



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

THE LAST MASSES CELEBRATED ON KING ISLAND, ALASKA

Editor's Note: For the contents of this issue of *The Alaskan Shepherd* we are indebted to the writings of Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J. Father Renner served in the Diocese of Fairbanks from 1958-2002. In 2002, he continued his "apostolate of the pen," in Spokane, Washington, at Gonzaga University. At Gonzaga, Father Renner completed, in 2005, *Alaskana Catholica*, a book detailing the history of Catholic Alaska. In 2008, Father Renner completed his autobiography, *A Kindly Providence*. Both works are available from *The Alaskan Shepherd* office. **Author's Note:** All the photos illustrating this article are courtesy of the Jesuit Oregon Province Archives (JOPA), Foley Library, Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington.

"In nomine Patris . . ." I began, 35 years ago this June 2009, the first of the last three Masses to be celebrated—to date—on King Island.

King Island was discovered by Capt. James Cook in 1778 and named for Lt. James King, a member of his party. The island—only two and a half miles long, a mile and a half wide, and from 700 to 1196 feet high—rises abruptly out of the dark blue-green waters of the Bering Sea about 40 miles west of the Seward Peninsula's Cape Douglas and some 90 miles northwest of Nome. Its longer axis is oriented east and west, and sheer cliffs ring the island except for the slight embayments in the southern and northwestern shorelines where the slopes are somewhat less steep. The island has no beaches, and granite boulders rounded off by the waves provide landing spots in only three places.

The village on King Island, Ukivok, is located on the south side of the island on a rock slide 200 feet wide, with a slope of about 40 degrees to the sea making the King Islanders, when they still made Ukivok their home, true cliff-dwellers. The houses were built on wooden platforms supported by long driftwood poles, "stilts," making King Island village a true "stilt village." After the winter of 1965-66, King Island ceased to be a year-round home. As of the year 1966, the village has been a ghost village, on a ghost island, except for during summers, when different skin-boat loads of King Islanders, generally family groups, visit



Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J., praying before the statue of Christ the King on King Island, June 23, 1974. The village of Ukivok is behind and below him. Photo by Hubert Kokuluk/JOPA 556.6.04.

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King Island, two and a half miles long, a mile and a half wide, rises abruptly out of the waters of the Bering Sea to a height of 1196 feet. It lies 35 miles off the Seward Peninsula and some 90 miles northwest of Nome. The village of Ukivok hangs center front near the water. JOPA-556.14.01.

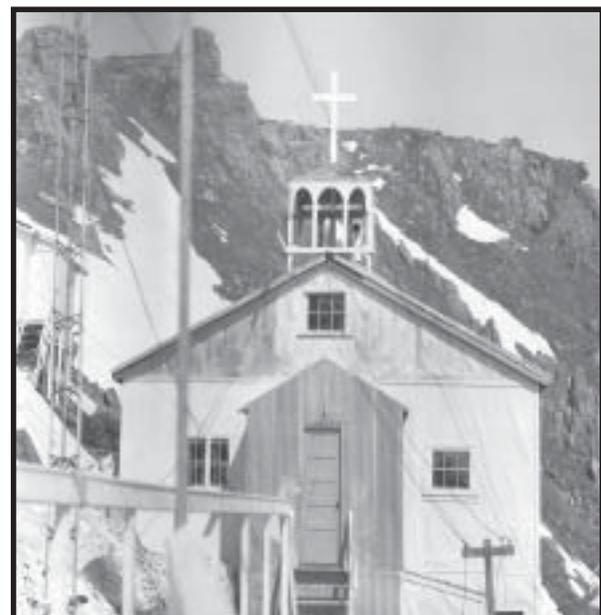
the island to hunt, to gather eggs and “Eskimo vegetables” (greens), or simply to make a nostalgic visit to their homeland.

During my novitiate days, 1944-46, I had already exchanged letters with Fr. Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J., pioneer missionary to the King Island Eskimos. Thirty years later, the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, where I was a faculty member at the time, granted me sabbatical leave to write the life of Fr. Lafortune. In 1929, he founded the Mission of Christ the King on King Island. But by then, he had already visited the island, for a few days, in June 1916. During that visit there, he offered the first Masses celebrated on the island.

