FOREWORD  

ENCOMIUM  An Offering of Praise to Saint Abba Isaac the Syrian, Inadequate for the Sublimity of its Subject, but Written With Much Love, by Photios Kontoglou  45

TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION  A Historical Account of the Life and Writings of Saint Isaac the Syrian  51

HOMILY 1  On renunciation and the monastic life  113

HOMILY 2  On thankfulness to God, in which there are also essential elementary lessons  120

HOMILY 3  That without toil the soul enters into understanding of the wisdom of God and of His creatures, if she becomes still to the world and the cares of life; for then she can come to know her nature and what treasures she has hidden within herself  127

   On the soul, the passions, and the purity of the mind in questions and answers  •  On the senses, and on temptations also  •  On our Master’s tender compassion, whereby from the height of His majesty He has condescended to men’s weakness; and on temptations

HOMILY 4  On the love of God and renunciation and the rest which is in God  141

HOMILY 5  On keeping oneself remote from the world and from all things that disquiet the mind  155

HOMILY 6  That to our profit God has permitted the soul to be susceptible to accidents; and on ascetical activities  169

HOMILY 7  On the kinds of hope in God; and for whom it is right to put his hope in God, and who it is that entertains such hope foolishly and imprudently  181
HOMILY 8 On what helps a man to approach God in his heart, and what is the real cause that secretly brings help near him; and again, what is the cause that leads a man to humility

HOMILY 9 On sins voluntary and involuntary, and on those which are committed because of some accidental circumstance

HOMILY 10 On the words of the divine writings which urge men to repentance, and that they were said with a view to men’s weakness, lest they perish from the living God, but that one must not employ them as an excuse for sinning

HOMILY 11 On how the beauty of monastic life is preserved and on how it can be a means for God to be glorified

HOMILY 12 That the servant of God who has stripped himself of the things of the world, and is come forth in quest of Him, must never, because he has not attained to a sure apprehension of the truth, cease from his quest for fear of this, and grow cold in that ardor which is born of love for things divine and of searching out their mysteries; and on how the mind is confounded by the memory of the passions

HOMILY 13 On the alteration and change that takes place in those who are making their way on the path of stillness, which has been laid out by God; for sometimes melancholy and suffocation of soul occur, sometimes sudden joy and unaccustomed fervor. Glory be to Him Who orders our paths aright! Amen

HOMILY 14 Concerning hesychasts: on when they begin to understand what place they have attained with their labors in the boundless sea that is the life of stillness; and on when they can have a little hope that their toils have begun to yield them fruit

HOMILY 15 On guarding and keeping oneself from lax and negligent men, and on how, by drawing near to them, heedlessness and laxity rule over a man and he is filled with every passion. And on guarding oneself from proximity to youths, lest the mind be defiled by licentious thoughts
HOMILY 16 On renouncing the world and refraining from familiarity with men 210

HOMILY 17 On a rule for beginners and their state and the matters that pertain to them 214

HOMILY 18 On the successive stages of the monastic life, briefly and distinctly noted; and how and in what way its virtues are born from each other 217

HOMILY 19 That abstention from cares is profitable for hesychasts; and that going out and coming in is harmful; and concerning distraction 219

HOMILY 20 On the paths that bring a man nigh to God, which are revealed to him by the sweet works of night vigil; and that those who labor in this practice are fed with honey all the days of their life 222

HOMILY 21 A narration concerning saintly men and the all-holy words I heard from them, and on their wondrous way of life 226

On an aged elder • On another elder • On the question of a certain brother • On the reproach of a certain brother

HOMILY 22 On the different kinds of noetic powers of the mind employed in the working of revelations and spiritual visions 236

On that which during prayer occurs within stillness

HOMILY 23 On the many different kinds of prayer, and the dominion of the mind; and to what extent this dominion is empowered to initiate its own movements in the different forms of prayer; and what the natural limit of prayer is, and to what extent you are empowered to pray therein; and that when prayer exceeds this limit, it is no longer prayer, although this activity is called prayer 238

On pure prayer

HOMILY 24 On the subject of a discourse spoken by true knowledge 246

HOMILY 25 On the things that are bestowed upon a brother within his cell 248
Homily 26 On the profit that comes to the soul that seeks after profound theoria, that she might immerse herself therein away from the carnal thoughts that arise from the recollections of things

Homily 27 Against those who say: If God is good, why has He made these things?

