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ST. INNOCENT OF ALASKA AND SITKA'S RUSSIAN- AMERICAN HERITAGE

In the summer of 2015, *Road to Emmaus* spoke with four local historical interpreters at St. Michael's Church and the Bishop's House about St. Innocent's years in Alaska and the New Archangelsk (Sitka) of his day. These keepers of local history include: Kodiak native seminarian Deacon Herman Madsen, who guides visitors through the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel; Ana Dittmar, an Orthodox anthropologist and parishioner of St. Michael's who is a member of Sitka's Historic Preservation Commission; and U.S. Park Service interpreters for the Bishop's House, Jon Fish and Anne Lancanau, who spoke with us during their public tours.

Sitka: An Overview

The Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel, the national historic landmark of downtown Sitka, is an enduring reminder of the Russian presence in Alaska and of the chain of historic Russian missions from Alaska to Fort Ross, California. Today, the church with its venerable icons, towering cupola, and the golden Orthodox crosses of Holy Russia remains a living symbol for native Sitkans, many of whom are descendants of the same Tlingit families who converted during the episcopate of St. Innocent Veniaminov, the first resident bishop of Alaska.

The Siberian-born Fr. Ioann Veniaminov came to Alaska with his wife and family in 1824, when he served as a priest in the Aleutian islands for a decade before being consecrated bishop in 1840, when he was given the name Innokenty (Innocent) and sent to Novoarchangelsk (New Archangel, now Sitka).

Opposite: St. Michael's Cathedral, Sitka, circa 1950's.

Well-known for his warm relationship with native Alaskan peoples and his appreciation of their cultures, Bishop Innocent translated the gospels and other church materials into local languages, for which he created the first written forms.

The original Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel was completed in 1848 in Novoarchangelsk. Bishop Innocent designed and oversaw the construction of the cathedral and also helped with his own residence, the Bishop's House. Financial support came from the Russian-American Company's headquarters in Siberia who, half a century earlier, had transported and maintained the first Alaskan Orthodox missionaries to Alaska—at the instigation of Empress Catherine II, who requested that Abbot Nazarius of Valaam



St. Innocent of Alaska.

recruit monks for the Alaskan mission. Most of the tools, manufactured materials, icons, and liturgical items for the church came overland and by sea from Russia. The cathedral's original bell tower clock was built by Bishop Innocent and the cathedral bells were forged in a Novoarchangelsk foundry.

Tragically, a little over a century later in the frigid early-morning hours of January 2, 1966, St. Michael's Cathedral burnt to the ground in a devastating night fire that destroyed seventeen downtown buildings. Courageous parishioners and townspeople were able to save almost everything from inside the burning Cathedral by forming a human chain and passing along ancient liturgical treasures from one person to another.

A few days after the fire, services were held outside on top of the cathedral's ashes, and rebuilding efforts were initiated. By 1976, St. Michael's Cathedral was reproduced by using architectural drawings that had been made in 1961 by the Historic America Building Survey when they discovered St. Innocent's original drawings which were housed in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.¹ All of the rescued icons and other historic liturgical items were set back in place, where they remain today.

The Bishop's House a few blocks away survived the fire and today is owned and administered by the U.S. Park Service as one of the four remaining Russian-era buildings in Alaska.

¹ Like the National Register of Historic Places, there is a Register of Historical American Buildings Survey (HABS) which houses architectural drawings of Historical Buildings. The HABS drawings were made by the National Park Service in 1961 and later used for the reproduction of the new cathedral.

Visitors and residents are also encouraged to visit Sitka's old Russian cemetery, and to view the memorial grave of St. Jakob Netsvetov, a contemporary of Bishop Veniaminov and the first native Alaskan priest, who was ordained in Russia and returned to serve the church in Alaska. Saint Innocent Veniaminov, who in later years was enthroned as Metropolitan of Moscow and All Russia to lead the entire Russian Orthodox Church, is buried at St. Sergius Lavra near Moscow, Russia.

