

Matushka Olga Michael of Alaska

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Introduction

Eastern Orthodoxy has existed in Alaska since at least 1794. Thanks to early missionaries, the Gospel of Christ was not just translated into the native languages, but more importantly their culture was baptised into Christ. Because of this, Orthodoxy is now an intrinsic aspect to life in Alaska. With this background, it should be no surprise that men and women among the Alaskans have and will continue to rise up as Godly people whose lives are worthy examples to follow, and thus are also worthy of veneration by the Orthodox faithful.

This paper highlights one such person: Matushka Olga Michael of Alaska. Those who knew her are spreading her story so that she may become recognized more widely as a North American saint. Let us start by briefly reviewing the process of glorifying someone in the Orthodox Church.

Criteria for Glorifying Saints in the Orthodox Tradition

The process of glorifying saints in the Orthodox Church is not defined strictly, and is therefore, frustrating to the Western mind, which likes rules and clear definitions. The Roman Catholic Church, being Western, does have a solemn proclamation made by the pope for the canonization of saints. With no single central authority in Eastern Orthodoxy, the official glorification of a saint is a conciliar decision, like other decisions made in the Orthodox Church.

The lack of a strict process does not; however, mean that glorification has no governing standards. Within Orthodoxy, there are three basic types of saints that are recognized. First, Old Testament patriarchs and prophets; second, New Testament apostles and martyrs; and third, outstanding hierarchs and people acclaimed for their personal struggle, either by righteousness or asceticism. Matushka Olga belongs in the third category due to her righteous way of living. The difficulty here is to evaluate the evidence of a person's way of life to determine if the wider Church should venerate those saints that are venerated locally.

In describing how the Church of the first millennium most commonly had local veneration of saints, Pomazansky explains:

In the Greek Church, until the eleventh century, only a very few of the choir of hierarchs were saints universally venerated throughout the entire Church. The greater portion of the hierarchs remained local saints of the individual Churches (i.e., dioceses)... With the eleventh century the transformation of the choirs of hierarchs from local to universal came about, as a result of which there are a great number of names.¹

¹ Michael Pomazansky, "The Glorification of Saints," 1996, <http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/glorification_saints.htm>.

From that period on, there has been a requirement that hierarchs, up to the Metropolitan, must be informed of whether a diocese would like to publicly venerate someone as a local saint.

The Orthodox Church in America (OCA) states that “the glorification of saints in the Orthodox Church is a recognition that God’s holiness is manifested in the Church through these grace-filled men and women whose lives were pleasing to God.”² One way of recognizing a “grace-filled” man or woman is to tell others about them: how they lived, what they taught those around them, and therefore what they teach us all. Although someone may be venerated locally as a saint, the more people there are that know of the person over a broader geographic area, the better chance there is of that person becoming venerated as a saint beyond the local diocese.

Matushka Olga: Her Life

What then, did Matushka Olga Michael teach us by her life? Her way of life was not distinct to her alone, for

...there were others, men and women of equal piety and dedication ... [among] the Yup’ik laity of her time. ... They sought to teach by example rather than lecture...this was just the way it was, a way of life, not a doctrinal system or code. ... To them, the Reality of the Spirit was perhaps even more self-evident than the physical universe.³

People in the native Alaskan culture live with a deep acceptance of the spiritual, a very Orthodox concept. This intrinsic spiritual nature is something that our dominant North American culture has almost completely abstracted from life, and treats it as an optional fragment of life one may or may not add to his/her personal lifestyle if one wish so.

² Fr. Joseph Frawley, “The Glorification of the Saints in the Orthodox Church,” *The Orthodox Church Newspaper*, April-May 2000, <<http://www.oca.org/FS.NA-Document.asp?SID=4&ID=83>>, published by the Orthodox Church in America, <<http://www.oca.org/>>.

³ Fr. Michael Oleksa, e-mail message to author, November 10, 2007.

Olga was born on February 3 1916, and she reposed on November 8 1979. She lived a very poor life of subsistence in the village of Kwethluk, Alaska, on the Kuskokwin River. She married the village postmaster and manager of the general store, who later became Archpriest Fr. Nicolai Michael.⁴ Of the 13 children born to them, only 8 survived.⁵ Though she was short and modest looking (see Appendix I), she had a sense of authority others could feel in her presence. She was loving, yet firm; always busy, yet always available to help. As mentioned on the webpage *Remembering Our Mother Olga*,

She didn't talk a lot. She just would go ahead and do what was needed... in order to help anyone with just about anything... She used to make traditional fur boots and parkas as donations to... other communities... which were trying to raise money.⁶

This was in addition to making all of her husband's vestments, as well as clothing for her children and for others in her village. This webpage also lists the following details about the life of Matushka Olga: she demonstrated compassion on those poorer than her, and allowed a neglected neighbour child to "steal" food from her table. She frequently passed her children's clothes onto other needy families, telling her children not to say anything if they saw someone else wearing something that used to be theirs. At least 10% of her village became seminarians at St. Herman's Theological Seminary during her lifetime. According to this source, "there is no other place in Alaska that has shown such a dedication to serving God during one person's life."⁷ Fr. John Shimchick mentions that Matushka Olga "knew the

⁴ OrthodoxWiki, "Olga Michael," <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Olga_Michael>.

