

## **Orthodox Youth Pilgrimage 4–14 July 2001, Russia**



*Participants hike on foot through the grasslands of the Oka river to the Solotcha monastery, Russia 2001*

*Impressions, by Helena Antoniadis, Orthodox Youth of Pretoria  
South Africa*

**At first, the thought of going to the great Russian continent on a pilgrimage with strangers sounded like a rather daunting prospect. However, my views were soon to have a drastic change as I was greeted by the friendly smiles of an unknown world. Upon arrival in Moscow we were whisked off to our first place of residence (in a taxi ride of death, mind you!) at the Synodal Department of Youth at Krutitsky Podvorye.**

**My sister and I were the only two people from the Southern Hemisphere and seemed to spark off a large amount of concern as to why our skins weren't black. We were joined by 45 other pilgrims- representatives from Russia, Greece, Netherlands, Lebanon, Syria, Poland and later, China. This pilgrimage was organized by SYNDESMOS which, as an active pan-Orthodox fellowship, has been able to serve as a catalyst in diverse areas ... as I was soon to find out as I set off on an amazing adventure.**

**The main stage of this holy pilgrimage took us through the cities of Moscow, Kolomna, Riazan and Vysha and was characterized by prayers in many ancient churches, visits to theological schools, sleeping in monasteries and convents, exchanges of culture and traditions at various campfires, and swimming in rivers to keep clean. The churches we**

**did see were undergoing extensive restoration works as they had only recently been given back by the state. The communists left behind a legacy of disrespect and desiccation. Many 15th century churches were used as garages, icons destroyed, churches blown up, and worst of all, the religious persecution of believers. These martyrs of the Russian church, whose faith stood the test, are now canonized (a thousand last year alone). We venerated the relics of older saints and sung in heavenly chorus to the Lord our God in places of sacred worship and much appreciated religious freedom.**

**We were introduced to a treasure of Russian history of Christianity by places such as the Novo-Golutvin Convent, Theophany and Holy Trinity Parishes, Staro-Golovin Seminary, Mother of God of Tikhvin Cathedral, St John the Theologian Monastery, Solotcha, Monastery of the Nativity of the Mother of God (reached by trudging through grasslands of the Oka on a 4 hour hike while eating wild strawberries!), Vysha Dormition Convent, St Nicholas Parish and finally celebrating the Divine Liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral. [...]**

**I would like to express my gratitude to His Eminence Bishop Seraphim, of the Johannesburg and Pretoria Diocese, on whose recommendation we represented South Africa on this programme.**

.....

*Short Journey in the Russian Land, by Yioulia Karagouni  
Diocese of Demetrias, Greece*

**It had always been a dream of mine to go to that huge country, Russia, with its endless expanses, forests of tall trees and exquisitely beautiful churches with their onion-shaped domes.**

**I was given the opportunity this year thanks to SYNDESMOS—my dream became a reality. I still can't believe that I have seen so much and lived through so many experiences, which for me will remain unique.**

**After a short delay and quite a few adventures, we finally arrived in the capital, Moscow, in the evening. Waiting to meet us was a young man who was going to take us to Kroutitskoe Podvorye, the premises of the SYNDESMOS member movement ACOYM in Moscow. He greeted us with a warm smile. This was my first contact with the Russian people and my first impression of our guide! Although we were unable to communicate in each other's language, that sincere smile filled me with confidence about the coming days.**

**The next morning I was struck by an unforgettable feeling in my heart, when I experienced what the catholicity (or universality) of the Orthodox Church means in practice. Matins was said in a mixture of Russian, Greek, Arabic, Dutch and English and at this point I started to see everything in a different way.**

**We set off on our journey along the never-ending Russian roads in our bus, and we sang songs in our different languages all the way. Wherever we went the people we met**

received us with great love and they gave us the best things they had to offer with a generosity that was moving.

We were given exceptional hospitality. I must mention a certain venerable old priest—or 'starets'—who, as soon as he learnt that there were some Greeks in church, rushed up to us and, even before the Liturgy had finished, welcomed us with great warmth and started telling us how it was his dream to visit Greece before he dies.

My impressions: wild plains with a never-ending horizon and marshy expanses with slowly winding rivers and massive golden shrubs; dark birch forests which Russians liken to slender young girls; churches being restored and parishes brought to life again, our common prayer and the essential nature of our efforts to communicate.

We had wonderful and serious discussions. I thanked God for this unique blessing which I have been given, brought up as I have been as a Greek Orthodox, to live truly what Orthodox universality is. I thank SYNDESMOS for giving me this opportunity. May God bless you all!

.....

#### **Pilgrims discuss.....**

*An extract from an interview by Vladimir Trookhin, journalist for the "Orthodox Pilgrim", with Fr Igor Bytchkov (Kolomna, Russia) and Svetlana Ouspenskaya (Russia) (see [www.syndesmos.org](http://www.syndesmos.org) for full text)*

**Vladimir:** What do you feel is the meaning of this kind of event for young people?

*Fr Igor:* These kind of meetings help us to see the universal character of Orthodoxy and to distinguish the most important things from the secondary. In the spiritual life there are also secondary, ritual and traditional aspects, which are interpreted differently in different local Churches; there are other things, however, which represent the essence of our faith and, therefore, are immutable at any time in any country. It is important for young people to know what the most important is and what the secondary is, so that they do not mix up one with another—and this will help them in their spiritual life. I have never seen such a heartfelt and spiritual unity as in SYNDESMOS events, in spite of the obvious cultural differences between participants.'

**I asked the young pilgrims the same question and they totally supported Fr Igor.** *"There is a wonderful feeling of a spiritual closeness—said Svetlana, a young teacher of St. Tikhon's Theological Institute—the most important thing here is of course communication, both spiritual and mental. The time is so eventful here, that you live one day as a whole month. It is impossible to describe everything. One can enumerate the outer events, but the most significant here is what happens between people. Another important aspect is this: we Russians tend to consider ourselves the most Orthodox, to think that all other nations have drifted from Orthodoxy to a lesser or greater extent (even the Greeks, who accepted the Gregorian calendar and so on). But when you see these people, your foreign brothers in the faith, in real life: how they pray, how they behave, then you realize that there are things to learn from them'.*

**The pilgrimage has come to a close. Young pilgrims have gone to different parts of the world, taking icons of Russian Saints, addresses of new friends, a lot of used films with them...But the most important thing that they have taken with them is an experience—their experience of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

*For further reading about this event see article on [www.syndesmos.org](http://www.syndesmos.org) by Andrej Gierasimiuk (Fellowship of Orthodox Youth in Poland)*



*Russian hospitality in Sumbulovo village, Russia 2001*