



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

Christ in the Wilderness

A Journal of Reflections and Experiences during a pilgrimage
into the sacramental and revelational dimensions of wilderness

by Alexander Sandoval and Shane “Elijah” White

“And He withdrew himself into the wilderness and prayed”
(Luke 5:16)

IN AUGUST, 2006 the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration sponsored a ten-day exploration of the potential to acquire spiritual formation through wilderness. Our program sought to apply the teachings of Scripture, Church fathers and saints regarding wild lands and their ability to cultivate ascetic practice. Our hope was that through this “Christ in the Wilderness” program, we might recover a deeper appreciation for what the fathers sometimes call “the book of nature,” and through it develop a means to bring at least a taste of the ancient desert experience to modern spiritual striving. If we could develop this much, perhaps we might also develop the insight and strength to further this ministry of transfiguration and healing.

Invitations were circulated to local OFT members in April. We had room for ten participants and exactly ten individuals registered. This resulted in a good mix of clergy, adult parishioners and teenagers. The following is a compilation of the lessons learned along with a few of our more memorable comments, experiences and observations.

Day One: Orientation, Tuolumne Meadows, Yosemite National Park

AUGUST IS STILL SPRINGTIME IN THE HIGH SIERRAS. A carpet of orange paintbrush, purple and yellow asters and thousands of other brightly colored wild flowers unfurl across the high grassy valley of Tuolumne Meadows. Snow still tops the ring of mountain peaks surrounding this beautiful alpine valley.

We have come from various parts of the United States for this program and represent a cross-section of ages, professions and interests. The challenge we will face together is to cut a path through the mental clutter of our technology-intensive, speed-addicted, consumer-desacralized attitudes and find a way to a more fervent Orthodox Christian regard for the Lord's good earth.

The orientation program begins with a "talk and walk" across the valley. The talk provides information about our journey and the reason for this program. The walk is a vigorous hike to loosen legs and acclimatize lungs to the 8,700 foot altitude. A bright joyous quality fills the air as participants leisurely hike through the nearby meadows and along the river. The tempo quickens as we cut cross-country to ascend the heights of Lembert Dome, a 2,000' foot-high round granite pinnacle that looms over the eastern edge of Tuolumne Meadows. This will not only stretch our legs, it will deliberately stretch our entire cardio-vascular system. The hike does its job and leaves us panting and gasping for breath as we climb up and further up in the rarified altitude. This, says Fred Krueger, our wilderness guide, is just healthy preparation for the more demanding hike with packs and gear that we will undertake two days from now.

That night we have a further orientation to the mountains. A bear stealthily enters our camp area, searching for camper food. Our two teenage girls spot him first and fix their flashlight beams on his dark outline. One blows incessantly on her emergency whistle while the other let's out a yell that can be heard across the whole campground. The bear's surprised shining yellow eyes open wide in the unexpected glare before he lumbers off into the dark. This alerts us that wilderness is filled with surprises.



The orientation phase of our program was invaluable preparation because it was during this time that we became familiar with the traditional process of discerning the spiritual lessons of God's creation.

Day Two: The Book of Nature: An Introduction

On Friday, we drive up to a beautiful location along the Sierra Crest. Today we will review an aspect of the patristic practice of “*theoria physike*,” the theological term for eliciting spiritual lessons from creation. Our method was simple. We read the historical legacy of learning from nature as reported in the writings of the fathers and the saints. To this we added pertinent quotes from Scripture. Significantly, the quotes selected only describe the *potential* to learn from nature. Nothing was read or said about method.

Some examples: St. John Chrysostom writes,

He [the Lord] has made the mode of creation to be our best teacher....

In greater detail, and more recently, St. Theophan the Recluse urges us on with the following commentary:

Everything, with no exception, is a source from which you can distill a higher and more celestial knowledge that is both valid and useful. Yet this understanding will alter from one person to another, depending upon their power of penetration, their degree of attention, and their faith and devotion. Those who relentlessly and enthusiastically pursue these exercises will in time feel enriched by the wealth of knowledge that is yielded. Then they will start to reinterpret everything around them and all that they meet with....