Unlike some non-Native visitors to King Island, who found it to be “a most inhospitable place, a rugged, wildly-desolate and isolated pile of rocks,” Fr. Lafortune found it to be “a true paradise. Wherever you look [in the spring], you see nature immense and wild, without a trace of human efforts to improve it, and the whole covered with a vegetation that God alone controls. More than of any other country it can be said of this place that ‘one has to see it to know it.’ No amount of writing or talking or picture-taking will ever give to people the real idea of this place.” Those last two sentences kept haunting me. I felt it imperative that I make a trip to the island to get some “real idea” of the place, before I undertook to write the life of Fr. Lafortune.

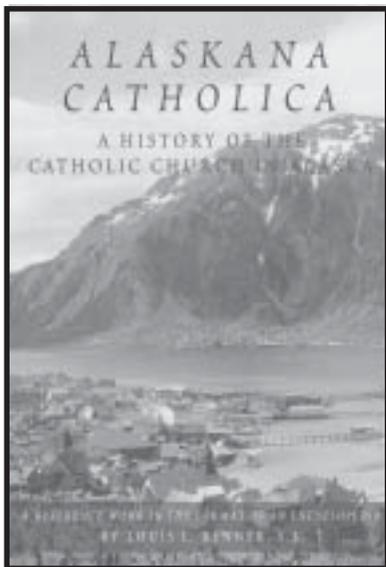
For a white man to find a place in a King Island Eskimo’s skin-boat due to make a trip to the island is not all that easy. Space in a given boat is generally very limited; and, of greater significance, a trip to King Island is something special to the King Islanders and jealously guarded as such by them. However, when it was learned that I wanted to visit the island, so as to be better prepared to write the life of Fr. Lafortune, Mike Saclamana, a member of the King Island Eskimo community living in Nome at the time, after an exchange of several letters, warmly welcomed me to make the trip to the island with him and his extended family in his boat.

On May 22, 1974, I arrived in Nome. Before the day was out, I had met Mike and family. Due to delays owing to various causes—among them: adverse ice and weather conditions, Mike’s being gone several times on hunting trips off Cape Woolley, a death and the funeral some days later—it was not until the morning of June 17th that Mike’s extended family and I finally left Nome, on the Coast Guard icebreaker, the *Burton Island*, which, with all 15 of us on board, took us out to off-shore of Cape Woolley. This cape is about halfway between Nome and King Island. Mike and his two boats and their crews were already at the cape, along with two other boats with their crews and passengers. The *Burton Island* had the last of those four boats and occupants onboard right around midnight, June 17th to 18th. Soon thereafter we were pounding and rolling and fog-horning our way through rough and choppy seas, King



This photo of Christ the King Church on King Island was taken by Fr. Bernard R. Hubbard, S.J., in 1938. The church was taken down by King Island men, ca. 1985, because it was becoming unstable and a hazard. JOPA-171.2.02.

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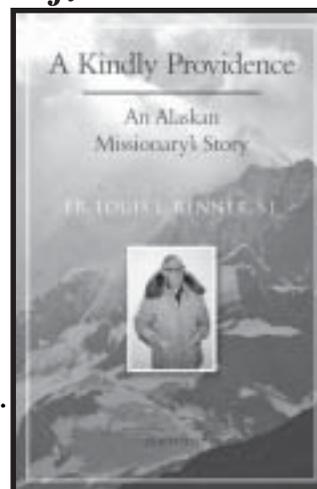
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Proceeds benefit the Catholic Missions of Northern Alaska. www.cbna.info

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To the friends and benefactors of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks:

In September we begin our annual novena to the patroness of the missions of Alaska, St. Therese, "The Little Flower." The Novena will begin on September 23 and will end on the Feast of St. Therese, October 1. On each of these days a Mass will be offered for our friends and for their needs and petitions.

