

Today we commemorate the Priest Alexis Toth of Wilkes-Barre, confessor and defender of Orthodoxy in America. He is one of the Saints of America.

Alexis Toth was the son of Fr. George and Mat. Cecilia Toth. He was born on March 14th, 1853 in Slovakia. His father was a priest of the United Greek Catholic Church. Slovakia was part of the Austria-Hungarian Empire. Alexis followed in the steps of his father, who was dean of the United Greek Catholic Church in the county.

Before I continue telling you about St. Alexis I thought it would be good to talk about the United Greek Catholic Church. This church is most commonly referred to as one of the Uniate Churches. The term Uniate applies to the Byzantine Rite Eastern Catholic churches in union with Rome. They were previously part of Eastern or Oriental Orthodox churches or of the Assyrian Church of the East.

The Byzantine Rites are the services that we serve in most of the Orthodox Churches. The Eastern Catholic Uniate churches are headed by patriarchs, metropolitans, and major archbishops. The preservation of their own traditions is explicitly encouraged by the Roman Catholic church today, although at one time they were discouraged. The total membership of the various churches accounts for about 16 million thus making up about 1.5 percent of the Roman Catholic Church.

Most of these churches came about by the conquering of lands where the Orthodox Church was the faith of the people by men whose loyalty was to the Pope of Rome. Most often when one ruler conquered another they forced the people of that land to accept and become members of the church of which they belonged.

In the nineteenth century, many of the Uniate faithful came to America as part of the great migration happening at that time.

Back to St. Alexis...

He was first educated in the local preparatory schools. Afterwards, Alexis went on to study in the Roman Catholic seminary for a year. Afterwards, he went to the Uniate (Greek Catholic) Seminary, where he continued his studies for 3 years. After this, Alexis continued to study in the University of Prague, where he graduated with a degree in theology.

On April 18, 1878 he married Rosalie Mihaluk.

Later in 1878, Alexis was ordained first to the Holy Diaconate, and then he was ordained the Holy Priesthood by Bishop Nicholas Toth, the Uniate Greek Catholic bishop of Prešov.

Unfortunately, within only a few years, his wife Rosalie and their only child fell asleep in the Lord.

After this, he was assigned to be curate in the United Greek Catholic Church in Homrogd. Then Bishop Nicholas Toth appointed Father Alexis to be his chancellor.

In 1881, Bishop Nicholas appointed him to be the director of the United Greek Catholic Seminary of Prešov, and Professor of Canon Law and Church History.

Then, late in the 1880s, Father Alexander Dzubay, who had studied with Father Alexis in the seminary, wrote a petition from the USA to the United Greek Catholic bishop, in which he asked that Father Alexis be sent to America. The bishop agreed, and he sent Father Alexis there as a “missioner”.

Father Alexis arrived in the USA on November 15, 1889, and on Thanksgiving Day, November 27th, Father Alexis conducted his first services in the new Saint Mary's Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as the first resident priest officially to serve this church. However, the church was still incomplete and there were no furnishings and no vestments; although, there was a debt. Over the next year, Father Alexis worked to build the community by preaching, asking for donations, acquiring furnishings and vestments, and by bringing the parish to the condition of being an organized, stable institution. He did this without receiving any salary.

He was named the head of the Sts. Peter and Paul Brotherhood, which had served as the organizational backbone of the community. This mutual aid society helped raise money for the church and did much to coordinate its development in these early years.

Five weeks after his arrival at St. Mary's, on December 19, 1889, Fr. Alexis went with one of the local Polish priests to present his credentials and secure the blessing of the local Latin rite Roman Catholic archbishop, John Ireland. While in route to the meeting, the Polish priest was called away to visit with some sick parishioners and Fr. Alexis was left to see the Archbishop by himself. However, Archbishop Ireland was leader among the *Americanist* Roman Catholics who favored

"Americanizing" their Church. This view did not allow for the use of the Eastern rite in Liturgy by foreign speaking immigrants.

Archbishop Ireland refused to recognize him as a legitimate Catholic priest and withheld permission for him to serve in his diocese. Having been a professor of Canon Law and Church History, Father Toth knew his rights under the terms of the Unia and rejected the Archbishop's stance. Archbishop Ireland wrote to his parish priests that they were to ostracize Father Alexis and forbid their parishioners from receiving sacraments from him.

