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THE ANGELS OF AKUN



When Archbishop Innocent Veniaminov's future biographer, Ivan Bursakov, lamented the loss of the hierarch's archives in a fire at the Yakutsk monastery, the archbishop replied, "At any rate, they would have all burned with the earth at the apocalypse." The disappointed Bursakov was not put off, however, and by the end of the 19th century had collected copies of the archbishop's letters and writings totaling nearly three thousand pages, to which we owe the following remarkable account.

St. Innocent of Moscow and Alaska (1797-1879) born Ivan (John) Popov-Veniaminov in Irkutsk, Russia, spent over thirty years in Alaska, first as a missionary priest and later as Bishop of Kamchatka and the Kuril and Aleutian Islands. In 1867 he was named Metropolitan of Moscow, and served as the first hierarch of the Russian Church until his repose. Buried in Holy Dormition Cathedral at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra near Moscow, he was canonized a saint in 1977 by the Moscow Patriarchate.

Rightly, St. Innocent is often called a "renaissance man." A zealous and effective missionary, he was also an able scholar, linguist, and administrator. He trained missionary-priests, organized and taught in primary and secondary schools, learned several languages and six Alaskan dialects, and (at first together with his translator, Ivan Pan'kov, an Aleut chief) devised alphabets, dictionaries, and grammars to translate the Holy Scriptures and church services, that native peoples might read and write their own languages. One of Alaska's first ethnographers and naturalists, his extensive cultural, geographical, botanical, and zoological observations, as well as his

major pastoral works are still in print.¹ A married priest with six children, he was also an accomplished woodworker who crafted furniture, clocks, and hand and barrel organs, and aided in the construction of several churches, including St. Michael's Cathedral in Sitka. In his early years as bishop, he was one of only four priests ministering to ten thousand Orthodox Christians in the Alaskan territories.

His three decades as an Alaskan missionary were extraordinary. In one fourteen-month period of visits to outlying parishes, he covered almost fifteen thousand miles on foot and horseback, by boat, dogsled, reindeer and sleigh, frequently spending nights in the open in below-zero temperatures, lacking even the fuel to heat his food. As one writer notes, "His physical exploits alone, in traveling through the territories of his diocese by dog-sled across great expanses or in a one-man kayak through rough freezing waters, reveal something of his faith, courage, and inner stamina."

One of the most striking events of his early years as a young missionary priest was Fr. John's astonishing meeting with an elderly Aleut on a missionary journey to the island of Akun. Many of Akun's villagers had been baptized thirty years earlier by Hieromonk Makary, one of the original Valaam Monastery monk-missionaries. Hindered, however, as Fr. John explains, by the lack of a fluent translator, Fr. Makary had only given a

¹ *Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska Region and An Indication of the Pathway Into the Kingdom of Heaven* remain in print in English. Besides Fr. John's Full Orthodox Catechism in the Aleut language and translation of the Gospel, his *Aleut Grammar* and *Aleut-Russian Vocabulary* were awarded a prize by the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences in 1836.

rudimentary explanation of the faith, and reposed before he could return. When Fr. John arrived in 1828 he was told of a series of miraculous events that had sustained the faith of these local Christians, which he reported first to his archbishop, Michael of Irkutsk², and later in a less formal retelling to the Holy Synod.³ Here begins his report to the Synod:



In April 1828, during Great Lent, I went for the first time to the island of Akun⁴ to visit the Aleuts. Approaching the island, I saw them all standing on the beach, dressed as if for a celebration, and when I stepped ashore, they joyfully rushed to greet me. When I asked why they were so festively dressed, they answered, “Because we knew that you had set out and would arrive today, we, in great joy, have come down to the shore to meet you.” “Who told you that I would come

today, and how do you know that I am Fr. John?” “Our shaman (sorcerer), old Ivan Smirennikov, told us, and described you just as we see you now.”

I found this rather strange and astonishing, but I didn’t give their words much attention and set about instructing them on how to prepare for Holy Communion. The old shaman, too, came to me, expressing his desire to prepare for Communion. He attended the services very diligently, but I still did not give him any special attention, and after serving him the Holy Mysteries, let him go. However, to my great surprise, after taking Holy Communion, he went to his toion [chief] and expressed his dissatisfaction with me because I hadn’t asked him at confession why the Aleuts call him a shaman. He found it very unpleasant to be called “shaman” by his own people, whereas in fact he was not. The toion informed me of old Smirennikov’s discontent, and I immediately sent for him, that we might clarify the situation.

