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Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

CHRISTMAS IN HOOPER BAY: GOD'S PRESENCE IN HUMAN GIFTS

Editor's Note: Father Bruce Morrill is a Jesuit of the New England Province; Associate Professor of Theology at Boston College. Among his many articles and books are Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory and Bodies of Worship (both published by The Liturgical Press). With great gratitude, I present to you, his story, "Christmas in Hooper Bay."

All photos courtesy of Fr. Morrill, S.J.

--Patty Walter

Last December [2004] I spent my fourth Christmas in the past five years among the Yup'ik people in the villages of Hooper Bay and, more briefly, Chevak on the Central Bering Seacoast of Alaska. My previous three Christmas visits had been primarily in Chevak, interrupted by just one snowmobile trip to preside at a funeral Mass in nearby Hooper Bay (less than twenty miles west). This year, however, Father Gregg Wood, the Jesuit who serves as pastoral minister to that area, asked that I, a Boston College theology professor, spend the precious ten days I could spare from the university in Hooper. I was acquainted with this village, located on a narrow cape limning the Bay that bears the same name. Not only had I been called to preside over the funeral rites of three other members of that community during other previous stays in the area, but I had also spent Holy Week and Easter there in 2002 (a luxury that my light teaching load during a visiting fellowship at another New England Jesuit college, Holy Cross, allowed me that year).



Hooper Bay, "Old Town," Alaska. This photo taken in 2004 shows the original cluster of houses, store, and church. The Church of the Little Flower is currently served by Father Gregg D. Wood, S.J., and retired Deacon, James Gump.

What, you might be asking, is a Jesuit professor from the other end of the continent doing intermittently out there on the western edge of Alaska? Indeed, I get the question from colleagues, family, and friends and, I must admit, from myself at times when, as was the case this past fall, I find myself tired and busy when

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Church of the Little Flower, Hooper Bay, Alaska. Hooper Bay is a Central Yup'ik Eskimo village on the Bering Sea Coast in western Alaska.

booking the flights in the middle of the semester. My most poignant memory of such interrogation, however, comes from among the Eskimo people themselves.

I warmly remember my first Chevak Christmas dinner at the home of Albert Atchak, the elderly patriarch of a large family who honor their now deceased father's custom of having the visiting priest into their home on the afternoon of December 25th. Having joined the large multigenerational circle (the primordial Yup'ik symbol of life and faith) to say grace and then accepting the honor of taking one of the few spaces at the table, I was just digging into my plate when John, the eldest of Albert's sons (and about my age), with the directness typical of this people asked me: "What are you doing here?" Although I could tell that he was not looking for a shallow answer, I reacted by stating the obvious, namely, that Father Gregg could not tri-locate among the area villages for Christmas Mass and, thus, I was happy to help out. "Oh. I didn't realize there is such a large number of priests in the Lower 48 states that they can send them up here." John clearly wanted a better answer. So I opened up, explaining that almost two decades earlier I had spent a year as a Jesuit Volunteer in Emmonak, at the mouth of the Yukon, and that I had learned much from the Yup'ik people there. Having finally reached a level of security in my university job, I was

