



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

ROBERT FATH: SEMINARIAN

In a diocese that spans 409,849 square-miles and serves 48 parishes, it is noteworthy that only 1 Bishop and 26 priests are available to bring the sacraments to this immense land. Yet, this is the very reality that the Alaskan priest faces as he travels hundreds of miles by dogsled, snow machine, and plane to administer the sacraments to this widely scattered flock. It is more usual than unusual that a single missionary priest serve three or more villages. The term “traveling priest” is used throughout the diocese to describe that priest who sets up “temporary camp” in a neighboring village. Sometimes met by a parishioner they are often whisked away to their modest quarters. The rectory is most often an attachment to the church. Many a time, the priest arrives in the peak of hunting or fishing season and must “foot it” to the parish or grab a ride from a passing four-wheeler.

Whether greeted by a flock of eager souls or by a “flock” of annoying mosquitoes—the Alaskan priest is indomitable. Great is the need for Catholic priests in Alaska.

This is the challenge that faces Robert Fath, the Fairbanks diocese “hometown” seminarian. He does not know in what capacity he wants to serve the diocese. He realizes the choice may not be his. Never-



Seminarian Robert Fath and his parents, Bob and Anna, share a visit at Mount Angel Seminary, in Benedict, Oregon. All photos courtesy of the Fath Family.

theless—Robert is sure he wants to a missionary priest in Alaska.

When you speak the name of Robert Fath, within the Diocese of Fairbanks, you will quickly notice that smiles abound and people gather to hear the latest news about our local Seminarian at Mount Angel Abby, in Benedict, Oregon. For you see, Robert is not just any seminarian—he is special—he is ours.

A parishioner of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Robert is specially prayed for by his parish family. Anna Fath, Robert’s mother and parish nurse at the Cathedral, remarks that, “*Robert knew when he was 12 that he wanted to be a priest. He came home from school one day, and very matter-of-factly announced to me that he needed to be a priest. It did not, for the most part, surprise me. He had always*

been a compassionate, respectful, focused, and prayerful child. But at that moment, he was so sincere about this newly announced intention that I had to convince him the priesthood would wait, at least for him to put away his books and eat dinner!”

Regarding his call to the priesthood, Robert recalls, “*When I first thought about the priesthood I*

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1312 PEGER ROAD FAIRBANKS, ALASKA 99709
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A special Mass is offered every day of the year for you and your intentions in one of the Missions. Please pray that God may bless us and our work.



A very young Robert Fath in 1980—at only 3 years of age.

wasn't sure whether I wanted to be a diocesan or a religious priest. Later, while in high school, I was in contact with then Bishop Michael J. Kaniecki, S.J., and the vocation director for the St. Louis Province of the Redemptorists. When I approached the bishop formally

during my senior year of high school about seminary, he told me that he wanted me to complete at least two years of college before he would consider my application. I began college though I was somewhat disappointed. During that time, I continued talking with the Redemptorists and was beginning to think their order was where I belonged. In 1998, while in college in Philadelphia, I had a chance to go on a discernment retreat sponsored by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary. During that retreat, I was convinced that I should enter the seminary. The Redemptorists sent a vocation director to Philadelphia to meet with me in person and after a long conversation; I finally asked what my chance was of going back to Alaska. He told me that it was most likely, not an option. I strongly felt that I was being called to serve the people of northern Alaska. A few weeks later, I called Bishop Kaniecki to tell him that I wanted to start the application process. It took three more years for me to finally make it to the seminary for the Diocese of Fairbanks.”

Born on December 28, 1977, in Honolulu, Hawaii, at Tripler Army Medical Center, Robert lived in Honolulu until 1980. Then they moved to Michigan, just outside of Lansing, where they were stationed for three years, and where Robert started preschool.

At five years of age, Robert first set foot on Alaskan soil. The Fath's moved to Fairbanks for the first time in the summer of 1983. Robert's Dad taught

at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, as an instructor for the ROTC program. Robert attended Woodriver Elementary from Kindergarten through second grade and received his First Holy Communion and Reconciliation at Sacred Heart Cathedral. Though the family would continue to “move around” as Army families will—Robert would come to think of Alaska and particularly of Fairbanks, as home. It was a natural feeling for someone who would eventually consider the Alaskan missionary lifestyle. Many Alaskan missionaries have arrived in Alaska from lands and countries much different from this land of wide-open spaces and thrilling northern lights. Each recalls that moment when they just knew this was “where they were supposed to be.”

In 1986, Robert was nine and the family transferred to an army post in Massachusetts. He attended second and third grades at Holy Innocence, a Catholic school, in Nashua, New Hampshire. Here, he became involved in Cub Scouts, an activity that would eventually earn him the highest honor of Eagle Scout.

