



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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SITKA'S CATHEDRAL OF ARCHANGEL MICHAEL

An Historic Russian Church in a Land of Saints

Here *Road to Emmaus* interviews Rev. Fr. Michael Boyle, Dean of the Cathedral of Archangel Michael in Sitka, Alaska, since 2011. Formerly the chaplain of Raphael House, then an Orthodox family shelter, and assistant priest at Holy Trinity Cathedral in San Francisco, Fr. Michael shares with us the challenges and rewards of being an Alaskan missionary priest in America's first Orthodox cathedral.

RTE: Father Michael, as a convert priest in a native Orthodox culture, and rector not only of the first Orthodox cathedral in America but one founded by the Russian St. Innocent Veniaminov, you must feel that you have very large shoes to fill.

FR. MICHAEL: Yes. This is a different world here in Alaska. I've had a lot to learn, but my wife and I feel very blessed to be here.

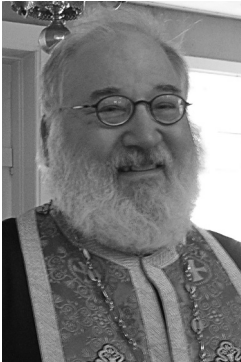
RTE: Can you tell us the history of the cathedral?

FR. MICHAEL: Bishop Innocent's missionary work began when he arrived in Unalaska in 1824. The second part of his missionary labors began in 1840 after his wife died and he was tonsured a monk and consecrated the first Bishop of Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands (Russia) and the Aleutian Islands (Russian America).¹ This is a huge area that included all of modern-

¹ Archimandrite Ioasaph, the head of the original group of Russian missionaries to Alaska was formally consecrated the first bishop of Alaska in Irkutsk in 1797, but died at sea in a shipwreck off of Kodiak before he could take up his duties.

day Alaska, and the far eastern mainland and archipelagos of Russia down to Japan. After his consecration he returned from Russia to make Sitka, which was then New Archangel, his diocesan seat.²

One of the first things he did here was to help build the Russian bishop's house as his private residence in 1842. Or rather, a not-so-private residence, as in his own time it also housed the seminary for native clergy, and at various times, a grade school and orphanage, with a hospital nearby. The Chapel of the Annunciation on the second floor of his house is still part of our church. We only serve there about twice a year because the stairs are hard for our elders to climb, but visiting Orthodox clergy and pilgrims also worship there, so it does get used. Bishop Innocent's house has been beautifully restored by the National Park Service to its original condition and its staff oversees the house.



Fr. Michael Boyle

In 1844, St. Innocent commissioned Finnish carpenters who were working for the Russian American Company as shipwrights to come and to build a cathedral to replace a smaller wooden chapel. He designed the cathedral, and the carpenters built it out of Sitka spruce. The cathedral was consecrated in 1848 and has been an active parish ever since. St. Innocent left in about 1850 when he moved to the town of Yakutsk in Russia after being made archbishop.

RTE: What can you tell us about his relations with the native Tlingit?

FR. MICHAEL: He came as a true Orthodox missionary, not to be a burden, but to bring the Christian faith. He began translations of the Gospels and a few other books into Tlingit, after having done the same in Aleut. With the help of native interpreters, he gave these people their written languages. His relationship with them was different than their relationship to the Russian American Company, and much different than the later American Protestant missionaries. It was warm, accommodating, and embracing of the people and their culture.

RTE: Yet only a few decades before there were two violent battles between the Russian traders and the natives.

² Sitka remained the headquarters of the Russian Church in America until 1872 when the diocese moved to San Francisco, and then to New York under Bishop (later Patriarch) Tikhon (Bellavin) in 1905, who renamed it the Diocese of the Aleutians and North America. He had a vicar bishop in Alaska and St. Bishop Raphael Hawaweeny in Brooklyn.

FR. MICHAEL: Yes, although there were trade agreements between the Russians and natives, there was also a clash of cultures. St. Innocent's relationship with the Tlingit was different. It was a good relationship and he lived near the native village, outside the fort. His point was to build up the church and train native clergy so that the Russian missionaries could move onto something else. The native people still remember him as their father who brought them Orthodoxy.

RTE: Do you have relics of St. Innocent?