² Archbishop Michael II (Byrudov) of Irkutsk. Consecrated archbishop on 22 August 1826, reposed 5 June 1830.

³ There are several versions of this incident by Fr. John: the letter written in June, 1828, to Archbishop Michael of Irkutsk, a Tobolsk copy of which was translated into English by Lydia T. Black; a later and less formal report to the Synod (quoted at length in the present article) and possibly delivered verbally on his visit to St. Petersburg in 1839; and a version of the letter to the archbishop quoted in Barsukov’s *Life* (see below), identical to the Tobolsk copy translated by L. T. Black but with small additions that do not appear in other copies. These additions are noted in this article’s footnotes.

⁴ According to Fr. John’s diary, he arrived on Akun on 12 April (Julian Calendar) 1828, leaving on 24 April. His talk with Smirennikov was on the evening of 23 April.



Those I had sent for him were still on the way when they met Smirennikov coming towards them. He said, “I know that the priest Father John is calling me, and I am coming to him.” I began to question him in detail about his life, and when I asked if he could read, he answered that, although he could not, he knew the prayers and the Gospels. I then asked him to explain how he knew me, how he had been able to describe my appearance to his people, and how he had learned that on a certain day I was to come to teach them to pray. The old man answered that two friends had told him about it. “Who are these two friends of yours?” I asked. “They are white people,” the old man replied. “They also told me that in the future you will send your family home by the coast, and you yourself shall sail by water to the great man (the Tsar) and speak with him.”⁵ “Where are these friends of yours, the white people, and what are they like?” I asked him. “They live nearby in the mountains and they visit me every day.” “And when did they first come to you?” In reply, he told me a wonderful story.

Soon after he was baptized by Hieromonk Makary, there appeared to him, unseen by anyone else, first one spirit, and then a second, in human

⁵ Ten years later, in 1838, Fr. John did indeed send his family home across the Bering Sea, up the coast to Okhotsk, then overland to Irkutsk. In November of 1838 to June 1839, Fr. John himself embarked on a voyage half-way around the world, sailing from Sitka to St. Petersburg around the Cape of Good Hope on the Russian ship *Nicholas I*, in order to report directly to the Synod and the Russian government about conditions in Russian Alaska. After the sudden death of his wife Catherine, Fr. John made arrangements for his children in Irkutsk, and the following year took monastic vows with the name Innocent. It was as Archimandrite Innocent that he was granted an audience with Tsar Nicholas I (as Smirennikov had prophesied), and at the Tsar’s expressed wish was consecrated bishop.



Alaskan Native graveyard, Ouainkie (Spruce Island), Alaska.

form, white-faced and clothed in white garments that, according to his description, looked like deacon's vestments trimmed with rose-colored bands. They told him that God had sent them to instruct, teach, and protect him. For thirty years, they had appeared to him almost daily in the daytime or late afternoon, but never at night. They instructed him in Christian teaching and in the mysteries of the Faith; also, they rendered him help in illnesses, and at his request, others (though rarely)⁶. They always responded to his appeals saying, "We will ask God and if He gives his blessing, we will fulfill this." Sometimes they informed him of what was happening in other places; very seldom they told him the future, and always with the remark, "If God wills to disclose it," meaning that they did this not through their own power, but by the power of God Almighty.

Although the teaching of these spirits seemed to be the doctrine of the Orthodox Church, I, knowing that the demons also believe and tremble, wondered if this wasn't a shrewd and subtle trap of the evil one, and asked him how the spirits taught him to pray – to themselves or to God, and how they taught him to live with others. He replied that they taught him to pray with the spirit and the heart and sometimes prayed with him for a long time. They taught him to practice all of the Christian virtues (which he described to me in detail), and that above all, they advised to observe faithfulness and purity, both within and outside of marriage. Moreover, they taught him virtuous behavior and rituals, such as how to make the sign of the Cross, that we should never begin to do anything without asking God's blessing, that we should not eat early in the morning, that many families should not live together, and the like.⁷

Then I asked if they had appeared to him that same day after Communion, and if they had told him to heed what I said. He answered that they had appeared both after confession and after Communion, saying that he should not tell the sins he had already confessed to anyone else, that right after Communion he should not eat foods rich in fat, and that he should attend to my teaching. They had even appeared to him that day on the way to me and told him why I was calling him, and that he should tell me everything without fear because nothing bad would befall him.

