



Metropolitan Hilarion opens First International Patristics Conference of the Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies



On 10 October 2013, the first international Patristics conference, St. Isaac the Syrian and his Spiritual Legacy, began its work at the Philosophical faculty of the Moscow State University.

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church, chairman of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission, rector of the Ss Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies, opened the conference, which was sponsored by the Theological Institute, the Philosophical faculty of the Moscow State University and the 'Meta' charity foundation. Invited to the conference are the leading experts in the Syriac patristics and oriental studies from Russia, West Europe, North America and the Middle East. Among those invited are scholars doing major researches of Isaac the Syrian's work, such as Sebastian Brock (Great Britain), Martin Tamke (Germany), Sabino Chialà (Italy), Marcel Pirard (France), and others.

Attending the opening of the conference were Christian hierarchs from Syria, including Bishop Isaac of Apameia, vicar of the Damascus diocese (Patriarchate of Antioch); Archbishop Joseph Absi (Melkite Greek Catholic Church); Bishop Armash Nalbandian (Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin); Archbishop Mor Silwanos Butros (Peter) al-Ni'meh (Syriac Orthodox Church); and Archbishop Samir Nassar (Maronite Church).

Present were Archbishop Nifon of Philippopolis, representative of the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia; Mr. Vladimir Mironov, dean of the Philosophical faculty and a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences; archpriest John Behr, dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological seminary (New York); archpriest Vladimir Shmaliy, vice-rector of the Theological Institute; hieromonk Ioann (Kopeikin), assistant to the rector of the Theological Institute; faculty and students of the Moscow State University, of the Moscow Theological academy and seminary, and three other theological seminaries of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In his address at the opening, Metropolitan Hilarion said:

'Our conference is devoted to one of the great fathers of the Eastern Church - St. Isaac the Syrian, who lived in the seventh century and wrote in the Syriac or Aramaic language. It was the language which our Lord Jesus Christ spoke, it was the language of an original Christian written literature, it was the language which for many centuries was spoken and prayed in by Christians of various Churches. Today it has survived mainly as a liturgical language. It is spoken only in a small number of villages.

'One of these villages, Maaloula, was recently subjected to insurgent attacks and powerful artillery fire, thereby finding itself at the centre of reports from the world's leading news agencies. Many of those present here have visited this village, as well as other places, linked to the development and expansion of Syrian Christianity. We know of Syria not from second-hand sources, we have visited the country and have seen how Christians up until the start of the military conflict coexisted peacefully with Muslims and representatives of other religious traditions.

Today this fragile inter-confessional peace has been undermined. Blood is being shed in the land of Syria and the number of those who have died runs into tens of thousands. We deeply sympathize with the Syrian people. Our special prayer is for Syrian Christians who have been subject to ferocious persecution from radical Wahhabite Muslims. The very existence of Christianity in this land, which has existed and developed for two millennia, is now under threat.

We sincerely sympathize with the Antiochian Orthodox Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church with regard to the kidnap of two metropolitans - Paul and John Ibrahim, who many of you know well. They were both supposed to be here present today with us.

We feel sorry for all Syrian Christians, many of whom have lost their loved ones and have been forced out of their own homes. We express sorrow at the destruction of Christian churches and the desecration of holy sites.

Today there are present among us six bishops who represent the various Christian Churches of Syria. I would like to especially greet you today, dear brothers, and address to you words of sincere and great support. You and the flock entrusted to you are living in extreme, inhuman conditions. Your churches have been subject to artillery fire, your holy sites are being desecrated and your flock is disappearing before your eyes: some have died as a result of terrorist explosions while others have been forced to abandon their homes. You have been able to venerate the holy sites of our country, to pray together with us, to meet with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus, and with important representatives of the Russian Federation. I would like to assure you that Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, which unites nations of various countries, will henceforth support you in your fight for survival, for the preservation of the Christian presence in the land of Syria, which is sacred to all of us.

I greet all the scholars who have gathered here today - theologians, patrologists and Syrologists, especially those who have come from abroad. Our conference has brought together the leading world specialists in the field of Syrian research. As far as I know, this is the first scholarly conference in the world devoted to Isaac the Syrian. The majority of the conference participants are scholars who have made a personal contribution to the cause of publishing or translating the works of Isaac the Syrian, and to research into his theological and ascetical teaching.

I hope that our conference will become a new step in the study of the spiritual legacy of this great church father. I hope that it will also draw even greater attention to the Syrian Christian tradition, which today is in so much need of defending.

I thank the philosophical faculty of Moscow State University for its participation in the preparation of the conference and for the use of its premises. I thank too the Meta Foundation for their financial support, without which it would have been impossible to hold this conference.'

Dean Vladimir Mironov also greeted the participants. He noted that it was for the first time that the Moscow University and the Sts Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies joined efforts in organizing the conference. Representatives of the religious and secular science and education have gathered in one and the same hall and we hope that cooperation of the University and the Church will develop on the regular basis.

'I am very pleased that His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion has chosen our faculty as a venue for the

conference, as he is a well-known author of a major research into a father of the Church of the 7th century,' he said.

Archbishop Mor Silwanos Butros (Peter) al-Ni'meh of the Syriac Orthodox Church expressed his gratitude to the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian authorities for their firm stand on the situation in Syria and for humanitarian aid being rendered to the Syrian people. He added that some million and a half Christians have lived in peace and accord in Syria. As hostilities opened in 2011, the churches and houses of Christian became subjects of attacks. 'Almost fifty churches were destroyed, including those in Maaloula, where people speak the language of Christ the Saviour,' the archpastors said. He also mentioned the Orthodox church of the Exultation of the Lord's Cross was hit by shells and bombs on October 6.

'Over half a million Christians have departed from the country. We are not foreigners, we have our own history. We have roots in the Syrian land and we will never abandon it,' the archpastor said.

He believes that the support of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian state and people will play an important part in stopping bloodshed and sufferings in Syria. 'I hope that Metropolitan Hilarion and all those present here will pray for us and for Christianity in Syria,' the archbishop added.

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