⁵ Olga (Michael) McGill, "The Very Reverend Fr. Nicolai O. Michael," *Blessed Olga of Alaska*, <http://oholy.net/stolga/fr_nic.html>.

⁶ "Remembering Our Mother Olga," *Blessed Olga of Alaska*, <http://oholy.net/stolga/mo_olga.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

hymns of many feast days, including Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Pascha in Yup'ik [her native language] by heart."⁸

Mother Olga was a midwife, a significant aspect of her life and legacy. She empathized with and encouraged those who had experienced abuse, especially sexual abuse. She herself had been traumatized and abused.⁹ She was blessed with the gift of knowing if a woman was pregnant even before the woman herself knew it. God also enabled her to know to send some women into a town with a hospital to give birth, because they were to have medical complications, and this directive came far sooner than any of the signs of complications became evident.¹⁰

Matushka Olga: Her Legacy

Olga died in November, and the weather was harsh and cold as usual for that time of year. Leading up to her funeral; however, a warm south wind blew in, melting the river, enabling many friends to come unexpectedly. During the funeral procession to the graveyard, a flock of birds escorted overhead – another exceptional occurrence for November. The warmth also softened the ground making it easy for those who dug her grave. Yet after the last of her friends departed that evening, the cold, harsh winter returned, the birds left, the river re-froze and the ground hardened. As Fr. Michael Oleska writes, "the cosmos still cooperates and participates in the worship the Real People offer to God."¹¹ In Mother Olga's native tongue, the very word "Yup'ik... means... to be a 'real person,'"... it means "an 'ideal' personality."¹²

⁸ Fr. John Shimchick, "Matushka Olga Michael: A Helper in Restoring the Work of God's Hands," *Jacob's Well*, Spring/Summer 1997, <http://www.jacwell.org/articles/1997-SPRING-Matushka_olga.htm>. Traditional Orthodox hymns sung in Yup'ik can be found on the website of All Saints of North America Orthodox Church, Hamilton, ON. There are texts and hymns (in MP3 format) in Alaskan Orthodox languages. Website: <<http://www.asna.ca/alaska/>>.

⁹ Fr. Michael Oleksa, "Matushka Olga," See Appendix III.

¹⁰ "Remembering Our Mother Olga."

¹¹ Michael Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska: A Theology of Mission* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 205.

¹² *Ibid.*, 101.

More than twenty five years after her death, one of Olga's daughters and her family still live in the same three-room cabin.¹³ Olga's children have recounted a story she told them when they were young, *The Hungry Giant of the Tundra*, and it has been retold as a children's story by Teri Sloat. This story tells why it is good for children to obey their parents (Appendix IV).

During an Orthodox youth conference in Edmonton in November 2005, some four attendees met two men on the street who came from Kwethluk, and were teenagers at the time of Olga's death. They called her a "spiritual mother" and "healer," explaining that she was very caring. That weekend, Edmonton was experiencing warm weather. One of the men made mention that at the time of Olga's funeral, it also was uncharacteristically warm.¹⁴

Probably the most significant story that has surfaced after Olga's death is that of a woman from New York. This woman was receiving counselling for severe sexual abuse experienced during her childhood. At one point, while in prayer, she had a dream/vision in which St. Olga led her through a forest to a clearing with a mud hut (barabara – see Appendix V). Inside, St. Olga assisted her through a process of healing and gave her some fragrant tea to drink. Afterwards, they went outside and looking up at the northern lights, St. Olga said, "the moving curtain of light was to be for us a promise that God can create great beauty from complete desolation and nothingness."¹⁵ This experience brought some very deep healing to the woman from New York, so after searching to locate "St. Olga," she wrote a letter to Fr. Oleksa and Matushka Olga's family. Upon receiving the letter of this story, Olga's son and daughter-in-law could hardly believe what they read, and though no incense was burning there, three people smelled strong, sweet incense.¹⁶

¹³ Anna Seraphima, "Sweet Kwethluk: A Personal Journey," *Blessed Olga of Alaska*, <<http://oholy.net/stolga/kwethlk.html>>.