⁷ In Barsukov's version is added, "... not to eat fish and animals that have just been killed and are still warm and not to eat some birds and animal-plants [zoophytes, such as jellyfish and sea anemones –ed.] at all, etc."

⁶ In an almost identical version of the letter, published in Barsukov's *Life*, four years after St. Innocent's repose, the angels rendered assistance "in case of illness or extreme lack of food."

Then I inquired what he felt when they appeared to him – joy or sorrow? In their presence, he said, he felt pangs of conscience if he had done something wrong, but at other times he did not feel any fear. As many people considered him a shaman, and he was unwilling to be thus treated, he repeatedly asked them to depart from him. However, the spirits’ reply was that they were not demons and were not allowed to leave him. When he asked why they never appeared to other people, they said that such was the command they had been given.

To make certain that his guides had indeed appeared, I asked him if I could possibly see and speak with them. He answered that he didn’t know and would have to ask them. Indeed, he returned within an hour saying that they had replied, “What more does he want to know about us? Does he still consider us to be demons? All right, let him see us and talk to us if he wishes.” They then said something favorable about me, but so that it will not be taken as vanity on my part, I will keep silent about this.

Then something inexplicable happened inside of me. I was seized with a feeling of fear and overwhelming humility. “Indeed,” I thought, “What if I see these angels, and they confirm all that the old man has said? How can I appear before them? Sinful that I am, I am unworthy of speaking to them, and it would be pride and presumption on my part if I dared to go to them. Meeting angels might make me too proud of my faith, or think too highly of myself.” So I, the unworthy one, finally decided not to go to them. I gave some preliminary instructions as to these events, both to Smirennikov and to his Aleut people, and told them that they should no longer call Smirennikov a shaman.⁸

In his more formal letter to Archbishop Michael, Fr. John also describes two miracles that happened through the prayers of Smirennikov and an instance of foreknowledge:

⁸ Fr. John’s instructions to Smirennikov are given at slightly greater length in the Tobolsk copy of Fr. John’s formal letter to Archbishop Michael of Irkutsk: ...Therefore, in order not to weaken (among the people) the faith and hope in the One Omniscient God, I, until I receive instruction from Your Grace, determined to render the following decision: I see that the spirits which appear to thee are not demons and therefore I instruct thee to listen to their teachings and instructions, as long as these do not contradict the teachings I deliver in the assembly; just tell those who ask your advice about the future and request your help to address themselves directly to God, as He is common Father to all. I do not forbid thee to cure the sick, but ask thee to tell those thou curest that thou doest so not by thy own powers, but by the power of God and to instruct them to pray diligently and thank the Sole God. I do not forbid thee to teach either, but only instruct thee to confine this teaching to the minors. [At this point, Barsukov’s version adds, ‘...As for the future, do not say a word about it to anyone, even to me.’] I told the other Aleuts who were present not to call him a Shaman, not to ask him for favors, but to ask God.”

1. *The wife of the toion of the village Artelnovskoye, one Fedor Zhiron, on October of 1825 was caught in a fox trap, and her leg was badly hurt. There were no means to help her, and she was expected to die momentarily. The trap hit her at the kneecap by all three iron teeth, about two vershok [1.75 inches] in length. Her kinsmen secretly asked the said old man Smirennikov to cure her. After thinking the matter over, he said that the patient will be well by morning. And, indeed, the woman rose in the morning from her deathbed, and is even now entirely well, not suffering any pain.*
2. *In the winter of the same year, 1825, the inhabitants of Akun suffered great lack of food, and some of them asked Smirennikov to pray for a whale to be washed ashore. After a short time the old man instructed the people to go to a certain place, where they indeed found a fresh whale carcass – precisely in the spot designated.*
3. *Last fall I planned to visit Akun, but because of the arrival of state ships from Russia, I had to postpone the trip. Yet, the Akun people sent an escort and all expected my arrival. Only Smirennikov boldly asserted that I would not come that fall, but should be expected next spring. And so it happened, contrary winds did not permit my departure, then the cold weather set in, and I was forced to delay my visit until spring.*

There are many additional instances which prove his gift of clairvoyance, but I shall omit them here.