When we can do so successfully, the world will be like a holy book filled with uncountable and wonderfully different paragraphs; then any fixed object, any changing event, will refer us to God, so that our thoughts will be directed toward Him.... This text is fertile beyond anything we can conceive.

We learned too that St. Irenaeus of Lyons, much earlier, taught something similar:

For even creation reveals Him who formed it, and the very work made suggests Him Who made it, and the world manifests Him Who ordered it. The Universal Church, moreover, through the whole world, has received this understanding from the Apostles themselves.

The Scriptures too report something similar:

But ask the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee. Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee and the fishes of the sea shall declare to thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? (Job 12:7-9 KJV)

Many other similar passages were read. Upon this meager foundation out of the Orthodox Tradition, participants, without further instruction, were challenged to go out and pray and reflect on how these passages have relevance for us today. After an hour the group would reconvene.

After the allotted time the participants return and report their insights. The comments are instructive. They demonstrate that even teenagers, unschooled in theological studies, can make a genuine recovery of the patristic mode of spiritual formation. Significantly this spiritual formation keys off of the design of creation as well as their elementary knowledge Scripture.

Isaac Bunitsky, a high school student from Syracuse, NY, who has been studying at Saint Innocent's Academy in Kodiak, Alaska, opened. He related that while he prayed, he recalled that every living thing has its own praise for God. "Everything that is alive has breath," he recalled, "and every breath praises the Lord." The purpose of every created thing is to show that God made it, he discerned, "and so it proclaims its Maker."



This was a beautiful location, glorious even. The key is that primal creation has a pristine quality. The hand of man is not changed this place. In this seeming barrenness, the hand of God became almost palpable.

Shane (Elijah) White, an Army veteran recently returned from Iraq and Kuwait and a member of Saint Seraphim's OCA parish in Santa Rosa, California, reported that he soon began to see theology everywhere. "While I started out with an expectation that I would apply all my senses, I quickly realized that without the prompting of the Holy Spirit, my searching would be futile. I knew that I had to be connected to God to learn His lessons in creation. This woke me up to a priestly responsibility to give thanks for all things, to be in a place of worship. Otherwise I would become arrogant in self-seeking."

Alexander Sandoval, also from Saint Seraphim's OCA parish, related that he came on this wilderness program because he felt that it would be good preparation for an upcoming mission to rural Mexico. As he went out, he said that he was unsure how to proceed, so he just laid down in the meadow. Then he described a sequence of perceptions. First he described how he saw the beautiful flowers and bees coming to gather pollen. Then he related how he felt the meadow almost massaging his shoulders and back. After a while the rocks which initially were comfortable began to feel hard and uncomfortable. He saw in this simple experience a teaching that nature does not allow anyone to become complacent in luxury. It gives, but sooner or later, it takes back what it gives. From this he saw an example of how "nature cultivates an ascetic attitude." To understand the spiritual side of

nature, I see how we have to lay aside our fixation on creature comforts.

Fr. James Robinson, a priest at Holy Resurrection parish in Boston and chaplain of our group, described an insight of how nature teaches by analogy. “Even the hardest rocks are eventually worn away by water,” and “the most beautiful purple flowers grow out of what are barely cracks in the rocks.” From this he saw how humans are can be changed in wilderness for “hard hearts can be broken by beauty.”

Hannah Shaw, the 14-year old daughter of Fr. Athanasius Shaw in Olympia, Washington, emphasized a different aspect of creation. “At first I thought I could never learn anything spiritual out here,” she related. “But as I looked at the mountains and all the beautiful flowers, this showed me something about God who made them. The more I looked around, the more I saw beauty and a mysterious complexity everywhere. I began to be grateful just to be here.”

Alicia Krueger, from Holy Dormition parish in Santa Rosa is thirteen-years old; she spent her time looking at small things close to the ground before focusing on efforts by a tiny spider to build a web. “How amazing that this little spider knew how to build such a orderly and symmetrical web,” she observed. “It never went to school, but it instinctively knew how to build a wonder-filled web.” Then she went further and noted, “God has given us many things like this which we take for granted, and so we never see the wonder in creation or the amazing skill of its creatures.”