FR. MICHAEL: We have no relics, but we do have artifacts. We have his translation of the Gospels and we have mitres, wedding crowns, liturgical candlesticks, and chalices that he used, as well as Gospel books, vestments, and the original church seal. It is amazing that these things were saved when the original cathedral burned down on January 2, 1966.

RTE: Do your Orthodox parishioners have a living sense of this history?

FR. MICHAEL: They do. He is accepted as their father who brought them Orthodoxy, and this is a culture in which ancestors are very important. However, the Sitka Mother of God is much more present to them on a day-to-day level. There is great veneration for the Mother of God of Sitka, for St. Herman, St. Michael the Archangel, as well as St. Innocent and St. Jacob Netsvetov. The lives of saints have not been as much a part of their daily life more recently, although they would have been in St. Innocent's time.

The Sitka Mother of God

RTE: Almost all of the native Orthodox have mentioned the Sitka Mother of God. What can you tell us about this lovely icon?

FR. MICHAEL: The Sitka Mother of God was a gift to the cathedral from the employees of the Russian-American Company. It was painted by the famous Russian painter Vladimir Borovikovsky, and was brought to the cathedral in 1850. This is a miracle-working icon that is considered the protectress of not only Alaska, but of all of America.

The icon has been taken to many parts of the United States and travels in its own beautiful lined wooden case. Unfortunately, after 9/11 the airlines insist that the icon has to fly in the hold of the plane. (Before 9/11 she was

given her own seat.) Today with the added security, her case is too large and heavy to be accommodated with a seat...not even in first class. I travel with the icon on Alaska Airlines, and whatever our destination, the icon receives the red carpet treatment. The Alaska Airlines manager here in Sitka calls the destination airports describing in detail what is coming and the sacredness of the icon, and their staff arranges the arrival.

In 2012 I took the icon down to the old Russian outpost of Fort Ross in California for the fort's 200th anniversary. When we flew out of Sitka the icon had to go through security, and so the Sitka TSA agents came out into the lobby with their wands and sensors. (This has now become a ritual: everyone gathers around—the security agents, counter attendants, baggage handlers—and then we open the case. There is always a huge gasp when we take off the covering.)

The TSA were gentle, kind, and beyond respectful. We put the icon back into the case and watched as it was placed on the plane. In Seattle, they came aboard and told me that the icon was safe and took me off the plane to a ground-crew supervisor's truck, so that I could watch as they transferred the icon to the next plane. When we arrived in San Francisco, the whole thing happened all over again. On the return trip, I came into the airport and found myself at the back of a long line of about fifty elderly Asian ladies for check-in, but I was immediately called up to the desk and they took care of us. They were all waiting for us to arrive, and it was like that the whole trip. When I took the icon to Seattle for the All-American Council we had set the icon up for everyone to venerate. As we left to return to Sitka, women in the hotel were stopping us and weeping and kneeling next to this wooden crate praying to her. It was hard to leave.

All icons are special, but this one is miracle-working—that is, miracles are attributed to the intercession of the Mother of God by those who pray in front of it. When cruise-ship guests visit us in Sitka, the candle stand is always full and many pages of petitions are left. A few years ago, a non-Orthodox couple came to visit from California. I asked if they had been here before, and they said, "Yes we were here thirty years ago. We hadn't been able to conceive, although we'd tried everything the medical world had to offer, until a friend read an article in *Sunset Magazine* about Alaska and about this miraculous icon of Jesus' Mother. He said, 'Why don't you go up and ask her to help you?' So we did. We came to the cathedral, lit a candle, and asked her to help us have children. We went home and we had four kids. We thought that after thirty years we should come back to thank her."

Relationship: A Mutual Catechesis

RTE: Father Michael, how do you approach catechesis in a traditionally oral culture?

FR. MICHAEL: Catechesis is much different here than anything I've experienced before. When I was first assigned here I asked my bishop for his counsel, and he said, "Just love the people." I found that this is the best catechism. Along with loving the Tlingit people, there needs to be an honor and respect for them that I cannot give until I've learned their customs and grown close to them, and they to me. Without that relationship, it is not going to work.

