

**SYNDESMOS Spiritual Ecology Camp  
Mount Athos  
24 July–6 August 2001**

*Adapted from an article by Dimitri Oikonomou, former President of SYNDESMOS, available in full at [www.syndesmos.org](http://www.syndesmos.org)*

**For the first time in eight years, the camp was held at a non-Greek monastery. The Imperial Serbian Coenobium of Hilandar, lies on the north-east coast of the Athos peninsula about two kilometres inland, in the valley of a short river, encircled by low, steep hills. Ranking fourth in the Athonite monastic hierarchy after the Great Lavra, Iviron and Vatopedi, Hilandar was established as a Serbian monastic house in 1198 by the Grand Zhupan of Serbia, Stefan Nemanja (later the monk Saint Simeon), and his son Prince Rastko (later Saint Sava, first archbishop of Serbia).**

**The SYNDESMOS Project**

**On Tuesday 24 July, the participants arrived by bus, train or plane at Thessaloniki, where they were accommodated and given hospitality in a residence provided by the Metropolis of Neapolis and Stavroupolis and at the home of Dimitri Oikonomou, the team leader. This day and the following were devoted to sight seeing: the city's Byzantine churches, its walls and the sea front. On Wednesday evening, the group attended Great Vespers for the feast of Saint Paraskeve (25 July) at a large parish church dedicated to the saint in the suburb of Menemeni. Metropolitan Dionysios introduced the visitors to the large congregation and provided them with a generous supper afterwards in the Church Hall.**

**At 0530 the following morning, we departed for Ouranoupolis village, taking the first bus from Thessaloniki's Halkidiki Bus Station. After receiving our Diamonitiria, we embarked on the Gorgoipoiko's, which departed the village port at 0945, for Daphne. Upon arrival, we headed for the Monastery of Vatopedi, where we were received with enthusiasm and heart-felt hospitality. Our Romanians were delighted to meet a large group of their own countrymen who have made Vatopedi their monastic home. The same could be said for our Russian, English and French speakers. The Monastery of Vatopedi has proved itself to be a veritable syndesmos ('bond of unity') of many nationalities and peoples.**

**Within a few hours we were given an informal lunch, attended Vespers, ate at the Refectory, venerated the Holy Girdle and other relics after Compline, and visited the monastery's splendid museum. We spent the night in comfortable quarters at Vatopedi's new archondariki and rose early on Friday to attend the morning services and the Divine Liturgy. After the morning meal, Abbot Ephraim met with the group, spoke some words of encouragement, and presented each of us with a beautifully illustrated Vatopedi desk calendar. Then we set off by boat for Hilandar.**

**The holy and venerable Monastery of Vatopedi was the venue of the first SYNDESMOS Spiritual Ecology Camp, held in the summer of 1994, and on many subsequent occasions the Fellowship's pilgrims have been made very welcomed here. We wish to thank Abbot**

**Ephraim and the community for their readiness to receive the SYNDESMOS representatives with so much eagerness and warmth.**

**Because Hilandari's wharf was under repair, we were obliged to disembark at Esphigmenou, about an hour's walk from our destination. The burning midday sun sent temperatures soaring and on arrival at Hilandari we were completely exhausted, having covered the distance carrying heavy bags and rucksacks. To our delight and relief we were each offered some strong livovica, loukoumi, iced water, and coffee in the monastery's spacious and elegant archondariki. There we were met by Hieromonk Metodije, who was to be our immediate contact for the duration of our stay.**

**Before Vespers, the team went on an inspection tour of the immediate surroundings and some took the 30-minute walk to a sandy beach, where they were dismayed to see piles of garbage: glass, paper, plastic and metallic objects that had been washed up or negligently discarded. We were later informed that this was almost an insoluble problem since much refuse and waste drifts over from the holiday island of Thasos or from passing vessels.**

**Saturday 28 July was the commemoration of the Holy Prince Vladimir, equal-to-the-apostles: services began at 0300 and finished by 0730. The Divine Liturgy was followed by a festive meal in the Refectory, after which the SYNDESMOS contingent was invited to assist in the clearing up. This turned out to be a twice-daily task (diakonima) but not the principal preoccupation of the group over the following week.**



*Participants outside the Holy Monastery of Hilandar, Athos 2001*

The real duty set by Hilandar Monastery for the working day (0900-1400) was of two kinds: (a) clearing an enormous olive orchard of large rocks and rubble that had inundated the area as a result of a torrential overflow of water from the adjacent river. The commission to prepare the ground for new seeding was given to six of the young workers; (b) clearing the hilly slopes around the 14th-century Tower of King Milutin of heavy overgrowth. The remaining nine workers wielded a variety of tools provided by the work supervisor, Father Sava. Both jobs were extremely strenuous and tiring. We laboured under a blazing sun with temperatures averaging around 38 degrees.

Naturally, there was no work on Sunday, except for table clearing after the morning and evening meals. The SYNDESMOS party relaxed with the monks and guests at the Monastery. At midday we decided to visit the only monastic establishment in the immediate area, the Monastery of Esphigmenou; about 50 minutes' walk from Hilandar.

Esphigmenou is the most populated of the Athonite monasteries, accommodating over 100 monks. We were greeted very warmly by the fathers, who spent a great deal of time showing us the grounds and the katholikon; they also presented us with souvenirs and offered refreshments. One of the monks, a Bulgarian, spoke at length with our two Bulgarian participants.

Each of the following days followed the standard pattern of services, meals, hard work and discussion – with a few exceptions. On Monday 30 July, a forest fire broke out at the extreme end of the peninsula, near the mainland village of Nea Roda; some of the team was called by the fire fighters to assist and all danger was eliminated after 90 minutes of fire fighting. On Tuesday 31 July, there was a one-day visit to Hilandar of 120 Serbs and the monastery's relics were set out for veneration. On the following day, five from the group went on a fishing convoy with some of the monks to find food for the morrow's feast of the Prophet Elias (Elijah). The Vigil that Wednesday evening lasted from 2100 to 0100. A day of rest was declared on Thursday 2 August for the festal Liturgy and the associated celebrations.

Finally, but reluctantly, the SYNDESMOS pilgrims took their leave of Hilandar on Friday 3 August. We split into a number of small parties that dispersed in various directions over the peninsula. We agreed to meet at Simonopetra the next day for that monastery's matronal feast of Saint Mary Magdalene. The Bulgarians visited the Bulgarian Monastery of Zographou, the Lithuanians went to the Russian Monastery of Saint Panteleimon, the Romanians made for the Romanian sketes of Col•u and Prodromou, while the remainder decided to go a day early to Simonopetra for the Vigil.

On Saturday 4 August the SYNDESMOS convoy assembled at the monastery. We were shown around the buildings, and inspected the new constructions, the gardens, the library and the Museum. There was also a long and inspiring discussion with the new abbot, Father Elisaïos, who offered us gifts and refreshments and spoke about the importance of our endeavours on the Holy Mountain.

The next day we were treated to an exciting speedboat ride to the Monastery of Xenophontos for our last night's stay. The fathers welcomed us warmly and provided us

**with excellent accommodation. On Monday 5 August all the participants returned to Thessaloniki and then made their way to their respective homes.**

*The Fellowship has received the blessing to hold the ninth SYNDESMOS Camp at the Holy Monastery of Xenophontos from 24 July to 5 August 2002.*