



The Alaskan Shepherd

Volume 40 Number 3

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Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

PRIEST IN ALASKA, 1958-2002: LOUIS L. RENNER, S.J.

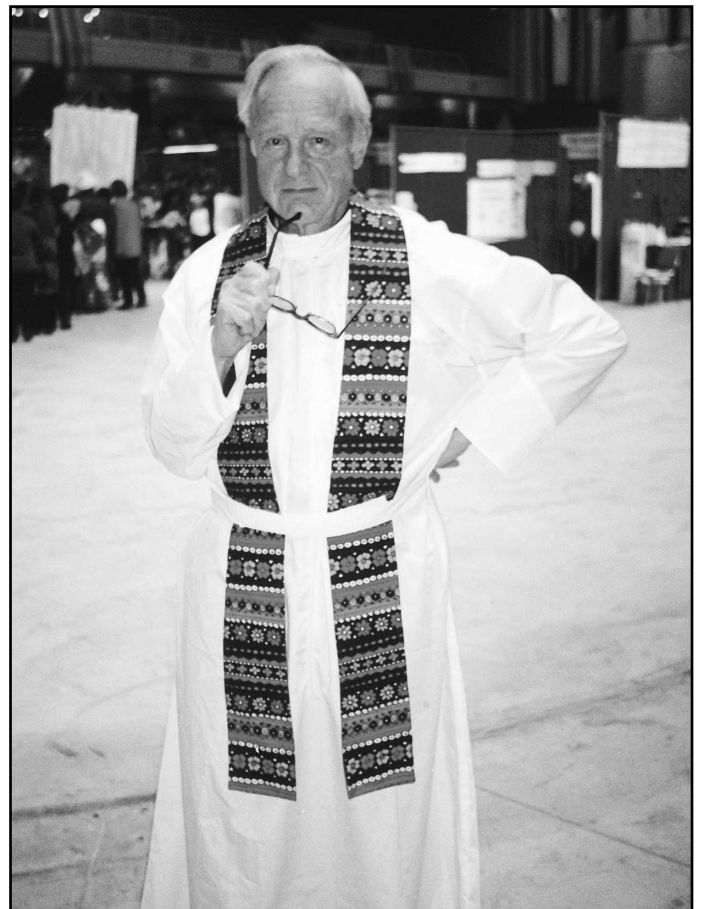
When assigned to tell the story of Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., I saw the assignment as one similar to that of making Alaska birch syrup. To make a gallon of syrup you need 40 gallons of sap. I saw myself challenged to produce an abbreviated narrative of his life from a biographical data file loaded with a great variety of accounts of his ministries and of his academic achievements, along with interviews, articles, biographies, published books, and the like. To fulfill the objective of this newsletter I had, regrettably, to do a considerable amount of selecting and cutting.

Some may know Father Renner from the books he has written. Others will recall his academic achievements. Many more are acquainted with Father through personal letters. What you may not be familiar with is the absolute kindness, virtue and peace that exemplify his character and establish "Father Renner" as one of the most admired, respected and loved priests in the Diocese of Fairbanks.

May I say, at the outset of this digest life of Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., that it relies rather heavily on an autobiographical sketch he put at my disposal. In a Pre-Note to this he wrote:

For years I was after others to produce for my historical files autobiographical sketches. Several years ago, feeling myself compelled by an inner force to practice what I was preaching, and motivated by the example of Holy Father Ignatius—who, having come to the realization that his life as Jesuit and priest did not belong to him exclusively, and yielding to the entreaties of his companions to favor them and posterity with his life's story, has left us his Autobiography—I produced an autobiographical sketch of my own. This I have updated at the beginning of each new year. When I first wrote it, it was my firm resolve that it be seen only by such as would outlive me. However, several members of my immediate family and a few close friends have asked me to see it. Rather reluctantly I let them read what I consider still to be only a rough draft.

Louis Lawrence Renner was born April 25, 1926, in St. Alexius Hospital, Bismarck, North Dakota. He was baptized in the hospital and given the name Aloysius, at the encouragement of a Sister in the hospital, having a personal devotion to that Italian Jesuit saint. Thirty-one years later, Bishop Bernard J. Topel, D.D., in St. Aloysius Church, Spokane, Washington, ordained Louis a priest. Still later, Father Renner was assigned pastor of



In the Carlson Center, Fairbanks, on August 27, 2000, Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., ready to concelebrate at the Great and Sacred Jubilee 2000 Mass.

