

Czech Metropolitan Christopher Visiting Alaska, Kodiak

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Metropolitan Christopher, left, with Bishop (now Archbishop) Benjamin in the Czech Republic in 2011.

Jay Barrett/KMXT

For only the second time, the head of an overseas branch of the Orthodox Church will be visiting Alaska. The Primate of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovak, Metropolitan Christopher, the Archbishop of Prague, will spend two weeks in Alaska, attending dedications of new Russian Orthodox Churches and attending the annual Pilgrimage of Saint Herman in Kodiak. Patriarch Aleksey II of Moscow visited in 1993 on the bicentennial of Orthodoxy's arrival in America.

Father

Michael Oleksa, the acting chancellor for the Orthodox Diocese of Alaska, will be the metropolitan's tour guide for much of his visit. Father Michael has known the metropolitan since studying overseas many years ago. The Alaska visit was facilitated through a visit made by Bishop Benjamin to Prague:

"Consequently, he being bishop of Alaska and so forth, and they being very interested in Alaska, after he concluded his visit to Slovakia and the Czech Republic, he reciprocated (and asked), 'why don't you come to Alaska?' And they had specifically asked for an invitation to Alaska in fact," Father Michael said.. "All though he's bishop of California as well, they weren't too interested in San Francisco and Los Angeles as they were in the land of Saint Herman. So the bishop said, 'Fine, let's plan on it next summer,' and that's how this all got started."

Father

Michael says the metropolitan will have a busy schedule as soon as he gets to Alaska, including attendance at the groundbreaking of a new Orthodox church in Wasilla, but he will get two days to fish and bear-watch on Lake Clark. After blessing the newly-renovated church in Nondalton, the metropolitan and his entourage will head for the Kuskokwim River, where several stops are planned.

"In

Tuluksak they're actually going to break ground for a new church named for Saint Prince Rastislav, the Prince of Moravia who invited the Orthodox missionaries to his principality back in the 800s. This is the first church in America dedicated to Prince Rastislav. And I think the delegation is bringing a special icon to present to the community there as they begin construction of their church. When Bishop Benjamin told them last year they were going to build the Saint Rastislav Church, they said they'd have to be there for that."

Before

coming to Kodiak for the annual Saint Herman Pilgrimage to Spruce Island, Metropolitan Christopher will visit two coastal villages:

"We're

going down to Eek where they built a new church. And to the village of Quinhagak, where Saint Juvenaly, a colleague and member of the original Valaam mission to Kodiak with Saint Herman, where Father Juvenaly and his Athabaskan companion were martyred in 1797 or 1798. We have a community there that wants to build a church, and it will be the Saint Juvenaly and his Athabaskan Companion Orthodox Church"

Father

Michael says the metropolitan is coming to Alaska at a time of rapid growth for the Orthodox Church in the state:

"I

think we've never had more clergy than we have now. The seminary has produced more priests than we've ever had in the diocese. We're building as you can tell. I can count five new churches going up, so expanding into communities where there haven't been Orthodox churches in the past. Mostly because of intermarriage. It's the same story: Orthodox people on the Kuskokwim marry Moravians. Now there's 80 Orthodox in Quinhagak. It's still a thousand Moravians, but there's 80 Orthodox want a church of their own. The Moravians want to help them out and give them the land. So we're going to Quinhagak to meet with that community."

Metropolitan

Christopher is scheduled to arrive in Alaska on Saturday, and he will be in Kodiak for the pilgrimage from August 7th through the 9th.

Unfortunately Father Michael will be teaching a college course and will be unable to attend the pilgrimage this year.