

**LEGACY OF ST.INNOCENT APOSTLE OF AMERICA, ENLIGHTENER OF
SIBERIA, METROPOLITAN OF MOSCOW (1797- 1879)**

by Sergei Shirokov

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*-The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord:
and he delighteth in his way – Ps.37:23
-Jesus saith unto him , I am the way , the truth, and the life – Jn.14:6*

St. Innocent was called as Metropolitan of Moscow in 1868 to be the successor of St. Filaret (Drozdov) the great pillar of the Russian Church. On entering the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Kremlin, full of true humility, he said:

“Who am I to dare to take the word and the power of my predecessor? A pupil of distant times, of a remote country, who passed more than half a life time on the frontiers; one who is only a common worker in Christ’s vineyard, a teacher of children and of those who are new in the Faith”¹

In 1977 he was canonized both in America and Russia, and recognized as one of the greatest missionaries, equal to an Apostle, in all the Christian world. He was indeed the Apostle to America, beginning his ministry there first as missionary priest and then as missionary bishop in Alaska. He was the Enlightener of Siberia for many peoples and tribes in Kamchatka, Yakutia, Chukotka, Amur Basin and Manchuria regard him as their Enlightener and Teacher. Later he became the first and the senior bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church, ending his magnificent and wonderful life as Metropolitan of Moscow.

¹The life and work of Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow, San Francisco, 1897.

“Tell them,” he said to his house-warden hieromonk Arsenius before his death, “that no eulogies be pronounced at my funeral; they only contain praise. Let them rather preach a sermon; it may be instructive, and here is the text for it: ‘The ways of man are ordered by the Lord.’”²

St. Innocent as the Holy Patron of Missionaries

“The Orthodox do not regard the saints as mediators,” wrote Nicolas Zernov about the Orthodox tradition of veneration of the saints, “but as teachers and friends who pray with them and assist them in their spiritual ascent. Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry was surrounded by disciples who did not prevent others meeting Him, but on the contrary helped newcomers to find the Master. In the same manner fellowship with the saints facilitates communion with God, for their Christlike character brings others near to the divine source of life and light. All mankind is involved in the process of deification and the saints are those who, having advanced near to the ultimate goal, can uplift the rest.”³

We also would propose to regard St. Innocent not only as saint in the traditional sense of the word, but as the Teacher, Protector, and Friend for those who are missionaries, or are preparing to devote their lives for missionary ministry.

²Ibid. p. 23.

³Nickolai Zernov, *Eastern Christendom. A Study of the Origins and Development of the Eastern Orthodox Church*. New York: G.P. Putnams, 1961.

“As a result of pastoral visitation and personal study of the archives and published books on the life of Bishop Innocent, I began to realize the breadth and depth of this unique pastor and missionary,” the Primate of the Orthodox Church in America, Metropolitan Theodosius, noted in the Preface to the hagiographical book of Paul Garrett, *St. Innocent. Apostle to America*. Theodosius was originally consecrated as Bishop of Alaska, in the line of succession of St. Innocent. “Although he was a person of humble beginnings with only a lower seminary education, Innocent proved in his life to be a highly talented, knowledgeable leader – something in fact, of ‘a renaissance man.’ As this book notes, he was to reveal and utilize many and varied talents during his pastoral ministry, serving as carpenter, watchmaker, inventor, linguist and original translator, naturalist and noted ethnographer, sociologist, missionary, teacher and scholar, as well as pastor and shepherd of his flock. His physical exploits alone, in traveling throughout the territories of his diocese by dog-sled across great expanses or in one-man kayak through rough freezing waters, reveal something of his faith, courage and inner stamina”⁴

Life of St. Innocent

He was born on the 26th of August, 1797 in the far-off village of Anginskoe north of Lake Baikal in the District of Irkutsk in East Siberia to the family of the sacristan of the church of St. Elias, Eusebius Popov and his wife Thekla. At five years of age John Popov began to study the alphabet, being instructed by his father, who was at the time already afflicted with the disease which brought on his death two years later, leaving a widow and four orphans in extreme poverty.

