

# Saint Herman of Alaska

*"Let your light so shine before men..."* (Matthew 5:16)

[Life of St. Herman](#)

[From the treasury of St. Herman Spirituality.](#)



SAINT HERMAN OF ALASKA, the first "American" saint, was the first to bring Orthodoxy to this continent. He came to America as a young monk in 1794 as part of the original Russian Orthodox mission to Alaska. He lived there until his repose, and for more than four decades taught the natives by word and example. With his own severe asceticism a secret, he ministered to both physical and spiritual needs of the people. And his memory is preserved, fresh and personal, among their descendents to this day. Ironically, however, he is unknown to so many other Americans. By his prayers may we, also, truly receive the Gospel he brought and follow the way that he taught.

IN 1793 AN ECCLESIASTICAL MISSION was composed in Valaam Monastery and sent to preach the Word of God to the natives of Northwestern America, who ten years before had come under Russian rule. Among the members of this mission was the Monk Herman, the future Elder of Spruce Island.

AFTER THEIR DEPARTURE from Valaam Monastery, the missionaries informed their brethren in Christ concerning their activities. Although these letters probably

continued throughout the stay of the Valaam monks in America, they were not all preserved in the monastery archives. Thus the Valaam Monastery knew the labors and the fate of the individual brethren primarily from the writings of Mr. Sturdza. These writings described the general progress of the preaching of the missionaries in the Russian-American territory, especially major events in the lives of these preachers, but lacked information concerning the Monk Herman. The information about Father Herman was brought to Valaam only in 1864, by a pilgrim. This pilgrim had lived some ten years in America, as a self-employed businessman, and personally knew the closest disciple of Father Herman. It is the account of this disciple, Gerasim Ivanova-Zyrianov, that was given to the Abbot of Valaam Monastery.

The Abbot was moved by the desire to receive more detailed information concerning the Elder, and to confirm the existing information. In that same year, 1864, he wrote inquiries to Hierarch Innocent, Archbishop of Kamchatka and the Aleutians; to Bishop Peter, who had previously resided in New Archangelsk and was a vicar of the Kamchatka diocese; and to the disciple of Monk Herman, Gerasim Zyrianov.

In 1865, while these inquiries were in transit, the Abbot of Valaam Monastery received a letter from Simeon Ivanovich Yanovsky in Kaluga. Mr. Yanovsky explained in this letter that he personally knew "the former monk of Valaam monastery, the esteemed holy man and great ascetic." He preserved two of his letters, "as a treasure from the holy Elder, whose memory is holy to him," and offered to provide these letters to the Abbot, as well as some other interesting information concerning the life of the Elder. A correspondence began, and information concerning the Elder was acquired. The letters were "written from the heart with an intent of making it better and more truthful." It became evident that the man who provided this, S. I. Yanovsky, was, from 1817 to 1821, the main governor of all Russian-American colonies, and that now, according to his expression, he was "a sick, old man of 77 ... at the side of his grave; and, who knows, maybe the Lord had prolonged his life in order that he might pass along the information about the life of the holy Elder."

In 1867 further answers were received in reply to the letters of the Abbot of Valaam (Abbot Damascene). Bishop Innocent confirmed the reality of his miraculous deliverance from drowning through the prayerful intercession of Father Herman, which had been reported by the previously mentioned pilgrim. Bishop Peter wrote Abbot Damascene: "I do not know whether the Kodiak Creole Gerasim Zyrianov will send you any information about Father Herman, but I have, on my part, commissioned a Kodiak priest and a Kodiak citizen, Constantine Larionov, to write all that he knows or has heard from others about Father Herman. I collected what I could and am hereby sending it to you."

Thus reliable information on the life of Father Herman was collected in Valaam. This unexpected collection of information occurred exactly 30 years after the death of the Elder, who had prophesied that in precisely that amount of time people would remember him, as if hearing his testament, to his beloved spiritual relatives, the inhabitants of his beloved Valaam. We will now attempt, on the basis of these sources, to depict the events of his life as a memorial of our blessed Father.

Monk Herman came from a merchant class family in the town of Serpukhov in the Moscow diocese. We do not know what he was called before his monastic tonsure, nor do we know what his last name was. From his very young years he had shown a great zeal for living a pious way of life, and became a monk sixteen years after his birth. At first he entered the Holy Trinity Sergius Hermitage, located on a Finnish bay on the Peterchhoff road about twelve miles from Petersburg. At that time St. Sergius Hermitage was attached to St. Sergius Lavra (near Moscow) and was governed by superiors sent from the Lavra. It is most likely that Father Herman, a native of the Moscow territory, had visited Moscow and made pilgrimages to St. Sergius Moscow Lavra. There he would have had occasion to find out about a holy branch of the holy Lavra, Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Petersburg Hermitage.

At St. Sergius Hermitage, incidentally, a carbuncle appeared on the right side of Father Herman's neck, under his beard. The pain was horrible. The swelling grew rapidly and disfigured his whole face; it was very difficult for him to swallow and there was an intolerable smell. In such a dangerous condition, expecting to die, Father Herman did not turn to an earthly physician, but, locking himself in his cell, with warm prayer and tears he turned to the Icon of the Heavenly Queen, begging her intercession for his healing. He prayed the whole night, then with a wet towel he wiped the face of the Immaculate Theotokos, and tied the towel around the swelling on his neck. Continuing with tearful prayer until, in exhaustion, he fell asleep on the floor and dreamed that he was healed by the Most Holy Virgin. In the morning he awakened and stood up and, to his great amazement, he found himself completely healed. The swelling had dispersed without breaking, leaving only a small lump as a little reminder of the miracle. The doctors who were told about this healing did not believe, insisting that the carbuncle must have been cut out, or had broken by itself. But the words of the physicians were the words of the weakness and inexperience of man in the face of the grace of God overcoming the order of nature. Such incidents humble man's mind under the mighty hand of God's mercy!

