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Spiritual nature is something that our dominant North American culture has almost completely abstracted from daily living, treated as an optional fragment of life that one may or may not add to his/her personal lifestyle as one wishes.

In contrast, people in the native Alaskan culture live with a deep acceptance that life is permeated with spiritual meaning and wisdom, a very Orthodox concept. In their culture, spirituality is intrinsic to their identity and worldview, a natural way of life where members are taught by the workings of nature and by example and stories rather than lectures and doctrinal systems.

The incorporation of spirituality into daily living is demonstrated by the Yup'ik people through caring relationships and by authenticity of personality without sham or show. In Mother Olga's native tongue, the very word *Yup'ik* means "Real People", suggesting an integrated, genuine personality in harmony with the community and the surrounding environment. To them, the Reality of the Spirit is perhaps even more self-evident than the physical universe. The Yup'ik people have had a long Christian history, uniting traditional customs and beliefs with conventional Christian doctrine and practice, beginning with Russian Orthodox monks who settled in the area in the late 18th century and American missionaries who accompanied Gold Rush miners to the Alaskan wilderness a century later.

This is the world into which Mother Olga ("Olinka") was born on February 3, 1916 and lived until she reposed on November 8, 1979. She lived a very poor life of subsistence in the village of Kwethluk on the Kuskokwin River not far from the Pacific Ocean in southwest Alaska where per annual capita income was less than \$6000. A description of her life on the Michael Family webpage entitled *Remembering Our Mother Olga*, describes Mother Olga as loving, yet firm; always busy, yet always available to help, simply doing what was needed to help anyone with just about anything. A skilled seamstress, she was noted for crafting the traditional fur boots and parkas she donated to groups for their fundraising efforts as well as clothing for her children and for others in her village. Chronicles of her life are filled with examples of the compassion she demonstrated toward those who were poorer than her own family. One story describes how she allowed a neglected neighbor child to "steal" food from her table. She frequently passed her children's clothes onto other needy families, telling her children not to say anything if they saw someone else wearing something that used to be theirs. The family noted that Mother Olga was short and maintained a modest appearance and talked very little, but conveyed a sense of authority that others could feel in her presence.

Mother Olga married the village postmaster and manager of the general store who later converted and became Archpriest Father Nicolai Michael (1912-1984). Thirteen children were born to them of whom only eight survived. Her experiences convinced her of the need for competent help during pregnancy and led her to serve her community as a midwife, a significant aspect of her life and legacy. She was blessed with the gift of knowing if a woman was pregnant even before the woman herself knew it and discerned when a woman needed to give birth in the local hospital because of medical complications, long before any signs of problems were apparent. With tender concern and understanding, she empathized with and encouraged those who had experienced abuse, especially sexual abuse.

Mother Olga died in November when the weather was harsh and cold as usual for that time of year. Leading up to her funeral, however, a warm south wind blew in, melting the river and enabling many relatives and friends to attend. During the funeral procession to the graveyard, a flock of birds escorted overhead – another exceptional occurrence for November. The warmth also softened the ground making it easy for those who dug her grave. After the last of her friends departed that evening, the cold, harsh winter returned, the birds left, the river re-froze, and the ground hardened. As Fr. Michael Oleksa writes, “the cosmos still cooperates and participates in the worship the Real People [“Yup’ik”] offer to God.”

Stories about Mother Olga continue to be shared among the Yup’ik people of the village who call her a spiritual mother and healer as well as others who have been touched by her. Perhaps one of the most remarkable stories that has surfaced after Olga’s death is that of a woman from New York who was receiving counseling for severe sexual abuse experienced during her childhood. At one point, while in prayer, she had a dream/vision in which the Mother of God walked to her and introduced her to a small native Alaskan woman whom she introduced as Saint Olga. In the dream, the woman followed Saint Olga’s beckoning through the forest to a clearing and into a hut built of mud-plastered logs and covered with grass (a *barabara*, from a Siberian word incorporated into the Yup’ik language). Inside, Saint Olga assisted her through a process of healing using aromatic herbs and pine boughs and gave her fragrant tea to drink. Afterwards, as they went outside and looked up at the northern lights shifting and dancing across the night sky, Saint Olga communicated to her that “the moving curtain of light was to be for us a promise that God can create great beauty from complete desolation and nothingness.”

This memorable experience brought deep healing and peace to the woman who resolved to find out more about Saint Olga, certain that she was not the well-known princess of Kiev depicted on Orthodox icons. Eventually, her search led her to write a letter describing her experience to Father Michael Oleksa, rector of St. Alexis Toth Orthodox Church in Anchorage, and to Matushka Olga’s family. Upon receiving the letter of this story, Olga’s son and daughter-in-law were amazed at the story coming from a non-Alaskan woman who accurately described the hut, the healing ritual, and the appearance of their mother, even though the dreamer had no knowledge of traditional Yup’ik customs. As they read the letter, three people smelled strong, sweet incense, though none was burning there. This story illustrates why Mother Olga has become an unofficial patron saint of battered and abused women.

The woman from New York is not the only one who has experienced healing and help from Mother Olga. A woman from Arizona experienced Olga in a dream telling her that her mother would be all right since she would soon be with Olga. She was somewhat confused because her mother had been in good health when they last spoke. Upon waking, she learned that her mother had been emergency-evacuated to a Sitka hospital. Olga's message in the dream enabled this woman to be with her mother and encouraged them during her mother's final days. A growing number of women in North America, both native Alaskan and others, venerate icons of her, noting a very real, peaceful presence when praying with this icon.

Matushka Olga's life was certainly lived as a good example of what Christ has commanded His followers to do. There are still people today who have clothing originally made by her. An unnamed author of an article in the Summer, 2000 edition of *Jacob's Well*, writes "Matushka Olga's "ministry" may be considered a "living icon" of the Gospel used on the Sunday of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-36). Her consoling presence has been offered on behalf of Christ to the "least of the brethren," to those who have been abused and marginalized, a sign of hope to those who have or will soon experience the death of loved ones. Her life of simplicity and generosity can inspire, energize, confront and challenge those of us who struggle to live as Christians...." (pp. 14-15). As in death as in life, Matushka Olga continues to minister and heal through her prayers and tender understanding.