

FATHER INNOCENT
ON
PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AS AN ORTHODOX PRIEST
BY

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ON

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AT

JOHN BURKHARDT'S HOUSE

KODIAK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

PROLOGUE

The following interview was held on March 28, 1993. I chose the Orthodox Church as the area of study because I found it the most interesting. The mission of the religion has been on Kodiak ever since the Russians first settled here.

I must say I did not know a whole lot about the Orthodox Church or St. Herman's Seminary before I started this project. However, now that it is complete I am really pleased that I chose to pursue this area for my project. Not only was I fortunate enough to interview a Russian Orthodox by the name of Father Innocent, I had the opportunity to eat dinner with him and four other native students of the seminary. After dinner I attended Saturday evening services with them where I was able to stand on the balcony with the choir. This I found to be an excellent position in which to observe the extravagant service.

There isn't enough words to describe this whole class project. However, I would encourage everyone who is interested to not only read about the topic but to get involved and really experience it.

JB: What is your name and where were you born?

FI: Father Innocent, I was born in Madison Illinois which is right across the river from St. Louis.

JB: How long have you been an Orthodox Priest?

FI: Well, that's a good one. Since 1967.

JB: That would be 25 years! I was born in 1967.

FI: April 27th will be my 25th anniversary.

JB: Does the church recognize or do anything special for such an occasion?

FI: The church acknowledges you and gives you some kind of award or certificate.

JB: How long have you lived in Kodiak?

FI: I hit Kodiak first in 1971. December. Not December but January 6th. I came in from Seattle, Washington. We left on the 31st of December and landed in Sitka on January 1 of 1970. Because we came in at 4:00 in the morning. The Bishop kept me at the cathedral for about 5 days. I told the bishop, "Your Grace, I have to leave because we have church services on January 7th". So, he let me go. I left Sitka about noon, on the afternoon flight, landed in Kodiak at 3:00 and around 4:00 we went to Old Harbor. So I only had 2 hours to meet the natives. Ha-ha. I'm only speak English I had to have a interpreter to tell me what they were doing and what I'm doing to the natives. And it went nice, really. They are just beautiful people and services went just perfect January 6th. See, January 7th is the Feast

day.

JB: So, you decided to come up here for the pilgrimage that occurred in 1970?

FI: Oh, that's what I did. I was in Sioux City, Iowa for about 2 years and ah, I get a notice from Headquarters, Orthodox Church in America! And they announce 1 year in advance that on August 7, 8 and 9th will be the canonization of the new St. Herman of Alaska. One year's notice. I was thinking, boy, if I sell my car, I'm going to go. I was only able to save up \$200.00 and so when I went home to Illinois for a visit they celebrate theirs on the 25th see, ah... My brother pulled me aside and said, "here's the first \$400.00 we're going to give you and you let us know how much more you'll need before you go. That was in December you see.

JB: Was your goal to come to Alaska for the pilgrimage or was it to teach the religion here?

FI: No, no just come here for the pilgrimage. I had the possibility five years before that to come to Alaska.

JB: You chose not to then? Why?

FI: Well, no, because the little that I knew about Alaska and the people still believe that today. Igloos and cold weather. The bishop was looking for candidates for Alaska. All I knew was about 'Seward's Ice Box'. But when I came to the pilgrimage, paradise! I really mean it! I never thought, I mean, I thought you'd always have to be covered up. I never saw an eagle to my eyes. Ha, ha, ha. Only in pictures. Not really when I go home even now, people ask me,

"do you live in an igloo?"

JB: I want to know about the pilgrimage. Why do we have the pilgrimage for St. Herman?

FI: Oh, thats very good. Ah, the king in 1794 and the Russian, whatchamacallit from the Russian American Company were mistreating our natives theres no doubt about that but sometimes even the what they had over here they went over-board. See, they made it worse than it was. See, thats the whole thing and so this is the reason why alot of the natives do not care to come to the thing. But, its being considered that want to change things see and theres the whole thing. I wish they would, I love that thing you see I would go over and see it again. Well anyways, because if something is right its right and if something is wrong its wrong. They also did not true. true whats his name to Herman. See, there was something negative that they put in there and they expanded that. see that had nothing to do with it see remind me thats one of those.

JB: Its a tribute then, the pilgrimage is a tribute to Father Herman and what his goals were when he was in Kodiak?

