

St. Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow, Apostle to America

By Very Rev. Fr. Lawrence Farley

St. Innocent was born with the name John in the district of Irkutsk in Russia in 1797. His father died when he was six, and he was cared for by his uncle Dimitri, a deacon. In 1806 he went to the seminary school for clerical families in Irkutsk. He married and in 1821 was ordained priest for the local church. The bishop wanted to find a volunteer to go to faraway Russian Alaska to work as a missionary. John volunteered—much to the horror of his wife, who burst into tears when he broke the news to her.

After a year's traveling, the family arrived in Alaska in 1824. Fr. John worked hard at his apostolic endeavors, building a church with his own hands and going all over to preach to the natives, traveling by canoe and later by dogsled. He learned their language and wrote the first grammar for them, translating the sacred church books into their own tongue. He lived on Unalaska Island for ten years, then was transferred to Sitka for another five years. He continued his work there, opening a seminary. The work grew as Fr. John traveled many hundreds of miles, and many were converted to Christ.

He decided to return to Russia to get extra help for his mission. While there, his wife died in 1839, leaving him with his six growing children. After much prayer, he settled them in schools, received monastic tonsure with the name Innocent, and was ordained bishop for his new missionary territory in 1840. He returned to his New World flock and spent the next ten years journeying throughout his far-flung diocese, preaching the gospel and strengthening his people in their new Faith. He gave directions for mission work, encouraging the use of English for North America and the use of North American-born clergy.

In 1850 he was raised to the dignity of archbishop, given more territory to care for, and his see was moved to Yakutsk in Siberia. After much apostolic labor, he was elected Metropolitan of Moscow in 1867. When he received the news of his election, he was greatly shocked, feeling quite inadequate. He said, "Who am I to take the word and power of my predecessors? A pupil of a remote country who passed more than half a lifetime on the frontiers, one who is only a common worker in Christ's vineyard . . ." Yet, at age seventy, worn out with sickness from years of hard travel and nearly blind, he worked hard as Metropolitan, building care homes for widows and orphans, working to help needy clergy, and establishing an Orthodox Missionary Society.

He passed away on Holy Saturday in 1879. Dying, he said, "Tell them that no eulogies are to be said at my funeral. Rather, let them preach an instructive sermon." When he died, he had laid the foundation for Orthodoxy in the New World as a true Apostle to America.