Father Herman lived at St. Sergius Hermitage for some five or six years. Then he moved to Valaam monastery, which is situated on the archipelago of the majestic islands amid the waters of Ladoga Lake. With his whole soul he came to love Valaam monastery, its unforgettable Abbot, the great Elder Nazarius, and all its brethren. "Your paternal kindness to my lowliness," he wrote later to Abbot Nazarius

from America, "will not be erased from my heart, neither the terrible impenetrable Siberian wilds, nor its dark forests, nor will the great rivers wash away the memory; neither will rough seas extinguish these feelings. For in my mind I imagine my beloved Valaam and look always at it across the great ocean." In his letters he addresses Elder Nazarius as "most holy, my beloved Batiushka," and all of the Valaam brethren he called "beloved and most cherished." He called his deserted Spruce Island, the place of his dwelling in America, "New Valaam." And, as is apparent, he was always in contact with his spiritual homeland. As late as 1823, thirty years into his stay in America, he wrote letters to Father Nazarius' successor, Abbot Innocent.

Here is what was said concerning the life of Father Herman on Valaam by his contemporary (who was also tonsured by Abbot Nazarius and was the future Abbot of Valaam), Father Barlaam. Father Herman went through various obediences, and was always ready for any good work; he was, among other things, sent to the city of Serdobol to supervise the marble quarry there. The brethren loved Father Herman and would daily wait impatiently for his return from Serdobol to the monastery. Having tested the zeal of the young ascetic, the wise Elder Father Nazarius blessed him to go and live alone in the desert. This desert was located in a dense forest, about a mile's distance from the monastery and it has until now retained the name: Hermanova - later known as Herman's field. On feast days Father Herman would come from his desert to the monastery. During vespers, he would standing in the cliros, he would sing in a pleasant tenor voice the refrain of the canon "Sweetest Jesus, save us sinners," "O Most Holy Theotokos, save us," and the tears would pour out of his eyes like water out of a bucket.

In the second half of the last century the boundaries of Holy Russia on the north were being enlarged with the activity of Russian *promyshlenniki* (scouts and pioneers). The Aleutian islands were discovered. The Aleutian are a chain of islands that stretch from the eastern border of Kamchatka to the western shore of Northern America. Having discovered these islands, it was found there was a holy need for the evangelical enlightenment of the native inhabitants there. Metropolitan Gabriel, with the blessings of the Synod, entrusted Elder Nazarius with the holy task of selecting capable men from the Valaam brethren. Ten men were chosen, and one of their number was Father Herman. In 1794 the chosen men left Valaam Monastery for their appointed destination. The evangelizers quickly spread the evangelical light with holy zeal among these newest sons of Russia. Several thousands of people accepted Christianity. A school was founded to educate the newly baptized children. A church was built where the missionaries lived. But by the unfathomable ways of God the general success of the mission was not long standing. After five years of greatly profitable activity the head of the mission and his whole entourage were drowned. (The head of the mission was Archimandrite Ioasaph, who had been raised to the

rank of a bishop). Before him, the zealous Hieromonk Juvenaly had been granted the crown of martyrdom. The others, one after another, left the mission. Finally, only Father Herman remained. Grace was given to him to labor longer than all his brothers in enlightening the Aleuts.

We mentioned before that the place where Father Herman lived in America was Spruce Island, called by him "New Valaam." This island is separated from Kodiak Island by a strait that is two miles wide. A wooden monastery is located on Kodiak for the placement of members of the mission and a large wooden church built in the name of Christ's Resurrection. Spruce Island in itself is not large and is all covered with forest. A small river runs from the middle of the island and empties into the sea. Father Herman chose this picturesque island by himself as a place for his seclusion. He dug a cave in the ground there with his hands and spent his first whole summer in it. By winter's onset the Russian American Company built a cell for him near his cave. He lived in this cell until his death, and asked that the cave be his grave on repose. Not far from the cell there was constructed a wooden chapel and a little wooden house for his school and for visitors. This was the place of great ascetic labors by Father Herman over the next four decades of his life. In the garden, he himself dug the beds, planted potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables. He had a basket, to carry sea cabbage (kelp) from the shore in order to fertilize the earth; it was so big that people said it would be hard for one man to lift it by himself. Father Herman, however, to the amazement of all, would carry it loaded with kelp, without any outside help, for long distances. One winter's night his disciple, Gerasim, accidentally saw him in the woods and walking barefoot with such a huge log that it would hardly be possible for four men to carry. Thus labored the Elder. All he did to provide food, clothing, and books for his orphans, was filled with immeasurable toil.

His clothing was the same winter and summer. He did not wear a shirt. Instead he wore a form of deerskin shirt without sleeves, which, for more than eight years, he would not take off and could not change. Consequently all the fur wore off and it became soiled. In addition he wore his shoes, his cassock, his faded and patched mantle, and his klobuk (monk's hat). He walked everywhere in this clothing in all types of weather: in rain, snow, winter storms, and in severe frost.

