

SAINT HERMAN OF ALASKA

—Commemorated December 13th—

Saint Herman of Alaska, the enlightener of North America was born in 1751 in the village of Kadom in the Voronezh province of Russia. He was born to a very pious peasant family, and his name was Yegor Ivanovich Popov. From his earliest years, Yegor displayed a remarkable inclination for the spiritual life and a yearning for solitude. Not much is known about his early years, but it is clear that he chose the difficult path of the monastic life from a very young age. As a boy, he would spend much of his time at the Sarov monastery, where he often went on pilgrimages. For a time he lived in the forest of Sarov, in a cell by the Elder Varlam, who instructed him in the ways of monasticism.

When he came of age, Yegor was drafted by the Russian army and was forced to leave his beloved Sarov. During his army years, he served as a junior clerk in the city of Kadom. But in 1777, Yegor was released from military service due to poor health, and in the following year he entered the Sarov monastery as a novice. Little is known about this period of his life, except that sometime early on Yegor fell gravely ill. A malignant tumor appeared on his throat, rapidly swelling in size and warping the contours of his face. The pain was excruciating, and a relentless torment made swallowing and breathing almost impossible. As the tumor grew in size and festered, it was clear that death was imminent. Despite this, Yegor did not seek a doctor. Instead, he fell on his knees before the icon of the Mother of God, which adorned his cell wall and poured out his heart in fervent prayer, beseeching God for healing.

Hours passed, and day turned into night while Yegor remained kneeling, transfixed and unmoving. Finally, he took a wet cloth, wiped it across the Theotokos' face, and placed it on the festering mass. Exhausted, he fell to the floor and slept. In this state, he had a vision in which he saw the Mother of God shining in a golden light, which was radiating from her in all directions. Looking at Yegor with complete compassion and love, she reached out and gently touched his neck. At that moment Yegor felt the pain begin to melt away. And as he woke up, he realized that the tumor which had almost claimed his life was completely gone. In its place, nothing but a small mark remained. With boundless gratitude he began to thank the Lord and the Theotokos for answering his prayers and healing him.