

**June 19, 2005**  
**Pentecost Sunday**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although eager to make the trip and looking forward to it with tremendous anticipation, I confess that nothing really prepared me for Alaska.

When Bishop Nikolai invited me, several months earlier, to give the commencement address at St. Herman's Seminary in early June, I promptly consulted a globe to get my bearings on Kodiak City, where the seminary is. The place is 152-30 west, nearly as far west as Honolulu. Moreover, it is 57-50 north, further up than Moscow. In short, I would be going further north and west than I had ever traveled. The distance from Chicago is almost 3000 miles.

The beauty up north is breathtaking, as I began to learn when our flight reached the Canadian Rockies. I have flown over both the Alps and the Pyrenees, but Canada is different. The mountains there seem infinitely more extensive, and it takes much longer to cross them. As we skirted up the coast near Yakutat Bay, the Alaska Range came into view, at the base of which sits Anchorage, the only large city in the state. It was there that I caught another flight down to Kodiak Island, an hour or so to the southwest.

The Orthodox Church has been on Kodiak since the 1790's when the island monks of distant Valaam settled there and began to preach the Gospel to the native peoples of the region. Tribal legends, including shamanistic visions, had foretold the coming of these missionaries, and, notwithstanding the perpetual and frequently violent interference of other Russians, their success was extensive.

Villages all over Alaska and down through the Aleutian chain were converted to the Christian faith, which became deeply planted in the local culture. I rejoiced to hear "Christ is risen!" in the various languages of Alaska. At the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday that I was on Kodiak, the Great Litany was chanted in Yupik.

Almost all the students at St. Herman's Seminary are native Alaskans and trained specifically for that mission field. (I hope that Alaska's one Orthodox seminary will forever resist the temptation to become another graduate school of theology. In this respect I was encouraged by a conversation with Father Chad Hatfield, the dean of the seminary. He assured me that St. Herman's would not seek accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools [ATS], the agency that has presided over the decline and decay of many seminaries in this country. As a former professor at two schools accredited by the ATS, I was delighted to learn this.)

Academic anthropologists from the Lower 48 provide one of the problems faced by Alaska's Orthodox Christians. These annual visitors, supported largely by government grants, ascend to Alaska to teach the natives about their "ancient heritage," an alleged

birthright lost when those terrible, marauding missionaries brought Christianity to the region. These anthropologists gather the children into camps and teach them about wearing tribal masks and getting in touch with the spirits of their ancestors, the wraiths of the forest, and that sort of thing. The most reliable upshot of this effort is that the kids start to have screaming nightmares in camp, and the local priest must be summoned to pray over them and calm them down.

The Christian faith serves young people in Alaska in more than one way. I was especially impressed by St. Innocent's Academy, which ministers to young folks "at risk." These latter, in their late teens and early twenties, are mainly from the Lower 48 and have been sent up to Kodiak to get them away from drugs and other threats to their moral and even physical lives.

I spent quite a bit of time with these kids, and the experience was overwhelming. The atmosphere at St. Innocent's was so godly and healthy. I particularly appreciated the marvelous music program, which taught them to sing and dance and play musical instruments. Indeed, the school itself is partly funded by the concerts that the students provide for the many cruise ships that come through the area.

I suppose the high point of the trip was my visit to Spruce Island, where St. Herman had spent his life as a hermit and ran an orphanage. On both islands the spirit of St. Herman is still very much alive and vibrant. (In this respect only, the place reminds me of Assisi, where one is still aware of the living presence of St. Francis.)

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