and creatively update at least part of what Rubenson has called the "radical curiosity and intellectual freedom" that had characterised Egyptian spirituality in the 4th century, and which had developed around monastic masters and was firmly based on Greek philosophical traditions. On the other hand, in organising the great collections, one also perceives an interest in regulating, ordering and structuring this past monastic tradition, emphasising certain particular themes and subjecting it at least in part to criteria of a dogmatic nature.

We should therefore give up seeing in these *Sayings* the *ipsissima verba patrum,* however disappointing this may seem to some (or perhaps to all), resigning ourselves to reading them more and more as a testimony to the Palestinian tradition of the fifth to sixth centuries and its pedagogical activities aimed at creating a monastic culture to be passed on to subsequent generations. I think this helps us not only to recognise the true nature and function of these texts (which is not purely historical), but also to rediscover the true meaning of the *monastic tradition.* Indeed, it is not only the origins of these texts (which to a large extent remain obscure to us) that counts, but also the long tradition that used, shaped and transmitted them down to us.

In a similar vein, Dimitrios Moschos has shown how the rich variety of spiritual currents present in the Egyptian deserts between the 4th-5th centuries was subjected to an operation of simplification and synthesis following the Christological disputes: in this way, the desert fathers of the *Sayings* were ideally taken as a model-community to find a certain unity beyond those ecclesial and theological conflicts. In fact, within the *Sayings*, conflicts are muted and in the background: the monks mostly appear withdrawn and distant from disputes and relations with the hierarchy; and the reaction of the desert Abba, who refuses to speak of theology but orients his discourse on spiritual struggle and the inner life, is typical. The reality of conflict however is not denied, but is transferred *to another* level: to the level of the heart, thoughts and passions. This is the perspective of the *Sayings*, partly the result of the context in which they were formed.

Although therefore the "wisdom of the desert" transmitted in the collections of the *Sayings* is also the fruit of subsequent revisions and interpretations, much more than a natural derivation from the "living voice" of the Egyptian desert fathers, it is still offered to us today as authentic wisdom, as the fruit of the will of men and women to remain faithful to the Gospel despite everything, to "seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Mt 6:33), and to transmit this art to their disciples. It therefore remains not only legitimate, but I would say our duty to continue reading and listening to the *Sayings* in the form in which theyhave come down to us, trying to grasp the themes and spiritual dynamics that run through them.

Subsequent papers were therefore devoted to analysing some of the major themes contained in the *Sayings*' collections. Obviously, the choice could only be limited and partial: many equally important themes could have been considered. Fr Viacheslav Patrin first showed us the central place of meditation on Scripture combined with continuous prayer in the life of the monks reflected in the *Sayings*, an activity to which they devoted their time in their cells and which shaped not only their way of praying and relating to God, but more generally their way of speaking, thinking and living. Scripture read in a spiritual sense as a “mirror” of the monk's life is in fact omnipresent in the *Sayings* ofthe desert fathers and mothers, representing the main thread and one of the fundamental dynamics of their spiritual world.

It is precisely from the listening and prayerful reading of Scripture that spiritual paternity according to the *Sayings* isalso born, as was shown by the speech, intense and full of wisdom, of Fr Agapie Corbu, dedicated to analysing the relationship between Abba and disciples and the event of the Word taking place within it. What are - Fr. Agapie asked - the conditions that the Abba and the disciples must fulfil for this word to really act? On the one hand, precisely meditation and contemplative reading of Scripture (not 'in the letter' but 'in the spirit'), an activity by which the word of the elder comes to conform to the Word of God, giving it authentic spiritual authority; on the other hand, an attitude of humble listening and docile obedience on the part of the disciple, which, beyond words, means a readiness to let oneself be moulded by the life and example of the elder, to tune in to his inner world and his silence, to the point of coming to understand its secret and deep source. A different attitude on the part of the disciples - the sayings show - can even go so far as to close the mouths of the elders, extinguishing in them the source of the word, as a saying of Abba Felix dramatically testifies1. In fact, Fr. Agapie has shown us the risk, underlined by the *Sayings*, of a change in monastic ideals and mentality, which ultimately derives from a reversal of priorities and precisely from the loss of the centrality of silent meditation on the word of God, with the consequent shift of attention to non-essential, often purely external elements: their absolutization - yesterday as today - has ended up creating fanaticism and divisions within monastic life.