Homily 28 On the vision of the nature of incorporeal beings, in questions and answers

Homily 29 On the example and similitude furnished by a divine vision concerning the Lord’s Day and the Sabbath

Homily 30 On different suitable ways of wise guidance for the instruction of disciples

Homily 31 Containing a most necessary and extremely beneficial daily reminder for the man who has chosen to sit in his cell and give heed to himself alone

Homily 32 On the power and evil activity of sin, and on what produces it and what causes it to cease

On the passions

Homily 33 That in certain conflicts, labor is better than being in danger of falling

Homily 34 On guarding the heart and on subtler divine vision

Homily 35 On the signs and workings of the love of God

Homily 36 On the modes of virtue

Homily 37 A discourse on various subjects in questions and answers, on the trustworthy way of life and every kind of virtue. This discourse will be especially useful for those who have stripped off the world, those who dwell in the desert, those who are recluses, and those who through voluntary mortification look forward to the crown of righteousness

On fasting and vigil • On the difference in tears
CONTENTS

HOMILY 38 That the body that fears temptations becomes a friend of sin 318

HOMILY 39 On the different methods of the devil’s warfare against those who journey on the narrow way that transcends the world

On the first method • On the second method of the devil’s warfare
On the third method of the enemy’s warfare against strong and courageous men • On the enemy’s fourth and obdurate warfare

HOMILY 40 On continuous fasting, and remaining collected in one place, and what are the consequences of this; and that by discerning knowledge I have learned the exact use of these things 329

HOMILY 41 On the motions of the body 337

HOMILY 42 On the kinds of different temptations; and on how sweet are the temptations that come to pass and are endured for the truth’s sake; and on the levels and disciplines through which the sagacious man makes his way

The trials of the friends of God, that is to say, the humble • The trials of the enemies of God, that is to say, the proud • On patience • On faint-heartedness

HOMILY 43 An explanation of the modes of discipline: what is the force of each, and what is the difference of each 346

On the purification of the body, the soul, and the mind

HOMILY 44 An epistle of our Father among the Saints Isaac the Syrian written to a certain brother possessed of the love of stillness, on how the devil contrives to make those who constantly endeavor to practise stillness to desist from their constant stillness by means of the love of a relative or honored men, and on how it behooves the hesychast to disdain all things for the sake of the knowledge of God which is to be found in stillness, even as it has been shown in the case of our Fathers of old 350
Homily 45 An epistle of our Father among the Saints Isaac the Syrian to his natural and spiritual brother, who, dwelling in the world and thirsting to see him, exhorted and entreated the saint by letters to come to visit him in inhabited parts

Homily 46 Containing profitable subjects replete with the wisdom of the Spirit

Homily 47 On how great are the measures of knowledge and the measures pertaining to faith

Homily 48 Containing counsels replete with profit, which he spoke with love to those who listened to him humbly

Homily 49 On the angelic movement that is awakened in us by God’s providence for the soul’s advancement in things spiritual

   On the second activity that works upon man

Homily 50 On the varying states of light and darkness that occur in the soul at all times, and her training in matters of the right and of the left

Homily 51 On the harm of foolish zeal that has the guise of the fear of God, and on the help that comes of clemency; and on other subjects

   On involuntary evil thoughts that originate from the previous laxity of negligence

Homily 52 On the three degrees of knowledge and the difference of their working and their ways of thinking; and on the faith of the soul and the mystic riches concealed in it; and on how much the knowledge of this world in its ways and means is opposed to the simplicity of faith

   On the first degree of knowledge • On the second degree of knowledge • On the third degree of knowledge, which is the degree of perfection • A recapitulation of the three degrees of knowledge

Homily 53 Short sections on other differences in the concepts of knowledge
On the subject of prayer and the other things which are necessarily required for constant recollection and are profitable in many ways, if a man read them with discretion and observe them

On the solitary life, and that we must not be timorous and afraid, but must make our heart steadfast through trust in God, and have courage with unhesitating faith, since we possess God as our Guardian and Protector

On how the hidden wakefulness in the soul is preserved, and how sleep and coldness steal into the mind and quench the soul’s holy fervor and deaden the Godward desire that yearns for things spiritual and heavenly

On patience for the sake of the love of God, and in what manner help is obtained through patience

