

**“Do not be afraid; only believe’ – Hope in a world in crisis”
Report on the 18th Orthodox Congress**



From Thursday 30 April to Sunday 3 May 2026, the 18th Orthodox Congress was held in the magnificent setting of the Château de Mesnières-en-Bray (Seine-Maritime-France). Under the auspices of the Assembly of Orthodox Bishops in France and organised by the Orthodox Fellowship, this congress brought together nearly 300 participants for three days of celebration, prayer and reflection. Coming from different regions of France, as well as from Germany, Belgium, Spain, the United States, Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Ukraine, participants were received by Archbishop Dominique Lebrun of Rouen who, arrived among the first, then delivered a warm welcome address during the celebration of Compline following dinner.

On Saturday, the Congress opened with the Divine Liturgy presided by Metropolitan Joseph (Metropolis of Western and Southern Europe, attached to the Patriarchate of Romania), who shared an opening message on behalf of Metropolitan Dimitrios (Metropolis of France, attached to the Ecumenical Patriarchate), president of the Assembly of Orthodox Bishops in France. Both hierarchs, each in their own words, recalled how these congresses are special occasions for experiencing and realising the profound unity of the Church. They also thanked everyone who had worked to make this event a success. This reminds us that the presence and trust of our bishops are not merely decorative symbols; it expresses the reality of the Church's life and helps us to move forward in it.

The first conference was then given by Georges El Hage, a lecturer and researcher in theology who is involved in biblical education for young adults in Paris. Georges explained with both conviction and humour, that, according to Scripture, the whole of Tradition, love and fear cannot coexist. In particular, he emphasised that the natural tendency to complain, rooted in the fear of death, has its antidote in thanksgiving.

After lunch, the first session of workshops took place. This session, along with the two that followed, allowed participants to discuss various topics in smaller groups. Topics included biblical exegesis, pastoral, ethical and liturgical issues,....

Later that afternoon, Swiss pastor Lytta Basset gave a moving testimony on what she called 'the invincible life'. Following the sudden loss of her son, she was able to regain her footing in life, not in the absence of her deceased son, but by forging a new and living bond with him that made her realise that, because Christ is risen, the departed continue their existence beyond death. Using language and sharing experiences that were at times unsettling for Orthodox sensibilities, Lytta courageously demonstrated, drawing on her own experience, how Christian hope can be integrated into the grieving process.

In the evening, a cheerful troupe of motivated participants gave a lively theatre performance. The play, directed by Audrey Renoir Larivière, showcased fictional and fantastical hermeneutical conflicts based on the story of Abraham. In this spirit, the congress activities provided an opportunity for the younger attendees to catch up and get to know each other. The activities and catechesis sessions are useful for parents wishing to attend as a family, and highlight the intergenerational dimension of the life of the Church.

On Saturday morning, the American theologian Aristote Papanikolaou, a lecturer at Fordham University (New York) and editor of the [Public Orthodoxy](#) website, demonstrated how it is necessary to overcome fear not only to freely enter into the process of deification in Christ, but also to bear witness to it in a world that does not share the same faith. He continued this reflection, in a more informal manner, during the workshop that followed his lecture.

Three parallel panel discussions took place in the afternoon. One on Christians facing war, moderated by Catherine Gousseff; the second, moderated by Alexandre Beloposky, on the commitment of Christians to the ecological crisis; and the third, moderated by Jean Rehbinder, on science, technology and ethical issues in the light of the Gospel.

The service of the Vigils then marked the beginning of Sunday. The solemn celebration of the Eucharist, presided over by Metropolitan Dimitrios, flanked by a large and diverse college of priests, and attended by the Archbishop of Rouen, was the highlight of the gathering. The morning continued with a final plenary session, at the end of which, Bishop Dominique distributed an image of Father Jacques Hamel (1930–2016), who was murdered during Mass in his diocese and whose witness echoes the Lord's words: 'Do not be afraid'. After sharing lunch, and renewed by their gathering, participants set off on their return journey, filled with Paschal joy.