



HUMBLE ACCEPTANCE— "How could I handle these holy things?" Asked 30-year church reader at his Russian Orthodox Church, Gabriel Gabrielloff, at Russian Mission when asked by Bishop Theodosius to become an Eskimo priest. The third time was charm, however, and Gabrielloff became Father Gabriel when he was bestowed the priesthood by the Bishop in Sitka recently.
—BETZI WOODMAN Photograph

Russian Orthodox Church Eskimo Reader Finally Vows Priesthood

(Special to the TUNDRA TIMES)
By BETZI WOODMAN

When for a third time a Bishop of the Alaskan Russian Orthodox Church invited Gabriel P. Gabrielloff to become a priest, the 54-year-old Eskimo from Russian Mission-on-the-Yukon felt he must accept.

In previous years, when asked

by Bishops John and Amvrossy, Gabriel felt he was not worthy. Then, shortly after Christmas, came the third call. Theodosius, present Bishop of Alaska, called on Gabriel to enter the priesthood.

Although he has served as reader in his church for 30 years, Gabriel was overwhelmed.

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Finally Accepts Priesthood . . .

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"I felt so humble, myself," he says, thinking of that time when he search his heart for a decision. "Alone in my house, I cried. How could I handle these holy things? How could I do what is expected for my people?"

But then it came to him that God was calling him to serve and he could not again refuse. "I felt peaceful after I decided," he says.

His two children, (he is a widower), son Moses and daughter Mrs. Mary Tinker at Pitka's Point, rejoiced as did the people in the district served by the Russian Mission church.

It was the people all down the river—even to Lower Kalskag on the Kuskokwim—who contributed to a fund so Gabriel could go to Sitka for pre-ordination instruction and studies in church liturgy.

At Sitka, Gabriel studied and slept in the same old Russian Mission building which has been the Bishop's residence continuously since it was built in 1842 by Innocent, Bishop of Kamchatka, Kurilian and Aleutian Islands.

This Bishop was the famed Father Ivan Veniaminov when he first came to Alaska and served Sitka, known then as Novo Archangelsk (New Archangel) as its priest from 1834-1839.

The old two-story building, now greyed by time, facing the small boat harbor in Crescent Bay, contains Holy Annunciation Chapel, planned first for the Bishop's personal worship. Valuable religious art and sacred objects of great historic value may be seen in the small sanctuary.

Bishop Theodosius, assisted by his secretary Father Michael and Protodeacon Innocent Williams (a Tlingit Indian who has held this position for several years) conducted the services raising Gabriel to deacon first, and a week later, to priest.

These took place in the recently-built basement of St. Michael's Cathedral. Soon, it is hoped, the cathedral will be rebuilt on this foundation and in the same design as the original.

That cathedral, which sat in the same spot in the middle of Sitka's main street, was destroyed by fire in January 1967, 125 years after its dedication.

It was the former Veniaminov, as Bishop Innocent is best re-

membered in Alaska, who planned and designed the Cathedral.

It was built of Sitka Spruce and was the first church building of its kind erected on American soil.

Although short in stature, the new Father Gabriel is possessed of a quiet dignity and imposing poise. None of his earlier trepidations about his coming tasks were apparent during the elaborate ordination service, which was an extension of the regular Sunday morning worship.

Father Michael explains that all segments of the church must participate in an ordination—that the people are all involved including indicating their approval by chanting "axios" or "he is worthy."

At the end of the service, a friend had to call "Father Gabriel" two times before the unassuming Eskimo priest realized that now was his title.

Gabriel's formal schooling went only to the fourth grade. He has nevertheless taught himself to read Slavonic, traditional tongue for Orthodox liturgy, from the old alphabet. He is now translating the Slavonic prayer book for publication in Eskimo.

Father Gabriel expects to be home in time to conduct Holy Week services (by Russian calendar calculations) in the chapel at Russian Mission. Once known as the village of Ikogmiut, the community was the site of a church built in 1851 by Father Netsytov.

It was the Russian Mission's farthest north parish and first in Interior Alaska. The old cluster of buildings no longer stands, but icons, icon screen, and other articles important for an Orthodox service still remain.

Gabriel hopes to erect a new edition of the historic "Elevation of the Cross" church here in the not too distant future.

He will not only serve a congregation of about 100 living at Russian Mission, but also people in communities down the Yukon to Pitka's Point.

And the people at home will already have gathered the birch and willow branches from their snowy places. Carefully tended, as has been done for generations, the dormant leaves will put forth their tender green.

The willows will serve as palms for Palm Sunday and new leaves of the birch symbolize the newness of life at Easter.



WITH EDGECUMBE STUDENTS—A group of Mt. Edgecumbe students from communities along the Yukon served by the Russian Orthodox Church at Russian Mission stand with Father Gabriel at the close of ordination ceremonies which brought the Eskimo into the priesthood.

The ceremony, which took place at St. Michael's Cathedral in Sitka, was conducted by His Grace, Bishop Theodosius along with his secretary, Father Michael and Protodeacon Innocent Williams.