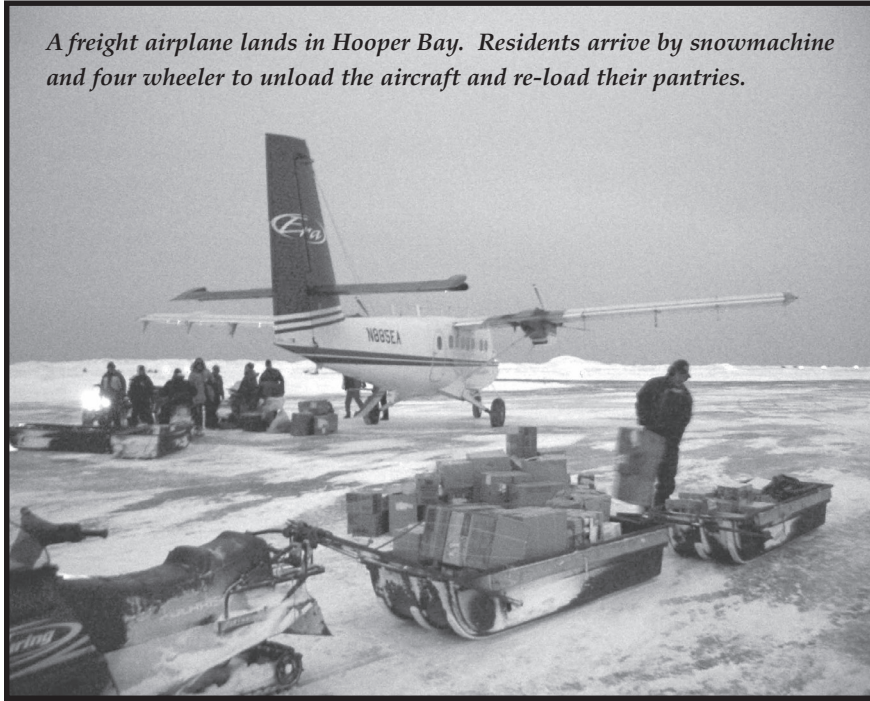
finally finding it possible to return to a place and people I had come to realize I missed very much.

John's reaction to my explanation was a silent nod—again, characteristic of his people, this economy with words and trust that silence speaks volumes. The jury on me was still out that day not only for John but, I am sure, many other folks in Chevak for whom I was yet another outside professional (whether priest, teacher, social worker, governmental project manager, healthcare worker) who comes once to the village but, more likely than not, will not return much if ever again. Two years later, during which I had spent not only each Christmas but also the better part of an entire summer in Chevak, John greeted me with, "Welcome home, Father!" when we met at the church. As for Christmas dinner conversation, John had something he wanted to say: "As a member of the parish council, I want you to know, Father, that you are always welcomed here." And so here is but one of many answers to why I find myself returning to the villages: God graces me with a tangible sense of a call to ministry coming from among the people, from the ground up, as it were, in a way that is sacramental of the vocation at the heart of all the varied apostolic work I am so busily engaged in.

But to get back to my most recent visit: I reached Hooper Bay on Friday, December 17th, around 12:30 p.m. I had arrived the night before at Bethel, having taken long flights from Boston to Salt Lake City (five and a half hours) and from there to Anchorage (five hours), where I had a three-hour layover. Having graded my undergraduate finals on the flights, I calculated the final grades into my ledger while sitting in Ted Stevens International Airport and then, having found an internet kiosk, recorded them onto the Boston College registrar's secured page on the university's website. I spent the night at the Jesuit parish in Bethel alone, as there currently was no regular pastor there. The visiting priest had left a key hidden outdoors. I was glad to be alone. I realized that I did not feel like expending energy meeting somebody that night. That's how tired I was. I also knew that if this trip ended up like all the others I would feel very differently on my return back through Bethel some ten days later. Renewed by my time with the people of the villages, I would be refreshed and feeling more generous, because more grateful. That ultimately proved, once again, to be the case.

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. For more information, please contact Tom Buzek, Business Administrator: 907-374-9528.

Once settled in Hooper Bay, I presided and preached at the liturgies each evening. Saturday afternoon and early evening was a Sea Lion (Native) Corporation meeting, and so the church was all but empty. The one participant at Mass was James, the son of the late Mary Smith, a beloved elder of the village, who was the first person I buried in Hooper back in the summer of 2001. James was praying so earnestly on his knees, on the hard floor between the pews. Once he sat down, I introduced myself, but he said he remembered me well as the priest who had done the two home Masses and then funeral for his Mom. Touching his chest, pointing at his heart, he told me how grateful he remains for that. I told him it was my honor.