To the sphere of the relationship of spiritual paternity also refers the practice of discernment mentioned by Fr. Adalberto Piovano, another of the great themes of the *Sayings*, not by chance placed at the centre of the systematic collection with the very long Chapter X. A difficult concept to define, discernment is a ubiquitous element in the life of the monk, so much so that one saying states that it is "the monk's work"2 . Rather than something to "do", discernment is a *basic attitude* to be assumed in every situation: it is the virtue par excellence of the Abba, which novice monks, in their school, are called upon to acquire in order to gradually learn to walk in their own strength, as "experienced monks". Thanks to discernment, every act, every observance, every virtue, every practice of life has value not so much *in itself*, but to the extent that it is recognised as conforming to one's inner truth. As another saying goes: 'What you see that your soul desires according to God, do and guard your heart'3 . Discernment in the *Sayings* thus presents itself as a journey within the "desert of choice", as Fr. Adalbert again said, as a space in which freedom is confronted with what is essential for

living and being saved: the will of God. Here we touch upon what I called earlier the "aporetic" aspect of the *Sayings*, that is, the fact that they for the most part do not offer certainties to their readers nor *ready-made* solutions applicable to every situation, because the real solutions do not find space in a theoretical teaching, but in the concrete of life and "struggle", and in the confrontation with the spiritual father, as well as in the knowledge and discernment of one's own "heart" by each individual.

True discernment for the Abbas does not exhaust the questions, but leaves them open, raises them to an ever deeper level. This, however, does not leave the monk in the paralysis of indecision, nor should it lead him to the conclusion that, since there are no definitive and absolute choices, one choice is worth the other. It would be a grave error to read the *Sayings* in a relativistic key – it has been repeatedly noted in recent days –, as a sort of post-modern *patchwork* in which all solutions are equivalent and offered as possible, and each person chooses the one that suits him or her best according to taste and the moment. In reality, a firm criterion exists for fathers and mothers, and it is precisely the search not for one's own will but for God's will, which, insofar as it is never something fully definable and comprehensible once and for all, asks each of us to humbly guard the questions ("Who am I?", as a saying goes[4]), to put all our freedom on the line and to remain *on the road*, aware on the one hand of the limits of our humanity and on the other of the mercy of God who has no limits, and who calls us to always imitate him in charity, according to the variety of situations that life places before us.

The fundamental tension between love of God and love of neighbour that Norman Russell spoke of also lies within the framework of discernment, a tension that runs through all the collections of the *Sayings* (but we could also say of Scripture and of Christian spirituality), a tension that never ceases to raise questions[5] and that is never definitively resolved by the desert fathers and mothers, even though they mostly imply (and sometimes explicitly affirm) that in reality love of God and love of neighbour are not and cannot be in opposition, because God himself is charity (cf. 1Jn 4:7)[6] and therefore, as Dorotheus of Gaza, an heir and interpreter of the Desert Fathers, would later affirm, the closer one is to God, the closer one is to one's neighbour and vice versa[7] . The fact, however, that the question of good or evil is continually re-proposed in the *Sayings* contributes to keeping the monk's (and the Christian's) life here too in a dynamism of restlessness that does not allow him to be satisfied with having solved the problem once and for all. And this gives to the life of the desert fathers that character of unconditional "openness" (and therefore of freedom) that is perhaps the secret of their holiness, and that undoubtedly led many of them, according to the testimony of the *Sayings*, to what - as Russell recalled - the Oriental tradition calls "deification" (*théosis*), to becoming "all fire"[8] , fully assimilated to the God who is love and "devouring fire" (Heb 12:29).

The discourse on the value and limits of monastic hospitality discussed by Athanasios N. Papathanasiou also refers to a similar issue. That hospitality, i.e. welcoming the stranger, is of great value is what the whole of Scripture tells us, and the Desert Fathers do nothing but repeat it again and again, showing that they put this truth into practice. Particularly significant are those sayings in which, in fidelity to the word of the Gospel, the guest is recognised as the concrete *presence of Christ*, a presence capable of literally "interrupting" any other ascetic or spiritual activity, because in the Christian life any activity is either in function and in view of that presence or it makes no sense[9] . From this point of view, the welcoming of the guest is a value that, one might say, presents itself without pre-set limits. Yet we can ask ourselves: are there limits to hospitality? An extremely topical question, which Papathanasiou has invited us to investigate in an original way, not only in the light of the *Sayings* but also confronting with contemporary philosophical reflection. While it is true that the total surrender of oneself to the will of God before the host and the abstention from any reaction even in the case of violent hospitality are theologically legitimate and can sometimes be an expression of supreme virtue - we have similar examples of this in the *Sayings* -, it is also true that this requires a strength that does not belong to everyone, and defenceless victims cannot be sacrificed on the altar of “absolute hospitality” (recall the case of Lot's daughters in the biblical story). More generally, there are positive limits highlighted in the *Sayings* that allow *the truth of* the act of hospitality to be preserved. Desert Fathers show that they know how to reconcile hospitality and truth in an original way. To be 'true', hospitality for them always needs proximity, a formulated word, recognition of the other's face, in a word, once again, *discernment*, unlike the so-called “absolute hospitality” defended theoretically by contemporary philosophers, which appears so much like an “empty room”.