This sense of wonder, another person interjected, is precisely the quality that leads to humility before God’s works.

Dimitri Bunitsky, also from Syracuse, New York, told how he walked around looking at the all of mountains that line the horizon and found himself “enjoying what God had made. I listened to everything, even to the sounds of the birds.” It all seemed new and fresh to me.

“Through prayer, through reflection on creation and group discussion in which you share your insights,” noted Fred Krueger, the group’s moderator from Santa Rosa, “do you see what you are finding? After barely two hours out here, you are recovering something basic in Orthodox spiritual formation. You are recovering, through nature and prayer, the practice of the virtues.”

“This is a foundation of *‘The Ladder of Divine Ascent.’* The virtues are the verbs in the initial stage of spiritual formation,” he explained. As you grow in the virtues, they become as “windows” into creation. “The acquisition of the virtues, as aspects of Christ in human form, both transform and begin the process of opening creation.”

Fr. Athanasius Shaw, pastor of the OCA's Holy Ascension Church in Olympia, Washington, remarked how surprised he was that so much was being discerned so rapidly out in nature, even by young people. "I am just astounded. I never imagined people could find so much," he declared.

This orientation process would have continued and the group would have probed deeper, but a sprinkling of rain drops hurried us into an early retreat from the mountains and back to camp.

For the next week we would juxtapose readings, the intentional practice of the basic virtues, the simple work of maintaining camp routine plus morning and evening prayers. The result of this "work and prayer" in the wilderness brought about new vigor, even renewal, for each person in his or her Orthodox practice. It also provided a clearer vision of the centrality of Christ, not only in nature, but as a force for cultural renewal.

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Day Three – The Program Begins – The Trail into the High Country

On Saturday morning we break orientation camp and begin a two day hike that takes up into the headwaters of the San Joaquin River before climbing up into our high country base camp. This is an area south of Yosemite that 150 years ago John Muir named "The Range of Light." From our base camp in the high country, we'll take day hikes to different locations. We are now carrying all of our sleeping gear while a set of pack mules will lug the food and heavier items up to our camp. Still our packs are heavy loaded with gear and personal items. This is turned into an opportunity to emphasize the need for prayer and Jesus Christ while on the trail. A slogan captures the challenge of our journey:

*Unless the Lord carry the pack,
They struggle with a heavy sack!*

The trail dips down to 7,500' before leveling off in preparation for the 2,300 foot ascent up to Ruby Lake, our destination in the uniquely stark and beautiful "Range of Light." Carrying a pack uphill while somewhat out of shape involves not only muscles, but a mind and a will that is firmly set on pushing past obstacles and physical shortcomings to reach our destination. In the process, endurance, stamina and perseverance are cultivated, what perhaps tritely we call "wilderness ESP."

After almost five hours on the trail, we stop at a beautiful meadow over the the upper reaches of the San Joaquin river. After an easy first mile, it has been uphill all the way. Now we have a spacious camp site overlooking the river. We gather fire wood, purify water, build a cooking fire, unpack dinner, set up tents and sleeping bags. Everybody has a

task and cooperation flows out of the necessity of establishing a camp in the woods.

It has been a struggle for some to make the hike up the mountain. In some ways the sweat and aching muscles reveal that the trail and all it demands is our first test. But as it offers a real sense of struggle against the terrain, it also provides a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day. Yet we know the physical struggle is just a shadow of the larger spiritual struggle which we face.

Day Four: Practicing Beauty in the Range of Light

Every day has a theme now. This theme is at once a reflection, an exercise for the entire day, and a discussion topic. The theme for today is beauty.

After our daily morning prayers, the quotes which launch our day are from the Book of Psalms, then St. Basil, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Fyodor Doestoyevski.

From the Book of Psalms, we read:

One thing have I desired of the Lord, and that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, and behold the beauty of the Lord...
(Psalm 27:4).

And from Dionysius the Areopagite we hear:

For anyone who reflects, the appearances of beauty become the themes of an invisible harmony. Perfumes as they strike our senses represent spiritual illumination. Material lights point to that immaterial light of which they are the images.

