

Church to Affirm Sanctity of Rivers and Lakes, Sanctity of Creation

His Grace, the Right Rev. Benjamin (Peterson) of San Francisco, Abbot Gerasim (Eliel) and other officials of the **Orthodox Church in America will visit Anchorage and several rural Alaskan communities January 18-20, 2011 to celebrate the Rite of the Great Blessing of Water**, reaffirming the Church's belief that the natural world is sacred and needs to be treated with care and reverence.

In October 2009, the Orthodox Church in America's Diocese of Alaska passed a unanimous resolution at its annual statewide gathering, invoking God's blessing on any and all "development" that would enhance the quality of life in villages, but withholding any such blessing from "development" that seriously threatened to poison or pollute the lakes and rivers, which the Church and its largely Alaska Native membership considers "holy and sacred."

Citing Biblical passages from both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, the Church affirms that the natural world, as created by God in the Beginning, is inherently blessed and must be treated with appropriate care and reverence. Celebrating the beginning of Jesus Christ's earthly ministry at His Baptism in the Jordan River, the Orthodox traditionally go to lakes and rivers on the holiday to invoke God's blessing on the ecosystem in which they live. In rural Alaska, this means that all the major rivers south of the Arctic circle are re-confirmed as holy and sacred each January 18-20.

This year, His Grace Bishop Benjamin of San Francisco. Abbot Gerasim Eliel, the vetted candidate to becoming the next Orthodox bishop of Alaska, and the Acting Chancellor of the Alaskan Diocese, Father Michael Oleksa, are planning to perform the **Great Blessing of Water at Lake Clark at the village of Nondalton (January 18) Lake Iliamna at Newhalen, Alaska, and the source of the Kvichak River at the village of Igiugig, (January 19) then fly to Koliganek, AK to bless the Nushagak River and finally to Dillingham to perform the same rite on the shores of Wood River, (January 20).**

While the local churches regularly perform the Great Blessing of Water every year, this January will mark the first time a bishop of the Church has come to lead the celebrations. Mr. Bob Gillam is providing the clergy and their assistants with both housing and air transport on one of his personal planes.

The Orthodox Faith came to Alaska via Siberia in the 18th century, and the Church's nearly 100 parishes are concentrated in the Aleutian Islands, Kodiak Island, Bristol Bay and the Kuskokwim-Yukon Delta, with other congregations in the interior and Southeast.

The Orthodox Communion is the second-largest Christian Tradition in the world, with more than 250 million adherents, mostly in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

For further information about the Great Blessing of Water January 2011 trip, please contact Father Michael J. Oleksa in Anchorage at 646-4086 or by email at vrevmichaeljo@aol.com.