

St. Herman of Alaska

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Fr. Josiah Trenham, Pastor

St. Andrew Orthodox Christian Church, Riverside, Ca.

Introduction: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. We are very fortunate today to glorify our Savior Jesus Christ in the life of one of His precious recent saints, St. Herman of Alaska. We revel in the saints, and in honoring them and contemplating their lives we honor Christ and meditate on Him. For what is a saint but one who is filled with Christ? What is a saint but one of us who has healed himself with the grace of God, and has become to us a living exemplar of a true Christian, and of our own potential and calling in Christ. There is no true Christianity without the saints. Without the saints our faith becomes a collection of ideas about God. With the saints, however, our faith shows itself as a concrete way of life leading to eternal bliss. In the lives of the saints our Savior continues His incarnation among men. Our Savior was born in the cave of the Virgin in order to unite Himself to all men, and to be subsequently born inside of each man. The saints show us the way to live in Christ, to live in abundant life, to live in fulfillment of Christmas. Meditation upon the lives of the saints forms in us “a concrete picture of the realm to which we aspire, it provides our faith with images, ideas, feelings...how can we love that which we do not see, of which we receive no constant impression?” (Fr. Elchaninov, Diary of a Russian Priest, p. 189). Therefore, if we wished to be saved, we must peruse the lives of the saints and imitate them. If we wish to understand the word of Holy Scripture we must read the lives of the saints for in their lives Scripture was lived out. If we wish to glorify Christ Himself, we must recognize it is Christ Himself inside a man or woman which makes them a saint. To honor a saint is, in fact, to honor the presence and work of Jesus Christ our Savior, Who has come to be born on earth to make all men saints, to make all human beings human beings! This is a true saint!

Life of St. Herman: It is for these purposes: the glorification of Christ in His handiwork and for our salvation that the Church provides the faithful with Saints every day of the year. Today we rejoice in the one whom the Church calls the “North Star”: St. Herman of Alaska. The original north star guided the Magi to the Christ child, and announced the birth of the Savior, symbolizing that this Child, this Sun of the East, would illuminate the world, which was sitting in darkness. Those in darkness have seen a great light. Christ has come to be born of the Virgin, and the world’s darkness is no more! So today we rejoice in St. Herman, calling him a “North Star”...even the north star for the Church in America. It was his life which symbolized for us and actualized the illumination of our country.

St. Herman was born in the second half of the 18th century just outside of Moscow into a family of merchants. From a very early age he showed forth a great love of the spiritual life, and at the age of twelve began to live with the pious Elder Barlaam, in a skete which was a dependency of the Monastery of Sarov, the very place that was the home of St. Seraphim. At 16 Herman became a monk himself, and soon moved to the monastery of Valaam. There he lived the life of prayer and repentance.

It was from Valaam that Herman as a young monk set out in 1794 with nine other monks and priests as part of a mission team to the Alaskan territories, which were at that time Russia’s most eastern lands. The Alaskan area had only really been discovered and desired by Europeans around 1730, and so by 1794 enough Russian merchants had settled in the area to organize themselves and do good things for their faith. They built schools, and began to call for priests and missionaries. So the Church sent this ten member team of which St. Herman was one. Of these initial ten only Herman was to remain. The others died. Many lost their lives through drowning in the icy waters, exposure, and martyrdom. St. Herman soon took up his residence on a small island not far from Kodiak which was popularly called “Spruce Island” due to the abundant Spruce trees.

St. Herman built a small hut for himself, planted a garden, constructed a chapel, and eventually built a school. Here he pursued a quiet life of ceaseless prayer, studied the

Slavic Philokalia which he brought with him fresh off the press in 1794 when he left Valaam, and transplanted the pure Orthodox monastic life.

St. Herman's Asceticism: St. Herman lived a life of self-denial, choosing to the true missionary path of silence and the desert. This path was originally set forth by St. Paul, who after his conversion and calling to preach the Gospel retired to the desert for more than a decade in seclusion and prayer (Galatians 1). Having obtained true spiritual life, the Apostle was then able in his missionary labors to not simply communicate ideas about God, but to communicate and transfer the life and experience of God (St. Paul calls this the "power of God"- 1 Thess. 2:13). St. Herman followed the same Orthodox path.

St. Herman lived alone in his small cell. He lived inside it in utter simplicity. He wore over his cassock a deerskin shirt, which he never removed for upwards of a decade at a time. He did not change clothes with the change of seasons. His bed consisted of a wooden board, and his blanket was another wooden board. When he was giving instructions to his spiritual children about how to bury him just prior to his repose he asked that he simply be wrapped in his monastic clothes and covered with his "blanket" (by which he meant his wooden board). His pillow consisted of a number of bricks. For his monastic belt he wore 17lb. chains. These chains are preserved today. He ate vegetables from his large vegetable garden, and fish caught from the nearby streams.