Fr. John continues his evaluation: *“It is possible to suppose that this man has heard from me or from someone else the teaching of our faith that he recounted, and only for effect or out of vanity invented the appearance of the spirits. Yet, I must state that Aleuts do not fall prey to pride, vanity, and empty bragging....”*

After enumerating scriptural events he had left out of his preaching, *“for the sake of brevity and to avoid complications,”* Fr. John comments that Smirennikov, *“told me these stories in detail... He himself is illiterate and does not know any Russian; therefore he could not have read about it... and there is no one from whom Smirennikov could have learned in the matters of Church teaching... [Ivan Pan’kov, as the villagers witnessed, had never spoken to him, and hearing others call him a shaman, discour-*

aged them from doing so also.] Moreover, the freedom, fearlessness and even pleasure of his discourse, and above all his clean manner of life, convinced me and confirmed me in the conviction that the spirits which appear to this old man (if they appear) are not demons. Demons may sometimes assume the image of Angels of Light, but never for the purpose of instruction, teaching and salvation of human beings, but always for their perdition. As the tree of evil cannot bear the fruit of good, these spirits must be the servants sent to those who seek salvation.”

Fr. John again explains to the archbishop why he himself did not dare to go to see the bright spirits who appeared to Smirennikov, “...*There was no need for me to meet them. Why should I want to see them personally when their teaching is Christian teaching? Out of curiosity, to learn who they are?*” For this I should ask the blessing of my Archbishop, to avoid the pit-fall of error, should I meet those spirits...”

He ends his letter to the Archbishop with the words: “*In reporting to you, Your Grace, I deemed it necessary to ask Ivan Pan’kov, who translated my words and those of ...Smirennikov, to sign this statement in witness of the truth of my story and the correctness of his translation. I also requested him to keep this matter secret for the time being. I beg Your Grace to let me know if my decision was right, and if there is any need for me to meet with the spirits which appear to the old man, and if so, what precautions I should take. If I erred, forgive me.*”

Signed: Your Grace’s Priest John Veniaminov, of the Church of Ascension in Unalashka, June 1828

Signed: below by interpreter Pan’kov as follows:

To the truth of the words of Priest John Veniaminov and the accuracy of translation of the words of the old man Ivan Smirennikov attests Tigal’da Toion Ivan Pan’kov

True copy of the original, Tobol’sk, 5 November 1829

⁹ Barsukov’s version adds: “Your Eminence, merciful Archpastor! Having put down the facts you see above, I beg you to give me your ...archpastoral instruction and permission: if I was right in this matter and, if I can and need, if the old man is still alive, to meet and talk with the spirits that appear to him and if so, what precautions I should take.”

Fr. John's concern about the reception of the report if it were to be generally known is reflected in an unpublished letter to Archbishop Michael on July 20, 1828, "...The description of my talk with the Aleut Smirennikov enclosed here is not an official report. I might have never reported this event that seems so strange to me if I didn't rely completely upon your fatherly mercy to me. Reading the account, someone may think that, at the least, I am not alien to superstition and empty holiness. But I have the honour of reporting to your Eminence that everything put down here is true, and I obediently ask your forgiveness if I was not right in doing this..."¹⁰

In his reply to Fr. John,¹¹ Archbishop Michael commends his reasoning, but nevertheless blesses him to meet the mysterious heaven-dwellers:

...True, this event is most rare and unheard of in our times. Therefore I thought it necessary to impart it, if not to all of my acquaintances, to those distinguished in mind and heart, in whom it evoked a particular zeal to further hear any extraordinary event that may befall your Smirennikov during this year, as well as in the future...

I will tell you, without flattery either to your face or behind your back, that you, not allowing curiosity to prevail over your faith, are to be more commended than all those who, like the Holy Apostle Thomas, subject the objects of faith to sensible perception. Nevertheless, as Thomas' disbelief is called good in our church hymns, my desire is, as well as many others', that for the sake of yet greater glory of our righteous faith, you should resolve (provided that old Smirennikov is still alive) to meet and speak with the spirits that appear to him. No greater caution is required than your pure faith and the prayer of the heart: only keep in mind the Lord's Prayer during this meeting, and say it together with the spirits. As for your conversation with them, it should be solely concerned with the future of your parishioners, the new Aleut converts. Whatever good you desire for them, ask this of God. For the clever, this will suffice.

