

Diocesan Assembly

Orthodox priests fly to St. Paul on Wings of Angels

by Father George Pietnikoff

(for the *Tundra Times*)

PRIBILOF ISLANDS — A stronghold of Russian Orthodoxy in Alaska for 200 years, St. Paul Island was the site for the recent 16th Diocesan Assembly meeting of the Diocese of Sitka and Alaska.

Alaskans representing Orthodox churches as far away as Ketchikan, Juneau, Kodiak, Iliamna and Dillingham gathered on the tiny Bering Sea island. Actually, the invitation was twofold — St. Paul also is celebrating its 200th anniversary as an Aleut settlement this year, and city-sponsored festivities punctuated church business meetings and services throughout the week of Sept. 18-25.

A charter flight, subsidized by Reeze Aleutian Airways, transported clergy and laymen from Anchorage International to St. Paul. Dubbed "Wings of Angels," the flight was greeted by a welcoming party that included most of the townspeople. Members of the volunteer fire department rolled a red carpet runner across the rust-colored soil of the runway, and each passenger received a welcoming bouquet of fresh flowers.

Among the honored guests was the Right Rev. Bishop Gregory of Alaska, who oversees the Diocese of Sitka and Alaska. He was joined by more than a dozen parish priests who participated in daily worship services at Saints Peter and Paul Church.

Faculty members from St. Herman's Seminary in Kodiak also were among the visitors, as were many men and women who are active in their local churches.

A high spot of the assembly meeting included the mid-week arrival of Metropolitan Theodosius, who flew in from New York. The metropolitan, who was once Bishop of Alaska, now serves as the Orthodox Church in America's spiritual leader for Canada, the United States and Mexico. He also is archbishop of Washington.

Among several orders of business, the Diocesan Assembly unanimously passed a resolution supporting the responsible fur seal harvest by the people of St. George and St. Paul. The resolution also reinforced the church's position that the Aleuts have been good stewards of the resource, for both subsistence and commercial/economic purposes, and that they have "lived in respectful harmony with nature for centuries."

Other business included reports from each parish, an update on the work to build a monastery on Spruce Island off Kodiak, approval of a booklet outlining parish bylaws and guidelines, election of officers and agreement to conduct a parish-by-parish census among the Orthodox people in the state.

In Alaska, there are 86 Orthodox churches, 36 of which are on the historical register. Church leaders estimate about 4,000 Orthodox people in the state. However, only 27 priests are available to minister to the wide geographical area. Many are traveling priests, with responsibility for several parishes.

On St. Paul, clergy and assembly members spent their spare time viewing some of the sights that make the Pribilof Islands famous — a seal rookery, seabird cliffs and archaeological sites.