



## Saint Patriarch Tikhon - His Missionary Legacy to Orthodox America

Source: [Orthodox America](#)



Most of what has been written about St. Patriarch Tikhon since his repose on the Feast of Annunciation in 1925, has centered on the short years of his patriarchate. Although this coincided with the most complex and difficult time in all of Russian Church history, all who take up the pen in his regard agree that he was the “right” man, chosen by God, for that critical hour.

The Saint’s English language biographer Jane Swan, has written: “It is difficult to assess the greatness of Tikhon....His spiritual growth was far beyond that of the ordinary mortal.” This finds agreement with the opinion of the Saint’s contemporary, Prof. Pavel Zaichenko: “in speaking about Bishop Tikhon, I am seized with reverent trepidation This was a giant among Russian Orthodox hierarchs; he was truly worthy of the honor and respect of the entire Christian world.’ [\[1\]](#)



The key to St. Tikhon's greatness lies in his personality, his character. Prof. Zaichenko recalls: "By nature Bishop Tikhon was kind, responsive and unusually sensitive. In his character he was quiet, merciful, good-natured and always tried to preserve in himself serenity, a serenity which he transmitted to the souls of all those around him." Elsewhere it has been said that "he had a strong sense of duty and responsibility... moreover, he was possessed of an iron like self-possession and circumspection"[\[2\]](#)

These were the qualities on which he built his fruitful activity as a missionary hierarch in North America. It was during these seven years, in the crucible of a pluralistic spiritual wilderness, that he refined and honed his insights into human nature and arch-pastorship. This period of Patriarch Tikhon's life and personal development has received little attention. Yet, his "years in America were not only extremely productive, as far as successful administration of his diocese was concerned, but for Tikhon personally, they were years of useful experience which served him well later on. Later in life, he mentioned the fact that his American sojourn not only widened his ecclesiastical horizon but also his political outlook... [since he] was thrust into a completely new environment including freedom of religion, no censorship, [and] the hurrying business-like American bustle..." [\[3\]](#)

Indeed, his experience on this continent contributed no small measure towards the rational and balanced way he had of thinking, and of dealing with events that would have overwhelmed a lesser man. At the same time, it was precisely during his American sojourn—an elementary stage in American Orthodoxy – that a whole "tone" was set, and a direction given, to the Faith on this continent.

It was on September 14, 1898 that St. Tikhon was appointed Bishop of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska, with his cathedral in San Francisco. In 1901 the future Patriarch blessed the cornerstone for the new cathedral of St. Nicholas in New York. On the occasion of its consecration a year later, the future Patriarch expressed a feeling that became very familiar to the Orthodox in the following decades:

"The present day," he said, "is as joyous for us as was the day for Israel when, in the reign of Solomon, the temple of the Lord was erected in place of the tabernacle. Truly enough, until now in New York we had but a tabernacle. Like the tabernacle carted from one town to another, our Church also moved from one place to another. And like David, being sorry that he dwelt in a house of cedar while the ark of God dwelt within curtains, we also many a time were sorry that our church was small, poor, and uncomfortable. Today we put an end to regrets of this kind: the Lord took notice of our heartfelt longings that in this great city there should be erected a church answering to the greatness of the Orthodox Faith."[\[4\]](#)

As a true Christian missionary, however, it was not the building of temples that concerned Saint Tikhon primarily, but the building up of the Faith in temples not made with hands—human souls. To this end he



made frequent tours of his vast diocese—Alaska, the U.S. and Canada, undaunted by the physical hardships which traveling often presented. Details have been preserved by those who shared in these trips.