¹⁰ Quoted as an unpublished letter in Tom II, Prilozheniye k rabote: "Svyatitel Moskovskii Innokentii Veniaminov i ego epistol'yarnoye naslediyе..." (Volume II. Supplement to the Thesis, "Holy Hierarch Innocent Veniaminov (1797-1879) and his Epistolary Heritage, a course paper by fourth year student Job Zamborsky, Russian Church History Department, Leningrad Orthodox Spiritual Academy (1980). (From the collection of the Moscow Patriarchal Synodal Library, Andreevsky Monastery, Moscow.)

¹¹ Quoted in Met. Vladimir of Tashkent and Central Asia. (see footnote 4)

Inform me by letter at a time convenient to yourself, or in person at our future meeting, of whatever God, through the gift of His Christ, grants you to learn. Invoking God's blessing upon you, I ever remain, your well-wishing servant.

+Michael, Archbishop of Irkutsk

But the angels sent to the old Aleut did not reveal themselves to human curiosity, however pious. In his next visit to the island of Akun, Fr. John learned that Smirennikov had reposed.

A final fitting comment on the occurrence comes from an acquaintance of St. Innocent, Andrew Muravev: "One scarcely knows at which to be amazed – the miraculous gifts of the old Aleut or the humility of the missionary who in patience is denied a singular opportunity to satisfy his obviously holy curiosity in such an unusual matter, simply in order not to transgress the commandment of obedience. The old man's premature death, however, vindicated his actions by showing clearly that these revelations had been necessary for himself, his family, and his people only for as long as the Aleutian Islands remained spiritually neglected. Now, however, by the grace of God, people have come to work towards their salvation, and the heavenly guides concealed themselves once again." Nevertheless, "It is comforting to read about such miraculous Divine Providence towards... sons of Adam *who, though forgotten by the world, were not forgotten by Providence, but because human means were lacking, were fed through the faith of one of their elders upon the saving faith.*"¹² ✚

SOURCES

1. With the exception of Fr. John's letter to Archbishop Michael of Irkutsk (see below), the translations in this article are by Inna Belov and M. Nectaria McLees. The report to the Synod and Archbishop Michael's written answer to Fr. John's letter was translated from: Vladimir,

¹² Quoted in Garrett, Paul D. *St. Innocent, Apostle to America.*, SVS Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1979, pg. 85



St. Herman's Spring.

Metropolitan of Tashkent and Central Asia, *Slova v dni pamyati osobo pochitayemikh svyatikh (Words on the Feast Days of Particularly Venerated Saints, Book III)*. In Russian:

<http://www.pravoslavie.uz/Vladika/Books/Slovo3/18Innokentiy.htm>

2. "Letter from Rev. Priest John Veniaminov to Archbishop Michael of Irkutsk," 5 November, 1829, translated by Lydia T. Black in "Ivan Pankor, Architect of Aleut Literacy," *Orthodox Alaska*, #8, 1978. With grateful acknowledgement to Professor Black for permission to cite her translation of the letter throughout this article (also reprinted in *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality*, Paulist Press, 1987). [Note from RtE Editor: The original letter to Archbishop Michael II of Irkutsk was written in June of 1828, two months after the incident. The date of 5 November, 1829 assigned to the letter in *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality* refers to the date the letter was hand-copied in Tobolsk.]
4. Details of the letter to Archbishop Michael of Irkutsk as published in Ivan Barsukov's initial biography: *Innokentii, mitropolit Moskovskii i Kolomenskii, po ego sochineniyam, pis'mam i rasskazam sovremennikov (Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna. His Writings, Letters and Stories Told by his Contemporaries.)* Moscow, Synodal Printing House, 1883. (From the collection of the Moscow Patriarchal Synodal Library, Andreevsky Monastery, Moscow, Russia.)
5. Fr. John's unpublished letter to Archbishop Michael II of Irkutsk on July 20, 1828 was translated from: Zamorsky, Job, *Tom II, Prilozheniye k rabote: "Svyatitel Moskovskii Innokentii Veniaminov i ego epistol-yarnoye naslediyе..."* (Volume II. Supplement to the Thesis, *Holy Hierarch Innocent Veniaminov (1797-1879) and his Epistolatory Heritage*, by Job Zamborsky, Leningrad Orthodox Spiritual Academy, 1980. (From the collection of the Moscow Patriarchal Synodal Library, Andreevsky Monastery, Moscow.)

Please remember in your prayers, Professor Lydia Black, the "mother" of Russian-American and Alaskan Orthodox native studies, who reposed in the Lord on March 12, 2007.

Memory Eternal!