

A Very Cold Church
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Alaska is the largest state in the union; and the oldest Orthodox diocese in the western hemisphere. Settled by Russians after 1741, the Orthodox Church carried out an active program of missionary work until the sale of sovereignty to the United States in 1867.

From 1867 until the Russian revolution of 1917, the Alaskan mission was dependent on the church in Russia for material support and for leadership. With the disruption of normal church life in Russia in 1917, the foreign missions – including Alaska – fell into considerable and chaotic disarray.

This ecclesiastical chaos affected the parishes on the “outside,” as Alaskans call the rest of the United States. However, in time, there was a gradual recovery of “normalcy” among the American parishes.

But Christian “normalcy” is the only kind of normalcy worth talking about among Orthodox Christians, and it is my privilege to tell you, young readers, that your parents and your parishes have not yet recovered one dimension of Christian life which is essential to Christian “normalcy”: that dimension is the whole matter of Church Mission.

We in Alaska have long expected that you on the outside would pick up the responsibilities, abandoned by the Russians in 1917; that is, that you would be the Good Samaritan for your brethren here. About 95% of your Orthodox brothers in Alaska are Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts – 95% of about 15,000 Orthodox Alaskans. Since 1867, these native Alaskans have been systematically exploited and stripped of their cultural, linguistic and artistic heritage by your government. All of which, by the way, is in sharp contrast to what happened to the same natives under the influence of the Orthodox Church which consistently supported the integrity of native life, art, language and culture.

The really sad thing is that so many young people are “concerned” with issues of peace and war, violence, poverty, and injustice; but no Orthodox young people seem to even know of the existence of Alaska’s problems – of the injustice, violence and poverty which sweep through countless native Alaska villages, many of which are Orthodox villages.

At the same time, we note a growing and indeed dangerous affluence among many “outside” parishes, an affluence which contrasts painfully with the dire poverty and desperate conditions of life which prevail among many if not most Alaskan Orthodox people. Did you know that, of all the many pockets of poverty which exist throughout the United States, the very worst off of all are the Eskimos and that these same Eskimos are in many instances your brothers in Christ – Orthodox Christians?”

A Christian Mission exists as the special task of another, established and well-off churchly community. Alaska existed on those terms until the sale of Alaska in 1867 and the Russian Revolution of 1917. It is long overdue that you, young Orthodox Christians in the rest of the country, begin to assume as your cause the survival of your Church among the “first Americans” and the “first Orthodox Americans” – the natives of Alaska.

The Alaskan Mission has been declining more rapidly every year – that means that every year more and more Orthodox Alaskans leave the Church, not because they’d rather go somewhere else, but because they have finally, after many years of patient prayers and waiting, given up hope that the Church will ever come back to life in their village; to serve our 15,000 faithful, we have about 16 clergymen, no planes, boats or funds to support traveling. (Compare this with the Episcopal Mission in Alaska: for about 9,000 faithful, they have over 30 clergymen, a plane, and excellent support from the outside; the same is even more true of the sectarians, who annual inundate Alaskan villages and every year make off with untold numbers of Orthodox.)

What we need is that you become aware of us; that you hear our cries; that you support in your own home parish the organization of serious and meaningful support for the Orthodox mission in Alaska; and that you encourage Orthodox teachers, doctors, nurses and other professional people to come to Alaska for even one or two years and work in an area where there are Orthodox.

Only in this way can we begin to reverse the tragic decline of this mission, the origin and root of Orthodoxy in North America. And then we may begin to be able to speak of a “future” for Orthodoxy among the Alaskan Orthodox faithful.