



The Alaskan Shepherd



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May-June 2012

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

THE HISTORY OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS PART II: ITS FIRST 50-YEARS: 1962-2012

*Editor's Note: The previous issue of **The Alaskan Shepherd** was devoted to the history of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks prior to its establishment as a diocese, on August 8, 1962. This issue treats its 50-year history as a diocese. Again, I very sincerely thank Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J., Alaska Catholic Church historian, for favoring us with these two accounts of the history of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks.*

—Patty Walter



**Bishop Francis Doyle Gleeson, S.J.,
Bishop of the Diocese of Fairbanks: 1962-1968.**

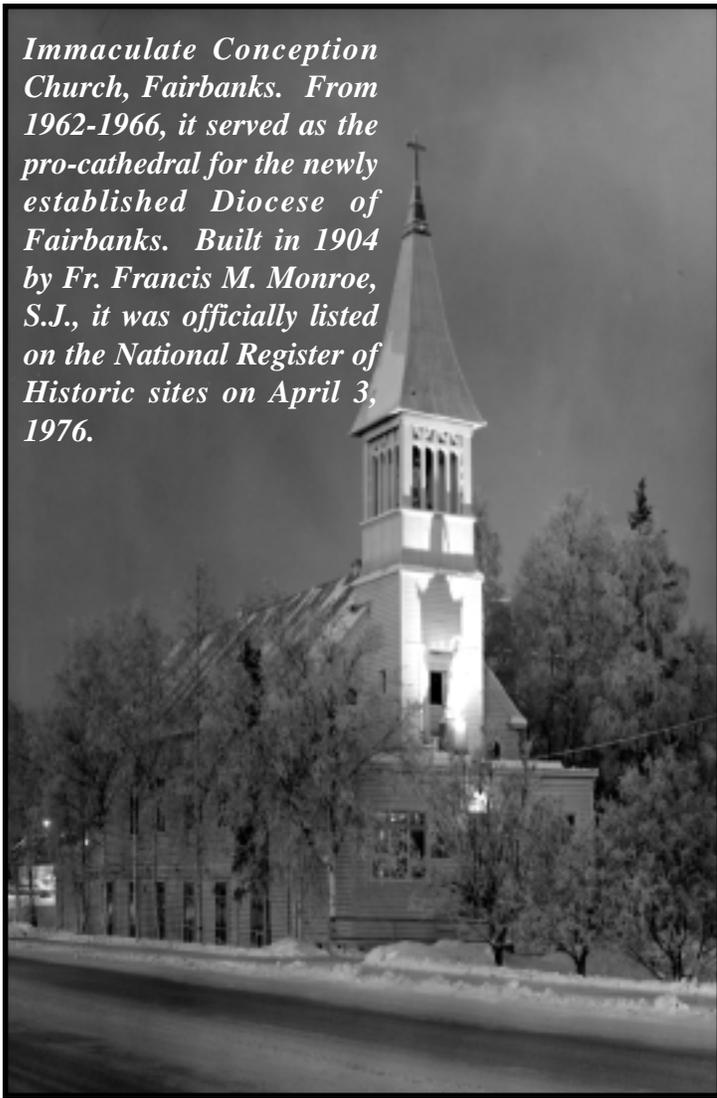
The year 1962 was for the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks a truly red-letter year; for that year— exactly 50 years after the first Catholic missionary (in the person of Fr. Jean Seguin, an Oblate Missionary of Mary Immaculate) first set foot in northern Alaska— on August 8, 1962, Pope John XXIII wrote in a letter to Bishop Francis D. Gleeson, S.J., Vicar Apostolic of Alaska at the time: “Today we have established the new Diocese of Fairbanks. We have planted the seed of hope in the land of Alaska and have kindled a bright flame by which people of that land may be illuminated.” Predictably, Bishop Gleeson, the last Vicar Apostolic of the Vicariate Apostolic of Alaska, became the first Ordinary of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks, became the first Bishop of Fairbanks. (The Diocese of Fairbanks is rightfully characterized as a “Missionary Diocese,” inasmuch as, throughout its 50-year history, it has remained directly under the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome.) In that same letter, the pope wrote: “The capital of this diocese and the residence of the Bishop will be the city of Fairbanks. In it, namely in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which we raise to the rank of a Cathedral Church, the Bishop will station the chair of his office and authority.”