A freight airplane lands in Hooper Bay. Residents arrive by snowmachine and four wheeler to unload the aircraft and re-load their pantries.

How grateful I was as I left James to approach the altar and begin the Mass, grateful to him for confirming my work here, as well as for his kindness in telling me that he was praying for me because of what I had done. This simply has to be another, if not the, reason why I find myself returning to serve these villages. Each visit is an encounter with the poor in spirit that Jesus proclaimed blessed and, thus, an invitation to participate in the Christ-like kenosis (self-emptying) that I teach and write about as being so central to the praxis of Christian faith. Indeed, I had found myself reflecting on this very thought as I walked for a half hour's exercise in the early morning darkness just the day before: I think I am called here to experience evangelical (Gospel) poverty in multiple, interrelated forms—personal, ecclesial, social, physical—as a graced moment for encountering the God of Jesus.

On Tuesday the 21st I awoke to a temperature of 4 below zero and a steady wind accented by heavy gusts. I kept the monitor heater only at 64 degrees, so as to conserve fuel. I heated water (there still are no running water and sewerage in Hooper Bay) and washed from head to foot at the kitchen sink. My scalp and body had gotten itchy since my last shower in Bethel on Friday. Given the whiteout conditions, people were not moving much around the village. A

little after ten o'clock Elmer Simon called to check on me, making sure I was doing okay. It was a thoughtful gesture, and I thanked him much. I incorporated him into my more than hour of Morning Prayer and meditation, time that would be a luxury back on campus and, thus, another concrete way my service to the village's people ends up drawing me closer to God.

The better part of that time in prayer, however, found me reflecting on the previous evening's Mass, for which the Gospel reading was Luke's account of the Annunciation. I preached on the Hail Mary, saying that in the first half of the prayer we make Mary happy (she whom, with Gabriel, we

proclaim blessed—happy—among women) by inviting her to remember this joyous event with us. The second half of the prayer turns to petition, and I said we can do so confidently, since Mary knew what it was to be afraid and anxious, but also what it is like to have the Holy Spirit come upon one and change one's life. So, I concluded, our petitioning Mary makes her happy, as it gives her the chance to participate in the work of the Spirit, of bringing her Son to us, even now.

Listening to the homily along with the handful of regular participants was a young woman perhaps 20 years old, who responded earlier to the ringing church bell, asking what we were going to do. When I told her, "Have Mass," she smiled and said she would go get others. She returned with two boys, probably 13 and 10, and she worked hard at having them try to follow the Mass with missalettes. At communion time, the boys approached but each nodded negatively to the host I offered, and so I blessed each on the forehead. I was left reflecting on how much pastoral work there is to be done here, how much catechesis. How could I but be moved by this young woman as she brought these two boys who, at my inquiry, she said were her cousins? These people and images became the sacraments of my next morning's prayer.



The sunrise, in Hooper Bay, Alaska, takes place at about noon in December--it sets just an hour or two later. Temperatures in Hooper Bay can get as warm as 80 and as low as -30. Winter ice pack and strong winds often cause severe winter conditions.

The weather all day Tuesday and Wednesday was ferocious, with the snow, blowing snow, a 10 below temperature with a wind chill of minus 50. I didn't move out of the church building. On Thursday I arose with the resolve to dig out the snowmobile, totally buried in a snowdrift, only to be delightfully surprised to discover that somebody had shoveled it out—a generous, anonymous gift. I got myself out and about around 11 a.m. I went to find Elmer, for whose house I had general directions.

Hoping I had knocked on the right door, I knew I had not when a young man opened. Charles Simon recognized me, before I did him, and only then did I realize that he was Elmer's son. Charles I had met and counseled in the summer of 2001 in Chevak, as he prepared for marriage with Jamie Agimuk, the daughter of Mark and Mary Agimuk, Chevak's parish administrator, and granddaughter of Deacon and Mrs. Frank Smart. Charles, a bright young man, works on the Hooper Bay police force, a job he has held for several years. I visited with him that morning just long enough for Charles to introduce me to their two little children before he had to head off to work.