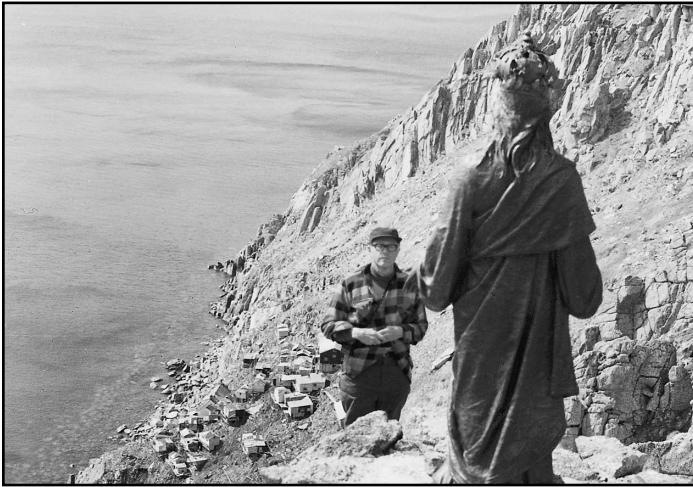
(All photos: Courtesy of Father Renner)

St. Aloysius parish in Tanana, Alaska. In June 2002, Father Renner will undertake his new assignment in Spokane, at Gonzaga University—named after St. Aloysius. June 21 is the feast of St. Aloysius. One cannot help but notice that, at

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A special Mass is offered every day of the year for you and your intentions in one of the Missions. Please pray that God may bless us and our work.

important junctures of Father Renner's life, St. Aloysius has been there.



On King Island in Bering Strait, on June 23, 1974, Father Renner prays before the statue of Christ the King. Behind and below him lies the Eskimo village of Ukiwok. He was on the island at the time to do field work for the writing of his biography of Father Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J., "Apostle of the King Islanders." It is Father Renner's firm conviction that to write fittingly about any part of Alaska "it is essential for the writer to have been there."

From his earliest years Louis helped with farm chores: gathering eggs, carrying water, feeding the chickens, gathering dried cow dung for the kitchen stove, hauling coal up from the cellar, carrying out ashes. The whole family farmed. There was no indoor plumbing; no electricity other than the little car headlight bulb made to glow by a car storage battery kept charged by a wind charger mounted on the farmhouse roof. He was milking cows before he began grade school, and operating horse-drawn farm machinery before he was ten.

The Renner family belonged to St. Lawrence parish in Flasher, N.D. This had no Catholic school, so his parents—never doubting for a minute the importance of a Catholic education—had their children enrolled in a boarding school operated by the Benedictine Sisters in Fallon. At considerable sacrifice to themselves they succeeded in getting Louis and his brothers into that school. The school had four levels: a basement with laundry, kitchen, dining rooms, furnace room and well room. There was no indoor plumbing and no electricity. The coal-fired furnace heated water, which circulated through pipes and radiators to heat the whole place. Classrooms and a chapel were on the first floor, a dormitory for girls and rooms for the Sisters were on the second floor. The boys slept in the attic. Food was generally poor, but the education was solid and Catholic. Mass and devotions were held in the chapel. There was praying in the classroom. The angelus bell rang three times daily. Prayers were said before and after meals. Confessions were heard weekly. Day scholars came from the surrounding farms: some on foot, some on horse-drawn wagons, some on saddle horses, some in old Model T cars.

It was at Fallon, at Saints Peter and Paul school, at the age of seven, that Louis first began to speak English. The classes were all in English, but outside of class time German was the vernacular. When the family moved to Tacoma in 1937, Louis and his three brothers had no difficulty "making the grade" in their new school.

The 30's were hard years for the North Dakota farmer: it was the "dust bowl" era, the effects of the great depression were still

a hard fact of everyday life, seed loans had many farmers deep in debt. These realities—along with the concern of Catholic schooling for his seven children—confronted Louis' father, John Renner, and motivated his leaving North Dakota.

