

St. Herman of Alaska
Fr. Michael Oleska
Tuesday 6 June 2006

Matushka Catherine Vitko:

Fr. Michael—a very white man in a very odd outfit. It took him about five minutes and the whole audience was mesmerized.

Jim Karabin is a videologist Fr. Michael is well renown for his work on Russian spirituality and Russian Alaskan culture.

Fr. Michael knew nothing about Sitka when he arrived in Kodiak in May 1970. He wanted to be an Indian when he was small. His mother told him: “Boys of European and German background can’t go up to be Indian chief.” He went to school at Georgetown University. There he met Fr. John Meyendorff who invited him to come to St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary for Pascha. After that he was interested in going into Foreign Affairs.

He just discovered that there are native Americans who were Orthodox Christians.

Fr. Michael tried to get to Alaska in August 1970. He started writing letters to get employment totally without success. The State of Alaska even paid somebody to be at the airport to discourage people from coming to Alaska to work. They were in a recession. He wanted to go because he wanted to meet native Americans and to see St. Herman of Alaska.

A student came to him and asked him if he wanted to go to Alaska. The village of Old Harbour on Kodiak Island had a place named after the Three Hierarchs because missionaries came on a ship named after them. They were without a priest since 1837, the day St. Herman died. The people learned how to pray in their own language, in Slavonic, and in English as their third language. Now these people were dying off. How were they going to keep the language going? They wrote to the bishop, Bishop Theodosius, who said that there is no place for a priest to live there. Build a house and he will send them a priest An old house was found and fixed up. They wrote back to the bishop and told him that we have a house. He wrote back that they need to have money to pay a priest They put \$9,000 in the bank and went back to the bishop. This time the bishop wrote back that he did not have a priest that he could send.

The mayor of the city went to a VISTA volunteer. He said that there must be a school some place where they train priests. They wrote another letter to the bishop and ask him to forward it to a seminary in North America.

Another VISTA volunteer was passing through Stika. He had a cousin at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary named George. The forwarded the letter to his cousin. George Koulomzin was a city boy. His idea of the wilderness and the west was New Jersey. He had no desire to go west of the Hudson River.

He started with his roommate and then went door to door through the dorm. He finally came to Fr. Michael.

Fr. Michael brought books to read to his church school class and it was his least successful class. The kids were bored. They had heard these stories all their lives. He was telling them stories that they heard since childhood.

On 13 December 1837 Fr. Herman died. None of the kids never heard that detail. They thought that he was still alive. Everybody had stories about him and how he healed people. They assumed that he walked into the room and healed them.

No saint has ever called himself a saint. "The great saints are certain that they are sinners and the great sinners are certain that they are saints." The closer you come to God, the more you see your own faults and unworthiness. The great sinners are far from God. They are in darkness. They are too far from the light to notice their sins. They can justify everything they have ever done and rationalize it. The great saints dying saying "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Why was he glorified? He was glorified as a saint for his ascetic life. He slept on a board and used another board as a blanket and a rock for his pillow. He had one change of clothes, a cassock that he wore year around. He wore a heavy cross under his cloak. Nobody knew this. HE was never ordained He fasted and he lived on the island for many years alone. Spruce Island was four iles from the town of Kodiak. "There I talk with angels. Here in town I talk with people."

Fr. Herman was directly in line with the ancient fathers. The rich young man was looking for the Lord's approval. He did not get it. The Lord told him to sell all he has and give it to the poor and come and follow Him. He went away sad because he had many possessions.

This passaged changed the life of Anthony, the first monk. He sold everything he had and gave it away. How do you follow Christ? He was 3½ centuries too late. Christ is not present in the same form on earth. St. Anathasias is the biographer of St. Anthony.

Biblically the desert is the devil's country. It is the land without life. It is where the devil rules because he had killed everything. St. Anthony goes to the land of the dead. When demons are cast out, this is where they go. Anthony goes there and starting singing songs. In the land of death and the dead Anthony sings songs and proclaims the resurrection of Christ. You go there and celebrate Pascha in the tombs You are surrounded by the dead and the tombs of the dead. We are taking the land back and proclaiming the risen Lord. We are going into the devils' country and reclaiming it in the name of the living God.

When Orthodoxy came to Russia, there were places where people did not want to live. There were plenty of places where the devil had driven out all life. The first monks found caves among the river banks of the Dniper. These caves became their own tombs. We are going to reclaim the whole world and all of nature. St. Sergius of Rozhinov established Holy Trinity Monastery in a swamp where nobody could stand the mosquitos.

Lydia Blanche discovered that St. Herman was originally baptized Gerasimos. As a teenager he felt called to the monastic life. There are those who are born to pray. We don't call them prayers, we call them monastic.

He looked for a place to go where monastic life might be the fullest. He found a chain of islands on a lake. This lake was frozen solid half the year. He eventually was tonsured a monk as a young boy and he spent 30 years there. He was in his 50s when a business man invited him to follow him to Alaska.