His bed was a medium-sized bench, covered with deerskins whose fur had worn out with time. For his pillow he had two bricks which were hidden under the deerskins and were thus not noticeable to visitors. He had no blanket; a wooden board, which he would lay on his stove, replaced it. Father Herman called this board his blanket and willed to have his dead body covered with it. It was fully his size. "When I visited the cell of Father Herman," stated Constantine Larionov, "I, the sinful one, sat on his bed and I consider it the height of my happiness! "

When Father Herman was a guest among the company's personnel he would talk on soul-saving matters and would sit up until past midnight. He would not stay the night though. No matter what the weather was like, he would always return to his desert hermitage. If for some reason he was compelled to spend the night away from his cell, they would always find his bed had not been slept in, so Elder had not slept after all. The same thing would happen in his desert hermitage. There he would spend the night in conversation, showing his complete disdain for rest.

The Elder ate very little. When visiting as a guest, he would barely taste the food set before him and would go without dinner. In his cell, a very small portion of fish and some vegetables made up his meals.

His body, worn out by labor, fasting, and vigils, was weighed down by fifteen-pound chains that he wore. These chains are to this day treasured in the chapel where, it has been said by some, they were found behind an icon of the Mother of God at the Elder's death; another explanation is that they fell out from behind the icon at his death.

Describing the ascetic labors of Father Herman, his disciple, the Aleut Ignatius Aliaga adds "Yes, Apa conducted a hard life, and no one can imitate it." He was referring only to the external activities of the Elder. "However, his main activity," Bishop Peter said, "was performed in the seclusion of his cell where no one saw him; only outside his cell did they hear him sing and perform the services in accordance with the monastic rule." Such testimony of the Bishop is confirmed by the following answer of Father Herman himself. The Elder was asked "How do you, Father Herman, manage to live alone in the forest, don't you get bored?" He answered "No, I'm not alone there! There is God, and God is everywhere! There are holy angels! How can one be bored with them? With whom is it more pleasant and better to converse, angels or people? Angels, of course!"

How Father Herman regarded the native inhabitants of America, how he understood his relationship to them, and how he had compassion for their needs, he expresses himself in one letter addressed to the former governor of the colonies, Yanovsky. "The Creator has given to our beloved motherland this region. Like a newborn babe, it is still without strength or knowledge of any kind, nor sense. It demands not only protection, but also, because of its weak and tender age, it demands support. But it is still not even possible to ask anyone to do this. The dependence of this people is a blessing of Holy Providence, given as it is into the hands of the Russian authorities here, for an unknown period of time, and is now given into your hands.

"For this reason I, the most humble servant of the local peoples and their nurse, stand before you with streaming tears and write my request of you to be a father and protector to us! We, of course, know no eloquence, but we say, with the halting

tongue of children, wipe away the tears of defenseless orphans, cool the heat of sorrow in melting hearts, give us to know the meaning of consolation. "

As the Elder felt, so he also acted. He always interceded before the authorities on behalf of the transgressors, defending those who were being hurt, helping the needy ones in any way he could. The Aleuts of both sexes, as well as their children, would often visit him. Some would ask for advice, others complained that they were pressured, still others sought defense, or requested help: everyone received satisfaction to the degree it was possible for the Elder to give it. He looked into their grievances, he tried to make all be at peace, and he worked especially to bring harmony back to families. If it was not possible to make peace between husband and wife, the Elder would separate them for awhile. The necessity of such measures he explained thus: "Better to let them live separately without fighting and quarrelling. Believe me, keeping them together might be very frightening. There were cases where the husband would kill the wife or the wife would drive the husband to madness!" Father Herman especially loved children. He would give them crackers and bake pretzels for them. The little ones were especially attracted to his gentleness. The love of Father Herman for the Aleuts would often reach the point of self-sacrifice.

An infection of deadly sickness and sores was brought by ship from the United States to the island of Sitka and, from there, to the island of Kodiak. This sickness would begin with a fever and a very runny nose coupled with shortness of breath, and would end in spasms, with the victim dying within three day's time. Since there were no doctors or medicines on the island, the sickness spread through villages, quickly embracing the entire region. It affected all, even suckling babes. The death toll was so great that for three days there was no one to dig graves and the unburied bodies were laying everywhere! An eyewitness said, "I cannot imagine anything more sorrowful or more horrible than the sight I was struck with when I visited an Aleut dwelling place, Kazhim! This was a huge barn or a barrack with bunk beds, which could lodge as many as a hundred people, where whole Aleut families were living. Some of the dead, who had already become cold, were stretched out next to the living; others were dying with moans and groans that would tear your soul apart! Your heart would bleed with pity at the sight I saw of dead mothers, upon whose already cold breasts crawled hungry little infants who, futilely, and with cries of anguish, were seeking food that was no longer there to be found! You would think that if you could paint all the horror of this sorrowful picture with a worthy brush, even the most hardened of souls would fear death. Father Herman, tirelessly visited the sick the entire time the sickness lasted, a whole month with a gradual decline; begging them to be patient, to pray, to bring forth repentance, or to prepare themselves for death."



The Elder especially cared about the moral enlightenment of the Aleuts. With this aim in mind, he made a school for orphaned Aleut children. He himself taught them the Law of God and church singing. He would gather the Aleuts for prayer in the chapel near his cell on feast days and Sundays. Here his disciples read the Hours and other prayers for them, and the Elder himself would read the Epistles and Gospels, and teach them with his words, while his girl students would sing. The Aleuts loved to listen to the instructions of Father Herman: these talks of the Elder were very interesting, and they had an astounding power of influence over his listeners. About one of these grace-filled talks he writes: "Glory to the holy ways of the merciful God! He, in His unfathomable providence has shown me a new phenomenon which I have not yet seen in my twenty years of living here. Now after Pascha one young woman, no more than twenty years old, who knows how to speak Russian well and who previously had never seen me or known me at all, came to me; and, after hearing about the Incarnation of the Son of God, and of eternal life, became so inflamed with love of Jesus Christ that she did not want to leave me at all. After pleading with me for a long time, she has persuaded me against my own inclination, and love of silence and seclusion, to accept her. Disregarding all the hindrances and difficulties of which I warned her, she has already lived with me for more than a month and is not bored. I, with great amazement at seeing this, remember the words of the Savior: *'Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes'* (Matt. 11:25). This woman lived near the Elder until his death; she watched over the good behavior of the children who studied in his school; and as he lay dying he willed her to live on Spruce Island and, when she should die, to be buried at his feet. She was called Sophia Vlasov."