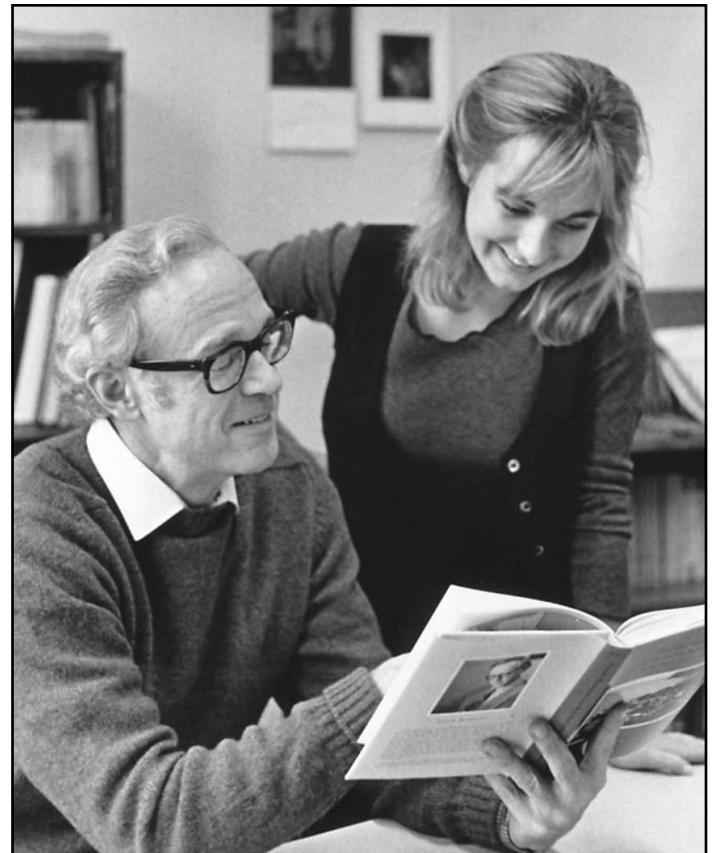
The Tacoma smelter hired Louis' father, and the rest of the family followed him west, arriving on the 31st of July, the feast of St. Ignatius, on the Northern Pacific Railway.

In Holy Rosary grade school, the Benedictine Sisters saw Louis through grades 5 and 6. Louis finished his last two grades at Sacred Heart grade school under the care of the Sisters of Providence and graduated valedictorian.

In the fall of 1941, Louis entered Tacoma's Bellarmine Preparatory operated by the Society of Jesus. He took the routine courses leading to the classical diploma. It was, however, athletics, rather than academic studies that mainly interested him. Louis earned a letter playing football as a freshman and lettered as a member of the varsity team as a sophomore. As a junior he was named to the all-Tacoma second team.

While at Bellarmine, Louis was a member of the school's Quill & Scroll—a club for aspiring journalists. He wrote a few articles for the school's paper, the *Bellarmino Lion*.

Throughout his seven years in Tacoma, 1937-44, Louis earned spending money for himself and the family at odd and part-time jobs: selling magazines door to door, selling the Sunday morning paper on a downtown street corner, picking raspberries and blackberries, working a paper route, working as a Western Union messenger pedaling his bike all over Tacoma, and working as a Safeway store shelf stocker. He spent the summer between his freshmen and sophomore years working in the lumberyard of the Northern Pacific Railway. During his sopho-