This was Grigorii Shelikov. He was a merchant in Ucoupsk. If you play Risk, you have an idea. It is thousands of miles away from European Russia, seven or eight time zones away. Russia has ten time zones.

In 1742 a group was sent by the tsar to explore. They found the Bering Straight which was named after Bering. Fourteen years later he was sent back to do it again. No one actually believed him the first time.

When the Russian government sent him back a second time, his orders told him to sail east and implant a brass plaque there. He was there to grab as big a chunk of North America as possible. He was supposedly going out for scientific purposes but he was really going to conquer land.

He discovered Mount St. Elias. It is the tallest mountain that goes from the sea and directly up. It goes from sea level up to 18,000 feet. Its base is at sea level. This explains how much of Alaska became Russian territory.

There was another ship that landed a day earlier and further south. They had to make a treaty. Bering was shipwrecked and died. He got all the credits.

The man who survived both voyages returned to Russia with booty. The Chinese were paying top rubles for the furs that were discovered. This started a fur rush and they made fortunes. Boats made of leather lashed together sailed out to the Alaskan Island to trade with the natives. Only the natives knew how to catch these animals. The Chinese were paying the equivalent of a year's pay for these animals. Thirty pelts were a pension for 30 years. We never had a fur rush in American history and they never had a gold rush. These men never retired. They were frontier men. They had no interest in settling down and getting civilized. They gave large donations to churches and monasteries. After giving all these donations, they still had a lot left. So they partied until it all ran out. Then they go out again.

A man decided to build ships and fill them with men and arm them. They outfitted three ships and sent them to Alaska in the spring of 1784. Two of them sank. The Three Hierarchs under Gregory's command sailed into Kodiak and established a settlement. Shelikov stopped off at the rival of the Kodiak people. The Unians considered the Kodiak people inferior. Unian means "human being."

The Kodiak people called themselves "real people" and they called the Unians "imposters." Fr. Michael's wife is Yup'ik.

You only enslave people who are not real human. It is foggy there in Alaska and the sun is out only 20 days a year. Якутск is 30 or 40 below zero most of the year. Coming from there and going to Alaska it is like going to Tahiti. People who spoke Russian had married the people. By the time the first priests came, they were disappointed because there were nobody to baptize and convert. Get five Russians together and at least four of them can sing. They had built even the first chapel and baptized their own wives and children.

Gushpak was a slave. He knew his own language and Russian. Shelikov arrived at Three Saints and started building a settlement there. He told the slave to tell his relatives and friends that he is here and give them presents. The people would not take the presents. Shelikov doubled the

presents but the people still refused. He did it a third time. This time the people told the slave that if he showed his face again, they will kill him.

The people expected a conflict. Guashpak knew the area. He led Shelikov and his men there and they began to bombard the fort. Several hundred people were killed. When he applied for his business license, a stipulation was that he had to deal fairly and compassionately with the people.

If they had fire arms at this time, it would have been muskets. You had to pour the powder down and ram the powder.

There were not many Russians. The Serbian people were mixed. A third were native people. They had to take out business licenses and their applications are on file. With Shelikov it is a new story. After this successful conquest, he came back to Europe and told Queen Catherine the Great that he now presents a new island to her with 10,000 new taxpayers. He asked to be knighted. He asks her for a monopoly. He wants to be knighted, a government subsidy, and a monopoly. Catherine the Great is reading from the laissez faire theory. She does not knight him. He is disappointed. He knew that she was old and she had a son.

Nicholai Kozand was in a military academy because it was either that or jail. Shelikov tries to make a deal with him. He offered him a major shareholder if he marries his 14-year old daughter Anna once Paul becomes tsar. Nicholai marries Anna. The marriage lasts two years because the girl dies. He is a major shareholder in the company. Catherine the Great dies and Paul becomes tsar.

Chelokoff tells Catherine the Great that these people are thirsty for the Gospel if he could only get a priest to go with him. She authorizes him to take ten priests, but at his own expense. This is why he came knocking on the door at Valaam.

It was 8,000 miles to Alaska. A train voyage today would take eight days. It took the monks eight months to walk the distance. Most of the travel cost was providing the monks with new boots or shoes. This is the largest missionary journey in the history of Orthodoxy and possibly in the world. On 24 September 1794 they landed on Kodiak Island.

They found Shelikov's men oppressing the people. The monks realized that this was illegal and immoral. It was 8,000 miles back to St. Petersburg. They began writing letters almost immediately but the letters did not go out until May 1795. They began writing down the stories the people told about their beliefs. The people believed in God and knew about the Ten Commandments. They even had a story for the flood. They wrote a report about the beliefs of the people and said we can work with this. You find out what the people know and affirm that and add to it what is uniquely Christian.

The monks still believed in Shelikov. He had told them that the church was already built and supplied. There was no church and it was not supplied. They blamed the problems on the mayor, Baronov. Finally the abbot decided to go on a company ship back to Russia. Another priest goes to the mainland. He is killed by an Eskimo hunting party. This is Father Juvenaly.

