

The Very Rev. Michael Oleksa

Sanctifying the Culture: The Theology and Legacy of Orthodox Mission retreat

Saturday June 3: at 1:00 – 4:00 PM at
Saint Nicholas Cathedral, Washington, DC. (202-333-5060)

MC: Fr. Michael is a scholar, author, and theologian. He is well known for his work in Alaska history.

Fr. Michael:

In 1967 on Lazarus Saturday Fr. Michael was here at St. Nicholas Cathedral. The celebrant of the Liturgy was Fr. John Meyendorff. Fr. Michael knew who he was. He had just purchased a book downstairs and Fr. John's picture was on the cover.

Fr. Arkady and Fr. Paul Lutov were also there. Fr. Dimitry was ordained a deacon the same day that Fr. Michael graduated. Fr. John Meyendorff invited Michael Oleksa to come to St. Vladimir's Seminary for Holy Week. In his first year at the seminary they announced that St. Herman would be canonized on 9 August 1970. Fr. Michael wrote to people to get passage. Hew received either no letter or rejection letter.

He gave up home and a letter came to another student. The village was the place where the very history of Alaska began and they were looking for a priest. The seminary had closed because the Russian Revolution cut off all the funds around 1917. This was now 1971.

The village wrote to Bishop Theodosius and asked him to send them a priest. He told them that he can't send them one because they have no home for him. They found an abandoned house. This was 1968. The bishop then told them that they have no salary and they have to be able to support a priest. They gathered thousands of dollars. The bishop then wrote that they don't have anybody to send.

The village went to a VISTA volunteer and he said that there must be a place where they train priests. There was another VISTA volunteer in town and his cousin George Koulomzin (associated with Sophia) was in the seminary.

George's idea of the West began with New Jersey and he had no desire to go to Alaska. He asked Ted Bezil who did not want to go. He went knocking on doors and finally came to Fr. Michael and two weeks later he was there.

Fr. Michael's topic today is about culture. What is your culture? He arrived in Kodiak this time of the year. It was like Greece but he does not need a passport. He went straight there. He was an Arabic major in college. [He also speaks Russian.]

When he first went there, there was nothing exotic. The people were speaking English. He heard Yup'ik only when the grandparents were talking. Some of the kids who lived with their grandparents understand them.

The longer he stayed, the more obvious it became to him that his students did not see the world the way he did. Your culture is the way you see the world. When you ask an American, "What is your culture?" you get one of two answers. Either "I'm part this and that and that and that." This is your ethnicity, not your culture. The other half said "I really don't have a color because I'm a Heinz 57." But that is not your culture.

What is culture? How do you define your culture? If it is how you see the world, then you don't see our own culture.

The metaphor that he prefers to use is a sunbeam coming through a crack in a building. You can look at each sunbeam and see every particle of dust. You can step into it and look out along it. When you are in that beam of light, you can no longer see that beam. You see what is outside. Your culture is the sunbeam that you are in. It is the way you see it.

People from other cultures are looking out at the same scene but they see different things. They see a different reality.

Your language helps you to focus on certain things. In the Aleut language and the Eskimo language there is no gender. *Dankas* is "he sees her" and "she sees him." Navaho is the other extreme. There are five scenarios for he or she.

Theological position can be analyzed by what you see. In European folklore an animal is an inferior being having inferior intelligence. To be turned into an animal is a demotion, curse.

Native American Alaskans tell stories about how smart the animals are.

Adolescents don't hear "don't." Parents have known this for years. When you say "don't," they might not have thought of it until now.

A young man was going some place and his grandmother told him "don't go over the mountain" and don't do something else. She knew very well that now we would do this. She also gave him a mink skin and told him, "if you get into trouble, chew on this and then stretch it and pull it over your head."

As he was climbing the mountain, a landslide occurred and he was buried alive. He pulled out this mink skin that she gave him and did what she told him to do and he was able to mink his way through the rocks back to safety. He put it away. Later he saw a fat mink, pulled out his skin, put it on and they lived happily ever after.

Animals are wise because they see things that human beings can't see, they hear things that human beings can't hear, they smell things that human beings can't smell, and they know things that human beings can't know. For native Americans the animals could speak with the humans and the humans could speak with the animals.

The universe was created in the shape of a church. When they build the traditional house, the house follows the same basic patterns. The parts of the homes and the parts of the world have the same structure and the same name. The word animal and the word house do not mean the same thing to us as they do to the Eskimos.

Your culture is the game of life as you understand it and play it. We have the game of football and basketball which are timed game. It is the clock that determines when the game is over and who wins and who loses. The inventor of the clock was from ancient Babylon. Some cultures believe that the game of life is a timed event. The clock determines politeness or rudeness in certain situations.