For four years, the Church of the Immaculate Conception served as the diocese’s pro-cathedral. But the diocese needed a real cathedral, a cathedral worthy of the name. Again Fr. James C. Spils, S.J.—“God’s Builder,” who had overseen the construction of both St. Mary’s Mission and Boarding School on the Andreafsky River and the Copper Valley School—was called upon to oversee the construction of what today stands as Sacred Heart Cathedral at the corner of Airport Way and Peger

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Immaculate Conception Church, Fairbanks. From 1962-1966, it served as the pro-cathedral for the newly established Diocese of Fairbanks. Built in 1904 by Fr. Francis M. Monroe, S.J., it was officially listed on the National Register of Historic sites on April 3, 1976.



Road. Ground for the new cathedral was broken already in 1962. However, the building took shape slowly. Finances and the supply of volunteer labor were limited. Nevertheless, the new structure, “the Farthest North Cathedral,” was ready, on April 3, 1966, for the Palm Sunday Mass. It was formally dedicated by Bishop Gleeson, on June 17, 1966, the feast of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. (Earlier that same year, on February 9th, the Archdiocese of Anchorage was established. Joseph T. Ryan, its archbishop, was installed on April 14th. With the establishment of the 138,985-square mile Archdiocese of Anchorage, the Diocese of Juneau was reduced to 37,566 square miles, and the Diocese of Fairbanks to 409,849 square miles.)

As Sacred Heart Cathedral was going up in Fairbanks, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council was taking place in Rome, and Bishop Gleeson was in attendance. In its Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the Council decreed that “the diaconate can be restored as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy.” Subsequently, Bishop Gleeson asked the bishops of the United States to petition Rome for the approval of the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the United States. Rome was petitioned, and gave approval; and, in 1968, the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the United States became a reality. This, as we shall see, was to have a major impact on the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks.

By the early 1960s, Bishop Gleeson—born in 1895—was approaching his 70th birthday. He asked Rome for a coadjutor bishop with the right to succeed him. On April 11, 1964, Pope Paul VI appointed Fr. George T. Boileau, S.J.,

Sacred Heart Cathedral, Fairbanks—”the Farthest North Cathedral”—was formally dedicated on the feast of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on June 17 1966, by Bishop Francis D. Gleeson, S.J. Fr. James C. Spils, S.J., was the overseer of its construction. In the summer of 1994, the cathedral received a new roof; and, in October, a steeple. (The most significant non-liturgical event ever to take place in the cathedral, the performance of J.S. Bach’s St. John Passion, took place in it on April 12, 1968. The internationally known bass-baritone, William Warfield, sang the part of Jesus.)



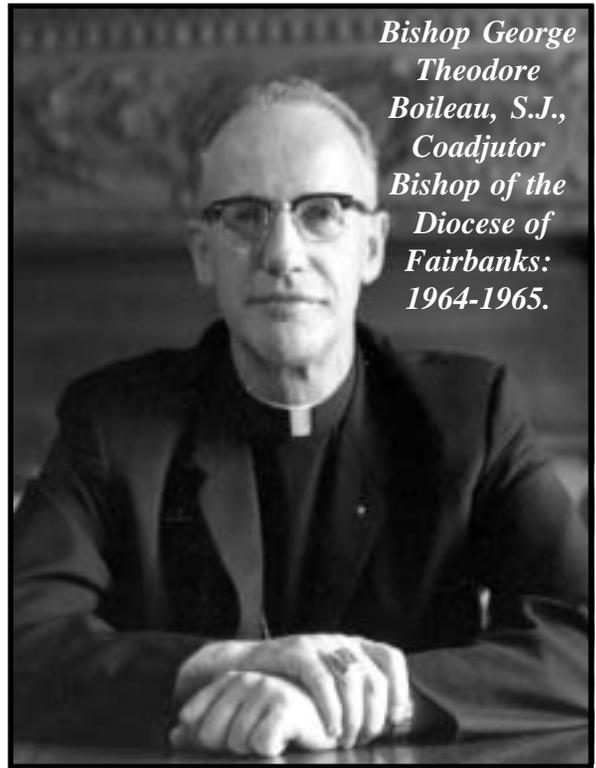
General Superior of Jesuits in Alaska at the time, Coadjutor Bishop of Fairbanks. In the Copper Valley School chapel, on July 31, 1964, he was consecrated bishop by Francis Cardinal Spellman. Bishop Boileau chose this wilderness site for his consecration, because, in his words, “I want to be consecrated among the people I have lived with and with whom I will be associated in the future.” For his motto he chose, “ONE BODY IN CHRIST.” In the fall of that year, he attended a session of Vatican II, and then did some traveling in Europe. His last night there, that of October 28th, he spent in Lisieux. The next morning, he offered Mass at the altar enshrining the relics of St. Therese, patroness of the Alaska missions.