At nine years of age John Popov was brought to Irkutsk, and was received as a student at the theological seminary. There he was named Veniaminov instead of Popov in honor of Benjamin, the bishop of Irkutsk, who had died that same year. Graduating from the seminary in 1817 at age twenty, he married and was ordained thereafter as deacon for the Church of the Annunciation in Irkutsk. Two years later he was ordained as priest for the same church, serving at the same time as teacher of the parish school.

Calling to the Missionary Ministry

⁴Paul Garrett, *St. Innocent. Apostle to America*. New York, 1979. p. 10.

In 1823 the Most Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church requested the Bishop of Irkutsk to send a priest to the island of Ounalashka, for the purpose of enlightening the natives with the faith of Christ. The prelate informed the clergy of Irkutsk, but no one wanted to go to a strange and distant land. This put the Bishop in an awkward position, for he could not send any one against his will.

At about this time Father John Veniaminov became acquainted with a certain John Kruikov, who had come to Irkutsk from Ounalashka. This newcomer from the coast of America, had much to tell him about Ounalashka and of life there. Indeed he went so far as to persuade him to accept the Bishop's invitation.

Many years later Fr. John recalled that

“When that pioneer, John Kruikov had already bidden me good-bye, and he still continued to try to persuade me to go to Ounalashka, and when on the same day, taking leave of the Bishop (in whose presence I happened to be then) Kruikov commenced telling of the devotion of the Aleuts to prayer and to listening to the Word of God (may the name of the Lord be blessed); I suddenly and completely became inflamed with the desire to go to such a people. I still remember vividly how I suffered with impatience, waiting for the moment when I could inform His Right Reverence of my intention, but he seemed to be surprised, saying only: ‘we shall see’.”⁵

During one of the family conversations, his little son, somewhat over a year old, came up to him. Father John took him up in his arms. “My child,” he said, “where will your feet soon be walking?” That was how his family surmised what had happened, so they fell upon him with tears and wailing, begging him to alter his decision. But he remained steadfast. So they began to prepare for the long, strange journey. On the 7th of May, 1823, Father John left Irkutsk with his family, which consisted of his old mother, his wife, a one year old son, and a brother.⁶

Building the Church

Ounalashka is one of the Aleutian Islands in the Pacific Ocean between Kamchatka and Alaska. Besides the Aleutian Islands there were others also which

⁵Ibid.

⁶Life and Work of, p. 4-5.

belonged to the parish of Father John, among them were the Fox, the Pribilof and other Islands.

The native inhabitants of all these islands were employed in hunting fur-animals and fishing for the Russian-American Trade Company. They lived in villages of earthen huts, which appeared more like bear haunts than human habitations. The wealthy Aleuts had the walls of their huts covered with furs and skins, there was no furniture or seats so they sit upon the floor.

In religious belief the Aleuts were half idol worshipers. Father John had found an old wooden chapel. His first task therefore was to build a new church. Being himself a good carpenter and builder, he began teaching the natives these handicrafts, and as soon as they were sufficiently proficient, he commenced building the church, which was dedicated in honor of the Ascension of the Lord.

At the same time Fr. John undertook a great and difficult task – the study of the native languages and then the translation of the Gospel and the liturgy for the aborigines. For this he had first of all to create the very alphabet itself, which these languages never had. In studying the Aleutian languages he endeavored to acquaint himself with their traditions and customs, in order to be better understood when preaching to them the Word of God.

Fr. Veniaminov loved the Aleuts for their simple-heartedness and diligence in hearing the Word of God, and the Aleuts also loved their pastor, and were sincerely devoted to him for his good nature and for the kindness he showed them.

On the Island of Ounalashka Fr. John at first lived with his family in an earthen hut, then in a small wooden house, which he built with his own hands. Not only his own children but also other children would surround him, as he explained to them stories from sacred History or the Gospel in a simple way, with language easily understood. At other times he played ball with them. He would wander in the hills with the children and as a lover and observer of nature, he would share with them his knowledge. In addition together with his children Fr. John would make the candles for their church.⁷

⁷Ibid. p. 10-11.

In such constant labor and care Fr. John spent ten years on Ounalashka. During that time he converted to Christianity all the inhabitants of the island. Then he was transferred to the Port of New Archangel, or Sitka, so that he might convert another people - the Kolosh - an Indian tribe, which were the inhabitants of this island. Later missions for other native peoples of Alaska - Eskimos, Athabaskas and Haida were founded. He preached not only near his home but also for his flock on other islands of his parish during his annual missionary voyages.

