



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

Father Joseph Jules Jetté, S.J., 1864-1927

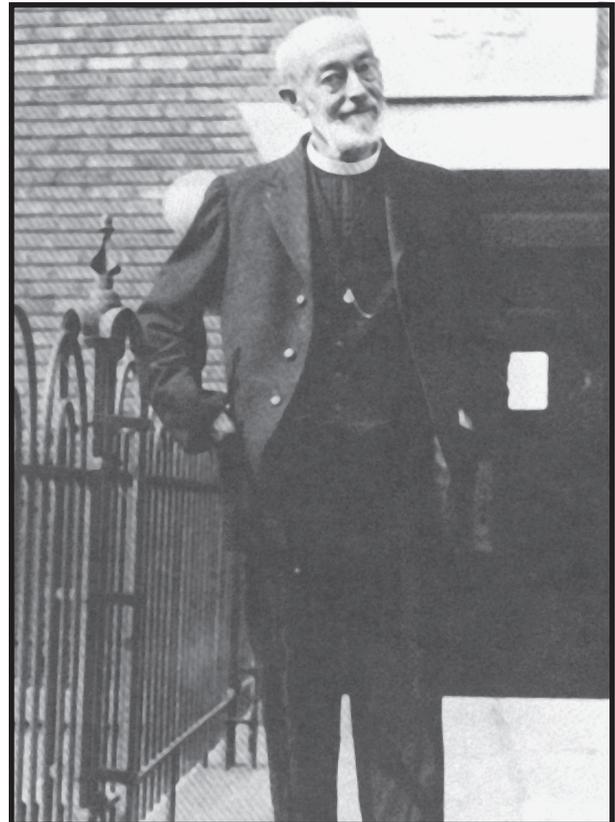
“Bright Star of the Tannah”: Part II

Editor’s Note: This two-part article is indebted to the writings contained in *ALASKANA CATHOLICA* by Father Louis L. Renner, S.J. Both the editors of the respective journals, as well as the authors of the respective reviews, have graciously granted the *Alaskan Shepherd* permission to reprint the two reviews of *ALASKANA CATHOLICA* reprinted in this issue. I sincerely thank all four of them and Father Renner. Proceeds from the purchase of *ALASKANA CATHOLICA*, through the Alaskan Shepherd office, directly benefit this Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks. --Patty Walter

The legacy of Father Jetté includes also works in the Koyukon language dealing with religious matters: a Bible history, a life of Christ, a hymnal, a Church calendar. His translations include: the epistles and gospels for all Sundays of the year, a large part of St. Matthew’s gospel, and both the Baltimore and Deharbe Catechisms.

Unquestionably, the crowning achievement of all of Father Jetté’s scholarly endeavors is his dictionary of the Koyukon language. It is a masterpiece of its kind, a work of lexicographical art. As a manuscript it comprised seven volumes, semi-bound in covers made by Father Jetté himself, and contained 2344 pages. The dictionary is, in reality, and at the same time, an encyclopedia embracing the whole of Koyukon culture. It contains many drawings made by himself to illustrate what words cannot adequately describe. It is utterly thorough, exhaustive. Words beginning with the letter ‘t’ alone cover 731 manuscript pages. He devotes 600 words to the *hi’o*, the “stickdance.”

As early as 1905, Father Jetté felt that, given a little leisure, he could have his dictionary manuscript ready for publication. On December 3, 1914, he wrote, “I am doing a little work on the Dictionary, re-writing the beginning of it,



Father Jules Jetté, S.J., taken in Seattle in 1924. (Courtesy Jesuit Oregon Province Archives 824.01)

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because I wrote that part before I learned how to write a Dictionary.” The following year, on July 10, 1915, he wrote, “I have a Ten’a Dictionary completely written, from a to z, and profusely supplied with genuine native phrases and expressions.” He mentions his dictionary for the last time in 1919. At the time of his death, in 1927, his dictionary, his *opus magnum*, was still in manuscript form.

Various reasons can be given to account for the dictionary’s not being published during Father Jetté’s lifetime. There were time constraints. He was first and foremost a totally committed missionary priest. Furthermore, he was in all of his scholarly pursuits ever the perfectionist, not easily persuaded in his own mind that a manuscript was finally ready for publication. This was especially true in the case of his dictionary. Specifically, it was problems concerning matters of transcription, of orthography, to which, in his eyes, there was no satisfactory solution, that kept him, therefore, from advancing the dictionary manuscript for publication.