You are invited to submit petitions to be remembered during the novena. No offering is necessary. Any received will be used to support our ministries here in Northern Alaska. You are also invited to join us on the novena days (September 23-October 1), by praying the following prayer:

"O Lord, Who said, 'Unless you become as little children you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven,' GRANT US, WE BESEECH YOU, the grace to so follow in the way of Blessed Therese in humility and simplicity that through her intercession these petitions and those of all our members may be granted as part of the shower of roses she promised to send upon this earth."

Please detach and send intention portion. Use prayer above for the Novena.



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Island bound. By shortly after 7:00 A.M., on June 18th, a Tuesday, we were on the lee side of the island. The village side was too rough for off-loading the boats, their cargoes, and all the people. Without delay, the off-loading of the *Burton Island* and the hauling of cargoes and the ferrying of people to the village side of the island began. Spending most of that first day on King Island unloading the boats, hauling them up on the rocks out of the reach of the waves, and bringing gear and supplies up the steep cliff to their houses left the sleep-deprived people utterly exhausted. I myself shared their labors, their short sleeps, and their exhaustion. I had intended originally to offer a Mass of thanksgiving for our safe arrival at the island shortly after our landing there, but the general fatigue made obvious to all that the Mass should be postponed a day or two .

The big event for Wednesday, the 19th, was, for all of us, of course, the planned Mass of thanksgiving. In the afternoon, at 5:15, I rang the rusted, but still resonant, old church bell long and loud. To the young, the bell's call to Mass was a new sound. To the old, it had a familiar, nostalgic ring, a ring evoking memories of bygone village and church celebrations, of sad funerals and burials, of hunters lost out on fog-shrouded ice floes. Slowly, young and old made their way up through the maze of houses to the weather-beaten old church dominating the village below it to attend the first Mass to be offered on the island in 14 years. Fr. George E. Carroll, S.J., the last missionary to serve on King Island, had offered the last previous Mass on the island, in late April 1960. In keeping with the wishes of the older people, this first Mass was to be offered in Latin, the way



This profile view photo of Ukivok, the village on King Island, was taken by Fr. George E. Carroll, S.J., ca. 1955. Christ the King Church and the house Fr. Bellarmine Lafortune, S. J., lived in are at the top left. The white building between them housed a chapel, in the end nearer to the church, and the priest's quarters. The big building lower right is the Bureau of Education School. JOPA-540.2.89

they remembered the last Masses they had attended on the island. The Mass I chose to celebrate was that of Christ the King, to whom the mission on King Island was dedicated.

“*In nomine Patris . . .*,” I began the Mass. Having no server, I was about to answer the prayers myself, when, out of the front pew and in perfect Latin, the proper response came. Ursula Ellanna (Mike Saclamana’s mother-in-law) had not forgotten. As I was unvesting, Mike came forward to invite me to his place for a reindeer stew dinner. After that Mass in that cold and raw church—so cold that I had trouble reading the missal through the clouds of my condensing breath—his invitation was most welcome. Outside the church, in the fog and drizzle, 14-year-old Gilbert Taxac was waiting to ask me, “What kind of talk was *that*?” “Latin,” I told him. “Where do they talk *that*?” he wanted to know. By 1974, my Mass Latin had become somewhat rusty. Ursula told me that I had made several mistakes, something I already knew.

At that first Mass, I did not give a sermon. I did not want to prolong our stay in that frosty old church. Only when it came time to commemorate the dead did I pause, turn to the people, and invite them to join me in praying for the departed. We prayed for those departed King Islanders whose bones were resting among the rocks on the steep slope above the village. We prayed for Fr. Lafortune, who died and was buried in Fairbanks, in October 1947. We prayed for Fr. Thomas P.



In the Church of Christ the King, Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J., offers the last Mass celebrated on King Island, on Sunday, June 23, 1974. Photo by Michael Saclamana/JOPA-556.10.19.

We want to thank in a special way those of you who have included the Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska (our legal title) in your bequests and wills, and those of you who, at the time of the deaths of dear ones, have suggested that in their memory contributions be made to the Missions of Northern Alaska or to the Alaskan Shepherd Endowment Fund. A suggested wording: “I give, devise and bequeath to the Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska, 1312 Peger Road, Fairbanks, Alaska...”