Visit to the Island Akun - the Truth and the Mystery of Missionary Ministry

Early in April of 1828 Fr. John sailed to the Island of Akun which was part of his parish and where he had not yet visited. After the eighty mile voyage to Akun, when his party of five boats approached the rocky shoreline, the whole village stood waiting.

“Who told you I’d be coming today, and how did you know that I am Father John?”

“Our shaman, old John Smirennikov, told us.”

When they met, Father John asked the old man how he had known him before they ever met and the time of his arrival to the Island. Smirennikov replied that two companions had informed him of these things.

“ And just who are these two ‘companions’ of yours?”

“White men,” he replied, “ And they told me that very soon you’re going to see your family off on shore and sail away to see some great man, and you’ll talk to him.”⁸

Then the old man revealed to him a miracle story about his ‘companions’, who, based on his description of their appearance, reminded Father John of icons of the holy Archangel Gabriel in white robe with a rose colored band across the shoulders.

“Soon after he was baptized by Hieromonk Macarius,” wrote Father Veniamonov to his Bishop in Irkutsk, “first one and later two spirits appeared to him but were visible to no one else... They told him that they were sent by God to edify, teach and guard him. For the next thirty years they appeared to him almost every day, either during

⁸Garrett, p. 79.

daylight hours or early in the evening – but never at night. On these occasions: (1) They taught him in its totality Christian theology and the mysteries of the faith...(2) In time of sickness and famine they brought help to him and - though more rarely – to others at his request. (3) Occasionally they told him of things occurring in another place or (very rarely) at some time in the future - but then only if God willed such a revelation - did so not by their own power, but by the power of Almighty God.”⁹

Translation Work, Theological and Scientific Writings

⁹Ibid. p. 80.

To present his project for reorganization of the mission in Alaska and more importantly to publish his Aleutian translation of the sacred books and his own original catechetical book *Indication of the Pathway to the Kingdom of God* for the Aleuts in their own language, he decided to sail from Sitka to St. Petersburg by the round-the-world ship ‘Nicholas I’ (November 8, 1838 to June 22, 1839).¹⁰

His report to the Holy Synod, “A Review of the Orthodox Church in the Russian settlements in America, Together with my Opinions as to how their Condition might be Improved” impressed not only Ober-Procurator Nicholas Protasov but all other members of the Holy Synod, as did the engaging stories he told about the Aleuts (like the story about his visit to Akun Island).

Then he was invited by Metropolitan Filaret to visit Moscow. At first sight of him, the Prelate who was a most outstanding theologian, church historian, fine linguist and pedagogue, took an immediate liking to the hardworking missionary. “There is something apostle-like in this man,” he would say when speaking of Fr. John. Fr. Veniaminov was elevated to the rank of archpriest by the Holy Synod, which approved his Aleutian translations and other theological works for publication.

The Cross of Apostolic Ministry and the Way to the Kingdom of God

Amid all this success and acclaim there came from Irkutsk the shattering news of the death several months before of Fr. John’s wife, Catherine. His first thoughts were for his orphaned family, and he immediately sought permission to go join them. Metropolitan Filaret did his best to console him in his grief and, following standard procedures in the case of clerical widowers, offered the suggestion that Fr. John become a monk.¹¹

He could not make up his mind, because his six children – two sons and four daughters – seemed to hold him in check. He went to Kiev, the first capital of Russia, where he wanted to pray and venerate before the wonderworking relics of ancient

¹⁰This is a good point to mention other well known written works of St. Innocent: *Notes on the Islands of Ounalashka District* (1840), *Full Orthodox Catechism* in the Aleut language and translation of the Gospel, *Aleut grammar* and *Aleut-Russian Vocabulary*, which was awarded a prize from the Imperial Academy of Sciences in 1836.

¹¹Ibid. p. 132.

Russian saints. Then, after his children were settled, at Metropolitan Filaret's request, in the best possible manner, he took the vows of a monk.