To the great shock of many, early in the morning of February 25, 1965, at his sister’s place in Riverton, Washington, after giving a lecture the evening before at Seattle University, while putting on his coat, Bishop Boileau was stricken by a heart attack that brought on instant death. After Solemn Pontifical Masses for the repose of his soul had been celebrated both in Seattle and in Fairbanks, he was laid to rest in the Clay Street Cemetery in downtown Fairbanks.

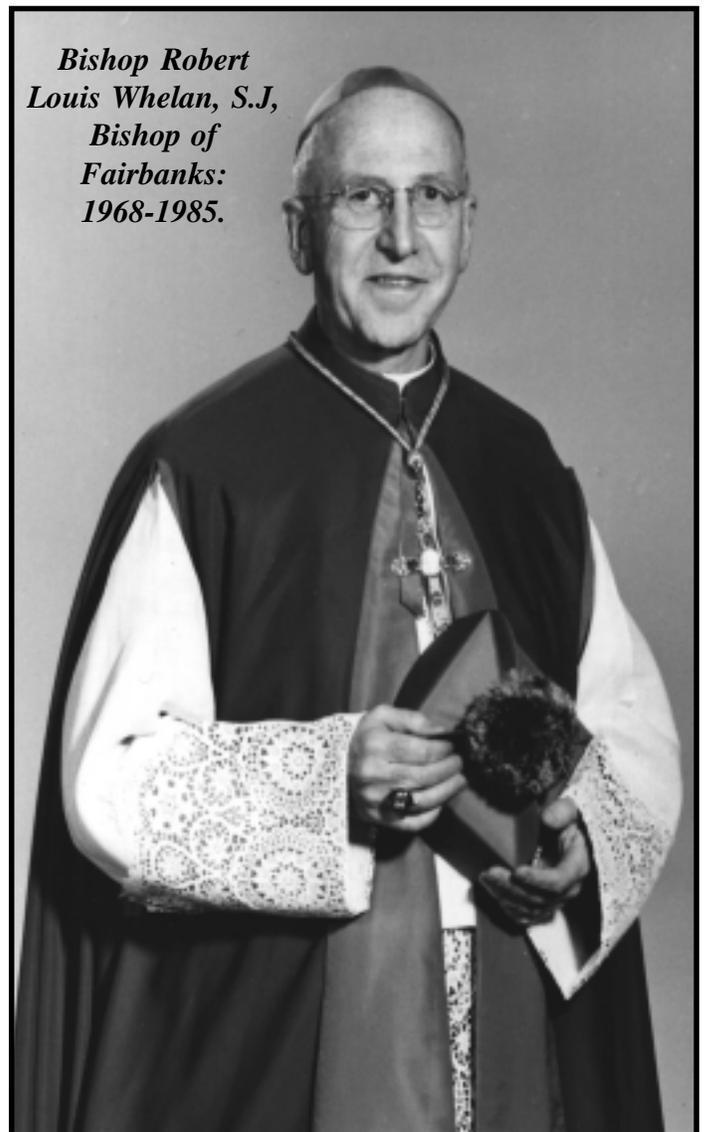
Again, Bishop Gleeson needed to petition Rome for a coadjutor with the right of succession. On December 6, 1967, Rome chose Fr. Robert L. Whelan, S.J.—a pastor of various parishes in Alaska since 1946—to fill that role. In Sacred Heart Cathedral, on February 22, 1968, Bishop Gleeson ordained him a bishop. On November 30th of that year, Bishop Gleeson retired, and Bishop Whelan became Ordinary of the Diocese of Fairbanks. He was formally installed as such on February 13, 1969.

