Patriarch Kirill's message to 18th International Symposium on Orthodox Spirituality at Bose

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia has sent the following message to the 18th International Orthodox Spirituality Symposium on Community and Solitude held at Bose Monastery, Italy.

Very Reverend Father Enzo Bianchi,

Dear Organizers and Participants of the Symposium:

I extend cordial greetings to the participants in the 19th International Symposium on Orthodox Spirituality organized by the Bose monastic community to discuss Community and Solitude. This theme concerns these two basic and equally necessary forms of spiritual life characteristic of any religious tradition.

Solitude as one's isolation from the surrounding world and at the same time, openness to others and creation of a community on the basis of certain spiritual principles have always been integral components on the way to salvation. Our Saviour Himself gave us an example of harmonious combination of community life and solitude, when, preaching the gospel together with His apostolic disciples, He withdrew from the others for a personal prayer *to a lonely place* (Lk. 5:16). The Lord also advised His disciples to pray alone: *When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen* (Mt. 6:6).

The peculiar dialectics of community and solitude has been manifested most vividly in the history of Christian monasticism. As is known, monastic life was born in the early 4th century as reclusion, and the word 'monk' itself means 'lonely'. The first monks in Egypt and Palestine, such as Sts Paul of Thebes, Anthony the Great, Macarius the Great, Simeon Stylites, were lonely ascetics in the desert who withdrew from the world to perform spiritual feats and to contemplate God. However, the light of divine grace caught by these ascetics attracted thousands of followers who sought spiritual perfection. It is not accidental that the very definition of monk acquired in antiquity some features of paradox uniting opposites: 'a monk is a one who, while withdrawing from all, is in community with all'. Abandoning the world with its vanity and passions, monks created a new spiritual community in which all humanity was united by the bonds of prayer and love in Christ.

Coenobitical monasticism, which emerged in the wake of reclusion, was especially popular in Rus'. Reclusion was practiced in the Russian Church, too, and many Russian saints began their feat in strict solitude. However, Sts Sergius of Radonezh, Paphnutius of Borovsk, Sergius and Herman of Valamo, Zosima and Savvatius of the Solovki never withdrew to this form of spiritual life but, in their desire to share their ascetical experience with their brethren, founded coenobitic monasteries. In Russian monasticism, there has always been a desire to balance community life and solitude, dictated by the awareness of equal importance and necessity to be given to individual ascetical and social principles in the life of a Christian.

This awareness was especially vividly manifested in Russian 'Starets' who combined the precious experience of reclusion, life in a monastery and spiritual edification in the world. The lives of St. Seraphim of Sarov, Theophanes the Recluse and Optina Starets give us great examples of the combination of reclusion and community, which became beneficial and even salvific for many souls. Great Russian thinkers A. Khomyakov, I. Kireyevsky, F. Dostoyevsky and V. Solovyev went to the Optina Hermitage in a search for a wise spiritual advice. Through them the Starets made an impact not only on the life of individuals but also on the Russian religious culture as a whole by filling it with pure images of truly Christian sanctity. The spiritual treasures of Russian culture, which attract people throughout the world today too, are a good fruit of harmonious combination of the ascetic feat of reclusion and openness to communication for the salvation of many.

The example of Russian Starets is especially relevant today. The modern culture liable to becoming completely secular and deprived a spiritual principle needs the beneficial influence of Christian asceticism exercised in our days. The world should see that the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which transform human life, are as abundant today among those who seek to live according to the gospel of Christ as they were among the ascetics of antiquity. Living Christian images revealing the power of God's grace cannot but inspire those who seek the truth and moral perfection.

I wish success to the 18th International Symposium on Orthodox Spirituality in its work.

With love in the Lord,

+ Kirill

Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/56742/