

# Christ in The Wilderness program

The Christ in the Wilderness program is a return to the desert, not as monks as in centuries past, but as visitors, as pilgrims, who seek a closer connection to Jesus Christ and a deeper understanding of creation as teaching method.

## Historical Commentary

### Saint Irenaeus of Lyons

Creation reveals Him who formed it... The universal Church has received this tradition from the apostles themselves.

### Saint Anthony the Great

When a visiting philosopher asked how such a wise man as he got along without books, the saint replied, "My book is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, they are at my hand."

### Saint Jerome

The desert fathers went to wild places to flee the corruption of cities, to wage war with their passions, but especially to encounter the holy.

### Saint John Chrysostom

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

### Blessed Augustine

Some people, to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the creation. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?

### Saint Maximus the Confessor

Creation is a bible whose letters are aspects of creatures and creation. Conversely, Scripture is like a cosmos constituted of heaven and earth and things in between.

### Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch

The mystical way in Orthodoxy requires the contemplation of nature....

## Long Island, New York

by Paul Maus

In May, 2007 the Greek Orthodox Church of the Hamptons enjoyed an introductory version of the Christ in the Wilderness program.

The program is a rediscovery of the Orthodox Christian practice of learning spiritual lessons from nature. The program involved periods of prayer and reflection alternated with group process to produce a blend of low-key instruction, personal experience and group discussion. Each person related his or her personal insights from time out in the woods and we learned from one another's experiences.

As the program progressed, the centrality of Jesus Christ in participants' lives became more apparent. Some participants were moved to tears and opened up in a manner of confession and related deep feelings about their lives in relationship to Christ.

The event began with an evening presentation on the historical potential to learn through creation. The next day involved a trip to a nature preserve where the participants found a deeper understanding of Christ's connections to the environment.

The parish has subsequently undertaken the task of revising its Sunday school program to include the methodologies of spiritual discernment used during the weekend.



## Mt Rainier, Washington

by Matushka Anna Shaw

Orthodox Christians from several jurisdictions met near Mount Rainier for an introduction to learning from nature. The event was attended by clergy, lay members, teenagers, and catechumens from the Seattle area.

After dinner Fr. Athanasius Shaw introduced the concept of learning out in nature. He read excerpts from Church fathers and the Gospels.

The next day we faced the challenge of how to learn from nature. Some sat by the rolling river, others near the trees, some wrote, some did the Jesus prayer while others hiked around. What was most interesting is how the ensuing contemplation brought forth quite profound revelations. Some people shared struggles, some inspirations, some reflections from their conscience, but what incredible discussions!

We did this several times and each time, we were as a group, going deeper. The fellowship went from friendly to real brotherhood in Christ. It was surprising that through this setting, men and women who had just been introduced on Friday were sharing intimately on Saturday.

What did I gain? The word that kept coming to me is a "bridge" — God's creation is a bridge to eternal life, yet it wasn't individual. We experienced the "Book of Nature" together! Through this simple format, a bridge was built to fellowship. This is not the simple fellow-ship of parish coffee hour. There was something about the peacefulness of the process, the shared essence of Orthodox Christians coming together, brethren contemplating God's world of nature and the lovable acceptance everyone wore on their faces, that this bridge of unity was built.