Yanovsky, the governor, recounts many instances where St. Herman warmed the hearts, not just of the natives, but of the Russians. Yanovsky himself was one such: highly educated and a superficial Christian, he was really a "freethinker" until he met St. Herman. "To my amazement he spoke so powerfully, so sensibly, and argued so convincingly that it now seems to me that no education or earthly wisdom could withstand his words. We conversed every day until midnight, and even later, about the love of God, about eternity, about the salvation of the soul, and about Christian life. His sweet speech poured forth from his lips in an unceasing stream ... with such constant talks and through the prayers of the holy Elder, the Lord completely converted me to the path of truth, and I became a true Christian. For all this I am indebted to Father Herman. He is my true benefactor."

"Several years ago," continues Yanovsky, "Father Herman converted one naval captain, G., from the Lutheran faith to Orthodoxy. This captain was quite educated. Besides many sciences, he knew many languages: Russian, French, German, Italian, English, and a bit of Spanish. In spite of that he could not resist the arguments and proofs of Father Herman: he changed his beliefs and was received into the Church

through Chrismation. When he was leaving America, the Elder said to him, at parting 'See to it that if the Lord takes away your wife that you will by no means marry a German woman; if you marry a German woman she will inevitably hurt your Orthodoxy.' The captain gave his word, but did not keep it. The warning of the Elder turned out to be prophetic. After several years the wife of the captain did die, and he wound up remarrying a German: evidently he either abandoned his faith or it was weakened, and died suddenly without repentance."

Perhaps the best known saying of St. Herman's was given to his fellow Russians. (The original description is quoted in full below). In a conversation with a group of sailors, he quizzed them on their love of God. When they all glibly claimed to love God, he responded: 'And I, a sinner, have tried to love God for more than forty years, and I cannot say that I perfectly love Him,' But he later added , 'at least let us make a vow to ourselves, that from this day, from this hour, from this very moment, we shall strive above all else to love God and to fulfill His Holy Will!'

In general, Father Herman loved to advise people in their hardships: he spoke wisely, to the point, and instructively; mostly on the points of eternity, salvation, the future life, and the ways of God. He would relate much from the Lives of the Saints and from the Prologue, but he never spoke about empty matters. Constantine Larionov witnessed that those who conversed with him found it was so pleasant to hear him that even the Aleuts and their women were delighted with his talks, and it was not unusual for them to part from him unwillingly at the dawn of a new day.

Yanovsky describes Father Herman's external characteristics in detail. "I clearly remember," he says "all the features of the Elder's face: it shone with grace; his pleasant smile; his meek, attractive look; his humble, quiet manner; and his pleasant words. He was not of a tall stature, his face was pale, covered with wrinkles, his eyes were gray-blue and full of brightness, and on his head he had a few gray hairs. His speech was not loud, but very pleasant." From his talks with the Elder, Yanovsky recalls two incidents. "Once," he writes, "I read to Father Herman from Derzhavin's Ode 'God.' The Elder was amazed, ecstatic, and asked that I read it once more, which I did. 'Is it possible that this was written by an ordinary, learned poet?' he asked. 'Yes, he was a learned poet.' I answered. 'It was inspired by God,' said the Elder."

"Another time I was telling him how the Spaniards in California captured fourteen Aleuts, and the Jesuits [Franciscans] were pressuring them all, to accept the Catholic faith, which the Aleuts would in no way agree to do. 'We are Christians.' they said. 'Not true, you are heretics and schismatics,' argued the Jesuits, 'and if you do not submit and accept our faith, we will torture all of you to death.' Then the Aleuts were placed in prisons by twos. The Jesuits came into the prisons in the evening,

with lamps and lit candles, and again began to persuade two Aleuts there to accept the Catholic faith. 'We are Christians,' was the answer of the Aleuts, 'and will not change our faith!' Then the Jesuits began to torture them, at first one, while the other was a witness. They cut off one joint on the Aleut's feet, and then the second joint, then one joint on the finger and then a second. Then they chopped off the feet and hands; the blood flowed, the martyr endured and firmly repeated the same thing: 'I am a Christian.' In such suffering, he died from loss of blood. On the next day the Jesuits promised to torture his friend the same way, but in the night they received an order from Monterey that all captured Aleuts should be delivered there immediately with a convoy. In the morning they were all sent away, except for the deceased Aleut. This was told to me by an Aleut witness, a friend of the martyred one, who had escaped torture. I then reported this to the headquarters in Petersburg. When I finished my description, Father Herman asked 'And what was the name of the Aleut?' I answered, 'Peter, but I do not remember his last name.' Then the Elder stood up before the icon, piously crossed himself and pronounced: 'Holy new martyr Peter, pray to God for us!'"

In order to give you some indication of the spirit of Father Herman's teaching, we will cite some words from one of his letters.

