



The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 41 Number 2

March 2003

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

ON THE WING WITH BISHOP KETTLER: PART II

As we were flying along the Yukon, en route to our destination, St. Marys on the Andreafsky River, I could barely contain my excitement. We were headed for what began, in 1951, as just a mission complex, but has since become a city of 482 inhabitants—and a major part of Alaskan Catholic Church history. Some of the missionaries, lay volunteers, and Native people associated with it have become heroes and legends.

Father Edmund A. Anable, S.J., in a 1968 issue of the *Alaskan Shepherd*, wrote concerning the mission: *“Sacrifice was there in plenty. Hardship and inconvenience were so commonplace that they were considered normal. Food was scanty and of little variety. Dried fish and bread was the staple diet, and under these conditions, for decade after decade, the wonderful (Ursuline) Nuns went about their work, simply absorbed in the one thing that counted in their lives, “the service of God.”*

Father Richard Case, S.J., piloted the Cessna 207. Bishop Donald Kettler was co-pilot. Sister Kathy Radich, O.S.F., and I were the passengers. We landed at St. Marys after a short one-hour trip from Emmonak. This being our fourth day on a nine-day journey, we were looking forward to a somewhat uneventful day to rest and regroup before heading on to Nome the following day. Erik Weingarth, Administrator of the St. Marys Conference Center, met us at the airport. Erik took Father Case and Bishop Kettler to the Jesuit Residence and Sister Kathy and me to the “Sisters House.” This house was from upriver, literally floated downriver to its present site on the banks of the Andreafsky. Its windows look out upon the peacefully flowing river. This stunning view offers the possibility of seeing nature close-up: moose, bear, duck, geese, swan, ptarmigan, beaver, otter, fox, mink, and muskrat. Fireweed in full bloom added color to the landscape. Many hours might be spent in quiet solitude, taking in the beauty of St. Marys—however, a hot shower beckoned to me. Showers were not a possibility in the previous two villages.

Sister Kathy, and Sister Ellen Callaghan, O.S.F., hosted lunch that consisted of sandwiches made with Sister Kathy’s tasty homemade bread. The Jesuit Fathers insisted that dinner



Bishop Donald Kettler kneels before Deacon Pat Beans, Sr., who bestows a special Eskimo blessing on him, on August 28, 2002, at a Mass in the Church of the Nativity, St. Mary’s Alaska.

--Photos by Patty Walter

was their turn, and so we took advantage of the ‘free’ time to nap, read and visit. When Father Case generously offered a tour of the old Mission, Church, and Boarding School, I eagerly jumped at the chance.

St. Marys history actually begins some 90 miles downriver at Akulurak. In 1894, Jesuit missionaries set up a mission at Akulurak to educate and care for children orphaned by a flu epidemic in 1900-1901. Akulurak is an Eskimo word meaning “in-between place,” aptly describing the settlement situated on an island, in a slough connecting two arms of the Yukon River. Under the care of the Ursuline Sisters, working in conjunction with Jesuit priests and brothers, the mission flourished for 50 years at Akulurak. In 1948, Bishop Francis Gleeson, S.J., found the site to be no longer acceptable, because the old mission buildings were sinking into the marshy tundra.

CATHOLIC BISHOP OF NORTHERN ALASKA
1312 PEGER ROAD
FAIRBANKS, ALASKA 99709-5199
<http://www.cbna.info>

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.

On August 3, 1951, the Akulurak mission was relocated to the banks of the Andreafsky River at St. Marys.

The new boarding school, which included the mission church, was built under the direction of Fr. James Spils, S.J., with a construction crew of volunteers and Alaska Natives. The Jesuits subsequently operated St. Mary's Boarding School, at St. Marys until 1987. The school was renowned for its excellence as a college prep school for the Alaska Native high school students of the lower Yukon region.

Though she supported the decision to close it, the closing of the school, was "an emotional heart-break" to the last principal of the school, Ursuline Sister Angie Pratt.

As we toured the school, the emotional tug of disappointment made itself more and more felt. Father Case was assigned in 1987 to carry out the necessary closure. Now, as he led the tour, I could easily conclude how difficult this must have been. Father Case added interesting details and amusing recollections along the way. He recalled at one point, a story about a Jesuit Father and an Ursuline Sister having a disagreement. The disagreement, which he could not recall, ended with the Ursuline Sister saying indignantly, "...and after all the years we have worked for the Jesuits!" This left the Father scratching his head—for he thought, that all these years the Jesuits had worked for the Ursulines!

