ALASKA
THE HOLY LAND OF THE
ORTHODOX CHURCH IN
AMERICA

• “It pleased those of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem.”

• —Romans 15:26.
A GATHERING OF ALASKAN CLERGY
ON THE SUNDAY
OF THE PRECIOUS AND LIFE GIVING CROSS
IN THIS PRESENTATION WE WILL COVER

• The Orthodox Mission in Alaska

• A Series of Setbacks

• The dire need for a Good Samaritan

• How the faithful of the Orthodox Church in America can be that Good Samaritan
WHAT WE MEAN BY ALASKAN NATIVE ORTHODOXY

- The term Alaskan Native Orthodoxy refers to the Alaskan native expression of Russian Orthodox Christianity adopted collectively by the first peoples of Alaska.

- In a state with 229 federally recognized tribes within roughly 12 distinct regions of Alaska, the expressions of Alaskan Orthodox Christianity are culturally diverse.

- Archbishop David used to say that he was the bishop of five dioceses, which meant that each deanery has its own set of problems each requiring a unique approach towards a solution.
THE SACRIFICIAL LABORS OF PLANTING ORTHODOXY IN ALASKA

• Russian Orthodox missionaries embraced a Native Alaskan mindset.

• By adopting the people as their children and being adopted by them as their fathers, the missionaries of Alaska were able to teach and live an Orthodoxy that became distinctly Russo-Native in tradition and practice.

• Saint Herman was an ideal example in how to cultivate Orthodoxy in Alaska by loving the faithful wholeheartedly and demonstrating that love practically by establishing institutions for their social welfare and education such as an orphanage and a school.
At the height of Orthodox missionary labors, the Church built three-altar cathedrals, beautiful churches, schools, orphanages, and provided for the poor in tangible ways.
SAINT MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL,
SITKA ALASKA
ASCENSION OF OUR LORD
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL,
UNALASKA, ALASKA
Through the efforts of the missionaries, the natives’ oral languages became written ones with adapted Cyrillic alphabets.

By the mid 19th century, Alaskan natives had become educated polyglots conversant and literate in at least one native language as well as Church Slavonic and Russian.
AN ALASKAN NATIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE THREE TRAGEDIES

• REGIME CHANGE IN ALASKA
• THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION
• PERIOD OF CONFLICT
After the Russian flag was lowered in Novo-Arkhangelsk, today known as Sitka, the United States began the implementation of coercive westernization and assimilation.

This resulted in the empowerment of the Presbyterian Minster Sheldon Jackson who is infamous today for his promise to eradicate every trace of Russian Orthodoxy from Alaskan soil within twenty-five years.
Having been given permission from President Grant, Jackson pursued a hostile campaign to convert the native peoples of Alaska to prominent American heterodox confessions by means of coercion, forced assimilation, and mandatory denunciations of the Orthodox faith.
Roman Catholics claimed the Russians have left you in our charge

Baptists ripped the crosses off young Aleut children’s necks and asked them to bring their icons to be burned for candy.
In line with policies for Indian reservations, the federal government sanctioned mandatory protestant schools for Alaskan native children where native practices, language, and culture were ridiculed, suppressed and forcibly replaced by euroAmerican culture and a protestant worldview.

Natives proud of their fluency in multiple languages were shamed for speaking Russian and their native languages, often having to endure beatings and public humiliation.
Within two generations, the unified native populations were religiously fragmented, culturally subverted, and an almost entirely Orthodox native population had been decimated.

Natives were deprived of the right to vote and underwent discrimination not unlike that of the post-reconstruction South.
MORAVIAN CONGREGATION IN BETHEL, ALASKA
The Bolshevik Revolution left the Church in Alaska without visionary leadership and in a severe financial predicament.

Banks foreclosed on orphanages, the Sitka seminary closed, and the publication and translation of Orthodox texts into native languages stopped.

The number of priests in the diocese dwindled. The missionary period was over for fifty years.

The native population was now even more susceptible to the aggressive tactics of protestant missionaries.
In the 2000s an era of pastorally insensitive and oppressive leadership at all levels of Church administration traumatized many of the clergy and nearly all the parishes in the diocese.

Native clergy and faithful lived in fear of the Church leadership from experiences of being publicly humiliated during the divine services. At the close of this period, many of the disillusioned turned away from the Church altogether.

Unfortunately, some of the damage is irreparable as many of the faithful during that time have either reposed, apostatized, or simply want nothing to do with the Church.
Reflecting on these tragedies, we can now understand:

- Why the Diocese today struggles with dwindling parishes, a shortage of clergy, and a dispersed Orthodox population
- Why the interrelated problems of alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, and migration from the villages are magnified.
- Why many venerable parts of the Diocese are now but a shell of their former selves.
- Without a drastic change, the majority of these parishes will have to close within the next ten years.
Currently, the Alaskan Church has 33 active clergy serving a diocese with over 80 active altars, but only 22 serve in distinct parishes as many priests cannot be assigned to parishes that need a priest, because of financial or family considerations.