Corresponding to the plurality of themes and points of view is the plurality of figures of fathers and mothers in the *Sayings* . Despite the attempts at sorting and selecting that we have discussed, those who produced the great Late-Antique collections of *Sayings* resisted the attempt to reconcile the diversity of voices, which means precisely also diversity of histories, personalities and perspectives of thought. As also in Scripture, this lack of synthesis is not a weakness, but represents the genius of these collections. Thus, in the *Sayings,* a large number of fathers speak, and also some mothers, and we have listened to some of them.

Leaving aside the more famous names (e.g. Antony or Macarius or others), on which we have dwelt at other times and which may still be the subject of other future conferences, we wanted to consider first of all the figure of Abba Poimen, known only through the *Sayings*, but actually quite central in these collections, so much so that he has been spoken of as the "quintessence of the desert fathers"[10] . Tim Vivian, a great scholar who has devoted a good part of his academic career to editing, translating and commenting on the texts of the desert fathers, has spoken to us about Poimen, presenting him in a fresh and original way as the "pedagogue of the desert" and pointing out an interesting itinerary through his sayings, which we readers are invited to follow. The name Poimen means 'shepherd': in fact, by his word and life, he appears as a shepherd and guide on a path of spiritual conversion that questions and transforms the deeply

worldly automatic reaction mechanisms of which we all risk becoming prisoners (judgement, condemnation and rejection of others): this path, passing through discernment, invariably leads to embracing compassion in imitation of Christ. The large space reserved for Poimen's sayings shows how the values he promoted (discernment, moderation, compassion) are also at the heart of the pedagogical message that the authors of the collections intended to pass on to subsequent generations, even within the extreme variety of the sayings contained therein. The longest chapter of the alphabetical series devoted to Poimen is the *counterpart* to the longest chapter of the systematic series devoted to discernment; and perhaps this is no coincidence.

Our sister Lisa Cremaschi then spoke us about the so-called “Desert mothers”, a collection of which she recently edited. Certainly a marginal presence (three women as opposed to 130 men), the Desert mothers are significant first of all for the fact that *they are there* and for what they represent, as a whole strand of studies today do not fail to emphasise: they represent the evangelical novelty of the fact that in Christ "there is no longer either Jew or Greek, man or woman" (Gal 3:28). An analysis of the *Sayings* of Syncletica, Theodora and Sarra, three nuns who each present us with their own particular character, perhaps allows us to grasp, behind the stereotypical language and discourses, some original elements of teaching and thought, even if the traits in which we might recognise a truly "feminine" spirituality seem almost absent. The strength of the male model perhaps did not allow for real alternatives. The fact remains, however, that the presence of three female voices within an entire choir of men is an acknowledgement of the full legitimacy and dignity of women's monastic journey (and their spiritual teaching), on a par with that of men; and this is no small thing. Indicative again of that freedom of the desert that in this as in other spheres has managed to impose itself even on the predominant cultural codes.

Alongside fathers and mothers, the world of the *Sayings* attests to the presence of many other figures representing "otherness" with respect to the monastic condition: laymen, philosophers, heretics, Manicheans, pagan priests... Daniel Lemeni has shown us that the spirituality of the desert is profoundly connected with a readiness to relate to anyone, in a spirit of openness, meekness and tolerance, even if this tolerance is different from what we understand by this word; it does not imply relativism, but is essentially acceptance of diversity in a spirit of love and humility. What is truly remarkable, in this confrontation with the 'different', is the readiness of the Desert Fathers to really learn from others, from non-monks, from simple lay people who live an apparently ordinary life in the world. There are in fact many sayings that, following an identical pattern, show the awareness that these monks had that they did not possess the monopoly of holiness, because every time they were tempted to think so, they were reminded, by divine inspiration, that even a simple cobbler from Alexandria, or a doctor, or a fruit seller, or a married couple, or two simple women could reach the heights of a desert monk like Antony or Macarius, or even surpass them11 . Rather than a lesson for the laity, these stories were in all likelihood intended to be a pedagogical reminder for the monks themselves who read the *Sayings*, so that they would cherish humility and a sense of limitation in their vocation. Here too, the wisdom of the *Sayings* consists in introducing doubts where someone is tempted to possess certainties.