But the dictionary manuscript was not destined to remain forever merely an unpublished manuscript. In the year 2000, the 1118-page *Koyukon Athabaskan Dictionary*, with authorship ascribed equally to Jules Jetté and Eliza Jones, was published by the Alaskan Native Language Center, University of Alaska-Fairbanks.

In 1906, as mentioned above, Father Jetté left Nulato to serve at Tanana, then in Fairbanks, then again at Tanana. In 1907, he began what was to be a six-year stay at Kokrines. After Tanana, he was more than happy to be there. From Kokrines he wrote that there he felt “ten thousand times better than at Tanana. Kokrines is a little paradise compared with Tanana.” He found the Kokrines people, around 65, “very well disposed,” faithful in attending Church services and catechism classes. There being neither a school nor a teacher at Kokrines in 1906, he himself, in his cabin, taught school. The following year a school was built, and he was hired to be the teacher, a post he held throughout his years at Kokrines. From time to time, he made trips to nearby encampments, to Tanana, and to Ruby, after gold was discovered in that area in 1907. When the people were off in their hunting camps, he, alone in his cabin, worked on his manuscripts.

In 1908, Father Jetté bought the Episcopal church at Kokrines and converted it into a Catholic church and residence. There is a well-authenticated story that one

day, when the Episcopal bishop was visiting Tanana, an officer from the Army base there approached him and, without ceremony, asked him, “Why don’t you give us a man like Father Jetté?” In answer, likewise without ceremony, the honest bishop answered, “Men like Father Jetté don’t grow on every bush.”

On March 17, 1913, Father Jetté left Kokrines for Nulato, where, as he wrote his mother, he was received with “universal rejoicing.” After spending the year 1913-14 at Nulato, he took up station at Tanana, where he was to spend nearly ten years. Here, too, he continued to occupy his free time in scholarly pursuits. As he had done at Kokrines, so at Tanana he did a considerable amount of carpentry work, grew his own fine gardens, chopped his own firewood, carried his own water, did his own housekeeping. He continued to get excellent results with his camera. On November 5, 1914, he wrote, “I am on very good terms with the natives, thanks to my camera.” He was an accomplished photographer, did all his own developing and printing. Generously, he gave prints to his subjects. He left an outstanding record of Koyukon life in photographs. His archive file contains 12 albums of photographs he either took or collected.

During his Tanana years, Father Jetté became a naturalized U.S. citizen, at Ruby, on July 18, 1916. In 1913, he had become a member of the California Province of the Society of Jesus, when the missions of northern Alaska were transferred from the Canadian Province to that Province. He had expressed the ardent wish to be ascribed to the California Province, so that he might be allowed to stay on in Alaska. It is known from a letter he wrote on August 25, 1912, to his Father Provincial that he had already in 1907, with the permission of his Alaska Superior to do so, pledged himself “by vow to remain in the Alaska Mission until death.” Also, that same year, on December 27, 1916, he became a member of the American Anthropological Association.

On October 19, 1922, the 59-year-old Father Jetté “lifted some very large log he wished to saw.” In doing so, he ruptured himself. It was freeze-up time, when the rivers were running ice, the lakes barely frozen over, the trails still almost without snow. Travel of any kind was nearly impossible. It was eleven days before his friends in Tanana were able to bring him by boat and dogsled to a doctor in Nenana. On his way there, he was met by Father Francis M. Monroe, S.J., who administered

TWO REVIEWS OF ALASKANA CATHOLICA:

From the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Summer 2006, Volume 97, Number 3, pp. 151-152

Alaskana Catholica, a History of the Catholic Church in Alaska

A Reference Work in the Format of an Encyclopedia

Louis L. Renner

(Portland Oreg.: Society of Jesus, Oregon Province, 2005, xxxvii, 702 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$82.50)

