

## Everywhere Present: Alaskan Pilgrimage

Going on a pilgrimage is a challenge and an adjustment to new places and inconveniences; yet, it is a reminder that God is everywhere present.

Kh Ginny and I joined twenty two other mostly Russian Orthodox on a pilgrimage to visit historic Orthodox churches and sites in Alaska; a pilgrimage led by Fr Andrey Kovalev of St Gregory the Theologian Patriarchal Russian Church in Tampa, Florida. We boarded a Holland American cruise ship in Seattle, Washington for fifteen days aboard M. S. Amsterdam. Each evening after Dinner we celebrated a supplication or an Akathist service to either St Herman or St Innocent – monks from Valaam Monastery located on an isle on Lake Ladoga who in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries brought Christianity to the Aleuts, Inuits, Tglint, and Athabaskan peoples.

In each port city we visited Orthodox churches or cemeteries, and met with Orthodox priests, bishops, deacons, and parishioners where we would conduct a supplication or Moleban Service.

The high point of our pilgrimage was to concelebrate a Divine Liturgy at Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Church in Kodiak for the feast day of St Herman. His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon, led the service with the assistance of Bishop Daniel of Santa Clara, ten priests of which I was one and Fr John was another. As this was a pilgrimage to venerate the holy relics of St Herman, priests and people came from many places. Three of the celebrating priests flew in from Moscow. One non-celebrating priest was Fr James Thayer, a retired Antiochian priest now living in Philadelphia. Three of the celebrating priests were native Alaskans. Rounding out the servers was an Arch-deacon, four deacons, and several sub-deacons.

One experienced the universality of Orthodoxy directly. Although we came from all corners of the globe we worship God with the same Liturgy in the same way. At the conclusion of the Liturgy we held a supplication service to St Herman and venerated his relics residing in a coffin in the church. After services, of course, we joined others for refreshments and coffee to exchange greetings and well wishes before departing our separate ways.

Perhaps the most intriguing site was in Chugiak at the Eklutna Historic Park which possesses two Orthodox churches and a cemetery on the same grounds. One of the churches is relatively new – built maybe fifty years ago, but the other dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is a very small wooden structure that one needs to bend down to enter. It is currently in disrepair with plans to restore it. Associated with the older church is an old cemetery that illustrates the Orthodox sensitivity to native cultures.

When the Russian monks and priests began to teach Alaskans about Christ, they proceeded by first asking them what they held sacred. Then based upon what they heard they augmented what the Alaskans knew and believed with Orthodox understanding of the divine. The monks and

priests did not disparage what the people held sacred, but affirmed those elements that corresponded to Orthodox theology. I am reminded of what St Paul says in Romans (2:19-20) that everyone who witnesses Creation can see God's work. It was the Alaskans belief that at the time of death the soul departed the body and hovered over it for some time and needed a place to rest. So over each grave they built a "spirit house" in addition to placing an Orthodox cross: truly, a blending of two cultures to sustain a family's sense of honor and dignity.

A pilgrimage contains many experiences and one I came to appreciate was the Akathist services we celebrated. Now for most of us the only Akathist service we know is the one held on the Friday evenings of Great Lent – the Akathist service to the Theotokos. Yet, there is an Akathist service for each saint. It consists primarily in rejoicing over the life of the saint by reviewing in nine sections (canticles) his or her life. It is a short bio of the saint in verse. By participating in the Akathist service for St Herman and St Innocent one learns about their labors, their struggles, and their spiritual achievements. We learn that these holy people are just like us – human beings – with the same challenges of life. They become our heroes.

Now, built into us humans is the need to acknowledge heroes and heroines. In the secular world we create Halls of Fame for baseball players, football players, and rock and roll musicians. We create Oscar awards, Emmy awards, Edgar awards and many others. In the academic world we create honorary degrees, named professorships, Fulbright awards, and McArthur Genius Awards. Almost every area of human activity creates an award system. Many people know these heroes' life stories, their stats, their film biographies, even their famous lines. In the Football Hall of Fame, for example, there is a bronze bust of the player, his uniform, his helmet, and a brief biography. In the Baseball Hall of Fame each player's portrait is prominently displayed together with his glove and bat. These objects are "relics" of the players, but they possess no spiritual powers. We go to these "shrines" to pay homage to them and to feel in touch with their greatness. But, what good are these relics on the Day of the Last Judgment?

In our Orthodox world our Hall of Famers are our saints to whom we can pray and who can intercede for us with God. Do we not sing in the troparion to St Nicholas, "O holy father and bishop Nicholas intercede with Christ our God to save our souls?" There is a value to knowing our saintly heroes. Participating in their Akathist service we can get to know them – learn their stats if you will. As many of us can recall the stats and achievements of professional ball players, actors, and musicians we should be able to do the same with a saint's life achievements. Let's make it a goal this ecclesiastical year to do just that by starting with our own patron saint.

Yes, pilgrimages are truly a way of touching another dimension of life that too often is overlooked in our secular world. This dimension helps us to connect to a fellowship of believers from around the world and to the fellowship of saints who departed this life. We are connected. We belong to a loving family of fellow Christians. St John talks about this fellowship in his first epistle when he says he has been telling us about Christ so that we can have fellowship with him and the other Apostles who have fellowship with Christ Himself. What greater company can we hope to enter?

At the conclusion of distributing the Holy Gifts to the faithful the priest sings out: “O Lord, save thy people and bless thine inheritance.” What does that mean? Having partaken of the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Christ now abides in us and so we beseech Him to save us from death and to bless us – His inheritance: we are His inheritance as are all the saints and those who have departed this life in faith. As inheritors of this divine mystery we have an obligation to stay connected to Christ and His saints and to experience a sense of belonging. We are the Body of Christ still alive and well two thousand years after His Resurrection.

Going on a pilgrimage with other Orthodox Christians opens to us another dimension of our faith and our connectedness to all Orthodox from other places and to the saints whose relics we are privileged to venerate, and in many instances possess spiritual powers of healing. Asking these warriors for Christ to intervene to Him for us acknowledges our dependence on God. For in many instances prayers to the saints are answered for our benefit.

Coming to church each Sunday is helpful for our spiritual growth, but making an effort to travel outside our comfort zone sheds new light and understanding and deepens our resolve to stay faithful to Christ – to witness to Him in our thoughts and actions and to grow in holiness.

He is, indeed, everywhere present!