My first class here fell on its face as the Tlingit are not anxious to acquire information, and didactic teaching doesn't interest them. As you said, this an oral culture that learns through stories. My homilies are now filled with stories, as are our bulletins and monthly newsletters, through which I try to weave the principles of our Orthodox faith. On Sundays after Liturgy we have a potluck trapeza with a short reading of five or ten minutes and a round-table discussion. I've discovered that the people here are very respectful and thoughtful. They don't just blurt out their opinions and if they don't have something to say, they don't say anything. So part of our Sunday meal is just learning how to talk with one another.

RTE: Are they comfortable with this approach?

FR. MICHAEL: Those who come seem to like it. One man said, "Father, this is great. We've never had anything like this before." Another older woman who is very reserved has recently begun to join in. There are now exchanges across the table between people. This "growing closer" is our mutual catechism.

RTE: Most people do that best when there is also food to share.

FR. MICHAEL: Yes, when I first tried to teach a "class," only one person came. It needed a down-to-earth bonding element, and what is more bonding for us than eating together?

In many ways, Orthodox life here is different. I've asked my subdeacon to tell me if I do something that is not Alaskan, and then to show me how it is done here. For instance, during funerals the royal doors are open here, and the candles and oil lamps are lit in the altar. When I did my first funeral, the subdeacon asked me if we were going to open the doors. I said, "No," not knowing



St. Michael's Cathedral, Christmas 2015. Courtesy of Michael Hicks, KCAW, Sitka.

that was the local tradition, and he simply replied, “Oh, alright.” Fortunately, I asked why and he said, “Well, we always open the doors for funerals.” After a couple of funerals with the doors open, I realized that this made perfect sense. When someone is being laid to rest here, they are traditionally laid in the middle of the church facing east, and the royal doors, “the gates of heaven,” are open and all of the lamps are lit. The Lord and the Mother of God and the saints are all welcoming the soul: “Come in!” I thought, “This is good!”

The Sitka Parish

RTE: What is the makeup of your parish?

FR. MICHAEL: Sitka has a population of about 9000. Out of that, there are probably about 600 baptized Orthodox people, mostly native. Out of those 600, about twenty people come regularly, and a few more come occasionally. Of the church-going parishioners about 70% are native Tlingit. In the past few years we've had many of the church and tribal elders pass away. We are losing them very quickly. Of those younger than fifty, we've lost two whole generations. The children and grand-children of those elders have left and haven't come back.



RTE: Why is that?

FR. MICHAEL: A couple of things. I think it was assumed that Orthodox belief was being passed on by simply attending church and Sunday school, but a living sense of how to engage the Faith in facing the trials of daily life seems not to have been transmitted.

Also in the 19th- and early 20th-centuries, American Protestant teachers and missionaries led by Sheldon Jackson decimated the native peoples here; their customs, languages, and their self-respect. It was the Russian Orthodox Church with its educated Russian and native clergy that defended the native people and culture against excesses by Russian traders and the incoming Americans, but since that time the native Orthodox in Sitka and other parts of Alaska have often been neglected, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

RTE: In what sense have they been neglected?

FR. MICHAEL: One of the examples I've heard from parishioners is that at one point the church had many altar boys serving each Sunday, all of whom had served since they were very young. With a change of leadership they were told, "I don't need your help". Well those boys left and never came back. For them being in church meant doing something important and now they weren't wanted.

The sisterhood was treated in a similar way. The women tell me that they were told they were no longer needed to clean the church, and later, “I don’t like the way you cook, I’ll do the cooking.” ...and there went the sisterhood. Our ladies were devastated.

RTE: If you can’t give, you no longer feel a part of the church.

FR. MICHAEL: Yes. Mistakes have been made by clergy toward their parishioners, parishioners toward clergy, and parishioners toward each other. The struggles of parish life are the same anywhere, but I can say that in Sitka and throughout Alaska, we’ve seen some sorrowful decades and need to work hard to repair these relationships with the Church.

And, of course we have to remember what St. John Maximovitch said when he was asked who had caused all the problems during the rebuilding of the cathedral in San Francisco? He simply replied, “The devil”. Our trials are aggravated by unseen forces that we no longer remember how to fight.

