Dearly beloved in Christ,

Consider the following text, which is a continuation of *The Epistle to Diognetus* which we began to look at last month. It highlights some specific ways that Christians distinguished themselves in those days:

*Though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behaviour is more like that of transients; they take their part as full citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country. Like other men, they marry and beget children, though they do not expose their infants. Any Christian is free to share his neighbour’s table, but never his marriage-bed. Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live according to the flesh; their days are passed on the earth, but their citizenship is above in the heavens. They obey the prescribed laws, but in their own private lives, they transcend the laws.*

It is interesting to note that the above passage, with its emphasis on living as “transients” on this earth, on obedience and on living as if in heaven, has a very “monastic” feel to it. It is also important to notice that it is all Christians that are characterized by this “heavenly” way of life. There is no distinction between people from this or that nation, between men and women or between monastics and married people.

Even though monasticism was not yet formally “founded,” the above passage (like many other passages from the Holy Scripture and from the early Church) makes it abundantly clear that many elements of the monastic life were already present in the Church. It is also clear from the above passage that all Christians, even those who were married with children, were striving to live “the angelic life.”

This is important to remember when we reflect upon the lives of the monastic saints of the Church, such as St. Herman of Alaska, whose memory we celebrate this month. St. Herman provides an inspiring example of one who lived “not according to the flesh,” an inspiration not just for monks and nuns, but for all Christians.

Saint Herman and all the monastic saints remind us that every human person should be striving to live an angelic life whatever his situation might be and wherever he might find himself. As Saint Paul writes: *For here we have no abiding city, but we seek the one to come.* (Hebrew 13:14). We should both respect the monastics as the specialists in the ascetical life, but also strive for that same life of prayer and repentance which will bring us closer to the life of the angels.
Fr. Claude Vineyard jumped at the opportunity when his grandson, John Urbanic, invited him for a visit in Alaska. It was someplace he had never traveled to, and, most importantly, it was the home of the most beloved Saint Herman. To be able to see where Saint Herman had labored, lived, and converted the first North Americans had always been something Fr. Claude longed for.

Upon his arrival in Anchorage, Fr. Claude was taken aback by the sheer beauty of the surroundings: snow capped mountains looming to the west and the serene waters of Chickaloon Bay to the East. Fr. Claude spent his first few days taking in the sights of Anchorage and the surrounding area with John. Eager to continue his pilgrimage, Father began to make his travel arrangements to Kodiak and, from there, to Spruce Island. Upon discovering that flights from Anchorage to Kodiak were quite expensive on Alaska Airlines, Fr. Claude decided to seek help from Father Paul Merculieff, an old acquaintance of his and a classmate at St. Tikhon’s Seminary who had been living in Anchorage for several years. When Fr. Claude attempted to reach him by phone, he found the number to be disconnected! Unsure of what his other options were, Father was able to contact the Abbess of the Protection of the Mother of God monastery in Kodiak to get some guidance. She referred him to the owner of Spruce Island Charters, Herman Squartsoff who would be able to transport Father from Kodiak to Spruce Island. But, the question of how to reach Kodiak still remained.

When Father Claude made his call to Spruce Island Charters, the man on the other end of the line was the owner himself. Father informed Herman of his desire to visit Spruce Island but expressed his dilemma at how to reach Kodiak. Herman advised Father Claude to purchase his ticket from another airline, ERA, for a fraction of the Alaska Airlines price. Father was very relieved that it now seemed feasible to travel to Kodiak. Furthermore, upon learning that Father was an Orthodox Christian Priest, Herman offered to transport him free of charge to Spruce Island on the condition that he serve the Divine Liturgy the following Sunday in his small village of Ouzinkie. Father Claude immediately accepted the proposal, feeling honored and overjoyed to serve on the same island where St. Herman walked and labored for Christ.

On Friday, Father Claude arrived in Kodiak. He purchased some icons of St. Herman and headed to the Holy Resurrection Cathedral where he met the Rector, Father Innocent Dresdow. As is well known, the Cathedral is the resting place of St. Herman’s relics, including the 16 pound metal cross and chains that he secretly wore as part of his ascetical struggle. Father Claude’s icons were blessed on these holy relics. Father Innocent also gave him some oil from the lampada which is never extinguished. Upon exiting the Cathedral with Father Innocent, a large group of tourists appeared and eagerly approached the fathers, asking to have their pictures taken with them. Father was somewhat tickled by the unexpected experience as he had never felt like such a “celebrity”.

Before departing Kodiak, Father Claude received a blessing to serve at the church of the Nativity of our Lord in Ouzinkie. Herman and his son, German, awaited Father’s arrival at the Port of Kodiak. The three men boarded the small metal skiff, a flat-bottomed boat, and set off for the famed Spruce Island. Herman showed excellent hospitality, as is typical of the Orthodox. At his home that evening, he prepared a delicious elk and deer meat stew which Father Claude thoroughly enjoyed.