What most inhabitants of the Lower 48 do not know about Alaska is almost as vast as the Great Land itself. Louis L. Renner, a Jesuit priest who spent most of his teaching and pastoral career in Alaska, has compiled an impressive book that sheds light on one portion of the state's history, that of its Roman Catholic institutions and people. The book is clearly a labor of love, the product of a lifetime's work of preserving and telling the story of those missionaries who followed white settlers north and who also brought their religion to native peoples, scattered across inlands and islands. This is not a narrative history but rather, as its subtitle says, an encyclopedia, presenting short and long entries containing basic facts. The coverage is monumental: 200 biographies of individuals, short histories of Catholic activity in nearly 100 towns, and more than a dozen general topical essays. A comprehensive index, a thorough bibliography, and a user-friendly format—love those boldface cross-references from one entry to another!—make this an indispensable volume on Alaska's Catholic history.

And what a compelling history it is. A few random missionaries visited the territory in its early years, but the church's sustained presence dates only from the 1870s, when the Jesuits assumed responsibility for missions to Alaska. They were joined by small communities of religious sisters—initially the Quebec-based Sisters of Saint Ann, but eventually other groups as well, including the aptly named Sisters of Our Lady of the Snows, a sadly short-lived order made up entirely of Native women. Parish churches were built in settlements large and small: Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, of course, but also Nome, Wrangell, Nulato, and even Unalaska in the Aleutians and Diomed in the Bering Strait. Though far removed from the historic centers of Catholicism, the always-small church in Alaska sometimes had a wider impact. In the 1960s, for example, its officials took the lead in reestablishing worldwide the ancient practice of ordaining Catholic deacons, laymen who were not priests but were nonetheless trained to carry out certain ministerial functions (baptizing, marrying, and so on) for communities that saw a clergyman only rarely. Renner complements all this by including extended quotations from original documents in many entries and with wonderful photographs, both historical and contemporary. How can one not marvel at the photo of a priest saying Mass on an altar made of ice blocks (p. 134), the Stations of the Cross with Jesus depicted in Native dress (p. 318), or the Ursuline sister, in full religious habit, helping Native girls process salmon (p. 654)?

It is churlish and unappreciative to nitpick at such a book, but reviews are expected to, so here are two nits. First, it is admittedly difficult to reduce such a huge territory to the size of even a large format volume such as this, but a map would have enhanced the work's usefulness for those unfamiliar with the state's geography. More seriously, the biographical entries are overwhelmingly weighted toward priests and bishops—many of them heroic, to be sure—and that leaves the reviewer wanting to know more about the ordinary Catholics who made up the church in Alaska. Only 13 laypeople merit their own entries: surely more than that number made significant contributions. This suggests one avenue for those who will continue the work of telling the history of the people who held on to their Catholic religious identity in the face of difficult odds. Those future historians will praise and thank Renner for his work. He has produced the necessary volume, the book from which all subsequent work will begin. Few historians, whatever their field, will ever make such a contribution.

James M. O'Toole

Professor of History, designated holder of the Clough Chair in History at Boston College, and Fellow of the Society of American Archivists

From *Alaska History*, Fall 2006, Volume 21, No. 2, pp. 61-62

Louis L. Renner, S.J., *Alaskana Catholica: A History of the Catholic Church in Alaska, A Reference Work in the Format of an Encyclopedia.*

(Spokane, Washington: Society of Jesus and Arthur H. Clark Company, 2005, xxxvii, 702 pp. Illustrations, introduction, bibliography, index. \$82.50)

A subtitle of *Alaskana Catholica* refers to the volume as “a reference work in the format of an encyclopedia.” True, the organization follows that style, with a wide variety of entries arranged in alphabetical order. The tone and content, however, far transcend the detached, facts-only style of most encyclopedias, making this an exceptional contribution to the genre.

This volume offers a chronology of key dates in Alaska Catholic history from 1779 to 2004, connecting two cultures and many peoples across time and space. The work is well indexed and cross referenced, promising a handy tool for scholar and non-academician alike. The subjects include, among others, Alaska towns, mission stations, key institutions, and significant persons—religious and lay. Given the author’s association with the Society of Jesus, the primary Catholic missionaries of Alaska, the information about the priests and brothers of that organization is the fullest and written with the most personal detail. All entries suggest a friendly intimacy, rich as they are with anecdotes of lives and personalities. They are filled, nonetheless, with larger observations about what the Catholic presence has meant to Alaska. Ample attention is given to the role of the Native people, Catholic nuns and missionaries, and the rising prominence of Native Alaskans in the practice and administration of their religion. Stunning photographs that capture the Alaska world are included, and most illuminating are the accounts of the Alaska Native Sisterhoods.

