



The Alaskan Shepherd



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Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

STILL MORE MISSIONARY TALES FROM THE ALASKAN BUSH

Editor's Note: The life of the missionary is a life rooted in challenge. The Alaskan Missionary comes with unique trials--situations exclusive to this frozen land. It is not hard to imagine a rich reward for those who walk daily a road paved with ice and with snow. Are the challenges faced by the Alaskan Missionary of today that different from the Northern Missionary of the past? Fr. Jules Jette, S.J., penned in October of 1906: "It is very cold. My water-hole showed a thickness of ice of 2ft. 5 inches by actual measurement, and my sourdough was frozen hard on Saturday morning. Just now I hear—and feel—the wind beginning to blow in a storm-fashion that promises a cold night." Another time he wrote, "I should have answered your letter then and there, but my ink had been frozen and had become so pale." A more recent email entry is available from Deacon Denis Shelden of Alakanuk, written in May of this year: "This



was the fastest and the highest river ice break-up we have had since the 1960's. The break-up was very high and very fast and did a lot of damage to the community and personal property. The greatest damages were to the electrical generator plant in which the large fuel storage tanks that were empty toppled over. The water and sewer piping were also damaged when they were broken from their ground anchoring. It's a miracle the pipes themselves were not broken and seriously damaged. For a while, the sewage vacuum system became inoperative until the local crew surveyed the piping and vacuum mechanisms and had the operation going again. Personal damages included snowmachines, ATV's knocked over into the water from elevated platforms and damages to other property such as chain-saws, small mobile generators and other things that floated away when

the water raised above their storages. There were damages to some homes, fish racks and smoke houses. The exact extent of damages has not been done yet. Thank God no one was seriously injured by the flood." The missions and missionaries have benefited greatly as a result of modern-day conveniences. What has not changed is the climate. The rawness of nature and the catastrophic results of its personality still implore the modern missionary to develop and implement action plans worthy of its often unannounced visit. It is both the heroes of the past and present that have woven the rich tapestry of Catholic History in Alaska. It is those missionaries and their experiences that I recount for you, in summary, in this issue.

—Patty Walter

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Special Masses are offered throughout the year for you and your intentions by our Missionary Priests. Please pray that God may bless us and our work.



Brother Bob Ruzicka, O.F.M., stays “on the trail” in Nulato, a Koyukon Athabaskan Indian Village on the right bank of the Yukon River. The Franciscan brothers and priests have served for over two decades in the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks.

This story I share has to do with knowing a little of the Athabaskan language. The word for cold is edzoo’ (sounds like aazoo.)

I stopped in to see an elder who had been sick at home. As I entered her house I noticed it was fairly cool inside even though her wood stove was burning. Since the temperature was -25°, I became concerned, so I asked her about the coldness. Erma looked up at me and said, “Brother I just put some wood on the stove, but it was so cold in here this morning that when the clock on the wall struck 8:00 it went “edzooo, edzooo.” Especially in the cold, humor sustains us!

One May evening I heard that two men had gone through the ice a little above Koyukuk. As I went through town to see if I could be of any help, I stopped in on one of the families of a man who was missing. Jenny Huntington approached me and said it was the custom to make a fire and burn some food and pray a prayer that the river would release the bodies of the men. She asked if I would go with her and pray also a church prayer for them. I did. A short time later we received news that the rescue team had found the first man and subsequently the second man. Two years later, at the same time of year, two men were once more missing. We could see from town, a place where they may have gone into the river with their snowmobile. I again went to the family and saw Jenny sitting by the table. She took one look at me and said, “Brother, are you thinking what I’m thinking?” We headed out the door with some food and with some of the people who were gathered at the house. We went to the bank where we could easily see those searching for the men. We made the fire and prayed the rosary. As we were coming to the last decade of the rosary, we noticed a little isolated snow storm moving up the river toward us and it began to engulf us. As we finished our last prayer, the storm ceased. We looked over at the search team and realized they were opening a tarp which contained the body of the first man. The body of the

second man was recovered also. It is very important to a family that they have their loved one to bury. The joining of the two prayers, in asking God to return these bodies to their families, became a beautiful way to reinforce God’s presence with His people.

