NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Government shutdown locks out Yosemite visitors on park's anniversary

Megan Fincher | Oct. 1, 2013 Eco Catholic

If you had planned Tuesday to honor Yosemite National Park's 123rd anniversary by paying it a visit, think again. Thanks to the federal government shutdown, Yosemite's giant sequoia trees will commemorate this day alone.

"No temple made with human hands can compare with Yosemite," John Muir, 19th-century naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club, wrote. No temple but the temple of man, it seems.

Did anyone ever imagine that for the second time in less than 20 years, government infighting would force the U.S. National Park Service to indefinitely close 401 federal parks and attractions [1], which includes the 84 million acres of land that our 59 national parks include? That the Department of the Interior, which oversees 72,562 civil servants, including those at the park service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Geological Survey, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and others, would have no option besides furloughing 58,765 of them?

Even Google didn't expect this [2].

Over the next couple of days, our national treasures will be locked away. People currently camping on federal land have two days to vacate. Even the park service's website [3] is no longer accessible.

"Tourists will find every one of America's national parks and monuments, from Yosemite to the Smithsonian to the Statue of Liberty, immediately closed," President Barack Obama said Monday evening [4]. "And of course the communities and small business that rely on these national treasures for their livelihoods will be out of customers and out of luck."

Sleeping under a sky littered with stars. Breathing in air scented with pine or creosote. Feeling so helpless in the presence of Old Faithful. Looking into the eyes of a buffalo that has walked up to your car window. For many people -- me included -- our national parks are our national churches. God's presence shimmers in the pristine ecosystems that the park service maintains.

Yosemite National Park [5], located in eastern California, is considered a "crown jewel" of the national park system. It was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1984, and more than 3.5 million people visit each year.

God's glory is perceptible in Yosemite's 761,268 square acres. Cutting through the park is the Sierra Nevada mountain chain, with the glacial Yosemite Valley lying within its granite peaks. Half Dome rises nearly 5,000 feet above Yosemite Valley, as well as El Capitan's 3,000 feet of nearly vertical granite that rock climbers covet. Waterfalls, lakes and ponds abound, with Yosemite Falls coming in as one of the world's largest waterfalls. The three ancient groves of giant sequoia trees are perhaps the most obvious example of God's hand.

"Do behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia! Behold! Behold! seems all I can say. Some time ago I left all for Sequoia and have been and am at his feet; fasting and praying for light, for is he not the greatest light in the woods, in the world?" Muir ecstatically wrote [6] upon seeing the towering conifers.

I, too, pray that the light of nature's beauty can dazzle our government back to its senses. If Yosemite is God's temple, as Muir stated, we must overturn the tables of greed, selfishness and power that now block Yosemite's entrance, as well as the entrances to all our national parks.

Until then, a virtual visit will have to suffice.

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