Equally important is how we as individuals remain faithful and alive in the Lord in our secularized culture. These are questions not only of survival, but of salvation. I am not talking here about diligently fulfilling the Christian commandments, but about simply remembering God and remaining authentically human. For many people, Sunday is no longer a sacred day and church services now compete with youth events, sports, and other recreations. Televised sports are very captivating here because the hugely popular Seattle Seahawks play on Sunday mornings, and this entertainment culture is sucking the life out of us.

RTE: Do you have hope of change?

FR. MICHAEL: There is always hope. We are rebuilding our sisterhood in “baby-step” ways, and supporting our altar boys and their families to encourage greater participation. I’m also hoping for a deacon to assist with the pastoral needs here. An amazing support is our new OCA bishop in Alaska, the Right Reverend David (Mahaffey) who was consecrated in 2014. Bishop David is a warm, patient, relentlessly hard-working, and loving hierarch, who is a real pastor and father to all of us, native and non-native. His leadership is a great hope.

Community Celebrations and Church Traditions

RTE: What can you tell us about Orthodox and community celebrations?

FR. MICHAEL: Commercial fishing is a way of life up here, and once a year the entire Sitka community gathers and blesses the fishing fleet. There are prayers from pastors of the different churches for the fleet going out, as well as a memorial remembering those who have died at sea in the previous year. We gather flowers for the memorial and then those flowers are taken out by the harbor master and laid into the sea.

RTE: You also have an historic Russian cemetery in Sitka. With the memory of ancestors being so important to native Alaskans, are there customs unique to the area?

FR. MICHAEL: Yes, we have a beautiful old cemetery that has been taken care of for years by only one man, Bob Sam, a local Orthodox volunteer, and this is where many of the Orthodox are buried. As for larger gatherings, Radonitsa (literally, “Day of Rejoicing”) is a commemoration of all of the faithful reposed celebrated by Orthodox Christians after Pascha. In Sitka it is held on Thomas Sunday, the Sunday after Pascha, which we also call Rice Sunday. Koliva, of course, is the traditional grain and honey dish that represents the resurrection of the good seed (the soul), and the sweetness of paradise. Here in Alaska it has been traditionally made with rice.

In Sitka, we distribute the *artos* on Thomas Sunday, and everyone brings their koliva and eggs. After the service we go to the cemetery, where we sing a memorial *panikhida* for all of those who have departed this life. We bless the graves by sprinkling koliva on them and we also place red eggs on them to symbolize the resurrection. Then we picnic together in the cemetery. When I first heard this, I thought: “Really? It’s April, it’s still freezing cold, and most likely raining, and we will be sitting on a blanket on the ground in the pouring rain? It’s a different thing to have a picnic here in Alaska, which is sometimes under a shelter while it’s pouring down rain. Rain has no bearing on things in this climate—you just put on your raincoat and smile.

RTE: How do the native Tlingit customs of burial and remembrance interface with Orthodoxy?

FR. MICHAEL: When someone dies, the Native memorial will be on the first

night, either at the Clan House or at the Sheet'ka Kwáan Nakahídi Community House. The following evening is the memorial in the church with a panikhída served. Then, the Orthodox funeral with a meal following on the third day. Around the fortieth day after the date of repose, we gather in church on a Sunday to sing a panikhída. (Sundays are the only day the whole community can gather.) Then we go down to the Alaskan Native Brotherhood Hall for a meal put on by family members of the deceased for everyone that knew them, sometimes several hundred people. It's an incredible expression of love towards the person who has passed away, and there is a very formal ceremony of speeches, condolences, remembrances and the meal. At memorials, if a Raven Native Clan member dies, an Eagle Native Clan member speaks first to comfort the grieving. If an Eagle Native Clan member dies, a Raven member speaks first in the same manner.

A year or so after the clan memorial is the "potlatch" which will be held within a year or several years after the person's repose. Following the potlatch, you aren't allowed to mourn anymore. If the family are of the Eagle moiety, then the Ravens, the opposite moiety, help with the funeral process, expenses, and support in the mourning. At the potlatch, the family gives gifts to thank the opposite moiety for their help. They have all sorts of gifts, some hand-made, some bought. Attendance at the potlatch can be up to 100 to 200 people. The potlatch begins with lamentation songs and dances, then moving into joyous songs, dances and celebration. During the joyous part, colorful costumes can be worn to add to the joy, celebration and remembrance of the departed. There are usually three meals served to everyone. The last potlatch I attended lasted from noon on Saturday until 9:30 am on Sunday morning. I finally had to leave at 7:00 am to get ready for Sunday Liturgy. I barely was able to stay awake, but I made it and the memories of us all together will last forever.