In 1977, Innokenty Veniaminov, the first Russian bishop of North America, was canonized and is commemorated throughout the Russian and American Orthodox Churches as St. Innocent (Veniaminov), the Enlightener of Alaska and All America.

RTE: Since you all have personal and professional interests in St. Innocent and the Russian heritage of Alaska, can you give us your impressions?

ANA DITTMAR: Saint Innocent was kind of a superman. He had so many talents and abilities that it's hard to grasp, and it is good to remember that he also had help. For instance, when he translated the Gospels and other liturgical texts, he had native people teaching him the language and helping with the translations. It wasn't magic. And I think that this was probably true of many of the things he did. He had a huge range of skills and did amazing things, but he also sought out help and acknowledged the help he received, both in his journals and in letters.

When he first moved to Sitka, he wasn't really sure how to integrate into the Tlingit community, so for the first few years, he just learned the language and watched what was going on. The Tlingits were well aware of scandals among employees of the Russian-American Company in Sitka—native men were sometimes overworked and native women passed around. The missionaries and church officials protested strongly against this, of course, and the Tlingits were understandably reserved in their acceptance of the newcomers.

Also, two decades earlier in 1802, the Tlingit had destroyed a settlement built further up the coast by Alexander Baranov, the head of the Russian American Company, who in 1797 had successfully negotiated with the Tlingit for trade agreements and use of the land, or so he thought. We have to remember that this was a complicated affair, and more of a mixed bag than most people think. It wasn't just a matter of natives against Russians. The Tlingit had native slaves of their own, and they were hostile to the Aleut natives from Kodiak, many of whom were conscripted to work with the Rus-

sians in Sitka. Two years after the destruction of the settlement, the Russians and Aleut returned, and after a three-day battle they built a permanent stockade in Sitka based on those earlier agreements.

There are long memories at work here, and when I worked at Sitka National Park we received a grant to ameliorate the bad feelings that still exist between the Aleut and the Tlingit. Interestingly, the Aleut had brought certain songs with them when they came with the Russians in the early 19th century. While the Aleut later forgot them, they lived on among the Tlingit, so the Park Service had Aleut youth come down from the Kodiak area, and there was a ceremonial handing back of the Aleut songs. The Tlingit youth taught the Aleut youth these forgotten songs, and the following year the Tlingit youth visited Kodiak.

Now, St. Innocent wasn't the first priest here, but he was the first official priest, and after his wife died, the first bishop. He lived here about ten years and for much of that time he traveled back to Russia and also throughout southern Alaska, including the mainland and the Aleutian and Kuril Islands, an immense diocese. I figure that he was actually physically present in Sitka about half of that time, but in that decade he built St. Michael's Cathedral, Holy Trinity Chapel, a school, and a hospital. His personal residence, the Bishop's House, also hosted the orphanage, the seminary, and the school, until more permanent structures could be built.

One of my favorite stories about St. Innocent is his arrival in Alaska as Fr. Ioann Veniaminov. Even before they set out, he and his wife had lost their first three children soon after birth, and when they found that they couldn't get to Kodiak that first winter, they landed here in Sitka. Father Veniaminov had with him not only his wife, who was seven months pregnant, but his toddler son, his mother, and his nineteen-year-old brother. He brought the whole family, and this is a picture that you don't expect. You understand that he was fully human, that his life was filled with personal relationships. And as I said, after his wife died and he became a bishop he didn't move into the Russian Bishop's House alone; twenty-three people moved in with him, including clergy, administrators, orphans, cooks and servants.

Something that I recently learned about St. Innocent is that by the time he moved to Sitka, he already had quite severe arthritis after years of crossing Alaska's icy Aleutian waters in a *badairka*, the Alaskan native canoe. He wanted to be transferred somewhere where he wouldn't have to use a *badairka* as often, so he was sent here as a priest and then made bishop.

RTE: There was a cost to that heroism, then.

JON FISH: Nevertheless, Bishop Veniaminov was not a stranger to New Archangelsk; while still a priest he would spend time here in the winter with his wife and family. Later, as bishop, he would leave the Bishop's House and walk down the boardwalk to the Tlingit village, where he sat among the elders, learning their language and culture, and gained their respect.

