

**ANNIVERSARY OF THE ARRIVAL OF THE ORTHODOX MISSION TO NORTH AMERICA**  
**Luke 21:12-19**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**  
**St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, 12189, September 24, 2023**

The first European colonization of Alaska was by the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century. The first Russian Orthodox missionaries arrived at Kodiak Island, off the Alaskan mainland, in 1794. The first mission had a two-fold purpose: to give spiritual service to the men of the Russian Trading Company who were living and working in Alaska, and to bring the light of Christ and His teachings to the native Alaskans. The leader of this first mission was Archimandrite Joasaph. The mission grew and flourished, a huge reason being that the missionaries adopted the Native Alaskan mindset and showed great sensitivity to the diversified cultures, languages, and traditions of the various native Alaskan population. A unique Russo-Alaskan Orthodoxy began to flourish. Later, the Orthodox Alaskans suffered many serious setbacks after Alaska was sold to the United States. With President Grant's permission, Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries sought to de-Russify and eradicate the Orthodox faith in Alaska. They greatly suppressed the native languages and cultural expressions and traditions, and attempted to turn the native Alaskans into clones of themselves.<sup>1</sup> This is the same *modus operandi* which the United States government followed with the native Americans on the American continent as well. Children were forcibly taken from their parents and placed in special indoctrination schools. Their hair was cut and they were forced to wear European style clothing. They were forbidden to speak their native language. In Alaska, among other things, they were forbidden to own icons. Although crippled, Orthodoxy in Alaska survived, and later flourished throughout North America. Time does not permit me in this brief sermon to recount the entire history of the Orthodox Church in America. Permit me, however, to make a few observations, touching on its past history, our present situation, and our hopes for the future.

St. Vladimir's Seminary is the oldest existing Orthodox seminary in America. The founding father of the seminary, Archpriest Georges Florovsky, aimed very high. Concerning his mission for the seminary, he made this daring observation at a fundraiser in 1949: "We don't need simply a professional school in which some few people are trained for the ministry — people who would be able to conduct services in the church and to carry on the routine work. We don't need simply craftsmen — we need **masters**. We don't need simply routine ministers — we need **prophets**. [As Feofan the Recluse said], 'What we need now is a band of people who would go everywhere and set the world on fire.'...We have to produce a band of people able and desirous of going abroad into the world, to carry with them the true knowledge, the true understanding, a burning conviction and a power of persuasion."<sup>2</sup> Remember that Orthodoxy at that time was being severely persecuted and suppressed by the atheist Communists. All of the Orthodox theologians and intellectuals, if they were not imprisoned or executed, were exiled from their native lands. Finding refuge in Europe and in America, they tried to pick up the pieces and build new lives for themselves and their families. Therefore, Florovsky's vision included not only the American continent, but an apostolic mindset, which encompassed the entire world. In Fr. Alexander Schmemmann's vision of Orthodoxy in America, he cautioned that Orthodox theology must emphasize the universal *catholic* tradition of the Church, and not merely be seen as an "Oriental" or "Eastern" expression of Christianity with its mysticism, elders, etc. In other words, Orthodoxy in America must follow its true calling as an expression of what is *best* in both Western and Eastern tradition and be truly Christian in its fullest sense of the word. Florovsky and Schmemmann both deeply believed that North America was ripe and ready to receive Orthodoxy, and that it was the seminary's mission to train future church leaders and priests who would go throughout America on an Apostolic mission to spread the light of the Orthodox Christian faith, the light of Christ and His teachings, based on true knowledge and true understanding of the Christian faith.

Fr. Schmemmann was only thirty years old when he first arrived in America from Paris with his young family and began to teach at St. Vladimir's. He hardly considered himself to be a theologian, but a student of his mentor Fr. Florovsky, who was twenty-eight years his senior. Later Fr. John Meyendorff, Serge Verhovskoy, and others arrived to serve on the faculty at SVS. The seminary was originally housed at Union Theological Seminary in NYC, and the students and faculty all lived in apartments at the seminary. Even Metropolitan Leonty, who taught for a time at the seminary, also had an apartment at the seminary. Money was scarce and the student body was small. Today, SVS is esteemed in all academic circles with high regard and reputation as a major school of theological higher learning. Its original faculty today are legendary, esteemed as great theologians and scholars among all the major Christian denominations.

Although Orthodoxy has grown exponentially in America, owing its roots to those first Alaskan missionaries, and later to that wave of great theologians who were displaced from their homelands, we have still suffered through many crises and growing pains — yet we survive. The Holy Spirit is greater and transcends all human sin, error, politics, and the ways of the ungodliness in the world. One of the greatest achievements of Orthodoxy on this continent occurred in 1970 when the descendants of the first Russian Orthodox Mission to America received autocephaly from the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus the canonical Orthodox Church in America was born as the first, and to this day, the only Orthodox Church in America which has severed the umbilical cord with the original mother Church, which exists in a foreign land. Can you imagine the strength and power that would infuse our apostolic mission in North America if all of Orthodoxy in the land were severed from a foreign church and united as one, autocephalous and united Orthodox Church in America. Let us all pray fervently for this, and may it with God's will and blessing, come to pass, to the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen!

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1. See "A Call for Help for the Church in Alaska" by Bishop Alexei Trader of Sitka and Alaska, presentation given at the Assembly of the Diocese of NY and NJ (OCA) on November 2, 2022, at Sts. Peter and Paul Church, Endicott, NY. A video of Bishop Alexei's presentation may be viewed on the website of the Diocese of NY and NJ (OCA), as well as a similar presentation made at the 20th All American Council of the OCA, July 22, 2022, and posted on the website of the OCA.
  2. See "On Christian Leadership: The Letters of Alexander Schmemmann and Georges Florovsky (1947-1955), by Paul Gravilyuk, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 2020. See also "Christian Leadership in a Time of Crisis: Lessons from Florovsky and Schmemmann," lecture given by Dr. Paul Gavriluk at St. Vladimir's Seminary, September 12, 2023. A video of this lecture may be viewed at [www.youtube.com/@stvladmirsseminary](https://www.youtube.com/@stvladmirsseminary)