News



This 1930s photo provided by her family shows Olga Michael, an Alaskan Yup’ik woman who became St. Olga of Kwethluk, Matushka of All Alaska, the first female North American saint in the Orthodox Church in America, and her husband, Nicolai Michael. (AP/Courtesy Helen Lason)

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KWETHLUK, Alaska — June 28, 2025

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It was in the dusty streets and modest homes of this remote Alaska Native village that Olga Michael quietly lived her entire life as a midwife and a mother of 13. As the wife of an Orthodox Christian priest, she was a "matushka," or spiritual mother to many more.

The Yup'ik woman became known in church communities across Alaska for quiet generosity, piety and compassion — particularly as a consoler of women who had suffered from abuse, from miscarriage, from the most intimate of traumas. She could share from her own grief, having lost five children who didn't live to adulthood.



This image provided by the Diocese of Sitka and Alaska in June 2025 shows a detail of the official icon of St. Olga of Kwethluk, Matushka of All Alaska. (AP/Diocese of Sitka and Alaska)

Her renown spread to a widening circle of devotees after her death from cancer in 1979 at age 63 — through word of mouth and reports of her appearance in sacred dreams and visions, even among people far from Alaska.

Now, after an elaborate ceremony in her village of about 800 people in southwestern Alaska, she is the first female Orthodox saint from North America, officially known as "St. Olga of Kwethluk, Matushka of All Alaska."

"I only thought of her as my mom," said her daughter, Helen Larson, who attended the ritual last Thursday along with St. Olga's other surviving children and many of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She is in awe of her mother's wide impact.

"This is not just my mom anymore," Larson said. St. Olga is "everybody's helper."

Why Olga's gender and ethnicity matter

For a church led exclusively by male bishops and priests, the glorification of Olga, the first Yup'ik saint, is significant.

"The church is often seen as a hierarchical, patriarchal institution," said Metropolitan Tikhon, head of the Orthodox Church in America. "Recognizing women like St. Olga is a reminder that the same path of holiness is available to all. Male or female, young or old, rich or poor, everyone is called to follow the same commandments."

St. Olga's sainthood is especially meaningful because many women canonized by the church have been ancient martyrs or nuns, said Carrie Frederick Frost, a professor of religion and culture at Western Washington University who studies women and Orthodoxy.

"To come here and be a part of the glorification of a woman who was a lay woman and was a mother and a grandmother and lived a life that many women have lived, it's just incredibly appealing," Frost said.

> "Today, we sang hymns of a pious Yup'ik woman who lived a life that we can relate to with words that only we can pronounce properly," Nicholai Joekay wrote. "Today," he added, "God was closer to all of us."
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St. Olga's appeal to those who have suffered abuse or miscarriage is also important, she said: "I think the church has largely failed to minister to those situations, not entirely but largely."

There are several female Catholic saints from North America. They include St. Kateri Tekakwitha, a 17th century Mohawk-Algonquin woman canonized in 2012.

An elaborate canonization ceremony

Hundreds of visitors from near and far converged for her canonization — or "glorification" in Orthodox terminology.

"Thou art the glory of the Yup'ik people ... a new North Star in the firmament of Christ's holy Church," the choir sang. The ceremonies were replete with ringing bells,

robust hymns and processions of black-robed clerics, golden-robed acolytes, women in headscarves and other devotees in a mingling of dust and incense.

Some worshippers arrived for the glorification from nearby Yup'ik villages. Others flew in from faraway states and countries to the regional hub of Bethel, and then rode in a fleet of motorboats some 17 miles up the broad Kuskokwim River — a watershed central to the traditional Yup'ik subsistence lifestyle, marked by yearly rhythms of fishing, hunting and gathering.

Hundreds gathered at a riverbank in Kwethluk to greet Tikhon and other bishops at a specially made dock. Choral chants and incense began rising after they disembarked, and continued for hours in the uncharacteristically hot sun of Alaska's long solstice eve.

About 150 devotees squeezed into the sanctuary of Saint Nicholas Orthodox Church, whose golden onion domes rise above the village's modest one-story homes. Others listened outside as a choir sang hymns in Yup'ik, many of them composed for the occasion:

"Nanraramteggen elpet, tanqilria atauwaulria cali Aanaput Arrsamquq, cali nanrararput tanqilria yuucin elpet," said one. ("We magnify thee, O holy and righteous mother Olga, and we honor thy holy memory.")

Prayers honored St. Olga as "the healer of those who suffered abuse and tragedy, the mother of children separated from their parents, the swift aid of women in hard labor, the comfort of all those wounded in heart and soul."

Worshippers approached her open casket after the ceremony, crossing themselves and kneeling.



Worshippers fill St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in Kwethluk, Alaska, on June 19, 2025, for the canonization ceremony of St. Olga, the first female Orthodox saint in North America. (AP/Mark Thiessen)

A family's recollections

Wiz Ruppert of Cranston, Rhode Island, returned to her native Kwethluk for the ceremony. That the grandmother she lived with for much of her childhood is now a saint seemed strange at first, "but then it was also very fitting, because she was also so kind and generous when she was alive."

And Larson, one of St. Olga's daughters, recalled watching women, and some men, seek her mother's counsel. She didn't eavesdrop, but "I used to read their faces," Larson said.

"They'd feel heavy, by their facial expression, their body language," Larson said. "Then they'd have tea or coffee and talk, and by the time they go out, they're much lighter and happier."

What is Orthodoxy's link with Alaska?

St. Olga joins a growing cadre of saints with strong ties to Alaska — widely deemed an Orthodox holy land, even though only a fraction of the state's population are adherents.

It's here that Orthodoxy — the world's second-largest Christian communion — gained a foothold in the present-day United States with the 18th and 19th century arrival of Russian Orthodox missionaries to what was then czarist territory.

Several Orthodox monks and martyrs with ties to Alaska have already been canonized in the Orthodox Church in America, the now-independent offspring of the Russian Orthodox Church.

St. Olga is the third with Alaska Native heritage, emblematic of how the faith has grafted in with some Indigenous cultures. Most of the state's Orthodox priests, serving about 80 parishes, are Alaska Natives. More than a dozen are from Kwethluk.

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A debate, now resolved, over Olga's remains

In November 2024, priests exhumed Olga's body. Her remains are currently kept in an open casket in Kwethluk's church, where pilgrims can venerate her shrouded relics.

When the bishops of the Orthodox Church in America authorized St. Olga's canonization in 2023, there was talk of moving her body to Anchorage as a more accessible location.

But bishops answered the pleas of village residents, who didn't want to lose the presence of their spiritual mother.

Now Kwethluk, inaccessible by roads, will become one of the American church's most remote pilgrimage destinations. The diocese is working with the village on plans for a new church, hospitality center and cultural center.

Worshipping in your own language

The village provided a taste of such hospitality for the glorification. Pilgrims stayed in a local school or in residents' homes — amply fed by home-prepared meals of Alaska specialties such as walrus meat and smoked fish.

Nicholai Joekay of nearby Bethel — who is named for St. Olga's late husband and grew up attending church events with her family — was deeply moved by the glorification.

"In church, up until today, we sang hymns of saints and holy people from foreign lands," he said in a written reflection shared with The Associated Press. "We have had to learn foreign concepts that are mentioned in the Gospels referencing agricultural terms and concepts from cultures that are difficult for us to understand.

"Today, we sang hymns of a pious Yup'ik woman who lived a life that we can relate to with words that only we can pronounce properly," he wrote.

"Today," he added, "God was closer to all of us."