



It was the summer of 2002, my second summer as a counselor on staff at the Antiochian Village, the mother camp for all eight of the camping programs throughout the Archdiocese. As a returning counselor, I was confident, perhaps too confident, of my abilities to lead a cabin of young men for four two-week sessions of summer camp. Registration day for the first session arrived and I waited with the rest of the energetic staff for my first camper of the summer. Finally, over a megaphone from the steps of the Metropolitan PHILIP Welcome Lodge, a voice rang out, "Philip, you have a camper!" I enthusiastically ran over to the lodge porch only to see my camper, my first camper of the eight-week summer camping season, leaping over the rail of the porch, running to his parents' van, climbing to the top, and holding onto the top of the van for dear life, refusing to come down. Fr. Michael Nasser, the director at the time, calmly went over to the van, coaxed the young man from the top of the van, turned to the parents and said, "Everything is going to be fine, you just have to leave now. Philip will take care of him and he will have a great time at camp." Fr. Michael then turned to me, smiled and said, "Philip, you have a camper."

The Risen Christ at Camp

Two weeks later, the night before check-out, this young man came to my bunk in the middle of the night and was once again in tears. "We have been through this already," I thought. "You're leaving tomorrow, no need to be homesick, you're going." But, he surprised me by tearfully saying, "I don't want to go home!" I laughed to myself and said, "I know, I'm sorry. We had a great time though. Just wait until next year. Now, go back to bed." Camp: filled with prayer, positive interaction with other campers, constant focus on Christ, not just in the chapel twice a day, but on the sports fields, in the dining hall, in

This article was inspired by a recent talk given by Fr. Philip Rogers which emphasized the important role that the Order of St. Ignatius plays in supporting the Archdiocesan camping program, and the positive impact that the camps have on our young people.



the cabins, everywhere – the Risen Christ at camp can transform even the toughest hearts and the biggest fears.

“The earth is the Lord’s, and its fullness, the world and all who dwell therein” (Psalm 23/24:1), the theme for our 2010 conference season, helps explain why the experience of Christ at camp is so powerful. In fact, Psalm 23/24 in its entirety shows us the final goal of camp and even our whole life: unity with Christ, and a blueprint for how to get there. How does a psalm written thousands of years ago do that? Did David envision the rolling hills of summer camp, and canoeing on the lake? Probably not, but let me explain.

In most of the sermons and talks given throughout the conferences, the theme was stewardship; in particular, properly taking care of the world that God created and gave over to our care. Perhaps our greatest responsibility, however, is to be proper stewards and trainers of the next generation, the children who will continue to preach, teach, and live the Gospel that has been passed down through the faith of our fathers for two thousand years. “This the generation of those who seek Him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob” (Psalm 23/24:6). Proper stewardship of our children is most assuredly not done by attempting to mold our camping programs after the world in which we live. Instead, before campers even arrive, the foundation of the camp is set and firmly rooted in the Church, the Body of Christ. Great effort is made to ensure that the Risen Christ is taught in every aspect of camp. Christian Education lessons are worked out and updated every year; craft projects are organized; staff are selected from a pool of serious, practicing Orthodox Christian college students and young adults committed to Christ and His Church. Everything in camp begins, ends, and continues in between, with the constant reminder given to us at the beginning

of Psalm 23/24; Christ is everywhere, and everything is, in fact, His.

Arriving at camp is itself the beginning of transformation for the campers. They do not arrive just anywhere for camp. The locations chosen for all of the camping programs throughout the Archdiocese are in a natural environment, surrounded by trees, sometimes mountains and lakes, with animals and insects as “normal” parts of camp life. The surroundings of camp bring to mind the importance of the world around us, instill a love for natural beauty, and make us mindful of the world that God prepared for us. Camp St. Thekla even has a few resident goats that are fed the left-over food from the dining hall, helping to teach that nothing should be wasted. “For He founded it upon the seas and prepared it upon the rivers” (23/24:2). And “prepared” it He did, for a specific purpose, “for us and for our salvation.”