Father Alexis sent reports to his bishop in Slovakia about his reception by Archbishop Ireland, but he received nothing in return. Other Uniate priests in the USA sent letters to Father Alexis, and reported that they had had similar confrontations. The problems for the Uniate priests reached a crisis-point after they met to discuss their situation. They had learned that they were all to be recalled, and returned to Europe.

In spite of the quandary in which they found themselves, Fr. Alexis and the parish of St. Mary persevered in seeing to the material needs of the church. Fr. Alexis continued his fundraising efforts. Within one year of his arrival, he had solicited enough money to purchase five sets of churchly vestments, a Holy Gospel book, chalice, a discos and other implements used for preparation and administering of the Holy Gifts to the communicants and other sacred vessels, candelabras, a censer, processional banners, a *plashchanitsa or epitaphios*, icons, and various other articles and books. All this cost \$840. Also in 1890, he purchased a house to be used as the rectory, for \$1,500. He also paid off \$1,800 in debt which remained on the church. Thus, in about one year, Fr. Alexis raised \$4,140. Leaving the parish with a significant but manageable debt of \$1,980. (Roughly speaking, in year 2002 terms, the liturgical items would cost \$30,000; the house \$55,000; the debt reduction of \$65,000; the total he raised \$150,000; and the debt left over \$70,000.)

All the while, they were not paying Fr. Alexis, "but" as he later wrote to Bishop NICHOLAS in 1896, "always I have been calling God's name, and I didn't lose heart and didn't fall into despair."

Not only did Fr. Alexis not lose heart nor fall into despair while overseeing all the money donated for the church's liturgical needs, but he responded to his own situation with entrepreneurial spirit. He opened a small grocery store for which he

served as the baker. With this limited income, he fed himself but also provided his poor parishioners with an inexpensive supply of provisions and used profit from business to pay for a caretaker and chanter for the church. (He ran the store until 1891, when he passed the business over to a parishioner.)

The following year, in October of 1890, the married Uniate priests were told that they were going to be recalled to Europe. Fr. Alexis convened a meeting at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania where eight of the ten Uniate priests in America expressed their concerns that American bishops had given them a hard time and had petitioned Rome to have the Uniate clergy be recalled to Europe.

In response to this meeting, all the priests in attendance were recalled to Europe. Fr. Alexis returned to Minneapolis and told his parishioners about his grave situation. He went on to declare that the best thing that he could do for St. Mary's was to leave. The parish, after having faced such difficulties in their struggle to get a resident pastor, was not willing to let Fr. Alexis simply surrender and leave. A number of the parishioners said, "Let us go to the Russian Bishop! Why should we always bow before foreign bishops?"

In December 1890, they wrote to the Russian consul in San Francisco, asking if there was a Bishop in America and, if so, what was his name and address.

In January 1891, Fr. Alexis convened a special meeting of St. Mary's church board of trustees and parishioners, wherein they unanimously voted to put themselves under the Bishopric of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska and to send Fr. Alexis and a parishioner to San Francisco to personally invite Bishop VLADIMIR to officially accept the congregation into his diocese.

In February, 1891 Father Alexis and the church warden Paul Podany went to the Russian Consulate and met with Bishop VLADIMIR. Fr. Alexis repudiated the Unia and announced his desire to serve in his ancestral Church and that of his faith - the Orthodox Church. The Russians, only recently had been surprised by the presence of Uniates in America, were again surprised by their eager desire to return to the Church of their Fathers. Bishop VLADIMIR kindly agreed with their request to enter the Orthodox Church.

The next month, Bishop VLADIMIR journeyed to Minneapolis and on March 25, 1891 received Father Alexis and 361 parishioners into the Orthodox Church. The parishioners cried out: "Glory to God for His great mercy!"

Uniates throughout America took note of this event and Saint Alexis, by preaching and writing about the false teachings and deceptions which had misled his people, found Uniate clergy and churches eager to hear him out.

