

# Our Mission in Alaska

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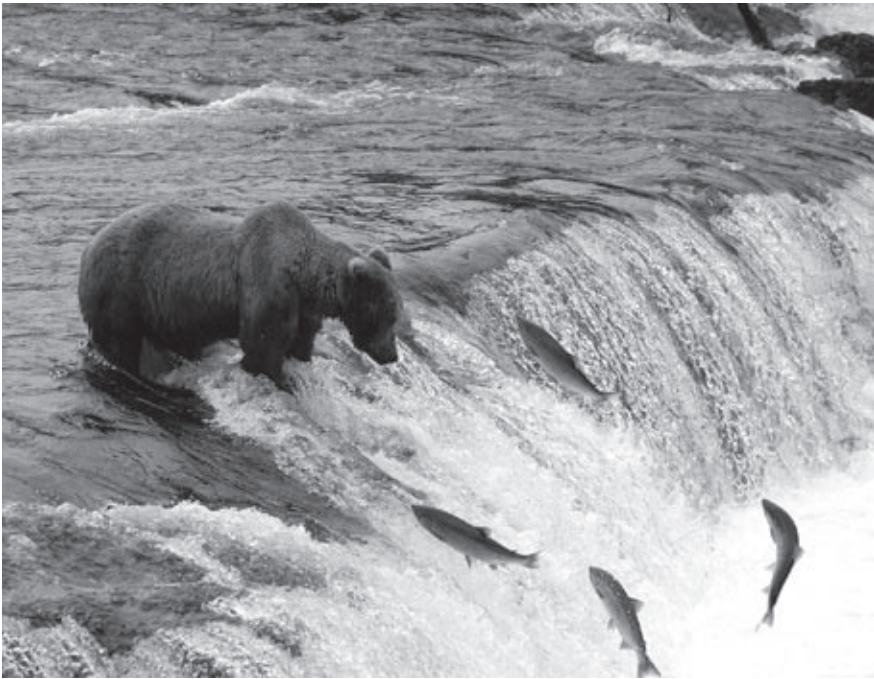
*Many of our readers may not know the Society has a regular Mass Center in Alaska, more precisely in Anchorage. As it is a very special place, and the parishioners are commendable for their friendliness, zeal and piety, I thought it might be of interest to our readers to know a bit more about this State and this Mission.*

By Rev. Fr. Patrick Girouard, SSPX

## Why such an interest for Alaska?

### **How I came to discover Alaska**

I must confess that, until three years ago, I



myself knew almost nothing about them. It has been thanks to the suggestion and highly communicative enthusiasm of a friend of mine, Miss Caroline Averkamp that I decided to try it out. Although I had first met Miss Averkamp in Kansas City (MO), where she is a much appreciated teacher at our St. Vincent's Academy, it is not sur-

prising that she suggested Alaska to me. Those who know her know also that she spends most of her free time on airplanes, visiting her friends and helping out the Society all over the place. So I was not surprised one day to receive a phone call from her while she was in Anchorage. Indeed, Miss Averkamp can phone you from anywhere in the world... Anyway, she told me I had to go there, and so forth and so on, telling me of a program for priests that the Mission is having. Miss Averkamp has been in so many places, I knew I could trust her experience. If she said it was wonderful, I could believe her. And so it is that I finally took the plunge and scheduled my first vacation there for the summer of 2007. Since then I have been addicted, and have returned every summer.

### **Alaska welcomes traditional Priests**

Those who know me will say I am going to Alaska because I am being a bit selfish, and I am trying to escape the summer heat by going to a cool place. Well, in a way I do, and it is cool, believe me! Not so much temperature wise (15 to 22 C in the summer), but especially as a place to spend a few days of total rest. Plus, and this is not a negligible incentive, the parishioners want to have more than their regular monthly Sunday Mass, so they have set up a program to encourage traditional priests to visit. In a nutshell, if a priest is willing to spend

a minimum of seven days, the parishioners will provide him (for free) with the following: An all-round plane ticket; an apartment; all the groceries he desires; a car; a guide to help him when discovering around; a motor home if he wants to wander further on; and countless possibilities of going fishing! Moreover, Alaskan people are well known for their friendliness, generosity, and hospitality and our dear traditional people are even more so. In other words, and to quote those of the Godfather: "They made me an offer

I could not refuse!" So is it being selfish of me, if I have been going there every summer since that first one? I bet you! But I can't receive absolution, since I absolutely have no contrition! In fact, I have just booked my plane ticket and, God willing, I will spend fifteen days in Anchorage this coming summer!