¹⁴ According to a parishioner from Vancouver, BC, interview with author, November 3, 2007.

¹⁵ Fr. John Shimchick, "Matushka Olga Michael: A Helper in Restoring the Work of God's Hands," *Jacob's Well*, Spring/Summer 1997, <http://www.jacwell.org/articles/1997-SPRING-Matushka_olga.htm>.

¹⁶ Fr. Michael Oleksa, "Matushka Olga," See Appendix III.

This story also illustrates why Matushka Olga has become an unofficial patron saint of battered and abused women.

The woman from New York is not the only one who has experienced healing by Mother Olga's hand. There are a growing number of women in North America, both native Alaskan and others, that venerate icons of her. A personal friend of mine has an icon of Mother Olga and says that she feels a very real, peaceful presence when praying with this icon.¹⁷ Another woman, from Arizona, experienced Olga in a dream telling her that her mother would be alright since she would soon be with Olga. This woman had no idea that her mother had been emergency-evacuated to a Sitka hospital. The dream enabled this woman to be with her mother before she died, and to encourage them both with Olga's words.¹⁸

Matushka Olga's life was certainly lived as a good example of what Christ has commanded His followers to do. There are still people today who have clothing originally made by her. As stated in an issue of *Jacob's Well*, "Matushka Olga's 'ministry' may be considered a 'living icon' of the Gospel used on the Sunday of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-36)."¹⁹ During her life, Matushka Olga mainly ministered to other women and children as well as priests – in connection with her husband, Fr. Nicolai Michael – and so far these are the same types of people she has continued to minister through her prayers.²⁰

¹⁷ A parishioner from Vancouver, BC, interview with author, November 3, 2007.

¹⁸ Shimchick.

¹⁹ Diocese of New York and New Jersey, "The Ongoing Story of Matushka Olga of Alaska," *Jacob's Well*, Orthodox Church in America, Summer 2000: 14, <http://www.jacwell.org/Acrobat/Jacobs%20Well%208_00.pdf>.

²⁰ Anna Seraphima, interview with author, November 7, 2007.

Conclusion

Matushka Olga Michael is being venerated in various OCA jurisdictions as a saint, and she "said to be the first Native American woman to be considered for glorification in America."²¹ On the Euphrosynos Café Web forum, there was one thread initiated on this very topic, but unfortunately, it quickly digressed to the general concept of glorifying local saints other than Olga. Matushka Olga is also one of the women mentioned by Mother Victoria from St. Barbara's Monastery at Orthodox women's conferences as a godly example of a woman.

An awareness of Matushka Olga Michael is building in North America, especially within the OCA. Perhaps she will one day join the list of glorified Saints of North America. For now, she is clearly making her mark on the lives of many individuals. I personally consider it a privilege to be a part of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has been glorifying godly men and women as saints for two millennia. I find it especially fascinating to be able to be part of this ongoing process that may one day make it possible to have Matushka Olga universally glorified as a saint from Alaska.

Venerable Matushka Olga, pray to God for us!

²¹ Orthodox Diocese of Alaska, "Meet a Seminarian: Vasily Fisher," *The North Star*, Orthodox Church in America, Vol. 4, Winter 2005, 12.

Appendix I: Photos of Matushka Olga Michael



Appendix II: Icons of Matushka Olga Michael



Matushka Olga Blue Joy Icon



St Olga with Northern Lights Icon



Mother Olga the Midwife Icon (written by Bess Chakravarty)

Appendix III

Matushka Olga

By Fr. Michael Oleksa

After the publication of *Orthodox Alaska* in 1987, a woman who was seeing a counselor somewhere in New York State, was praying. Suddenly, whether she was dreaming or having some sort of vision, found herself in a forest. Through the trees she saw the Most Holy Theotokos who walked past her, and a second woman, to whom the Virgin Mary gestured, indicating that she should follow her. They continued through into a clearing in which there stood a grass-covered hill. Circling around it, they found a low door and entered into the "hill house," where the lady wordlessly invited her to lie down. As she lay there, the woman massaged her, like a midwife, helping her to give birth, although the New Yorker was not pregnant. All the hurt, pain and evil that had entered her body from Years of trauma and abuse poured out of her. Weeping and exhausted she sat up, and the woman gestured for her to follow her outside.

A fire with a tea kettle on it provided them with the basics for a cup of herbal tea. As they sat sipping their beverage, the New Yorker looked around.