—*Brother Bob Ruzicka, O.F.M., Rural Ministry for the Galena Region, Coordinator and Pastoral Administrator for Nulato.*

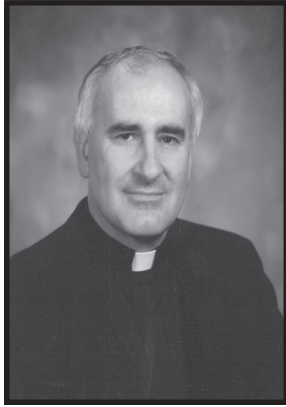
I was in Nightmute for Christmas Eve midnight Mass. Nightmute is a Yup’ik Eskimo village of about 250 located along the Toksook River on Nelson Island. On Christmas day I was planning to travel to Chefnak, a little southeast on the Kina River. I woke to find it raining, snowing, and blowing winds of 40-50 mph. I decided to go anyway, but with a guide. On the way we lost the trail and had to backtrack—then one of my sparkplugs went out and the snowmachine quit entirely. I hopped on my guide’s snowmachine and we finally arrived in Chefnak three hours later. Villagers had planned to celebrate Mass at 11:00 but instead went ahead with a potluck in the Community Hall and Mass followed in the school gym since the village had lost its church to a fire the past year.

Later, we headed back to Nightmute around 7:00 pm with new sparkplugs in hand. When we stopped for my snowmachine along the trail we realized that because of the bumpy terrain my backpack had fallen off--somewhere. The backpack contained my snowmachine keys. Just as we were going back, another snowmachine came by on its way to Chefnak. He promised to search for the pack. The next morning I received a call with the news that he had found the backpack near Chefnak—a dog was chewing on it. I remembered then that I had put some food in it from the potluck. That afternoon we went to get my snowmachine and I was finally home safe and sound. There is never a dull moment in bush Alaska.

—*Fr. Dave Anderson, S.J., Toksook Bay, Chefnak, & Nightmute.*



In Toksook Bay (from left to right): Bishop Donald Kettler, Larry John, Maggie John, Fr. Dave Anderson, S.J., Patty Walter and Fr. Dick Case, S.J., pose for a picture during Bishop Kettler’s 2002 ordination trip.



Dear Co-missionaries in Christ,

As we prepare to welcome a bright new year, I have the privilege of once again sending our sincere thanks to all of you who have so generously provided for us and made it possible for us to carry on our work in this northern Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska.

It has been, thanks be to God, a good year and, thanks to Him and to you, though a few changes have taken place, our mission work has prospered.

I am pleased to announce to you that once again, now eleven years in a row, our Radio Mission, KNOM in Nome, the oldest USA Catholic radio station, received the prestigious Gabriel Award, its 14th!

We had cause to celebrate on many occasions this year. On January 14, I traveled to Aniak to dedicate their new addition to St. Theresa Church. On March 28, I celebrated the Mass of Chrism in Bethel, Alaska. This was the first time a Chrism Mass was celebrated in two locations in the Diocese, in the same year. June began the 40th anniversary celebration of Sacred Heart Cathedral and, on June 9, I had the joy of ordaining to the transitional diaconate Seminarian Robert Fath. Deacon Fath will be returning to us upon completion of his seminarian training in 2007, to be ordained a priest for the Diocese of Fairbanks.

Good friends have retired and moved on—while we were blessed to welcome some new friends. In April, Lucy Dalsky, Alaskan Shepherd Office Manager, retired after 10 years of service. Fred Villa moved on to a University administrative position in April and was replaced by Robert Hannon, in July, as Special Assistant. In May, Brother Kirby Boone, C.F.X., retired from his Alaskan missionary ministry and returned to Kentucky. Brother Kirby served as a missionary for 16 years. In May, too, Sister Rose Beck, S.S.N.D., retired after a total service time of over 22 years as a missionary in Alaska. Father John A. Hinsvark retired in May after over 40 years of service to the people of Alaska. Sister Cynthia Borman, S.S.N.D., retired in May. Sister Cynthia served the people of Kaltag. In July, we said goodbye to Sister Ann Sabol, C.S.J., and to Sister Andrea Scott, C.S.J. Sister Ann served as manager for the House of Prayer and she served in the school as a teacher. Sister Andrea served in the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks as librarian. In August, Father Mark Hoelsken, S.J., took up a new ministry in Oregon, after serving a combined time of 18 years in Alaska. Sister Marian Leaf, O.S.F., joined the good people in Aniak to serve as their Pastoral Facilitator in August. Sister Margaret Butler, S.S.J., arrived that same month to serve the people of Tok, as Parish Administrator. To our chancery family, I had the pleasure of welcoming the following: Vicki Kinsey, receptionist; Krystal Francesco, documents clerk; Justin Lefevre, CCHD (Campaign for Human Development) intern; Odessa Bogusch and Katrina Francesco, Alaskan Shepherd clerks; Kathleen Welborn, facilities housekeeper; and Regina Miller, cook.