From there I went next door to Elmer's, where I found him and his wife watching Sesame Street, with one grandchild in their lap. They offered me sheefish to eat, along with coffee. We visited as grandchild after grandchild, and eventually one daughter, emerged from the back corners of the house, waking up with the late dawning sun. The daughter had an infant in arms, hers and Bryson Kanrilak's first child. So, I mused, Alexie and Rose, who had become good

friends to me during my Chevak summer of 2001, are now grandparents! Visiting in the homes of the village continuously reveals to me how intricately connected the Yup'ik people are, not only within but also among the villages. Family ties are valued ahead of just about anything else one could name.

Leaving Elmer's I walked across the lake to Neva Rivers's house, taking photos along the way. It was a beautiful, clear blue-skied day, with the sun still cresting near the horizon at 1 p.m. During Holy Week of 2002 Neva's brother Alexis Hunter, a well-respected elder, had died at age 85. I had been profoundly moved by Neva's faith at that time, as well as the love and care she so freely shared with her sister Natalia, a warm kindness that poured out to all she met. I remembered as well the young woman, a niece, who had cared daily for the failing Alexis. Her devotion to him was so evident in her tears when I had arrived at Neva's home in the wee hours of the morning to lead them in the Church's Prayer After Death, gathered around Alexis's body lying on the sofa. In the course of the ensuing days, the wake took place in the home, with my celebrating Mass and the Vigil for the Deceased on successive evenings. The children and wider family of Alexis arrived from Mountain Village and beyond by plane, and the funeral, in a church as packed as it had been for Mary Smith, proved a deep consolation.

Later, on Easter Sunday night, a customary occasion for Eskimo dancing (the element of Yup'ik culture with which I am most taken), Neva danced up a storm, as she and others celebrated both the Lord's resurrection and Alexis's journey to eternal rest in Him. Having been taught how to dance two



A typical home in Hooper Bay with a traditional steam bath hut to the right. The village satellite is in the background.



Dear Co-missionaries in Christ,

As this year draws to a close and we look forward to that day on which we celebrate again the birth of Our Savior, my heart is filled with a deep gratitude to every one of you who have helped us fulfill the trust God has placed in us, that is, to be true shepherds to His flock of the Arctic. Each one of you has assisted so well in bringing the Savior of the world to this Missionary Diocese.

As 2004 closed I had yet to tell you of the joyful dedication of St. Michael's Church, on November 7, in St. Michael, Alaska. The end of the year also brought with it the arrival of Fathers Vincent U. Chimezie and Paulinus C. Iwuji from Nigeria. They are both members of the Congregation of the Sons of Mary, Mother of Mercy, the first indigenous missionary congregation in Nigeria.

I am pleased to announce to you that once again, now three years in a row, our Radio Mission, KNOM in Nome, the oldest USA Catholic radio station, received the prestigious Gabriel Award, its 13th! KNOM is also the winner of the 2005 NAB Crystal Award for Excellence.

It has been a busy year, full of celebrations. On January 30, I had the joy of ordaining to the permanent diaconate Eskimo John Andy to serve as a deacon at Sacred Heart Church in Chevak. In March, Sr. Dorothy M. Giloley, SSJ, joined our chancery staff as Diocesan Religious Education Director. On June 12, I traveled to Ruby to dedicate their new church, St. Peter in Chains. We also welcomed to our chancery family Fred Villa, to the position of Special Assistant, Mary Ann Stewart, to the Alaskan Shepherd office, and Maria Kropf, to our Accounting department. On August 16, the Diocese rejoiced with Sr. Marilyn Marx, SNJM, on her Golden Jubilee as a Religious. In August, too, we welcomed Fr. Matthew Lamoureux, MIC, to our University parish of St. Mark's to assist Fr. Gerald Ornowski, MIC. On September 4, in Sacred Heart Cathedral, we celebrated with the four Ursuline Sisters still remaining in Alaska the 100th Anniversary of their service to the people of Alaska. Later that same month Fr. Mirosław "Mirek" Woznica arrived from Poland to serve the Diocese of Fairbanks. We were blessed to receive Fred Bayler of Healy, Alaska, into our Seminarian program. In November, we celebrated the publication of *Alaskana Catholica*, by Fr. Louis L. Renner, SJ. *Alaskana Catholica* is an encyclopedia documenting over 225 years of Catholicism in Alaska.