Bishop Gleeson, upon his retirement, was hailed by Pope Paul VI, in a letter dated November 30, 1968, as a “staunch herald of Christ,” and granted “the honors and privileges of Bishops Assistant at the Papal Throne.” The 13th Alaska State Legislature saw in him “a recognized leader and builder of the Catholic Faith in Alaska.” During his retirement years, he lived in what was then referred to as the “Bishops’ Residence,” today’s Diocese of Fairbanks Chancery Building. After his retirement, ever interested in education, he taught Spanish for a semester at Monroe Catholic High School. Routinely, he cooked the Sunday dinners for the community living at the Bishops’ Residence. Until his last years, he was active in local affairs—and at the pinochle table. He died, as he had lived, quietly and peacefully, in Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, on April 30, 1983. He lies buried in the Fairbanks’ Birch Hill Cemetery.

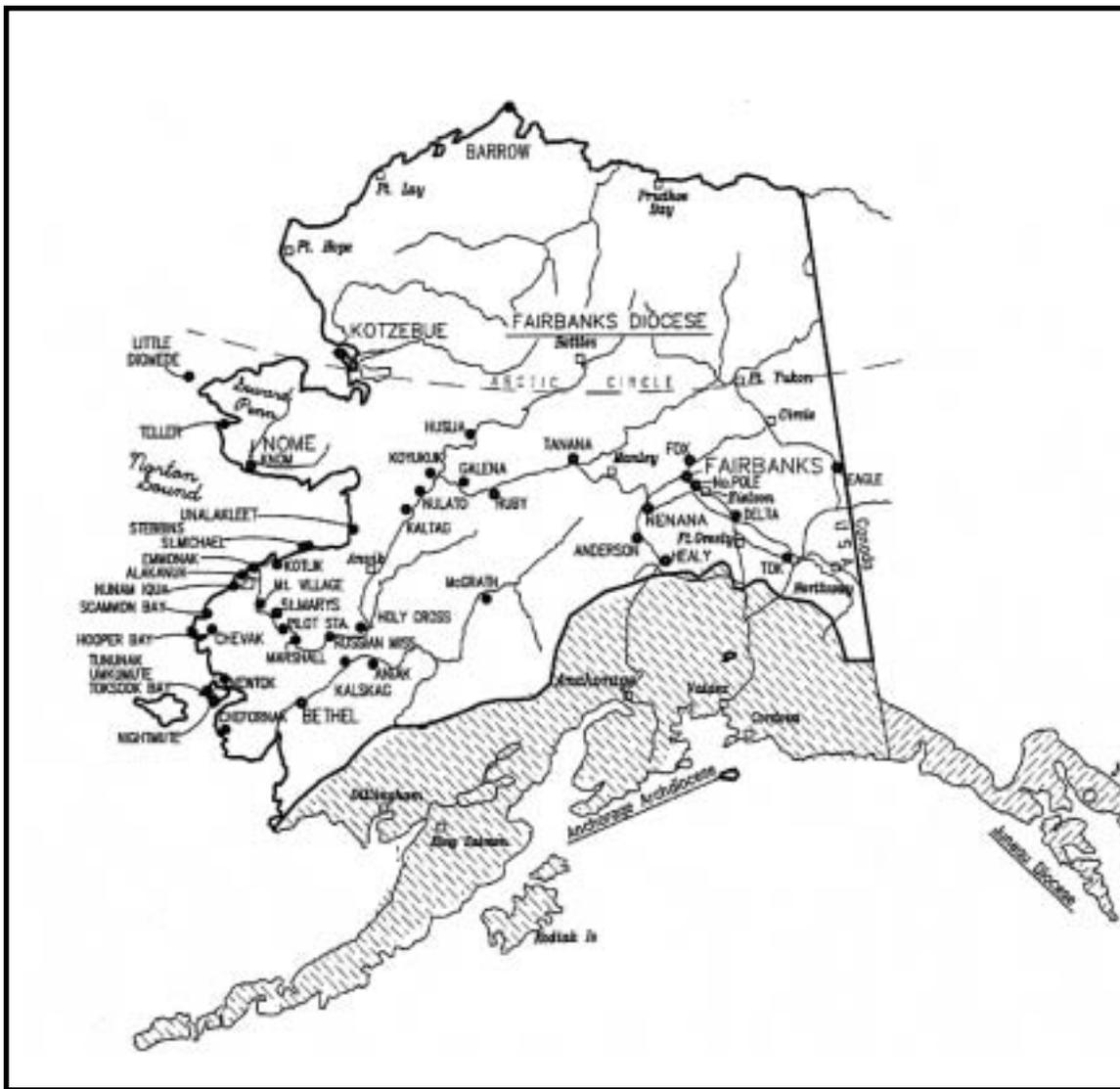
As Bishop of Fairbanks, Bishop Whelan—in keeping with the motto on his coat of arms, *SOLLICITUDO ET CARITAS* (“Solicitude and Charity”)—was a tireless traveler, visiting by plane, boat, and snowmachine the widely-scattered Indian and Eskimo villages of his vast diocese. It was during his years in office that the “Eskimo Deacon Program” came into being and to full flower. He himself ordained 28 Eskimo men to the permanent diaconate. He considered doing so “an important development for the work of the Church in our bush villages, and a morale builder for the Eskimo