In the year 2006, we bade goodbye to faithful servants of the Diocese of Fairbanks. Father William C. Dibb, S.J., died on November 2, at the Jesuit infirmary in Spokane, Washington. Father Dibb spent a total of 38 years in Alaska, serving in all three of Alaska's dioceses. He ministered to Alaska's Native peoples, as well as to its non-Natives. Father Al Allmaras, a retired priest from the Fargo Diocese, who for a time served as parish priest at Our Lady of the Snows in Nulato, died May 18, in Anchorage. Over the last few years, Father Al ministered at Nulato during Lent and Holy Week. Father Al had a deep love for the people and parish of Nulato and a true missionary's heart. Father Richard L. McCaffrey, S.J., who spent most of his apostolic life as a Jesuit serving in Alaska, died on Sunday, May 7, of natural causes at Colombiere Jesuit Community in Portland, Oregon. He was 45 years a Jesuit and 33 years a priest.

This diocese is a mighty big sled. It takes many to pull it. It is heartwarming to know you are pulling along with us. Without you, the sled would become impossible to budge. May God bless you. May He bless, too, all who are dear to you and look kindly on all your concerns. Be assured that we do daily remember you and them in our Masses and prayers—and are very grateful to be remembered in yours.

I pray that the New Year of Our Lord 2007 may bring you and all dear to you many special graces and blessings. And I extend to you, dear Co-missionaries, my personal best wishes—in Faith, Hope, and Love...

Donald J. Kettler
Bishop of the Diocese of Fairbanks

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Donald J. Kettler". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

During the Month of January, and throughout the New Year, 2007, please remember in your Masses and prayers the following friends and family:

Yes, please send _____ copy(ies) of
***Alaskana Catholica, written by
 Father Louis L. Renner, S.J.***

I am enclosing \$80.00 for each book,
 which includes shipping.

Name _____
 Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email _____

DATE _____ 2006 10 F92

Yes, please send _____ copy(ies) of
***Gleeson, The Last Vicar Apostolic of
 All of Alaska, written by
 Sister Carol Louise Hiller, O.P.***

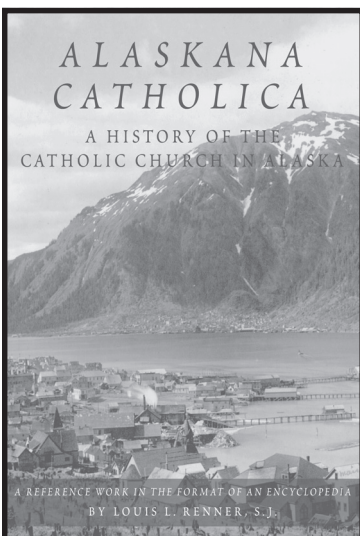
I am enclosing \$20.00 for each book,
 which includes shipping.

Name _____
 Address _____

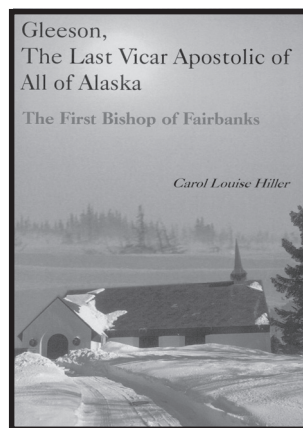
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email _____

DATE _____ 2006 10 F91



Alaskana Catholica (“a unique gift, whether to give or to receive”) is a reference work in the format of an encyclopedia. It offers its readers something more than mere bare-bones reference data and Who’s Who-s. Moreover, some entries have a story about the given entry’s subject attached to them. Some have a “tapestry” woven out of a series of quotations from the mission diary of the given place attached to them. These stories and tapestries give readers a kind of “you are there” experience, of being present at an event of the past or at a place remote to them. Close to 400 images illustrate *Alaskana Catholica*.



This personal story of Bishop Gleeson unfolds against the backdrop of early American growth and expansion, with special focus on Alaska as it evolved from a territory, was purchased by the United States and then achieved statehood. This part of the globe is explored from the earliest introduction of Christianity into the territory by the Russian Orthodox priests until the growth leads to division into three dioceses by the Catholic Church along with scattered Protestant development within the frigid climes.

The life of Bishop Gleeson and his insights into the future of Alaska are woven together into a fabric that lets readers see a metamorphosis of Alaskan Natives from hunters and gatherers toward a cultural subgroup that can cope with the demands of today’s world. Gleeson served as the Last Vicar of All of Alaska, and one can capture a glimpse of a man with a servant-heart who was a Joyful Frontiersman for God.