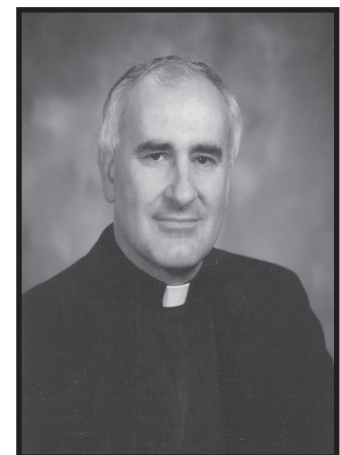
The year 2005, was also a year of some sadness for us, as we bade goodbye to many faithful servants of the Diocese of Fairbanks. Fr. William J. Loyens, SJ, died on December 8, 2004. Deacon Cyril Alexie, of Newtok, died on February 1. Deacon Lawrence Chiklak, of Mountain Village, passed away on April 5. Sr. Roberta Downey, CSJ, died on April 28. On June 6 the Diocese and the Catholic Schools bid farewell to Sr. Felicitas Farrell, OP. Deacon David Erik, of Chefornek, died on July 12. Fr. Frank Mueller, SJ, passed away on September 4.

I beg that each one of you will remember us in your own prayers, with the simple request that God will grant us, the strength, the zeal and the determination necessary to serve well the Catholic Church in Alaska. We are thankful. We continue to remember you and all your dear ones, and all your concerns, in our daily Masses and prayers. We greatly appreciate being remembered in yours.

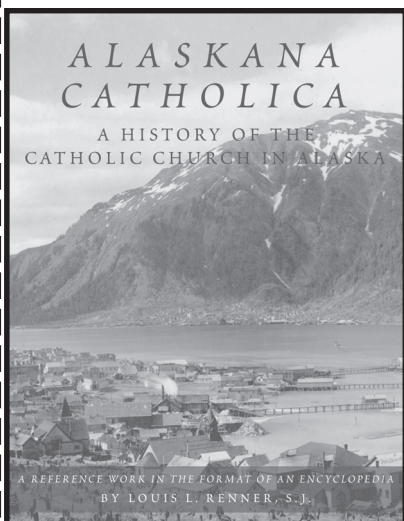
I pray that the New Year of Our Lord 2006 may bring you and all dear to you many special graces and blessings. And I extend to you, dear Co-missionaries, my personal best wishes—in Faith, Hope, and Love...

Donald J. Kettler

Donald J. Kettler



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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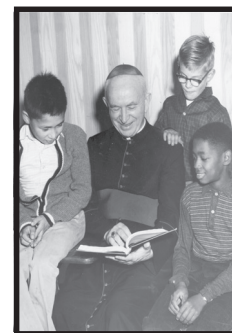
Yes, please send _____copy(ies) of *Alaskana Catholica*, written by **Father Louis L. Renner, S.J.**

I am enclosing \$80.00 for each book, which includes shipping and handling.

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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.