Bishop George Theodore Boileau, S.J., Coadjutor Bishop of the Diocese of Fairbanks: 1964-1965.



Bishop Robert Louis Whelan, S.J., Bishop of Fairbanks: 1968-1985.



On July 28, 1985, Bishop Whelan retired as Bishop of Fairbanks. But he did not go into rocking-chair retirement. He spent a week on Little Diomedede Island bringing the people there the 1985 Christmas Mass. In 1986, he began a new ministry as Director of the House of Prayer, a building near Sacred Heart Cathedral and placed under the patronage of St. Therese, “the Little Flower.” This he termed “a spiritual fitness center.” Here, in what he described as “a very peaceful place,” he lived and spent much time in prayer. As its director, he organized and directed retreats, prayer sessions, and workshops. For physical exercise, he rode his bicycle around Fairbanks. At times, he flew to some distant village to offer Christmas Mass for people who would otherwise have

people.” He also ordained a number of men to the priesthood for the Diocese of Fairbanks. It was he who pushed the button, on July 14, 1971, that launched the diocesan Catholic radio station, KNOM in Nome, on the air.

Bishop Whelan was an ever-active shepherd, totally devoted to the flock entrusted to him, happiest, when he was off in some distant village ordaining men to the diaconate, conferring the Sacrament of Confirmation, blessing a newly built church, or just being with his people for any reason whatever. By the early 1980s, however, he, born in 1912, was getting along in years. He requested Rome to consider providing him with a coadjutor with right of succession. Rome looked favorably upon his request; and, on May 1, 1984, he had the joy of ordaining Fr. Michael J. Kaniecki, S.J.—at the time, General Superior of Jesuits in Alaska, and appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Fairbanks on March 8, 1984—to the rank of bishop as his successor. And the following day, at the Fairbanks International Airport, the two had the joy and the honor of hosting, on behalf of the whole Diocese of Fairbanks, both Pope John Paul II and President Ronald Reagan during their stopovers in Fairbanks!

been without it. Christmas 1990 found him offering Mass in the little log church in McGrath.

Bishop Whelan liked to keep active, to be with people, especially young people. They energized him. However, by 1995, the time had come for him to go into full retirement. On August 19th of that year, he offered a special Mass of Thanksgiving for his nearly 50 years in Alaska and for the countless friends he had made there in the course of those years. Festive farewells followed that Mass. On September 1st, he flew to Spokane to join the Regis Jesuit Community on the Gonzaga University campus. He died in his sleep the evening of September 15, 2001. In keeping with the express wishes of the people of the Diocese of Fairbanks, his body was brought from Spokane to Sacred Heart Cathedral, Fairbanks, on September 28th. After a wake service that evening, and the Mass of Christian Burial the following day, the body of Bishop Whelan—“a most thoughtful, kind and gentle man, universally loved”—was laid to rest alongside that of his predecessor, Bishop Francis D. Gleeson, and that of his successor, Bishop Michael J. Kaniecki.

Bishop Kettler,

I want to help you and the missionaries ministering in Northern Alaska to bring the Mass, the Sacraments, religious education, and training to the widely-scattered Indian and Eskimo people of Christ. Please accept this donation to your *General Fund* and use it where most needed.

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Dear Friends of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks,

The heavy snows of many an Alaskan winter have taken their toll on some of our mission churches. One can almost hear one or another of the older ones cry out, "I really can't take it much longer!"