ANA DITTMAR: Also, relations were not always bad between the Russian-American Company and the native Tlingit. During St. Innocent's time, there was a small wooden church built into the fort wall with doors at each end that opened into the fort and into the native village. This was the second church—dedicated to the Holy Trinity—and it was built about the same time as St. Michael's Cathedral.

Another local person who deserves to be mentioned is St. Jacob Netsvetov, who was the first native Alaskan priest and a close co-worker of St. Innocent, slightly younger. They collaborated on translating the Gospel and church services into local languages. He first served as a missionary to Atka, where his wife, his nephew and his father all died within a few months of each other around 1836. (His wife, in fact, died here in Novoarchangelsk, in the hospital attached to the Bishop's House, and is buried behind the rectory). Around the same time Father Jacob's house burnt to the ground and he lost all of his possessions. After his family's deaths, he was tonsured a monk by St. Innocent, who inspired him to continue as a missionary.

Father Jakov then went to serve in the Kuskokwim and Yukon River areas, which was new mission territory. Although he was Alaskan born—his mother was a native Aleut from Atka and his father a Russian from Tobolsk—his native languages were Aleut and Russian, so he had to learn the very different languages of these areas. At the end of his life, he moved to Nova Archangelsk and served in the Holy Trinity Chapel. He was a capable and accomplished man, who went to new cultures and peoples, invented alphabets, and built churches among newly converted Native Alaskans. He had to build his bridges, not just walk on them.

Old Sitka Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel

RTE: What can you tell us about the historic Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel?

DCN. HERMAN MADSEN: The church was commissioned and designed by St. Innocent Veniaminov, and built between 1844-1848 by a group of Finnish Lutheran shipwrights who were already here in New Archangelsk working in the shipyard, building and repairing ships. St. Innocent hired them to build this church, and in return, he helped them design a Lutheran church, which was built directly across the street and which still exists (though rebuilt in 1942 and 1967). The bishop himself built the clock in the cathedral bell tower and did some of the decorative wood-carving.

Saint Michael's remained a thriving parish for about 300 families until 1966 when a cataclysmic fire broke out in a general store about a block from here, where the Wells Fargo Bank is now. It was January, mid-winter, -10° F. and a hard wind was blowing. The general store had just bought a new heater system, but the wiring was done with substandard materials and a fire broke out which burnt down everything in its path. It jumped across the street and caught the roof of the Orthodox church on fire.

Now the Lutheran church had been rebuilt in 1942 with stucco on the outside, and although the church was badly damaged, that stucco wall stopped the fire from spreading further on their side of the street and saved the rest of Sitka. Sparks had already jumped across the street, however, and you can see photos taken that night of the flaming bell tower. The church burned rapidly from the top down. About 250 local people spontaneously grouped together, forming a human chain extending out of the front and side doors. They pulled everything off of the walls and carried it to safety—all of the icons, artifacts, altars, doors, the chandeliers.

The huge chandelier in the center of the church, which was also from St. Innocent's time, was the last thing to be taken out by four men who ran back in to get it. There were benches against the wall, which they grabbed and stacked up to reach the chandelier. This had to have had divine aid, because one man stood on the top of the benches while the others steadied him, unhooked the chandelier, and handed this 450-pound chandelier down. At that point, this side of the church was already in flames. The chandelier was

Opposite: Interior. St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral. Sitka, Alaska.





† ALEUT GOSPEL †
Translated by St. Innocent and
in the 1820's with
them. In the
Nati

extremely hot and the three who lowered it were burned as they carried it out. It took six men to bring it back in.

The only thing they weren't able to save was a crescent-shaped icon of the Last Supper above the Royal Doors, which wouldn't come off of the iconostasis—there wasn't time to cut it out. The Last Supper icon that is in its place now was taken from the Bishop's House, and is also an original from the time of St. Innocent.