I glanced into charming dorm rooms, each still holding endearing clues of the gender that occupied it nearly 15 years ago. When we stopped in the chapel, I closed my eyes to envision the 70+ students that had sat in these pews, sang songs, read Scripture, and strengthened their Catholic faith. Beautiful statues of St. Therese and St. Francis Xavier still adorn the walls. Representations of Eskimo culture—baskets, weavings, tapestries, and art carvings—also decorate the interior. We moved on to the bakery—fully operational. We traveled down halls filled with paintings, prints, and children's artwork. As we neared the end, I could not help but divulge what a shame it was, to close the school. It was all so wonderful! Father Case had personally watched enrollment drop and knew the diocese could not support the financial demands of operating such a large boarding school. Though entirely necessary—that same loss, that Sister Angie Pratt felt, was contagious—for it was hard not to feel sad.

Sister Kathy invited me to tour the Native Ministry Training Program Offices. Sister Kathy is the Coordinator of Rural Ministry for the Yukon Kuskokwim areas. She provides



Eskimo Brother Jakes, S.J.-- "a man of few words"--plays chess with Father Henry Hargreaves, S.J. Brother Jakes died, August 23, 1999.

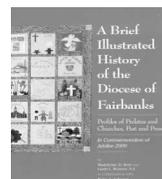
Photo by Father Louis L. Renner, S.J.

training and materials for the many deacons, lay ministers, and parish administrators that provide support for the parish priests and sisters. She is additionally supported by Sister Ellen Callaghan, O.S.F., Director of Native Ministry, Father Paul M. Cochran, S.J., and by Pam Tweto, Workshop Coordinator. Father Mark A. Hoelsken, S.J., is the Director of the Rural Deacon program for the Diocese and Father Theodore E. Kestler, S.J., is part of the staff as well as pastor of the Church of the Nativity.

Dinner that evening, a scrumptious chop suey dish, was hosted and prepared by Jesuit Fathers, Kestler, Cochran, and Hoelsken. In addition to sharing good food, we shared enjoyable conversation. The Jesuit Fathers told stories of past and present missionaries. The stories were both inspiring and hilarious. At one point, Father Hoelsken told a story that I have found to be a great example of Jesuit Brother Ignatius J. Jakes's character and personality. After 55 years as the Diocese's only Eskimo Jesuit brother, he died on August 23, 1999. It is a well-known fact that Brother Jakes was a man of few words and depicted a physical and spiritual strength that is the subject of many stories. In one such story, Father Hoelsken had gone fishing with Brother Jakes and accidentally "hooked" his scalp with a fishing lure. Though he must have been in great pain, and Father noticed blood dripping down his forehead, Brother Jakes did not want to stop fishing! He finally convinced an uncomfortable and embarrassed Father Hoelsken to cut the hook free from his scalp! On another occasion, the Jesuit residence received a call from a concerned parishioner, asking about Brother Jakes' burned hands. It seems while helping move a stove, the good Brother Jakes, touched both his hands to the intensely hot stove. The parishioner seemed surprised that no one was aware of the injury, as she expected Brother Jakes would have needed medical attention for such a burn. Concerned, the Jesuit Fathers searched the mission for Brother Jakes and finally found him in the basement kitchen, eating a sandwich—he was wearing gloves. Upon forced inspection, it was found that the burns were quite severe and required immediate medical attention. Brother Jakes would not hear of it. Finally he was coerced to visit the hospital but not until he finished his sandwich!

Following dinner, we headed off to Mass at the Church of the Nativity. Bishop Kettler was offered a ride to the nearby church, but declined, and we all decided to work off the dinner by accompanying him. Soon we were walking, or rather hiking,

Sincere thanks to those of you who occasionally send us stamps. For those who inquire about our immediate needs, in addition to stamps, we are always in need of rosaries and Pieta Prayer books.



Copies of *A Brief Illustrated History* may be ordered from the Alaskan Shepherd, 1312 Peger Road, Fairbanks Alaska 99709-5199, for \$25.00 a copy. This includes shipping and handling.



