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REMEMBERING SAINT INNOCENT

In reading Orthodox saints' lives, it is easy to become accustomed to a style of writing that divorces these men and women from human experience and everyday life. As an antidote, it is sometimes useful to see how outsiders of other nationalities, backgrounds, and even religious beliefs appraised them. Following are a triad of impressions of St. Innocent (Veniaminov) in Sitka and Moscow published years after their brief meetings, by men who shared with him nothing but good fellowship.

I.

In 1837 English sea captain Edward Belcher stopped in Sitka on a voyage around the world, where he attended a service in St. Michael's Cathedral and met with Bishop Innocent:

I visited their church, and witnessed the ceremony. The interior of the edifice is splendid, quite beyond conception in such a place as this. The padre, who officiated in his splendid robes, was a very powerful athletic man, about forty-five years of age, and standing in his boots (which appear to be part of his costume) about six feet three inches; quite Herculean, and very clever. I took a very great liking to him, and was permitted to examine his workshop, in which I noticed a good barrel-organ, a barometer, and several other articles of his own manufacture. He was kind enough to volunteer his services on one or two of our sick barometers, and succeeded effectually. Notwithstanding he only spoke Russian, of which I knew nothing, we managed to become great allies...ⁱ

II.

A surprising accolade from Sir George Simpson, the imperious Governor-in-Chief of the Hudson's Bay Company, who met Bishop Innocent in Sitka in 1843:

On the Friday after our landing [April 23, 1842], the Bishop of Sitka returned from Kodiak, distant about six hundred miles, after a run of five days. His outward voyage, however, had occupied precisely four weeks, this as the vessel was crowded with passengers; the daily allowance of water had been gradually reduced to one pint for each person, and, on anchoring at Kodiak the whole of the remaining stock consisted of a single bottle. This prelate's diocese is perhaps the most extensive in existence, comprising as it does, not only the whole of Russian America, but also the Sea of Okhotsk, Kamchatka, and the Aleutian archipelagos. He looks as if intended by Nature for the bishopric of two worlds, being a man of herculean frame; and the

specimen of his travels, which I have just mentioned, shows that he is likely to need all his constitution for an episcopal visitation.ⁱⁱ

Ten days later, Bishop Innocent set out on a tour of the western half of his diocese that took him to the Aleutian Islands and the Russian Far East. He returned in late 1843. Here Simpson adds vivid details of the farewell service held at Sitka and pays tribute to the bishop:

In addition to four assistants in holy orders, he was attended by a number of youthful acolytes, all as proud as possible of their embroidered robes of silk and velvet; the congregation was large and well dressed, while, so far as I could judge from the earnestness of the preacher, and the attention of the hearers, the sermon was more than ordinarily impressive. On taking leave of this worthy prelate, I cannot refrain from rendering a small tribute of praise to his character and qualifications; and, as he is still in the prime of life, I trust that his widely-scattered flock may long enjoy the benefit of those powers of mind and body, which combine to fit him for his important and arduous charge. His appearance, to which I have already alluded, impresses a stranger with something of awe, while, on further intercourse, the gentleness which characterizes his every word and deed, insensibly molds reverence into love; and, at the same time, his talents and attainments are such to be worthy of his exalted station. With all this, the bishop is sufficiently a man of the world to disdain anything like cant. His conversation, on the contrary, teems with amusement and instruction; and his company is very much prized by all who have the honour of his acquaintance.ⁱⁱⁱ

III.

Seemingly either a foreign diplomatic attaché or representative of a European firm, A.D. Sverbeyer warmly describes two meetings with Metropolitan Innocent in the evening of the hierarch's life.

Friday, December 23, 1877, Moscow.

... I spent the evening with Metropolitan Innokentiy. The Vladyka was particularly gracious and talkative. It was more than a consolation to see him; rarely have I felt so unfettered... the Vladyka won my sympathy with his unaffected simplicity and gay, youthful laughter. Indeed, in his old age – he had turned 80 recently – he is so young in spirit, he is so sincerely concerned for all the needy, he is so far removed from all secular, unnatural and trite customs and uniquely intelligent as well, that it is impossible not to take a liking to him. Being with him you feel as though you have been whisked away into another world... He is pure of heart... It is not for nothing that he brought so much of the Light of Christ during his missionary work. Today we spoke about war and then proceeded to his activity of setting up schools, homes, and so forth...

Sunday Evening, December 21, 1878. Moscow.

... I was glad to attend, like last year, the All-Night Vigil at the Podvorye of the Holy Trinity and receive the blessing of the Vladyka Metropolitan, who blessed me with the large cross upon my new service and wished me every success, health and well-being. I believe in his blessing and his prayers and recall today with gratitude how he blessed me and consoled me with his words on this very day a year ago. I was glad to find him fresh, robust and just as healthy as in previous years, without signs of his recent illness.

After the All-Night Vigil he, my sister Sonia and I sat for over an hour in his study and had a lively conversation. You feel so calm and at ease when you spend a little time with him; the grace inherent in him seems to enter your soul as well; you seem to grow younger in heart and spirit and the dust of every-day cares and concerns falls from your tired shoulders. No one has exerted such a beneficial influence on me; and yet not a single word of exhortation or spiritual consolation ever passed the Vladyka's lips; evidently the listener's soul receives an imprint of the fine, simple and Christian life of the spiritual shepherds; "one heart speaks to another." I derive much consolation from each encounter with him and I preserve it as a

treasure for hours of dejection and struggle. It is then that I find it a source of consolation to recall that I often drew close to such a man and was sought out by his attention... I give thanks to the Lord that I am ending the old year with the same feelings of gratitude with which I began it, with the blessing of the same archpastor, by whose prayers the path lying before me will be blessed.^{iv} ✠

Bibliography/Endnotes

i Sir Edward Belcher, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World: Performed in Her Majesty's Ship Sulphur During the Years 1836-1842*, H. Colburn, London, 1843, pg. 99.

ii Sir George Simpson, *Narrative of a Journey Round the World, during the Years 1841 and 1842*, Vol. II, Lea and Blanchard, Philadelphia, 1847, p. 180.

iii Ibid.

iv (In Russian) "Reminiscences of A.D. Sverbeyer 1877-1878," from the Central State Archives of Literature and Art, Moscow. Quoted in "St. Innokentiy, Metropolitan of Moscow: The Final Years of His Life," *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, no. 11, 1981, pp. 73-75.