It's a struggle to keep our parishioners warm in some of our weather-beaten church structures. Some basic maintenance in the case of some of our older churches is urgently needed. Building and maintaining churches in the remote regions of northern Alaska is far more expensive than doing so in the Lower 48. Distances are great. Shipping rates are high. By the time building materials



Holy Family, NEWTOK



Our Lady Perpetual Help, NIGHTMUTE

are on site, once the water courses are navigable, their cost is about double of what they would be in the Lower 48. Our people are generous, when it comes to volunteer labor. Still, when it comes to the erection of churches built to withstand Alaska's temperature extremes, professional construction workers need to be hired. Understandably, wages for such in bush Alaska are very high.



St. Peter, NUNAM IQUA

Aware of how wonderfully generous you have been to this needy mission here in the Far North, I am confident that I have only to make known to you this special need to receive your support. Whatever help you can give us toward funding our Church Renewal and Replacement fund will be deeply appreciated by the people of that village and us who minister to them. In this letter, I am asking you to make a donation—in keeping with your means—to help us build our Renewal Fund. Please do not make this donation at the expense of your regular donation, which we very much need to carry out our basic, essential ministries.

For all you have done for us, and for doing in this case what you can, I thank you very sincerely and ask God to reward and bless you. Know that you and all your intentions are daily remembered in my Masses and prayers.

Very gratefully in our Risen Lord,
+Donald J. Kettler
Bishop of Fairbanks

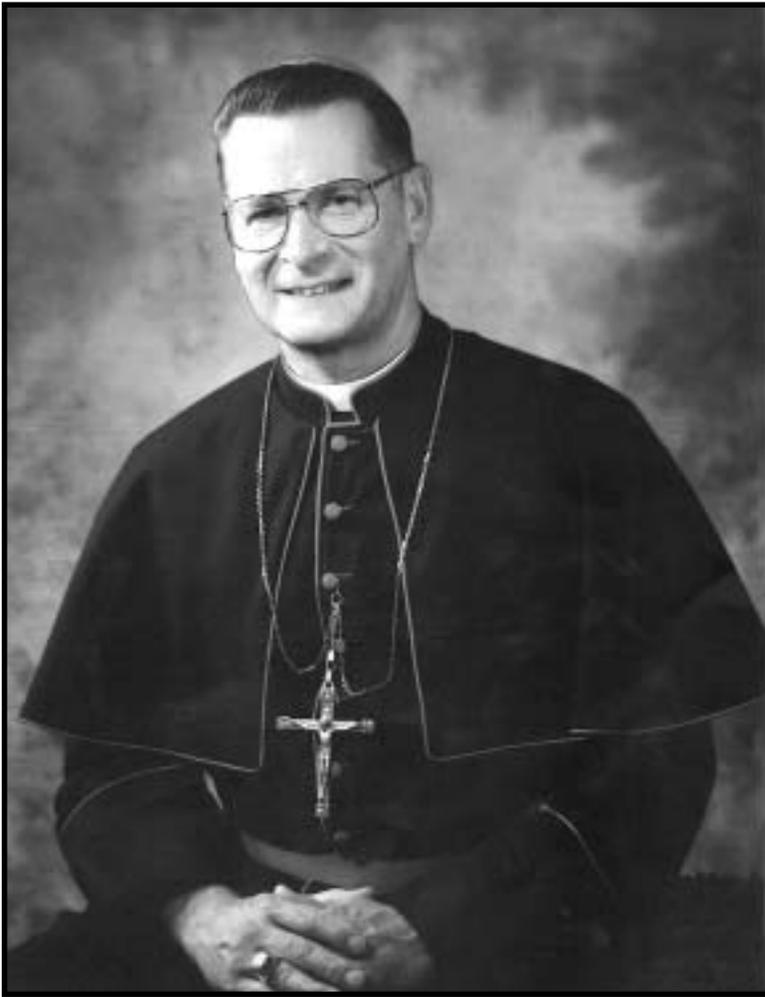
+ Donald J. Kettler

Dear Bishop Kettler, Date F04 SH03 2012
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***Bishop Michael Joseph Kaniecki, S.J.,
Coadjutor Bishop of Fairbanks: 1984-1985;
Bishop of Fairbanks: 1985-2000.***

