



Christ in the Wilderness

Yosemite National park

Photos and Participant Commentary from the 2015 Program



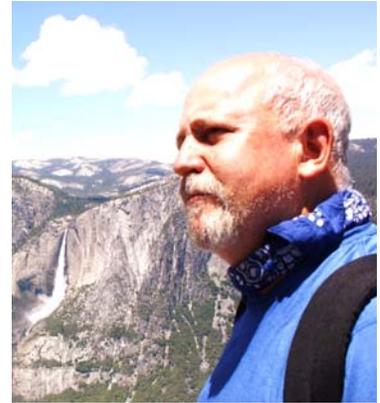
Jennifer Ferraez
St. Nicholas Orthodox Church (AOC)
Santa Barbara, California



“Words cannot express how thankful I am to have spent the last week with all of you. It is through contemplating creation that we encounter the great Artist. It is not through imagination of the mind, writings of scholars, or hearing the words of gifted orators alone that we truly find God, but through the experience of the soul being touched by a direct interaction with the Divine. It is through contemplation of the natural world and its order that we see God's interaction with the earth and his love for humanity. It is impossible to experience the beauty of creation and not feel flooded with the love of God and the grace which flows through the cracks of brokenness.”

Bob Harrison
Annunciation Orthodox Church (OCA)
Portland, Oregon

“Regarding our last event, God's good creation always helps me to get in touch with Him. As the event title states "Christ in the wilderness," that says it all. The giant sequoias were so spectacular I have to say words actually escaped me.”



Ashley Veronica Zappe
Holy Trinity parish (AOC)
Santa Fe, New Mexico

“Christ in the Wilderness was a much needed 'detox' from modern overstimulation. With the guidance of readings from the church fathers, I was able to "be still" and begin to contemplate the "I AM." I began to see nature as an icon written directly by God.

“Most importantly, I was reminded that it is not man-made technologies and worldly structures but the gift of God's creation and His continuing presence in it are what alone sustain me. I can think of no better way to "renew the mind" than a Christ in the Wilderness weekend.”

Fr. James Robinson, pastor
St. Mark of Ephesus Orthodox Church (OCA)
Kingston, Massachusetts

“Being out in the wilderness put me into an ascetic state of mind. It 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.”



Meal times were always a nice time to refresh ourselves and spend some time together. The meals were always good and wholesome. Conversations were lively and substantial. We ate out under the trees in a group camp area all to ourselves. It was a great time. Thank you.

Fr John Henry,
Westlake, Ohio



The views were often spectacular. Here Joseph Koch from New York and Evan Shortes from Boston, Mass. stand on the edge of a deep canyon to view Nevada and Vernal Falls far down below.

Evan writes, “I was able to slow down and take my mind off of worldly things so I could focus on my faith.

“Things became clear to me that otherwise would have been a struggle to obtain.

“The isolation from people played a big part. Being mostly alone except for the company of a group of like-minded people, getting to know each of them on a very personal level, and sharing with them our insights on daily problems and struggles. This helped me a lot to appreciate my faith.”

We watched this bear peacefully grazing in the meadow. It paid no attention to us even though we watched it carefully.





Alejandro Sandoval
Holy Trinity Parish (AOC)
Thoreau, New Mexico

“Prayer in nature seems to bring an immediacy to God’s presence. We then see nature in a different way – through God’s presence all around us. When we see the world this way, the love of God is immediate and we sense creation is already glorifying Him. In this way nature reminded me to glorify God, but also how weak I am in my constancy in giving Him glory compared to the fidelity of nature (His creation). For me it is humbling to see how much more faithful is the life in nature than in our own lives. This realization showed me how much we need to be in nature/ God’s creation because it helps us to be faithful! It helps us to remember God. It helps us to see, and feel, and have the realization of God’s presence in all things.”

Andrew Stoiko
St. Mary the Protectoress Parish
Ukrainian Orthodox Church
Dearborn, Michigan



“Our lessons would be learned from Christ as the teacher and the saints through His book of nature. We would seek to discern His presence through group and personal prayer.

“With the beauty of the Mountains framing the Sierra landscape, our group's pilgrimage to God’s beauty began at the Wawona group campsite which would serve our mini community as base camp. Every day we had a different way to learn about God in nature. We practiced the virtues, we learned about silence and the struggle to reach that empty state, we learned about asceticism, which came easily in a wilderness place where we had only few things, and found we didn’t need once we were in a miniature community. We had to quiet our minds from busy lives in the city and the quiet of the forest helped to slow our busy minds which we brought with us even to the paradise of our Godly surroundings.”



After lunch we stopped in a forested meadow for a writing exercise about the lessons learned during our time in Yosemite.

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We visited a grove of giant sequoia trees. Some of these are 3,000 years and among the most massive trees in the world.

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Up above Yosemite Valley we pause atop Union Dome for a group photo. As group we didn't just learn lessons about God and nature, but learned how to harmonize with each other and form a mini-community. This has always been an unexpected dimension of coming out to the wilderness.

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This mother chipmunk delivered a lesson about how even small animals care and love their families. She had transferred eight small young chipmunks from a den that had become too small to this larger location dug out from under solid rock. The care and attention that went into this family relocation was amazing to watch and experience.