So all of the icons you see now were saved that night, and range from the 1700's to 1900's. They were donated by wealthy benefactors in Russia who wanted the first cathedral in Alaska to look stunning, and they were painted by well-known Russian iconographers.

On the right wall is an icon of the Transfiguration. During the rescue, the villagers couldn't remove the icon out of its decorative panel, so they ripped the entire panel off of the wall. It was later restored to its place, so that is the original panel with its original carvings, which we believe were done by St. Innocent. This is important because we are pretty sure that St. Innocent carved this panel's decorative detail. He also hand-tooled the bishop's "throne," which is less a chair than a large and ornamental stool. This was a traditional design in ancient Russia.

Icon of the Sitka Mother of God and Other Relics of New Archangelsk

RTE: Wonderful. Can you tell us now about the icons and the museum exhibits in the church?

DCN. HERMAN MADSEN: Our most famous icon, of course, is the miraculous icon of the Sitka Mother of God, painted by the very famous Russian iconographer, Vladimir Borovikovsky (1758-1826). It was painted in the style of the Kazan Mother of God and was brought to Sitka while St. Innocent was here. There have been miracles attributed to the Mother of God through her icon. People come to ask the Theotokos to pray for them, and then anoint themselves with the oil from the lampada that burns before the icon. People have been healed of cancer, paralysis, blindness and infertility.

Four weeks ago a man came in and said that he had come to Sitka to pray in front of the icon six years ago because he had a tumor that was causing his eye to bulge out of its socket. He prayed and anointed his eye with the oil, then

Opposite: Aleut Gospel translated by St. Innocent. St. Michael's Cathedral, Sitka.

left town. When he woke up in the morning the tumor was gone. He returned to Sitka to tell us what had happened and to bear witness to the miracle.

There are also museum cases that line the walls of the nave that contain possessions of St. Innocent: Gospel books, chalices, vestments, seals, including his personal Slavonic gospel dated 1759 that he brought from Russia, as well as his hand-written translation of the Gospel from Slavonic to Aleut.

On the left side of the church, next to a portrait of St. Innocent, is a large silver Gospel book that was commissioned by St. Michael's native and Russian Orthodox parishioners for St. Innocent long after he had left to become the Metropolitan of Moscow and All Russia. He was elderly by then, his eyesight was failing, and he wrote to them, "I can't read to preach anymore." So the Orthodox faithful here in Sitka commissioned a large-print Gospel to be made in Russia for him. After he died, the gospel was sent back here.

We also have other original things from his time, such as a mother of pearl cross that contains a sliver of the True Cross, and marriage crowns that were used for weddings. There are also old documents such as birth and marriage certificates, land leases, and letters that are now being catalogued, as well as many icons, including an interesting early nineteenth-century image of two angels holding an icon of the Kazan Mother of God, painted by Native Aleut iconographers.

The Bishop's House

RTE: Anne and Jon, what can you tell us about the Bishop's House, where St. Innocent lived?

ANNE LANCANAU: The Bishop's House was designed by Bishop Innocent who oversaw its construction. He hired Finnish wheelwrights who had come to Sitka to build and repair ships for the Russian-American Company and for foreign merchants trading in New Archangelsk. Finland was part of the Russian Empire, and native Finns worked extensively in Russian territories. The Bishop's House was built out of local first-growth Spruce trees, and the upper floor included the Bishop's own room and office, a reception room, dining room, and a small house-church dedicated to the Annunciation.

Downstairs was a kitchen, and at various times the first floor also housed a seminary and school rooms. Russians, natives and creoles attended classes

Opposite: Desk at the Bishop's House made by St. Innocent in 1840's.





together. There are school books left from that period, published in the first half of the nineteenth century which include Russian texts on grammar, algebra, geometry, history, geography, Lives of Saints and the Gospels. Because Bishop Innocent had become a monk after his wife died, the Bishop's House was also a monastery.

Another interesting thing we've found from that period is a Russian sealskin bag to store bread in, with the Russian words "Rye Bread" embossed on the flap. The growing seasons are very short here, and the main reason that the Russians founded Fort Ross in California, was to grow grain and vegetables. It wasn't a great success as grain did not grow well on the foggy coast, so they finally solved their food problems by trading with the Hudson Bay Company.