Fr. Marcari is sent to the Alutian Island. He had no one to convert but he had lots of weddings and chrismations. He goes back to Russia and he blames the _____ [wsls] for what is going on.

Fr. Joseph is appointed Bishop in Kodiak. He had legal authority to arrest Baronov. The ship is caught in a storm and sinks. Baronov's rule lasts another 20 years.

Now the oldest member is Fr. Herman. It is not safe for him to stick around. He packs up his things and move to Spruce Island. He dug a hole in the ground and lived in a cave. When he died nearly 25 years later, he was buried in that cave.

He help write letters until 1818 when Baronov was finally relieved of his command and retired. In 1799 the company got its monopoly. Catherine died and Nicholai marched into the office of the tsar with the monopoly papers naming the monopoly the Russian American Company.

Why did Shelikov died of? He designed his own monument. He called himself the Russian Columbus but he never discovered a single island. He died in 1798 suddenly of severe stomach pain. People believed that he was poisoned by his wife for forcing their daughter to marry Nicholai.

Fr. Herman was in Alaska and the suffering of the new people is all around him. Finally when Baronov retires, he wrote a letter to the new governor who heard nothing good of this trouble making monks. He comes to Spruce Island. He said "Our country has been given this country as a new born babe. Our baby cries only tears of blood. Help us to know what consolation is." The original letter survived to today. It is in a Russian museum which bakes during the summer and freezes in the winter. They do not have microfilm and Xerox copies. The new governor asked if he could substantiate his charges. They were never given paper or ink to keep records. Paper was not available then.

He spent 19 years of his life on that island. His settlement continued to grow. He had built a small chapel and people built their homes nearby. An Aleut married and a man built a school.

Tsar Paul did not last long and Tsar Alexander became the tsar. He got tired of these conflicting reports. In 1802 he sent his father confessor Hiermonk Gsaddin to get to the bottom of this. He certified everything that the monks say. He learned their language within two years. He was a welcome addition to the mission. He had a college degree. The monks are not theologians and priests and they don't go to school. They walked from town to town and from monastery to monastery for eight months. There were no Marriotts. They stopped at monasteries at night, each one having been built in the wilderness beyond the frontier of the empire. They then had some experience dealing with local Siberian tribes. They had experienced listening to their stories. They revived the missionary experience of the Orthodox Faith in Siberia night by night. They were not professionally equipped but spiritually equipped. The shamans fulfilled the work of the Old Testament prophets. They welcomed the monks. Two hundred years later a grandmother told a grandchild, "If you don't behave Shelikov will get you."

When the monks came, the people came to the beach to meet them. The medicine men usually did not participate, but they ent the people. There were 1,000 baptism in the first year. They had the support of the local spiritual leaders, the shamans. The native people realized that the monks were on their side. There were three assassination attempts against Fr. Herman alone. Three monks drowned on their attempts to return to Russia and report back.

When Mr. Michael came to Kodiak, he found the people very excited about the canonization of St. Herman. They kept the memory so alive that the kids did not know that he had died. The miracles attributed to him occurred after his death. There are only two miracles during his life.

One was a fire and St. Herman drew a line on the ground and said that the fire would not cross it and it did not. The other was a tidal wave and he placed an icon of the Theotokos on the beach and the water did not pass it. (See Saturday's notes.)

All the miracles of healing were when people came to his grave time after time after his death. Everybody had stories. In 1894, the 100th anniversary of their arrival, the local people built a chapel over the cave where St. Herman was buried. The alter is over the cave. He was remembered initially for his heroic defense of the native people. In 1970 those miracles were widely known in Kodiak. The local sectarians dare not say anything against them.

Back in 1930 Fr. Garisios came there to be the caretaker of the shrine. He died in 1969 or 1970. He was there to keep the shrine pure and holy. He was a priest monk. He removed the coffin of St. Herman from the cave and built a new one and painted an ephitarios with the image of St. Herman on it. When St. Herman died, he told the people not to kill the priest and don't bring his body to Kodiak.

Fr. Michael took a Greek friend, Fr. George, to Spruce Island. The Greek asked if the Church could stand alone. He said that you need to have holiness. Fr. George said that he had experienced holiness only one other place, namely at the tomb of Our Lord.

We should come here at least once in our life. It is a place where holiness is. You only need to walk into the forest ten steps to know that you are on holy ground. It was brought there by this one celebratory monk. If we all live our faith seriously, every Orthodox Christian is capable of sanctifying the place where he is. People were inspired by him. The miracles that flowed from his grave soon after his death only confirm people. God would like nothing better than to make miracles from all of us. If we went to the hospitals and raised the sick, it would go to our head. We are too close to the darkness. Through him thousands were inspired during his life and after his death. Every 7 and 8 August thousands of people go to Spruce Island and they all have the same report.