FI: Yes thats right! So, when the Russian American people treated him badly, and the new man came in.....ah. I am sorry ah I should his name but I do not know his name. Everyones warning "watch that, watch that monk! See he is bad." So, he wanted to see for himself so he came out to visit him and the monk treated wryly see because he knew he was and started crying. So he says "You dont know what your people are doing to the people here." and you see explained it to him. Because if they would not get

their fare share or something to that nature. Overboard on that you see. Okay so, he was very much moved, very moved by what's his name. I will find that quotation for you, alright. I will show it to you. Now to give it to you straight see, I will give you what we call call a time line.

JB: Okay, alright.

FI: Read it in the acts of Apostles. See, or in the acts of Pentecost . This is when the church was established at Pentecost. And we go from the time of Pentecost and we, we. No see what happened. Er ah everytime and, I will show you along the line. The whole thing really.

JB: Alright, I guess from our history course were led to believe that the Russian Orthodox religion is only in Russia and then it spread to Alaska to help civilize the natives. I am just curious.

FI: Well, I am glad you mention that see, because we celebrated our bicentennial. uh, well would call it bicentennial because of, Vladimir accepting orthodox; see and that was two hundred years ago....millenium one thousand years! Millenium we were celebrating you see. I do not know of you remember this; a group that went from here to Russia? In August of 1987 was it?

JB: I was not here in August of 1987.

FI: Well, well, see there it is the millenium. We went there! That was a part of the program. This is why we went there. We went and saw the area where the first missionary, that is how did that come about? Vladmirs great grandmother is very religious so is his other grandmother. Ah, Vladimir was not even Baptized

that I know of you see and he is ruling the this the overthere in Russia. He says "We have to get a religion for our people." See. How do you know which is the right one? They start challenging and its boring. He said "thats a good point, thats a good point." Lets send our missionaries to find out, and they to, to, the Roman Catholic, they went to the Jews, they went to the Hindus, they went to the Moslems, really they went to China! And they started coming back and said no, these people will not let us eat pork. These people will not allow us to drink this. Then when it came to this one and you know; like when you were in church. We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth. They were so moved!

JB: Wow!

FI: And everyone treated him wryly. Well thats the one, he says. But, you will have to read something into his. He says I will accept it but the I forget what he is. the Emperor of the that is in Constinople. I want to take your daughter to be my wife and she did; and he accepted everything.

JB: So she was orthodox?

FI: Yes, she was orthodox.

JB: And thats

FI: He was baptized see and then he had everyone else be baptized! And this we will be the policy.

JB: Wow!

FI: Everytime when there is a peace day you see, like Christmas or Easter, food was put out on the street for everyone to come and celebrate. Just like that: one big family.

JB: Fantastic, one more personal question for you. How did you become involved in the orthodox religion?

FI: Oh, well my parents came in with it.

JB: Your parents are Russian?

FI: Yes, see they made things very difficult in Europe. It was just before the time World War I. Kaiser and I do not at that time. My dad saw the difficulties that were coming and people were coming to the United States and my dad came about 1908 or 1910 I really do not know. But anyways he was here before the war started over there in Europe. Then got a message from what's his name. Kaiser. We need at home.

JB: When you say here, do you mean Alaska or America?

FI: No, no, America. Now how come he came to America? Well, he was working the coal mines. He went to Ohio, because it was better you see. Then he moved to Illinois because the work was better there, okay. Then when he came to Madison, Ill. There were car shops. Well as luck would have it Dimitri, my dad, got a job selling cars. There's one home I could tell you Cohula, yeah. He had seven different families living there! That is how the church started there. We have to have a church. See, the priest was only in St. Louis, which is only 30-45 minutes away. He would only come once every 3-4 months. See, there's the whole thing. He was taking care of this little old church. In St. Louis which was bigger, then the people got together and built their own church in Madison, Ill.

JB: And that was for the immigrants or I guess for anyone?

FI: No, see you have to know about the Byzantine Catholics, there

Roman Catholics. I am sorry you can read this. They built churches with their cars with the cupola and everything. There's one in Anchorage right now, see. That's not our church? Because when they go inside it's completely different. On the same block there is what we call the Ukraine Church and then the Roman Catholic Church is only a half a block away. Now why was it so close I do not know, but anyway; we went to one and the Roman Catholics belonged to the other one.

JB: So when you arrived here in Kodiak, you decided to stay and not go back to the states?