His letters reflect a man of patience, simplicity and love. "Our sins do not in the least hinder our Christianity... Sin, to one who loves God, is nothing other than an arrow from the enemy in battle. "The vain desires of this world separate us from our homeland; love of them and habit clothe our soul as if in a hideous garment. We who travel on the journey of this life and call on God to help us, ought to divest ourselves of this garment and clothe ourselves in new desires, in a new love of the age to come, and thereby receive knowledge of how near or how far we are from our heavenly homeland.

He never sought anything for himself in life. For a long time after his arrival in America, out of humility he refused the rank of hieromonk or archimandrite, and remained forever a simple monk. Father Herman, without the slightest fear of those in power, worked for God with all his zeal. With meek love, disregarding rank, he reproached many for their unsobber life, disrespectful behavior and oppression of the Aleuts. The self-condemning anger of these people rose against him, made all kinds of difficulties for him, and slandered him. The slanders were so powerful that often people of good will could not detect the lies in their accusations against Father Herman, so well were these accusations covered by external correctness. You would have to say that it was the Lord Himself who preserved the Elder. Even Yanovsky, before he had seen Father Herman, wrote to St. Petersburg about the necessity of the Elder's being removed: [false] report was given to him, that he was agitating the Aleuts against their authority. A priest from Irkutsk caused Father Herman much

sorrow, and wanted to send him away to Irkutsk, but a governor of the colonies, Muraviev, defended the Elder. Another priest came to Spruce Island with a governor of the colonies and company employees to make an investigation of the cell of Father Herman, assuming they would find rich possessions there. When they did not find anything of value the employee Ponomarkov, evidently with the permission of superiors, began to pull out floorboards with an axe. "My friend," Father Herman then said to him, "In vain hast thou taken this axe, this very tool which will deprive you of your life!" After a certain period of time men were needed for the Nikolaev redoubt and several Russian employees were sent there from Kodiak. In their number was Ponomarkov and there, at the redoubt, the Kenai natives chopped his head off with an axe when he was asleep.

Father Herman also endured many sorrows from demons. This he revealed to his disciple Gerasim when the latter, entering the cell without the usual prayer, did not receive answers to any of his questions. The next day he asked for the cause of yesterday's silence. "When I came to this island and settled in this wilderness," Father Herman said to him, "many times the demons came to me as if from some need, in the form of people and in the form of animals. I endured a lot from them: both all kinds of sorrows and temptations, and, therefore, I now do not speak to anyone who comes into my cell without prayer."

Having dedicated himself entirely to the will of the Lord while zealously laboring alone to glorify His all-Holy Name, far away from his homeland amidst many sorrows and deprivations, and having labored for many decades with lofty self-denial, Father Herman was endowed with many supernatural gifts from God.

In the middle of Spruce Island there is a little river that runs from the mountain down into the sea. There were always large logs of driftwood at the mouth of this river, brought there by storms. In the springtime when the fish would first appear, the Elder would dig in the sand so that the river could pass by and the fish in the sea would hasten up the river. The disciple of Father Herman, Ignatius Aliaga, said, "It would happen that Apa would say: 'Go and get a fish from the river,' and I would go and get one. He used to feed birds with dried fish and great numbers of them would nest near his cell. There were even some ermine living under his cell. This little animal, after giving birth to its litter, is unapproachable, yet the Elder would feed them with his bare hands. 'Wasn't that (the feeding of the ermine) really a miracle we have seen?' asked his disciple Ignatius. Father Herman was also seen feeding bears. With the death of the Elder both the birds and the beasts disappeared: even if someone were to care for it willingly, the garden would not give forth a crop (after the death of the Elder)."

Once there was a flood on Spruce Island. The inhabitants ran with fear to the Elder,

whereupon he took an icon of the Mother of God from the house where the students lived, carried it out and placed it on shallow ground. He began to pray. After the prayer, he turned to those who were there and said: "Do not fear, the water will not go further than the spot where the icon is standing!" True to his prophecy, the water did not go past the spot where the icon was placed. He promised them that the icon of the Holy Queen would protect them in future times of similar need. He assigned his student Sophia the task of placing the icon on *laida* - shallow ground - in case of flooding. This icon is still preserved on Spruce Island.

Once, at the request of the Elder, Baron F. P. Wrangell wrote a letter as dictated by Father Herman to a Metropolitan. When the letter was finished, the Elder congratulated the Baron with the rank of Admiral. The Baron was amazed. This news in actuality was confirmed to him only after a long period of time, upon his departure from Petersburg.

"I feel sorry for you, my dear relative," Father Herman said once to the administrator Kashevarov, whose son was his godson, "I feel sorry for you; this change for you will be unpleasant!" About two years later, when certain changes had taken place, he was sent to the island of Sitka in bonds.

Once the forest on Spruce Island caught on fire. The Elder, together with his disciple Ignatius, made a clearing in the forest thickets about a yard wide to the foot of the hill by turning the moss up, and said: "Be at peace, the fire will not cross this line." The next day when, according to Ignatius, there seemed to be no hope for salvation, the fire came with great force up to the moss which the Elder had upturned, it ran along it, and stopped, not touching the forest on the other side of the line.

A year prior to the news that was received in Kodiak about the death of a Metropolitan, Father Herman said to the Aleuts that their big spiritual leader had died.

According to Bishop Peter, the Elder often used to say that in America they will have their own bishop, and that there will never be a time when America will be deprived of a bishop. His prophecy came true in time.

"After my death," Father Herman used to say, "there will be a plague and many people will die from it, and the Russians will join with the Aleuts." It is true that about six months after the death of the Elder, there was a smallpox epidemic in Alaska that caused such an atrocious number of fatalities that in several villages only a few people remained alive. This compelled the colonial authorities consolidate the Aleuts: thus from twenty villages there remained only seven.

