

***A Brief History of Orthodox Evangelism:  
18 & 19 Centuries***

By Victor Beshir

## **The Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries:**

Last time we stopped at the great missionary **Macarius Gloukharev**. We talked about his vision. He was well educated before becoming a monk and later a hermit. When he was called to missionary work, he noticed that other missionaries placed a big emphasis on the number of baptized people-with minimal catechism-as a measure of success. His approach to missionary work concentrated on offering himself as a servant to others to let them see the light of Christ. In addition, he practiced a long catechism before allowing baptism. He told his catechumen that baptism is just a beginning, and not the end of their new Christian life. In his opinion, baptism is a beginning to go from glory to glory in the kingdom of God.

From there, he went on to establish Christian communities to guard and encourage spiritual growth. These communities became like a light to those who lived in darkness and helped in converting more than half of the natives. In conclusion, Macarius succeeded in establishing quality and depth of faith, and in giving an example of a missionary who lived as an ascetic, giving himself as an example of the true Christian. His vision was outstanding. Nikita Struve, a historian, wrote about him: "**He remains one of the most memorable incarnations of the Orthodox apostolic ideal.** In the beginning he knew the desert, the call to silence and contemplation, the affirmation of the transcendence of Christianity; then, in work, he lived in poverty, sharing the needs of the most humble and bringing the wealth of the Orthodox liturgy within the scope of elementary dialect. And finally, there came the return to a praying community, to the life that once glimpsed in the desert, a life devoted to the worship and praise of God."

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## **Innocent Veniaminov: Missionary to America (1797-1878):**

When he was young, he read about lives of missionary workers, which ignited his heart with desire to follow their steps. In his missionary work, he did not only learn the language of the natives, but also created a dictionary for it and wrote a booklet for catechism. In his booklet, he emphasized the need to study the word of God and considered it as the foundation of our Orthodox faith. His booklet was translated into Russian and Slavonic languages and raised the spiritual commitment and missionary awareness in Russia. So, the first lesson we learn from Innocent is the great role of studying the scripture in starting a spiritual awakening among people, which naturally leads to missionary

awareness. This comes as an answer to the "Churchless people" Macarius referred to earlier.

The second lesson we need to learn from his missionary work is his respect to the culture of the native. Although the culture of the native had many negatives, he started not by condemning their way of life, but rather by retaining the positive aspects of it. By doing this, he allowed them to take ownership of their faith. Through education, he allowed the people to see the incompatibility of some of their habits with the gospel. The changes, as a result, came from the natives.

After his ordination as a bishop, he sent recommendations as to how Orthodoxy can penetrate America. He wrote: 'a new bishop who knows English language should be appointed to America. His staff should know English too. Ordain to the holy priesthood American citizens who had converted to Orthodoxy. The bishop and all clergy should be permitted to celebrate the Divine Liturgy in English language.'

One of his remarkable achievements is the establishment of the "**Orthodox Mission Society**," which worked to increase the awareness of the need to support missions by contributing funds and also by the prayers of its members to God to send workers into His harvest, then to open the hearts of those who listen to the Gospel." He worked hard to increase the number of members of the society, and made it as a part of prayers for the society. This society sent hundreds of missionaries to Siberia, Alaska, Japan, China, and Korea. The mission society set the standard for an ideal society that combines the missionary awareness with prayers, along with contributing to the evangelistic work. **Establishing a similar society in our Coptic Orthodox Church would greatly benefit the evangelistic work.**

He died in 1878, and the Russian Orthodox Church canonized him as a saint and as an "Apostle to America." They said that he helped the church to fulfill her responsibility towards her missionary call.

## **Nicholas Kastakin: Missionary To Japan (1836-1912):**

He started his life as a scholar in the area of theology. However, as soon as he heard about the search for a priest to serve in the Russian consulate in Japan, he found a strong resolution in his heart to go to Japan to preach Christianity. Arriving to Japan, he was very disappointed to find out that 'the Japanese at that time viewed foreigners as beasts and regarded Christianity as a villainous sect, to which only inveterate villains and sorcerers could belong.' He struggled for seven years to learn the Japanese language, and the Japanese culture. His intense study of Japan included studies of its religions, mythology, history, and literature. He even attended sermons of famous Buddhist preachers. He was after understanding the mind of the Japanese.

