

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Ethnographic Project: The Russian Orthodox of Kodiak Island

Submitted to Dr. Stanley John,

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of

CS501

People as Social and Cultural Beings

by

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Introduction

The purpose of this project was to engage cross-culturally with and complete a mini-ethnography for a congregation culturally distinct from my own. The chosen congregation to fellowship with was the Russian Orthodox community of Kodiak, an island in southwestern Alaska. This church presented a unique opportunity, as it is the first Russian Orthodox church in America, has an Orthodox seminary as part of its campus, and its legacy has strong ties to the native Alaskan peoples.

Field Notes

Session 1 – First Interview with Deacon Innocent: Gaining Entrée

The task of gaining entrée into the Russian Orthodox community on Kodiak was fortunately easier than expected. With a bit of networking in my local church, I was put into contact with Deacon Innocent Philo¹, a chaplain at the local hospital. Our meeting was brief, about the span of an hour, but we were able to get through introductions, an explanation of what this project would entail, and a survey of topics pertaining to the local congregation and the Russian Orthodox faith in general.

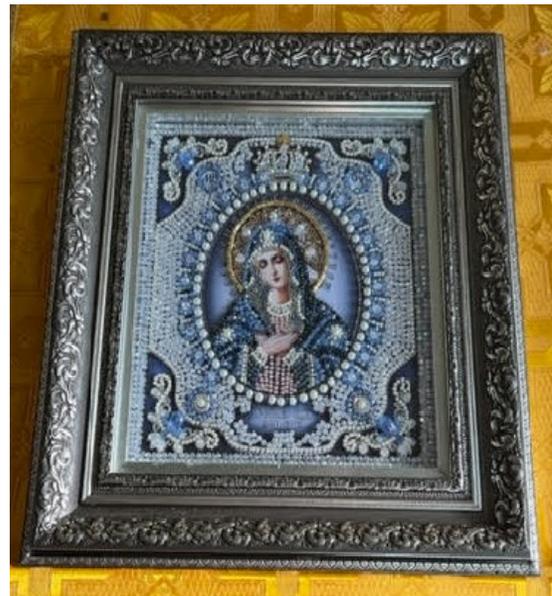
A few noted points of interest included a brief history of how the Orthodox arrived in Alaska and Kodiak specifically. Tales of Saints Herman and Innocent featured prominently in our discussion, as well as those of the martyrs Juvenali (Iuvenalii) and Peter the Aleut. These stories will be explored with more depth in the History and Mythos section of the paper. Following the history lesson, we discussed some of the cultural aspects of the congregation, and I used the opportunity to inquire about some of the do's-and-don't's of participating in worship and fellowship within the community. The guidelines given me were simple: men were expected

¹ I have requested and received permission from all interview subjects to use their real names.

to stand on the right side of the building and women on the left. Regarding participation in Holy Communion, I was informed I was not to partake of the bread and wine, but that I was permitted to request and receive a blessing. Lastly, we discussed the days and times for the various services held throughout the week, most of which were unfortunately in the middle of my workday. Overall, Deacon Innocent was open and receptive to our meeting. I left more informed than when I arrived and had an air of excitement for the opportunities to come.

Session 2 – First Sunday of Great Lent & The Bishop of Sitka

I met with Deacon Innocent another two times before my first worship service. We continued to discuss some of the differences between the Orthodox faith and both my present beliefs and my Catholic heritage. I mention this because going into the service, I thought I had a better idea of what I was going into, but I quickly realized how out of my element I was. From the outside, the church looked old and unassuming, but its weathered white siding, sky-blue spires, and salt air-worn wooden stairs and walkways gave way to an elegant inside. A gilded iconostasis with images of saints and angels, of Christ and the Blessed Mother, stood prominently before me. The walls were lined with icons of both local saints and those from throughout Church history. The floor space was also filled with various icons, including a beautiful bejeweled image of the Blessed Mother in a border of silver. There were several other features whose purpose eluded me at the time.



Icon of the Blessed Mother. Photo by author.