One year later, the family transferred to Fr. Monmouth, New Jersey, where Robert completed Junior High and started High school. Robert continued his involvement in Boy Scouts—holding several positions within the organization: assistant patrol leader, patrol leader, troop scribe, assistant senior patrol leader, and senior patrol leader. He was also inducted into the Order of the Arrow, which is an organization for honor scouts.

Also in New Jersey, Robert volunteered at the hospital, in the Intensive Care Unit, where his mother worked. Anna recalls that, “Robert would volunteer in the most difficult areas of the hospital. He held hands with patients during transfusions, he sat with families as they waited for the completion of serious operations, he answered questions, he assisted patients, and helped make families comfortable, and most importantly—he really listened. While he had the heart and the intelligence for nursing and medicine, he seemed to be searching for something. That unwavering focus that he had all his life seemed to be missing.”

In 1993, Robert's Dad retired from the Army and the family moved back to Fairbanks, with plans to retire there. Robert enrolled at West Valley High School. He graduated from West Valley in 1996 and heeding Bishop Kaniecki's advice, went on to attend college at UAF where he completed his undergraduate core requirements. He enrolled at Thomas Jefferson Universi-

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, Facilitator of Business Activities: 907-474-0753.

NOVENA IN HONOR OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

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

On the eight days preceding the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and on the feast day itself, June 27th (2003), a novena Mass will be offered in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and for our benefactors and their intentions.

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. (The Cathedral of the Diocese of Fairbanks is dedicated to the Sacred Heart.)



You are also invited to join us on the novena days (June 19-27th, 2003) inclusive by praying the following prayer:

O Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, you said: "Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you." With confidence in your loving, compassionate Heart I come to you as the fountain of every blessing. I ask you to make my heart humble and holy like yours. Grant me to live a holy life and to die a happy death. During this novena I humbly ask also for certain spiritual and temporal favors:_____.

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on me!

"Today as ever, the living Christ loves us and offers us His Heart as the source of our redemption." —Pope John Paul II

Please remember the following petitions during the Novena of Masses in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus:

TO: CATHOLIC BISHOP OF NORTHERN ALASKA
1312 Peger Road, Fairbanks, Alaska 99709

DATE _____ 03-76#16

Dear Bishop Kettler:

Enclosed is my special donation of \$_____ to the **Seminary Training FUND**, a fund intended exclusively for the Education of Seminarians of the Diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

Please make checks payable to: CATHOLIC BISHOP OF NORTHERN ALASKA



In Commemoration of Jubilee 2000, the Diocese of Fairbanks published,
in 2001, a 96-page volume entitled,

*A Brief Illustrated History of the Diocese of Fairbanks:
Profiles of Prelates and Churches, Past and Present.*

Please send me _____copy(s) of
*A Brief Illustrated History
of the Diocese of Fairbanks --\$25.00 each.*

