

Life at the Antiochian Village: a *Transfiguring* Experience
by Fr. Fred Shaheen

When the Antiochian Village began its first season in 1978, many saw it as a place of retreat, an oasis of Orthodox Christianity isolated and protected from the rest of the world and its worldly matters; a Holy Mountain in the Laurel Highlands of Western Pennsylvania.

To a great extent, this popular notion held true: the Village was removed from much of the rest of the world. Our kids, the good Orthodox ones, could go there, and for a time, not have to deal with the problems that were out there in the world. They could go up the mountain to experience something other-worldly: two weeks of fellowship, prayer, and play that was satisfying in a way the world did not know and could not offer.

But over time, things started to change. Little by little, as Orthodoxy began to engage and infiltrate more diverse aspects of our culture, the kids who went to camp - our kids, the good, Orthodox ones - brought with them all the baggage of a multi-cultural society. The Village, previously a bastion of sanity and sanctity, now had to deal with the same ugly things that were out there in the world: broken homes, teenage pregnancy, suicide, violence. Little by little, the world was creeping up the mountain.

In spite of changing times, it was then and still is “good to be there” on the Holy Mountain of Western PA. So good, in fact, that kids who go to camp are often so inspired by the life of prayer and fellowship that they never want to leave. On the last day of camp, when everyone is saying tearful goodbyes, the kids are already counting down the months, the weeks, the days, till next year, when they can begin the experience all over again.

What to do? Life is so good up on the mountain, and the presence of God can be felt in just about everything that happens there. The world is not like that. What to do? It’s no surprise that so many kids wish they could stay there all year long.

Each year, the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord, August 6, coincides with the last session of camp at the Antiochian Village. Indeed, we can see a parallel between kids going to camp and the disciples who went up Mt. Tabor with Jesus. Peter, James and John witnessed something that they never could have seen had they not ascended the mountain: they saw Jesus changed in appearance, radiating the all the glory of the uncreated divinity. And Peter said, “Lord, it is good to be here.” *Let’s stay*. Peter wanted to encamp on the mountain, to set up a tent for Jesus next to Moses and Elijah; he wanted, effectively, to make the glory of that moment last forever.

But Peter was missing the point. Jesus did not take him up there so that he could revel in glory. Our fathers teach us that Jesus revealed His glory to his disciples so that when He was crucified, they would know that His passion was voluntary. When they saw Him nailed to the cross, seemingly defeated, they would recall how His glory, the glory of the triune Godhead, shone from Him on Mount Tabor, and know that He is true God from true God. At the Village, when kids don’t want to leave, we tell them, “take the Village home.” You can’t stay here all year long, but if the life of fellowship, prayer and play is so meaningful to you, bring what you learn at the Village to your homes and parishes. We Orthodox have seen the light of Tabor: our Lord Jesus Christ has shown us his glory in the light of the true faith we have received. And he has commissioned us to take that light out into the world, to make believers of all men. We, like those kids at camp, can’t stay on the mountain forever. We must learn how to take what we experience, and share it with the world; we can’t hoard the light of our Orthodox faith; and we

can't be territorial about the kingdom of heaven which we have in our midst.

As we have seen, the world is slowly creeping up the mountain. This shows us the work that needs to be done. Sooner or later, as good as it is to be there, we have to come down from the mountain and be witnesses to the truth that has been revealed to us: that our God loves us with a love that knows no boundaries, not even death on the cross; that He loves us so much, he willingly took upon Himself all of our sin and fallenness so that the whole world might be saved.

Let us pray to God that we would take what we have received, and use it to engage the world in a way that confronts it, challenges it, and ultimately, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, transfigures.