His mother was of German descent. They have only one heirloom in the house and it is a clock. His sister inherited it. Being on time is an essential component of the culture. To the Germans lateness is a sign of rudeness and disrespect.

It was cities which invented the clock and we have been victims every since.

His father was not of German descent. He had a brother and sister.

You learn your culture by the way people around you behave.

His father married his mother and they argued about punctuality for 63 years. If the Germans are playing football or basketball with a clock, the Russians are playing baseball. You can't say time is up and the game is over.

People who play the game of life and see reality are playing with people who see reality in another way. His father is 82 years old and uses a walker. Fr. Michael told about a recent time when he had a 11:00 doctor appointment and he did not leave the house until 11:00. His mother was mortified. She complained about how late they were, etc. He said that he was not late. When he got there, they took him immediately.

A third definition of culture is that culture is the way you see things but you can't see the way in which you see them. You are not conscious of the rules of the game any longer.

As soon as he hears "**These people**" he knows that we have another case of tackle basketball.

In Eastern Europe Eastern Pennsylvania culture, things are done in threes. When somebody offers you something, you adamantly refuse on the first time; you waver on the second time, and you capitulate on the third time.

How do you get into the other's way of life when the rules are not written down? Your culture is the center into which you are born. Your culture doesn't start with you. The best way into a culture is to invite them to tell you their stories.

You have a culture. Tell me your grandmother's story. His grandmother can from Western Europe. She was 16 years at the time. There was not a building called a school. There were itinerant teachers who came door to door.

Writing was respected. A letter was read by the post master to your since you could not read. It was read aloud. But you only receive very few letters a year. The postmaster also responded back for you.

His grandmother was Anna and his great grandfather was Stephen. How did she get on the right train and the right boat to get here if she could not read or write? Nobody knows. She was glad to see the Statute of Liberty because it meant that she can get off the boat.

The state trooper came to her house and told her that she was in violation of the law because she did not send her children to school. He was speaking English and she understood only Ukrainian. She could not understand that school was required and that school was free.

The natives in Juneau had to make a decision between their culture and the Presbyterian religion. The son of one of the chiefs went to Sitka. About the same time the father was dreaming of a white man who kept telling him that he should be baptized. The man was Saint Nicholas, Bishop Nicholas I. The son returned with a picture of him and the chief recognized him. He sent for the bishop who came and baptized over 200 people. A society sent money for a church and what they needed. All they had to do was to provide a place and the labor.

In their culture everything had to be paid back with interest to express your gratitude. Fr. Michael realized that they did not pay back this gift and he proposed teaching in Moscow for one year. They had a priest for free since Fr. Jerome Cwiklinski was there. One of his students was the son of the general for the patriarch. He was asked to return to Alaska early. He asked somebody to design a cross. It arrived three years later. It is a reliquary cross. It has icons of St. Innocent, St. Tikhon, and St. Herman of Alaska. He also has a relic of St. Nicholas of Japan.

His aunt and his father were the first Oleskas in history to go to school. His grandmother did not know what culture she was born in. His aunt and father were told, "Work hard. Respect your teachers. Don't disgrace us. If I find out that they had to discipline you there, when you get home, it will be much worse." The night before he went to kindergarten he heard the story.

Our first schools in Alaska were Orthodox schools. In 1802 the inspector for the tsar came and devised an alphabet for the kids. They learned both languages: their own and Russian. The missionaries who came in 1794 were sending back reports with analysis of the stories that the people told. They have stories about all human beings descending from the same parents. The Holy Spirit inspired truth wherever He wants. We are looking for truth for whatever they know so we can build on that.

In Kodiak there was an oppressive management of the American Russian Company and their manager was a dictator. There were never more than 800 Russians there. Most were probably new Siberian people or men of mixed background. The first priest did not have anybody to convert. The first chapels were already built when clergy arrived. The immigrants started the parishes here and then found out that they are tax exempted.

Real mission is the work of the lay people. Priests don't have time to do outreach. If the priest is spending time with non-Orthodox, there would be complaints. Who is going to be in touch with people who are seeking? The parish priest is not employed to be missionaries. The foundation of church life is the lay people.

The people had intermarried with the other people. If the people intermarry and bring their spouses into the Church, this is a major victory. If they marry and leave, we lose.

St. Herman wrote back that we have very much with which to work. The monks also stood up for the people with the fur company which had a monopoly on all trades. Their letters were going out on company ships and the mayor was reading the mail and covering himself and making accusations against the monks. This is why Fr. Gillian was sent to find out who were telling the truth.

In the Troparion to St. Herman we have intercessor of the oppressed. This is only in the Troparion.