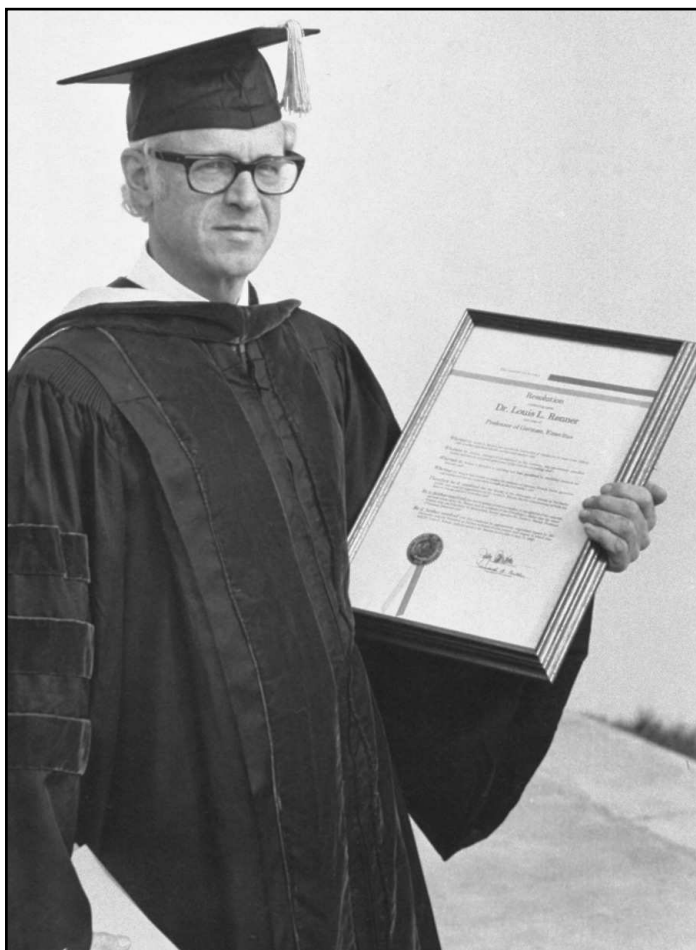


In his office at the University of Alaska, Father Renner, on October 25, 1979, shows his newly published life of Jesuit missionary Father Bellarmine Lafortune to student Annina Salvagno. The University had granted him sabbatical leave to write the biography.

more year, after the football season, he worked in the fertilizer department of the Carstens Meat Packing plant, finally making "big money" at 83¢ an hour! He spent the summer of '43 at a job he genuinely loved, working as a deckhand for the Foss Tug and Barge Company. His final job, before entering the Society of Jesus, was that of a clerk in the parcel post section of the Tacoma's downtown post office.

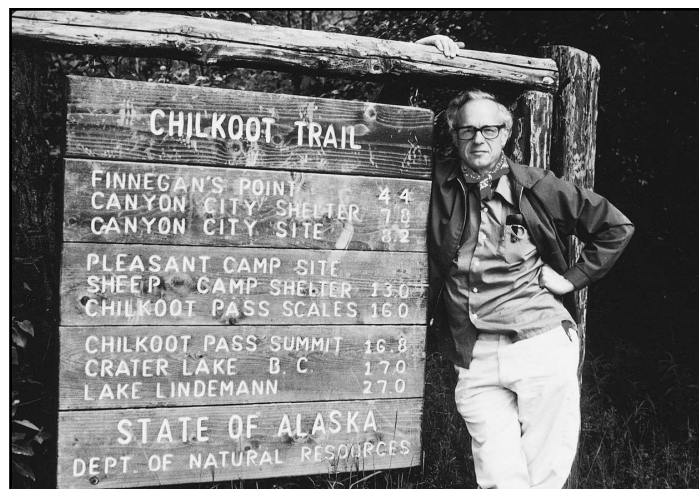
On his being called to the priesthood, Father Renner had this to say:

It is a truism to say that calls to religious life and to the priesthood are, at root, profoundly mysterious. As I reflected on my call, in a homily on the occasion of my golden jubilee in the Society, I still could give no clear reason for becoming a Jesuit. I had no natural attraction to the Society, or to the priesthood. Though I had admired certain Jesuits at Bellarmine, only the school's "Spiritual Father," Father Joseph Lynch, S.J., had suggested that I 'consider the higher life.' My parents had never talked about the possibility of my being a religious or a priest—though, I later learned, my mother had been praying God to grant me a priestly vocation.



"Doctor" Renner, on May 11, 1980, poses with the official document conferring on him the title of "Professor of German, Emeritus, for having served the University of Alaska-Fairbanks for 15 years as a distinguished scholar and devoted teacher."

During Louis' high school years, World War II was raging. With the military draft in force, Louis was eligible on April 25, 1944. In February he was inspired to go and see Father Lynch in hopes that he would put his mind at ease and assure him that it would be in keeping with God's will for him to go off and serve in the Navy. But Father Lynch, being a wise judge of the case, suggested he apply for admission to the Society of Jesus and, if



History-minded and adventurous, and, therefore, wanting to walk in the footsteps of the first Jesuit missionaries to enter Alaska, Father Renner, in June, 1980, hiked the Chilkoot Trail, as they did.

accepted, enter the Jesuit novitiate—at Sheridan, Oregon, at the time—and, if it seemed to him not to be God's will that he become a Jesuit, he could still leave and join the navy. Hear the experience as told by Father Renner:

I have never forgotten the profound peace that came over me when I first walked through the novitiate doors. Immediately I knew that the Jesuit life was it for me. The thought of 'giving it a try' never entered my mind. This was it! Given my expressed desire to join the Navy, there was ruled out the crass fear of military service as a motive. I could only conclude that this vocation was a divine call, a gift, a grace. I have never had the slightest doubt about the authenticity of my call to religious life and the priesthood.

