

Orthodoxy in America

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In the 18th Century, the great Orthodox Christian missionary work which began with Pentecost in Jerusalem, so many centuries before, finally crossed from the continent of Euro-Asia into North America. The first missionaries traveled with the explorers Vitus Bering and Alexei Chirikov, who formally claimed Alaska and the Aleutian Islands in 1741. For the next fifty years, together with the exploration and economic development of this new outpost of the Russian Empire, the first attempts were made to bring the Orthodox Faith to the natives of that region (the Aleuts, the Athabascan Indians, the Tlingits, and the Eskimos).

The first formal Orthodox Christian Mission to America arrived on September 24, 1794, in Kodiak. This Mission consisted of eight Monks and two Novices, together with ten Alaskan natives who had been taken to Russia by Gregory Shelikov in 1786. This Mission discovered on Kodiak Island hundreds of natives who had been taught the rudiments of the Orthodox Faith, and had been baptized by laymen. Gregory Shelikov, one of the founders of what was to become later the Russian-American Company, had himself baptized about two hundred Aleuts on Kodiak Island.

The American Mission, headed by Archimandrite Joasaph, immediately began the work of establishing the Church in Kodiak and the Islands and later on the mainland of Alaska. Despite great difficulties, this Mission was very successful, for virtually all the remaining natives of Kodiak Island were baptized in just three years. During this period, one of the missionaries, Hieromonk Juvenaly, was martyred at Lake Iliamna by natives.

The Martyrdom of Hieromonk Juvenaly.

In 1795 Hieromonk Juvenaly left Kodiak for Nuchek, where he baptized more than seven hundred Chugach, and then crossed to Kenai Bay and baptized there all the local inhabitants. In the following year (1796), he crossed to Alaska in the direction of Lake Iliamna, where his apostolic duties came to an end, together with his life. He was killed by the natives, and the reason for his death, was partly because the first thing he did after baptizing the natives was to order them to give up polygamy. He had also persuaded the chiefs and other leading men in the tribes there to give him their children so that the latter might be educated on Kodiak. When he set out with the children, the men regretted what they had done, gave chase, caught up with him, and fell upon him.

When Father Juvenaly was attacked by the savages he did not try to defend himself, or run away, which he could easily have done, especially since he had a firearm with him. He let himself be taken without offering any resistance, asking only that those with him should be spared, which was done.

Much later those who had been spared related that when Father Juvenaly was already dead he had risen up and followed his murderers, saying something to them. The savages, supposing him to be still alive, attacked him again and beat him. But as soon as they left him he again stood up and followed them, and this happened several times. Finally, in order to be rid of him, the savages hacked his body to pieces. Only then did this fervent preacher fall silent, a Martyr for the word of God. On the spot where the missionary's remains lay, there at once appeared a column of flame, reaching up to the sky.

The Martyrdom of the Aleut Peter.

In a letter to Abbot Damascene of Valaam, dated November 22, 1865, Simeon I. Yanovsky, Chief Manager of the Russian Colonies from 1818 to 1820, wrote:

Once I related to [Fr. (later St.) Herman] how the Spaniards in California had taken fourteen of our Aleuts prisoner, and how the Jesuits had tortured one of them, to try and force them all to take the Catholic faith. But the Aleuts would not submit, saying: We are Christians, we have been baptized, and they showed them the crosses they wore. But the Jesuits objected, saying No, you are heretics and schismatics; if you do not agree to take the Catholic faith we will torture you. And they left them shut up two to a cell until the evening to think it

over.

In the evening they came back with a lantern and lighted candles, and began again to try and persuade them to become Catholics. But the Aleuts were filled with God's grace, and firmly and decisively answered, We are Christians and we would not betray our faith. Then the fanatics set about torturing them. First they tortured one singly while the other one was made to watch. First they cut off one of the toe joints from one foot, and then from the other, but the Aleut bore it all and continued to say: I am a Christian and I will not betray my faith. Then they cut a joint off each finger first from one hand, then the other; then they hacked off one foot at the instep, then one hand at the wrist. The blood poured out, but the martyr bore it all to the end, maintaining his stand, and with this faith he died, from loss of blood!