And from Saint Basil the Great:

He magnifies the Lord who observes with a keen understanding and most profound contemplation the greatness of creation, so that from the greatness and beauty of creatures he may contemplate their Creator.

The deeper one penetrates into the reasons for which things in existence were made and were governed, the more he contemplates the magnificence of the Lord and, as far as it lies in him, magnifies the Lord.

Finally we hear a short sentence from the Russian novelist Fyodor Doestoyevski, who bluntly exclaims, "Beauty will save the world!"

We will strive to practice beauty. As we see beauty externally, we will know it also

exists within us, and so we will strive to bring forth beauty in our every thought, word, action. There is a three-fold quality in this practice which reminds us of the Holy Trinity. We seek a flow from beauty seen externally, to a knowledge that that same beauty is within us, and so we are reminded over and over again to bring forth that same beauty into our thoughts, our words, our interactions with each other, and every facet of our being. This practice at first seems easy, but because it requires a mindfulness that is both challenging and demanding, there is more to it than one might think.

At midday, just as we finally reach our campsite, the mule packer arrives on horseback with mules in tow. As we unload several hundred pounds of supplies, thunder clouds are building around us.

“How come we are reflecting on beauty when it looks like it is going to rain and we’re going to be trouble?” asks one teenager. The rumble of thunder interrupts his question and we scramble to set up tents and a great canopy over the cook area.

The thunder continues around us, but we are dry, at least for now. We decide to hold our daily group discussion early while it is still light and warm.

“The practice of beauty,” declares Shane White, “causes a heightened sense of responsibility in me for how and what I think.” He continues observing that beauty, as an aspect of the Creator, should be found everywhere, but we sometimes miss it. Yet “the more we are alive to Christ, the more we find beauty everywhere. God created it all and He called it all good. Jesus shows us how to manifest its beauty.”

Dimitri begins to relate his experience of the beauty exercise, but rain drops interrupt him. All day dark cumulus thunder heads have been dropping rain around us. Somehow we never got wet. Now, just as camp is being completed, a monstrous dark thunder- cloud rolls upon us: lightning flashes and a blizzard of hail stones crash down upon us.

The entire area is quickly turning white with hail. It builds up to perhaps three to five inches deep, and it looks almost like snow. There is a joy in our experience of the storm and the way it quickly coats the trees and ground with a blanket of white.



We quickly realize that here in the wilderness we have to form community. There is just too much for just one person

“This is almost like winter,” says Hannah. With the hail coating the ground and the trees in a mantle of white, it sure looks like snow. It’s cold too.

to manage easily. Already, through our common spiritual striving, we are ceasing to be individuals and becoming bonded into “indivisibles.”

In his journal entry for today, Alexander Sandoval described how important these first days have been in forming a proper foundation. “I was glad that the first four days have been relaxed and easy-going. This allowed me to acclimatize to the altitude and terrain, but perhaps more importantly, to the mix of personalities. The rhythmic pattern of prayer and the patience of our leader ensured fellowship among us, and it built a pattern of respect and spiritual striving into the program. Out in the wilderness, we had to confront our pampered ways and it could have been easy to succumb to irritation, impatience, displeasure, frustration and a temptation to anger if a nurturing framework was not firmly in place. To me the temptations of the day seemed like signs that a “decontamination” from the unnaturalness of the city was taking place inside me. The artificiality of the city seems to create artificial people who are quickly spoiled by an ability to indulge their hungers and appetites at the slightest whim. But here in the wilderness, life is simple. You either work with wilderness and things godly, or you work against them and ultimately your own spiritual striving.”

Late this first night, one participant is startled by a dream-like confrontation with what he says seemed to be a nasty demon who speaks and says that and it would kill that person and send the whole group down off the mountain. Only by rising up and fervently invoking the presence of Jesus Christ and the Holy Archangels does it finally depart. This shows that there is more here in these mountains than trees and pretty lakes.

Day Five: Thanksgiving Every Day

The air is bright and clear this morning. Patches of hail continue on the ground, especially in shady areas. Thanksgiving is our theme today. After morning prayers we read from the Scriptures and the Fathers a series of commentaries on thanksgiving.

