

Pioneering North Coast Ecumenicist

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Seventeen years before Pope Pius IX created the San Francisco Archdiocese (1854) which included our current diocese, Russian Orthodox priest Ioann [John] Veniaminov visited Fort Ross—part of his Russian-Alaska parish. On July 16, 1836 he sailed into Bodega Bay, disembarked and spent the next five hours on horseback “riding,” he wrote, “at a moderate gait.” When he arrived at Fort Ross, he had traveled 1,100 miles. Fortunately for us, he kept extensive diaries in which he described his trip, observations and thoughts.



Veniaminov who would later be canonized “St. Innocent of Alaska” spent his time at Fort Ross performing various religious rituals.

Two months later he left Ft. Ross to return to Alaska. This time he intended to meet up with his ship in San Francisco Bay—some seventy-five miles south. The thirty-nine year old priest’s horseback trek lasted two days and required him to camp in the vicinity of Santa Rosa.

The following day he continued on for his embarkation point at San Rafael. Innocent enjoyed our North coast climate: “the healthful air, the pure blue sky, the geographical position and the native vegetation” which he contrasted to the sub-polar climate of his Alaska parish.

Arriving at Mission San Rafael Arcángel, Innocent relates: “Here for the first time I saw a Catholic church and met a monk of the Franciscan order.” The mission prelate, Father José Lorenzo de la Concepcion Quijos, “became my close acquaintance.”

Leaving San Rafael by boat in the early evening they traveled “along San Francisco Bay, arriving at the port itself.” Innocent relates they “were met with severe winds” which forced them to abort their landing. Instead they made “a dangerous landing on a on an empty little island (На пустом острове)” where they spent the night. Based upon boat and sail type, likely prevailing winds and probable tides, the island was most likely Alcatraz—making the priest the first saint and only man named “Innocent” to spend the night on “the Rock.” He was used to dangerous sea voyages. He was known for exhaustive journeys throughout his vast Aleutian Island parish “by sea along the notoriously treacherous Alaska coast, usually in a kayak,” explains one of his biographers.

The Russian Orthodox saint was born in Siberia. Starting his seminary studies at the age of nine “he distinguished himself not only in academic subjects but also in carpentry and mechanics.” In 1821 (age 24) he was invested as a priest. Two years later he volunteered to be a missionary in Unalaska, an island in the Aleutian Island chain with a native population of 2,250. Over the next decade he built a new church, school and priest house. Innocent mastered six dialects of the Native Alaskan language and compiled a

grammar and dictionary of the Unagan language. He translated parts of the New Testament into the native tongue. A bit of a do-it-yourselfer too, he built his own furniture, musical instruments and a clock for one of his Alaskan churches.

Arriving in San Francisco the next morning, Innocent discovered his ship wouldn't be provisioned for the return trip for a couple of weeks. He decided to take advantage of the time by visiting "the neighboring missions." The brief holiday occasioned by the delayed debarkation, provided him the opportunity to investigate the California Catholic mission culture. His journals reveal his joy and wonderment at the ecumenical experience. Oxford University Professor S. A. Mousalimas observes that Innocent's journals during the California trip reflected his "enjoyment of another culture."

At Mission San José he met Father Jose Maria de Jesus Gonzalez. "He was," wrote Innocent, "the most educated and kindly of any of his brethren in all of California." While at the mission he attended "Mass four times and saw all the [Roman Catholic] religious implements." Innocent and Gonzalez "conversed [in Latin] about religious matters" for hours while "sharing his table" over the next four days.

Father Gonzalez then escorted Innocent to neighboring Mission Santa Clara de Asis. Here he met Father Jesus Moreno and was, he wrote, "met with great cordiality." Innocent spent two days as a guest at the mission (now the University of Santa Clara). He marveled that "three priests celebrated the Liturgy at the same time, but at different altars."

The saint-to-be sailed back to San Francisco where "before doing anything else, I attended the Liturgy at the San Francisco Mission [Mission San Francisco de Asis, aka Mission Dolores]." Put in historical perspective, in 1836 the population of San Francisco was 190 while that of Fort Ross was 260. The San Francisco port was in a sandy cove near the present day Transamerica Building.

On his voyage back to Sitka Innocent noted in his journal: "While in California...I managed to visit four missions and meet five priests." He was excited that he was able to use "for the first occasion" his knowledge "of the Latin language" to communicate with the Spanish speaking mission padres. His Latin was rusty: "I explained my ideas to the best of my abilities," he embarrassingly wrote of the bi-lingual experience.

The ocean voyage back to Alaska took thirty days. The Eastern Orthodox scholar Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia observes that Innocent was an open, loving man who received "at times enthusiastic reception on his pastoral journeys." This is evidenced by his ecumenical attitude towards the Franciscans. His journals reflect no "defensive hostility towards them because of their Roman Catholicism," continued Kallistos. He was a true ecumenicist.

When he arrived back in Sitka, the 6'3" muscular prelate was told that his "Aleut Grammar" had been awarded the *Demidov* Prize by the Russian Academy of Sciences. At the time the prestigious prize was akin to our modern Nobel Prize.

Back in Alaska he took the time to use his mechanical skills, building two small organs [i.e., a kind of crank melody box with pre-recorded liturgical and non-spiritual songs on replaceable cylinders]. He had negotiated building and selling them to the Franciscan's while in the Bay Area. In 1838, he returned to the Bay Area to deliver them (probably to San Jose and Santa Clara)—"a rare gesture of ecumenical goodwill for the time," according to Bishop Kallistos.

In 1841, Father Veniaminov was made Bishop of Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands of Russia and the Alaskan Aleutian Islands. As is the custom in the Russian Orthodox Church, he chose his own Bishopric name—"Innocent." In 1850 he was elevated to Archbishop and in 1869 he was appointed Metropolitan of Moscow, the highest rank in the Russian Orthodox Church. He died in 1879 at the age of 82. He was canonized a saint in the Russian Orthodox faith in 1977.