On the following day it was planned to torture the others, but that same night an order was received from Monterey that all the captured Russian Aleuts were to be sent under guard to Monterey. And so in the morning those remaining alive were sent away. This was related to me by an Aleut who was an eyewitness a colleague of the man put to death and who later escaped from the Spaniards....

When I had finished telling him this, Father [Herman] asked me, What was the name of this tortured Aleut? Peter, I replied, but I cannot remember the other name.

Then the elder stood before the Icon, devoutly crossed himself and said, Holy newly-martyred [Peter], pray to God for us!

[The above accounts were taken from The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in America, 1794-1837, with Materials Concerning the Life and Works of the Monk German, and Ethnographic Notes by the Hieromonk Gedeon, St. Petersburg, 1894.]

In 1798, Archimandrite Joasaph returned to Irkutsk in Siberia and was consecrated on April 10, 1899, Bishop of Kodiak, the first Bishop for America, but he and his entourage, including Hieromonk Makary and Hierodeacon Stephen of the original Mission, drowned somewhere between Unalaska and Kodiak Island. Though the American Mission was now reduced to half of its original number, it continued its work. Notable was the great spiritual and missionary work of the Monks Herman and Joasaph. Not only did they instruct the natives in spiritual and religious matters, but they also taught them practical, secular subjects, such as mathematics, carpentry, agriculture, as well as animal husbandry.

In 1824, with the arrival of the Missionary Priest John Veniaminov in Unalaska, a new impetus was added to the missionary work already done. The original missionaries had been replaced by others, so that by the time of the arrival of Father John, only the Monk Herman, now retired to Spruce Island, was left of the original American Mission. He died on December 13, 1837, and on August 9, 1970, he was canonized as the first Saint of the Orthodox Church in America.

Our Venerable Father Herman of Alaska.

Little is known of the early life of the Monk Herman. He was born in Serpukhov in the Moscow Diocese about 1756 and at the age of 16, he began his monastic life at the Trinity-St. Sergius Hermitage near St. Petersburg. While at the Hermitage, Herman developed a severe infection on the right side of his throat which brought him to the point of death. After fervent prayer before an Icon of the Most-Holy Theotokos he fell into a deep sleep, and during this sleep, Herman dreamed that he was healed by the Virgin. Upon waking, he found that he had completely recovered. Remaining at the Trinity-Sergius Hermitage for five more years, he then moved to the Valaam Monastery on Lake Ladoga.

During his stay at the Valaam Monastery, Father Herman developed a strong spiritual attachment to the Elder Nazarius, Abbot and Renewer of the spiritual life of Valaam. He found in Nazarius a gentle, yet effective spiritual guide, whom he would remember for the rest of his life. During his stay in Valaam, the monastery was visited by Gregory Shelikov, head of the Golikov-Shelikov Trading Company, who requested Monks to work in the new mission field in Alaska. Thus, in 1793, Father Herman, with several other Monks was sent by the Holy Synod of Russia to the Alaskan missionary field.

After a journey of nearly a year, the little band of eight Monks arrived on Kodiak Island on September 24, 1794. From Kodiak, the Monks began their effort to convert and educate the natives. Several thousand Alaskans were converted to Orthodoxy, but the Mission did not have the success that had been expected. Archimandrite Joasaph, the head of the Mission, was consecrated a Bishop, but died with two others when the ship on which he was returning to Alaska sank, and Fr. Herman, who, from the beginning had distinguished himself with his humility, compassion for the natives and his administrative skills, became the acting head of the Mission. Eventually only he remained from the original Mission.

After difficult relations with and persecution by the Russian-American Trading Company, which controlled the Alaska Colony, between 1808 and 1818 Fr. Herman left Kodiak and went to Spruce Island, which he called New Valaam. He spent the rest of his life on this island, where he cared for orphans, ran a school and continued his missionary work. He built a small chapel, school and guest house, while food for himself and the orphans was produced from his own experimental garden.

Caring little for himself, Fr. Herman wore the oldest and simplest clothes under his cassock and ate very little. His free time was devoted to prayer and singing the services he could do as a simple Monk, since, in humility, he had refused to be ordained. Thus, his life on the island was that of an ascetic and was in many ways similar to the lives of the early Monks of the Egyptian desert. When asked if he was ever lonesome, Fr. Herman answered, No, I am not alone there! God is there, as God is everywhere. The Most-Holy Angels are there. With whom is it better to talk, with people or with Angels? Most certainly with Angels.