In November 1840, he was tonsured, given the name Innocent and on the 15th of December, 1840 according to the will of the Sovereign, Emperor Nicholas I, he was consecrated Bishop of Aleut, Kamchatka and Kuril, the first Orthodox Bishop for America. Thus was realized the prophecy of Smirennikov, who foretold his meeting with the great man.

Fr. Veniaminov's project concerning the transformation of the Mission in Alaska into the American Orthodox Church was approved by the Holy Synod as well as by the Chief Manager of the Russian-American Company. "Instructions to Priests Assigned to Convert Non-Orthodox and to Lead Those Converted into the Christian Faith," proposed by Fr. Veniaminov, obtained canonical force for all missionaries within the Russian Empire.¹²

"To leave one's homeland and go to far-off, savage lands void of many of the comforts of life in order to turn to the path of Truth people still wandering in the darkness of ignorance, and to illumine with the light of the Gospel those who have not yet seen this saving light of the Gospel is truly a holy work, like that of the Apostles. Blessed is he whom the Lord chooses and confirms in such ministry!

"Great will be his reward in heaven. But how horrible for him who is chosen and confirmed to preach the Good News but who fails to do so!

"Thus, O Priest, as you undertake this work for which you will either enter into the joy of your Lord as His good and faithful worker, or receive condemnation as a hypocritical, evil and lazy servant – may the Lord God preserve you from the latter and grant you the desire and the strength to achieve the former...."¹³

On the 3rd of April, 1843, Bishop Innocent arrived in Ohotsk, where he remained for about four months. During that time he was spreading the Faith among the Koriak, Chukcha, and the Tunguz.¹⁴

¹²Ibid. p. 134.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Life and Work, p. 19.

While living in Yakutsk Siberia (1852-1862) the Prelate took great pains in supervising the translation of sacred books into the Yakut language. Great was the day for the Yakut people, when at last the first Liturgy was offered in their native language.

The Archbishop himself officiated at the praise service and read the Gospel. This had so touched the hearts of the Yakuts that their native representatives came to the Prelate Innocent with their petition, asking that hereafter the day be observed as a holiday, because it was the first day on which they heard in the temple, the Divine teaching in their own tongue.¹⁵

Soon Archbishop Innocent moved his see to the Amur Basin where he founded the diocese for enlightening many native tribes, like the Tungus, Chines, Mongols, Golds, Olutors, Negidils, and Kurils. There in the new city of Blagoveshchensk in 1858 he founded the Church of the Annunciation, moving his see there in 1862. Vicar Bishops were appointed to Alaska in 1859 and then to Yakutsk.

Here in Blagoveschensk Archbishop Innocent received a report concerning the sale of Alaska to the United States. On December 5, 1867 he wrote to the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod in St.Petersburg:

“Rumor reaching me from Moscow purports that I wrote to someone of my great unhappiness about the sale of our colonies to the Americans. This is utterly false. To the contrary, I see in this event one of the ways of Providence whereby Orthodoxy will penetrate the United States (where even now people have begun to pay serious attention to it) . Were I to be asked about this, I would reply:

- Designate San Francisco rather than New Archangel the residence of the vicar.
- Return to Russia the current vicar and all clergy in New Archangel and appoint a new vicar from among those who know the English language. Likewise his retinue ought to be composed of those who know English.
- Allow the vicar bishop and all clerics of the Orthodox Church in America to celebrate the Liturgy and other services in English (to which purpose, obviously, the service books must be translated into English).

¹⁵Ibid.

-To use English rather than Russian...in all instruction in the schools to be established in San Francisco and elsewhere to prepare people for missionary and clerical positions.”¹⁶

Apostolic Ministry and the Orthodox Missionary Society

In his letter to Metropolitan Filaret in December 1866, St. Innocent asked him to find a place for his retirement and rest somewhere in the monasteries of Moscow, complaining of his health and loss of sight. But instead of rest in Moscow, after the death of his great patron Metropolitan Filaret on December 19, 1867, “pillar, light, and teacher of all Orthodoxy,” Bishop Innocent was elected as his successor.

On May 26, 1867 while staying at his residence in Blagoveschensk, St. Innocent was handed an urgent dispatch from St. Peterburg, “IN HIS MERCY THE EMPEROR DEIGNS TO APPOINT YOUR EMINENCE METROPOLITAN OF MOSCOW.”