"Although much time will pass after my death," Father Herman used to say to his

disciples, "My memory will not be forgotten and the place of my dwelling will not be empty. A monk, similar to me, fleeing the glory of men, will come and will live on Spruce Island. And Spruce Island will not be without people."

"My little one," Father Herman once asked Constantine Larionov, when he was no more than twelve years old, "what do you think? Will the chapel which they are now building be abandoned?" "I do not know Apa," answered the boy. "And really," said Constantine, "I did not understand the question then, although the whole conversation remains lively in my memory." The Elder, being silent for a while said "My child, remember that in time there will be a monastery here."

"Thirty years will pass after my death, all those who live now on Spruce Island will be dead, you alone will remain alive, and you will be old and poor; then they will remember me," Father Herman used to say this to his disciple, the Aleut Ignatius Aliaga. "It is remarkable," explains Ignatius, "how a man similar to us could know all this these things way ahead of time! He was not a simple man! He saw our thoughts and he would make us involuntarily open them up to him and receive instructions."

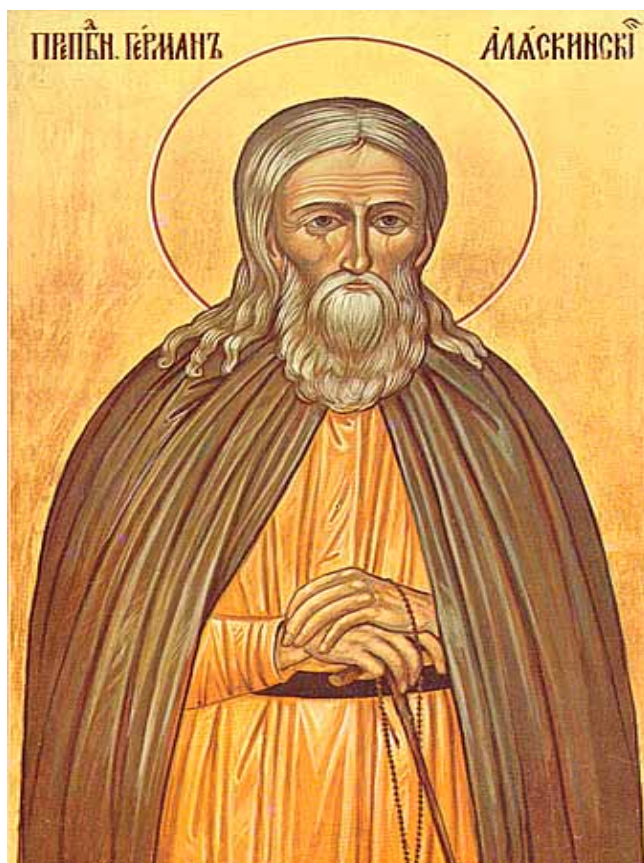
"When I die," the Elder would tell his disciples, "you bury me next to Father Ioasaph. Kill my bullock at once. He has served me enough. Bury me by yourselves and do not tell of my death in the harbor The inhabitants of the port (Kodiak) will not see my face. Do not send for a priest and do not wait for one to come: your waiting will be in vain! Do not wash my body, place it on the board, fold the arms on the chest, bind me in my mantle and with its edges cover my face and my head with my klobuk. If someone should wish to say good-bye to me, let him kiss the cross (in my hands); do not show anyone my face. After lowering me into the earth cover me with my blanket." This blanket, as we have already mentioned, was the board that was always in his cell.

The time was approaching for the departure of the Elder. One day he called his disciple Gerasim to his cell to light candles before the icons and to read the Acts of the Apostles. After some time his face shone and he loudly pronounced: "Glory to Thee O Lord! " Then, ordering Gerasim to stop the reading he said that it was pleasing to the Lord to prolong his life one week more. After a week, again according to his order, the candles were lit and the Acts of the Apostles were read. The Elder quietly leaned his head on the chest of Gerasim, the cell was filled with fragrance, his face was shining - and then Father Herman was no more! Hence, he reposed with the sleep of the righteous in the 81st year of his long-suffering life, December 13, 1837.

In spite of the will of Father Herman expressed before his death, his disciples did not decide to bury him without letting anyone in the harbor know about his death. They

were afraid of the Russians, the Aleuts said.

An envoy was sent with the sad news to the harbor. Upon his return the envoy informed them that the manager of colonies Kashevarov forbade them to bury the Elder until his arrival, he had ordered a good coffin to be made for the deceased and he himself would bring it without delay. However, such instructions were contrary to the will of the deceased. And so a frightful wind blew, rain began to pour, and there developed a terrible storm. The traveling distance from the harbor to Spruce Island was not a long one, only two hours, but no one would venture to go into the sea in such weather. It continued in such a way for a whole month; the body of Father Herman lay in the warm house of his disciples. There was no change in his face and not the minutest smell from his body. Finally the coffin was delivered by the experienced old man, Cosmas Uchilisshev. No one from the harbor came, and the inhabitants of Spruce Island placed the earthly remains of the Elder into the earth themselves. So was fulfilled the last wish of Father Herman - and the wind calmed down and the surface of the sea was as smooth as a mirror.



Also, for some unknown reason, they did not kill the bullock, but the day after the death of Father Herman his bull apparently began to miss him so much that in his despair he hit a tree with his head and fell to the ground dead.