St. Mary's parishioners Marcia Thompson, Teresa Mike and Lily Afcan Marcia's daughter, visit during a potluck honoring newly ordained Bishop Donald Kettler, in St. Mary's.

up a rather steep hill. From the hill, you could see most of the city and, across the Andrafsky, you can spy Pilot Station. By the time we came to the top of the hill, I had renewed my vow to get in shape. My lungs were aching from the climb! Bishop Kettler, Sister Kathy, and Father Case almost looked refreshed! The church filled quickly as the parish bells announced to all the expected arrival of the new bishop. Bishop Kettler celebrated Mass, assisted by altar servers—Christopher and Stephen Weingarth and Pam Tweto's son William. Following Mass, Bishop Kettler received a special blessing from Eskimo Elder and Deacon Pat Beans, Sr. After the blessing, Marcia Thompson and her family performed an Eskimo dance and song that told of one of Marcia's summers at fish camp. Bishop Kettler and staff were then invited to a potluck in the parish hall.

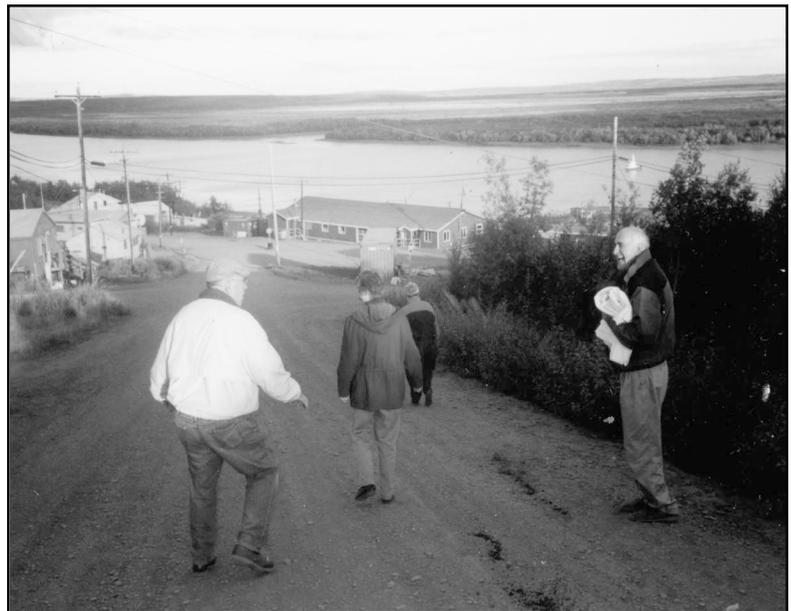
Our return trip, downhill, was far easier. Back at the Sisters' house, Sister Ellen served peaches and ice cream—the perfect end to a perfect day.

The next morning, Father Case announced our departure to be “noon-ish.” Sister Kathy and I ambled up to the mission cemetery. Particularly, I wanted to visit the grave of Father Rene Astruc, S.J. Father Rene spent over 50 years in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, before dying, on June 28, 2002, of kidney cancer. He asked to be buried in the mission cemetery “with my old friends.” His grave was adorned with multicolored flowers and ribbons, and well cared for. Some graves were difficult to see among the tall grasses, which threatened to take over the cemetery. Winter comes just in time, to beat down the grass, allowing the cycle to continue. Departing the cemetery, I strolled along the riverbank, where a few fishing boats were docked. Sister Kathy introduced me to Russell Tiffert—in charge of food services for the conference center—and to John Sipary, and Raphael Mike—in charge of maintenance. We talked about the drought and need of water, commercial fishing, and its effect on the mission, and the change in the Alaskan waters. Most notably, mention was made, that someone had

recently discovered a squid and a penguin in the Bering Sea—very far from home! John Sipary, having met Father Segundo Llorente, S.J., shared some stories about Father's wit. Having just finished Father Llorente's, *Memoirs of a Yukon Priest*, and considering the saintly priest a new dear friend, I felt comfortable commenting, “that sounds just like something he'd say!”

As we boarded the plane to continue our trip to Nome, I muttered a silent goodbye to the mission, not knowing when I would be able to return. Flying commercial is very expensive, about \$800. It was indeed a wonderful opportunity to be able to visit the mission with Bishop Kettler and Father Case and experience the generosity and benevolence of the Jesuit Fathers and Sisters of St. Francis.

