

LIFE OF ST. ALEXIS TOTH

Imagine this at a job interview:

- you show up to meet the new CEO after being hired by the branch office
- you are greeted coldly when you present your resume
- you find the only language you both have in common is ecclesiastical Latin
- he reads your resume but objects strenuously to your credentials: you were once married, you use the wrong business approach, he even calls your deceased wife horrible names!
- he not only refuses to approve your employment but even orders you out of the country!

Alexis Georgievich Toth was born on 14 March 1853 in small town outside Presov, in Slovakia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire under Emperor Franz Josef. Local Uniate bishop and an uncle and has a priest uncle.

Dad is Fr. George Toth, mom is Pani Cecelia Toth. Dad is the parish priest and Dean of the Uniate Presov Deanery.

Alexis grows up speaking Carpatho-Rusyn, Hungarian, Russian, German, Latin and has a reading knowledge of Greek.

Young Alexis is educated in the local state schools, decides to follow his dad's profession and spends one year in the local Roman Catholic Seminary, then finishes his seminary studies at the Uniate seminary in Ungvar.

On 18 April, 1878 he marries Rosalie Mihaluk and is ordained right afterward by his uncle.

While second priest in Saros county, his pani and their only child die. Uncle transfers him to be second priest in the Uniate church in Homrozd.

In 1881 is appointed diocesan secretary and chancellor and later that year becomes director of the Uniate seminary and professor of Canon Law and Church History, important posts for future issues. He also directs the diocesan orphanage.

Sometime in the late 1880's, Bishop John Valyi, who succeeds his uncle Bishop Nicholas Toth receives a letter from a classmate of Fr. Alexis', a Fr. Alexander Dzubay, asking for a "missioner" to serve with him in America among the scattered Uniate communities and bishop agrees.

Uniates first came to America in late 1860's and many settled in the Connecticut River Valley of New England. Attended local RC Polish parishes. But majoristy discover that they are welcomed in the mines of Pennsylvania (as strike breakers!) at up-to-then unimaginable wages. Most settle there, in midWest, Colorado.....

Fr. Alexis arrives in NY City on 15 November 1889 and goes right after to the new St. Mary's parish in Minneapolis as its first resident priest. Serves first Liturgy there on Thanksgiving Day, 27 Nov. 1889.

He finds basically a building with bare walls, having been recently built by its parishioners. It has no vestments, no icons or other appointments but does have a huge debt! Fr. Alexis starts working immediately over the next year to remedy all of this. He organizes regular parish life and stabilizes the parish while taking no salary.

There was no Uniate bishop in America at the time. Most of Uniate priests worked as "missionaries" of their respective bishops in Europe. But people and local Polish RC priest urge Fr. Alexis to meet with Archbishop John Ireland of Minneapolis-St. Paul. On 19 December 1889 Father does so.

Ireland:

- Irish born, educated in France as a diocesan priest for Minneapolis.
- served as chaplain from 1861-1863 of 5th Minnesota Volunteers Regiment in civil War.
- resigns due to bad health. Establishes himself as well-loved and respected, become super patriot. Wanted RC Church firmly established in American life: Americanism.
- loyal to 1st Plenary Council of Baltimore of May, 1852:
 1. among other things forbid use of any rite other than Roman in America.
 2. forbid any trusteeism in parishes.
 3. churches could only be built with approval of local diocesan bishop.
 4. all lay activity must be done directly under episcopal supervision.

Uniates did not fit in! Ireland wanted them out of his "American" church. Not unlike the attitude of other US bishops. Priests in Pennsylvania had same problem, but not as forcefully as Fr. Toth did. Bishops were demanding from Rome some decree forbidding the immigration of Uniate clergy. In fact, a decree "Graeco Rutheni Ritus" was being prepared to forbid married clergy in America.

Outcome of the meeting:

- Fr. Toth refused faculties to serve in Minneapolis
- letter from Ireland to all in his diocese to shun Fr. Toth and his people
- Polish priest says to Fr. Alexis, "Oh, Father, what have you done?"
- Uniate priests from all over America write to Toth telling him of similar issues
- Toth writes to his bishop in Europe for guidance but never receives a reply
- Ireland complains immediately to Rome and when 8/10 of the Uniate priests come together in Wilkes-Barre, PA they learn of the letter and their pending order by Rome to return to Europe

Fr. Toth reports back to his parishioners and volunteers to leave. One of them cries, "No, let's go to the Russian bishop. Why should we always subject ourselves to foreigners!"

John Mlinar of the parish contacts the Russian Consul in San Francisco and learns of the presence of a Russian Orthodox bishop there. He travels to SF and meets with Bp. Vladimir Sokolowsky, but there is misconfusion since his Russian is poor and the bishop speaks no Ukrainian. But bishop asks for priest to come and meet with him.

Father Toth goes to SF the following February with a few of his people and parish warden Paul Podany. Fr. Alexis is received then and there into the Russian Orthodox Missionary Diocese and the bishop grants him a monthly stipend to meet his needs, since Fr. Toth had no income since coming to America.

On 25 March 1892 Bp. Vladimir comes to Minneapolis and receives the 361 parishioners into Orthodoxy. One of them cries, "Glory to God for His great mercy!" On 14 July 1892 the Synod in Moscow approves their reception.

Once word of this was out, a landslide of returning Uniates begins and Fr. Toth begins to travel all over the Eastern US preaching return fearlessly and writing on the topic.

He is threatened by some Uniates and RC's and there is one assassination attempt on his life while he is in Wilkes-Barre.

Fr. Toth himself was often harsh in his condemnation of the treatment of Uniates in America. But he counsels his people to live sober, upright lives and defend their newfound Orthodoxy vigorously. One pamphlet, "How We Should Live in America" is very popular. It is part of the new series of catechetical materials he wrote.

Other Uniates accuse him of "selling out" to Moscow at expense of his own Carpatho-Russian heritage. Toth lived a poor life in spite of it all, even taking on a baker's job for a while to generate income while in Minneapolis. Gave much away to help his people, other priests, and to build a permanent church in Minneapolis. Starts a seminary in Minneapolis to educate clergy.

Serves under Bp. Vladimir, Nicholas, St. Tikhon, Platon. Becomes a travelling missionary to other Slav communities reinforcing Orthodoxy. He was instrumental in forming or returning to Orthodoxy 17 parishes and 20,000 people to the Church, even here in the DNE: Bridgeport and Waterbury.

He receives many recognitions from Moscow: jewelled cross & mitre from the Synod itself, Orders of St. Vladimir and St. Anna from sainted Tsar Nicholas II. In 1907 he was considered a candidate as auxiliary to the bishop but declines, saying that such an honor should go to a younger, healthier man. He was raised to protopresbyter.

In early 1908 Fr. Alexis began to have bouts of sickness, and spends 2 months on the Jersey Shore and another 2 months in bedrest in Wilkes-Barre. He reposed on 7 May 1909. His work more than tripled the size of the RO Mission to America.

Fr. Alexis was buried in a tomb behind the altar of the Monastery church at St. Tikhon's. Very soon his intercession was working miracles (1993 story on Orthodox Wiki.) He now reposes in shrine inside the church.

He was glorified in 1994 at the Memorial Day pilgrimage. His icon as well as the service to him were written by our own +Vladyka Job of blessed memory.