Above: “Breakup” in bush Alaska, turns a one-time road into a river. In Marshall, Sr. Rose Monica, O.S.F., waits on the newly formed bank for a ride across the river--and receives it, thanks to local assistance. Below: Sr. Kathy Radich, O.S.F., prepares for a trip from St. Marys, Alaska, to a neighboring village.



in Julia’s kitchen learning about the village and hoping for a key to the parish house as she butchered a caribou. A Tununak visit gave me my first experience of sitting with other adults on the floor around a pot of musk ox soup to eat lunch and to listen to Yup’ik stories I could not understand. The children sat at the table eating chicken nuggets. A serving of fish head soup was my introduction to a wonderful family in Chevak. Sitting on the floor watching a woman clean a ptarmigan I listened to her struggles and heard about her hopes for marriage and family. Walking the tundra in search of berries with a parish administrator gave us a chance to talk about the concerns she has for the parish. While on retreat in Pilot Station I was called down to a fish camp below the church to get some fresh king salmon, the invitation to come down also held the desire of the woman to have conversation around God’s working in her life. I am never quite sure who ministers to whom around the food, but I know that ministry happens and the eating of the food is a great by-product.—*Sister Kathy Radich, O.S.F., Rural Ministry for the Y-K Region, Coordinator.*

It was a beautiful spring day in April, 2004. I was lucky. The pilot from Grant Aviation in Saint Marys was flying upriver to Marshall where I was headed to help prepare for Confirmation over the weekend. Bishop Kettler was expected to arrive two days later. Breakup on the river had begun about a week earlier and as we headed up the Yukon River you could see large chunks of ice floating. It was an awesome, impressive sight.

As we got closer to Marshall, the pilot signaled for me to look down. I was horrified. An ice jam in the river had caused the water to back up over the six-mile road which I needed to cross to get into the village. It looked like a lake at least six feet deep. I fully expected we would need to turn around and go back to St. Marys. After two years in bush Alaska, you would think I would have learned how creative the Yup’ik people are and how easily they handle any situation.

The plane landed and the pilot helped me carry my bags down the road to where the lake started. I was only to wait a few minutes when a boat traveling from the side where the road was no longer submerged pulled up carrying passengers and a four-wheeler to help haul mail. “Hop aboard, Sister,” the airline agent said. When all was ready, we crossed the lake. Finally back on terra firma, I got into the awaiting truck and proceeded to the village.

By the time I was leaving Marshall four days later, the lake had receded and I got to the airport by the normal, boring method of truck. It had been a small adventure but a fun one!—*Sr. Rose Monica, O.S.F., Administrative Assistant to Programs in the Y-K Delta Region.*

A good amount of ministry here in the bush communities centers around food and gathering. In order to find out about parish life on my first visit to Kotlik, I sat on an overturned bucket in the kitchen of the school while two of the most active women in the parish served a spaghetti dinner. On one visit to Hooper Bay I made the wedding cake as the bride came a couple hours before the wedding with the cake mix to state she did not have a working oven. My first visit to Nightmute had me sitting

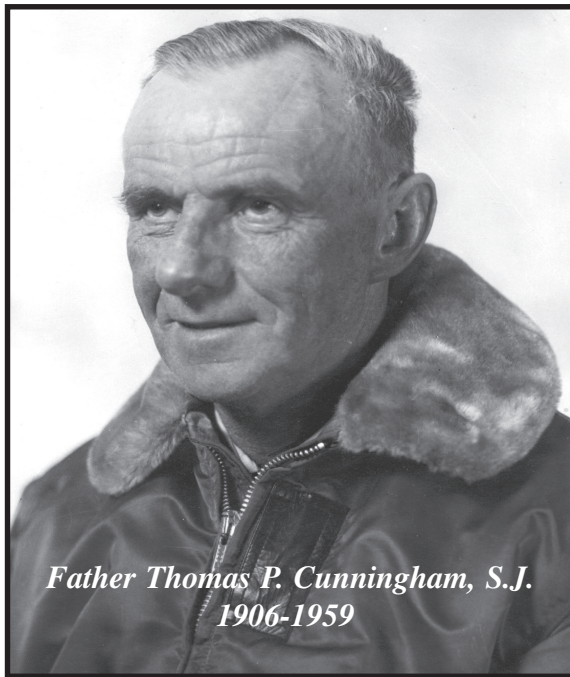
He was born restless and preordained to a life of high adventure. He was an expert on polar ice conditions. When he died at Barrow after 24 years in the Far North, he was acclaimed a folk hero in Catholic New Zealand, and read into the *Congressional Record* as “a noble and gallant figure, a devoted servant of God and of his fellow men.”