On those who live near to God and pass all their days in the life of knowledge

On the many changes that cleave to the mind and are tested by prayer

On love of the world

That without necessity we should not desire or ask to have manifest signs wrought by our hands or unto us

On the reasons why God permits temptations to come upon those who love Him

On how a man can know the measure in which he stands by the thoughts that are stirred in him

On why men who are unspiritual in their knowledge investigate spiritual things in accord with the grossness of their flesh; and on how the mind can be raised above the grossness of the flesh, and what is the cause that a man is not liberated from it; and on when and by what means the mind can remain without phantasies at the time of entreaty
HOMILY 64  On prayer, prostrations, tears, reading, silence, and hymnody. Excellent admonitions that teach watchfulness and rules for an ascetical way of life, that by them a man may acquire for himself a comely rank

On silence

HOMILY 65  An epistle of our Father among the Saints Isaac the Syrian, sent to his friend, wherein he expounds things respecting the mysteries of stillness, and how many monks, being ignorant of these things, are negligent in this wonderful activity, and that the majority of them hold on to their cells by reason of the tradition current among monks; and together with this, a brief collection of sayings useful for the practice of stillness

HOMILY 66  A study and elucidation with examples concerning diverse concepts, and on what use each one of them has

A selection of short sections

HOMILY 67  On how the discerning monk ought to dwell in stillness

HOMILY 68  That we can understand the degree of our manner of life from the changing states of our mind, and that we should not childishly rely on the great diversity of our labors, but as wise men we should recognize the degree of our soul from the secret renewal which we perceive day by day; and on the subtle stage of discernment

HOMILY 69  On true knowledge, and on temptations, and on how one ought to know clearly that not only certain lesser, weak, and untrained men are tempted, but also those are tempted who have been accounted worthy of dispassion for a time, who have achieved perfection in their manner of thought, and have in part drawn near to the purity that is conjoined with mortification, and have been raised above the passions in so far as this is permitted by God while men are in this world, under the yoke of life conjoined to the passionate flesh: they have a contest, and are vexed with passions because of the flesh, and in [God’s] mercy they even suffer abandonment on certain occasions because of the danger of pride
CONTENTS

HOMILY 70  The concise sense of [the previous] chapter, with the significance of the things that were said; and on prayer  487

HOMILY 71  On the difference of the virtues, on the end of the entire course, and on the greatness of love for mankind which in a spiritual manner perfects all the saints, and firmly plants the divine likeness in them through God’s abundant love, which He has poured out upon the race of the sons of men  491

HOMILY 72  On faith and humility  499

HOMILY 73  On the benefit to be had from fleeing from the world  507

HOMILY 74  On the means whereby a man can acquire a change of his hidden thoughts with a change of his external discipline  509

HOMILY 75  On night vigil and the various ways of its observance; and that we must not make the aim of our labors the fulfillment of a definite quantity of prayers, but rather with freedom and discernment we should be like children of God with their Father, laboring with the eagerness proper to love; and on how the work of vigil is more venerable than all other disciplines; and on what things are sought by those who choose this work; and on how men should perform night vigil; and on the gifts that these men are granted from God, and the conflicts and battles waged against them by the ruler of this world  515

HOMILY 76  An answer that Saint Isaac made to a brother who asked him, ‘Why is it that, although our Lord defined mercy as likeness to the majesty of the Heavenly Father, solitaries honor stillness above mercy?’ And a defense concerning this; and that it is not right to neglect the afflicted and the sick when they are near  528

HOMILY 77  On how much honor humility obtains, and how very lofty is its rank  534
Appendix A  Additional Homilies by Saint Isaac the Syrian, From the Syriac Printed Text

I  On the different kinds of revelations and [divine] workings given to the saints in images and likenesses  540

II  On the gloomy darkness that befalls those who pursue the life of knowledge in stillness  544

III  On [divine] overshadowing  546

IV  On how it is right for a man’s life to be set apart [from the world]  547

V  On the workings of grace  550

VI  On hidden states, and the powers and operations therein  553

VII  Brief subjects  554

Appendix B  The First Syriac Epistle of Saint Macarius of Egypt  557

The First Syriac Epistle of Saint Macarius of Alexandria, On the Christian Discipline

Appendix C  Glossary  568

Appendix D  Table of Homily Equivalences  575

Index of Subjects  578

Index of Scriptural Passages  605