

The Life and Teachings of St Innocent of Alaska

by Father Emmanuel Kahn, Assistant Priest, St Aidan's, Manchester

The humble Russian Orthodox saint, St Innocent of Alaska, was born in a small village in Siberia in 1797 and was proclaimed a saint in 1977. He is known as the Apostle to the Americas because of his decades of service to the many indigenous peoples of Alaska, including the Aleuts. During the 82 years of his life, he faced and met many different challenges. Understanding how he faced these challenges and what he taught has been helpful to me; and I hope will be helpful to you.

The Synaxarion: The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church explains how John Veniaminov, as he was first known, “showed during his studies [both] a lively intelligence [and] great skill with things technical, especially clock-making and woodwork. From his childhood to his last days, he was never without [some kind of work, either spiritual or intellectual or technical].”¹ He married and was ordained a priest in his home village in Siberia, never dreaming “of becoming involved in distant missions.” I think many of us are that way—living our lives as Christians where we are, not considering the possibility of missionary service in some distant part of the world. However, when Father John was 26 years old, a lay person who had lived in the then Russian colony of Alaska told Father John of how an indigenous tribe, the Aleuts, were very interested in Jesus and wanted to learn more about the Word of God. Father John was then inspired by the Lord “to leave for [this Russian colony of] America with all his family.”

After a fourteen-month journey across Siberia, Father John and his family arrived in the Alaskan islands that were to become their home for the next 45 years. They were in for a shock: they found a broken-down “and disused chapel. Although a number of the inhabitants had received baptism from the missionaries of the preceding generation, most of them were, through lack of pastors, living in ignorance of the elementary truth of the Gospel and [the moral life that the Gospel

¹ *The Synaxarion*, 31 March, Vol. 4, pp. 287-292.

requires]. [So] Father John undertook first of all the building of a church with his own hands, with the help of local men to whom he taught [both] construction techniques [and the Orthodox Christian] Catechism.” [Father John] quickly learned the language of the Aleuts “and began without delay to translate [into their language] the liturgical texts and passages of the Gospel that are read in church.” During his first four years in Alaska, Father John travelled extensively around the islands in a a canoe and wrote “the first grammar of the Aleutian language, which had, till then, not been written down.”² He also wrote a beautiful little book, *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven: An Introduction to the Christian Life* that offers helpful insights about how we can live as Orthodox Christians.³

St Innocent begins his book with the words: “People were not created merely to live on earth like animals that disappear after their death, but to live with God and in God, and to live not for a hundred or a thousand years, but to live eternally.”⁴ That is quite a challenge, both to the Aleuts to whom St Innocent was writing and to us—“to live with God and in God.” A vast number of Aleuts in Alaska learned to do that. Can we follow in their footsteps? How can we live “with God and in God?”

St Innocent certainly understands how people live and think. He continues: “Everyone, whoever he [or she] may be, desires and seeks prosperity and happiness. To desire what is good for oneself and to seek prosperity or happiness is part of [human] nature, and, therefore, it is not a sin. . . . But we need to know that here on earth there has not been, is not, and never will be true and perfect happiness and prosperity [because] all our prosperity and happiness is only in God. . . . Nothing in this world but God can fill our heart or fully satisfy our desires. A fire cannot be put out with [broken branches and twigs] and oil because only water will put it out. In exactly the same way, the desires of the human heart cannot be satisfied with

² *The Synaxarion*, 31 March, Vol. 4, pp. 287-292.

³ Holy Trinity Publications, 2013, Second Edition.

⁴ *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven*, p.vii.

the goods of this world because only the grace of God [that is, the love of God] can [satisfy] the thirst of our desires.”⁵

In facing this challenge that St Innocent is giving us we each have to decide within ourselves that we do want to “live with God and in God.” We can each do that right now: we can choose to say silently to ourselves, “I want to live with God and in God.” St Innocent then points out that “no one by [themselves] can turn and draw near to God [without Jesus Christ] because our sins, like a high wall, do not let us come to Him. . . . [However, the] death [and resurrection of Jesus Christ] destroyed the wall that separated us from God. . . . There is only one way into the kingdom of heaven, and that is the very way that Jesus Christ went when He lived on earth. There is no other way, and never was, and never will be, for Jesus Christ said [in the Gospel of St John, chapter 14, verse 6], “I am the way. . . So, for every Christian, and . . . for every human being, it is extremely necessary to know how to find the way and how to follow it.”⁶

In *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of God*, St Innocent sets out “the way by which we [can] go into the kingdom of heaven; and how Jesus Christ helps us to go by this way, and how we can receive His help.”⁷ The opening chapter considers “The Blessings That Jesus Christ Has Granted Us by His Death” and how “by His resurrection, Jesus Christ destroyed the gates of hell and opened to us the gates of paradise that had been closed for everyone by Adam’s disobedience; and He . . . crushed the power of the devil and death, our enemies.”⁸ This crushing of the power of the devil happens because we drive the devil away through “the cross and [our] prayer.”⁹ We are blessed when we follow Jesus Christ, “because He will certainly be there [waiting for us in heaven] where Jesus Christ Himself lives.”¹⁰

⁵ pp. vii-viii.

⁶ pp. ix-x.

⁷ p. x.

⁸ p. 4.

⁹ p. 4.

¹⁰ p. 6.