The papers in this morning's session were devoted to what, with perhaps an overused expression, we might call the *actuality of the Sayings*, that is, their relevance for the men and women of today. Abuna Markos of Saint Makarios first of all offered us the rare privilege of hearing - this time "live" - the voice of today's "Desert Fathers". With the precision of the scholar and the spiritual sensitivity of the monk, not without a bit of that irony that is so typical of the *Sayings*, he showed us the role that these texts continue to play in the life of an Egyptian monastery today: which *Sayings* are read, how they are read, and through which channels they are continuously transmitted. He emphasised the crucial role they still play in the framework of monastic formation, which confirms their originally pedagogical nature already noted several times in these days. Especially remarkable seems to me what he told us about the intimate bond between Scripture and *Sayings* that still remains alive in the awareness of monks, and about spiritual paternity as the fundamental hermeneutical place that allows these *Sayings* tobe transmitted in a personal way, to explain them, interpret them, and thus keep them alive in the Holy Spirit, without absolutizing their literal content in a fundamentalist way. Alongside this broad positive appreciation, Fr Markos did not fail to bring out with honesty the resistances to this spiritual heritage, resistances that in part can be attributed to misunderstanding (or to a complete lack of hermeneutical capacity), and in part are the sign of a more general crisis of spiritual paternity and monastic life, which needs to be questioned (and here we see similarities with what Fr Agapie already brought out in his paper).

Our journey concluded with a talk by Metropolitan Job of Pisidia, who, with the authority of a bishop, showed how these texts, beyond the sphere of monastic life, are still able to speak to all Christians, and perhaps not only to them. He investigated the reasons for their enormous editorial success in recent decades, emphasising in particular their brevity, their practical and existential character, their lively and richly imaginative, sometimes paradoxical and often humorous language, but at the same time highlighted the aspects in which the *Sayings* are still capable of challenging and questioning the modern reader. Indeed, the *Sayings* are not quiet and harmless texts, written to leave us *where we are*, but powerful, in some ways disturbing and provocative texts, because, like the Gospel, they have the capacity to transform us and set us on a path of conversion, provided we do not extinguish their power and dynamism. They not only speak to our present, but also speak of our future, of our true image to which we are called to strive. The wisdom that they hand down to us, the “wisdom of the desert”, is after all a wisdom that in the eyes of a worldly mentality certainly appears to be folly, as the Apostle says, a folly that nevertheless appears to be prophecy of *another* world:

Abba Anthony said, “A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, ‘You are mad, you are not like us.’”12 .

And I would like to conclude by quoting one last saying, a tasty sketch in which the view of an upside-down world emerges that certainly provokes our laughter, but which also immediately prompts us to ask: who are the fools? The two old men who stage this ridiculous situation or the whole world, the world in which we live, which every day - and often, as we know, with dramatic consequences - finds cause for quarrel or even war over worthless nonsense?

There were two old men who lived together and had never quarrelled. One said to the other, "Let us also quarrel like men!" And the other replied, 'I don't know how a quarrel happens. And the one said, "Behold, I place a brick in the middle and say it is mine; and you say, 'No, it is mine!', and so it begins." They did so, and one of them said, "This is mine!" And the other said, 'No, it is mine!' And the first answered, "All right, it is yours: take it and go." And they withdrew without having found a way to quarrel among themselves13 .

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1 Cf. *Alph*., Felix 1 (= *Sist*. III,36). Cf. also *Sist*. XIV.3, where the disciple's obedience becomes the key to the "word of God" conveyed by the elder, who says of him: "He comes to hear a word because of God ... and whatever I tell him, he does with zeal. Therefore I also proclaim the word of God to him'.

2 Cf. e.g. *Sist*. XXI,9.

3 *Alf.*, Nesteroo 2 (= *Sist.* I,18).

4 Cf. *Alph*., Josephus of Panepho 2 (= *Sist.* IX,8).

5 Cf. *Alph*., Arsenius 38, where the dilemma emerges explicitly: "One of the fathers prayed to God saying: Lord, show me [the meaning of] this fact: one flees [men] because of your name, the other because of your name embraces them!".

6 Cf. *Sist*. XVII,31.

7 Cf. Dorotheus of Gaza, *Teachings* VI,78.

8 Cf. *Alf*. Josephus of Panepho 7 (= *Sist.* XII,9).

9 Cf. *Sist*. V,2-5; 11.

10 J. Chryssavgis, *The Spirituality of Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Qiqajon, Magnano 2004, p. 39.

11 Cf. e.g. *Alph.*, Antony 24 (= *Sist*. XVIII,1); *Anon*. N 490.

12 *Alph*. Antony 25.

13 *Sist*. XVII,26.