From Saint Paul’s First Epistle to the Thessalonians, we read,

*Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing.
In every thing give thanks:
For this is the will of God in Jesus Christ concerning you*

Next, from Saint Clement of Alexandria, we hear the following exhortation:

It is not in a specific place, nor in a privileged temple,
nor on certain celebrations or chosen days,
But in every instant of life, in all places
that the Christian proclaims thanksgiving.
Going through our life as in a celebration,

certain that God is always everywhere,
We sing while we work, we travel to the singing of hymns,
we conduct ourselves in everything as citizens of heaven.

We hear too from His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew who explains to us a deeper dimension to thanksgiving.

Our sin toward the world, or the spiritual root of all our pollution, lies in our refusal to view life and the world as a sacrament of thanksgiving, and as a gift of constant communion with God on a global scale.

A discussion ensues about thanksgiving, its nature and its practice. We leave with a question: What are the consequences of vigorous and continual practice? To answer this and other questions from our own experience rather than trite conjecture, we go out with an intention to relentlessly practice thanksgiving all day today.

Later, after hiking and exploring with this theme foremost in mind, we see that despite the urging of Scripture and the Orthodox Tradition, there has been too little emphasis, at least at the parish level, on how to practice thanksgiving, especially a thanksgiving “without ceasing.”

We see too that unless we are very intentional about prioritizing spiritual practice during the day, we easily get caught up in our physical activities and forget that we are here first for a spiritual purpose. A clear lesson from today is that vigorous activity overwhelms our focus on the practice of any virtue. We decide to address this by correcting our program design to bring a more deliberate focus onto our spiritual practice.

Late that night, after we have retired to our tents, we have a surprise visitor. A large aggressive black bear swaggers into camp and beats ferociously on our closed metal food containers. He knocks food boxes around the camp area, and creates a terrible racket. Pots and pans clank and scatter before his violent quest for food. Thankfully, every container is “bear proof” sturdy and tightly sealed, and not a morsel of food was lost. Fr. James is sleeping in his tent just a few feet from this angry bear. He has a special experience of midnight prayer as he imagines if the bear can’t get food, maybe he will become dinner.

During orientation, we often discussed the need for food and camp security and our preparations enabled us to meet this expected test. The faithful obedience to camp procedures provided a good parallel to spiritual rules dealing with discipline and cleanliness and obedience. Failure with our camp rules would have meant a fat bear and hungry teenagers as the bear would have eaten all of the lunches for all of the remaining days. But failure with spiritual rules bring degradation to life and even death.

Day Six: The Love of God's Creation

We have silence every morning until after prayers. This morning however, there is excited chatter about the bear and each person has a different commentary on the strength or the noise that made while whacking heavy metal containers around like play things.

Today our theme involves the love of God's creation. As we adjust our program method, we will devote more time to the intentional and exclusive practice of the day's virtue. As we are more deliberate about our spiritual focus, we will hopefully plant these qualities deeper into our beings.

We also readjust our camp routine. Dimitri and Shane take over the task of pumping and filtering drinking water each morning. Alexander and Shane make the lunches. Fr. James and Fred prepare breakfast. Fr. Athanasius, Alicia and Isaac team up to gather wood for fire.



We had a beautiful natural chapel made of rocks with sloping sides. It even faced directly east into the rising sun. Every morning and evening we gathered here for prayer.

This morning over breakfast Father Athanasius observes how this program would be excellent for the inadequately addressed need to bond fathers and sons better together in Orthodox parishes – probably mothers and daughters too. There is a growing need, he describes, for families to share spiritual activities together, and nowhere is this more acute than with fathers and sons. This, he explains, is because most parents turn the education of their children over to school teachers while they work at jobs unrelated to family duties. Parents may be with their children in the evenings, and while they impart their values, many are not prepared to share in their spiritual instruction. But a full religious education should be more than just what children obtain from liturgy or Sunday school. This program, he continues, could provide a valuable dimension to youth education, even adult education, at the parish level because it would fortify people in the foundational principles of Christian discipleship.

After this discussion we stay close to camp as we go off to practice an intentional love for what God loves.

Later in the day, we hold our daily discussion. Here are a few excerpts from participant comments.