But I have talked enough of my personal discovery of Alaska, and by now you are probably eager to know more about this place, so let me give you some information...

## What is Alaska?

### **When Alaska was Russian**

In 1725, Russian Tsar Peter the Great sent Vitus Bering to explore the North Pacific, and 3 years later the explorer sailed through the strait that was to be named after him. A second expedition was launched in 1733, and it led to the discovery of Alaska in 1741. Alaska means "A Great Country" in the native language of the Aleut tribe. Indeed, the first settlers of Alaska were Inuit (formerly called 'Eskimos'). The first "white" settlement was established at Three Saints Bay, Kodiak Island, by Grigori Shelikhov in 1784. A first oil seepage was discovered in 1853, and gold was found in many locations from 1862 to 1894.

### **Alaska becomes American**

On March 30th, 1867, the US government bought Alaska from the Russians at the cost of \$7.2 millions ( = \$95 millions in 2005). The negotiations were done by the US Secretary of State, Mr. William Henry Seward and the Russian Minister Eduard Andreevich de Stoeckl. An interesting fact about Mr. Seward is that he had given his support to the establishment of Catholic Schools in the US in 1850. Fifteen years later, he survived a knife attack during the John Boote plot that assassinated Abraham Lincoln. Maybe it has been God's way to thank him. Mr. Seward's name has been given to a peninsula and to many streets and highways. Even if Alaska became American, many Russian Orthodox churches remain in Alaska, and quite a few Russians still live there, since Alaska continues to have commercial ties with the Russian Federation. A major gold discovery in the Klondike River in 1896 led to the famous "Klondike Gold Rush" (1897-1900). Anchorage was founded in 1914, as a modest village around a train station.

### **A Japanese invasion!**

On June 7, 1942, during the Second World War, Japan bombed Dutch Harbor, and invaded the Aleutians Islands of Attu and Kiska. Although of a small strategic importance, this invasion could eventually have led to an invasion of mainland Alaska. This was the only invasion of a US territory in North America by the Japanese. Due to their involvement in many other operations, it is only in May 1943 that the USA was able to launch a counter-attack to retake these islands. I will now let a historian give us more details on these operations of liberation: "The first assault was aimed at the snow-covered mountains of Attu, where Japanese forces were firmly entrenched and protected by land mines and booby traps. The ensuing battles ignited the biggest banzai charge of the war. Hundreds of frustrated Japanese, hand grenades pressed to their chests, made a desperate suicide charge at American lines. Over 2,300 Japanese were killed and 550 Americans died. By June 3, most of the Japanese garrison on Attu was annihilated. With Attu captured, the Allies turned their military might 170 miles east toward Kiska and the main Japanese base. On Aug. 15, 1943, American and Canadian troops invaded the island, but a combination of daring and Aleutian fog allowed the Japanese to evacuate their personnel and escape unharmed." (Cf. Website on Mr. Chris Calle's artwork on WWII; [www/unicover.com](http://www/unicover.com)).

### **The State of Alaska**

On January 3rd 1959, under President Dwight Eisenhower, the US Federal government recognized Alaska as becoming the 49th State of the Union, with the town of Juneau (having today 31,000 inhabitants) as Capital. On March 27th, 1964, which on that year was Good Fri-

day, central Alaska suffered a terrible earthquake of a magnitude of 9.2 on the Richter scale! Damages to property were evaluated as high as \$311 million (of 1964!). The major industrial development of the oil industry in Alaska, which had started in 1953, culminated in 1977 with the completion of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline for natural gas. Alaska is therefore a wealthy State, even if times had been difficult in the 1980s, due to the low price of oil. Nevertheless, it is in 1980 that the State Legislature voted the creation of the "Permanent Fund Share" and of the "Dividend Fund", by which 50% of the royalties received from the oil companies are shared with all Alaska residents. Thus, in 1989, \$10 billion

biggest, lake Iliama is 1,600 km<sup>2</sup>, or 1,000 sq. miles). Because of its size, its location, and weird shape, Alaska can also rightly boast of possessing the Northernmost, the Easternmost, and the Westernmost compass points of the USA! The State is so big it used to have four time zones (Pacific, Yukon, Alaska Standard, and Bering). In 1983, for practical purposes, the State decided to bring those back to two: the Alaska Standard Time and the Hawaii-Aleutian Standard Time.