One evening in the village of Katari (on Afognak Island) an unusual pillar of light was seen over Spruce Island that reached to heaven. Stunned by this miraculous phenomenon, the elderly Creole Gerasim Vologdin and his wife Anna said to themselves: "It looks like Father Herman has left us!" and began to pray. Subsequently they were informed that precisely at that time the Elder had passed away. This pillar was seen in other places by

other people as well. That very evening, in another village on Afognak Island, people saw a man being lifted up from Spruce Island toward the clouds.

Having buried their Father, the disciples of the Elder erected a wooden memorial over his grave. "I saw it myself," said Kodiak priest Peter Kashevarov, "and now I can

say that it is by no means touched by time and looks as if it were nailed together today."

Seeing the glorious life of podvig of Father Herman, his miracles, seeing the fulfillment of his prophecies and finally his blessed falling asleep, "generally all the local inhabitants have an awesome respect for him as a holy ascetic, and are entirely convinced that he was pleasing to God," (Bishop Peter).

In 1842, five years after the repose of the Elder, while traveling by sea to Kodiak and finding himself in extreme danger, Archbishop Innocent of Kamchatka and the Aleutian Islands, looked at Spruce Island and said in his mind: "If you, O Father Herman, have pleased the Lord, then let the wind change!" And indeed, even a quarter of an hour did not pass, said the Bishop, when the wind became favorable to them and they successfully landed on the shore. Archbishop Innocent served a pannikhida at the grave of the blessed one out of gratitude for this deliverance.

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## From the Treasury of Saint Herman's Spirituality

A compilation of Saint Herman's teachings on spiritual life

drawn from his letters and conversations.

### The Way Of A Christian

Without exalting myself to the rank of teacher, nonetheless, fulfilling my duty and obligation as an obedient servant for the benefit of my neighbor, I will speak my mind, founded on the commandments of Holy Scripture, to those who thirst and seek for their eternal heavenly homeland.

A true Christian is made by faith and love of Christ. Our sins do not in the least hinder our Christianity, according to the word of the Savior Himself. He said: I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance; there is more joy in heaven over one who repents than over ninety and nine just ones. Likewise concerning the sinful woman who touched His feet, He said to the Pharisee Simon: to one who has love, a great debt is forgiven, but from one who has no love, even a small debt will be demanded. From these judgements a Christian should bring himself to hope and joy, and not in the least accept the torment of despair. Here one needs the shield of faith.

Sin, to one who loves God, is nothing other than an arrow from the enemy in battle. The true



Christian is a warrior fighting his way through the regiments of the unseen enemy to his heavenly homeland. According to the word of the Apostle, our homeland is in heaven; and about the warrior he says: we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph.6: 12)].

The vain desires of this world separate us from our homeland; love of them and habit clothe our soul as if in a hideous garment. This is called by the Apostles the outward man. We, traveling on the journey of this life and calling on God to help us, ought to be divesting ourselves of this hideous garment and clothing ourselves in new desires, in a new love of the age to come, and thereby to receive knowledge of how near or how far we are from our heavenly homeland. But it is not possible to do this quickly; rather one must follow the example of sick people, who, wishing the desired health, do not leave off seeking means to cure themselves.

(From a Letter of June 20, 1820)

### Love Of God

Once the Elder was invited on board a frigate that had come from St. Petersburg. The captain of the frigate was a man quite learned, highly educated; he had been sent to America by Imperial command to inspect all the colonies. With the captain were some 25 officers, likewise educated men. In this company there sat a desert-dwelling monk of small stature, in an old garment, who by his wise conversation brought all his listeners to such a state that they did not know how to answer him. The captain himself related: "We were speechless fools before him!"

Father Herman gave them all one common question: "What do you, gentlemen, love above all, and what would each of you wish for his happiness?" Diverse answers followed. One desired wealth, one glory, one a beautiful wife, one a fine ship which he should command, and so on in this fashion. "Is it not true," said Father Herman at this, "that all your various desires can be reduced to one - that each of you desires that which, in his understanding, he considers best and most worthy of love?" "Yes, it is so," they all replied. "Well, then, tell me," he continued, "can there be anything better, higher above everything, more surpassing everything and in general more worthy of love, than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who created us, perfectly adorned us, gave life to all, supports all, nourishes and loves all, who Himself is love and more excellent than all men? Should not a person then love God high above all and desire and seek Him more than all else?" All began to say: "Well, yes! That is understood! That speaks for itself!"

"And do you love God?" the Elder then asked. All replied: "Of course, we love God. How can one not love God?" "And I, sinful one, for more than forty years have been striving to love God, and cannot say that I perfectly love Him," answered Father Herman; then he began to show how a person should love God. "If we love someone," he said, "we always think of him, strive to please him, day and night our heart is occupied with this subject. Is it thus that you, gentlemen, love God? Do you often turn to Him, do you always think of Him, do you always pray to Him, and fulfill His holy commandments?" It had to be acknowledged that they did not! "For our good, for our happiness," concluded the Elder, "at least let us make a promise to ourselves, that from this day, from this hour, from this very moment we shall strive to love God above all, and fulfill His holy will!" Behold what an intelligent, superb conversation Father Herman conducted in society; without doubt this conversation must have imprinted itself on the hearts of his listeners for their whole life!

(Yanovsky, in Life of Monk Herman of Valaam, 1868)

## The Providence Of God

A terrible accident has a power to awaken us to the realization of the existence of various calamities and dangers surrounding us, from which the Providence of God preserves us. At the same time it convincingly persuades us to acknowledge our own infirmity and weakness and to seek the Father's protection and His most powerful defense, which affirms us in the Wisdom and the Word of God, which came down from above by the will of the Heavenly Father under a curtain of flesh like ours, woven by the Divine Might from the Immaculate Virgin, for our salvation. He became man and taught us to pray that we be not led into temptation. This reminds us from what Father we have our existence, and this in turn should make us seek our heavenly Fatherland and our eternal inheritance.