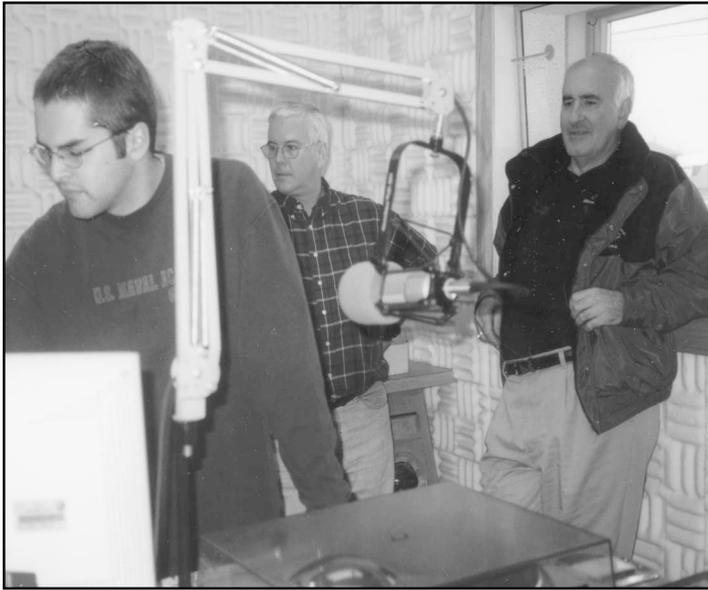
Regarding our next “place of pause,” Father Llorente wrote, “Nome is about 110 miles south of the Arctic Circle,



Bishop Donald Kettler, Father Richard Case, S.J., Sister Kathy Radich, O.F.M., and Sister Ellen Callaghan, O.F.M., take the much easier route down “The Hill” in St. Marys, Alaska.

which is north enough.” The flight to Nome was about 170 nautical miles. Nome derives its name from a mapmaker who wrote “Name?” on a map during the gold rush days. The *a* was mistaken for an *o* and the question mark removed. The location became known as Nome—which has no meaning. Today, Nome is populated by 3,620 people. At the peak of the Gold Rush, in 1900, Nome's population reached 30,000! St. Joseph, then the westernmost Roman Catholic Church in the United States was dedicated on November 17, 1901. The first Catholic Church building in Nome was sold in 1945 to the U.S. Smelting and Mining Co. and converted into a warehouse. A second St. Joseph church was built two blocks south of the old location. It was dedicated on Easter Sunday, 1946. The third and present St. Joseph church in Nome was built on the original site in 1993 and it was dedicated by Bishop Michael J. Kaniecki, S.J., on March 19, 1994.

Father John Hinsvark, pastor of St. Joseph, picked us up from the airport and drove us back to the parish to settle in before Mass and a potluck!



Bishop Kettler and General Manager Tom Busch visit award-winning KNOM's studio, where DJ Tim Bodony, prepares for the weather report.

Tom Busch, General Manager of KNOM Radio Station invited us over to visit the award winning station. In 2002, KNOM was awarded its 10th Gabriel Award. The Gabriel is a national award, created as "a salute to all those who strive for values-centered programming."

One cannot speak of KNOM or of its success without mention of its founder, Father James E. Poole, S.J. KNOM's early years are detailed in *The KNOM / Father Jim Poole Story* by Louis L. Renner, S.J. The book is out of print, but can be found in many Catholic college libraries. It is the story of Father Poole's struggles to get radio KNOM on the air, keep it on the air, and develop it into what has become a top-award-winning station.

After a tour through the remarkable station, we continued across the street to St. Joseph's for Mass. Immediately after Mass, the parishioners, in celebration of Bishop Kettler's visit, prepared a fantastic potluck. On the menu was fried and baked halibut, salad, coleslaw, beans, hot dogs, hamburgers, desserts, desserts, and more desserts! That evening we watched a little television and turned in for the evening.

The next morning, Father Hinsvark made us wonderful pancakes from his sourdough starter, affectionately named "Henry." Father Hinsvark, one of twelve children, is by his own admission, "an accident waiting to happen." By the time he entered the Seminary, he had broken his left thighbone once, left forearm five times, right forearm once, and torn his left forearm to the tune of close to forty stitches. Father maintains, that he

"took the breaks" for his siblings—no one else broke any bones while growing up. Father Hinsvark first arrived in Alaska in 1966. Now, 37 years later, in addition to being the pastor of St. Joseph's parish, he is also the visiting priest for parishes at Kotzebue, Little Diomedea, and Teller. In case of emergency, Father is also available to the villages of Stebbins, St. Michael, and Unalakleet, which currently, are without a priest. You can well see how "stretched" our Alaskan priests are and how much they rely on the help of devoted parish administrators, deacons and sisters.