The Russian Alaskan Tradition of Christmas Starring

RTE: Can you also tell us about the Christmas tradition of starring?

FR. MICHAEL: Starring came from Orthodox Ukraine, and it represents the journey of the Three Wise Men following the Star to Bethlehem. It is now our Alaskan Native Orthodox tradition. The star represents the star of Bethlehem and is made of a huge wooden frame covered with fabric. It is three-dimen-

sional and decorated with tinsel and bows. In the center of the star is an icon of the Nativity. The star is mounted on an axle so that during the procession and singing, it spins around while the Nativity icon remains stationary in the center. The star is heavy, of course, and traditionally it is the men or the boys who carry and spin it, but even the teenage girls get to spin as well.

Everyone is invited for starring and we begin here in the rectory with a huge Nativity potluck dinner. We sing Christmas songs in Slavonic, Tlingit and English, with the star in the icon corner. The priest then blesses the star and the food, we eat, and then we set out from house to house. When we are invited into a house, the star always goes first, because we are following the star. The priest blesses the home and family, we sing Christmas songs, and wish “Many Years” to the householders. Then we sit down and eat again. Households may prepare a meal, an array of sandwiches, or bags of treats such as fruit, fried bread, candy, and soda pop. One of our particularly favorite houses to star at was Irma and Jim’s, who made homemade Rice Krispy Treats for us every year.

Then we go to the next house and repeat the ritual again, finishing late at night. We do this for three nights, and the third and final night we go to the hospitals and to the Pioneer Home for the elderly, where we also sing. At the Christmas Liturgy there are also bags of treats under the tree for everyone who comes—icons, fruits, nuts, candies, small toys.

Church Demographics and Pastoral Needs

RTE: Do you have a large turnout at Pascha?

FR. MICHAEL: This past Pascha night we only had about fifteen local Orthodox faithful because the Liturgy is at midnight and it is too hard for some to come. We also had about thirty students from Mount Edgecumbe High School, the boarding high school here in Sitka for high school students from the smaller villages up north. There can be as many as fifty people at a Sunday service in the summer with cruise ship visitors, a few elderly converts, and seasonal workers. Recently the new principal of our elementary school moved up from Idaho with his wife and four children, and we also have two other families with young children, and more on the way.

As you can imagine, we have many pastoral needs. When I first came here, I was supported by the parish, but after looking at the accounts I realized



Above left: Russian Christmas, 2015.

*Above right: Lighting a candle before the icon of the Sitka Mother of God.
Courtesy Michael Hicks, KCAW, Sitka.*

that if we were to continue this, the parish wouldn't make it financially, so I went to work full-time work as a speech pathologist at the local community hospital. We've cut the budget every year since I've been here to make ends meet, due largely to the decline of cruise ship visitors. However, this summer the tide is turning, for more guests are anticipated to visit Sitka.

Also, I don't yet have a deacon, and we need someone to take care of all of the cruise-ship visitors who are coming through during the day in the summer. The Cathedral is a major historical landmark, so when people come to visit, we ask for a donation. This is our main fundraising event of the year to support the Cathedral. The ladies are valiant with their fried bread and clam chowder sales, God bless them, but they can't raise all of the money we need to keep the Cathedral open. Since we depend on tourism, we make our money in the summertime and then live off of it the rest of the year, as well as try to save some for repairs.

Surprisingly, Sitka is a *very* expensive place to live—even to purchase a two-bedroom cottage can be up to \$300,000. The weather is brutal on buildings, so you are always needing to do repairs, and ours are overdue. Our four main annual expenses are: repairs and maintenance are about \$25,000;



heating oil, \$16,000 a year; church insurance for this historical landmark with priceless icons is about \$9,000 a year; and utilities, another \$9000, which takes up close to half of our budget. I also have to say though that God has never failed us.

RTE: So tourism is your main financial support?