Chapter 2, “How Jesus Christ Lived on Earth, and What He Suffered for Us,” begins: “Everyone must obey the law of God. That law is contained in the two commandments: (1) Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength and (2) Love thy neighbour as thyself.”¹¹ However, St Innocent reflects: “There is no one, and never has been, and never will be a [person] who could fulfil these two commandments perfectly. Only Jesus Christ fulfilled them perfectly and without any deficiency. In this respect, all the saints, and even the greatest saints, are only like lamps, whereas Jesus Christ is like the sun in all its brilliance and splendour.”¹² St Innocent then describes the life of Jesus Christ on earth as portrayed in the Gospels, focusing on “how great is His love for us.”¹³ St Innocent concludes: “Jesus Christ is true God, the almighty Creator of the whole universe, the great King of angels and men, the powerful Lord of all creatures, the awful Judge of the living and the dead. This same Jesus Christ willed to suffer for mankind.”¹⁴

Chapter 3, “The Way That Leads into the Kingdom of Heaven,” stresses that Christ “does not compel or force anyone to follow Him: “Christian,” urges St Innocent, “your salvation . . . depends on your own will! . . . The Lord has given you freedom to do what you like, and He does not wish to take this most precious gift away from you. . . . In His great goodness, Christ knocks on the door of everyone’s heart for a long, long time to awaken his [or her] soul and arouse in it a desire for salvation.”¹⁵ Then in seeking Christ, St Innocent urges us to study the Holy Scriptures and to “try to have and to stir up within yourself a desire to do what Holy Scripture teaches.”¹⁶

In Chapter 4, “How Jesus Christ Helps Us,” St Innocent explains how when we receive the Holy Spirit in baptism and chrismation, we are offered a path to draw

¹¹ p. 9. The citations are from Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18, repeated in the Gospels of Matthew 22.37-39, Mark 12.30-31 and Luke 10.27.

¹² p. 9.

¹³ pp. 9-17.

¹⁴ p. 17.

¹⁵ p. 19-20.

¹⁶ pp. 20-22.

closer to Christ. This path is “the true and recognized means of receiving the Holy Spirit, according to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the experiences of the great saints,” requiring the concurrent implementation of seven steps: “(1) purity of heart and chastity, (2) humility, (3) listening to the voice of God, (4) prayer, (5) daily self-denial [including fasting and almsgiving], (6) reading and listening to Holy Scripture, and (7) [receiving] the sacraments of the Church . . . especially Holy Communion.”¹⁷ The following 15 pages set out a profound guide for how to implement each of these steps in our lives.¹⁸ Then St Innocent adds a note of encouragement: “Here it needs to be said further that if any one of you receives the Holy Spirit and then somehow falls and sins, and thereby loses the Holy Spirit, do not despair and think that all is lost; but quickly and fervently [that is, with enthusiasm and commitment] fall down before God ... [in] prayer ... and with penitence [that is, a desire to reform], and the Holy Spirit will return to you.”¹⁹

In 1840, after the death of his wife, Father John, at the age of 43, became Bishop Innocent. Then for the next ten years, he travelled thousands of miles to many of the islands, by canoe and dogsled and on foot, organising churches and schools. In 1850, his diocese was expanded to cover more than 200,000 people. After 28 years as Bishop and then Archbishop, *The Synaxarion* tells how with “failing [eye]sight [because of] long periods [spent] in the snow,” in the midst of much fatigue, at the age of 71, he was hoping to retire quietly to a monastery. Instead, “contrary to all expectations . . . in 1868 . . . he became Primate of the Russian [Orthodox] Church.” During the next 10 years, he “gave the Russian Church a new momentum, reorganising the schools and charitable [groups, as well as] the Russian Missionary Society.” Furthermore, he inspired St Nicholas of Alaska and many others to persevere in their ministries. Then, in 1879, at the age of 82, this remarkable person died “a few moments before the celebration of the Easter Office.”²⁰

¹⁷ p. 53.

¹⁸ pp. 53-67.

¹⁹ p. 68.

²⁰ *The Synaxarion*, 31 March, Vol. 4, pp. 290-292.

St Innocent concludes *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven* with friendly encouragement. He stresses that: "Our Lord Jesus Christ is always ready to help us to follow Him. He gives us the Holy Spirit, and sends His angels to guard us on the way, and supplies us with teachers and guides. . . . The way into the kingdom of heaven is difficult and there are bitter labours on [that path], but [those] who [have] not seen and experienced what is bitter cannot know the value of what is sweet. . . . Do not be afraid to follow Jesus Christ; He is a powerful Helper; follow Him, hasten [to Him] and do not delay. Go while the doors into the heavenly kingdom are still open to you. And even while you are still a long way off, our heavenly Father will come to meet you on the way [just as the prodigal son was met by a loving father]; [and our heavenly Father] will kiss you, will put on you the best garment, and will lead you into His bridal chamber where He Himself dwells with all the holy prophets, apostles, martyrs, and all the saints, and where you will rejoice with true and eternal joy."²¹ Amen. So be it for each of us.

²¹ *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven*, pp. 72, 79.

Note: Multiple copies of this book can be purchased by parish bookstalls at a 35% wholesale discount directly from the publishers, Holy Trinity Publications, Jordanville NY, USA (at: www.holytrinitypublications.com) or from their European agent, Orca Book Services (email to: enquiries@orcabookservices.co.uk). It should be noted that each section contains points for further reflection, either for group discussion or personal reading and prayer.