Father Hinsvark was to accompany us to Kotzebue, there to "set up camp" for a while. The visiting priest is a welcome sight for parishioners. They must plan marriage preparation, weddings, baptisms, and confession around such visits. In 1935, upon his arrival in Alaska, Father Llorente wrote, "*The isolation of these diocesan priests made quite an impression on me at the time. We were in Alaska and things were different here. I asked myself how I would like to be so isolated. Could I stand it? Four years later, I had to stand it when I was sent to Kotzebue where I did not see a priest for thirteen months. Someone said that I could not then afford the luxury of committing a mortal sin. It was well put, I thought, except for the word luxury.*"

Father Hinsvark proved to be an extraordinary tour director, pointing out, as he did, during our flight to Kotzebue, "points of interest." The view was amazing. We flew over mountains and over numerous rivers and streams lacing the tundra beneath us. Immense fields of wildflowers spread out in all directions and painted the landscape vibrant shades of red, yellow, and green. With God's canvas spread beneath the Cessna, I was somewhat surprised, 160 nautical miles later, to have arrived, so quickly, in Kotzebue.

Kotzebue is the commercial center for a 48,000 square-mile area of northwestern Alaska, which includes 10 villages, and a population of about 3082. It is the largest Eskimo village in Alaska, with over 80% of the population Eskimo. The town is situated on a spit of land, about three miles long and 1100-3600 feet wide, and is located about 26 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

Upon landing, we waited for the truck that would fuel up the plane to arrive. When Bishop Kettler signed for the fuel under the name Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska, the attendant asked, "Hey, I just heard over the radio (KNOM) that you guys got a new bishop." Imagine the astonishment of our fuel attendant, when Bishop Kettler humbly responded, "Yes, and I am he." We found a place to park the plane.

Upon the suggestion of Father Hinsvark, we walked to St.

Memoirs of a Yukon Priest



by
Segundo Llorente

Memoirs of a Yukon Priest, by Father Segundo Llorente, S.J., is available from the Alaskan Shepherd, 1312 Peger Road, Fairbanks, AK. 99709, for \$25.00 which includes shipping and handling.



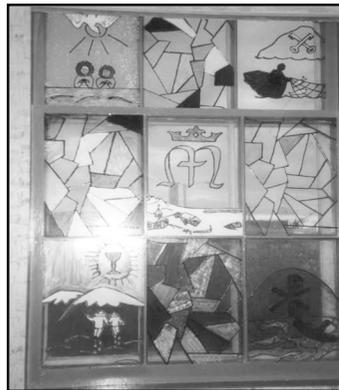
Father Case, S.J., prepares to land at the Kotzebue airport. Kotzebue is located on a spit of land that is about three miles long, 1100-3600 feet wide and about 26 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

Francis Xavier church, while Father Case secured the plane and arranged for the bags to be taken there. On our way to the parish, we stopped in on parishioners John and Mary Schaeffer. Mary offered us tea, which we eagerly accepted. The temperature was a chilly 45 degrees—seemingly colder due to wind, but entirely comfortable for walking. After a brief visit at the Schaeffers’ beautiful home, we continued. Father Hinsvark took us by the cemetery. Brightly colored arrangements adorned almost every grave, adding a vibrant hue to a grey landscape.