“I made a special effort to see the better aspects of my brother, Dimitri,” explains Isaac. “I had to fight to get beyond a dwelling on his bad parts which I have to live with every day.”

“I almost died today,” related Shane White. “This is going to sound silly, but what happened is that a Fig Newton candy wrapper blew into the water, and Dimitri and I both dove in to get it. We’re racing to see who can get to it first. While the water was tolerably cold along shore, it was absolutely freezing further out. Yikes! The ice cold water off shore was so intense that it took my breath away and paralyzed my muscles so that I could scarcely breathe, let alone swim.” While in the water and shocked with the thought that I might not make it,” he relates how he has the flash of a mystical experience that his dying not being right with God. “This was a sobering and even life-changing experience. When I came out,” he continues, “I was so cold and so shocked that I couldn’t even talk about it.”

Afterwards he is so moved that he writes a touching poem about love and Jesus Christ and the crucial tie we all have to creation.

“My experience was different, but it has a similar ending,” says Alexander. “I went to the top of a granite mountain where I too was inspired to write a song about the love of God and repentance. Then I sang about practical ways to teach love and this became the focus of my reflection. I saw a perfect creation just the way God created it, but what we humans have done to it is more a desecration than a blessing.”

Alicia speaks next and explains her reflection. “I tried to love a rock, but that was a hard challenge. Then I saw how the discomforts of wilderness are good for us because without wilderness, we would not know the world the way it originally was for early people. Without wilderness we could easily become spoiled people. This has happened to many people and this shows why we need wild places to teach us how life really is.”

Hannah Shaw tells how she went out and laid down on a warm rock under the bright sun. “I became so grateful to God that He has given us a warm sun that gives us life. I was thankful, and that touched me.”

“I have been overwhelmed with so much spiritual intensity,” says Fr. Athanasius. “This afternoon I just wanted to be quiet and alone with Jesus Christ.”

Fr. James added that he was grateful for the solitude. “I related my experience to that of Saint Herman after he first arrived in Alaska. The wilderness provided the framework for his spiritual life and his love. It helps us in our spiritual life to have these experiences.”



The headwaters of the San Joaquin river with Mount Ritter on the horizon. This is an entry way into the Range of Light in the High Sierras.

Day Seven – The Practice of Solitude

Today we hike several miles to beautiful Garnet Lake where we would seek the depths of solitude and silence. The emphasis was not just on quiet, but on probing the depths of silence. Fred explains that there is a silence to the lips, but that veils a deeper silence of the mind which overlays yet deeper silence. How far could we penetrate? We take three hours for solitary practice before we reconvene and discuss our experiences.

“I started out trying to kept quiet,” says Dimitri, “but I found that silence is hard because I have become so used to noise. The noise keeps me busy, but I see that it is also a distraction that keeps me so busy that I don’t remember God.”

Fr. James found a cave on the side of the mountain and there he situated himself for his three hours. “And I was really enjoying the depths of the quiet....”

Hannah then describes her experience. “The sun was so nice and warm. It was nice to be quiet, and very relaxing too. I finally got sleepy and just took a nap.”

Alicia follows, “Yes, I found a warm rock in the sun and I fell asleep too. But when I woke up, maybe an hour later, all nature seemed much more alive. I stayed silent, and now I heard so much more. I heard the birds chirping, the water lapping at the shore, the wind blowing through the trees. Even though all these sounds had been there before, I had missed them because I was not quiet in myself.”

“I sat for awhile on a rock and then I took a nap,” says Isaac. “When I woke up, I did the same and just listened to the sounds around me.”

“I was silent for awhile,” says Shane, “but then I felt an overpowering need to walk over to Father James where he sat in his cave and discuss some issues which were coming up strong within me. This conversation was not part of my plan,

Reflection by Fr. Athanasius Shaw several weeks after our wilderness exploration was completed

My evaluation of the wilderness trip is thus: It was good, helpful, and useful. The format was simple and effective. ...