The proper location in a truly natural environment is not enough to bring about an encounter with the Risen Christ, though it surely helps. “Who shall ascend to the mountain of the Lord? Who shall stand in His holy place?” (23/24:3). These questions asked by the psalmist are the guiding principle for every decision made at camp. The purpose of the entire program is to show all who are involved with camp what it means to work to ascend the “mountain of the Lord,” not an easy task. Living the life in Christ is very difficult, but the structure and model of life at camp shows how it can be accomplished. The psalmist answers the question above, “He who has innocent hands and a pure heart” (23:4). Recently, I have been in many different airports and other large public places and had ample opportunity to observe people. Most people walking through airports, driving in cars, or even standing in conversation have their hands busy with a number of different electronic devices: cell phones, iPods, mp3 players, or video games. None of these things are evil in themselves, but they can be a distraction and an opportunity for sinful behavior. One young lady I was speaking with asked me if I used text messaging. I confirmed that I did, but on a limited basis, I only paid for 250 minutes a month. She was shocked, saying, “I couldn’t do that. My phone only saves 500 text messages and I delete it twice a day.” Clearly, we live in a time when our hands are constantly busy. The psalms remind us, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 45/46:11). This

“The earth is the Lord’s, and its fullness, the world and all who dwell therein.”
(Psalm 23/24:1)

injunction is difficult to follow when our hands and our lives are constantly distracted with any number of new and exciting gizmos – *none of which are allowed at camp!*

Upon checking in at camp, each camper hands over his or her “contraband,” including all of these fancy phones, portable GPS systems, and anything else that you can plug in to tune out the world that God created. Contrary to what some parents might think, this is not to limit a camper’s interaction with them; instead it is meant to give them an opportunity to see that they *can live* without 24/7 contact with friends on Facebook; they don’t have to watch TV or check their e-mail every two hours. The world still goes on. We forget that this generation does not remember a time when TV, the Internet, and even cell phones did not exist!

The structure and life at camp is engineered specifically to show how important it is to maintain “innocent hands and a pure heart.” This is not done in a dramatic fashion, but in the little aspects of camp life. With no electronic devices, each camper is forced to interact and establish a relationship with the people who are right in front of them. Even when these people are from different parts of the country and might not share the same interests, campers interact with each other – *and love it!* Every afternoon, no camper is left in front of a TV screen or a computer (none of those at camp); they are outside swimming in the lake, playing basketball and soccer, learning new games like angleball and castle. (Ask any camper, he or she will explain it to you.) In the morning, they learn about the Church and their faith in Christ through lessons taught by knowledgeable staff; they make crafts and go on nature hikes and are given the opportunity to ask a priest any question that they have ever had about Christ and His Church. The evenings are filled with fun events that involve the campers in skits, dancing, and competing in camp-wide activities. All of this is bracketed with prayer. They pray Matins in the morning, Vespers in the evening, before and after every meal, and even prayers in the cabins just before lights out. Prayer serves as the backbone of the entire camp experience, molding and transforming all of the campers.

Who else may ascend to the top of the mountain? “He who does not lift up his soul to vanity” (verse 4). Young and old, people are often concerned about how they look. Unfortunately, much of what



is seen on television, in magazines, and even what is “fashionable” in stores, does not model Christian modesty. At camp, this issue is addressed with a dress code. Some might call it strict, and perhaps it is at times, but the purpose is to give an example of proper ways to dress, not just at camp, but in the “real world” as well. At camp you won’t find bikinis, short shorts, revealing clothing, and the like. What you will find are campers well-dressed for Church, wearing proper clothing for playing sports, and even fun casual outfits for dancing. Everyone is outside, everyone is playing sports, and everyone is sweaty and stinky – *it’s camp!* Some counselors will even suggest a one-day vacation from make-up. Being dressed in a Christian fashion is something not just for camp, but a lesson that many campers take home.