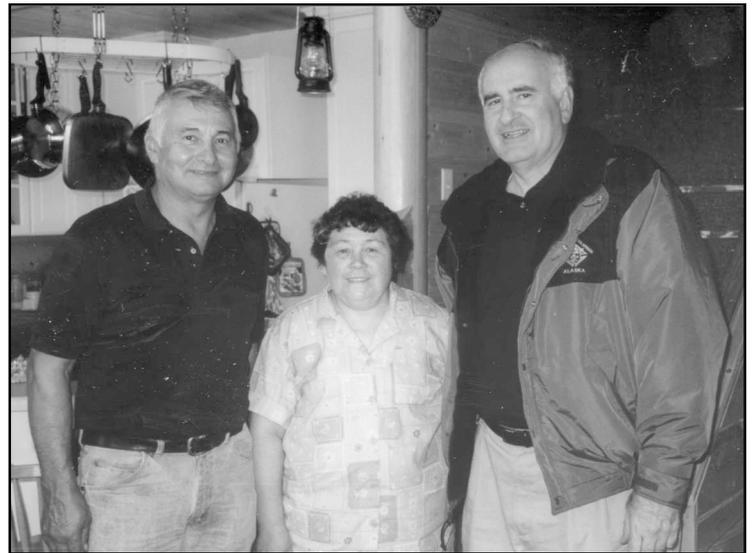
As we walked, Father Hinsvark entertained us with the story of delivering a seal—and a marriage proposal! Father, doing a favor, delivered a fresh seal to the door of an Eskimo woman’s house. What he did not realize was that, when an Eskimo man leaves a seal at the door of an Eskimo woman’s home—it is a marriage proposal. The Eskimos had a good chuckle at Father’s expense. He promised he would never deliver another seal!

Arriving at the church, we found our bags delivered and

These beautiful stained glass windows, painted by parishioners of long ago and recently re-touched, depict the Eskimo way of life in conjunction with Sacraments and Sacramental preparation. St. Francis Xavier church, Kotzebue .



Father Case already relaxing! With the potluck only about half an hour away, we took the opportunity to read and relax. I was delighted to find a copy of *Eskimo Parish*—a book written by Father Paul C. O’Connor, S.J., in 1947—in the rectory. The book is not strictly a history. It tells stories, describes personalities, and reflects the personal views of the author. It acquaints you with the great missionary souls of the past. I was sorry to have to leave the book behind. Concerning arctic flying, Father O’Connor tells this story about leaving Kotzebue in poor flying weather, *“I was so busy buckling my safety belt that I didn’t notice the rising plane slide and side-step in its ascent. I looked up in time to see the taut jaw and whitened knuckles of the pilot, and realized immediately that we had missed a bad crack-up by inches. The chief engineer, a fellow passenger, later remarked with the laconic unconcern that continual exposure to danger breeds, ‘You were ten feet from eternity, Father; I measured it myself.’”*



Bishop Donald Kettler poses with St. Francis Xavier parishioners John and Mary Schaeffer, at their home, in Kotzebue Alaska, where he stopped for tea. Mary’s comment on seeing the picture, “Look at my pots.”

The potluck was delicious. Many parishioners attended, all adding to the variety of food and loading the tables in the social hall located beneath the Rectory Meeting Hall. One of the favorite desserts was salmonberry pie.

Following the potluck, we spent some time in St. Francis Xavier church. Bishop Kettler posed for a picture, his head nearly touching the cross beam. A tall man, our bishop! The stained glass windows were hand painted by parishioners of long ago and had been recently touched up by parishioners. Father Hinsvark offered that, though charming, they lack heat retention and may soon be replaced or possibly enclosed. Behind the altar, whale baleen flanks the crucifix. Father Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J., spent the winter of 1930-31 in Kotzebue. Of the church—built of six by six timbers spiked together, he wrote, *“There is not an Eskimo shack as cold.”*

Note: Substantiate your gift to us, a non-profit organization. The IRS encourages your gift to Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska, if you itemize it on your income tax return. If you have given us a gift of \$250.00 or more, and wish to have the IRS recognize it as a tax-deductible gift, then a receipt from us *must* be in your hands before you file your taxes for the year. We happily provide you with receipts acknowledging your donations.

That evening, we took a walk along Kotzebue Sound. The Sound resembled a sheet of glass, smooth, calm and with only an occasional ripple from an unseen sea creature. Returning to the parish—we received our room assignments. Father Hinsvark assigned me to the chapel. I admit I stood for a moment, somewhat perplexed, in the center of the chapel. The next few minutes were spent desperately searching for the appropriate and respectful way to “sleep” in a chapel! I had no guidebook to consult. Jokingly I whispered, “Mom would be so mad if she saw me sleeping in church!” What to do? In desperation, I closed my eyes and imagined I was sleeping in a little corner of the stable where the Baby Jesus slept. This brought me comfort and peace and allowed me to spread out my sleeping bag in front of the altar. Soon, the sound of barking dogs faded into the distance. Before I knew it, morning came. Father made eggs, toast, bacon and a perfectly brewed cup of java, before returning us to the airport to complete the final leg of the journey.