FI: I would say yes and no. In other words when I came here from Kodiak. Ah, er, ah, ...see. Because...Hmmm. Let's leave Kodiak. Kodiak is my landing place. I came to Old Harbor okay. I came to Old Harbor. I was so moved by Peter. You see but Peter already passed away. He was a Chief. Each village had a Chief. He saw me! And recognized me right away and he said "Father give me the blessing! Hug me oh, you came back!" Because I told him that I would try to return. Really after services are over I was telling the Bishop first thing. "Your grace I am very serious about this and would like you to consider my being transferred to Alaska." I had to get his permission to leave and then I had to get the permission of the Alaska Bishop to come in. You see there's the whole thing. Oh and he was feeling very good to he just came from Russia, also. He was very good I just love that man. What he did for me and everything. He puts his arms up in disgust and says, "Ah, forget about it, all these dignitaries and everything. When you come

home you will forget about it." No way the longer I was away the more I wanted to come back to Alaska. It took me four months I did not want to leave him. He had three empty churches and when I left there were four. Priests do not like that; an empty church. Theres the whole thing. So he gave me the permission and so did Bishop Theodosius, who is Metropolitan Theodosius. They had a big convention, all the priests are invited thats once every three years. When came up there and I saw the Bishop I said, "Your grace I would like to talk to you about going to Alaska." Evidently I caught him at a fast time because we are going to be her e for five, six ,or seven days. So I let three days go by and I see him again ,and again we started talking and someone came. Here comes the Bishop so and so we have something to discuss. Then I saw him again you know where all the Bishops stand. He was over ther by himself, there were more in the area just getting ready to get together. So I went over there to talk to him again, and the Bishop told me about Old Harbor. One big street. The Chief is over there, the school is here, the church is over here, clinic is here. And ther is 105 children! Wow alot of family! So when I was going home Peter thought I was going to Ouzinke, you know where Ouzinke is. Peter started crying. So I said wait awhile Peter! That does not mean I am not coming back. I will be in Kodiak but I will be traveling. So I will be coming to see you. And thats the whole thing. Then he felt better. So I was doing my work and there in a year and a half and at that time they did not have phones....walky talky. You have to go to hooska

whats his name.

JB: You have to communicate by mail?

FI: No, no, everyone has radio and you talk by radio.

JB: Oh, short wave radios.

FI: Oh, yes short wave radios and everybody is listening in. I was a little disgusted see they had phones at Kodiak. The Bishop in Sitka wants me to go to Dutch Harbor and I am like where is Dutch Harbor? You know Unalaska. Okay where is Unalaska? See I did not know anything about that. I have only been up here a year and a half. I am just getting to know the people here. I can not see leaving right now. You do not want to start making changes until the people know who you are, then you start making changes. I was a little upset. Then I got a call about 11:00. I am going to catch that afternoon train! Then we started talking Russian to one another and if someone knew Russian. But anyway, oh no . Then you come in here. So I landed in Kodiak and caught a Mark Air flight and I knew the priest from school at St. Vladmirs and so he took very nice care of me, he let me use his phone and I called up there and I knew the other priest to because we were students at St. Vladmirs also. I said whats with you people and they said just a minute slow down, slow down. Father, and he is very nice man, and he was helping organize things to and the Bishop left and he more or less did it and thats when Father Joseph came in Because they needed someone to run things. Okay, so Father David told me at Sitka who was taking care of the cathedral because the Bishop there was moving to Pittsburgh, see. So

what happened. Heres what it is, Father Ishmael Gromov the priest that came from the Pribilovs and he has two children one is fourteen and the other is fifteen or sixteen and theres something wrong because they could have been a couple years younger and they came one thousand miles. He is concerned about his children. I told him right then and there, Father you let me know when to come and I will come as soon as possible. Well, since he is here and he knows the area and everything. We have to bless the water within two weeks . . . We have Christmas and then two weeks later we the blessing of the water on January 19. I said you bless your water at home and I will bless mine and I will go to each village and let them know a new priest is coming in.

JB: So, you guys swapped because he needed the facilities here?

FI: Yes, there you are. So when we made the switch I got to Cold Bay and as soon as I got there a woman asked me to bless her.

JB: She knew you were the priest?

FI: Well, this is it. I said who could you be? She says Barbara I work for Reeves Airline. I got to know Reeves very well. But anyway, she said Father you can stay with us or we can make arrangements for another quarters for you. In case the weather is bad. I wanted to catch the next plane out of there and they told me, no you will have to wait. Well, I do as I am told to do. No, you have to fight for that place you need to go. Well, the people are waiting for me over there because I told them that I would be there at such and such a time. Then I flew from Cold Bay to Dutch. Well, I finally get there

at about 5:30 and ask where is the church? The people tell me it is on the other side. Let us see Dutch and....