Father Herman continued to grow in his love for the natives while he lived on Spruce Island, for he saw them as newly-born children in the faith, who had to be guided and taught. He had a special love for the children and they were very fond of him. One of his greatest pleasures was being with children, teaching them and giving them the delicacies he made. During this time a ship from the United States brought an epidemic to the Alaskans and hundreds of them died. But they were not alone, for Herman remained with them constantly, going from person to person, Comforting the dying, and praying with and for them. After the epidemic ended, Fr. Herman brought the orphans back to New Valaam with him and cared for them. On Sundays and Holy Days, Fr. Herman would gather the people for prayer and singing, and he would give sermons that captivated the hearts of all those present. As a clairvoyant Elder, he could see into the hearts of his spiritual children and help them.

The natives recognized the holiness of the Venerable One and turned to him for help, seeing in him an intercessor before God. Once there was a great tidal wave threatening the island and the people came to Fr. Herman for help. He took an Icon of the Theotokos, placed it on the beach and said, Have no fear. The water will not go any higher than the place where this holy icon stands; and it did not. On another occasion there was a fire on the island and the people again turned to the righteous Elder, who interceded successfully on their behalf.

Prior to his death, Fr. Herman revealed what would happen to him. He told the people that when he died there would be no Priest in the area and the people would have to bury him by themselves. He also said that he would be forgotten for thirty years and then would be remembered. Father Herman died on December 13, 1837, in the manner in which he had described to his flock. They continued to revere his memory, but the outside world seemed to forget him until the first investigation of his life in 1867, by Bishop Peter of Alaska. Finally, on August 9, 1970, the Holy Monk was glorified by the Orthodox Church in America, in impressive ceremonies at Kodiak, Alaska, and the Blessed Father Herman of Alaska entered the ranks of Saints who are interceding on behalf of American Orthodoxy.

The Church, however, worked hard to further the work of the Mission, even in these difficult times, so that, despite the harsh climate, the difficulty of supplying the Mission because of the great distances involved, Father John found a solid foundation upon which to do his work. He had the help of Father Jacob Netsvetov (a Creole, one of mixed race), who had been sent to Irkutsk, Siberia, for Seminary training, and had been ordained in 1828. (The first American-born Priest, Prokopy Lavrov, was ordained in 1810, but he returned to Russia after a brief period of less than a year, since he found the life in Kodiak too harsh.)

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Together, Fathers John and Jacob were a remarkable missionary pair. They succeeded in revitalizing the Mission to such a degree that at the end of the 1830's, there were five active Priests and five religious centers, with more than 10,000 Orthodox Christians. There were four schools for boys (about 100 students) and four orphanages for girls (about 60). All these schools, as well as the churches, gave religious instruction to the natives in their native tongues. This missionary work was financially supported primarily by the Russian-American Company, with substantial assistance also provided by the Holy Synod and the Church of Russia.

On December 15, 1840, the American Mission was blessed with the consecration of the now-widowed Priest, Fr. John Veniaminov, as Innocent, Bishop of Kamchatka, the Kuriles, and the Aleutian Islands. With the consecration of Bishop Innocent, the history of the American Mission entered an even more glorious phase. Bishop Innocent's sixteen years of experience in the Alaskan missionary field, coupled with his in depth knowledge of the natives now entrusted to his pastoral care, as well as his judicious choice of fellow missionaries, accounted for the unparalleled success of the Mission.

As soon as he arrived in Sitka (the capital of Russian America), he began the work of enlarging the missionary work of the Diocese. The Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel was beautified and enlarged, and plans were laid for the construction of a Seminary, which opened in 1845. At the same time, he continued his extensive missionary journeys throughout his far-flung Diocese which covered parts of two continents.