We arrived in Galena, 191 nautical miles southeast of Kotzebue. While Brother Justin Huber, O.F.M., graciously prepared a delectable spaghetti dinner, Father Case and Bishop Kettler decided to watch the Notre Dame football game. Bishop Kettler wanted to celebrate Mass before dinner, so we joined him in the attached St. John Berchmans church. Bishop Kettler ended Mass traditionally, but added, as we headed back to the rectory, “and God bless Notre Dame!” (P.S. Notre Dame won.)

We all retired early that night. The plan was to celebrate Mass with parishioners in the morning, partake in our final potluck, and be on our way home.

For the most part, we were all looking forward to our arrival home in Fairbanks after such a long and eventful trip.

Completely confident in the abilities of the pilot and co-pilot, I snapped pictures, made notes, and even dozed off on the flight back. It was hard to believe I had ever been apprehensive of flying. Father Case made it appear easy. My only problem was that I couldn’t see out the front windshield! I joked with Father Case that, even if I had been able to make

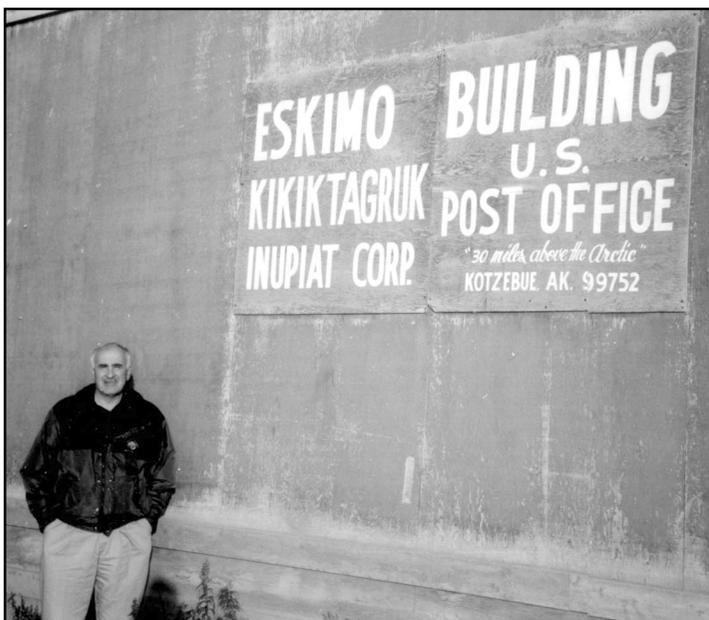


*This caption submitted by Father John Hinsvark: “This a picture of Father Case, Bishop Kettler and myself. We have been **ordered** (by the photographer) to turn away from the beautiful scenery of Kotzebue Sound and Nameluk mountains.”*

sense out of the gauges on the instrument panel, I couldn’t see them—hidden, as they were, in front of the tall frames of chancellor and bishop!

How to summarize so fine an experience? This only I offer: it is rewarding to be involved, in any way, in such a worthwhile endeavor. I have seen the results brought about by many Alaskan missionaries, and the results are impressive. The lives of some of those early-day Alaskan missionaries have been described as “nothing short of heroic.” Today’s Alaskan missionary is no less heroic. Alaska’s weather and landscapes have not changed. Nor have the basics of leading people to Christ changed. Modern technology and advances may offer today’s missionary a degree of comfort not available to missionaries of long ago. Yet, today the Alaska missionary meets the same challenges in terms of expenses, language barriers, weather, and solitude. I have seen a multitude of heroes along the way. Some of these heroes celebrate the Mass and the Sacraments, still others teach, train, and care for children and the poor. Some manage radio stations, bringing the Word to villages that would otherwise not be reached, while others serve as parish coordinators, directors, administrators, and volunteers. Some fly planes, bringing supplies and occasionally a Bishop to the remote parishes of the Diocese of Northern Alaska. And some, heroically, answer a call, from as far away as South Dakota, to shepherd, to build, and to comfort in a distant and vast missionary land.

—Patty Walter



Bishop Donald Kettler, stops in front of the Post Office in Kotzebue. The sign reads, “30 miles above the Arctic”, KOTZEBUE AK 99752.