A panikhida is sung at the grave of Matushka Olga (Arrsamquq) in Kwethluk, Alaska, on the 35th anniversary of her repose. (oca.org)

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Tanqilria Tanqilrianun/ Holy Things for the Holy: Society and Sanctity Among the Yup'ik People

Christopher Sprecher

Unlike the regions of "Old World" Orthodoxy—that is, the parts of Europe, Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and India where Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches have long existed—the lands of the New World do not yet have many local saints to laud on their calendars. The great heroes of the faith—the Apostles, the Myrrhbearing Women, the early martyrs and confessors, the great missionaries and healers—find honor and praise around the world wherever the Divine Liturgy is served and wherever the faithful call upon their intercession. True, here in North America, there are some saints who have devoted their labors to this land. St. Herman of Alaska cared for the peoples around him, Russian and indigenous, on Kodiak Island; St. Innocent came from Siberia and worked tirelessly among the Unangan (Aleut) and Lingít (Tlingit) peoples; St. Jacob travelled from his native land in the Aleutian Chain to work with the Yup'ik and Athabaskan peoples inland; further south, Saint Alexis of Wilkes-Barre and Saint Nikolaj (Velimirović) did much to reunite the splinter immigrant groups with canonical Orthodoxy. All of these saints, however, were foreign missionaries, transplants in this New World soil. But what of that soil? Is there any native holiness? Are there any saints to whom one can look that have sprung up on this continent? A hardy stock bearing such fruits in the North American vineyard can be found among the Yup'ik peoples of Western Alaska.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to spend part of the winter, and to experience the deep darkness and bitter cold of the tundra, among some Yup'ik Orthodox Christians in the villages of Kwethluk (Kuiggluk), Bethel (Mamterilleq), and Napaskiak along the Kuskokwim River. These villages are located about 400 miles west of Anchorage, Alaska, as the crow flies. Living here, worshipping with the villagers in their churches, and seeing their

faith in action showed me a different angle on holiness and what sainthood can mean for the Church today.

To begin exploring this perspective on what it means to be a saint, it can help to look at the word *saint* itself and what it means. In both Ancient Greek (*hagios*) and Latin (*sanctus*), the word for "saint" or "holy" refers literally to something set apart or set aside from everyday use. The thing that is holy or saintly is on one level nonordinary, not like everything else around it. For this reason, the inner areas of ancient pagan temples, as well as the innermost rooms of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, were strictly separated and off-limits to regular worshippers. Indeed, we read in the Book of Hebrews how only the High Priest of the Temple, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement, carrying the blood of sacrifice, entered the Holy of Holies, the innermost room of the Temple (Heb. 9:7). The holy place was not for everyone; it was not a place of everyday activity and life. It was separated, different, other.

From my experiences in *Yupiit nuniit*, the land of the Yup'ik people, I could see that saintliness—holiness—was also marked in a way by isolation, but isolation was not the end or goal of such holiness. This focus on the self and knowing the self was the starting point, from which the particularized and individualized holiness could spread and find action and response in the community. This twofold nature of holiness—its isolation and interaction—can be understood via three windows of insight: the importance and nature of knowledge and cognition in Yup'ik culture and language, the celebration of Christmas in Orthodox Yup'ik culture, and the example of the life of the popularly venerated Yup'ik saint, Blessed Matushka Olga (Arrsamquq).

The main road in the village of Kwethluk in autumn. (Karol Raszkiewicz)

Ellangellemni / When I Became Aware: Knowledge and Identity among the Yupiit

In the village of Kwethluk, I stayed at the house of the priest and his family, and through them became acquainted with some of the other villagers in this small—about 700 strong—settlement on a side channel of the Kuskokwim River.[1] Learning the Yup'ik language and culture, I tried to spend as much time as I could with the elders in the village, which still uses Yup'ik as its language and where children grow up with it as their mother tongue. Often stories would start with the phrase *ak'a tamaani*, "a long time ago"; but sometimes they would relate tales from their own life, and would say *ellangellemni*. A culturally appropriate translation into English might be "when I was younger" or "when I was a little kid" or "when I was growing up" The literal meaning, however, is, "when I came to awareness." The moment of self-awareness is so prized, I was told, that a family would celebrate this with neighbors and relatives when they could see that their child could distinguish itself from other human beings and from its own reflection. Coming to self-awareness is therefore the beginning of one's own story, the real starting point in life: awareness that is keenly necessary to

[1] The native Yup'ik name for this village, *Kuiggluk*, means "fake or false river," alluding to its location on a side channel of the Kuskokwim.

survive and thrive in the harsh climate of the Alaskan tundra, and also vitally important in one's spiritual life.