As already mentioned, Bishop Whelan ordained Fr. Michael J. Kaniecki to the rank of bishop on May 1, 1984. On July 28, 1985, Bishop Kaniecki succeeded Bishop Whelan as Bishop of Fairbanks. For the most part, he carried on where Bishop Whelan had left off. In keeping with his motto, "TO LOVE AND TO SERVE," he, too, traveled often and far and wide throughout his 409,846-square-mile missionary diocese. In confirming, ordaining, blessing new churches, and in simply bringing the Mass and Sacraments to some mission too infrequently visited by a priest, he found "personal fulfillment." He felt himself most a bishop, most a shepherd, when he was out among the people. He was a happy bishop, and always happy to be "a bishop on the wing." He was a highly skilled pilot. An airplane propeller appears on his coat of arms. Shortly after he was ordained a bishop, he received from Harold Esmailka—a product of the Holy Cross Mission boarding school who achieved major success in the field of aeronautics and airplanes—a Cessna 207 as an ordination gift. When not at the desk in his office, he was very likely to be at the controls of the 207, flying to one or other of the many bush missions in his missionary diocese.

As did Bishop Whelan, so Bishop Kaniecki made the Eskimo Deacon Program one of his major concerns. It gave him great satisfaction to see it flourish. He ordained a fair number of Eskimo men to the permanent diaconate. In 1990, the National Association of Permanent Diaconate Directors presented its award to him "in recognition of the outstanding service rendered in developing indigenous leadership."

The "indigenous" peoples of his diocese, the Indians and Eskimos, were of major concern to Bishop Kaniecki. Prior to his becoming Bishop of Fairbanks, he had ministered to them at Kotzebue and in villages along the Lower Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers. In late April 1991, at St. Mary's Mission, Andreafsky, he, in the name of the Diocese of Fairbanks, hosted the Tekakwitha Conference. The Conference, with the theme, "One Voice in the Spirit," though open to all Alaskans, was intended primarily for Alaska's Native people. In his own words, the Conference was a "Huge success."

Bishop Kaniecki took special satisfaction in seeing the diocese's Catholic radio station, KNOM in Nome, continue to receive top awards, year after year. More than once, he himself was on the air at KNOM. On April 23, 1993, he dedicated the station's new Keller Broadcast Center. He took particular satisfaction, too, in dedicating new churches in his diocese. The previous month, on March 28th, he dedicated the new St. Patrick's Church in Barrow. This was but one of the dozen new churches he dedicated during his years as Bishop of Fairbanks.

In 1988, Bishop Kaniecki made the first of his three *Ad Limina* visits to Rome. After his second one, that of 1993, he wrote, "The visit I made in 1988 was a wonderful experience, and I thought nothing could top that. However, I must say that my recent visit, in late September and early October '93, surpassed the previous one." His third and last such visit he made in October 1998. By that time, he and Pope John Paul II had become "mutual personal friends."

In 1992, Bishop Kaniecki—as were all the Jesuits of the Oregon Province—was asked to answer the question: "Where do you see yourself in the year 2000, and what do you see yourself doing?" He concluded his answer to the question with the words: "My daily prayer continues to be the same, and I hope that in the year 2000 it will still be, 'Lord, teach me to live my motto: TO LOVE AND TO SERVE.'"

Addressing the benefactors of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks in *The Alaskan Shepherd* calendar 2000, Bishop Kaniecki, little realizing that that would be the last year of his life, wrote:

The Year of Our Lord 2000 is also for me personally a year of some round numbers, of some personal anniversaries: 65 years of life, 40 years since I first set foot in Alaska, 35 years of priesthood, 15 years as Ordinary of this Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks. They have been good years for me.

Throughout them all, God has blessed me in countless ways. I am sincerely grateful to Him for every one of them.

In the Year of Our Lord 2000, on the morning of August 6th—with diocesan seminarian Sean Thomson on board—Bishop Kaniecki, in the Cessna 207, made his final approach and landing, at Emmonak, a Central Yup'ik Eskimo village near the mouth of the Yukon River. The two had spent the previous night in nearby Alakanuk, where he had celebrated Mass and administered the Sacrament of Confirmation—and, where, on the last evening of his life, he and Sean had watched a video life of St. Therese. After securing the plane, the two went to the church to help ready everything for the Mass scheduled to take place at noon, a Mass at which 25 people were to be confirmed. Then Bishop Kaniecki went to the rectory to relax and to attend to parish business. There, feeling pain in his upper body, he took a Tylenol, then, with Sean as his companion, went for a walk. Returning from their walk, as they drew near to the church, Bishop Kaniecki experienced extreme dizziness and, at once, had to lie down. Soon Fr. Thomas G. Provinsal, S.J., pastor of Emmonak, was there to administer the Last Rites. Bishop Kaniecki was alert enough to take an active part in these. Personnel from the Health Clinic were also soon there. They did all they could to keep Bishop Kaniecki alive—but, in vain. His hour had come. In bush Alaska, among his beloved Eskimos, while lying on his back and facing the Alaskan skies he had so often, and so recently, flown; and while he was about to do what so very much befits a bishop, a massive heart attack put an abrupt end to his earthly life. It was the feast of Our Lord's Transfiguration.