Cunningham, S.J., who succeeded Fr. Lafortune as missionary on King Island, 1947-50. And we prayed for Fr. Bernard R. Hubbard, S.J., who spent the winter 1937-38 on the island, photographing and filming the King Islanders and their way of life, and who brought the statue of Christ the King to the island.

On Saturday evening, the 22nd, I again offered Mass in that old church. This Mass was in English, and, since it was attended mainly by children, I had all come close to the altar. The Mass had a tangible family warmth about it.

The last Mass celebrated on King Island I offered the following day, Sunday, June 23, 1974. All attended this Mass. For my sermon, I spoke about how everything on the island—the rocks, the snows, the waters, the village itself—was slowly moving down to its ultimate source, the primordial sea, nature’s immense and mighty symbol for God the Creator, the Alpha and the Omega of all creatures.

While we were still in Nome, King Islanders expressed to me their concern for the island’s church and some of its fixtures. Of special concern to them was the ivory crucifix, carved by a King Islander, on the tabernacle door. After that Sunday Mass, Mike, unprompted, brought me that crucifix with the words, “Here, I feel something like this should go to a person like you.” Sixteen years later, someone in Nome asked that the crucifix be sent to Nome. I happily sent it. As for that old Church of Christ the King on King Island, having become unstable and a hazard, it was taken down by King Island men, around 1985. And that old bell—after having called the living and mourned the dead for over three decades—as it was being rung for the last time during my stay on the island, the tower, on which it was mounted, collapsed—and down the bell came.

Mike had planned for us to leave the island that Sunday afternoon. However, a stiff wind out of the northeast had made the sea so rough and choppy, that a crossing over to Cape Woolley was considered too dangerous for overcrowded, heavily laden skin-boats. Around noon, I joined the Saclamana family for a climb up the 700-foot cliff to the life-size, bronze statue of Christ the King and some picture taking. A family picnic followed. This—on the lee side



This rusty old bell at the top of King Island village, near the church, rang out for the last time the third week of June 1974, when the tower collapsed. JOPA-556.17.03.

of huge granite outcroppings, out of the wind and in the warm late June sun—was a most pleasant, relaxing family affair. It was anything but a Sunday afternoon in the park. The sun was just then putting in its longest days of the year. The whole island was covered with a dense carpet of lush green vegetation brightened by a great variety of wildflowers in full bloom. The skies overhead were filled with screeching and whirring myriads of sea birds of all kinds. King Island—nature immediate, raw and wild—was now fully alive. That night, in spite of a roof-rattling wind, I was soon fast asleep.

It was not until Wednesday morning, the 26th, that that northeast wind began to abate, and the heavy swells on the sea to subside. By 6:30 that evening—after I had led the people in some prayers thanking God for the good and safe stay we had had on the island and asking Him for a safe crossing—we were well into our 35-mile crossing over to Cape Woolley. As our outboard motors, assisted by a moderate tailwind, pushed us steadily toward the mainland, King Island began to lose its sharp contours, to flatten out, to become ever smaller, a sinking blue rock on the distant horizon. Shortly after midnight, we were all safely ashore at Cape Woolley.



The life-size, 900-pound, bronze statue of Christ the King stands on a 700-foot high cliff overlooking the King Island village of Ukivok. On the base of the statue one can read: “Sam Kitson fecit 1904.” It was brought to King Island by Fr. Bernard R. Hubbard, S.J., in 1937, and solemnly dedicated on October 31, 1937, the Feast of Christ the King. Sometime toward the end of the last century, the weather-worn crown came apart and fell to the ground. Photo by Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J./JOPA-556.18.08.

“We are blessed to have so many supporters who make our work possible. I want to especially thank those of you who remember us in your prayers. Donations provide tangible benefits, but the power of prayer and the Lord’s grace is our bedrock. Thank you with all our hearts.” --Bishop Donald J. Kettler