

Fra Angelico – Andreï Rublev
Association



Abbaye de Sylvanès

The Russian Orthodox Church
of Sylvanès

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH OF SYLVANES

" A tale of an encounter and friendship,

of cultural and spiritual exchange "

AN EXCEPTIONAL MONUMENT

Made out of wood in the pure tradition of the Russian VIIIth century, it reaches up from its ground base to 27metres in height, and stretches over a surface of 300m². It rises up in all its monumentality in the heart of a cirque of mountains, in the midst of forests.

For those who discover it for the first time, it appears like a "little sister" to the Kiji churches, defying them only by the extent of its surface!

WHY SUCH A MONUMENT?

That is the question that every visitor asks!

Because right from the outset of its foundation, the "Centre of Spiritual and Cultural Encounters" in Sylvanès has allocated an important place to Russian culture and to its Orthodox tradition.

In the propitious period of "perestroïka" a French friend of Russian origin, Basile Solnychkine, helped the founders of the "Centre", Father André Gouzes and Michel Wolkowitzky, to travel to Russia and to develop privileged relations with Mgr Alexander Moghilev, the Bishop of Kostroma. Numerous exchanges took place : a mutual and fraternal aid unfolded, with visits, the hosting of young Russians, invitations to artists and intellectuals, which sealed a deep and faithful friendship.

And so it was that on his journey to France, Mgr Alexander, impressed by the beauty of the site and the surroundings at the "Prieuré des Granges" ("Barn Priory"), suggested building a beautiful wooden church for us, in the pure Russian tradition, as a sign and bridge of a new era between our countries and our churches.

The late Father Serge de Beaurecueil was the patron of that undertaking, which was entrusted to a team of young Russian builders in the region of Kirov.

In 1993 this sumptuous church headed for France by railway, under the aegis and patronage of the national French railway, S.N.C.F. It arrived in July of the same year, at the station of Millau in Aveyron.

For six months, seven young Russians, various artisans and local farmers collaborated together in an environment of exceptional friendship, towards the construction of this monument. Numerous press articles, television and radio reports, several films and compact discs were produced to mark this singular adventure, but also to disperse its exploit and message to the four winds.

A RICH AND LIVING HERITAGE WHERE FRENCH AND RUSSIAN ART MINGLE

The chapel to the east of the edifice possesses a beautiful "iconostasis" that was painted by a female Russian immigrant in France after the First World War. We were also able to acquire an antique collection of Russian icons.

The western chapel possesses an item of great value : a life-size Christ sculpted in wood, dating from the close of the XVth century.

A Russian-style set of bells was mounted in the beautiful bell-tower, which can be seen from every mountain-top for miles around.

A NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE

A considerable afflux of visitors from the early days of its construction only continues to increase from year to year: we have already exceeded 15,000 visitors a year.

Local roadsigns and markings are now in place.

Le "Conseil Général du département de l'Aveyron" (the departmental council, equivalent to the county council) has contributed aid for recent works protecting the wood and finishing off the interior.

Other projects are underway for the ten hectares (c. 25 acres) of surrounding forestry.

The national and international press is intrigued, and has asked for permission to develop features and articles, probing into reasons for this "passion for Russia"(!), wondering what a masterpiece like this could mean to France, and how it will change the lives of those around it...

A SITE FOR WALKS, AND TOURIST VISITS

The church figures in all the tourist guides.

Tour operators in this beautiful part of southern France long ago inscribed this monument in their itineraries and continue to book guided visits. All of which points to a great interest in Russian culture and in its religious Orthodox tradition.

Finally, public authorities will restore the former Spa which had such a wide influence in the XIXth century. This centre will be able to host about a thousand people at a time, and its promoters soon saw how the site of the "Russian church" and its "priory" would be a major attraction for all those taking the waters ...

A STRONG SIGN OF FRIENDSHIP AND COLLABORATION WITH THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Right from its conception and opening, our "Cultural Centre" in Sylvanès Abbey has given a pride of place to Russia and its Orthodox religion: in debates, concerts, exhibitions, together with its hosting of young artists, intellectuals, prelates and young clergy.

Approximately ten years ago we took on a brilliant student who had only just turned sixteen, to help him further his studies. Today he has gone on to become the Hegumen Alexander Siniakov. Through him we are in contact with the Patriarchate and collaborate with the "Istina Centre", welcoming young Russians who come to France to study religious sciences in our best Parisian institutions. We contribute to their experience by welcoming them to Sylvanès for the vacation period – particularly around Christmas – and help them to find the necessary funds for their stay.