On March 24, 1944, Louis entered the novitiate. Now known as "Brother Renner," he took to all aspects of novitiate life quite naturally and with enthusiasm. Like his fellow novices he was accustomed to pause and pray at the various little shrines scattered around the property. One of his favorites was the simple little one to Sainte Therese, the Little Flower. His life-long devotion to her had been implanted in him during his time at Holy Rosary and at Bellarmine. In late October, 1964, he was to have the good fortune to be able to visit Lisieux and say Mass at the altar of Sainte Therese. As editor of the *Alaskan Shepherd* it was he who was to offer the annual novena of Masses in honor of the Little Flower, the patroness of the Alaska Mission. He has many graces and blessings to acknowledge, gratefully, to her intercession.

On March 25, 1946, he pronounced the vows of perpetual poverty, chastity and obedience. He was now a member of the Society of Jesus. For his vow crucifix he was given the one Father John B. Sifton, S.J., left behind when he died at Hooper Bay, Alaska, in 1940, after having spent 28 years in northern Alaska.

Brother Renner continued on at Sheridan for the years 1946-48, studying the classics: Latin, Greek, English, History, French and German. In the fall of 1948 he—now called "Mr. Renner"—moved to Mount St. Michael's on the outskirts of Spokane for his three years of philosophical studies. Upon his introduction to philosophy, "it was," in his own words, "a case of love at first sight." He made philosophy his major, and by the end of this third year had earned his M.A. in philosophy. While at "the Mount," he had various non-academic tasks, among them that of a tombstone carver.

For his "Regency" period, he was assigned to teach at Seattle

Preparatory School, still an all boys' school in the 50's. Mr. Renner found his years of teaching, 1951-54, very demanding, but satisfying. He routinely taught five periods a day, prefected a study hall, and served as "Property Room Manager," meaning he was in charge of all athletic equipment—and that he traveled with all the teams to all games. He also organized the Orphean Club, a club for students interested in classical music, art, and chess. Renner was considered a good, successful classroom teacher. He thought of himself as a firm disciplinarian. He later learned, from fellow teachers, students referred to him as "the blond dove."

Mr. Renner became "Father Renner" on June 15, 1957. By the time he finished his theological studies in the spring of 1958, he had earned the Licentiate and the Master of Sacred Theology degrees. He expected to spend the year 1958-59 at Port Townsend, Washington, making his "Tertianship." Great, and very pleasant, was his surprise, when he learned that, instead, he would be going to Monroe Catholic High School in Fairbanks, Alaska. With considerable excitement he visited his family in Tacoma, and by the third week of August he was in Fairbanks. Upon his arrival in Alaska, he received a \$5.00 bill from his younger brother, Dick, who wrote, "you win!" Many years prior, Father had bet Dick \$5.00 that he would get to Alaska before him. While still in high school, Father Renner, "dreamed of one day going to Alaska. I just kept thinking North." He likes occasionally to remind people that he was already in Alaska "back in the territorial days, before statehood."