This was a providential event for the Russian Orthodox Church and its apostolic ministry. Here in Moscow in the capital of universal Orthodoxy, St. Innocent, the great missionary who was equal to Apostles, fulfilled his old dream and in 1870 founded the Orthodox Missionary Society. Now through the Providence of God the missionary ministry became public knowledge for all the church, state and society, not just for missionary bishops and priests.

“It has pleased the Lord,” said St. Innocent, the first president of the Orthodox Missionary Society, “that even here, at the center of Russia and in my declining years, I have not become a stranger to the missionary work to which, by the will of Divine Providence, nearly my entire life since my early years has been devoted in the far-off reaches of our country.”¹⁷

The Legacy of St. Innocent

¹⁶Garrett, p. 277-78.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 306.

His great apostolic life came to an end on March 31, 1879 the great day of Holy Saturday. The great bell in the tower of Ivan the Great in the Kremlin pealed forth the announcement to the citizens of Moscow that the Prelate was dead. He was buried in the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra alongside the grave of Metropolitan Filaret, and now their relics, after they were discovered and glorified on October 1994, rest on either side of the main altar of the Cathedral of the Assumption in this monastery.

In the official address on the occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the birthday of St. Innocent in 1997, Alexis II, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy Synod, noted: “The task of spiritual renaissance for all historically Orthodox peoples, which is now the task for all our Church, calls for urgent renewal in the Church of an effective system of Christian mission and evangelization. Successfully fulfilling this very difficult task might be possible by drawing on the legacy of our foremost missionary, St. Innocent”¹⁸

The first biography of St. Innocent was published in English in New York in 1877 by Bishop Charles Reuben Hale, who called St. Innocent ‘the apostle.’

“He was not only, in his vast diocese, the chief of the missionaries,” noted Bishop Hale, “but the chief missionary, not a spiritual governor but a model of faithfulness and zeal. We are told that he became master of the six dialects, spoken in the field committed to his charge. He himself translated, and assisted others in translating, large parts of God’s Word and the Liturgy of his Church for the use of the natives. For forty-five years, ten of them as Bishop of Kamchatka, eighteen more as its Archbishop, he labored on, in season and out of season.”¹⁹

¹⁸Missionerskoe obozrenie (Missionary Review) 3/97, p. 5.

¹⁹Edward Kasinec and J.Robert Wright. “Charles Hale’s Biography of Innokentii: A Note on its Context”, unpublished manuscript.

As we have seen, St. Innocent was chosen of God and called to the missionary ministry, like the Apostles. He had special spiritual gifts as preacher, teacher, theologian, linguist, scholar and also numerous talents. Like the chosen Apostles he received mysterious knowledge about the participation of heavenly spirits in the missionary ministry of the Church which is not only on earth but also in heaven. As church leader and bishop St. Innocent was not only a strong administrator, but had an apostolic vision for spreading the Christian Faith and growing the Church not only inside Russia, but through the activity of the Orthodox Missionary Society also to North America, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, and China, where the Russian Orthodox Church founded their missions. This apostolic vision was especially demonstrated in his important catechetical book, *The Indication of the Way to the Kingdom of God*.

“You should know that there is only one way to the Kingdom of God,” wrote St. Innocent, “and this is the same way, which is to follow Jesus Christ’s example when living on earth. There is no other way and never has been and never will be, because Jesus Christ said: “I am the way, and if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”²⁰ By the example of his own self-denying life and carrying the cross of missionary and apostolic ministry, St. Innocent revealed to us how one can follow Christ as a missionary, and taught us the way to the Kingdom of God.

It is the main goal of the apostolic ministry of the Church to preach the Gospel and to instruct people how they should follow Christ, because “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Mt.4:17) St. Innocent in his life, ministry, and teachings was really like an Apostle, enlightening a great number of people and tribes through the Light of Christ and showing them the way of the Kingdom of God.

Through the prayers of St. Innocent, the Holy Patron of those who are in missionary ministry, may God have mercy upon us.

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²⁰St. Innocent. Indication of the Way to the Kingdom of God. Moscow, 1997. p. 7.

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