When his responsibility was again increased with the enlargement of his Diocese into an Archdiocese, with increased territories, Bishop Innocent transferred his center of activity to Siberia, leaving an Auxiliary Bishop to supervise the American part of his enlarged domain. In 1869, Archbishop Innocent was elevated to the See of Moscow as its Metropolitan, but he still kept a careful watch over his beloved American Church. Important here was the organization, at his urging, of the Russian Missionary Society, which was organized to further the missionary work of the Russian Church, especially in Siberia, Alaska and Japan, which guaranteed that the work begun in America would not be abandoned or forgotten with the sale of Alaska to America which had occurred in 1867. With true prophetic insight, the aged Metropolitan called for the missionary work to be directed to the whole of America and foresaw the need for American-born clergy totally conversant with the American cultural ethos, as well as the English language.

Our Father among the Saints Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow, Enlightener of the Aleuts and Apostle to the Americas.

John Popov (later St. Innocent) was born on August 27, 1797, in Aginsk, a small village near Irkutsk, Siberia. He came from a pious family and at age six, young John was already reading at his parish. At age nine he entered the Irkutsk Theological Seminary, where he remained for eleven years, proving to be its most brilliant pupil during this time. Besides his Seminary classes, he read all of the books in the library dealing with history and the sciences, and while still a student he began to construct different types of clocks, acquiring the skills of carpentry, furniture making, blacksmithing, and the construction of musical instruments.

At the age of seventeen, in recognition of his outstanding achievements at the Seminary, his last name was changed to Veniaminov, in honor of the late Bishop Benjamin (or Veniamin) of Irkutsk. Not long after graduation from the Seminary, John married the daughter of a Priest and was ordained to the Diaconate. In 1821, he was ordained to the Priesthood.

While a young man, Fr. John had heard stories about the native settlements at Unalaska in the Aleutian Island chain, part of the Russian colony in America, and how they labored in the darkness of paganism. Thus, in 1823, having heard that the Bishop of Irkutsk had been requested to send a Priest to Alaska and that everyone else had refused, against the wishes of his family and friends, he volunteered to go. After fourteen months of difficult travel across the wilds of Siberia and the Bering Sea, he arrived in Unalaska with his family.

Upon arriving at Unalaska, Fr. John found that there was no house or chapel there, but he welcomed this as an opportunity to teach the natives. He first built a home for his family, using the opportunity to teach the natives carpentry. Constructing furniture for the new home, he taught the natives this skill as well, so that, with these newly-acquired skills, they were able to assist Fr. John in the construction of the Cathedral of the Ascension, which was completed in 1826.

At the same time, Fr. John's primary work was converting the natives to Orthodoxy and educating them. He learned the Aleut language, as well as the life style of the people. He and his wife organized a school for them (as well as for their own six children), and one of the required subjects was the Aleut language, for which Fr. John had devised an alphabet based on the Cyrillic. He translated services, as well as the Gospel of St. Matthew, and even wrote a small book, A Guide to the Way to the Heavenly Kingdom in the Aleut language.

Fr. John traveled throughout the Aleutian chain to teach and baptize the people, and while preaching he was always able to communicate effectively with his flock. One of these wrote, many years later: When he preached the Word of God, all the people listened, and they listened without moving until he stopped. Nobody thought of fishing or hunting while he spoke; nobody felt hungry or thirsty as long as he was speaking, not even little children.

In 1834, Fr. John and his family were transferred to Sitka, where the local Tlingit population was intensely antagonistic to their Russian overlords. He learned their language and culture, but they showed now real interest in his message until a smallpox epidemic hit the area. Father John convinced many of the Tlingits to be vaccinated, saving many of them from death. This served to be the means whereby he was to reach these natives and gradually he gained their love and respect.

In 1836, Fr. John decided to return to Russia to report to the Holy Synod on the needs of the Alaskan Mission. Leaving his family in Irkutsk, he went on to Moscow, where he met with the Synod, which approved his request for more Priests and funds for the Mission, as well as desiring to publish his translations. While in Moscow, he learned of the death of his wife. Hearing of this, Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow encouraged Fr. John to become a Monk, which he accepted, being tonsured with the name Innocent. Soon after, the Alaskan Mission was constituted part of a Diocese and Fr. Innocent was consecrated Bishop of Kamchatka and Alaska on December 15, 1840.

Returning to his new Diocese, Bishop Innocent traveled to the far reaches of his new domain, teaching the population and organizing churches. Everywhere he preached and served in the native languages. In Sitka, he organized a Seminary to train native Priests and built a new cathedral there dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel. Although preoccupied with the affairs of his large Diocese, the Bishop did find time to construct, with his own hands, the large clock on the front of the Cathedral.