### **Alaska is strong and rich, despite weird nights and days**

Alaska is well known for its salmon, and fisheries constitute an important part of its economy. There is still a lot of gold being exploited in Alaska, as well as jade, a gem that has received the title of State Gem. Indeed, on the Seward Peninsula, an entire mountain is made of jade! Alaska's nick name is "The Last Frontier". Nevertheless, Alaska is quite modern also, and has a pretty good road system and all the modern accommodations and services. Alaska is rich. Indeed, there is no State Income Tax nor Sales Tax! Alaskans only have to pay a Federal Income Tax, and a few specific and local taxes (like on alcohol). That is nice, but, yes, summer days are long (in Anchorage you have about 22 hours of light then 2 hours of dusk), and winter days are short (only about 4 hours of daylight). Winters are fierce. Having 12 feet of snow in Anchorage in winter is an ordinary thing (no "global warming" visible in Alaska...). Alaska's flag has a blue backdrop, signifying the purity of the sky and the state flower ("Forget-me-not"). On it is the North Star, signifying the State's motto: "North to the Future", and also the "Big Bear" constellation, signifying both the strength of the Kodiak bear (one the most striking animal of the State) and the tenacity of Alaskans.



**Mount McKinley or Denali (Athabaskan for "The Great One") in Alaska is the highest mountain peak in North America, with a summit elevation of approximately 20,320 feet (6,194 m). It is the centerpiece of Denali National Park.**

were given out by the State to be shared among all Alaskans! We cannot conclude this brief historical review without mentioning that Alaska's Governor, Mrs. Sarah Palin, was chosen by the Republican Party to run for Vice-President in the 2008 federal election.

### **Some geographical features of Alaska**

Alaska is a very beautiful place to be. It is also very big: 1, 530,000 km<sup>2</sup> (956,250 sq. miles). To make a comparison, let's say the Province of Quebec is only slightly bigger at 1, 540,000 km<sup>2</sup> (962,500 sq. miles). Seventeen of the USA's highest peaks are located in Alaska, and the highest mountain in North America is Mt McKinley, its summit reaching 6,194 m (20,320 ft). We can actually see it from Anchorage. There are also 70 potentially active volcanoes, 3,000 rivers, 100,000 glaciers, and 3 million lakes (the

### **The city of Anchorage**

Anchorage is by far the biggest town in Alaska, being home to 280,000 of the State's 670,000 inhabitants. It has a big university, a major US Air Force base, an international airport, tons of restaurants, and many museums, including the splendid "Alaska Native Heritage Center", which is sprawled over 26 acres! I visited it in 2008, and was very impressed, especially by the trail along which you can visit the reproductions of the habitats of the various Alaskan Native tribes and nations. Some of these houses look like

those of the hobbits in “Lord of the Ring”! (See p.28). Anchorage has also many beautiful parks and sightseeing spots, as well as bicycle and hiking trails. There are important Russian and Japanese communities in Alaska, especially in Anchorage, as Alaska trades a lot with these two countries.

I could go on and on, but this is not supposed to be a book, so I will proceed more specifically with our SSPX Mission in Anchorage.



**Anchorage is a consolidated city-borough in the U.S. state of Alaska. It is Alaska’s largest city and constitutes more than 40 percent of the state’s total population; only New York has a higher percentage of residents who live in the state’s largest city.**

## St. Therese Chapel in Anchorage

### The very beginning

Fathers Daniel Couture and Walter Ranger were stationed at Immaculate Conception in Post Fall, Idaho. They were servicing Juneau, (the capital of Alaska) once a month. Fr. Couture called Dr. & Mrs. Martins in early January, 1986 and asked if there were people in Anchorage who would like to have the traditional Mass. Of course, the answer was YES! The Martins contacted Miss Diane Armitage, who they knew supported the SSPX. They also arranged for a newspaper advertisement and Miss Armitage arranged for the use of a classroom at Bear Valley Elementary School. Toward the end of January, Fr. Couture sent Fr. Ranger to Anchorage for a one-night stay. Mass was said at the School. The attendees included: Miss Diane Armitage, the Martins, the Hammers, Mr. & Mrs. Hugh Bradley, Lt. Col. & Mrs. Theodore Heller (retired), and Mrs. Moseian.