When I entered the church, I arrived in typical military fashion--fifteen minutes before the Deacon recommended. As such, I had a few minutes to take in the sights while the choir began to sing psalms and other Scripture readings. I had a few brief interactions with the handful of congregants present before the majority began to trickle in. Shortly following, the priests and other service officiants entered in robes of white and gold. Also part of the officiating party was



Bishop Alexei Panteleev of Sitka and the clergy. Photo by author.

Alexei Panteleev, the Bishop of Sitka. I was later informed by Deacon Innocent that to witness a service presided over by His Grace was a great honor. It truly was. The Bishop opened the season of Great Lent with a convicting, thought-provoking sermon on forgiveness. The choir also deserves to be mentioned, as the nearly two-hour service was entirely

sung and supported by the voices of these faithful servants to the Lord with little to no time in between pieces.

Admittedly, much of the service was spent just soaking in the new experience. There were movements I had no context or past frame of reference for and verbal responses, some in English, some in Russian, and some in the tongue of the native Alaskans, for which I suffered a similar lack of context. I did my best to go with the flow and at least mouth what I could pick up on. After the service, I waited around for Deacon Innocent so that we could discuss some aspects of the service and provide some answers for the questions I had accumulated. I also had the opportunity to speak briefly with one of the seminary students, who was less than impressed with

my presence and denominational affiliation. At this point, the ice had been broken and I was looking forward to future attendance.

Session 3 – Wednesday Night Vesper

The island of Kodiak is known for its large amounts of rainfall and generally inclement weather. The Bishop's return flight to Sitka had been cancelled due to such weather and as a result, he ended up officiating the Wednesday Vesper service, during which the pre-Sanctified gifts were partaken of. Once again, the clergy were gathered in their fullness, but their robes of gold and white were replaced by Lenten

purple and black. This service was a somber one and deeply moving in the spirit. The church echoed with the phrase, "Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy" over and over again. It was during this service that something truly connected for me with regards to the Orthodox practice. This is a



The bishop, standing upon the cathedra and orlitz. Clergy in attendance. Photo by author.

church that is keenly aware of man's fallen nature and the need for God's forgiveness. Following the service, I had the opportunity to talk at length with another seminarian, but this one was much more open than the first I had spoken with. We talked for some time about the symbolism of the Orthodox cross and the imagery of the iconostasis and the design church as a whole invoking Temple and synagogue imagery. This led to my second major observation of the evening: the Orthodox church has a deep respect for preserving sacred space. I left once again feeling edified and connected to my brothers and sisters in Christ whose particular mode of worship seemed to me the only difference we had.

Session 4 – Final Service

At this point, I have continued to meet regularly with Deacon Innocent and have attended several services, but the last service deserves special mention because it impacted me in several unexpected ways. First, I would mention that I was given the privilege of ringing the church bells at the beginning of the service. From there, the service began as all the rest. By this point, I had attended enough services that I could follow along, perform the *metania* genuflection when I was supposed to, and had a decent grip on the procession of the service. Up until this point, I had not



Lay singer Mike Hoffmann performing the metania before the iconostasis and altar beyond. Photo by author.

experienced a theological hard line I could not perceivably cross, even for the sake of being cordial. Unfortunately, during the presiding priest's sermon, that perception was shattered for reasons I will remain silent on out of respect for the Christians whom I have grown to care for over the course of this project. I took on a defensive posture and my mind began to bring various pieces of contention to the forefront. I found it difficult to remain for the service, let alone continue to listen to the rest of what the priest had to say, but I stayed—and I am glad I did. When the service ended, there was a memorial for an elder congregant who had recently passed. I stuck around to observe the ceremony and was hit with another perspective. I listened to the priest talking very personally with the congregants who remained, I watched him use humor to lighten the somber mood. This tender and vulnerable moment humanized the people I was ready to write off moments ago in a way I could not ignore. I ended up staying for the fellowship meal after the service and conversed with several congregants, including Mike Hoffmann, one of the

church's lay singers. I enjoyed our time together and just taking in the atmosphere of fellowship from those surrounding me. I would end with one final observation: From my first interview with Deacon Innocent to my final interview with Mr. Hoffmann and every individual in between, I heard the same phrase uttered: "Orthodox Christianity is a religion of the heart, not of the mind." This notion has stuck with me and continues to give me pause for thought as I reflect upon my experience.