“He who does not swear deceitfully to his neighbor. He shall receive blessing from the Lord and mercy from the God of his salvation” (verses 4–5). In everything at camp, everyone from the director to the youngest camper relies on everyone else. Every day we have a system of cleaning and work, preparation and finishing-up, team activities that would not work without the cooperation and honesty of others. At Camp St. Thekla, every day the campers are judged by their ability to clean up their cabins before heading to Matins on time. (Early is on time, on time is late!) Those cabins that work together, dividing up the jobs, following through with their tasks, are the ones scored with the cleanest cabins. And those with the cleanest cabins are rewarded with slushies at dinner for a job well-done. Working together as the “Body of Christ” is an important lesson for all campers and staff to learn.

All of these little things, these regular routine parts of camp, which might not seem like much, together bring about the most important outcome of the camp experience. “Lift up the gate, O you

*“This the generation of those who seek Him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob”
(Psalm 23/24:6).*



rulers, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall enter. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord powerful in battle. Lift up the gates, O you rulers, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall enter. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory” (verses 7–10). These familiar words, said in a powerful interchange on Great and Holy Pascha, close out this beautiful psalm, and show the ultimate purpose of camp and, in fact, of all our lives. The ultimate purpose of camp is to experience the Risen Christ, He is the King of Glory, Who has ascended the mountain and continues to reveal to us how to ascend it with Him.

The structured, simple, routine environment of camp provides a safe place for campers to allow their weaknesses to be strengthened by Christ. Campers come dealing with all kinds of different issues: parents in jail, families broken by suicide and divorce, or emotional and physical abuse. Many of them have countless reasons not to trust people who are in authority. For many campers, camp is the first time they feel comfortable and confident enough to share their struggles with their fellow campers and loving staff, and to pour themselves out to Christ in the Holy Mystery of Confession. Camp provides a joyful opportunity for campers and staff alike to realize that they are not alone in their struggles, that they have the power and grace of the Risen Christ and the Church that He founded for their salvation.

One of the only places that this wonderful psalm is used in the liturgical life of the Church is in the service of preparation for Holy Communion. Everyone who comes to camp learns a greater appreciation for communion; communion with each other and most importantly, communion with the Risen

Christ and His Saints. One evening, one of the last evenings of camp for the summer, I was walking from the chapel to the lake when I was stopped by one of our youngest campers. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “St. Thekla winked at me during the service.” Being in the youngest cabin, this particular camper was right at the front of the church and in fact he had been standing right in front of the icon of St. Thekla for the Vespers service that evening. Not sure what to say, I looked at him, shrugged my shoulders and said, “Why not? She is definitely here with us, praying for us and with us.” Not the most profound statement, but he agreed and went about the rest of the evening and the rest of the time at camp recognizing that he had a unique experience showing the reality of the communion of the saints in Christ.

All of the lessons that campers learn throughout their experience of camp are not just for that holy place, but are a proper preparation for Holy Communion, the experience of the Risen Christ *par excellence!* If campers learn all of these wonderful lessons and have this experience of the Risen Christ at camp and leave it there, then truly camp has failed. The purpose of all of this is to take these experiences, these life-changing realizations of the power of Christ in our daily lives, and bring that back to the communion of the saints experienced in our parish communities. Though surprising even when I think again about this encounter with our young camper, I know these types of events are not unique to Camp St. Thekla, or even to camp. But what this event and the words and use of this Psalm do is remind all of us that camp is not just a place for young people to be away from home for a week, play sports, stay up late, and see their friends; camp is a place where campers encounter the Risen Christ. Where we find the Risen Christ, we find all of His saints, including St. Thekla, who apparently will even reveal her presence to a young man through a playful wink. Encountering Christ and His Saints at camp helps the campers, staff, and even the director, more readily see Him and properly commune with Him everywhere and at all times.

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