Keeping warm was a constant concern and we discovered very interesting architectural details in restoring the house. These people were from cold northern climates—Bishop Innocent himself was from Siberia—and they knew how to build. First, at each end of the house are galleries, like mud-rooms or hallways that provide an extra area of insulation between the outside walls and the living quarters. Sawdust provided insulation inside the walls, and raised thresholds cut down on drafts between rooms; the doors would cover the thresholds. The traditional double-paned windows you see today are part of the original design.

Also, the builders glued paper strips over the cracks between the logs to keep out drafts. These strips are from old ledgers, records, and letters that were no longer needed, and are inscribed with beautiful Cyrillic handwriting. From them we have learned some interesting details of the lives of people in this house. Over the paper strips they tacked sail cloth to keep out the cold and damp, and to make a smoother surface for the decorative wallpaper that finished the rooms of the home. This is the same sailcloth (now canvas) that you now see on the inside ceiling and walls of St. Michael's Church.

JON FISH: In the 1970's the Bishop's House was sold by the Orthodox Church to the United States Park Service, which incorporated it as part of the Sitka Historical National Park, and embarked on a complete restoration. While they were removing the sawdust and sand insulation, they found an interesting plant buried throughout the house, stalks of Devil's Club, which grows throughout the Pacific Northwest. In the Tlingit culture, you would take a piece of Devil's Club and place it above your clan house to ward off evil spirits.

Opposite: Reception room of Bishop's House, with portrait of Tsar Nicholas I (1825-1855), Sitka, Alaska.

Bishop Innocent was a witness to the area's disasters and one of them was smallpox, which hit the area in 1835.² With the Tlingit's troubled history, the natives were suspicious of the Russian-American company's offers of medical help until it became apparent that local shamans weren't able to combat the disease, and that the natives were dying at a much higher rate than the inoculated Russians. With Bishop Innocent's encouragement and example, both the Tlingit and Haida people agreed to be vaccinated. The vaccinations stopped the spread of smallpox, and in return the local Tlingit buried Devil's Club throughout the house to protect the children who went to school downstairs, the seminarians and the clergy, and also to protect this holy man who had shown so much respect and care for the local people.

So now we see these local Tlingit, who were not yet baptized, trying to protect this man and this house in the only way they knew how to prevent it from being visited by evil spirits. This is a remarkable connection between the Russian Church and the local people.

Also, Bishop Innocent probably spent most of his working life as a missionary in a house no larger than our dining room here, with his mother, brother, wife and children. When he moved into the Bishop's House as a monk after his wife's death, he had the entire second floor: his small bedroom, office, chapel and a larger reception and dining room for guests, which is why he called it the "ecclesiastical palace." He had gone from being a back-country preacher in rural Alaska and the Aleutians, basically working solo, to being the head of the church in Alaska, and later the leader of the entire Orthodox Church in Russia.

The desk and table in his office at the Bishop's House are of his own making and are probably where he did some of his finest translation and writing work. We also know that he traveled as far as California, which was part of his diocese, and made a barrel organ for the Catholic missionaries down there. When he wasn't here, he was out doing his job as bishop, and in his ten years in Sitka, he visited every community in his extensive diocese twice. If these walls could talk!

For both natives and Russians, much energy was spent in simply staying alive in the cold Alaskan climate. The rooms of the Bishop's House were

2 Ed. Note: In 1835, with the outbreak of smallpox in New Archangelsk/Sitka, Russian-American Company doctor Eduard Blashke and a medical assistant began vaccinations of both Russians and natives. Few natives would submit to the procedure, however, until Bishop Innocent's intervention.

Opposite: One of twenty iron plaques buried by explorer Gregory Shelekov from Alaska to California, claiming territory for Russia. This Sitka plaque is the only one to be recovered. The inscription reads, "Land of Russian Possession."



