

Program Report

A Pilgrimage into the Sacramental and Revelational Dimensions of Wilderness

by Elias White

And Jesus withdrew himself into the wilderness and prayed... (Luke 5:16)

The OFT sponsored a ten-day exploration to determine the extent to which a modern group could acquire spiritual growth through wilderness. The excerpts below summarize a few of the lessons and comments.

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG TO REALIZE that in wilderness we need community. There is too much for just one person to manage easily. Through our common spiritual striving, we quickly are ceasing to be individuals and becoming bonded into "indivisibles."

Our program focused on the acquisition of a different virtue every day. This gave us a simple activity and clear method for our spiritual striving.

In a journal entry Alexander described his experience of the first several days of the program. "Out in the wilderness, we have to confront our pampered ways and it would have been easy to succumb to irritation, frustration and a temptation to anger if a nurturing framework was not firmly in place. The temptations of the day seemed like a "decontamination" from the unnaturalness of the city was taking place inside me. The artificiality of city life seems to create artificial people... But here in wilderness, life is simple. You either work with wilderness and things godly, or you work against them – and your own spiritual striving...."

"Out here away from the glamour and commotion of the city, the big distractions are inside. I see now how one can open up to the beauty and purification of a life of ascetic and wondrous contemplation. Somehow we don't learn this lesson in an urban parish."

Over breakfast Fr. Athanasius observed how this program would be excellent for bonding fathers and sons together in parishes – mothers and daughters too. There is a growing need, he explains, for families to share spiritual activities with their older children.

It is difficult for us as city dwellers to move into wilderness and live like the desert fathers did, but we can still visit the wilderness. If we come with discipline, spiritual exercise and knowledge, we too can grow in Christ and develop spiritual strength like those of old.

We have learned that through a determined focus on the virtues, we can "exercise ourselves unto godliness." Moreover this method allows the lessons of creation to open up.

"Through prayer, through reflection on creation and group discussion, do you see what is happening?" asked Fred Krueger, the group's facilitator from Santa Rosa, California, "You are recovering something basic in Orthodox spiritual formation – the practice of the virtues."

"This is the foundation of 'The Ladder of Divine Ascent.' The virtues are the verbs in spiritual formation," he explained. They also become windows into creation. The virtues, as aspects of



Christ in human form, provide transformation. If we are going to engage the degraded state of creation, we need spiritual muscle to change our lives.

Fr. James Robinson, our trip pastor from Holy Resurrection parish in Boston, declares, "The attitudes that we have developed out here are how we should live all the time."



For a detailed report on this exploration of wilderness as a framework for spiritual learning and growth, please write the OFT.