Thomas Patrick Cunningham was born in New Zealand of Irish immigrant parents on February 24, 1906. He was ordained a priest on August 12, 1934. A year later he arrived in Nome, Alaska, to serve there as pastor of St. Joseph’s parish.

During his year in Nome, Father Cunningham, though busy with routine pastoral duties, devoted four hours daily, except Sundays, to the study of Inupiaq Eskimo. By March 1936, he could write, “the language is no longer the illogical puzzle it used to be.” He was soon well known and liked in Nome and the surrounding area, by Eskimos and whites alike. All called him “Father Tom.” One of his parishioners echoed the sentiment of all Nome: “Fr. Tom seemed to fit right in with the people of Nome and the Eskimos. He had great public relations; knew everyone in Nome.”

Although Father Tom had expressed a “great desire to labor in the Kotzebue district,” he was next assigned to Little Diomed Island. “He has lots of pep,” wrote Father Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J., “and lots of experience on the sea and with boats. Moreover, he begins to speak Eskimo, and that goes to the heart of the natives more than anything else.”

On Little Diomed, too, Father Tom devoted much time to the Eskimo language. He soon became quite fluent in it. He also became an expert seal and walrus hunter. From time to time he visited Big Diomed Island, or entertained visitors from there. During the year 1939-40, he was away from the island he called his “first love” to make his tertianship at Mont-Laurier, Quebec. He became a U.S. citizen on October 1, 1941.



*Father Thomas P. Cunningham, S.J.
1906-1959*

The year 1943-44 was Father Tom’s last full year on Little Diomed. As early as 1941, he had had hopes of becoming a military chaplain. “Just sort of figured it was the patriotic thing to do,” he wrote his Father Provincial. He received his commission in the U.S. Army on January 11, 1945, and, after graduating from Chaplain School on March 17, 1945, was assigned to Nome. On September 20, 1945, he arrived at Hickam Field, Hawaii.

Father Tom, upon returning to Alaska in the latter part of September 1946, went at once to Little Diomed, where he found “little change.” Soon thereafter, he was back in Nome to assume charge of the parish there and of all its dependent stations. He hoped to spend the summer of 1947 at Teller. However, around mid-July Father Lafortune, while saying Mass in St. Joseph’s Church, Nome, collapsed at the altar. Father Tom went to Nome to tend to him. On July 29th, he and Father Edmund A. Anable, S.J., accompanied Father Lafortune on a flight to Fairbanks. Father Tom was now the obvious choice to replace Father Lafortune on King Island. He landed there on October 4, 1947.

No sooner was Father Tom on the island, than he was teaching school there for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In addition to that, he continued Father Lafortune’s long-established tradition of catechizing, visiting the sick, and sharing in village life. But, unlike Father Lafortune, he also joined the men in hunting. “On Wednesday and Saturday,” he wrote, “I hunt in the afternoons, as I need to eat too. All hunting is done on moving ice, and it is sometimes dangerous and always cold and miserable.” In reality, he did not have to hunt. He would have been, and was, given meat, just as Father Lafortune had been. Father Tom hunted because he needed to hunt, was a hunter at heart, and a good one. One King Islander said of him, “He’s tough man, that one! He go hunt on ice, just like us. All alone. He come back with something every time. Ahhhh! Father Tom!”

“Fr. Cunningham, Arctic Priest, Dies,” read a headline in the September 5, 1959, issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Again his name was in the headlines of newspapers across the nation and on nationwide radio broadcasts, but this time it was to announce his death. At Barrow, in his Quonset hut dwelling, after morning Mass and breakfast, on September 3, 1959, without benefit of last rites, Father Tom’s colorful life came to an abrupt end, at the age of 53. “Coronary occlusion,” the nurse said.

After the Latin *Benedictus* was chanted, taps sounded. The military honor guard fired off a three-round rifle salute. Airmen folded the flag and presented it to Bishop Gleeson. The body of Father Thomas Patrick Cunningham was lowered down to lie next to that of Father Lafortune, who, 24 years before, in Nome, had introduced him to the Eskimo apostolate. What Father Cunningham wrote in the King Island diary about Father Lafortune at the time of the latter’s death can fittingly be written about Father Cunningham himself, “He was a good man to have in this world.”- *As recounted in Alaskana Catholica, by Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., CUNNINGHAM, Father Thomas P., S.J.*

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