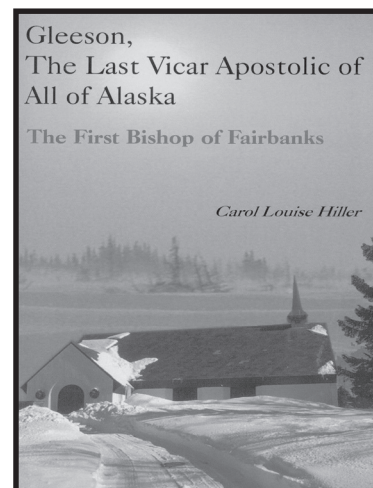


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Yes, please send me _____copy(ies) of *Gleeson, The Last Vicar Apostolic of All of Alaska*, written by **Sister Carol Louise Hiller**.

I am enclosing \$20.00 for each book, which includes shipping and handling.



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To the left:
Elders, (and sisters)
Angelina Ulroan
and Lucy Tuluk at
the Chevak Eskimo
dancing on Sunday
night, December
26th.

To the right:
Drummers perform
at the Eskimo dancing
on Christmas
night at Hooper Bay.

Below:
Dancers at the vil-
lage of Chevak use
traditional and
beautiful fur,
feather, and beaded
fans.



decades earlier by the elders in Emmonak, I surprised the Hooper folks that night when I joined in. At the end, Neva gave me a set of dance fans she had made, and I understood well what was happening. For the Yup'ik people the exchange of gifts is a concrete practice of gratitude essential to genuine friendship and mutual esteem. Neva and so many others there have taught me how to receive gifts freely, without dissimulation or protest—the very experience of God's grace.

Alas, on that bright, cold December morning some two and a half years later, I did not find Neva available for a visit. I had, however, at least learned over my years in Chevak and Hooper that if we were meant to see each other again, God would provide the way. And, true to such wisdom, I finally did meet up with Neva some days later at the Eskimo dancing on Christmas night, the best context imaginable.

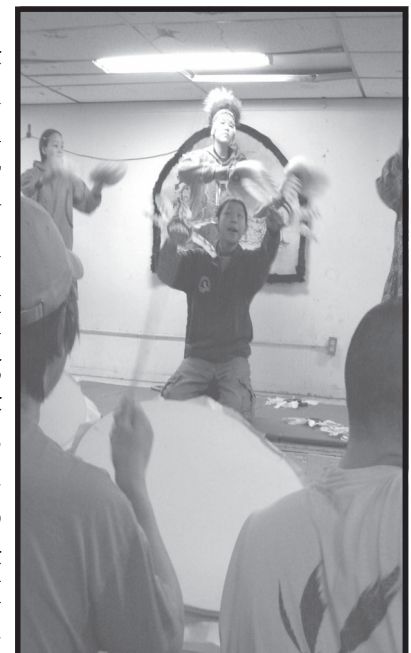
Having quit Neva's house, I crossed town again that Thursday afternoon to shop at the Alaska Company store, buying some groceries to tide me through my remaining days at Hooper. I was well aware that I could get weathered in and not leave on Monday the 27th, so having enough milk and other stuff seemed like a good idea. The store manager, whom I judged to be about 40 year old, chatted me up. He said he was John Olson and pointed down the aisle at Cecilia Olson, saying she

was his mother. Cecilia and I joked about how just the two of us had had Mass together the stormy night before. We were only just acquainted and, yet, our sharing the Word and Sacrament had, for Cecilia, and for me in response, placed us on familiar terms.

At the checkout, a cluster of employees and customers wanted to know who I was. One young woman said she recognized me from Chevak. She asked when Father Gregg would be back, and I explained this would be sometime in January. She asked if she could talk with me, and I said certainly, of course. She said she would like to talk with me right then. Over to the church we went.

I felt privileged to listen to her story and counsel

her as best I could. I concluded by promising to offer the Mass that night for her. Her eyes got big as she said, "You're not going to announce my name out loud, are you?" I laughingly retorted,





This Yup'ik Nativity is displayed in the Little Flower of Jesus Church, in Hooper Bay. It was handcrafted by parishioner Helen Smith.

“What do you think I am, crazy or something?” We laughed. I said I would simply have her as my special intention at the altar that night.

