

## Chaplain's Reflection — October 10, 2011 — © Very Rev. Steven Belonick

### *The Way into the Kingdom*

In his journal entry dated April 21, 1832, Priest John Veniaminov (St. Innocent) wrote these words:

*After a reading of the Rule of Prayer, I heard Confession from all of the adults, chrismated two infants, celebrated the Liturgy, and held a prayer service for the health of His Majesty. I gave Communion to all those who had confessed and to the young people. After the Liturgy I taught about the same topics that I had discussed in the first village and sacramentally blessed two marriages. At 3:30 I set out, and we arrived at the village of Chernovskoe at 7:30. After celebrating Vespers together with Matins, I taught the inhabitants about repentance, as I had in the first few villages. (The Rasmuson Library Historical Translation Series, Volume VII, University of Alaska Press, 1993)*

In this short paragraph we get a glimpse of an incredible missionary, pastor, and teacher. In it we can decipher a number of evident qualities: his discipline of prayer, his zeal in ministry, his stamina, and his pastoral care, among others. His travels were not without danger, and he had to contend with the harsh environment of Alaska that finally took its toll on his body. I have to wonder if he ever took any "post-liturgical naps." The above entry in his journal was not atypical. In fact, St. Innocent travelled routinely by either kayak or *baidarka* from village to village to visit his flock: such was his means of transportation in the instance quoted above; after traveling 4 hours in a *baidarka* on open seas, he celebrated Vespers and Matins.

From his journal we also learn of St. Innocent's noteworthy talents and abilities. He learned the Aleut language so that he could communicate with his flock in their native tongue. Since an Aleut alphabet did not exist, St. Innocent developed one, using Cyrillic letters. He then proceeded to translate the Gospel of Matthew from Slavonic to Aleut. Interestingly, he decided to excise two verses, namely Matthew 7:17 and Matthew 9:17, because neither could be found in the experience of the Aleut peoples. We are blessed at St. Vladimir's Library to have a copy of the translation. In addition, he developed schools, orphanages, and even a seminary to serve the Aleut people.

His fascinating journal describes not only his ecclesial abilities, but also provides a glimpse into his many cultural and scientific interests and talents. It was not unusual for him to complete two to three books each month on a variety of topics, including botany, astronomy, and politics. He built furniture, clocks, organs, and he was the designer, architect, and builder of Archangel Michael Cathedral in Sitka; during that project, he trained the natives in carpentry and building skills.

Upon the unexpected death of his wife, Catherine, he was tonsured a monk by the Russian Orthodox Church and was consecrated to the episcopacy, thus becoming the first hierarch on the North American continent. In his later life, he was elected Metropolitan of Moscow and All Russia. Clearly, he was a remarkable churchman.

While still a missionary priest, however, he authored a simple yet penetrating explanation of the basic tenets of the Christian spiritual life, in a book he entitled

*Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven* (1833). This little gem, which provides insight into St. Innocent's inner thoughts and spiritual life, continues to be a gift to the Church.

In it, he draws four timeless conclusions: 1) "Without faith in Jesus Christ no one can return to God and enter the Kingdom of Heaven"; 2) "No one, even though he believes in Jesus Christ, can be called a disciple of Jesus Christ or live with Him in Heaven, unless he acts and lives as Jesus Christ acted and lived on earth"; 3) "No one can follow Jesus Christ without the help of the Holy Spirit"; 4) "Whoever wishes to receive the Holy Spirit must use the means given us by God for that purpose."

He further specifies the "means" of receiving the Holy Spirit:

- **By purity of heart and integrity of life**—The Spirit cannot make a dwelling in a heart or body that is unclean.
- **By humility**—We are to consider ourselves unprofitable servants and no more than God's instrument through which He acts. Humility also means to bear all troubles, sorrows, and adversities we meet with patience and without murmuring.
- **By attentive listening to the voice of God**—God speaks to us in all circumstances, events, various occurrences, and events, be they joyful or sorrowful. We need to develop "ears to hear."
- **By prayer**—We must pray both with our bodies (exterior prayer) and with our hearts and souls (interior prayer). One cannot pray "without ceasing" outwardly (I Thess. 5:17), but if one senses his/her inner poverty, he can accomplish unceasing prayer.
- **By self-denial**—The holy Fathers have said: "If you want your prayer to fly up to God, then give it two wings, fasting and almsgiving." Fasting entails both strict moderation in food and also a restraint of one's tongue and a rooting out of passions. Almsgiving includes not only care for the poor, but encompasses all kinds of acts of kindness and mercy.
- **By reading and listening to Holy Scripture**—Holy Scriptures are a great treasury from which we can draw light and life. We need to read it seeking grace, power, and spirit.
- **By receiving the Eucharist**—Whoever worthily communicates of the Holy Sacrament is mystically united to Jesus Christ. In other words, whoever receives the Body and Blood of Christ with true repentance, with a clean soul, with the fear of God, and with faith, at the same time receives the Holy Spirit who enters the soul and prepares a place there for the reception of Jesus Christ Himself and God the Father.

By enumerating these "means" to receive the Holy Spirit, St. Innocent not only "showed us the way" but also revealed something of his own interior life. May the example of this remarkable saint inspire us to imitate him in our future work in Christ's Vineyard.

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