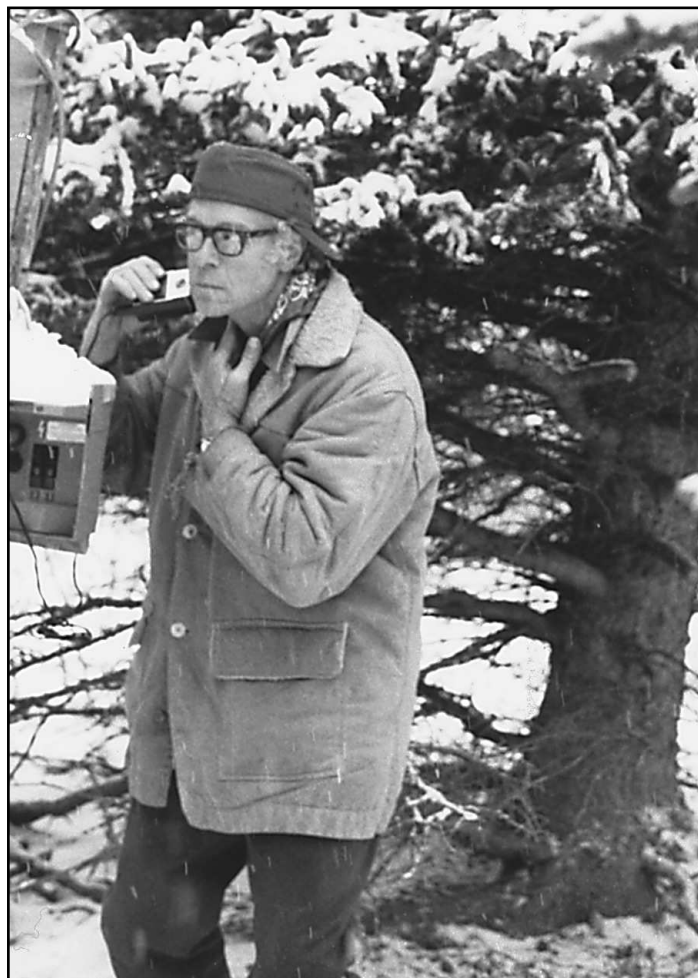
In Bristol Bay, near Dillingham, Father Renner helps his long-time friend, Richard Dykema, one of his former German students, fish commercially for sockeye salmon. Father Renner—living in a tent on the banks of the Nushagak River—spent twelve "working vacations" in Bristol Bay.

During his two years of teaching at Monroe, Father Renner served also as chaplain to the Catholic students at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Early in 1960, he proposed to his Father Superior that he make his Tertianship in France, at Paray-le-Monial, and then—to prepare himself for future work at the UA—go on to get a doctorate degree at some European university. His Father Superior was all for the proposal. During the summer of 1960, Father Renner spent six weeks studying French at the Sorbonne University in Paris. He then spent ten months at Paray-le-Monial making his Tertianship. Part of this consisted of helping out US military chaplains in Germany. While doing so, he made contact with a fellow American Jesuit doing doctorate work in Munich, who introduced him to his future professor. Four years later, in the summer of 1965, graduating *magna cum laude* from the University of Munich, Father Renner now became also "Dr. Renner." In the fall of 1965 he began his 15-year career as a teacher of mostly German at the UA. He also taught some Latin and Humanities courses. To account for his 15 years on the UA faculty: Francis D. Gleeson, S.J., Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska at the time, was convinced that the best way to have an influence in higher education in Alaska was to have priests teach at the UA.

During his teaching years at the UA, Father Renner lived in a simple apartment—a 15 minute walk from the university—did his own housekeeping, offered Mass every morning on the coffee table set on the chest of drawers. He has never had a driver's license. He walked to the university, no matter what the weather. He knew how to dress for temperatures sometimes sinking even into the minus 50° and 60° range. In his four decades in Alaska, he never once suffered frostbite.

At the time of Father Renner's retirement from the university, an article appeared in the university's publication, "Now in the North." Wrote its author: "Renner, perhaps above all, will be remembered, by students and colleagues as a dedicated teacher who honored by example the Jesuit motto, '*cura personalis alumnorum*,' (a personal concern for students)."

In 1979, Father Renner was asked to consider taking over the editorship of the *Alaskan Shepherd* from Father Edmund A. Anable, S.J., who, for reasons of age, was ready to retire. Father was wholly open to the idea. In 1980, he retired from the University of Alaska, as "Professor of German, Emeritus." He spent several months understudying Father Anable. In late June,



Father Renner, on September 23, 1980, at Healy—where he was helping build the new church—with mirror propped up in snow on the power pole, getting a shave.



Father Renner: a happy man, when swinging an ax, whether in the woods felling and limbing a tree, or at the chopping-block splitting a round into stove-size pieces. Both in Indian villages on the Yukon and on the outskirts of Fairbanks he has often helped bush pastors and friends build up their woodpiles for the winter ahead. Here: Galena, October 7, 1982. Twenty years later he is still adept with an ax.

1980, he, in company of several other priests, hiked the Chilkoot Trail from Dyea to Bennett Lake to familiarize himself with the trail over which Jesuit pioneer missionaries first came North. In 1981 he became the official editor of the *Alaskan Shepherd*.