ЗЕМЛЯ РОССИЙСКАГО ВЛАДЕНИЯ

1612



heated by a typical Russian stove, where the air is warmed by a fire in the box below and moves up through a series of brickwork vents. The house was completely sealed, with some air pipes for fresh air. The galleries, which were unheated and are more like a mud room or an enclosed porch for storage, also prevented the freezing air from entering into the building.

One of the biggest challenges for both Russians and natives was food. As we've said, rye was the staple grain of the Russian diet and most food was shipped in, though they were also hunters. There is a little recreated garden outside the house that our kindergarteners plant each spring, and come back and tend in the fall as first graders, to give them an idea of what grew here. The original gardens were much larger, of course, as they needed to have enough vegetables to prevent scurvy and starvation, but with the short growing season, food production was always a problem, which is why they established Fort Ross in northern California as an agricultural outpost. Even to this day, things haven't changed much in Sitka. When our barges don't show up, you won't find a drop of milk in this town. I have six kids who hate powdered milk, but we just have to wait until it shows up.

Later there was a priests' residence across the street, and next door was another building as large as the Bishop's House, where he relocated the school and seminary for religious education. The Orthodox seminary is now in Kodiak, Alaska.

Bishop Innocent used the old Russian Cyrillic alphabet and applied it to the language of the native peoples so that the young seminarians could go back to their villages and read and teach Scripture, but in doing this he was also giving the natives their first written language, which the children learned in this house.

The books you see on the shelves of the Bishop's House weren't used by Russian children. They were held in the hands of native children who were learning how to read and write. The doodles and sketches that these students left in their books are time capsules through the eyes of the children. The sailing vessels, weather, the girls that walked by... including their hair styles and the expression on their faces. These people were using quill pens and ink wells and graphite pencils. The artwork is absolutely remarkable.

ANA DITTMAR: Another interesting thing about the Bishop's House is that St. Innocent's private prayer room is still an active consecrated chapel that is used by the Orthodox Church. The priest of St. Michael's serves there several

Opposite: St. Michael's Cathedral, late 19th century.

times a year with his parishioners, and visiting Orthodox clergy and pilgrims also pray there. Although the furnishings were sold to the U.S. Park Service along with the Bishop's House building, the icons and liturgical items in the chapel still belong to the Orthodox Church, though the Park Service watches over them.

The U.S. Park Service spent millions of dollars on the restoration, and along with extensive structural repair, they paid great attention to detail. For example, they had a tiny patch of the original elegant wallpaper in St. Innocent's reception room, so they sent the sample to Russia and had the paper recreated in rolls. They restored it as faithfully as they could, down to the Russian china on the table. The Church and the U.S. Park Service have a good relationship, and in fact when I worked at the Sitka Historic National Park, one of my jobs was to curate the agreement between the Park Service and the Orthodox Church.

Sitka After the Sale of Alaska to America

RTE: We know that in 1853, after being named archbishop, St. Innocent moved to Yakutsk on the Siberian Russian mainland. In 1867 he was raised to the rank of Metropolitan of Moscow, becoming the primate of the entire Russian Orthodox Church, and reposed in Moscow in 1879. Can you tell us what happened to the Russian churches and the Orthodox Christians when Alaska was sold to the United States?

ANNE LANCANAU: When Alaska was transferred to the US in 1867, most of the Russians went back to Russia, but some Russians and creoles wanted to stay and were guaranteed by the terms of the transfer that they could keep their homes and property. However, when the U.S. army came in, that agreement was often violated. At the time of the sale Russia had told them, "We will pay your way back to Russia for three years after the transfer," so when people were forced from their homes by the American newcomers, many of the Russians and creoles changed their mind and went back to Russia.

An 1840 census records up to 1200 Russians, creoles, and natives who worked for them in Sitka, but this probably does not include the independent Tlingit natives. In 1870 there were around 300 creoles and Russians.

Opposite: The Russian Pallada sails into Sitka on July 27, 2011 for the 270th anniversary of the Russian discovery of Alaska. Courtesy James Poulson, Daily Sitka Sentinel.