(From a Letter to Baranoff, 1809)

## Spiritual Power

I was thirty years old when I met Father Herman. Here it should be said that I was brought up in the naval corps, knew many sciences and read much, but unfortunately, of the science of sciences, that is God's Law, I scarcely understood the surface, and that theoretically, without applying it to life, and I was only in name a Christian, while in soul and in deed I was a freethinker, a deist, as are nearly all who are brought up in the military corps and in public institutions. How unfortunate that no attention is given this: that God's Law is everywhere taught superficially, even in the seminaries; yes, and even from the theological academies there come out students, even Masters, who are very learned, but do not have an active faith in their heart, and thus do not live in a Christian way.

All the more did I fail to recognize the godliness and sanctity of our religion, in that I had read many atheist writings of Voltaire and other philosophers of the 18th century. Father Herman immediately noticed this and wished to convert me. But this was not easy! I had to be convinced, to be shown the sanctity of our religion; and, therefore, much time, knowledge, and the ability to speak well and convincingly was required.

To my great amazement, the simple, uneducated monk, Father Herman, being inspired by grace, spoke and argued so wisely, powerfully, and convincingly that, it seems to me, no kind of learnedness and earthly wisdom could withstand his words. In actual fact Father Herman had a great innate intelligence and sound thinking, had read many spiritual patristic books; and most important, he had the grace of God! But since in a short winter's day I had no time at all to devote myself to him, he therefore came to me every day for evening tea, and sometimes also for dinner, and we conversed with him until midnight, and sometimes after; he never stayed the night. Neither rain nor snow nor storm kept the zealous Elder from visiting me and returning the half mile home alone at midnight! He came to me regularly every day in an old ryassa, without a coat; I warmed him with tea and I conversed with him without ceasing: on God's Law, on eternity, on the salvation of the soul, on Christian life, and other things. A sweet discourse flowed from his mouth in an unceasing, enthralling torrent . . . !

Then at midnight, or after, the Elder went home alone with his staff in every kind of storm and cold weather; no one accompanied him on the slippery rocky path; but angels accompanied him and supported him: "For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways" (Ps. 90:11). And Christian love warmed him, with which he was penetrated for the salvation of his neighbor.

By such constant conversations and by the prayers of the holy Elder the Lord completely converted me to the true path, and I became a real Christian. For all this I am obliged to Father Herman. He is my true benefactor.

(Letter of Yanovsky, November 22, 1865)

### Converser with Angels

At the end of the 1930's and the beginning of the 1940's, when the Russian Orthodox Church in America was under the Synod Abroad, I spent more than three years as a pastor in Alaska, where right and left I heard a great number of stories about Father Herman, the Wonderworker of Alaska. People told of his ascetic life, of his miracles, many cases of miraculous help from the water of his spring, from placing earth from his grave on diseased places, cases of sight restored to the blind, of the healing of every kind of cripple, and so on. Of course, one doesn't remember everything. It was a long time ago, and for some reason I didn't write anything down then. I remember very well that a great deal was said. I myself spoke with those who had received miraculous help by the prayers of God's saint.

While I was serving in Kodiak as a priest, the Aleuts there also told me much about Father Herman, and of this the following two incidents stand out sharply in my mind; as I recall, I've never come across them anywhere in print, but they seem nonetheless quite authentic.

The Aleuts related that when Father Herman was still alive and lived on Spruce Island, the local inhabitants used to go to the Elder for some reason or other. And more than once it happened thus: They approached the chapel where he celebrated divine services, and they heard superb choral singing, a multitude of voices singing. They wondered where the people had come from. And all this time the singing was clearly audible, and such harmonious, sweet singing . . . They opened the door into the little chapel, and there Father Herman stood alone reading, chanting half aloud, celebrating the Lord's service. And of course he was alone and there was no one there with him. Father Herman was not a priest, and he could only read and sing as on the cliros. And such a thing was noticed more than once. It was angels of God who sang praises to the Lord with him. The biography of Father Herman records the following incident. The Elder was asked: "How do you live alone in the forest, Father Herman? Don't you become bored?" He replied: "No! I am not alone there! God is there, as God is everywhere. Holy Angels are there. How can one become bored with them? With whom is it better and more pleasant to converse, with men or with Angels? With Angels, of course!"

*Archpriest Prokopy Povarnitsyn*

## A Miraculous

### Feast

*He answered and said unto them, "Give ye them to eat"... And they all ate and were filled (Mark 6:37,42).*

The Aleuts told me also the following incident, which took place on Spruce Island not long before Father Herman's death. Two American natives came to the Elder on the island, either hunters or fishermen. In any case, they came to look at the Elder, because much was said about him even during his lifetime. They were very hungry and, having greeted the Elder, asked him

to feed them. The Elder readily agreed, but told them that they would have to wait a little, to which they agreed. Father Herman went to the little canal not far from his cell, which flowed into the creek, and that into the ocean. The Elder went down to the water and caught a little fish with his hands. He brought it to his cell and began to prepare it. The natives, seeing that one such little fish would hardly satisfy their hunger, called the Elder's attention to this. But the Elder only replied that they should not worry. And what happened? When the meal was ready and the Elder served it to them, he not only fed them until they were full, but there was a great deal left over from this little fish. Astonished and miraculously fed, they left and told many people of this. This story came down to me.

Everything set down here I personally, being three years in Alaska, heard from the local Aleut inhabitants.

*Archpriest Prokopy Povarnitsyn*

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