

Priest Pin-Points Native Harmony with Nature

(Rev. Fr. Michael T. Irvin of the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church, Diocese of Sitka and Alaska, Box 697, Sitka, Alaska 99835, wrote a guest editorial in "Orthodox Alaska," a publication of the Diocese printed six times a year. The following excerpt is reprinted from the Guest Editorial in which Fr. Irvin wrote about harmony with nature of Alaska's native people.)

. . . The native was almost universally conceived by the non-native to be ignorant, savage, superstitious, hopelessly primitive and barbarian. One particular facet of native culture which has, until this day, escaped the understanding of most non-natives, is that special relationship which exists between the native and the natural world in which he lives. The native has an awe for the world, an attitude which expresses itself in respect and love.

Examples easily come to mind of this unique relationship, and can be found among all the native peoples of Alaska. Among the Tlingit, their totemic emblems are themselves expressions of the oneness which these people feel with the natural world. In the old tradition, their young were taught a quiet and reverent respect for all forms of life—for they understood that they shared the same life with all living things.

The Eskimos express their own particular sense of oneness with that harsh land which they love so strongly in the chants which they sing to the animals of the hunt as they search for them on the seas. These chants call to the whale or sea lion or walrus to come and feed them and their families, expressing, at the same time, their own gratitude to the animals for the food, housing, fuel and clothing they provide.

These people do not despoil the land and then cast it aside as so much garbage. They live on the land and off it. They realize very well that the ruin of the land is their own death. They respect the land, They love it, and because of that the land is allowed to flourish; and they survive.

Now, facing the reality of what we have done to "the good earth," we have come full circle and it is time for we who thought that we knew all things to learn from those whom we have despised as simple and uneducated. Our technology will never be able to return to us what we shall destroy, just as it can never return to us what we have already obliterated and exterminated. Only the simple understanding of these people who have lived for centuries upon centuries upon their mother, the land, will create a new context in which we might learn to widely "subdue" the earth. . .

—REV. FR. MICHAEL IRVIN