ANA DITTMAR: One of the reasons that the Russians decided to sell Alaska was that it was costly to maintain the infrastructure and trade had generally become less lucrative. Evidently, the sale wasn't well known here except in the larger towns, and in some remote locations it didn't affect people's lives for decades.

Church lands were not transferred to America, so land that was owned by the Russian Orthodox Church remained so, including property in downtown Sitka and a few islands in Sitka Sound. I recently saw a deed from around the time of the Russian Revolution for the sale of a small island that the church still owned to a native woman and a European man who wanted the island to raise either bees or foxes. It was sold for \$15.00.

The church also owns a property across from the cathedral, on which several shops were built including the parish gift and bookstore that I now manage. Because we own the land, we have the shop rent-free. We also own the land the rectory sits on, which is part of the Russian cemetery and was probably next to the original walls of the Russian stockade, as well as a few smaller parcels. And there are acres that belong to the historic Russian cemetery.

After the 1867 sale, the Russian tsars continued to fund the Alaskan Orthodox churches and the Russian schools, and Sitka remained the headquarters of the Church. As an American you get the picture that "Russia's gone; America's in," but it wasn't quite that clear-cut. Personal donations by succeeding tsars: Alexander II, Alexander III, and Nicholas II and other wealthy Russians were generously forwarded until the Russian Revolution of 1917, when the Bolsheviks stopped all support. The native Orthodox Churches didn't have a culture of providing for themselves, and when the support stopped, things began to fall into disrepair.

Russian Patriarch Tikhon (Bellavin), who led the Russian Church around the time of the Russian Revolution, had earlier served as the ruling bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in America from 1898 to 1905, when he finally moved the church headquarters from San Francisco to New York and founded St. Tikhon's Seminary in Pennsylvania. In 1899 he made an episcopal visit to Sitka and served in St. Michael's Cathedral.

The Sitka church and other Russian Orthodox parishes in Alaska are now under the Orthodox Church of America (OCA), which was recognized as an American jurisdiction by the Moscow Patriarchate in the 1970's. The OCA then sold the Bishop's House to the U.S. Park Service. The house needed

Opposite: A pair of eagles on St. Michael's cross. Courtesy Charles Bingham.

extensive rebuilding and the National Park Service did a faithful and beautiful job of restoration. This is one of the few remaining examples of Russian colonial architecture left in America.

RTE: Did the native Orthodox Christian population also decrease after the Russians left?

ANA DITTMAR: No. Actually, it increased. The cathedral's consecration in 1848 was not the high point of Orthodox conversion here, as one might think, but the very nascent beginning. The real growth in conversions came later.

For the Tlingits, the years following the sale of Alaska to America were difficult. Most of the Russians left except for the clergy and some school teachers and their families. Also, incoming Protestant missionaries did things very differently from the Russian clergy. Instead of translating scripture and utilizing native languages as the Russians did, the Protestants tried to cut the native languages off. Children in Protestant schools were forbidden to speak their native tongue or to follow their clan traditions. This was characteristic of Protestant mentality at that time.

The Sheldon Jackson School, which became a college, attracted some of Sitka's students who wanted an education and to learn a trade. However, they were required to only speak in English and they had to attend the Protestant church. As the Russian schools closed down, some of these native Orthodox students were forced to give up their cultural and religious heritage (others just pretended to) so that they could go to school. There was one account of an Orthodox priest in Sitka who had gone to serve another settlement. When he returned, some of his Orthodox parishioners' children had been forcibly taken to the Protestant boarding school. In the late 1800s this kind of treatment by American Protestant missionaries led to an increase in Orthodox conversions and church-going. The Tlingit were very aware of the differences between the two forms of Christianity.³

Our great authority on the Russian period of Sitka and the Tlingit people is Dartmouth Professor Sergei Kan, who wrote *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture*

³ Ed. Note: Exceptions to Sitka's Protestant policy of enforced enculturation include more culturally sensitive Protestant teachers who often worked alone in isolated native villages. One example is Hannah Brandt, the aunt of the celebrated critic of urban planning, Jane Jacobs, who served as a teacher among different tribes from 1904-1918, Hannah Breece, A Schoolteacher in *Old Alaska: The Story of Hannah Breece*, Vintage Books (Penguin Random House), NY, 1997.