“On May 6, 1900, at 2 o’clock in the afternoon, His Eminence Tikhon set sail for Alaska on the ship of the Northern Commercial Company, “Homer”. This time His Eminence wished to visit the Kuskokvimsk Mission, established by Bishop Nicholas.<sup>[5]</sup> Inasmuch as the sole means of communication with this mission is by dogsled, Vladika is now faced with the difficulty of traversing on foot the marshy tundra; in especially difficult places he must trust himself to the porters’ skill. The lack of any means of contact with this mission in summer hindered previous hierarchs from visiting this corner of the diocese” <sup>[6]</sup>

Priest Ioann Orlov wrote this in his diary:

“...In 1905 God deigned that I should accompany Bishop Tikhon, and Priest James Korchinsky on a trip from the Russian Mission on the Yukon, through portages along the tundra, through lakes and rivers, along the Kuskokva, to my St Paul Mission... The weather was clear, still, sunny. The entire trip we were tormented by myriads of mosquitoes. When we ‘broke camp for the night, we all, together with Vladika, gathered dry branches for a fire. Along the way we managed to shoot some wild ducks or geese. Vladika helped me to pluck the feathers. I was both hunter and cook for our company. When it came time to go through the forest. Vladika sent me on ahead with a gun, in case we should be met by a bear or other wild animal<sup>[7]</sup>

As an arch-pastor, Saint Tikhon encouraged the development of a missionary attitude not only among his clergy but also among the laity, in a sermon on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, 1903, he exhorted his flock from the ambo of the Cathedral Church of San Francisco:

“Holding: to the Orthodox Faith as to something holy, longing it with all their hearts and prizing it above all, Orthodox people ought...to endeavor to spread it among people of other creeds. Christ the Saviour has said that *neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house* (Matt. 5:15) The light of Orthodoxy was not lit to shine only on a small number of men. The Orthodox Church is universal; it remembers the words of its Founder: *Go ye unto all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature* (Mark 16:15) ..We ought to share our spiritual wealth, our truth, light, and joy with others who are deprived of these blessings, but often are seeking them and thirsting for them...



“But who is to work for the spread of the Orthodox Faith for the increase of the children of the Orthodox Church? Pastors and missionaries, you answer. You are right; but are they to be alone? St. Paul wisely compares the Church of Christ to a body, and the life of a body is shared by all the members. So it ought to be in the life of the Church also...The spread of Christ’s faith ought to be near and precious to the heart of every Christian. In this work every member of the Church ought to take a lively and heartfelt interest...”[\[8\]](#)

The respect and affection of the faithful was made clear when, in that same year, Bishop Tikhon returned to Russia for what was intended to be a brief visit:

“In him said a writer at the time, “we had a Guardian Angel, protecting and encouraging us in the darkest moments when the ignorance of the people whom we were called upon to save, and the continuous intrigues of the enemies of Orthodoxy contrived to dash our brightest hopes and to frustrate our efforts—,’ was such a comfort to know that in difficult moments our leader was with us” [\[9\]](#)

While in Russia, St. Tikhon was appointed to the Holy Synod, necessitating a longer stay. His American flock sent congratulations, but added: “We pray that this great joy be not followed for us by sorrow; that our greetings on this occasion do not turn into farewell from the American Diocese to our beloved Shepherd, but that we shall see you soon, rested and invigorated for the continuation of the preaching of the Gospel of Christ here.”[\[10\]](#)

Eventually Bishop Tikhon was able to return to San Francisco, “having gathered physical strength through contact with Russian earth,” as he wrote, ‘and not only in a physical sense, but above all in a spiritual one [\[11\]](#) In the spring of 1905 he was elevated, at the young age of 40, to the rank of Archbishop. At the same time the Saint had petitioned the Holy Synod to transfer his cathedral city to New York. Upon receipt of the imperial consent, the transfer of administrative offices from San Francisco was made. It was while traveling east that the new Archbishop stopped in Denver, Colorado, to receive into the Orthodox fold a former Uniate parish—which was but part of a widespread movement of many Uniate groups back to Orthodoxy under the vigorous leadership of St. Tikhon, working with the energetic Priest, Alexey Toth. [\[12\]](#)

In his first sermon back in New York Archbishop Tikhon said:

“To the gifts already received by your church from the Heavenly King and from the earthly Tsar, in recent



days there was added the gift of the transferred Diocesan Cathedral into your city and into your church. This is given to you according to your ability. Your city is the second in the world and the first in this country. All the nations are represented here. And how many churches of different traditions are found here! Why not also have the representation of the true Orthodox Church?..But.,you should take care that this gift is not wasted, or buried, but that it bring profit to your church life and to yourselves.”[\[13\]](#) This was a theme the Saint sounded repeatedly in America.