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Gina Margitich,
Massachusetts



Yosemite falls, at 2,425 ft,
is the tallest in the U.S.



Andrew Stoiko,
Michigan

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Jennifer Ferraez,
Santa Barbara, California,
showed how to walk up close to deer
without disturbing them.

“In the week we shared together in Yosemite, our interconnectedness with *each other* was also made clear and how mysteriously our healing is intertwined as we cared, served, and supported our little community. Perhaps it was something of a taste of the Kingdom of God.

“Through the Christ in the Wilderness program, we were given a therapeutic space and community to nurture this experience of creation, humanity, and God. Christ in the Wilderness should be an annual prescription for the spiritual health of every Christian!

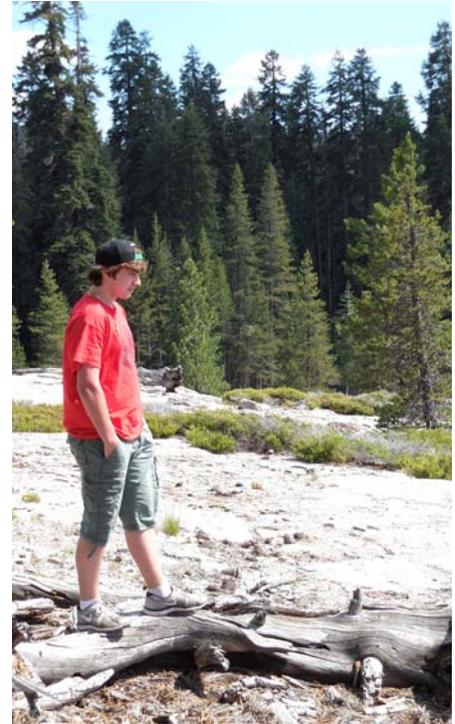
“Let's continue to build this “community of the spirit,” as Bob put it, whether it be for planning our next time together or the future development of sharing life together.

“I believe this “program” might more accurately be called a "spiritual clinic.” It is nurturing to the spirit and provides guidance through the words of Church Fathers and direct experience in nature, rather than specific instruction that could be limiting due to the variety of human experience in the group. This allows learners from any background to feel comfortable, yet challenged. Each of us was given what we needed in the moment. Also, living in an impromptu community forced us to integrate what we learned each day. Like rocks in a stream we bumped up against each other, smoothed rough edges, and revealed new colors.

“One of the added challenges we have to contend with in modern society when choosing to step away from the “flow” of everyday life is “unplugging” from technology. The constant buzz of cell phones and computers can be numbing to the spirit, rather than growing in spiritual connectedness. Modern society, with its layers of complexity, distracts from the fact of our reliance on the earth and each other. This, in turn, can further alienate us from God.

“In the wilderness we are laid bare before our Creator. We realize our vulnerability and our desperate dependence on God—and our need for each other! Taking a step outside our every day life allows the vantage point of looking from the outside in. This always provides clarity to reflect on our lives, but being in the wilderness also shows us another rhythm. If we listen we can begin to understand in what way our lives might be out of synch. The question then arises, “how can I bring my life into harmony with the rest of God's creation?” It seems that we need one foot in the church and one foot on the earth to fully integrate our experience of God and understand how to serve him as we walk through this world. We need to know how to worship in the context of the earth He created.

“In feeling the pulse of the earth we hear the heartbeat of God. The beauty and grace that fills all things is made clear. Through this God's love for creation is undeniably apparent. We understand more, with the heart of His relationship to us. This experience gives context to the services of the Church. Upon returning we are able to carry our experiences with us and enter in more fully to worship.” +



Stan Margitich reflects by himself on the lessons of the day. It turns out that teenagers are often better able to learn the lessons from wild places than the older participants



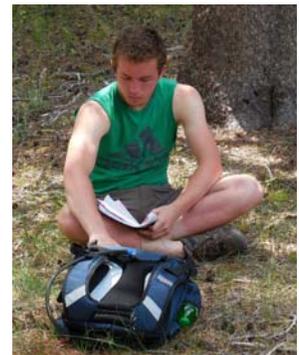
Afterwards, Evan Shortes, center left, adds these comments:

“There is something different about Orthodoxy when we are out here in the wilderness. In the ordinary cycle of parish services, you walk out the door and you are back in the world. Out here in the wilderness the spiritual healing does not end at the "door." It is constantly with us because there is nothing to distract us mentally or spiritually.

“I would tell anyone who is interested that this is an experience that cannot be had anywhere else. That it is completely unique and is like medicine for the soul.”

Fred Krueger, program coordinator
Santa Rosa, California

One of the lessons from the Christ in the Wilderness program is how quickly teenagers see how to learn about God thru nature. They are often faster than their parents at finding the connection between God, nature, Orthodox theology and the practice of the virtues as keys to opening the creation. Any parish youth program can benefit from the processes that have been developed in this program as they are foundational to becoming steady and stable in the life of the Orthodox Church.



Joseph Koch, New York, reviews his notes after a long day of reflection.