Via Bethel and Anchorage, Bishop Kaniecki's body was flown to Fairbanks on Wednesday, August 9th. For several days it lay in state in Sacred Heart Cathedral. On Friday, there was a major wake service in the Holy Family Chapel at the Catholic schools complex—a chapel which he had dedicated the previous April, on the 14th, and the bringing about of which he considered one of his crowning achievements as bishop. On Saturday, August 12, in the presence of an overflow crowd, the Mass of Resurrection was solemnly celebrated by Francis T. Hurley, Archbishop of Anchorage at the time. Burial followed in Fairbanks' Birch Hill Cemetery. At graveside, as at the Mass, there were readings and songs both in the Central Yup'ik Eskimo language and in the Koyukon Athabaskan Indian language, as

well as in English. Bishop Kaniecki was buried in a manner similar to that in which Alaskan Catholic Natives are buried. As the sheep, so the shepherd.

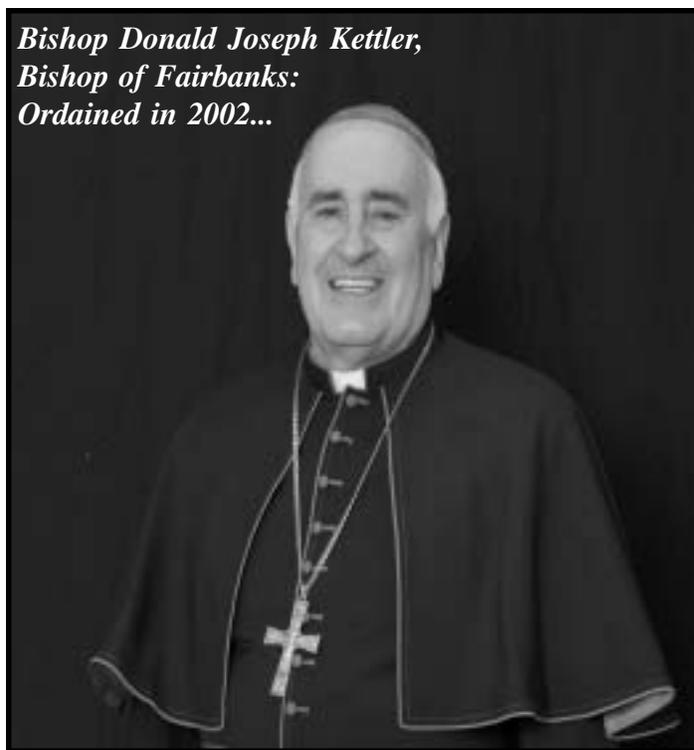
The Diocese of Fairbanks was now without a bishop. Shortly after the burial of Bishop Kaniecki, the seven diocesan consultors, by a majority vote, elected Fr. Richard D. Case, S.J.—veteran Alaskan missionary—to the role of Diocesan Administrator, a role he was to fill for nearly two years. He and the whole Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks were greatly relieved and filled with joy, when they learned that Pope John Paul II, on June 7, 2002, had appointed Msgr. Donald J. Kettler to serve as the fourth bishop of the Diocese of Fairbanks. On August 22nd, in Fairbanks' large Carlson Center, Msgr. Kettler was ordained and installed as Bishop of Fairbanks by Robert L. Schwietz, O.M.I., Archbishop of Anchorage. For his motto, Bishop Kettler chose, "FAITH, HOPE, and LOVE."

--Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J.

*Editor's Footnote: The next issue of **The Alaskan Shepherd** will be devoted to the Bishop Kettler decade: 2002-2012.*

—Patty Walter

*Bishop Donald Joseph Kettler,
Bishop of Fairbanks:
Ordained in 2002...*



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..."

"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