Name _____

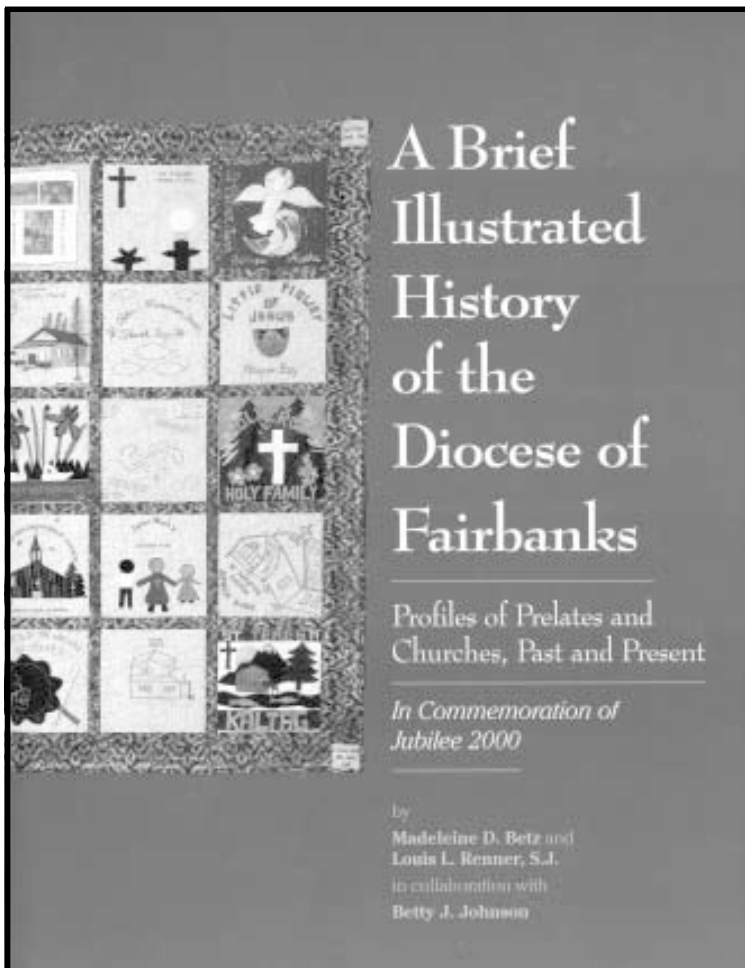
Address _____

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The book begins with a Foreword and a digest history of the Diocese of Fairbanks by Madeleine D. Betz. Betz is also author of the second and largest part of the book, "Churches of the Diocese." This part has photos--most of them in color--of the 49 parish churches in use today. The photos are accompanied by a brief history of the given parish. The third section of the book, "Former Mission Churches" has photos of five one-time parish churches, with a brief parish history of each, written by Betty Johnson. Many will find the photos and brief histories of these five formerly active churches and parishes--Akulurak, King Island, Kokrines, Marys Igloo, and Pilgrim Springs--of special historic interest.

Part one of the book, "Prelates Past and Present," authored by Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., profiles men who have held ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the geographic region that today comprises the Diocese of Fairbanks. The men in question are: Bishop Modeste Demers; Archbishop Charles J. Seghers; Prefect Apostolic Paschal Tosi, S.J.; Prefect Apostolic Jean B. Rene, S.J.; Bishop Joseph R. Crimont, S.J.; Bishop Walter J. Fitzgerald, S.J.; Bishop Francis D. Gleeson, S.J.; Bishop George T. Boileau, S.J. (Bishop Boileau, though he died before becoming Ordinary of the Diocese of Fairbanks, is included since he was ordained bishop with right of succession to that post.); Bishop Robert L. Whelan, S.J.; Bishop Michael J. Kaniecki, S.J.; and Diocesan Administrator Richard D. Case, S.J. A black and white photo and a biographical sketch constitute the profile of each of these prelates.

The volume ends with photos and brief biographical sketches of authors Betz and Renner, as well as of their collaborator, Betty J. Johnson. It was Johnson who did the final editing and preparing of this book for publication. The truly attractive layout and design of the book is owing to the extreme care lavished upon it by Mr. Dixon J. Jones--a gratis contribution on the part of *Designata/Dixon J. Jones*--to the Diocese's Jubilee 2000 celebrations.



ty (TJU) in Philadelphia, PA, in nursing school, in 1998. After completing one semester of nursing, and deciding that it was, just not for him—he moved back up to Fairbanks where he decided to major in psychology at UAF. Robert graduated from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, in May 2001, cum laude, with a Bachelor of Science degree, in Psychology. Once enrolled at Mt. Angel Seminary as a first year Theology student,



At the Portland International Airport, in April of 2002, Robert and fellow seminarian Thielo Ramirez, from the Diocese of Phoenix, bid farewell to Bob and Anna Fath.

Robert and his family agree that his “focus” returned and the missing piece seemed to reappear.

Robert’s Mom jokingly, describes him as “scary” smart. She remembers one time when Robert was about three. *“One night we headed to the library to check out more books about Robert’s latest interest, Egypt. He was completely fascinated and could not get enough information about the pyramids and pharaohs. Upon arriving, we found the doors locked. I can still picture him, leaning his head against that locked door, in utter disbelief that this place that held such marvelous answers—could actually be closed.”*

His love of learning has not changed, yet his outlook has. *“When I entered the seminary, over a year ago, I had very different ideas about what it would be like to study for the priesthood. I knew there would be a lot of praying and, of course, academics. The experience has been much different. I came to Mt. Angel with the same mindset that I had while working on my undergraduate degree at the University of Alaska—do everything you possibly can to get an “A.” I quickly learned that academics were only part of the reason for seminary training. Instead of only focusing on academics, I am learning to be more aware of my spiritual well-being and of my personal relationship with God. My first semester here, at Mount Angel, was extremely difficult for me to understand that good grades do not equal being a good priest. With the help of my formation and spiritual directors, I started asking myself questions like: “Are parishioners going to ask me for Aquinas’s five proofs for the existence of God? Are they going to expect me to be fluent in Greek?” I began to realize that the answer to these*

questions was a clear—NO. People are going to expect me to have a good, solid spiritual life and a deep personal relationship with God grounded in the Eucharist. The academics are important, insofar as they help me to accomplish that end. Not all the book knowledge in the world is going to make me more available to the people that God is calling me to minister to. I still focus on my classes (as I should), yet, I am more aware of when my studying is encroaching on my prayer time. I am more apt now, to stop working so

that I can pray, rather than ignore prayer and continue with what I am doing. Still, I have a lot of work to do, but I know that the seminary is where God is calling me to be at this point in my life. In 4 years, God willing, I will be ordained a priest in the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks.”

