

**Syndesmos Festival 2001  
Saint Maurin, Southern France  
25 August-2 September 2001**

*Impressions of the Festival*, by *Pantelis Kostoulas, USA*  
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The Yanks are coming!

OK, so a grand total of two people does NOT make an invasion (We tied with Belgium!). Still, the small but determined American presence at this summer's Syndesmos Festival in France was hopefully the start of something wonderful. Where can I begin to describe the experience? We were truly blessed to be able to join together with 150 of our Orthodox brethren from around the world for a week of worship, fun, and fellowship in the beautiful French countryside. It was amazing to hear of the different circumstances under which people strived to attend the Festival. Even though I traveled quite a distance, others had much more strenuous journeys. I still recall the story of poor Petko's 3-day journey by bus from Bulgaria to be with us!

From Marseilles, we traveled by bus to our destination, Chateau de Saint Maurin, on the road between Rians and Jouques, in the midst of the Provencal countryside. The location of the Chateau itself was an impressionist painter's dream! Lectures and liturgy took place on the grounds of the Chateau in a stone farmhouse with a field of sunflowers outside. It was great fun to explore the spacious grounds and live in a building that was built at a time when the American colonies were still a sparsely populated wooded thicket. It was also a great blessing to be able to experience much of the rich history in the area surrounding the Chateau during our field trips to Rians, Gordes, and the Abbey of Senanque (a Cistercian abbey built right after the Great Schism). The past is made immediately accessible through the architecture.

It was a time of sharing.

Besides the historical wealth of the surroundings, there were so many other things that went into creating an enjoyable and unique atmosphere. Most of all, it was the simple details that made it special, that made it seem like camp or a brief return to childhood: the gorgeous weather, the joy of eating all our meals outside in the bright and warm sunshine, the respite of tea-time (replete with French bread and chocolate), even the sound of the bell to call us together to the next activity. These all served to forge a warm communal bond. Of course, we were not without moments of humor either. I can't help but think of the fountains in the front of the Chateau, which would miraculously stop, almost on cue it seemed, whenever one would try to take a drink. This was an experience that quite a few of us had in common that week!

Though we had just met, it seemed as if I had known some of you for ages. The simplicity of our life together at the Chateau, and our common Orthodox faith, were a true syndesmos (bond of unity). We took comfort and joy in this unity even as we explored our varying cultural backgrounds. Our cultural differences were celebrated in the evenings through song and dance with each person having the opportunity to sample from many cultures. Nowhere was this more evident than on International Night – a chance for each nation to present an offering of song, dance, and mirth. There was such a

rich pool of talent available to entertain us! It was like a little Orthodox Eurovision (sans competition). For hours on end, we enjoyed the God-given talents of the group in a simple setting – no microphones and no elaborate backdrops, just the sound of happy voices, sweet instruments, hearty laughter and much applause. The ensuing exposition of food and drink from around the world was a great end to the evening.

## **PHOTO**

*Participants enjoy Informal discussion during the Festival in France 2001*

It was a time of learning.

The lectures and workshops were truly first-rate. There was so much information that was offered concerning our Orthodox Christian faith and its application in our daily lives. We began with Dr. Plested's talk on Tradition vs. traditions and we ended with the charismatic and ever-joyful Archbishop Anastasios exhorting us to live the missionary spirit of our rich Orthodox Tradition. In between, we covered practically every other topic from folk dancing to building a Christian family to furious scribbling in an attempt to record Professor Andre Lossky's every word. Outside of the workshops, we also learned from each other. Sometimes the lesson was profound – such as the realization (at least in my mind) during the Diaspora roundtable discussion that no matter where we live, we are (sadly so) an Orthodox Christian Diaspora living in a secular world. Other times the lessons were not-quite-so-profound. An example of this was the many different ways we learned to say "Cheers". (This was NOT one of the practical workshops advertised).

Most of all, it was a time of worship.

It was a time for God's people to gather together and offer praise in a myriad of tongues. There was an unreal splendor to the moment, despite the unassuming appearance of the surroundings. The ornateness of the vestments stood in contrast to the stark walls of our "chapels", almost like a juxtaposition of the glory of Imperial times with the simplicity of the early Christian era. While our church building was not as elaborate as a typical Orthodox church, the services were still moving and fulfilling: perhaps even more so, given the enthusiasm and attentiveness of the worshippers. It was so wonderful going to Orthros and having the church full! Each service was like a mini-Agape (Pascha Vespers) service. So many languages!! I personally will miss hearing Fr. Boris's petitions in Dutch.

I think the vigil on the last night was the perfect end to the week. In worship is the beauty of the Orthodox Church made manifest. This was especially true in the vigil we celebrated together. I think it was a great blessing that we spent our last hours as the community we had become in the celebration of the Liturgy. This was truly an important memory for us to have as we parted company.