To date Father Renner has authored three books, and part of a fourth. In 1975, during his 10th year at the UA, he applied for and was granted an academic year of sabbatical leave to write what was published in 1979 under the title *Pioneer Missionary to the Bering Strait Eskimos: Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J.* The book was written in collaboration with Dr. Dorothy Jean Ray—the foremost authority on the Seward Peninsula area and on Alaskan Native art—and its publication was made possible with grants from the Alaska Humanities Forum, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Alaska Society of Jesus, and the State of Alaska. The scholarly book—described as a “book of hope and love and great poignancy...a smoothly flowing narrative written in a lucid, engaging style”—has for years been out of print.

Out of print, too, is Father Renner’s second book, *The KNOM/Father Jim Poole Story*, published in 1985.

This is written in a “breezy style, in keeping with the subject matter.” And likewise out of print is Father’s third book:

“Father Tom” of the Arctic, also published in 1985. It is the life of Father Thomas P. Cunningham, S.J., missionary to the Eskimos of northern Alaska for a quarter of a century.

In addition to the books Father Renner has authored also numerous articles. Some of these have been published in Canada, France and Italy. Regarding his articles and his Alaskan Shepherd related work, late Bishop Michael J. Kaniecki, S.J., wrote to him in a letter of evaluation: “I can’t praise you enough for the fine work you do in the Shepherd office. Your articles are superb, and I think our reading audience justly recognizes that.”

Father Renner has already led a long and eventful life. His accomplishments are many. His is a life one cannot help but respect and admire. It really should be told at greater length. It has been my privilege to present here only a brief sketch of it. We will miss him. We will miss his good humor, his gentle and ever-patient demeanor, his beautiful Masses and inspiring homilies. All-too soon we will be saying, “He was a good man to have in Alaska.”

—Patricia “Patty” Walter, Editor and Director of the *Alaskan Shepherd* Fundraising Program

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April 15, 2002

Good Friends,

Ten years ago, in 1992, I was asked by my Father Provincial, “Where do you see yourself in the year 2000, and what do you see yourself doing?” My answer in part: “In the year 2000—assuming I will live another 8 years—I will be 74. I see myself, during the next decade, as continuing to live in Fairbanks, as continuing to serve as editor of *The Alaskan Shepherd* and as a fund-raiser for the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks, and as a formally assigned writer.”

How speedily that decade has passed! On 1 May 2000, I wrote to my Father Provincial: “You asked me to give thought to the matter of my writing for publication a kind of history of the Catholic Church in Alaska. Over the years I have amassed

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a considerable amount of manuscript and raw material towards such a history. A fair number of Jesuits, scholars, historians, and people interested in things Catholic and Alaskan have urged me to produce a book on this general subject. I have given the matter much thought and prayer."

I went on to tell Father Provincial that I was quite willing to attempt the writing of the history in question—which, tentatively and for brevity's sake, I am calling simply *Alaskana Catholica*. I told him, further, that I would have to consider the research and writing project a full time job, and that I would have to relocate to Spokane, Washington, where, in the Gonzaga University Foley Library, the Jesuit Oregon Province Archives—containing over a century's worth of archival materials relating to the Alaska missions—are housed. Father Provincial readily saw the logic of my thinking, but asked me to continue on at least one more year in my given assignment. A year ago, when I signed my contract with the Diocese of Fairbanks, I made it known that that would be my last one.

"How do I feel about all this?," I wrote in that 1 May 2000 letter to Father Provincial. "I love Alaska. First set foot on this blessed soil in 1958. I have spent more years in Fairbanks than any other Jesuit or priest. I have become thoroughly 'Alaskanized.' I am happy in my present work. I would be content to continue on in it. There would, naturally, be mixed emotions about leaving it and Alaska. But, confiding in God's grace—and seeing myself as an instrument in the hands of Divine Providence, a kindly Providence, that has guided and orchestrated, mysteriously, yet reassuringly, my life from my North Dakota farmboy beginnings to the present—I am ready and willing to move on. With St. Paul, 'I press on to what lies ahead, confident that He, Who began a good work in me, will, in due time, bring it to completion.'"

I plan to make the move to Spokane this coming June, there to continue my "apostolate of the pen," to write history that informs, that interests, that inspires; history that reflects my esteem and respect for things Catholic and Alaskan, as well as my esteem and respect for the traditional spiritualities and cultural values of Alaska's Native peoples.

