

**Sermon delivered on
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by the Very Rev. Michael Oleksa

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Christ is in our Midst!

Over all, parish clergy have a rather poor record achieving recognition as glorified saints of the Church. Most priests over the last 2000 years have been glorified as martyrs rather than for their pastoral ministries. The twentieth century was a little kinder to those who serve God and His Church as parish priests, but even here we have some difficulties.

Consider St. Alexis Toth, whose holy relics repose here in this monastery church. He labored for decades to bring tens of thousands of Uniats to Orthodoxy. Consider the most famous parish priest to be canonized in the last hundred years, St. John of Kronstadt, to whom miracles were attributed, his powerful intercessions curing the sick even, it is reported, by telegram. If we must meet this criterion to attain salvation, most pastors will necessarily despair.

Fortunately, we can cite another modern example of holiness that might serve to inspire and encourage us. St. Jacob Netsvetov was a rather ordinary priest serving in some extarordinary circumstances. His life may serve as a more accessible and attainable model for us all.

To understand the basis for his glorification, however, I will digress here to introduce another theme based on an incident that occured in Moscow about a decade ago.

In September 1995, the Diocese of Moscow celebrated the 600th anniversary of the translation of the Vladimirskaya Icon of the Virgin by re-enacting the procession that welcomed it to the city. Unfortunately, that day was the wettest of the year, the rain falling in buckets. The hierarchs and priests led thousands of faithful through the narrow streets of the old city bending under thousands of uniformly black umbrellas. Vespers began at the Dormition Cathedral within the Kremlin and concluded at the doors of St. Basil's on Red Square. Matins began as the crowd moved slowly up an ancient avenue paved in huge cobblestones two feet square. But some of these were missing, creating rather deep water-filled potholes.

Some pilgrims noticed that among them a priest was carrying a replica of the Vladimirskaya and asked if they could hold their candles in front of us. This required them to walk side-ways up the road, but the crowd was so densely packed and moved so slowly that this was not at all difficult. The participants sang troparia and hymns as they wound their way toward the Monastery of the Meeting, where the original Vladimirskaya icon itself was waiting to be venerated by those who had the patience and piety to stand in line for as many hours as this would require.

Periodically the entire procession was forced to halt for traffic. One of the candle-holding lady's feet disappeared into a muddy puddle as she was forced to stop directly over one of those potholes, and the priest gestured for her to squeeze to the side. She frowned and silently indicated her disapproval. Fortunately, the crowd lurched forward and her feet stood briefly above the water line, until, at another juncture, they disappeared into a second pothole, her stockings and sandals submerged in another crater. Again the priest, and this time one of her companions whispered that she should step to the side, onto solid ground. She shook her head emphatically, resisting their persuasive efforts. The procession moved forward only to stop exactly where yet another cobblestone was missing, placing this same pilgrim's feet into yet another deep puddle. This time her friends began scolding her, insisting that if she did not move to one side or another she would catch some fatal virus and die.

The lady became much more animated and resistant, finally appealing to the priest and saying four critical words that forced him to relent. "Vsyo na Slavu Bogu!" she emphatically whispered. "Everything to the Glory of God!"

There is nothing particularly miraculous or remarkable about St. Jacob Netsevtov, the first Unangan Aleut to be ordained to the Holy Priesthood. Born on St. George, an island remote even by Alaskan standards, the son of a Russian father and Aleut mother, he traveled to Irkutsk, in Siberia to attend seminary. There he married a Russian matushka and was ordained in 1826. Returning to his homeland, he was assigned to Atka, in the western Aleutians, and spent twenty years visiting his scattered flock, all the way to the Kurile Islands, just north of Japan. He learned St. Innocent Veniaminov's writing system and translated the Gospels into Unangan, opened a school, built a church.

But disaster struck. Within a few years his wife Anna, sent to Sitka for medical treatment died, his house burned down, and the nephew he had adopted and was raising as a son also suddenly died. Homeless and without family, he petitioned for permission to retire to a monastery. His friend and colleague, Bishop Innocent, in principle agreed, saying that Father Jacob could retire as soon as a replacement became available. He served another 18 years.

And not in his homeland. He was transferred to the delta of the Yukon River, the traditional homeland of the Yup'ik Eskimo. There he mastered their language, devised an orthography and began translation work. He served in a "field church," a tent, for nearly a decade before a church could be erected at Ikogmuit, the village now known as "Russian Mission," though hardly a Slav ever visited there. He was sick for weeks on end, with no medical supplies or physicians to attend him. Bedridden for weeks each winter, he dragged himself to the tent church to celebrate the services of Holy Week and Pascha, and in these found his purpose and strength each year.

His mail and supplies arrived once a year, but he had to travel several hundred miles to rendezvous with the ship at St. Michael's Redoubt, on the Bering Sea. The ship was nearly always late. Yet he traveled throughout his extensive district baptizing and confirming Eskimos and Indians in the Orthodox Faith, regularly begging for assistance in his annual reports to the bishop at Sitka, 1500 miles away.

Siberian hierarchs, to whom these appeals were forwarded, viewed Alaska, it seems, as a suitable

place to relocate clergy they could not handle. Several clerics were transferred to St. Jacob's deanery, each mentally and psychologically less stable than the last. One accused Netsvetov of murdering Native people along the river, and even poisoning his food. The new bishop at Sitka, not knowing whom to believe, ordered all parties to report to him there, but the accuser died and only St. Jacob appeared to answer the outrageous charges. Cleared of these allegations he died, sick and nearly blind, finally in retirement there in 1862, but his gravesite remains unmarked and still unknown.

What strikes a reader of his official journals is not that he is doing anything extraordinary, but that he is carrying on a perfectly normal pastoral ministry under extremely difficult circumstances. When we might be tempted to complain that the church was a little drafty or uncomfortable on a particular Sunday, we need only to imagine St. Jacob in his tent church, celebrating the Liturgy at minus 20 degrees. When we complain that our colleagues or superiors do not appreciate our efforts and contributions, we need only remember how St. Jacob was slandered and then forgotten for over a hundred years. If we have family or personal problems, we should remember Netsvetov suffered the loss of his entire household, his home and eventually his health in the service of the Church. If he is not a saint, there is no hope for the rest of us!

The pilgrim on that rain soaked Moscow street tells us why St. Jacob was canonized. He worked no miracles, wrote no theological tomes, enunciated no new doctrinal formulations, suffered no martyrdom. He preached the gospel, baptized converts and infants, confirmed and married adults, instructed children and teens, anointed the sick and buried the dead. He kept excellent records, though these too were misplaced for over a hundred years, and only their discovery has allowed us to know anything about him and his heroic missionary life. He did nothing that was not expected of all parish clergy, though his circumstances were more difficult than most. His life is "ordinary" in this sense. But he did everything "to the Glory of God." He was faithful in "little things." May his example inspire us all, as pastors, to love God and serve His Church, our flocks, faithful in the same "little things," to His Glory, so that on the Last Day we may hear Him say "enter into the Joy of your Lord."