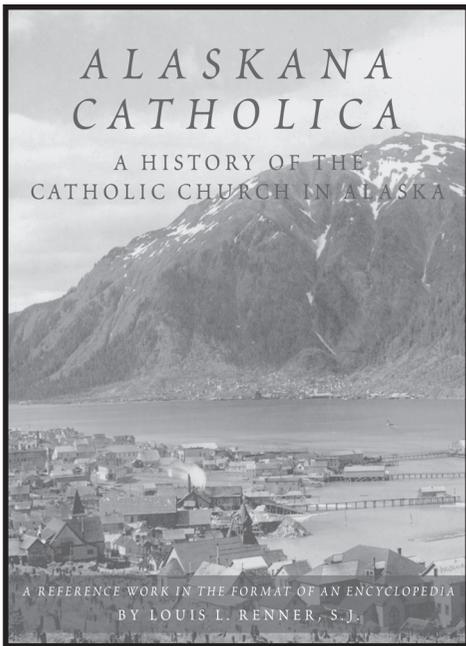
Renner delves widely and deeply into a unique and demanding region, steeped in Native history and ritual. Catholic missionaries brought new forces with European/American linguistics, natural sciences, photographs, medicines, technologies, music, and spirituality that blended into, conflicted with, and changed the world of many Native people, even as this place transformed those who entered the Alaskan landscape. Renner, nonetheless, makes it clear that Alaska is not for every newcomer. Disputes—priest to priest, Native to missionary, nun to priest—inevitably surfaced, sometimes over unexpected issues. Renner addresses these clashes and disagreements with measured language and occasionally a touch of humor.

No reader of this volume could regard Alaska or Catholicism as secondary subjects in the historical canon. This work demonstrates how the mix of the secular and the sacred can produce history to be read thoroughly and savored carefully for important themes and thoughtful analysis. In addition, Renner weaves into an Alaskan fabric the colorful threads of peoples of many cultures across national and international boundaries. This is an “encyclopedia” that delivers far more than the title suggests.

Alaskana Catholica is seven hundred pages in length—a size difficult for today’s budget-minded publishers. Fortunately, many organizations and persons, this reviewer included, contributed to a subvention, so that the work could be printed in its entirety. This is a stand-alone volume, one for everyone with an interest in Alaska, the history of Catholicism, the intersection of the two, and the way a meticulous scholar manages challenging subjects with balance, clarity, inclusiveness, grace, and warmth. *Alaskana Catholica* is the crown jewel in the long career of Louis L. Renner, S.J., Alaska’s most accomplished Catholic historian.

Anne M. Butler

Trustee Professor, Emeritus, Utah State University, served for fourteen years as associate editor, coeditor, or senior editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly*.



ALASKANA CATHOLICA

“Through years of dedicated research, writing, and documentation, Father Renner has created a succinct yet comprehensive guide detailing in total clarity and conciseness the history of the Catholic Church in Alaska. Within this historic documentation the reader can reference over 225 years of Catholicism in Alaska. Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., has accomplished in Alaskana Catholica a momentous feat—a magnum opus.”

Donald J. Kettler
Bishop of Fairbanks

“Father Renner is the foremost authority on Catholic history in Alaska, writing history at its purest, almost exclusively from archival sources.”

Dr. Dorothy Jean Ray
Historian and Anthropologist

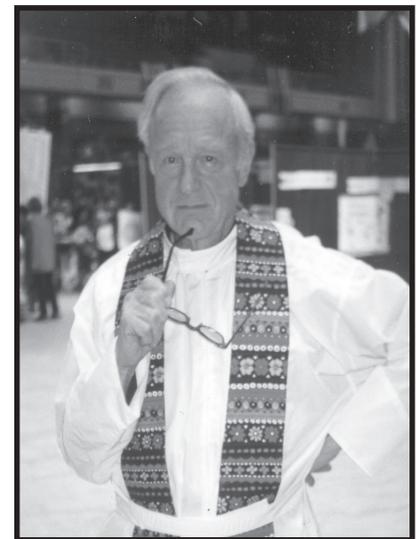
“This fascinating volume offers an intimate picture of the activities of the Catholic Church’s Alaska Mission, from its beginning in the nineteenth century to the present. It is a fact-filled account of people and places with a wonderful array of characters...Father Renner, with a historian’s concern for the facts and a writer’s eye for a good story,

has produced a valuable work.”