FR. MICHAEL: Yes. With our low numbers, and the lack of a developed culture of tithing or pledging, we rely on tourist donations. From the beginning of the missions there were always sponsors—first the Russian American Company, and after the sale of Alaska to America, private benefactions from Tsar Alexander II, Tsar Alexander III, and Tsar Nicholas II, as well as other pious Russians. At the time of the Russian Revolution, all of that stopped. Of course, a few individual parishioners have been very generous, and in the past many people volunteered their labor. Some still do.

We don't keep exact numbers on visitors, but this year we have at least one cruise ship coming in five days a week during the summer with approximately 1800 people on board each ship. There are also coach tours, and between the two, we perhaps have 400 people a day visiting the church. We ask for a \$5.00 donation. Fortunately, for years Allen Marine Tours, which is owned by our parishioners Betty and Bob Allen, have given their passengers a free ticket to see the church. For each ticket used, Allen-Marine pays the admittance.

Orthodox Alaska: A Missionary Field

FR. MICHAEL: We converts often think of “Orthodox Alaska,” but Alaska is actually still a missionary field and the needs here are very great. We have 39 priests in Alaska and 96 parishes. Some parishes are very far from each other and most are accessible only by boat or float plane. Outside of the main urban areas, there is no road system in Alaska. I am the only priest in southeast Alaska, which includes many baptized Orthodox. I am also the Dean, so I am responsible for St. Michael’s Cathedral, for the Chapel of the Annunciation in the Bishop’s House, for St. Nicholas Parish in Juneau, and for the churches in the villages of Hoonah and Angoon. There hasn’t been a priest in Hoonah or Angoon for over thirty years, nor have we had a priest in Juneau for the past three years. In Juneau, Protodeacon Paul Erickson and Matushka Julia keep the church open during the day for cruise ships and they hold reader’s services during the week.

We also have a ministry to the high school kids here in Sitka, which includes the boarding school students from villages further north, as well as the Pioneer Home for the elderly. Then we have chaplaincy needs for the hospital and for the homebound, plus Sunday school. My wife, Matushka Magdalena, started a “one-room school” type of Sunday school last year.

The one remaining major missionary “sweat and blood” labor we face all over Alaska, with all of our communities, is alcohol abuse, domestic violence and sexual abuse. From these generational struggles, we are increasingly facing the horrific effects on the children, as well as the adults who are still trying to survive and overcome this onslaught of tyrannical evil.

St. Michael’s Cathedral: Destruction, Rebuilding and Revelation

RTE: What can you tell us about the tragic fire that burnt down the original cathedral built by St. Innocent?

FR. MICHAEL: As you’ve heard from our parishioners, on January 2, 1966, at around 3:00 am there was an electrical fire in a general dry goods store across the street. The shop caught fire and it was about 10 degrees below zero. The winds blew the blaze across Lincoln Street and caught the cathedral on fire quite rapidly, as the whole cathedral was built of Sitka spruce.

When the fire fighters came they hooked up their fire hoses, but the hydrants were frozen so they had to run lines down to the ocean to pump up sea water to put it out. In the end, the fire totally consumed the cathedral and a third of downtown Sitka. One of the volunteer firefighters that night recently told me that he was the last person to turn off his hose. When he tried to climb down from the roof of the Sitka Bazaar where he was positioned he couldn't move. The night was so cold that he was literally encased with ice from the water and his feet were frozen to the roof. Fellow firefighters had to climb up and chisel him out with their axes and then take him to the firehouse to allow his fire gear to warm up before he could take it off.

The next morning, authorities flew over the town and took a photo—the site of the cathedral was just charred ashes. Even the bells in the bell tower melted. The miraculous thing was that everything inside was saved—all of the icons, all of St. Innocent's artifacts, all of the liturgical vessels. The townspeople formed a human chain, threw open the doors and came in and hauled everything out in about ten minutes while the fire burned above them. The only thing that was not saved was an icon of the Last Supper over the Royal Doors in front of the altar, which they weren't able to get off of the iconostasis. They were taken to local shops and later the Salvation Army stored everything for us in their large warehouse here. God bless them, because it took ten years to rebuild the cathedral, after which all of the icons and artifacts were returned.