Russian Orthodox in Kodiak – History and Mythos

From the first interview, a great amount of information was taken in concerning the origins of the Orthodox in Alaska and Kodiak. Some of this data was cumbersome to process, as many dates were presented along with Russian names that were, admittedly, difficult to spell and keep track of. There was a prospective opportunity to access the archives of St. Herman's Seminary which unfortunately never came to fruition, but two key texts were made available for this project: *Orthodox Alaska* by Michael Oleska, former Dean of St. Herman's Seminary, and a primer on St. Herman by Sergei Korsun and Lydia Black. Both texts contain a historical account of major figures within the Orthodox formation in Alaska and provide some ethnographic details regarding the native Americans and their introduction to Orthodox Christianity in the late 1700s. In *Fieldwork*, Harry Wolcott suggests that the anthropologist approach any collected information with skepticism.² Therefore, the accounts provided by Deacon Innocent and other interviewees will be checked against the available materials.

Much of the information provided by Deacon Innocent found parallels in the available texts. Some of the earliest interactions between the Russians and the native American tribes were through the trade interactions of the *promyshlenniki*, Siberian serf-class individuals composed of

² Harry F. Wolcott, *Fieldwork: The Basic Arts* (California: AltaMira Press, 1995), 118.

poor peasants, released convicts, and soldiers, most of which were assumed to be of poor moral character.³ Nevertheless, the *promyshlenniki*, through trade, war, and intermarriage with the natives, paved the way for the Russian missionaries of the late 1700s.⁴ Their presence would also prove pivotal to Saint Innocent Veniaminov's translation of the Gospel into the Aleut language and the overall communication of the Gospel to the native populace.⁵

After failed prior attempts by Gregory Shelikov and Alexander Baranov to establish an Orthodox mission presence in Alaska, Father Herman, serving in Archimandrite Joasaph's absence and subsequent drowning during his voyage on the *Phoenix*, continued to serve in Kodiak to establish a school and orphanage on the island, while settling himself in solitude on Spruce Island, just off Kodiak.⁶ He would faithfully serve the people of Kodiak until his death in 1837. Because of the success of the Kodiak mission, his dedication to a sanctified life in service to others, and the many miracles attributed to him, Father Herman was canonized St. Herman of Alaska in August of 1970.⁷ His relics are venerated to this day, every Thursday evening, at Holy Resurrection Cathedral in Kodiak.



St. Herman of Alaska. Photo by author.

Another intriguing story relayed by Deacon Innocent is that of the martyr Juvenali, a highly successful evangelist of the native peoples. Both texts attest to this event, although the accounts differ. The Oleska account recounts the martyr's death by a hail of arrows as he preached to the native Quinhagak from a small boat. Upon recovering his body, the Quinhagak

³ Sergei Korsun and Lydia Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint* (New York: Holy Trinity Publications, 2012), 20-21.

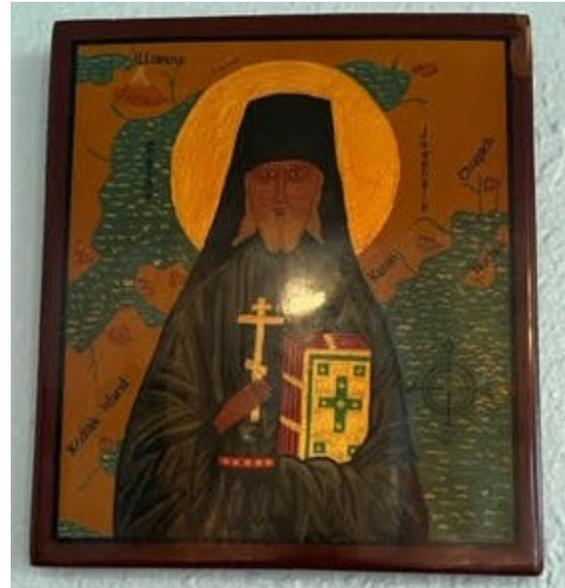
⁴ Michael Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 83-93, 143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 126-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 106-112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 126-7.

