

An Alaskan/Russian Orthodox celebration in Washington D.C.

by Mike Rostad

Father Joseph Kreta, dean of St. Herman's Seminary in Kodiak, joined President Bill Clinton, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and other celebrities in witnessing the opening of "In the Beginning was the Word: The Russian Church and Native Alaskan Cultures" at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The exhibit chronicles 200 years of Orthodoxy in Alaska, a period that Fr. Kreta has taken a vital interest in as priest and professor.

A guest of United States Senator Ted Stevens, who headed the official greeting party, Fr. Kreta shook hands with the two presidents. Several days later he shared his enthusiasm with seminarians.

"This (shaking hands) is an extension of your handshake and greeting," he said. "Our seminary has a reputation. Through the grace of God, somehow, we are known. I had the opportunity to send the outreach a little further. This is an extension of why you're here," he told the students.

Father Kreta said that the political leaders didn't seem to be hindered by separation of Church and State as they addressed those attending the opening of the exhibit.

"What a joy it was to hear President Clinton speak of the

Russian Orthodox Church," referring to the missionaries that arrived here and what was done by Saints Veniaminov and Tikhon. President Yeltsin of the Russian Republic spoke about missionaries, leaders of the Church, and the wonderful contribution the clergy made to America.

Father Kreta said that President Yeltsin alluded to Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party, when he said that there are some people of "very poor training" who want to take Alaska back.

But "that's not the feeling of Yeltsin and many of the people in Russia," said Fr. Kreta. "He said they were happy with the good care that the United States has given Alaska after the sale. Yeltsin pledged that our countries will remain in peace."

Father Kreta looked at the ribbon cutting ceremony as a symbolic gesture. For the first time in Library of Congress history, the official opening of an exhibit was beamed live on the Internet computer network, which is beamed around the world.

Also on hand at the opening ceremony were Librarian of Congress, Dr. James H. Billington, Senator Frank Murkowski, Speaker of the House, Tom Foley,

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and exhibit's curator, Dr. Vyacheslav V. Ivanov.

The exhibit, located in the foyer of the Library's James Madison Building, continued through December 31. It included a letter from Czar Alexander II expressing concern over the

small number of conversions to Russian Orthodoxy, reports made by priests on demographics of parishes, journals of settlers who brought American and Protestant traditions to Alaska and rules for conversions and for the establishment of church archives.



Father Joseph Kreta addressing seminarians

Photo by Mike Rostad