In 1850, Bishop Innocent was elevated to the dignity of Archbishop and his new Archdiocese was enlarged to include more territory in Asiatic Russia, with its center at Yakutsk. Once more Innocent and his Priests set out to learn languages and cultures, teaching the new flock with gentleness and by personal example. In 1860, Archbishop Innocent met the future Bishop Nicholas of Japan (canonized in 1970), who was just beginning his lifetime missionary labors, and he gave Nicholas advice on missionary work.

Despite declining health and his request to retire, in 1868, Innocent was elevated to the rank of Metropolitan. He was especially loved by his new flock for his many works of charity, and he remembered his former missions by organizing the Imperial Mission Society, which he served as its first President. Almost blind and in constant pain, Metropolitan Innocent died on Holy Saturday, 1879, at the age of eighty-two, having served Christ and His Church throughout his entire life, distinguishing himself as a true missionary and apostle. In recognition of his great apostolic and missionary labors, the Russian Orthodox Church, on October 6, 1977, solemnly glorified this Man of God and entered him into the Church Calendar, styling him St. Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow, Enlightener of the Aleuts and Apostle to the America's.

In 1867, Bishop Peter (Lyaskov) of Sitka was succeeded by Bishop Paul (Popov) and in this year the first study of the life of the Elder Herman of Spruce Island was initiated. In 1870, Bishop John (Metropolsky) was appointed and he transferred the center of the American Church from Sitka to San Francisco, California, in 1872. In 1879, the American Church came under the supervision of the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg, and the long tie with the Diocese of Eastern Siberia was ended, with Bishop Nestor (Zakkis) being appointed Bishop of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska in that year. In 1882, however, he drowned at sea and was buried on the Island of Unalaska.

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After six years without a resident hierarch, Bishop Vladimir (Sokolovsky) was appointed in 1881, and on March 25, 1891, he accepted the Holy Virgin Protection Uniate Church in Minneapolis, as well as its Pastor, Fr. Alexis Toth, into the Orthodox Church. With this event, the American Mission entered into a new phase of its life. A Church almost exclusively concerned with missionary work among the natives of America, mostly in Alaska, now was to change its focus of attention to the return of the Uniates to Orthodoxy. This work, until now centered in the Western provinces of Russia, was directed to those Uniates who had emigrated to America, together with those from the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Galicians and Carpatho-Russians). The first attempts at a development of an English liturgical text to be used in the Church also began at this time.

In 1891, Bishop Nicholas (Ziorov) arrived in America and became deeply involved in the many-sided work of the American Mission to the native Alaskans, to the newly-returned Uniates, as well as to the Orthodox immigrants from virtually all of the traditional Orthodox nations in Europe and Asia. It was in this period (from the time of the American Civil War) that Serbians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Greeks, Russians, Syrians and Albanians began to come to America in increasingly greater numbers. The Mission was now extended to Canada, where great numbers of Orthodox and Uniate immigrants had been arriving, a Missionary School was established in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a bilingual (English-Russian) publication for the Diocese was initiated.

In 1898, Bishop Tikhon (Bellavin) arrived to rule over the Church in America, and in his nine years of service in America, the Mission was brought to a new stage of maturity. For the first time the American Mission became a full Diocese, with its presiding Bishop wholly responsible for a Church within the continental limits of North America. In 1905, the center of the Church was transferred to New York (St. Nicholas Cathedral, the new Episcopal Cathedral, had been dedicated in 1902), and the newly-elevated Archbishop Tikhon was now given two Auxiliary Bishops to administer a greatly-expanded Church in America. Bishop Raphael (Hawaweeny) of Brooklyn (the first Orthodox Bishop consecrated in America March 12, 1904) was primarily responsible for the Syro-Arab communities and the other Auxiliary, Bishop Innocent (Pustynsky) was appointed Bishop of Alaska.

Excerpt taken from "These Truths We Hold - The Holy Orthodox Church: Her Life and Teachings". Compiled and Edited by A Monk of St. Tikhon's Monastery. Copyright 1986 by the St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, South Canaan, Pennsylvania 18459.

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