His life poured forth in love to the Aleut people. The original missionaries baptized and married thousands of Aleuts. He established an orphanage, and fed numerous orphans from his garden. He built a school, and saw to the instruction of the children. He counseled those who were having difficulties, healed marriages, and taught all the gospel, prayer, and church singing. Many would gather in his chapel on a regular basis and he would teach them, read from the Scriptures, and share stories from the lives of the saints. St. Herman suffered great persecution and slander for defending the Aleuts against certain Russian merchants who were enslaving them. One of these moments of persecution was quite memorable. A number of merchant men came to St. Herman's cell hoping and expecting to find treasures stored up inside which he was keeping for the

Aleuts. They could find nothing in his barren cell, and so one of them picked up an axe and began hacking at the wooden floor hoping to unearth a compartment with goods. The man found nothing, and in sadness St. Herman told him, "You should not have picked up that axe, for soon you will die by the same". And, in fact, the man very shortly thereafter was struck and killed by an axe.

St. Herman's Miracles: It was from this fish, after it had been dried, that St. Herman fed so many of his friends- the animals. Hundreds of birds flocked around his small cell. Numerous bears inhabited the island's forest, and Herman was often seen feeding them. The big grizzlies used to stand by the riverside and lop up the salmon swimming upstream, and they were St. Herman's friends. The animals detected instinctively paradise within Holy Herman, and were tamed. Interestingly, one of the instructions he provided his spiritual children upon his death had to do with his bull that had served him faithfully for almost all of his forty plus years on Spruce Island/New Valaam. He instructed that upon his repose the bull should be killed and go to its rest as well since it had nothing left to give having served faithfully for so long. This instruction went unfulfilled, and so the day after Herman's repose his bull rammed himself into a tree and died on the spot.

St. Herman worked numerous miracles out of his great love for the Aleut natives. He is famous for stemming both floods and fires, and on one occasion a tsunami/tidal wave was coming and the islanders were certain all would be flooded. St. Herman took an icon of the Mother of God and placed it in the sand telling the people not to worry and that the water would not rise above the icon. This is exactly what happened. St. Herman conversed with angels. On one occasion he was visited by a man who asked Herman if his seclusion wasn't a bit boring. To this question Herman posed another memorable one. "Which is more delightful? The company of humans or angels? Angels indeed!" Answered Herman. His societal isolation was filled with God, the angels, and the saints.

St. Herman's death was beautiful. He gathered his close spiritual children, notified them that he was about to repose, gave them his instructions that he be buried in the dirt

without fanfare, had them light the candles and begin reading the Acts of the Apostles. In a few minutes he stopped them and told them that God had informed him that he had one more week. In one week he called them once again, set them about the same tasks, laid his head on the chest of his spiritual son Gerasim as his face glowed with light, and gave his soul into the hands of God. At that time on several neighboring islands a number of different people witnessed a pillar of light rising from Spruce Island into the heavens, and they knew that St. Herman was passing.

St. Herman's entire life was one of humility and love for God and others. I close with his words showing forth his great humility and love which shine forth as examples for us to imitate. At this death his words were, "Do not bury me, I want to be, always, the least in the universe". Such humility! And perhaps St. Herman's most famous instructions concern the love of God. The occasion for his giving his famous instructions was the visit of a Russian frigate to the nearby bay. St. Herman was invited to board the ship which was filled with educated Russian civil servants. The humble monk sat down in his deerskin shirt in their midst and put this question to them, "What do you, gentlemen, love more than anything else, and what would you wish for your happiness?" Various answers began to pour out. Some wished for riches, others glory, others a beautiful wife, and others a wonderful ship on which he would be captain, and so on in the same vein. 'Isn't it true,' said Father Herman to them, 'that all your various wishes could be summed up into one, that each of you wishes that which, according to his understanding, he considers the best and most worthy of love?' 'Yes, that is true!' answered all. 'But still, tell me,' continued he, 'what could be better, higher than all, more superlative and most worthy of love if not the Lord, our Jesus Christ Himself, Who created us, adorned us with such perfections, gave life to all, upkeeps everything, nourishes, loves all, Who Himself is love, and most wonderful, more so than all people? Shouldn't one therefore love God more than everything, and in everything wish and seek Him?' All began to speak: 'Well, yes! That is self-evident! That is true in itself!' 'But do you love God?' asked the Elder. And all answered: "Of course we love God. How can we not love God?" 'And I, a sinner, have tried to love God for more than forty years, and I cannot say that I perfectly love Him,' answered Father Herman, and began to explain how one must love God. 'If

we love someone,' he said, 'then we always think of that one, we strive to please that one; day and night our heart is preoccupied with that object. Is it in this way, gentlemen, that you love God? Do you often turn to Him, do you always remember Him, do you always pray to Him and fulfill His holy commandments? We had to admit that we did not. 'For our good, for our happiness,' concluded the Elder, 'at least let us give a vow to ourselves, that from this day, from this hour, from this minute we shall strive above all else to love God and to fulfill His Holy Will!' (Little Russian Philokalia, Vol. III, St. Herman, pp. 31-33). May the North Star of Christ's Holy Church, Blessed Father Herman of Alaska, shine his light upon our darkness and lead us to the love of Him Who is worthy of our complete devotion: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

HOLY FATHER HERMAN PRAY FOR US!