"Can't you wait a few more years, before making the move?," I am asked. Well, not really. My age is getting to be a major consideration. I will celebrate my 76th about the time you are reading this. While my health continues good, the shadows are inexorably lengthening. Fortunately, longevity runs in the Renner family. I will need a sizable chunk of it.

The ending of my four decades in Alaska seems like little more than the ending of a fine summer day, so quickly, and pleasantly, have they passed.

As to who will fill the position I vacate: I am happy to be able to inform you that it will be a young lady "eminently qualified" to do so, Patricia "Patty" Walter. Patty has been working in the Alaskan Shepherd office for almost a year now. She is wholly familiar with the entire program. During much of her time on the job she has been understudying me as editor of our newsletter, *The Alaskan Shepherd*. She has the skills to carry on where I leave off. But more important than the skills she brings to the job is her attitude toward it and the personal spirituality she brings to it. She sees it as much more than just a "job." In her eyes the whole work is essentially a spiritual work, the work of the Lord, who alone makes it meaningful and fruitful. Reassured, and happily, I see Patty take over this "apostolate of paper and pen."

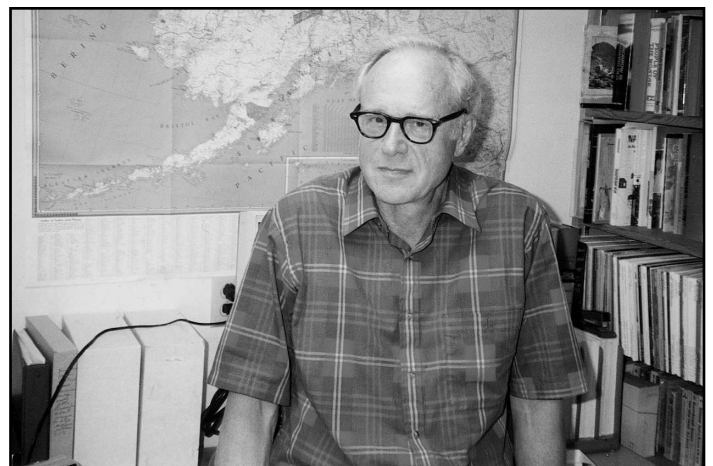
I come now to thanking you, faithful friends of the Alaskan Shepherd Fundraising Program—become, in many cases, also dear personal friends—with all my heart for the wonderful, abiding support—financial, spiritual, moral—you have given this needy missionary diocese, and me personally, over the long years. And among "friends here I number also you "faithful Shepherdesses," you ladies here in the Alaskan Shepherd office, who, day in and day out, have rendered such selfless and devoted service to this most worthy cause. I number further among "friends" here, very gratefully and happily, also you, my business partners, who, over the years, have likewise become close personal friends. Without your faithful, competent service, the Alaskan Shepherd Program, as we know it, would simply not have been possible. I must mention you by name: Phil Bridge and Ali Hassannia of Journal Graphics, Portland, OR; Jim Bell of AD MAIL, Portland, OR; Charles Parish and Jack Savage of Mail Communications, Inc., St. Louis, MO; and Sharon McGlynn of Catholic Lists, Inc., of Mount Vernon, NY. The Lord, the Good Shepherd, alone knows the full extent of our, of my, indebtedness to each and every one of you for all you have meant to and done for us and how much it is appreciated. May He bless you, as He alone can, bless you one and all, and all dear to you, prosper all your endeavors, reward you richly, both in this life and in the next. As I have written to many of you: it is not that we do it for the rewards, but God will not be outdone in generosity. Know that I, for my part, will continue to remember you, all dear to you, all your concerns in my daily Masses and prayers. Kindly keep me and mine—and my writing project—in your prayers.

And now I bid you all farewell! —till merrily we meet, yonder, where breaks a new and glorious morn, where the dreams we do not even dare to dream really do come true...

Most gratefully and sincerely in Our Lord,

Father Renner

Louis L. Renner, S.J.



Father Renner in his little windowless basement office in the diocesan chancery building. It houses his substantial library. At times it serves as a confessional, or a counseling room. Often it is filled with the sounds of classical music or grand opera. But, before all else, it is where the *Alaskan Shepherd* is produced. Note the map of Alaska on the wall behind him!