How knowledge is reported in the Yup'ik language is also worth mentioning in this context. In English and many other languages there is often a base verb meaning "to know," which then must be negated to indicate the opposite, "not to know." In Yup'ik, the reverse holds true. The base verb is one of ignorance or lack of knowledge. *Nalluaqa* would mean "I do not know him/her/it." To say the positive, the Yup'ik verb must be negated: *nallunritaqa* (literally, "I am not unknowing of him/her/it").[2] The presupposed starting point for cognition is one of ignorance. By the same token, Yup'ik verbs must be marked for experiential knowledge of the action described (in linguistics called evidentiality). If I were to say *tangellrua angun*, it would mean "he saw the man," and I would be assuring the hearer that I knew this from firsthand experience—that I saw the one man see the other. If my news is reported or otherwise indirectly observed, I must mark this overtly on the verb with a special postbase, *-llini-*. Hence *tangellrullinia angun*, "he saw the man (but I did not observe this directly)." Omitting this verbal postbase of evidentiality, when one did *not* in fact witness the event mentioned, would be interpreted as a lie by Yup'ik speakers. In this way, the correct observation of oneself and one's actions, as well as those of others, is grammatically encoded in the language.

Naruyakluta Anagciqukut / By Sharing We Will Survive: Self and Society in Celebrating Selaviq

The movement of holiness from self-awareness and internalization of virtue and knowledge into action geared toward building up the community was driven home to me in my time in *Yupiit nuniit* in the dark but delightful days between the feasts of the Nativity of Christ and Theophany. This season of feasting is called *Selaviq* in Yup'ik, a borrowing and relexicalization of the Russian word *slavy*, meaning "praises." During *Selaviq*, in the evenings—which fall very early on the tundra—the window curtains would be pulled back and candles placed on windowsills to welcome all and to symbolize the light of Christ in the darkness. On a given night, one family or household from the village would throw a feast and host the entire village. The first one I saw was at the priest's house where I was staying. The whole day was spent preparing food: cooking moose soup and duck soup, thawing dried salmon strips saved from the summer hunt, fishing out reserves of seal oil, making *akutaq* (literally, "mixture": a dessert of seal or moose fat mixed with tundra berries or dried meat), and preparing gifts of items like candy and clothing. Then young boys from the village came, together with other villagers, with a massive hand-spun star; Christmas carols in Yup'ik and Slavonic were sung. Everyone sat down on the floor of the house, save the elders who were granted seats of honor on the few chairs, and the priest gave a short homily in Yup'ik about the season and why we celebrate *Selaviq*. Then the feasting began!

Everyone joyously partook of the food and conversation. As the guests departed, they were laden with gifts of food and clothing to take home. The cabinets were gradually emptied out. At this point I was getting a bit worried, thinking that my hosts and I would soon have no food left. By the end of the evening, with all the guests gone, I turned around and saw the cupboards bare, with hardly any food left in the

[2] These verbal ending here, *-qa*, means that the verb is transitive, with a first-person singular subject and a third-person singular object. The direct object would be translated as "him", "her", or it depending on the context, since there is no grammatical gender (even in pronouns!) in all the Eskimo-Aleut languages, including Central Alaskan Yup'ik.

Icon of Matushka Olga (Arrsamquq), painted by Matushka Ann Margitich.

house. I was confused and concerned, but didn't want to embarrass my hosts and said nothing that night.

The next day, another house in the village held a festal meal of similar proportions, and the pattern repeated itself: the spinning of the Star of Bethlehem; people singing with candles in the background; a joyous meal. I was handed bags of salmon meat and socks to take home. This time, crossing the threshold of his house, the priest saw my confusion and smiled, and said: "*Naruyakluta anagciqukut*. By sharing our food with each other, we will survive. The only way to get through the winter in the tundra is as a community. So after *Selaviq*, none of the meat or fish in my house is what I caught or hunted or fished. My family and I only survive the winter on account of the food and gifts of others. And they survive on our gifts. And Christ is the greatest gift." Having spoken simply and succinctly, he nodded and entered the house. My heart and mind continued for hours to absorb this lesson in holiness, of self-understanding and awareness of one's life in a harsh land that opened up into mutual support and giving that led to real, tangible survival. Reflecting later during my stay in the village of Kwethluk on this communal act of love and giving, I was told of one of the great exemplars of such holiness in our times, a simple village woman and priest's wife from Kwethluk now widely venerated in Alaska and throughout North America: Blessed Matushka Olga, also known in *Yupiit nuniit* by her Yup'ik name, Arrsamquq.