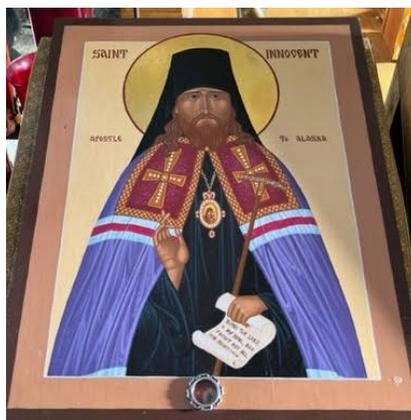
attempted to perform a ritual upon Juvenali's pectoral cross, but was unsuccessful.⁸ Korsun and Black's account, also allegedly given by St. Innocent, attests to the same details described above, but replaces the latter portion regarding the shaman with a supernatural account of Juvenali reviving several times, forcing the natives to repeatedly slay him, only ending the situation by cutting him into pieces.⁹ The post-script of both accounts attest to the fact that the event impacted the natives powerfully and that subsequent missionaries, notably Father Makarii, found great success in evangelizing and baptizing.



Icon of St. Juvenali. Photo by author.

Lastly, the most interesting account involves the mission work of St. Innocent to the

island of Akun. This event was not recounted by Deacon Innocent or the other interviewees, but



was discovered while reading through the Oleska text. Upon his arrival to Akun, St. Innocent discovered the native population awaiting his arrival and that they already knew he was there to evangelize them. The people of Akun, he relates, were foretold of his arrival by their shaman, Smirennikov, who was a mystic of some renown. Upon their meeting,

St. Innocent with Relic. Photo by author.

Smirennikov relayed to St. Innocent that he had already received the Gospel and learned about God from two spirit beings whom St. Innocent identified as angels.¹⁰ Anecdotally, this account in its fullness has many parallels with the shamans' capabilities and interactions with the spirit

⁸ Ibid., 113-4.

⁹ Sergei Korsun and Lydia Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint* (New York: Holy Trinity Publications, 2012), 40-42.

¹⁰ Michael Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 130-132.

world as presented in *Spirit of the Rainforest*. Ultimately, this fascinating account demonstrates how both God’s physical and spiritual creation work side-by-side to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Cultural Analysis

Society – Grid-Group Theory

Although the power structure is significantly smaller than its Catholic counterpart, the Orthodox church has a structured system of authority of deacons, priests, and bishops, as well as monks of various ranks. Utilizing Mary Douglas’ Grid-Group theory, the Orthodox community would fall solidly inside of the positional block.¹¹ Throughout the service, there was a high degree of formality and rigidity within the process of preparation for the liturgy. The clearest example of this was in the resident clergy’s preparation of the bishop before the service. Great care was exercised by those assisting His Grace in donning



Preparing the Bishop's Attire. Photo by author.

the proper attire and proper respect was rendered to him at all times. This respect was extended down to the very objects on his person, including his cross and other personal effects. By extension, this reverence is seen offered, at all levels, to the saints venerated by each icon. The power structure of Orthodoxy extends beyond the realm of the physical and into the heavenly realm of the spiritual.

¹¹ Mary Douglas, “A History of Grid and Group Cultural Theory” (transcript in CS501 at Alliance Theological Seminary, New York, NY, December 20, 2016), 4.