The median family income in Alaska is $77,790 per year.

Median stipend for my priests is $7,200 per year with nothing paid into the pension plan.

Our priests or their matushki must seek employment to support themselves and their families. Some of our priests have even gone bankrupt, being unable to cover basic bills.

Hence, our priests have less energy and less time to devote to exercising their priesthood.
CONDITIONS OF THE CLERGY

• Many villages do not have a rectory for the priest, such as the Yukon deanery which does not have a single rectory.

• This means that unless the priest already has a home in the village, he cannot be assigned there.
THE FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

- Diocesan poverty is in part a reflection of the poverty of the faithful who financially struggle to procure costly basic staples in villages with 90% unemployment.

- In recent years, emphasis has been placed on the spiritually beneficial practice of tithing. Although on a personal level this is valuable, on a corporate level it is markedly insufficient.
THE FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

• Diocesan poverty is also a reflection of inadequate staff to oversee diocesan lands, the revenue from which amounts to roughly 55% of the $192,000.00 annual budget with which we operate today.

• As our primary source of income, the state of land management has diminished our overall budget and ability to carry out the mission of the Church.

• Land leases, property rentals, sales, and other tenant agreements are the primary revenue streams to this day, however derelict management of the lands have resulted in a loss of revenue, disadvantageous land deals, and a real possibility of adverse possession on lands in commercial and remote regions alike.
THE FAITH PERSISTED

- Pious native Orthodox communities have been kept alive by the heroic dedication of lay readers who have taken on the mantle of spiritual leadership in priestless villages.

- Some communities remain 90% to 100% Orthodox, even though they are not served by a priest, but led by a reader.

- Saint Herman’s Seminary opened the way for native men to be trained to serve as clergy in the Church of Alaska.

- Graduates of Saint Herman’s Seminary have opened new parishes in Fairbanks, Valdez, Oscarville, and Mountain Village.

- Saint Herman graduate Archpriest Martin Nicholai has put the entire liturgy into Yupik with latin characters.
Life as a priest in Alaska
Presented by Archpriest Vasily Fisher

Archpriest Philip Alexie of blessed memory
FRUITFUL LABORS

• The Seminary has drafted a new curriculum emphasizing Alaskan-centric pastoral formation and cultural care, reflecting what the natives express as being important to them, rather than what those outside their culture believe is best for them. At present, we have nine men in seminary with three more enrolled for the fall.

All Saints of Alaska Chapel, Saint Herman’s Seminary
FRUITFUL LABORS

• There are communities who are actively building new temples, with one parish having brought in over 40 new converts in 2020.

• The diocese has established the Orthodox Care Network of Alaska (OCNA) which provides an opportunity for those in need to appeal for items such as winter clothing, infant supplies and other household goods that are difficult to acquire in rural Alaska.

• With the gracious donation of benefactors in the Lower 48, the Diocese established the Saint Innocent Wellness Center which manages the Archbishop DAVID Clergy Support Fund and the Subdeacon Nicholas Burial Support fund.

• The former providing resources for clergy support programs and the latter providing funds for families who are in financial need and are considering cremation of a departed loved.
PRAYER AND VISION FOR THE DIOCESE

• This All-American Council can be a turning point for the Diocese of Alaska.

• There are parishes that need rectories. Perhaps groups of parishes in our sister dioceses can gather to help build a rectory in the Yukon.

• My priests need a sufficient stipend to fully dedicate themselves to their parishes. Perhaps, we can begin here a diocesan wide endowment to supplement clergy stipends.

• The Diocese needs to develop programs and I need to be able to visit my flock. Establishing a missionary fund, much like the funds Saint Innocent, could help this.

• Perhaps, you can help with the formation of a staff to manage the lands that could help provide for these needs.
CONTINUING MISSIONARY WORK

- If every established parish in the OCA could pledge to give $100/month for two years we could establish an Alaskan Clergy Stipend Endowment in which the interest would provide even under the most conservative estimates a modest $80 stipend from the diocese each month. If every institution would take part, we could do this with only $60/month.

- With that $80/month. You will have increased my priests annual stipend of 7,200/year to $8,160/year, still very small, but a 13% increase.

- This would mean in terms of food, in terms of gasoline, in terms of heating fuel, in terms of winter clothing..
Quyana
Qagassakung
Gunalchéesh
Спасибо
Thank you