On the treeless landscape the star-lit sky seemed especially huge. The northern lights appeared, dancing overhead, displaying a spectacular array of colors. The lady finally spoke, pointing at the aurora. "This is God's sign," she said, of His ability to create amazing beauty where before there had been only desolation and darkness. At this Point, the stranger stood and began walking away.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What's your name?" to which the stranger replied something "Olga."

At this point the dream or trance ended, and the woman, joyfully, realized that she felt Healed. But who was that woman? She asked her counselor, an Orthodox "Matushka," the wife of a priest. "Is there a Saint Olga?" She asked. Yes, of course, a medieval princess of Kiev. "Let's find her icon!"

They did, but the New York lady said this was not the woman in her dream-prayer. Could there be another Saint Olga? And the Matushka suggested it might be Matushka Olga. Yes, she said, what is a "Matushka"? And they wrote to me, describing all this.

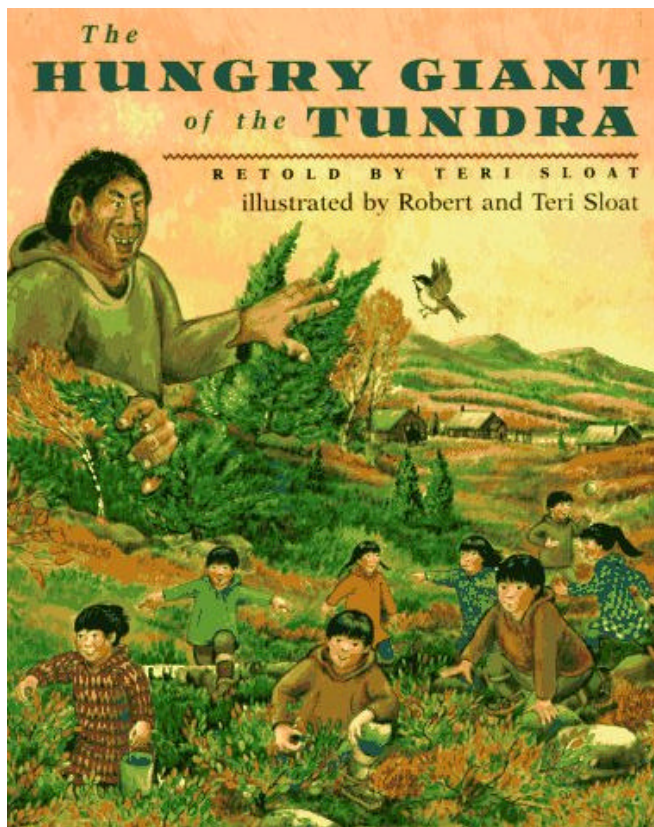
I was leaving for an academic sabbatical year in Moscow the day this letter arrived, and had no chance to answer it, nor find the photograph of Matushka Olga that they requested.

Months later my sister-in-law, married to Matushka Olga's oldest son, received a letter from New York, describing the events as I've outlined them here. My sister-in-law could hardly believe what she was reading, and read the letter a second time, and then a third. As she finished her third reading, she began to smell incense in the house, though no one was burning any incense there. Her husband entered the house and she gave him the letter to read. He also read it several times and began to smell the sweet fragrance of incense, but said nothing. Then a third person came into the house and exclaimed "Why are your Burning incense here?" and they all realized they had had the same experience. When they conferred with me, I suggested they send a photo of Matushka Olga in a crowd of other women, to see if the lady could identify her in a group. Upon receiving the picture, the lady did, but said that when she met her, she was younger than when the photo had been taken!

The lady from New York made a pilgrimage to pray at Matushka Olga's grave and has written an icon of matushka Olga, who was, during her lifetime, a midwife. She herself had been traumatized and abused, and therefore has become an unofficial patron saint of battered and abused women.

At least one other woman has had a similar vision experience of Matushka Olga without knowing anything about this first reported incident. From these encounters, a growing number of women now venerate her and consider her their patron, who intercedes for those who have suffered trauma and abuse. Venerable Mother Olga, pray to God for us!

Appendix IV: *The Hungry Giant of the Tundra*



Yup'ik children's story by Blessed Olga of Alaska; compiled by her children in her memory and retold by Teri Sloat, an English Version.

Available for purchase from *Amazon.com*:

<http://www.amazon.com/Hungry-Giant-Tundra-Teri-Sloat/dp/0882405365/ref=pd_sim_b_shvl_title_6/103-3738890-0982222>

Appendix V: Photographs of Alaskan Barabaras



Newly built sod Yup'ik Eskimo barabaras that have not grown moss or grasses on their roofs yet <<http://oholy.net/stolga/bara.html>>



A one-person barabara on Spruce Island once used by Orthodox monks <<http://oholy.net/stolga/bara.html>>

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