The next morning, Father Claude awoke
Parish Profile

Name: St. Mary Orthodox Christian Church
Location: Coaldale
Size: 140 parishioners
Founded: 1909
Clergy: Fr. Daniel Mathewson
Email: fr.daniel@gmail.com

“STILL A LIGHT”

One hundred years seems like a long time to us finite beings, but to our heavenly Father a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day, so to Him we are still just beginning! The Nativity of the Theotokos, our actual patronal name, in Coaldale certainly has a legacy of longevity and perseverance since 1909. As a local gathering of Galician-Russian immigrants and Ugors to this American land, they wanted true authentic Orthodox Christianity not a “look alike” faith or a connection to the Roman Church. Being from the Byzantine Rite they broke away and came into the arms of the Holy Orthodox Church here in America. Setting out on this journey meant they would have to give up all to follow Christ and His Church. That they did, building a beautiful place of worship by 1914. This little jewel, in the heart of Schuylkill County, has been a strength of prayer and Christian communion for all to see in this region.

Under the direction of His Eminence Archbishop Platon, Archpriest Alexandar Hotovitsky was given the task of organizing the parish. By the Grace of God, the first Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the local public school on Phillips Street in Coaldale. This was truly an historic and memorable service! Immediately following the service, the first parish meeting with 200 people in attendance was held. Fr. Hotovitsky chaired the meeting and the parish was underway.

The first priest was Father Michael Fekula, and the choir was directed by Professor Boruch. With untiring dedication, these men and many others began the work of the Orthodox Church in Coaldale. They began by building the Church Hall and later the rectory. This Hall would be their place of worship until the Church could be built. In 1911, a cemetery in Summit Hill was dedicated by His Eminence Platon.

Of course, this town, and the surrounding towns were one of the main suppliers of coal for the industry of the United States. The coal taken from the mines in this area is still to this day the richest and best coal to be found anywhere in the world. Coal mining was not easy in these days and, sadly, it took many young lives. There was great need for the Church to minister to these hard working men and women, and to reassure them of the hope of the resurrection and the “life of the world to come”. Many priests ministered here in Coaldale over the years, 18 in all, each striving to reach these miners with the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Most of the priests served for about 10 years be-

Parish Profile
Father Nicholas Solak and a group of nine others traveled to St. Innocent Orphanage near Tijuana, Mexico in July to join with more than 100 other Orthodox from the United States and Canada in building homes for four poverty-stricken families. Seven in the group were parishioners from Holy Trinity in Stroudsburg – five of whom were hard-working young ladies between the ages of 14 and 21. This is the second year Holy Trinity has carried out a mission trip with Project Mexico – the Orthodox organization at St. Innocent Orphanage that oversees this work. The trip – eight days and seven nights – involved four days of house building, one day stuccoing a wall at the orphanage, two travel days, daily worship, a trip to the ocean, basketball, volleyball, soccer, guest speakers, getting to know the local people (especially neighborhood children), quiet time and wonderful Christian fellowship.

The group from Holy Trinity joined with an Antiochian parish from Souder ton, Pennsylvania and a Greek parish from Webster, Massachusetts to build a small house with a concrete floor, stable walls, two windows, a door with a lock, and a shingled roof for a family of five. The family, a father, mother, and three little girls, had bought a small parcel of land from the government but could not afford the material to build a house. The shelter they were living in had a dirt floor (not healthy during the rainy season) and was built from wooden pallets wrapped with torn plastic tarps. There were no windows and no lock on the simple door that led into the house. The house the mission team built is a healthier and more secure home that gives the family a socio-economic boost and better positions the three little girls to start the climb out of poverty. The mission trip gave this beautiful family a simple home. It also impacted the mission team members in big and unexpected ways. All returned home wanting to go back again next year. Larissa Hatch, a Holy Trinity mission team member from last year, felt the same way when she came home last summer. This summer, she did return – as a two month summer intern for Project Mexico. She helped supervise the work of Holy Trinity’s mission team and the work of many others who came down from the United States and Canada to experience the joy of doing mission work. In so many ways, God’s grace touched all those involved in this project. May such work continue for us and may God’s grace continue touch all of our lives.

Even though the area is “depressed” economically, there are still many who need the healing that the Church can offer, if they only know that it exists. The Roman Catholic Church has closed all three of their communities in Coal dale, so St. Mary’s has a grave responsibility to reach out and bring the message of the gospel to those around us, for the next 100 years! Our strategy is simple: to let people know we exist as the best kept secret in Coaldale, and to invite them to Come and See!

Future plans include: a parish community icon park, community sports programming, more youth events and community service projects, missionary support for foreign missionaries, short term missionaries sent from the parish, Christian day care for small children and the development of a local Orthodox retirement community facility.

We still have an active Ladies Aid group, which meets monthly and serves the parish through community meals and service to the parish. The Ladies Aid also founded the “Good Samaritans” a group of men and women who visit and bring cards to some 30 people in the hospital or nursing homes. St. Mary’s is celebrating her 100th Anniversary this September 6th, with His Grace Bishop Tikhon. Under his direction and the guidance of the Holy Spirit we hope that we will continue to be a bright and shining beacon of the Truth of the Church and the message of Salvation to all. Please pray for us!