The abbey is a sharp contrast to Alaskan life, but Robert enjoys his time “on the hill,” as the students at Mt. Angel call the Seminary, which was founded in 1882, by a small group of Benedictine monks from Switzerland. The Abby is located on a large hill, on the edge of the Willamette Valley. Native Americans called the site Tapalamaho. In earlier times they had come to pray often within the thick fir forest.

The primary focus of the Mt. Angel Seminary is the education of priestly ministers for dioceses and religious communities. The school is also open to non-seminarians who are looking for an excellent education in preparation for some aspect of ministry within the Church.

Robert’s education is heavily comprised of the formation cycle. The purposes of seminary formation are twofold, first to assist the student’s growth, and second to provide an accurate and helpful assessment to the student’s home diocese. The formation program of Mount Angel Seminary integrates four main areas: spirituality, academics, personal, and pastoral. The goal is to help the seminarian become effectively self-reflective so that in accurately viewing his life he can see where changes need to take place, make plans to change, and achieve the plan.

Robert says about his 6:15 AM to 10:00 PM daily schedule, *“My schedule stays about the same all week*

with the some exceptions. Every other week I act as the Master of Ceremonies for the seminary liturgies. When this happens, instead of praying at 7:15 AM, I am usually busy getting things ready for Mass, so I fit prayer in where I can. On Thursday, I go to my ministry site in the afternoon. This year I am working at MacLaren Youth Facility, an Oregon youth prison. Then, on Friday Evening Prayer starts at 4:00 PM so that we can have the rest of the weekend free. In addition, every few weeks I have a meeting with my formation director and spiritual director.”

This semester his classes included Theology of Liturgy, Synoptic Gospels, Rite of Christian Initiation, Historical Foundations (Middle Ages), Church Classics, Ministry in a Multicultural Church, and Piano.

Though primary, prayer and study are not the only things a seminary student does at Mount Angel. During an average week, groups of students gather to participate in various sports including soccer, basketball, racquetball, and floor hockey. Mt. Angel has an intramural basketball team that plays other colleges in the surrounding areas. On Friday and Saturday nights, as Robert says, “many Seminarians, just decompress from the week.” Movies are sometimes rented and students relax. Occasionally, activities off the hill are offered. This year groups of seminarians have attended operas and plays in Portland, watched a variety of professional sporting events, and participated in skiing excursions to Mt. Hood and Mt. Bachelor.

There are also annual events that students eagerly anticipate. Every year in September, the town of Mt. Angel holds a traditional German Oktoberfest. St. Benedict’s Day, is another festival that Robert particularly enjoys. Last year’s festivities included the province of Anchorage (the Archdiocese of Anchorage, the Diocese of Fairbanks, and the Diocese of Juneau) win-



Mount Angel Abbey and Seminary, on the hill, in Benedict Oregon.

ning the annual diocesan float parade. “We decorated a car as a dog sled and pulled it around campus.” In addition, in late spring, the local Knights of Columbus sponsor a seminary miniature golf tournament in which the seminarians build the courses and then team up with knights to compete for prizes.

Abbot Zodrow, in an October 2002, letter writes, “In a world where many have lost their way, we are called to help illuminate the path with the light of Christ. This is the heart and soul of the Mount Angel Abbey.”

Today the Abbey strives to provide the best possible priestly formation for the 155 Seminarians enrolled from 24 Dioceses and 6 Religious communities. Alumni of Mount Angel Seminary serve five million Catholics in 1800 parishes in the western United States, Canada, and Samoa. The commitment is to form holy and well educated priests for service in the Church today.

What are Robert’s plans upon returning to the diocese as a priest? He fully realizes such matters are out of his hands, but says, “I’m not sure what I would

like to do other than be the best priest I can be. My preference is to work in the parishes along the road-system, but I recognize how great a need our villages have as well. I am called by God to serve and I am willing to go wherever He is calling me to go. Every parish in the diocese presents its own set of blessings and challenges and I am looking forward to experiencing as much as possible.”

It will indeed be a day of grand celebration, when Robert arrives home to be ordained as a Missionary diocesan priest to the people—his people—of Northern Alaska.

—Patty Walter

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

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.