Francis Paul Prucha, S.J.,
Professor of History Emeritus , Marquette University

“One of the main intents of this volume,” we read in the author’s Preface, *“is to keep alive for posterity the memory of many major Catholic Alaskan figures—clerical and lay, Native and non-Native, living and deceased—by the recording of their lives and deeds.”*

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*.



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 written by **Father Louis L. Renner, S.J.****

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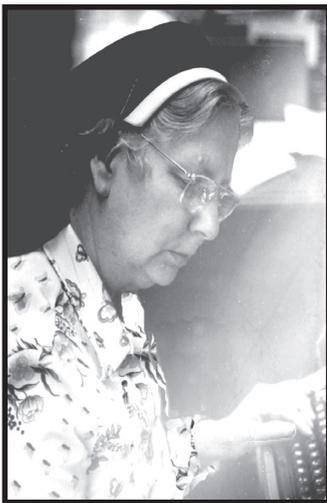
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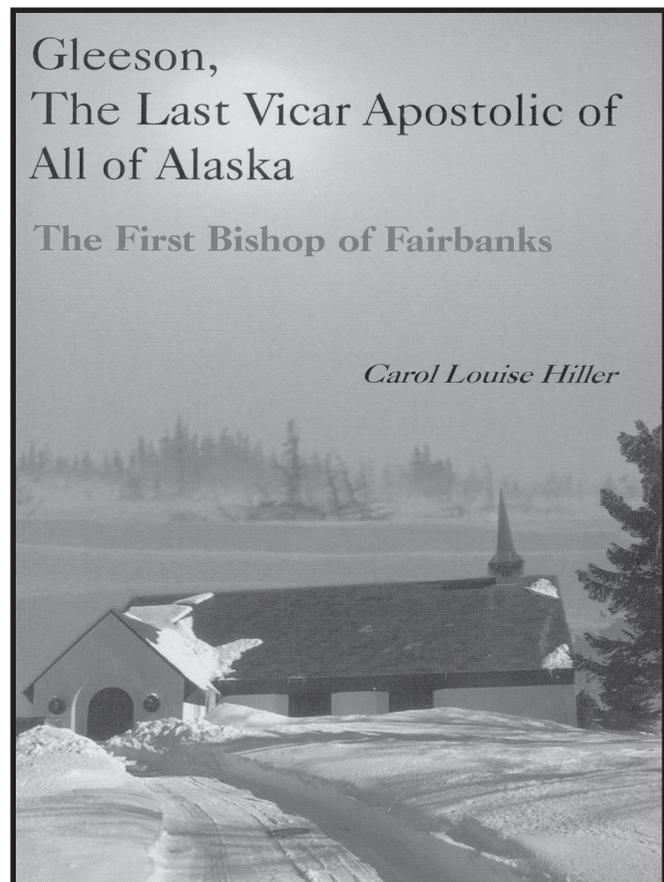
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This personal story of Bishop Gleeson unfolds against the backdrop of early American growth and expansion, with special focus on Alaska as it evolved from a territory, was purchased by the United States and then achieved statehood. This part of the 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.



him the Last Rites. Father Jetté was near death upon his arrival in Nenana. An immediate operation revealed a strangulated hernia already gangrenous. After spending almost a year in St. Joseph's Hospital in Fairbanks, he was taken to Seattle for another operation. Father Monroe accompanied him from Fairbanks to Seward, and Bishop Joseph R. Crimont, S.J., from there to Seattle.

