

Christ in the Wilderness

The Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary Boston, Massachusetts

September 2008

by Stephani Colby

*“O Son of God, do a miracle for me,
and change my heart....”*

from “Christ’s Bounties,” a poem
by Tadhg Og O’Hilliginn,

What a miracle indeed! Those of us who gathered from the cold, clattering city and sleepy suburbs set off to find out about the “Book of Nature.” Led by our twinkly-eyed guide Fred Krueger, our band of nervous urbanites journeyed an hour’s drive south of Boston to the Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary for a day of “active contemplation” of the living presence of Jesus Christ in nature.

Encouraged by our patient leader, we sleepy-eyed neophytes – Orthodox Christians from the Antiochian, Greek and Bulgarian jurisdictions ranging from college students to middle-aged – went off to discover the extent of our habitual unconsciousness and “deadness” to God’s creation.

We had attended the eye-opening “Christ in the Wilderness,” lecture the night before at Holy Resurrection parish in Allston, Massachusetts before an enthusiastic audience.

Astonished by both the quantity and the vividness of patristic references on the value for the Christian of a dynamic relationship with God as expressed in Nature, those of us who could set out the next day to taste this ancient revelation which had seemingly gotten lost in the rough-and-tumble course of lives imbued – despite our Christian strivings – with a distinctly materialist and secularist tinge in relation to the creation.

After some instructions, Fred sent us off for an hour to be alone in forest or field to reflect on how to learn about God from the creation. As we drifted back one by one, the unexpected transformation in each face was remarkable. “They look like they were just baptized!” was my first thought. Surely things couldn’t be happening this fast!

In some mysterious way a deep inner chord had been struck though this attempt to connect to the ways of the ancient desert fathers. Although it was expressed in different ways by different people, most of us had an experience of being loved in some new way, of being received, of being opened up for healing; of being embraced in an unexpected manner.

Each person shared with the group what he or she wished to relate of the experience of searching for the lessons of Christ in nature, often with heartfelt tears. Fred then asked probing questions and affirming the good fruits being described, also thereby sharpening the group’s focus and awareness.

Speaking of her difficulty in letting go of a hectically scheduled life in order to be receptive to this new experience, one young woman told us that bees kept visiting her as she sat, gently buzzing before her eyes. She said it finally dawned on her that she could relinquish her churning thoughts and just sink into “bee-ing.” As we laughed, Fred commented that animals, often bees, but other creatures too, visit people during the program at times when they have certain difficulties or needs, seemingly to help them in some way. To the delight and amusement of all, unbeknownst to Fred, as he made these comments, a dragonfly landed its glistening orange body right on the end the bill of his baseball cap as if to emphasize the importance of what he was saying, sitting there calmly until he finished speaking.

We repeated this exercise several times with different emphases, each time going further and deeper into

the deepening refreshment of sensing Christ in creation. Our time was regrettably short and Fred reminded us that we had had only “one lick of the popsicle” – barely a taste of what is possible. As the sun sank into late afternoon, we felt increasingly close to one another, to the creation and its Creator, and to our own selves (those harried, unconscious, distant strangers barely glimpsed in our daily lives).

The sun’s rays were slanting in almost horizontal bands through the trees as we gathered at the picnic tables for our final prayers. At the closing moment of our program, a flock of wild turkeys appeared, walking single-file in a dignified, neatly spaced procession, perhaps only thirty feet away. Out of the forest they came, one-by-one, silent and high-stepping, their dark-brown feathers glowing gold from the setting sunlight. It was as if nature was acknowledging and paying homage to our efforts to discern Christ in the fabric of creation.

This was a fitting final note and benediction at the end of a special day, one in which we pilgrims began to shed our “stoney insensibility” to the wisdom hidden in God’s creation and to His living pulse and communication within it. We had taken our first small but rewarding steps toward a deeper and truer life in Him through His great Open Book.