Opposite: St. Innocent's Chapel of the Annunciation, Bishop's House, Sitka.



and *Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries*.⁴ He has been adopted into one of the Tlingit clans and comes up once or twice each year.

RTE: How do the native Tlingit people in the parish view their Orthodox practice now, and what changes have you seen since you've come here?

ANA DITTMAR: There were many more elders living when I first came, and the flavor was different. The priest that was here when I arrived was native, but he was Yupik, not Tlingit, and the priest after him was Russian-American.

I've seen pictures of the church from the 1960s and 1970s and it is packed with Tlingit families. When I arrived, the parish was primarily native and some of the natives expressed sadness, as I do, that none of the services are in Church Slavonic anymore. I grew up in a Russian Orthodox Church in Philadelphia, but even in the 1970s when St. Vladimir's seminarians used to visit, they were already talking about how the services were going to change to English. Although I would have called myself a progressive teenager, I remember having a hard time with that. They said, "Young people can't understand the liturgy anymore," and I thought, "So what? It's supposed to be in Church Slavonic." I hear the Tlingit elders here say the same thing. The church culture lost a lot when that change was imposed.

RTE: What did it lose?

ANA DITTMAR: There is an emotional response that you have to language, period, whether it is in church or at home. When that is taken away, it is a bond that is broken. The church I went to in Philadelphia was an immigrant church with a lot of people who still spoke Russian and could hardly speak English. So in changing the language you were either grieving the old people, or you were supposedly losing the young people.

I'm not convinced that the use of Slavonic stopped young people from going to church in Philadelphia—they'd grown up with it, but there are people in Sitka who stopped coming to church because of the change to English in the early 1970's. The native Orthodox were not asked if they wanted this. They had already lost their history because of what American non-natives have done to them in the past and they were still mourning—and now to have their adopted liturgical language taken away by American Orthodox was very hard. There are still a few small things we do in Church Slavonic

⁴ Sergei Kan, *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries*, Univ. of Washington Press, Seattle, 1999.

at the services, and we've recently been talking about bringing back some Slavonic hymns. I think that everyone is in favor of that.

RTE: In fact, the written languages that St. Innocent developed were based on Slavonic.

ANA DITTMAR: Yes. Saint Innocent's development of written native languages and his translations of church services were in Russian Cyrillic letters. He didn't know Alaska would be sold to the United States and he had no reason to translate into the Latin alphabet, even if he had spoken English. The native church readers all learned to read the Slavonic characters, and could read both Slavonic and the variants.

RTE: Do you feel hopeful about the future of the church?

ANA DITTMAR: This is definitely the end of an era, just as it is for the church that I grew up in, and that is very profound for me. You have to ask yourself, as many people here have, "Is it so different that I can still relate to it?" It's not just language or culture, but it's how people approach Orthodoxy now. People are different, and how do you describe that? It is the beginning of another time, and I notice that the Antiochian Orthodox church communities in America are very appealing for English-speaking American converts.

But I came from a nest of Orthodoxy—when I'm in church, I'm at home. When I see people trying to be Orthodox I feel a little sad, but how do you give them your genetic patterns? And what it must feel like to be a convert, and to have left your family's culture and religion to be something else?

ANNE LANCAU: I've noticed that visitors to Sitka are often disappointed to learn that although there is so much Russian history here, there aren't any Russians. However, the Alaskan native Orthodox come from a lineage that stretches back to the Russian era. Even today the Orthodox Church continues to train native clergy in Kodiak, and these seminarians are almost all natives whose ancestors converted or are descendants of creoles who carry on that Russian experience. They don't practice their faith because they think, "Someone has to remember the Russians were here." No, somewhere along the line it stopped being something from the outside. They made Orthodoxy their own. It is their religion. ✦