Where do we go from here?

In the post-St. Maurin era, though our lives pull us in various directions, we fortunately have email to help us keep in touch. Even more so, we have Holy Communion and the divine services to hold us together. I know that each time I sing the Agioritiko Kyrie Eleison, I will think of you all!

I would like to thank the committee for their hard work and dedication in organizing and conducting the festival. There is certainly much to be done in such an undertaking and they did a wonderful job! From the moment when I was greeted at Gare St. Charles and was helped to the church with my luggage by Marc, to the final goodbyes, to every moment in-between (marked by Alevtina's announcements), the committee was a constant and quiet blur of activity. Events just flowed.

My dear fellow Syndesmos Festival participants, as I reflect on the joy, warmth, and fellowship that we shared, my thoughts are with you all. I send my greetings to you from across the ocean. America now awaits YOUR visit, YOUR witness!

## **PHOTO**

*Metropolitan Joseph joins with Archbishop Anastasios and participants in celebrating the Liturgy, France 2001*

*Liberty, equality, fraternity and... love in the Holy Spirit, by Dn. Alexander Vasyutin, St. Mitrophan of Voronezh church, Moscow, Russia*

The first thing I would like to note about the SYNDESMOS Festival, is its absolute freedom and openness. Each of us felt part of one family, not there for ourselves alone, but to share our time, thoughts, and abilities with other members. After a week spent in fellowship, our differences were forgotten, and, in saying good-bye we embraced one another like brothers. That testifies to the unity and equality of all us who participated in the Festival in St. Maurin.

For me, as a follower of Old Calendar and the tradition of Slavonic Divine service, it was especially useful to feel the atmosphere of unity in the Spirit during the Liturgies, despite the fact that they were held in 11 different languages, most of which were alien to my ears. And nevertheless I prayed, I felt myself in the same Church, as if I were in Moscow among my brothers and sisters of my parish. It was easy to see that people came not to attend the Liturgy simply, but to partake in it, to stand before God, not in fulfillment of a duty, but as an act of faith, molded in the depth of their souls. It was really unhypocritical.

It is very significant, that today we touch the theme of the liturgical language from a new angle, using new approaches. Dr. Plested testified in his keynote address that the issue of the language is a secondary one, that the real problem lies beyond this, that it is much more complicated, and that liturgical language is not the cause of the de-christianisation of the present world. This helps us to look for a more profound analysis of contemporary life, and the discussions and round tables which took place were the most effective means for doing this, because nobody imposed anything upon the other, but all burned with the common endeavor to find the possible and concrete solutions to our questions.

Fr. Jean Gueit delivered a lecture which was in a way political. It was also prominent, right and worthy of further reflection. If we are human beings, having our own national and historical, cultural background, the idea that we Christians must be beyond politics turns out to be false. The challenge of our time is not to bury our head in the sand like an ostrich, but to react to events as Christians, and thereby to influence modernity. And this process should be interorthodox, this reflection should be held in the whole Body of Christ, excluding narrow clique interests. No national or cultural superiority should exist.

Interestingly, most people gathered in St. Maurin had quite a high educational level, some speaking two or three foreign languages. Many were interested in theology, which it is also very important and shows that we are not so far from a theological and general religious revival. It was especially significant for us Russians to see such a trend among Western youth – we who till now consider the West as a potential enemy, guided as we are by historical experience. But now it seems that times are changing, and we are getting closer.

Judging as a "citizen of the world", who has "here no continuing city, but seeks the one to come" (Hebrews 13,14), it is very important to see, to feel and to understand, that today young people turn away from positivistic values and materialistic ideals and put their expectations in the metaphysical arena, in God alone. If we acknowledge that we are getting closer and Russia is coming into Europe, we must affirm that such a tendency is waiting for us too. This is most encouraging impression I got at the Festival.

Brotherly dealings cost much. This is the foundation of our eschatological belief in *communio sanctorum*. And when you see the real fruit of such fraternal love inspired by the Holy Spirit and the Apostolic Tradition, you begin to understand God's presence in His Church wherever it exists. Note, the same fruit everywhere. And it is this, if I may say, physical feeling of the Divine in the Church, which I try to share with my pupils at Sunday school, mixing with different people. Paraphrasing the famous popular song "we are the one, we are God's people".

*For further reading about this event see articles on [www.syndesmos.org](http://www.syndesmos.org) by  
Bertinos Genbrugge (Orthodox Youth of Belgium)  
Evangelia Velli (Diocese of Demetrias, Greece)  
Sotiris Vlavianos (Youth of Alexandroupolis, Greece)*