While he was waiting for an opportunity for evangelism, he translated service and prayer books, catechism books, and the scriptures. Later on he helped in writing a Russian-Japanese dictionary. **The great lesson here is the importance of understanding the mind of the people we are going to evangelize, which includes: their language, their culture, and their religion.**

His first successful attempt in evangelism came after about seven years when he met Sakai, an extremist Shinto priest who used to hate Christians, but God opened his heart to the Gospel and he immediately started inviting others to Christianity. Nicholas envisioned the importance of the new believers' responsibilities towards carrying the evangelism efforts rather than having them assigned to foreign missionaries, so **he encouraged the new believers to share their faith and look for every opportunity to boldly proclaim the Gospel.**

Furthermore, he established two types of meetings, each held twice a week; catechumen meetings, where they learn the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in preparation for baptism. The second meeting was for 'evangelists,' which included all those who have been baptized to study the New Testament. While the indigenous evangelists continued to proclaim the Gospel, Nicholas concentrated on strengthening the leaders and working on translations. When the number of believers exceeded 4000 persons, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church ordained Nicholas as a bishop.

As a bishop, he elevated many of the indigenous people to the rank of priesthood, and continued to translate the Bible and other service books. One of his great ideas of evangelism was building a beautiful big cathedral on the top of a hill in the midst of Tokyo to be as one of the most remarkable structures in the city. His vision was that the building would teach many for centuries to come about Christianity. This is one of the ideas I am asking Copts to use in a slightly different way. **I am asking our Coptic churches that have**

been built after Coptic structure module and those churches that have Coptic iconostasis to open their doors to tourists and do evangelism through tourism. I will write more details about this project in my coming book.

By 1891, the church had grown to 20,000 believers. In the midst of this success, Bishop Nicholas wrote a remarkable statement, in which he said 'If the numbers of preachers here corresponded to the Mission spiritual needs, there would be Orthodox Christians in all cities and villages of all provinces in Japan. All Japan is ready to adapt Christianity and only men are needed to gather the harvest in the field of God.' Few years later, he summarized the evangelistic efforts in Japan in a sad report to the Holy Synod. Bishop Nicholas wrote: 'In Japan, we have 205 workers from the Catholic Church, 680 Protestant missionaries, and only one Orthodox missionary. While the Roman Catholic attracted 52,000 to Christianity, Protestant attracted 38,000 and Orthodoxy attracted 23000.'

He ended his report by asking for assistants to be sent to help him. What a sad remark that came from a heart that was burning with a desire to see Christ entering into each village and each city in Japan. He saw its possibilities. He even saw the harvest ready, but sadly he could not find Orthodox missionaries to work with him!

When he passed the way in 1911, he left behind a church of 33000 Japanese believers in 266 communities, with 43 clergymen and a seminary. Richard Drummond, a non-Orthodox historian wrote about him the following words: 'the life and life-fruits of Nicholas compel us to recognize him as one of greatest missionaries of the modern era. In accordance with the Orthodox tradition, he respected highly the language and cultural traditions of the people among whom he served. He respected the people and loved them as persons. He stressed above all the raising up of national workers and the indigenization of the church.' Please notice that this historian recognized the important following factors in Nicholas evangelization:

- 1- The Orthodox tradition respects the language and culture of people (a remark that we need to remember while we call for evangelism)
- 2- Offering peoples both Respect and love
- 3- The importance of raising national workers and indigenization of the church (Here in America they are the Coptic youth who were raised in America).

One of his great statements that summarize his life is this: 'I am happy in the joy of serving to establish God's Kingdom on earth. There is no more important service than this. It is for this that God became man and Himself served the cause, to continue which He chose the Holy Apostles and they, on His instructions, chose their own successors and exhorted them to do the same

from generation to generation till the end of the world. **The field of this ministry is the entire world: the Gospel of God's Kingdom is to be preached to all people**

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Next time we will talk about the Twentieth century evangelists. By the way, there are two words in English that are used interchangeably; **Evangelist** and **Evangelizer**. The first word 'Evangelist' refers to either one of the writers of the four Gospels or to people who preach the Gospel. We read the advice of St. Paul "Do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim 5:4). **He was not talking** here to one of the four evangelists but to his disciple Timothy. In Arabic, the word 'Evangelists' (Engeleen) is strictly used in the Coptic Orthodox Church to refer only to the four authors of the Gospels . The English word 'evangelizer' is seldom used, however, when it is used it refers to 'evangelist'.