What the Fathers say about the “book of nature” is really startling to me. Some of the greatest Fathers give rich food for thought. An important connection was made for me between the Church and God’s creation. The earth and its beauty do indeed reveal qualities of God that are meant to bring us into communion with Him. My love for the wilderness can be an aid to my spiritual life, prompted by the spiritual knowledge of the Fathers. These Fathers certainly did not consider their love for nature, the wilderness, whatever we might call it, as an isolated experience from the rest of their Orthodox Christian life.

By ‘breaking down’ the experience into these ‘keys,’ I see that this can be a valuable aid in focusing on traditional spiritual striving in our daily life. In other words, these qualities, or keys, that we thought about and attempted to get a feeling for are helpful in giving us direction, where to direct our focus, when we come back into everyday working life. They are transcendent qualities because they come from God. The ‘book of nature’ offers a God-blessed way to ‘discover,’ or rediscover, these spiritual keys. +

but it turned out to be very helpful.”

“I found this exercise difficult to do without prayer,” explained Alexander. “I started out scattered, I think because this required such a high level of concentration and intentionality. For me to become silent I had to battle a number of issues, starting with an affliction with my knee. After I let go of the soreness in my knee, I found a layer of thoughts that I had to slow down. I learned that one needs prayer to practice silence in an effective manner.”

Fr. Athanasius described his experience and also an insight from it. “I saw that I’ve been too much on the go, always exerting my will, always trying to use effort to accomplish anything. Somehow there should be a way to let go of all these other concerns. I get tired of having to do so much with my will. There is a need for synergy, and through silence I could feel something more than just my own will at work.”

That night Alexander writes the following in his journal. “Over these past few days, I have sought to delve into the mysteries of creation. I confess that for the first few days, I was something of a tourist. The lies of the city still dwelled in my attitudes.

“By becoming still, as we sought to do today, I first saw that our brothers and sisters are easily captive to the vices and cares of the city. Then I saw that their souls had been deformed by pride and disobedience to God and that it is hard to escape the sins of our culture. In silence though, I gradually came to understand that we, His children, have to see the goodness of life in His creation, or we will only find death.

If we do not flee with Christ into the wilderness, if we do not receive the fruits of His creation which are found in the wild places, then we can become habituated and cemented into the lies of Babel and Sodom and Gomorrah – in the things of this world. But I have found that one can tear away the outer veil of worldliness, which the wilderness shows is also the veil of death. We can enliven our souls by being purified with Christ in the wilderness.

“Out here away from the glamour and commotion of the city, the big distractions are inside. Here I see how one can open up to the beauty and purification of a life of ascetic and wondrous contemplation. Somehow we don’t come close to learning this lesson in the city.”



Disciplined group discussion was an important feature in the success of this pilgrimage into the spiritual lessons of wilderness. By ourselves it is hard to learn about God through nature, maybe impossible for a beginner. But in community and communion with one another, we learn from each other’s experiences.

Day Eight – The High Practice of Participation

The theme for today is participation. This is a striving to enter into the high and lofty presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the high ascetic pinnacles of the Orthodox tradition.

We hear the Scriptures and then inspiring words from Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, a Romanian theologian.

It is only through an eternal participation in the infinity of this Supreme Personal reality that our being reckons it will see its own meaning fulfilled. This is how the Orthodox Christian doctrine of the deification of our being through participation in God or through grace is to be understood.

To make this high striving accessible, our program breaks down into elemental qualities (see the Journal Handbook for this day's exercise) so that we can practice them first as separate qualities before joining them together. Fred calls this the "lower ladder" of divine ascent.

Just as we begin to discuss the practice of participation, a golden eagle – for the first time on this trip – flies overhead and lets out a loud whistling screech. This gets our attention, but somehow seems to remind us that what we are doing has the attention of those above.

Alexander begins. "The practice of this exercise made me feel how much I yearn to give myself over to Jesus Christ."

Isaac: "Through this exercise I found that I could catch myself when I started falling into negative attitudes. At least I could catch myself. Usually I don't."

Fr. James: "This attitude is where we should be all the time. For me, this was an amazing exercise."

"If we are ever to acquire the Holy Spirit," says Shane, "we certainly have to acquire these qualities. In the process of doing this exercise the question of what occupation I should follow kept coming up for me. As far as I am concerned, this practice should be central to Orthodox practice because it brings us close to Jesus Christ and makes his presence accessible and even imitable."