Worship

One of the most powerful observations was that of the Orthodox congregation's worship style. Nancy Ammerman describes worship as the "unifying vision of the congregation" and elsewhere describes effective worship as "involving all the senses."¹² The Holy Resurrection Cathedral certainly checked all these boxes. The eyes have no lack of visual to draw the worshipper towards the heavenly sphere, the smell of incense is ever present upon the air, the brush of fellow congregants lets the individual know they are a part of a larger Body of believers, the ears take in haunting hymns which pierce the soul, and the mouth partakes of the body and blood of the Savior and the meal of fellowship with the congregation after the service. There is a physically transcendent aspect brought about by the Orthodox's high-church aesthetic, but there is an experiential, spiritually transcendent aspect wrought by the corporate worship of the liturgy, a combination seldom realized outside of such an environment.

Congregation

One surprising aspect of the congregation was its population of converts into Orthodoxy, rather than those born into it, locally referred to as 'cradle Orthodox' amongst those I spoke with. This was indeed confirmed as I began to speak with several individuals within the congregation, only one of which was 'cradle Orthodox.' Two of the individuals I spoke with converted from a Protestant background, which made communicating differences and similarities significantly easier. In general, there was an openness and curiosity amongst the congregation as to my presence in the church. Most were friendly and willing to engage in dialogue and only one individual was standoffish.

¹² Nancy T. Ammerman, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1998), 84-5.

Another aspect which stood out was the church's diversity. Kodiak is a diverse location; homogenized congregations are in the minority. What stood out most, particularly post-research, is that the congregation seems to hold to a demographical distribution which honors its roots. The congregation had a spread of Russian immigrants and Alaskan natives in addition to its American converts and cradle Orthodox.

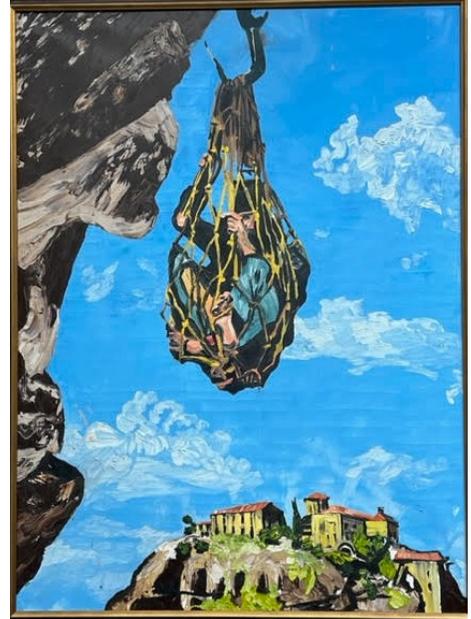
Art

If it is not already apparent by the sheer amount of digital and verbal imagery, the Orthodox church is in no short supply of artwork. From the icons and iconostasis to the temple imagery and architecture of building itself, the church's artwork is transcendent. One design feature I found particularly engaging, whether intentional or not, was the simplicity of the church's exterior compared to its ornate interior. It goes without saying that this design is not common amongst all Orthodox churches, as there are numerous grand Orthodox cathedrals in Russia alone. However, the simple exterior and grand interior creates in the individual a feeling of being transported from the physical to the heavenly, from the fallen world to the sacred space of heaven. It is also a characteristic which is distinctly Kodiak.

Lastly, with regards to artwork, I would recall my last meeting with Deacon Innocent. On the wall of his hospital office is a painting made by his daughter titled "Ascension." It depicts an Orthodox monk being hoisted up via a netted and pulley to the clifftop monasteries of Meteora in Greece. I had inquired as to the meaning, and after a brief history lesson about the monastery, Deacon Innocent concluded with the statement, "Ascension is not always easy. Sometimes Ascension is painful." After spending a few more minutes gazing at the painting and reflecting on the artist's intended meaning, I would add that for those who follow Christ, Ascension can be dangerous.

Reflection

From start to finish, this project has been extremely edifying. I got to step outside of my normal routine and out of my comfort zone and engage with fellow believers I likely never would have otherwise. As with every Godly pursuit, the timing of this project was nothing short of providential. It came at a time where I was struggling with contested beliefs and was asking God for some clarity. The Lord showed me the beauty in diversity present within the Body and a brief glance at what a Revelation 7:9 Church looks like.



'Ascension.' Photo taken by Author.

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