Around 3 o'clock I was utterly delighted to find Mary and Mark Agimuk at my door, handing me a wrapped Christmas present. They had come over by snowmobile to see their family and shop at the Hooper store. We'd not seen each other in two years, and they both looked great. We chatted pleasantly, and eventually Mark asked if there would be Eskimo dancing in Hooper Bay on Christmas night. I prattled on a bit about how they probably would. Well, then Mark got to the point: They would be having dancing at Chevak, as usual. Wouldn't I like to attend? Mark said he would be happy to come get me on Christmas afternoon. They said this would give me a chance to see my friends in Chevak (Mark and Mary's words) not only that night but celebrating Masses the day after, Sunday. I could then fly on Monday from Chevak to Bethel to start my journey back to Boston. While thrilled by the idea of being able to visit the folks in Chevak, I explained that I had a dinner invitation from Deacon James Gump for Christmas afternoon at his daughter Albina's house, but I could imagine heading out after that. Mark said, sure, he could come get me at night. People go back and forth between the two villages regularly at night, weather permitting.

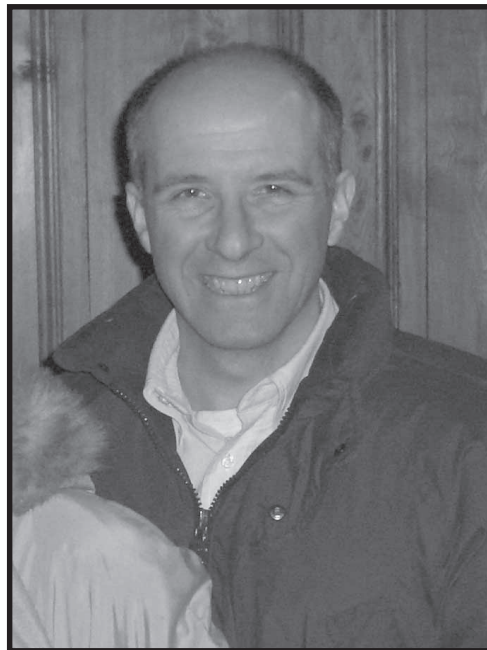
As things turned out, another strong snowstorm blew into the Hooper Bay region on

Again we assure you that we never, under any circumstances, sell, exchange, or give out the names of our benefactors. This has been and continues to be our sacred pledge.

Christmas Eve and lasted through much of Christmas Day. By that afternoon I was able to make my way to Albina's home and thoroughly enjoyed time with her, her father Deacon James, and all the family. The weather was not going to allow Mark to travel from Chevak, but he and I agreed on the phone that, given the predicted good weather for the next day, he would come get me after my morning Mass at Hooper and bring me to Chevak for the evening Mass there. The folks in Chevak had also decided, due to the weather, to postpone their Christmas Eskimo dancing until Sunday night.

What a luxury for me: I got to participate in the dancing at Hooper on Saturday (Christmas) and at Chevak on Sunday—a great Christmas present. But there had been many others in those days at Hooper as well. I recall tenderly, for example, a middle aged woman who came for the Sacrament of Penance two days before Christmas and how we engaged in a lengthy, courageously honest conversation. The next day she was back at my door with the gift of a pair of socks she herself had knitted herself.

The men and women of Hooper Bay and Chevak practice a profound tradition of exchanging gifts, tangible symbols of friendship and respect, gratitude and grace. No wonder I find myself always blessed—in the biblical sense of that word, happy—when once again I hear God's call to meet me on the



The author, Fr. Bruce Morrill, S.J., Department of Theology, Boston College.

furthest end of the continent, in the cold and darkness of the year's shortest days, in the wide and warm embrace of a people with genuine faith in the Creator whose healing love has taken flesh among us.

Special thanks to those of you who have sent stamps! These 37¢ first class gifts are of great use to the Alaskan Shepherd.