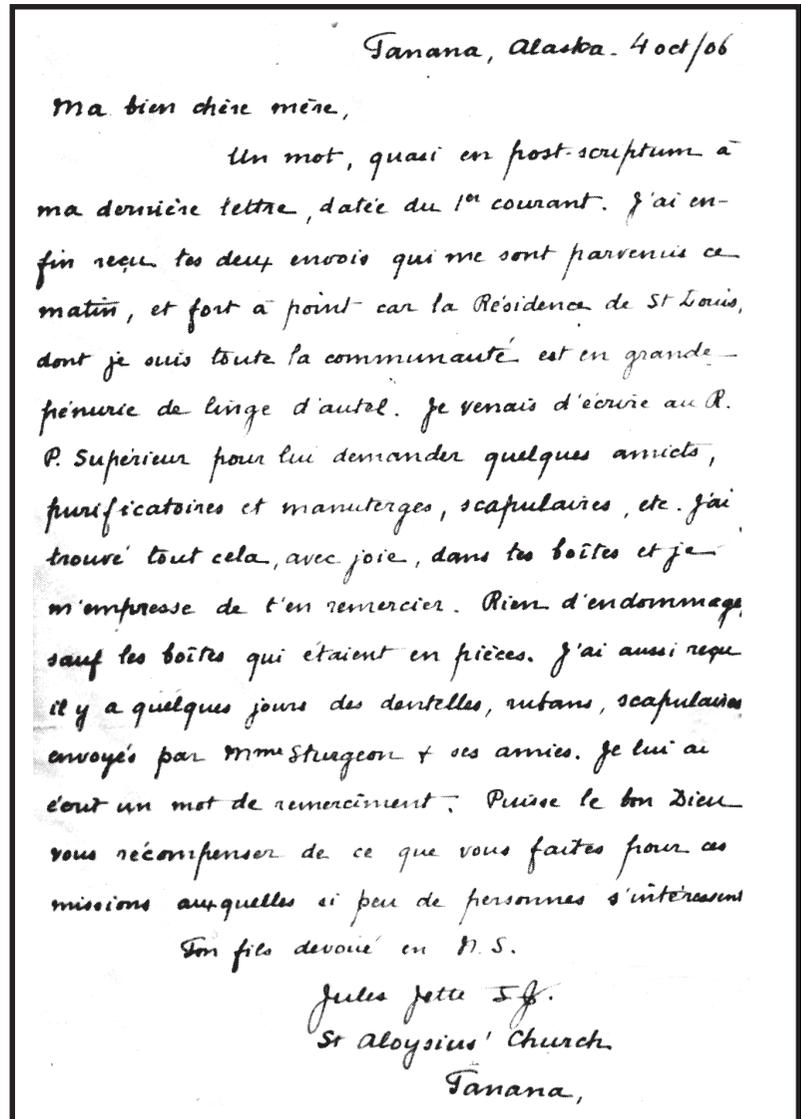
In the fall of 1924, Father Jetté went to recuperate at Seattle College. While there, he taught French in the high school and was Spiritual Father to the Jesuit community. At this time, too, he began to gather materials for what was to be his last major undertaking, a projected "History of the Alaska Mission." He had been assigned to produce such a history by his Father Provincial. Of this he was to complete only the first three chapters. The manuscript, titled "Jottings of an Alaskan Missionary," consists of 23,000 words and covers the history of Alaska from 1741 to 1877. This painstaking, meticulous study of historical events, done with all the precision of his mathematical mind, he called "Jottings," because "it is not meant to be 'sophisticated.'"

No account of Father Jetté's vast written legacy would be complete without mention of the innumerable letters he wrote to people of all walks of life. Some of the letters are quite lengthy. Many are studded with gems of wit, urbanity, erudition, human warmth. Those in English are written in clear, beautiful, flawless English, though this was not his native tongue. And all are penned in a handwriting absolutely perfect.

In the summer of 1925, Father Jetté returned to Alaska. For a year, he served as an assistant in the Fairbanks parish and as hospital chaplain. In May of 1926, on the *Matanuska*, he left Fairbanks for Holy Cross Mission, where he arrived on the 23rd. There, on July 1st, he was host to Ales Hrdlicka, eminent anthropologist from the Smithsonian Institution, on a field trip along the Yukon. Hrdlicka found Father Jetté to be "a fine old Frenchman and scholar, whose meritorious work deserves to be known and published." On the 15th, Father Jetté left Holy Cross on the mission boat, the *Tosi*, for St. Mary's Mission, Akulurak, where he arrived on the 17th.

