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A Special Vacation for Families

An alternative summer program helps parents and children discover the beauty of the great outdoors while forging long-lasting relationships.

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While not exactly a camp, the Family Summer program in Colorado certainly includes all the trappings: nature, outdoor games, bonding experiences, new friends... But unlike a camp, there's no grimey

cabins and it's not just for kids: the whole family can share in the fun, as parents join their children for a unique summer experience.

In its fourth edition, thirty-three families gathered together at a hotel set against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains this past July. The program includes activities, meals and scheduled events specially tailored to the needs of all participants. In addition, a simple chapel is set up on site and Mass is celebrated daily for anyone wishing to attend.

“We didn’t just like Family Summer, we loved it!” says James from Houston. “Our vacation with Family Summer overflowed with all of the good stuff: rest, friends, adventure, beauty, silliness, inspiration, learning, and freedom.”

Throughout the week, participants enjoy the beauty of nature,

rediscover the value of leisure and genuine conversation, and share in the excitement of outdoor adventures. (During the year, the organizers also promote a Family Service Project called "Thanksgiving of Giving", aided by a nonprofit.)

Family Summer includes a discussion-based Family Enrichment course for parents that spur them to look at their priorities and gain perspective over their family's future. These morning sessions happen while the teenagers take on the responsibility of running a wonderful morning "camp" for about 100 children. The kids deepen their friendships and, aided by their surroundings, develop their capacity for contemplation. Parents grow alongside their children, pausing to ponder and recalibrate the goals they are pursuing in the context of experiencing and discussing deeper realities.

As for the afternoon, the sky is almost literally the limit: there's hiking, mountain biking, fishing, rafting, canoeing, horseback riding, and much more. And in the evening after dinner, everyone comes together to do something as a group, whether it be music or conversation, games or a movie, skits or a talent show... even family bingo and square dancing!

After this year's whitewater rafting adventure – which, in addition to the roaring Colorado River, also included torrential cold rain – one participant said, “Thank you: really, thank you. We would have probably been at a theme park arguing about yet another ice cream cone; and did you see their warrior faces, fighting the waves and the cold? I don't remember seeing them so happy.”

“WOW! Just amazing!!” said Christine and Daniel, “Our family

had a wonderful time filled with lots of fun memories! The joy and happiness will never be forgotten.”

The impetus that spurred a group of families to organize Family Summer four years ago is best captured by what Pope Benedict XVI said at a Wednesday audience during the Year of Faith, speaking about man’s innate desire for God, how to enkindle it, and make it grow: “It would be of great use, for that purpose, to promote a kind of pedagogy of desire... learning or re-learning the taste for the authentic joys of life.” In the same audience, Benedict also recommended, “Educating individuals from an early age to savor true joys, in all areas of life – family, friendship, solidarity with those who suffer, self-denial to serve others, love for knowledge, for art, for the beauties of nature – all this means exercising that inner taste and producing effective antibodies

against the trivialization and flattening prevailing today.”

Pope Francis says something similar in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*: "By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple."

Family Summer offers many opportunities for children, teens, and adults alike, to awaken the desire for “authentic joys” and to shun the throw-away culture of empty amusement and distraction. Children experience the joy of friendship forged in shared experiences, the sense of accomplishment at the end of a strenuous climb, and the peace of contemplating the effortless glide of a bald eagle.

The organizers of Family Summer believe the goal of education should be the attainment of virtue. The best thing that parents can give their children is an appreciation for what is truly good. Do they have the sensitivity and discernment to know what is truly good, and do they have the tools to pursue it in spite of everything? These are key questions and one of the parents' main tasks.

It is not inconsequential, for children and parents, if they choose to hike up a 13,000 foot mountain over spending the day at an amusement park, if they choose to canoe on the crystalline lake over arcades and casinos, if they choose to float down the river through the abrupt canyon over playing video games at home. These joys may not have an immediate call on our sensible appetites but are discovered by experiencing them fully. Relishing them more frequently, our

appreciation and desire increase, leading us to hunger for truer, more beautiful and loftier realities and, ultimately, for God.

Antoine de Saint Exupery offers the following example: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men and women to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." If we want to develop virtue in our children, we must start by helping them develop a deep yearning for the good. In his address at the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, Pope Francis reiterated that beauty "is the path to reach God. Beauty brings us to God." This is what Family Summer seeks to do in the confines of one week, immersed in nature and among friends.

So who ever said camp was only for kids? Family Summer has revamped the very idea of camp, and in the

process, created something that surpasses Disney World or a cruise: allowing parents and children to experience the simple joys of nature together, growing and strengthening their family for the future.

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