Iirumalria Ikayurta / The Hidden Helper: Blessed Matushka Olga (Arrsamquq)

Olga Arrsamquq was born in Kwethluk on February 3, 1916. The man she married, Nikolai Michael, was renowned as a good hunter, and was eventually ordained to the priesthood. Having a large family herself—raising eight children to adulthood—Olga also worked as a midwife in her village, tending to the needs of many other women and families in the area. She became known in time for her quiet generosity, sewing clothing for poorer families and spending time with women who were victims of abuse in the *maqivik* or steamhouse, where neither physical nor emotional wounds could be hidden and where she was able to offer compassion and words of healing and love. This Yup'ik woman had lived through massive cultural changes with a spirit and mind fixed firmly on Christ, which helped her family and fellow villagers negotiate this transition. In the early twentieth century, much of Alaska still had little contact with the outside world or with Europeans or white Americans. Many Yupiit women and children still lived in traditional sod houses (*nepiat*), while men lived in their own communal houses (*qasgit*) in the villages. The diet was still utterly traditional, consisting of hunted fish

and game, tundra berries, and several herbs and roots that could be foraged. The twentieth century saw the influx into *Yupiit nuniit* not only of white people speaking English, but also of white American culture, the values and priorities of a global capitalist economy, and prepared foodstuffs with preservatives and carbohydrates, as well as alcohol, the consumption of which has led to high rates of obesity and alcoholism in many Native communities in the Yup'ik region, Alaska more broadly speaking, and in Native American and First Nations communities throughout North America. Matushka Olga was born into a world that was wholly Yup'ik: linguistically, culturally, nutritionally. By the end of her life, this world had entered the global stage and struggled to keep its place when confronted with alternative diets and influences. But throughout these changes, she provided a firm anchor for her family and community, remaining rooted in her faith and the traditions of community care and support. Thus, after many years of this ministry of love and compassionate presence to others, Matushka Olga reposed on November 8, 1979, following a struggle with cancer.

After her death, it was reported that a strong southern wind blew the whole night, which allowed for the ice and snow on the tundra to melt: mourners could travel across land and by river to attend the funeral, and the earth warmed enough for her body to be buried with unusual ease for that time of year. In the decades since her repose, more and more people have experienced miracles of healing through her intercession, and visions of her appearing to people were related to me by various Yup'ik Orthodox believers I met, hailing from several different villages in *Yupiit nuniit.* The intense personal life of prayer and faith led by Matushka Olga followed the pattern I had seen in the Yup'ik world: the individual, isolated experience of the believer issued forth with fruits for the surrounding community—in the case of Matushka Olga, fruits that have continued to this day for believers in the tundra and beyond. Many people have begun to paint icons of her; an Akathist hymn has been written in her honor; and more and more voices from among the faithful in Alaska and elsewhere are interceding for her official canonization by the Orthodox Church in America.[3]

[3] More details on the life of Matushka Olga, as well as the text of the Akathist hymn to her, may be found at: http://orthodoxcanada.ca/Saint_Matushka_Olga_Michael_of_Alaska (accessed August 4, 2016).

Villagers singing and starring at a home during Selaviq.

Ciuliamta Qanruyutait Iinruugut / The Saying of Our Elders Are Medicine: The Tradition of Holiness

The experiences and encounters I had during my brief sojourn in *Yupiit nuniit* and afterwards through my continuing contact and relationship with the Yup'ik people transformed both how I understood and experienced holiness and how I think I might implement such an understanding in my own life. In our contemporary Western world, driven by greed and ego, the pursuit of riches and fame and bodily perfection, one can see a clear focus on the individual apart from the others. Yup'ik culture, too, has a focus on the individual: the need to be self-aware, the need to clearly observe one's environment, the need to be correct in speech, the need to hunt and gather well to survive. Yet unlike an egocentric self-focus, which often results only in transient fruits for the self with no regard for, and often to the detriment of, the surrounding community or culture, the self-focus exhibited in the Yup'ik world was one I often found imbued with prayer and an expansive openness to the other. The fruits of this experience were to be shared and scattered abroad liberally. Like the food gifts at *Selaviq* or the steamhouse conversations with Matushka Olga, the encounter with the other is the very context, the very meeting place of the everyday with the extraordinary, the "thin place" where profane and sacred, holy and humdrum collide and are made whole.

Matushka Olga with one of her grandchildren. (stnicholas-narol.com)

In my last days on the tundra, I marveled at the attentiveness of some of the young persons to an elder speaking to them, explaining how to hunt properly on the river when it was frozen. One of the adults said in Yup'ik: *Ciuliamta qanruyutait iinruugut.* "The sayings of our elders are medicine." The Yup'ik people believe in passing forward not only culture, but also an understanding of holiness as at once intensely intimate and personally and wholly community-centered. This awareness of tradition as something medicinal and healing holds true, I would say, no matter where we find ourselves: in the Old World markets of Athens or Jerusalem, in the contemporary cosmopolitan hubs of Moscow or New York, or in the small fishing villages of Alaska or Alabama. And once healed by this example, like the mother-in-law of the apostle Peter, we too can rise up to meet the other and let that healing shine forth in holy acts of love and service to the world. ✠

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