Father Martin J. Lonneux, S.J., began the Foreword to his "Complete Graded Baltimore Catechism in Innuït" with "Father Jetté came to Akulurak to learn the Innuït Language. This knowledge was necessary for some special work he was doing." In a letter Father Lonneux wrote to Bishop Crimont on February 4, 1927, the day Father Jetté died, he gave a more precise reason why Father Jetté came to Akulurak: "He came to pay us a short visit, in order to gather datas [sic] for the History he was intending to write." Father Jetté, seeing the Akulurak mission very much in need of additional priestly help, asked Superiors to be allowed to prolong his stay there, and was allowed to do so.

On August 17, 1926, he wrote to his Father Provincial: "I came here just a month ago and, finding Fr. Lonneux alone, overworked, seriously handicapped by lack of support and cooperation from our Alaskan Superiors, decided to remain as long as possible, instead of paying only a flying visit as



A letter written by Father Jetté, S.J., to his mother-- a typical example of his handwriting.
(Courtesy Louis L. Renner, S.J.)

was first intended. Even more, I have applied, with Fr. L's full approval, to be stationed here for the winter, to give him at least the advantage of congenial companionship, which may in some degree make up for the incapacity resulting from my battered condition. The others, it seems, cannot put up with his outspoken language, or his progressive methods. The latter I approve, and the former I rather enjoy. I cannot understand why older people (of whose number I am) should be so attached to our old methods, which have not yielded extra bright results after all, as to reject a priori and without trial any change or improvement proposed by the younger men. This seems very unreasonable, and after we have begged for years to have some young men sent to this country, we ought to welcome them, and their ways too, with an open heart and an accommodating mind."

It was of this man, and at this time, that Father John L. Lucchesi, fellow Jesuit and veteran Alaskan missionary, wrote, "Fr. Jetté, the bright star of the Tennah, is in his old age, studying another language, and out of his native district." Perhaps "in his old age," but surely not old in mind and outlook, nor in scholarly plans. One could wish that he had been spared another decade or two, but this was not the case.

In the Akulurak mission diary, Father Lonneux recorded the gradual setting of "the bright star of the Tennah." "Dec. 30: Fr. Jetté not feeling well. Jan. 12: Fr. Jetté's condition is not improving—on the contrary. Jan. 29: The health of Fr. Jetté gives great worry. He could scarcely move to his table for meals. His strength is giving way gradually. Jan. 31: Father still going down; scarcely eats. Feb. 3: Father Lonneux spent again the night with Fr. Jetté. He suffers very much. At 8 a.m. Fr. Lonneux gives him the last sacraments. Fr. Jetté answered all the prayers. After that he suffered so much that he was quite unconscious. He came back to himself for a very short while at 2 p.m. At 6:30 p.m. he told Fr. Lonneux he did not want anything but sleep. Feb. 4: Fr. Lonneux passes night with Father. At 11:40 a.m. Father noticed that Fr. Jetté's breathing became less regular, and, at 12:40, quickly, peacefully he rendered his soul to God. At once he was prepared and at 4:30 was placed in the church. Although only six full months here, his sound

judgment, his great activity, his clear understanding of native ways and his straightforwardness did an immense good for the Mission. He was regretted by all, but especially the boys and above all by the Brothers. Feb. 5: The house seems dead. Feb. 6: Children visit Fr. Jetté in church. Feb. 7: High Requiem Mass for Fr. Jetté in Sisters' chapel as church was too cold."

On that same February 7, 1927, the Sister diarist wrote in the *Ursuline Annals* of St. Mary's Mission, Akulurak: "Fr. Jetté radiated sanctity and sunshine."

The body of this great missionary and scholar—who 29 years earlier was granted permission to go to Alaska, "at least for a time, as an experiment, to see whether his health is able to bear the rigors of that region"—was laid to rest in the mission cemetery, where it lies buried in the frozen tundra to this day. The written legacy and the memory of the man, however, live on. His published works and his manuscripts still receive much attention, and older people along the Yukon still remember well and speak fondly of Julius Jetté, known to them as "Father Jetty."



Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., visits the grave of Father Jules Jetté, S.J., in Akulurak, August 4, 1981. (Courtesy Louis L. Renner, S.J.)

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