### Organizing Mass in a chapel!

Mr. Bradley owned a building at the corner of Old Seward Highway and Klatt Road, which the Bradleys were using as a business called St. Joseph’s Books. He offered the use of the building for future Masses and Fr. Ranger looked at the building. In February (the next month) Fr. Couture came, said Mass at the Old Seward Highway and Klatt Road location, stayed for several days, and chose the name, St. Therese, Patron of Alaska Mission. It therefore became Chapel # 85 of the Society of St. Pius X, Southwest District. He also established a checking account, appointed Dr. & Mrs. Martins as coordinators, appointed Dr. Martins as Treasurer, negotiated the lease arrangement for the use of the Bradley’s building

(still in effect today), and taught Dr. Martins the responsibilities of Sacristan. Fr. Couture later on brought vestments, Benediction Candelabra and Monstrance, an alb, frontals, the silver Chalice and Mass Paten, Mass cards, and an altar stone with relics for St. Therese. He also arranged for the ¾ life size statue of St. Anne. He was always very generous to St. Therese Chapel, even coming to give a wonderful course during Lent on the Holy Shroud of Turin. At Fr. Ranger’s suggestion, parishioners individually, and once as a group, commissioned the Carmelites to make and embroider beautiful vestments and sew linens, which have been donated to the Society of St. Pius X for use at St. Therese Chapel. Before summer of 1987, Mr. Bradley had an addition made to the room in which Mass was

**Mass at St. Therese Chapel in Anchorage.**



said, as well as installing walls and doors to create a proper confessional. Once this room was enlarged, Dr. Martins built a proper-sized altar with two front steps. In January, 1989, Mr. Bradley died. The first funeral! After Mr. Bradley's death, Mrs. Bradley donated the inventory of St. Joseph's Books to the Chapel. There were only ordinary chairs until Archbishop Hurley gave Mrs. Bradley 6 pews for her chapel. Also, the Sisters of Providence gave Mrs. Bradley the ¾ life-size Crucifix, which she has placed to the side of the altar, owing to the very low ceiling in the chapel.

#### **SSPX Priests on the Alaskan Mass circuit**

It should be noted that by the 3rd or so visit of a SSPX priest, people in Fairbanks came and requested that the priest come also to Fairbanks, which was indeed done. Over the rest of 1986 and into 1987, Fr. Ranger and Fr. Couture took turns coming once a month for a 2-3 day visit usually beginning on Wednesday about mid-month. The circuit then included Juneau, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. Fr. Couture also came to Anchorage for the weekend each time there was a 5th Sunday in the month. These were the first Sunday Masses. During this era, the number of attendees expanded.

**Outside view of St. Therese Chapel in Anchorage.**



When, in the Spring of 1988, Frs. Couture and Ranger were transferred from Post Falls, the chapel went through six months with a new priest every month or every other month. One of these priests insisted upon having the Blessed Sacrament reserved and Dr. Martins built a tabernacle of rosewood. In late Fall of 1988, Fr.

Christopher Hunter was assigned to the chapel with a schedule that began on Saturday and included a Sunday morning Mass in Fairbanks, then a late afternoon/early evening Sunday Mass in Anchorage, plus 1 or 2 week day Masses and then on to Juneau one weekend a month. From the Spring of 1996 to that of 1998, Fr. Hunter was replaced by Father Katarof, who was then replaced by Fr. John Peek. In September 2001, Fr. Hunter was once again appointed as our Mission priest, coming from his priory of Veneta (Oregon) to say Mass every last Sunday of the month. He continues his very good apostolate to this day. Bishop Williamson came for confirmations in the Fall of 2000 and again Spring 2008. The Superior General, H.E. Bishop Fellay came for a pastoral visit in 2009.

#### **Evolution of the Society's Apostolate in Alaska**

The first 3 years saw an increase from about a dozen and a half regular attendees to about 35. Between the fall 1988 and the spring of 1996 the number of regular attendees over time fell to less than 15. Also during this time period, all of the faithful in Juneau either died or moved away, but the Gonzalez family moved to Sitka at about the same time and so the third leg of the Alaska circuit became Sitka. (Fairbanks, Anchorage, Sitka). Fr. Katarof insisted on spending Saturday night in Anchorage, since that was the only one of the three places which had the Blessed Sacrament reserved. So the schedule became: Friday night Mass, Saturday morning Mass with Benediction, Early Sunday morning Mass in Anchorage, Early Sunday afternoon Mass in Fairbanks with Fr. Katarof returning to Anchorage in the evening, then 1 or 2 weekday Masses in Anchorage and then on to Sitka. Between Spring 1996 and Spring 1998 the number of regular attendees grew from 15 to more than 60 (more than could fit if they were all there!). Finally, let us say that both Sitka and Fairbanks are no longer serviced. Only Anchorage remains.