Within two months Archbishop Tikhon left the metropolis, braving blizzards and snow drifts so that he could consecrate a new church in what remained of America’s “wild west”–Montana. The number of his parishes had grown from 15 to 70–all of them self-supporting–and there were also two seminaries, one in Minnesota and the other in Pennsylvania. (St. Tikhon’s, in South Canaan, still functions as both a monastery and seminary.) The Archbishop particularly wanted to train American clergy so that his parishes would no longer be dependent upon Russia for priests. Through his efforts a seminary was also founded in Alaska. There, too, he was active in opening a school for women, with an affiliated orphanage.

Too soon came sad news for the American flock. In February of 1907 a decree signed by the Emperor arrived, appointing the Saint to the Sees of Yaroslavl and Rostov in Russia, In his farewell communication to his American flock, Archbishop Tikhon expressed a concern for the Church in America that is still valid today:

“How can we help fearing for our small flock? How easily the candle can be extinguished by the wind coming through the open window. How easily can an oarsman in a frail boat be overturned by the sea-waves. Here we cannot boast of great numbers, neither of renown, nor of wealth, nor of learning–all that is valued in this world. We are strong here only in one thing- in possessing the True Orthodox Faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8’), and we should ask the Lord for the increase of this gift. Let them stand fast in Thy Holy Church in the Orthodox Faith...” [\[14\]](#)

Soon Archbishop Tikhon was back in his homeland, where events of cataclysmic proportions were about to erupt, and where his Golgotha-and his glory-awaited him. But in America his voice continued to echo with a missionary fervor the Church most still heed today.

“...Do not lose the chance of helping the cause of the conversion of your neighbors to Christ, because by so doing, in the words of St. James, you shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins (James 5:20)



“Orthodox people!..., you must devote yourselves to the Orthodox Faith not in word or tongue only, but in deed and in truth.,”[\[15\]](#)

O HOLY PATRIARCH TIKHON, PRAY TO GOD FOR US!

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[\[1\]](#) Cited in "The San Francisco Cathedral before its Transfer to New York and the Missionary Labors of its Archbishop" by Mission Archbishop N. Demchenko, in *Trudy, San Francisco*, January, 1977 (in Russian)

[\[2\]](#) Orthodox Life, No. 3, 1981.

[\[3\]](#) Biography of Patriarch Tikhon, by Ivan Sazonov.



[4] [Pravmir.org](#) St. Nicholas Cathedral of New York: History and Legacy

[5] [Pravmir.org](#) St. Nicholas's legacy under the Eucharist of the Moscow Patriarchate

[6] [Pravmir.org](#) op. cit.

[7] [Pravmir.org](#)

[8] [Pravmir.org](#) op. cit., 1998

[9] [Pravmir.org](#) op. cit.



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[\[11\]](#)

[\[12\]](#)

This site parish church, Holy Transfiguration, will parish in Galveston, a suburb of Houston, Texas, and is hereby the "mother church of the Gulf Coast" in Orthodox parishes in general. Originally all Orthodox Christians, of whatever ethnic origin, belonged to this parish. Only many years later were other parishes formed along more strictly ethnic and jurisdictional lines. At present this parish is part of the "Orthodox Church of America" (OCA). For more about the missionary activities of St. Anthony, see the last issue of Orthodox Life (May/June 1989).

[\[13\]](#)

[\[14\]](#)





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