Ever since we began to develop links with the diocese of Kostroma, we have supported an orphanage attached to the convent in the bishopric – through our association for humanitarian aid, "Droujba".

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PROJECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Cult

As this church is visited by many Russians – young and not so young, living and working in nearby regions – we asked them if they wanted to be informed of opportunities to worship in the Orthodox liturgy within this same monument. About a hundred and fifty couples have left their address with us, and are ready to participate in a parish project. We have informed the hierarchy of our wish and are ready to welcome the priest who will be designated with food and lodging.

Culture

Our International Cultural Centre should like to multiply its relations and collaboration with artists, clergy, composers and musicians. Why not a resident quartet of sacred music, that would allow this exceptional monument to glow with the spirit of Russia, and its culture?

Attendance to concerts, visits, church service and talks has been on a constant increase for nearly thirty years now.

A GREAT PROJECT FOR 2007

TO COMPLETE THE PAINTINGS IN THE RUSSIAN CHURCH

This site has become an important asset, a show-room and emblem of the influence of Russian culture and Orthodoxy in the south of France and way beyond, through the international renown of the centre.

The main part of this monument is complete and out of danger. A foretaste of high quality furnishings has already been installed. But the essential is missing: "the main iconostasis" in the large chapel, where the congregation may join together.

The beauty of the site calls for a construction grouped into three rows and topped by a pinnacle, reaching a width of 10 metres and a height of 4.5m. – (cf. enclosed is the draught of an example).

Finally, a painted ceiling, in the tradition of ancient churches, would allow the entire work to soar. It would overwhelm both visitor and pilgrim with the feeling of an "internal assumption," after their miles long climb to reach the church on its full heights!

Two possibilities for the setting up of the worksite

As all the ceiling paintings, together with the iconostasis, will be executed on wooden panels, it would be possible to work in Russia and mount it all in Sylvanès once the pieces are completed.

But we could also welcome a group of high quality, selected artists to Sylvanès, where we could house them in the winter. We would take care of their board and lodging. Of course an interpreter would be needed, to accompany the group.

We are open to all propositions that might help us complete this great work, a true apotheosis of all that has already been admirably undertaken.

MOBILISING MEANS AND SUPPORT

Since the outset of this achievement we have been almost entirely alone in assuring the financing and the supervision of the work. We have exhausted all our possible financial resources.

Because of its international appeal, the significance of this place goes way beyond any "use" that we derive or might derive from it for internal purposes. We have embarked on this in the spirit of a "service" dedicated to the meeting of our peoples, of our churches, and their culture.

We appeal to your benevolent attention to see this through, and to help us find the means that would allow us to carry such a work through to its rightful end.

We would be happy to welcome you to Sylvanès so that you can discover "de visu" the scale of the monumental work that has already been undertaken.

There is a little of Russia's spiritual soil in this land of France that is in Rouergue. There is also a lot of our heart, and sincere friendship. It is our every wish that this project meets with your understanding - and why not with your solidarity and adherence.

Basile Solnychkine
President of the Fra Angelico-
Andreï Rublev Association

Father André Gouzes op
Rector of Sylvanès and of the
Russian Church in the Priory

BUDGET ESTIMATE

Grand iconostasis	75 000 €
Ceiling paintings in the large chapel	30 000 €
Ceiling paintings in the two side chapels	25 000 €
Paintings in the entrance rooms	20 000 €
Transport/lodging/insurance for the artists	30 000 €
Lifting material and scaffolding	10 000 €
To form a total of	180 000 €

TIME-FRAME

First phase : grand iconostasis 2007-2008

Second phase : painting of the ceiling 2008-2009

PUBLICATIONS

Book:

« The Russian Orthodox Church in Sylvanès », by Paul Castaing

CD:

« Let's Save the Russian Church in Sylvanès »

Film:

« The Little Russian Sister from Sylvanès Abbey », by Vladimir Kozlov

Awarded at the Festival of Religious Documentaries in Belorussia

(July 2007)

EXTRACTS OF PRESS REVIEWS

- 1995 An Orthodox Dome in Cistercian Hills
The Russian Press relates the construction of the Russian Church in Sylvanès
The Chapel that came in from the Cold (Valeurs Actuelles)
- 1996 A Dream of Wood under a Sylvanès Sky (Centre-presse)
- 1997 East and West come to terms in Sylvanès (La Croix)
Sylvanès overshadows its Russian enclave (le Journal de Millau)
- 2005 A Russian Church restored in Aveyron (Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace)
- 2006 A little air of Russia in Sylvanès, from the Urals to Sylvanès (Journal des Compagnons du Devoir du Tour de France)