#### **The Chapel becomes too small**

Because the number of regular attendees was already more than could fit into the chapel if all were present, and because a very large family moved to the area in 2002, beginning in January of 2003 till the present there have been 2 Masses on Sunday (weekend of the 4th Sunday of the month). At Fr. Hunter's decision, the early Mass

is the Missa Cantata (sung Mass), while the later Mass is the Missa Lecta (low Mass). The Schedule is otherwise the same as that established by Fr. Katarof: Friday night Mass, Saturday morning Mass with Benediction following, Sunday morning Mass (now 2), and when the airline schedule permits, Monday morning Mass. On Sundays when the priest is not here, some of the faithful gather at 10:00 am for Rosary, the Men's Schola practices at 11:30, and some of the faithful gather to chant the Votive Vespers of the Blessed Virgin Mary at 12:45. There have always been several faithful who visit the Blessed Sacrament daily since it was first reserved. During Fr. Katarof's tenure, Lt. Col. & Mrs. Heller found, purchased, and donated the beautiful, brass, liturgically correct tabernacle. In the beginning, the room that is now the server's sacristy was all the room there was for the SACRISTY. Fr. Katarof encouraged the enclosing of the space that is now the Sacristy. In summer 1997, Dr. Martins & Mr. Rick Woodard enclosed the space and built the sacristy with Sacarium and Vestment drawers.

### Learning to Praise the Lord

From the beginning till 2001 there was a mixed choir, and after the chapel was enlarged, there was a small parlor American reed organ for the accompaniment of the singing. This choir was active from 1986 through 1988, less so between 1989 and 1995, and very active from 1996 through Spring 2001. In September 2001 the small reed organ was replaced by the donation to the Society of St. Pius X of a proper 10 ranks, 2 manual, with concave, radiating pedal board Estey model T reed church organ built in the 1930s. In September 2001, the two men who had been part of the mixed choir decided that they needed to meet to practice the Propers and thus began the Schola Cantorum. Immediately, a third man joined them. Two years later, a fourth man joined them. There have also been a couple of high schools boys who joined, but they left as they went off to college. The Schola is still made up of the 4 men.

The Boys Schola was begun in the Fall of 2006 with 4 boys. Presently, there are 5 boys who have been invested as Schola members, and 2 more boys who are studying music at the beginning level for a total of 7 boys involved in the program. There was an investment ceremony for the boys in 2006, 2008 and 2009.

### Conclusion

The beauty, wisdom, and creative genius of God are manifest when we look with open eyes at His work of creation. Our planet is blessed with a diversity of climates, geographical features, and animals. Some of those can sometimes be very close to us, as can be sometimes experienced in Anchorage. Although it is only natural and good to believe the best place on earth is where we grew up, sometimes the Lord

**Our commitment to Traditional Roman Catholic Liturgy and Doctrine is all spelled out on the outside Advertisement Board of the chapel.**



enables us to discover other places, and to love them and to see His hand there too. Alaska is one of those places. And Alaskans, by their tranquil and friendly strength, make it a place where we feel welcome to enjoy God's creation. But our presence in Anchorage is also a new proof of God's goodness. Indeed, despite the terrible "Civil War" that has been devastating the Catholic Church for almost 50 years, He is still sending out missionaries to bring the true doctrine and the true sacraments to the four corners of the earth. Indeed, against all odds, a traditional parish has been founded in Anchorage, and is flourishing today with about 100 parishioners, including young families and lots of kids. Let us thank the good Lord for His help, and let us pray St. Therese, Patron of Alaska, for our Mission in Anchorage, so that it can continue to grow and to provide Alaskans with God's presence among them. And who knows, maybe I will see you there sometimes!

NB: My thanks for their help to Mrs Theresa Bradley (coordinator), Mr. Hugh Bradley, Ms Diane Armitage, Mr. & Mrs. Duane Hill, and Dr. and Mrs. Donald Martins (for the history of the Mission), but also to many others!