This was our wilderness refectory. After breakfast, we would read the exercise for the day and hear the quotes that related to it.

We now are nearing the end of our program. This is our last full day in the high mountains. Fred convenes our group after dinner and asks us each to reflect on whether or not this “Christ in the Wilderness” program was a valuable experience.

Alexander responds first. “Yes, it was very valuable. If parishioners could attend something like this, it would help them break away from a captivity to worldliness. It would expand and strengthen the life of the parish. And it would help members of the parish to know each other better. This sort of experience is valuable too because it gives simple spiritual guidance that can last forever.”

Shane: “Absolutely, this was good. The average parishioner does not get out into the woods to enhance his spirituality. Most people wouldn’t even have a clue about how to go about it. Here in the wilderness I felt I was genuinely being caught up in doing God’s will.”

“These exercises provide a discipline, even a monastic quality to them,” added Alexander. “This helped me to break away from worldly concerns and focus on spiritual growth. Sunday liturgy alone is just not enough. Classes don’t do it either. But by doing these exercises on the virtues, one should better appreciate Sunday liturgy.”

“This was most helpful to me too,” responds Fr. Athanasius. “I have always loved wilderness. It was helpful to understand it in a clearer way, to break it down into incremental parts. I have always loved nature, but I have never been able to put it all together in this way. When we approach nature in a Godly way, it can become a spiritual teaching, even a foundation for a deeper understanding and striving. It is also helpful to not have to compartmentalize my love for nature and for Orthodox life. This brings these things together and makes them wholistic.”

Alicia reflects on how this trip taught her much more than appreciation for nature. “I always thought that nature was grass and trees and pretty flowers outdoors, and that is all nice, but now I see that there is much more to it because nature is like a huge cathedral. It is a place to pray. I learned that God is in every single thing.”

“For me, it was good to get away from home,” replies Isaac. “I liked the hikes and the fishing. I also learned that I have a long way to go spiritually. It was good to have a spiritual practice and to learn how to appreciate things more.”

“Yes, absolutely!” declares Fr. James. “But I came with a purpose. I came to see if God is calling me to this sort of work. Now I can say, yes, He is. It has been a privilege to be here. My time has confirmed to me that this sort of activity is valuable.”

We close the evening with the Vespers for Creation which the Office of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has circulated. Afterwards in our silence after prayers the stars are brilliant and seem especially close, almost alive.

Day Nine – Back to Civilization

As we pack up to leave our mountain encampment, Fr. Athanasius observes that wilderness has a special quality that brings into focus where we are spiritually. “Somehow spiritual practice is clearer out here,” he remarks.

As a group we have decided to improvise a short cut and hike diagonally down the steep side of the mountain. No trail descends the brush-covered jagged side of the mountain below us. Still we improvise a route around the rock out-croppings that shortens our journey. Besides it is exciting to be trail-blazing in this rocky and rugged area.

As we hike out, clouds again gather over and around us. The further we go, the thicker and darker the clouds become. Four hours later, as we exit the mountains, thunder is booming off the nearby mountain peaks and it has become substantially colder. The first drops of rain fall intermittently.

It has been a great trip. We have learned important lessons. This feeble account cannot begin to capture the full spirit of our journey nor the intangible soaring elation and joy that we found. We have formed bonds of fellowship. Perhaps most importantly we have demonstrated that even in this modern era, we can still turn to the wilderness and find transforming spiritual experiences. In some way we are all indelibly changed.



The rain and hail forced us to be resourceful and prepared for anything. In this photo remnants of winter snow can still be seen on the slopes of the higher peaks.

Program Post Script

Subsequent to this sojourn in the wilderness, several participants’ lives changed in unexpected ways. Several months later, Alexander Sandoval announced a calling to the priesthood and enrolled at Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville, NY. Shane White also discerned a priestly calling and prepared enter Holy Cross Seminary in Boston. Hannah Shaw, still only 14, traveled to Saint Paisius Women’s Monastery in the Arizona desert and entered the lyceum for young women.