Father Toth's life was not without struggle and hardship. From the time he was received into the Orthodox Faith in 1891, it took over a year for the Holy Synod of Russia to officially accept Father Toth and his flock into the American Missionary Diocese. During this time Father Toth was without any salary, his only income was the small trebe or gifts he received from baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Despite his poverty, Father Toth was accused of selling out the Christian Faith to the Muscovites for a huge sum of money, he was accused of stealing orphan's money in Hungary before fleeing to America, and in Old Forge, Pennsylvania, he narrowly escaped serious injury or death when a rock was thrown at his head through the rectory window. Returning from his missionary journey to Northeastern Pennsylvania, he found that his own flock at St. Marys had turned against him which caused him to move to the newly-converted Orthodox parish in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Recalling this tragic event, Father Alexis later wrote to his Bishop, Nicholas:

...these same people, for whom I sacrificed everything and who, during the attacks of the Papists, stood as strong as a wall, and whom I had been protecting and saving, became so ungrateful...It was told to my face that "we do not want the 'Hungarian' as a priest anymore - we need a Russian priest!" ... So I left Minneapolis and moved to Wilkes-Barre.

Father Alexis endured all his sufferings with the help of his faith in the Lord. He wrote:

I lived through very difficult days. But regardless of the difficult situation and privations, I did not rescind from my temporary thorny road. The Lord gave me strength to overcome the difficulties of being scorned and disdained as a slave of my past connections. All this trouble with its many uncalled for offenses against me, I was able with the help of God to overcome. Glory to God for His great mercy.

Father Toth's health began to decline in 1908 and he fell asleep in the Lord in Wilkes-Barre on May 7, 1909 and was buried in a magnificent mausoleum behind the altar of St. Tikhon's Monastery Church in South Canaan, Pennsylvania. His body was exhumed from his tomb in 1994 and placed in the special shrine in preparation for his official glorification as a saint with the title: Confessor of the Faith in America.

St Alexis' love and concern for his spiritual children did not cease with his death. Before closing the account of his life, I would like to tell of one example of his heavenly intercession:

In January, 1993 a certain man prayed to St. Alexis to help him obtain information about his son from whom he had been separated for twenty-eight years. Placing his confidence in the saint's boldness before God, he awaited an answer to his prayer. The very next day the man's son telephoned him. It seems the young man was in church when he was suddenly filled with an overwhelming desire to contact his father. He had been taken to another state by his mother, and she changed his name when he was a child. This is why his father was unable to locate him. Having learned from his mother that his father was an Orthodox Christian, he was able with the help of an Orthodox priest to obtain his father's phone number in a distant city. As a result of that telephone call, the young man later visited his father, who rejoiced to see what sort of man his son had become. The father gave thanks to God and to St. Alexis for reuniting him with his son.

St Alexis was a true man of God who guided many Carpatho-Russian and Galician immigrants through the dark confusion of religious challenges in the New World and back to the unity of the Orthodox Church through his grace-filled words and by his holy example. In his last will and testament St. Alexis commended his soul to God's mercy, asking forgiveness from everyone and forgiving everybody. His holy relics now rest at St Tikhon Monastery in South Canaan, Pennsylvania where the faithful may come to venerate them and to entreat St. Alexis' intercessions on their behalf.

To quote the Very Rev. Edward Pehanich: "The life of St. Alexis challenges us in his relentless and courageous pursuit of the truth of the Gospel. One of the pamphlets he wrote and distributed in his missionary work was titled *Where to Seek the Truth*.

The challenge for Orthodox Christians living in America today is the dangerous yet common belief that there is no one truth but that each person follows whatever is true for them. Truth is not objective but subjective: I decide what is right and wrong, what is true and false, truth is not revealed from God on high and disseminated to mankind.

While our respect for people of other beliefs has led to relative peace among the many religions of America, the price has been the embrace of a non-Biblical, non-Christian teaching that there are many paths to God, I have my path and you have yours and they are all equally valid.

This new view now demands that we question and change the meaning of such previously basic institutions as family and marriage. In today's society, to declare that there is objective right and wrong, sin and virtue, truth and falsehood is to be labeled bigoted, old-fashioned, narrow and exclusive. St. Alexis, by his struggle to return to the truth of the Gospel, inspires us to continue to seek the truth revealed by the Lord Jesus Christ to an unchanging Church that continues in the Faith of the Apostles."

Through the prayers of Father Alexis, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us. Amen.