The native people were always called the Americans. Those from the lower 48 were called Bostonians. The natives considered Christianity to be the completion of what was missing in their culture.

The first Gospel to be translated into each language was the Gospel of Matthew because it quoted the Old Testament the most. It shows that Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. You are not there to destroy but to build on solid foundation. You are there to build up and to care for these people. There were three attempts on the life of St. Herman. The monks loved those people and the people reciprocated.

The second missiological principal is that you can't save whom you don't love. Let's accept them where they are. Assure them that we can for their benefit. Don't attack them as "**these people**" as being different from you. You can't save what you don't love.

Come to see the world through their beam of life, at least a little bit.

We have to fight for our faith by applying the Gospel. The Church is not there to create division and hatred in the name of Christ.

Fr. Herman stayed on the island and he prayed. He loved the people. During his life there were only two miracles. There was a fire and he draw a line and said that the fire won't cross this line and it did not. There was also a tidal wave and he put an icon of the Theotokos on the beach and said that the waves were not coming over this and they did not. His examples converted 1,000 people and saved 10,000.

We have to walk the walk. We can't preach it and not do it.

The seminary in Russia was the equivalent of high school and classes were conducted in Latin. St. Yakov toured a Franciscan mission and he made an organ for them. He conversed with the Franciscans in Latin. He had never met a Catholic and they have never met an Orthodox.

He learned Aleut and for ten years ran the Aleut school. He had to devise an alphabet for the Yupiks also. Education is essential. The faith without the education leads people's faith to become colder. When people attack Orthodoxy, those who don't have the education don't have the answers.

The missionaries to Alaska did not have any training. There were no schools to train them. What does it mean to inculcate the Gospel? You have a bag of seeds. You have to have soil. In the Parable of the Sower, there were three harvests. Some 30%, some 60%, and others 100%. The diverse was the soil condition. You plant the seed and allow the Holy Spirit to let it grow.

When he became metropolitan, St. Innocent was 71 years old and he noticed that Alaska was in American hands. In 1894 the Juno church was built from funds from mission society. You need lay people also to pay the bill. The society which he established was not just to pay the bills. Who accepts and who rejects the Gospel is a mystery known only to God. The best financed, the best equipped, and the best trained does not always succeed. There were people who met the Lord in person, heard Him preached, and saw Him raise the dead and still turned away.

The essential ingredients of mission is prayer. Pray for those who have not heard the Gospel who will hear it and be drawn. Pray for the missionaries. And finally thank you for your funds. It is the preparation of the soil.

When Christ said "I am the life of the world," the word for world is *κοσμος*. He did not say *οεκουμενε*. Christ is not only the life of human being, but He is the life of everything., Christ is the life of everything and not just everyone. When you kill something to eat, you had to pay special respect to that life force. Your survival depends on the life of life of the other creatures. The sacrifice of Christ makes perfect sense to an Eskimo.

Marry as many as possible and bring them to church. Learn their story. You can't save whom you do not love.

Freedom is God's gift. St. Gregory of Nyssa said the same thing in the fourth century. We are eternal, not without beginning, but without end. We can only tell our story to people with whom we have rapport. The Constitution's Bill of Rights said that all freedom comes from our Creator, not from the government. Freedom is inherent in us and it is God's gift. With it comes responsibility. Why do we worship God? Does God need our worship? No. We need to worship Him.

In the history of the Church married priests have a bad record. There were only three non-martyrs saints who are married. St. John of Konstandt, St. Alexis Troth, and one other. The other married priests who are saints are martyrs.

You come to church because you have faith in God. First of all, there is God.

"In the beginning was the meaning and the meaning was with God." We say that there is a God because there is a purpose and a reason for our lives.

Our story is of a God Who not only created heaven and earth but also Who became man. Because we don't do our job, everything is going to hell. We say this in the Anaphora: "Thou art God ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, and ever existing,..." He does everything possible to unite us to Himself. The Church is the remembrance of the future. What we see in icons are the saints as they will be. It is the resurrection. The remembering is of "these savings commands and all things Thou hast done for us." Five of those events are in the past. The list is to come. The Church is the remembrance of the future. It is the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

I go to church because there is a God. To believe there is not one is also a belief. We can't prove it.

God was free to create or not to create. He could have done nothing and still be happy ever after. We celebrate the story at every liturgy and then we keep it to ourselves. We are like the myrrh-bearing women who went out and told nobody because they were afraid.

The ground is rocky, maybe more like concrete in our story today. Lay people have to do missionary work. It has to be grounded in theological education. We have to say “Come and see.”

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann said there is no right answers to a wrong question.

We can enrich each other and that will enrich our missions. Mission is not something that we pay people to do. To be the people, to share the story, and to invite them to come and see—this is the story of mission.