

# In Old Harbour ● Icon depicts Alaskan Saints

By Fr. Michael Oleksa

A hand-painted, neo-Byzantine style icon depicting two Alaskan saints, Father Herman and Bishop Innocent (Veniaminov) has arrived from Greece and been installed at Three Saints Orthodox Church in Old Harbor, near Three Saints Bay, the site of the first Christian worship services in Alaska.

The icon, measuring three and one half feet (3 1/2') by two and one half feet (2 1/2') was painted (more accurately "written") by nuns in a convent affiliated with the monastic community at Simonos Petras, on Mount Athos, one of the most ancient Christian monastic centers dating back to 958 A.D. The design of the icon was submitted by the Old Harbor parish which commissioned the work at a cost of approximately \$500.00.

St. Herman, a monk and a layman, arrived in Alaska in 1797 as a member of the original Christian mission from Valamo monastery in Finland, and spent the rest of his life in self-sacrificial service to the Kodiak Aleut people, teaching them the basic tenets of Orthodox Christianity and, perhaps more significantly, exemplifying these in his life of loving labor among the Native people, in establishing an orphanage and a school for children, in interceding for them before the civil authorities, and in his humility, generosity and piety.

In 1970 he was canonized by the Orthodox Church in America as a miracle worker and a charismatic healer in ceremonies at Kodiak's Holy Resurrection Church, where his body is entombed in a hand-carved reliquary. His original burial place at Monk's Lagoon on Spruce Island, three miles

northwest of Kodiak, is the focal point for an annual pilgrimage on the Feast of St. Herman of Alaska, August 7-9. St. Innocent (Father John)

first schools in Alaska, teaching the Native peoples to read and write their own languages (he later learned Tlingit and published the first books in that

Eskimo and Indian peoples of the Alaskan mainland. It was, in fact, an Aleut priest who first evangelized the Yupik people of the Yukon Delta in the mid-19th century. Bishop Innocent was later elected Metropolitan (Archbishop) of Moscow, and when he departed this life in 1879, he was buried at St. Sergius Monastery near that city. Three years ago he was canonized by the Orthodox Church in Russia as "St. Innocent, Apostle to America".

The new icon in Old Harbor represents this Aleut Community's pride in their heritage as descendants of the first Native Alaskan Christians.

Commissioned by the parish of Three Saints, the icon pictorially celebrates the rich spiritual and historical tradition of the Kodiak people, and links them directly with the thousand year old monastic communities of Mount Athos. Most importantly the icon testifies to the enduring love of the Native People for two of the greatest men in Alaskan history whose accomplishments are so often neglected by academic historians but whose memory lives in the hearts of Aleuts, Indians and Eskimos throughout the state: St. Herman the Wonderworker, and St. Innocent, Enlightener of the Aleuts.



Veniaminov, graduated from a seminary in Irkutsk, Siberia, before volunteering to come with his wife and children to Unalaska in the Eastern Aleutians where he arrived in 1824. He undertook the evangelization of the Aleut people by learning their language, devising an alphabet for it, and translating the Gospel of St. Matthew and a short catechism into the Fox Island dialect.

Visiting the remote and widely scattered settlements by kayak, Father John organized the

language as well) and added mathematics, music, and history to the curriculum.

As an amateur architect, he designed and built the first two Orthodox Cathedrals in the New World at Unalaska and Sitka. (Both of these are now Registered National Historic Landmarks). After his wife's death in 1840, he was tonsured a monk and given the new name, "Innocent" and elected as bishop of Alaska.

He then opened the first seminary (high school) in Sitka (the so-called "Orphanage" now being restored by the National Park Service) where native students were educated to become leaders in their society as teachers, accountants, navigators and missionaries. This school enabled the Orthodox mission to bring Christianity to, the