Another wonderful story is that in 2010, the priest here began to clean up the basement storage room, which had been used as the altar while the church was being rebuilt. It was piled quite deep with things they hadn't found a place for after the fire: books, pictures, vestments, kitchenware, and lots of boxes. He tried to go through the things little by little, and one day a red plastic Dixie cup sitting on a shelf caught his eye. He said to himself, "That seems odd," and as he went closer he saw a piece of paper sticking out of it. He picked it up and realized that the paper was actually a piece of cloth. He took the cloth out of the cup and opened it, to discover St. Innocent's *antimension*, signed with his own hand. As you can imagine, it was quite a surprise. It is now framed and hanging in the cathedral.

We are now finally going through boxes of old records from after the fire and have found letters from Archbishop St. John Maximovitch of San Francisco to Bishop (later Metropolitan) Theodosius Lazor. We've also found correspondence to Bishop Theodosius from "Reader Seraphim Rose and

Reader Gleb Podmoshensky” before they became monks and moved to Platinia, California to establish the St. Herman of Alaska Monastery.

RTE: How did the parish raise the money to rebuild?

FR. MICHAEL: Of course many of the townspeople were generous with their time and help, and larger donations not only came through individuals and churches, but also through larger corporations and organizations, including Alaska Airlines. Most of the help, however, came from American Orthodox churches.

RTE: How was the cathedral replicated from the original?

FR. MICHAEL: After the fire, St. Innocent’s original architectural drawings were located in the National Archives in Washington D.C. Through the grace of God, the efforts of the National Park Service, and the forethought of the Historic America Building Survey, copies of St. Innocent’s drawings had been made in 1961, five years before the fire. They sent these copies to the Diocese of Alaska as the prototype for the new architectural blueprints to rebuild the Cathedral.

The new cathedral was consecrated on the feastday of the Archangel Michael and All Angels in November, 1976. It is an exact reproduction of the original, including the linen-like sail cloth that covered the walls of both the old cathedral and the Bishop’s House.

RTE: I understand that you now have structural problems with this historic church.

FR. MICHAEL: Yes, we are experiencing the aches and pains of a building that is growing older. The weather here in Alaska is not kind to buildings. We live in a far northern rainforest where the climate and elements are brutal, and buildings take the brunt of it. We need to do repairs from the bell tower down to the basement which floods every year. When you have the cathedral basement sitting about a foot above the water table, with torrential rains and run-off rushing down from the surrounding hills, plus high tides, you can end up with a “perfect storm” situation and the basement fills with water. Added to this, we also have serious structural weaknesses in the foundation due to an unscrupulous contractor who used substandard materials and workmanship. We didn’t know this until recently, but now we are bearing the results of that shoddy work.

RTE: What can our readers do to help?

FR. MICHAEL: We have already had two engineering assessments of the situation and are still formulating the actual plan to proceed. It is a multi-faceted problem, and we are still gathering professional information to make the best choices. A ballpark guess for how much it would cost right now? A lot. I really don't have a number yet. His Grace Bishop David is working on a tentative fundraising plan with the national Orthodox Churches. We are also exploring grants from private foundations. As for our dear friends who are reading this issue, and also perhaps their friends, we ask, accordingly as God may direct their hearts, to help us either financially, and/or with professional assistance to meet our needs for repair and restoration. If individuals would like to donate they can send their tax-deductible gift to: St. Michael's Orthodox Cathedral (Basement Repair Fund), PO Box 697, Sitka, Alaska, 99835. Their monies will be placed in a separate account for the use of that repair.

RTE: What thoughts would you like to leave us with?

FR. MICHAEL: Saint Michael's is not only Alaska's historic cathedral, but it was Russia's cathedral in the New World, and it is Orthodox America's first cathedral. It was built by a saint in a land of saints, and when you enter, you understand that it is not just an historic building, but a house of prayer where you can feel the presence of God.

But the greatest miracle here are the Orthodox people. They are simple, heartfelt, beautiful people who love God and want to live a life that is pleasing to Him. I'm very honored to be their priest. To give you a flavor of St. Michael's church life, at our parish council meetings we all get along and we work together without strife. There are no arguments, no fights, no power trips, no personal agendas. I am blessed. We just love the church and try to do the best we can. It's a beautiful life. ✦