

Wilderness Prayer in Yosemite

And Jesus withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

- Luke 5:16

Nature is our best teacher.

- Saint John Chrysostom

In June, 2010 the OFT convened an eight-day Christ in the Wilderness program in Yosemite National Park. This would demonstrate that lay people can benefit immensely from a focus on Christ in wilderness.

For Orthodox Christians this is not a new concept. Saint Jerome, historian of the Early Church, wrote, “The desert fathers went to wilderness, not to get away from people, but to find a more transforming experience of Jesus Christ.”

Following this ancient motive, the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration hosted a pilgrimage into the sacramental and revelational dimensions of wilderness. Using the teachings of the fathers and saints, a system exists that opens a path through which a more intense practice of the virtues emerges.



Fr. James Robinson, pastor of Saint Mark of Ephesus parish (OCA) in Massachusetts, had this comment. “I went on this event to discern whether this was valuable or not. I stepped into the process and it was amazing because it put me into an ascetic state of mind. It then opened me to the phenomenal beauty of God’s creation. I was able to see that creation does God’s will completely. That in turn led me into a state of repentance that I seldom find so acutely in my daily life in the city. The result was that I was quickened in my spiritual striving far beyond my normal daily push.

“I saw how wilderness strips us of our city idols. By this I mean that we had no TV, no cell phones, no city conveniences. These become distractions to the spiritual life. Because people had to leave these city ‘idols’ at home, they were freed up for the spiritual challenge before us. I saw too that the more complex our lives, the less able we are to remember the presence of God.”

Dr. Heather Devich, from Saint Sava Serbian Church in Phoenix, Arizona, reported “this was one of the most valuable experiences in my entire life!” I enjoyed all of the people. The program developed a wonderful sense of rapport with one another. I came for a holy experience of God and that happened far beyond my expectations.

Ms. Anna Wawrzeniuk from Saint Michael’s Russian Orthodox Church in Patterson, NJ (ROCOR), supplied this commentary.

“There was also great joy in the program.... I felt a profound healing take place – a healing I didn’t even know that I needed took place. I found a tremendous deepening of my awareness of the depth of the spiritual journey that came from this effort to read the Book of Nature, that we need this to help us understand the Book of Tradition.

The design of the program was wonderful.... The content was rich, the program progressed logically on a solid foundation in the Scriptures and saints. It led upwards to higher and higher experiences. At times I felt as though angels and saints were with me.

“In the past I considered my love of nature as separate from my spiritual life. I learned that experience in nature is not separate. With a right attitude, it becomes an integral part of one’s spiritual life. The lessons in wilderness seemed natural, gentle, yet profound. My worldview expanded in many unexpected ways.

“The trees, the rocks, the stars, all of wild nature, all stood in their own right and glory. Never before did I hear nature proclaiming so loudly, “I am God’s Creation.” We were given a wonderful opportunity, the impact of which we are *still* processing, and the lasting gifts of which still expand our hearts with thankfulness and gratitude....”



“After a few days I observed my heart opening to everything around me. Imagine living and walking in beauty for days, absorbing it and becoming saturated with it. Beauty works on you; God works on you. You almost see His face in the beauty around you. I felt closer to God, closer to my soul, closer to every living thing I passed. Even the animals now seemed undisturbed by my presence.

“My heart relaxed in ways that I did not know were possible as it grew in trust in God, in easy acceptance of life, in joy, and spontaneity. It looked like God began dissolving all the knots in my thinking. During one of the solitary walks I caught myself in a state of total peace and joy. I had no worry in the world (and I did run my mind though the list of things which usually disturb me in case I was in a state of blissful denial). In this setting all the “problems” seemed real, but now insignificant, insubstantial on the scale of things, to be managed perhaps, but not worth losing peace over. Filled with this peace that I knew my mind could not possibly produce by itself, I asked myself in disbelief, *“Can life be this beautiful?”*

“During the following days I practiced turning to God constantly, something I easily forget in my daily life. I learned how to address



Fr. James ready for prayers at our woodside chapel.

everything with prayer and how to quietly bless places and people. We faced our inner challenges. This was far more than a camping trip; this was indeed a holy pilgrimage. Everything presented an opportunity to learn, change



We improvised simple meeting places, often sitting on the ground or among rocks for our discussions.

love and grow closer to God.”

“Without the contemplation of nature, one never comes to the mystical side of Orthodoxy.”

- Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch

“With experiences like this, we began to understand more clearly the lessons wilderness gives to us when joined with prayer and spiritual striving. As we learned how to prime our attention with prayer, silence, gratitude and love, the wilderness began to unfold its essence. It showed its harmonious duality; complexity and simplicity, vibrant life and all present decay, breathtaking grandeur and humbling beauty of the smallest things.”

A month after the trip, Ms. Gina Margitich, from St. Mark’s OCA parish in Kingston, Massachusetts, wrote these reflections about the Christ in the Wilderness program in Yosemite.

“I mistakenly thought that my experience in Yosemite would end after I drove away. But, when one enters into the glory of God’s creation, something else entirely happens. Indeed it is a blessing; a stretch of the mind, an opening of the heart, a shifting of the soul

toward the divine. When we turn to walk in the way of the Lord, in the midst of His creation, we feel created ourselves and in so being more a part of everything.”

“It takes strength and courage to walk such a path.... Ultimately it takes a willingness to surrender to the will of God and for a short time to be as the desert fathers were, subject to the glory of Divine creation and made painfully aware of our need for humility and awakened by the inexplicable joy of knowing that ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son for the salvation of our souls.’

“This was not just a walk through the park. It was a spiritual trek that offers a look at the complete self through an unfiltered divine lens. Both the best and worst [in one’s self] is seen. The challenge is reckoning with what you see in humility, forgiveness, and love. The opportunity exists through this wilderness program to become a truer self and to experience joy as a child of God amidst His vast and endless beauty from the tiniest flower to the majestic, tallest tree.

“It is a chance to feel the pulse of all creation; the bees, deer, birds, squirrels, lizards, bears, the rivers rushing and the thundering waterfalls, and the peaceful sweetness of the deep woods. Here you can hear the rocks cry out and the trees clapping their hands *‘praise and glory be to God the giver of all good!’*”

