

By Fr. Lucas Chuffart, A.A.
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During the 2011-2012 year, I was able to send some news from our communities in Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Israel where I spend a part of the sabbatical year I had been granted. It all began right where the Congregation did here in 1862, that is to say, Istanbul.

Making full circle, so to speak, of the Near Eastern Mission, here I am in Moscow, the northernmost city of the Mission. I was only able to get here on November 22 since the visa paperwork which I officially began in August met with frustrating delays, perhaps because I was asking for a resident's visa in view of religious activity at our parish, St. Louis des Français. Others much less patient than I have also become discouraged with this process. On the advice of Fr. Slava Gorokhov, I had begun preparing all my documents in June, but only received my visa on November 15.

On November 22, after celebrating the *dies natalis* of Fr. d'Alzon with the Oblate Sisters, lay Assumptionists, and my brothers in the Lille community, I had an uneventful flight from Paris to a new airport in Moscow, Vnukovo.

First impression: very positive ---seeing the smile of Fr. Celeste, accompanied in the car by Ms. Irina, a friend of the community. They were waiting for me at the scheduled arrival time of 9:30 P.M.

Second impression: after a long drive between buildings that were hopelessly similar along interminable avenues, arriving in the center of Moscow, magnificently illuminated and all the restored buildings in their splendor: the Kremlin, the Orthodox cathedral of the Holy Savior, the Bolshoi theater, etc. But have the Russian people been able to evolve at the same rate? That remains to be seen.



Third impression: what I feel when we arrive «home» at the community, located in a fourth-floor apartment of a large building downtown. The warm welcome from Celeste who gives me a fraternal bear hug and the “I can’t believe my eyes» expression on Slava’s face! Since then, Celeste has become the superior of the community and we’re still waiting for the arrival of a Vietnamese deacon, Pierre Tran Duc Long, who’s having a harder time than I to get here! The warm welcome more than compensated for the cold outside.

Fourth impression: Because of the weather and various activities, you have to change clothes endlessly: when one leaves in the morning before 8 A.M. to go the church in the morning chill, when ne is in the church where the central heating is cut off, as it was recently, by the ex-KGB because the boiler is located in the former rectory which is supposed to be returned to us at some as yet undetermined date… in these cases, warm clothes!!! And when one is in the apartment, where it is hot, all you need is a shirt

Fifth impression: at 8 A.M. it’s dark outside (for a change, it’s snowing)

at noon, it’s still dark (and for a change, it’s snowing)

at 4 P.M. it’s dark again (and for change, it’s snowing!)

Celeste, the Mediterranean, is practically depressed by this weather; fortunately, he has been able to keep the sun shining in his heart and is able to let it shine all around him and especially to us the members of this community.

Sixth impression: I noticed quickly that the people around rarely speak about politics. The notion of the democracy currently in power has chilled more than one person. After the Pussy Riots incident and the repression of the large demonstrations last spring, a wall of silence seems to have fallen on the population. Maybe that’s just the surface of things. Let’s hope so.

And to end on a high and happy note, friends of the parish brought Celeste and me, already the first Sunday I was there, to the steamy Russian baths, a kind of sauna that is extremely overheated at the exit of which one jumps *in adamo* into an icy pool screaming and groaning like polar bears before flagellated oneself with bouquets of birch branches like some penitents of the Middle Ages! One’s well-being is thus taken care--- massages to the limit and good humor on every floor! A warning to new visitors coming to see us in Moscow.