JB: Dutch Harbor and Unalaska are side by side.

FI: But there is no bridge. There is a bridge there now.

JB: And you were on the opposite side of the church?

FI: This is it! Well, anyways thirty minutes later I catch a boat to the other side. The church is right on the water. About one hundred yards from shore I heard the people saying, "That looks like the priest." The people came down to help me with my luggage. I had no way of contacting them. So anyway, I had eight churches to take care of.

JB: How does one take care of eight churches, did you have helpers?

FI: No.

JB: Do you teach in each church?

FI: Since Unalaska was my home base they gave me a home and I did not have to pay anything, that was part of the arrangements made. I told them that I would be at Nikolski two to three days at the most. I will go for the weekend so they can have confession on Saturday night like you did and receive holy communion on Sunday, then I will come right back. Well, now see if I go to Belkofski, there's three villages I can take care of see King Cole.

JB: Oh, eight churches eight different villages.

FI: Yes. Now since I am over there and passed up Sand Point I will be gone two weeks. I will make arrangements to be in one village on Saturday and Sunday I will be in another village.

JB: Did you do the services in native tongue?

FI: No,no. Slavanic, yes. They like Slavanic. But mostly English. I never learned their language.

JB: You speak Russian and English?

FI: Yes, thats all.

JB: Thats all!

FI: Why? The government ruined everything.

JB: We discussed the other day about Sheldon Jackson and the public schools.

FI: There you are. Read Barbara Jacksons book, she exposes everything.

JB: His goal was to educate the natives in public schoools or private schools at the same time Orthodox priests were trying to teach religion as a way of life not just spelling and writing. Was that the conflict?

FI: No, no. The conflict ocurred when Alaska was sold to the United States. The government said that everybody will be american citizens.

JB: Because they were natives?

FI: There you are! And they will not be treated like the Indians were. They wanted to get all the natives and put them in one area.

JB: The conflict began because the missionaries were here befor the government was here?

FI: No,no. The government came and the priest complained to the Russian dignatary that was here at the time. Now, in the church program it says there will be a Catholic priest, a

Orthodox priest, and a Protestant priest on the committee. The Orthodox priest never knew about it for eight years. "They will not let us do anything." The ambassador to the United States found out and within one weeks time everything was taken care of. He gave one months notice and said, you make sure you put an Orthodox priest in there.

JB: How long has the church been in Kodiak?

FI: Well, since 1794. You can find out more from Laura the tourist bus driver. Because actually that is the fourth church, the others have burnt down. The original was in town actually.

JB: The story of Father Juvenal.

FI: Juvenally.

JB: He was a missionary wanting to spread the religion throughout Alaska.

FI: There is a great conflict with that one.

JB: The story that I know from "Lord of Alaska" is that Father Juvenally was seduced by the native women then killed by the natives. Is this true or not true.

FI: Not from my side.

JB: Okay lets hear your side.

FI: Get Michael Oleksas book. My point with Juvenal is, we would take the smartest children from the village and they would learn about the church, not only the church; but about seamanship or whatever it is these other things. Then they would return and teach the others. Thats the whole thing. You should have seen under what conditions he went under. Veniminov speaks highly

of him. Put in an unfamiliar area does not know the language...

JB: One of the books you gave me was about the act of cannonization. One of them was Father Juvenally and the other was Peter the Aleut. Both of them died for the Orthodox Church. What does cannonization mean?

FI: In other words, what we are saying is that they should as a saint. The cannonization is the authority of the church. A saint can start in a local area; but when other people hear about it everybody wants a saint.

JB: Peter the Aleut died in California because he refused to convert to Catholicism.

FI: Some said the Jesuits did it. But also Spain was at war with Italy; but Russia was on one side and Spain was on the other. So, the Spaniards thought the Russians were dirt.

JB: Peter the Aleut died as part of the Russian Conflict?

FI: Yes. What they did for fresh food was to travel south to California and thats how the story begins.

JB: The Russian fort down there, Fort Ross?

FI: Yes, to this day it is a national park and they let the Russian Orthodox Church have one service only per year, and many people come for that occasion.

Summary

Unfortunately, we had to end the interview early. Father Innocent had to go back for church services. I would like to end this project by thanking Father Innocent for his time and cooperation. A special thanks to him for not only letting me interview him, but for also showing me what actually happens at St. Hermans Seminary and the Orthodox Church. This project has definitely been a learning experience.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

For an index of other recordings in this collection see the index:

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