

# The Alaskan Shepherd



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*Some give by going to the Missions*

*Some go by giving to the Missions*

*Without both there are no Missions*

## THE LITTLE SISTERS OF JESUS OVER 50 YEARS OF SERVICE IN ALASKA

*Editor's Note: In 2002 the Little Sisters of Jesus of Brother Charles of Jesus celebrated in Anchorage the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their presence in Alaska. I am pleased to be able to share with you a brief history of the Little Sisters in Alaska by Little Sister Alice Ann Sullivan. Sister Alice Ann has been in Alaska since 1960.*

*--Patty Walter*

In August 1952, Little Sister Magdeleine of Jesus, the foundress of the community of the Little Sisters of Jesus, and Little Sister Jeanne of Jesus arrived in Nome, Alaska, with Fr. Voillaume, the founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus. They had founded their respective communities following the innovative spirituality of Brother Charles of Jesus who lived and died in North Africa in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their visit to Nome was part of a worldwide tour by the group to search out places for foundations of the rapidly growing community. A number of reasons brought them to Alaska. Bishop Francis D. Gleeson, S.J., at that time the Apostolic Vicar of all Alaska, was open to a foundation in Alaska. Little Sister Magdeleine had a vision of surrounding Russia with communities of Little Sisters to be centers of prayer for the people of Russia. She was particularly interested in Little Diomed Island, which faces the Russian Far East, and which, at the time, was known for the large prison camp (gulag) established there. Her idea was to have a small community of Sisters on Little Diomed to share the life of the Eskimos and to be a center of prayer for the thousands of people in the gulag.

The Sisters were not able to go to Little Diomed, but Fr. Cornelius K. Murphy, S.J., the pastor of Nome, told the traveling group of founders that it would be impossible to found a community on Little Diomed without having a base in Nome. Thus began the first community of Little Sisters of Jesus in the whole United States, in Nome, Alaska.



*This group photo was taken during a meeting at the house of the Little Sisters in Anchorage. Little Sister Yoshie is missing. From left to right—back row: Little Sisters Solange Marie (Mae), Gwendolyn (visiting), Alice Ann, and Monique. Middle row: Damiene, Odette, Nobuko, and Marie Josephe (Mary Jo). Kneeling in the front, Nirmala.*

*--All photos courtesy of Little Sister Alice Ann*

The first Sisters came to Nome in 1954 and spent a few months there. As they were all Europeans, they needed to obtain permanent visas. They returned to Canada, their jumping off spot, and applied for permanent visas to the United States. Almost as soon as they received them, they returned to Nome, where they were given a shack, which was moved to the east end of Nome, where the King Island people camped in the summer, while they were visiting Nome. Among the core group of Sisters who

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*Ignaluk, the Inupiat Eskimo village on Little Diomed Island.*

participated in the foundation at Nome and later on Little Diomed were Yvonne-Mary, Solange-Marie, Odette, Damiene, Jacqueline, Josephe-Alice (Mary Jo), and several others. These Sisters, who came from Paris, Strasbourg, Versailles and other cities in Europe had not the least idea of how to live in the arctic. It was the King Island people who taught them. It is part of the charism of the community to learn from the people among whom they settle. The Sisters learned skin sewing and made their own parkas and mukluks. They learned how to fish through a hole in the ice for crab and cod. Most importantly, they all made attempts to learn to speak the Eskimo language, Inupiaq. At the time, there were no resources, such as books on grammar, and so their attempts to figure out future and past tenses, etc., often led to hilarious sessions with their friends. As is normal for the community, they supported themselves by salaried work in local stores or cleaning offices.

All this energy and effort was applied following the model of Brother Charles of Jesus (Charles de Foucauld) who, at the start of the 1900's, was living an essentially contemplative life without the walls. He shared the daily life of the Touareg people of North Africa—living as they lived, very simply, but also living a profound Eucharistic life of prayer and meditation. Brother Charles envisioned religious and lay people living this type of life, but was not able to experience it in his lifetime, as he was killed in the skirmishes of World War I. His basic intuition was

that a contemplative life does not require living in a monastery, but can be lived by anyone anywhere. Fr. Voillaume and Little Sister Magdeleine read Brother Charles' writings and founded communities that incorporated his vision. Thus, wherever Little Sisters or Little Brothers are established, there is a chapel with the Blessed Sacrament and regular recitation of the Divine Office, times of meditation and adoration, days and weeks of retreat and, whenever possible, Mass. Brother Charles was to have been beatified in the spring of 2005, however, with the death of Pope John Paul II, the ceremony was delayed until November 13, 2005.

As the years passed, King Island village slowly began to disappear. A huge fall storm in 1974 severely damaged many of the houses, including that of the Little Sisters. As a result, Federal relief housing was developed in the town of Nome. However, everything in the local culture

was changing. People were working fulltime jobs and many young people were going outside of Nome for more schooling. The Little Sisters also shifted gears and became more involved in the town and with the people of Nome.

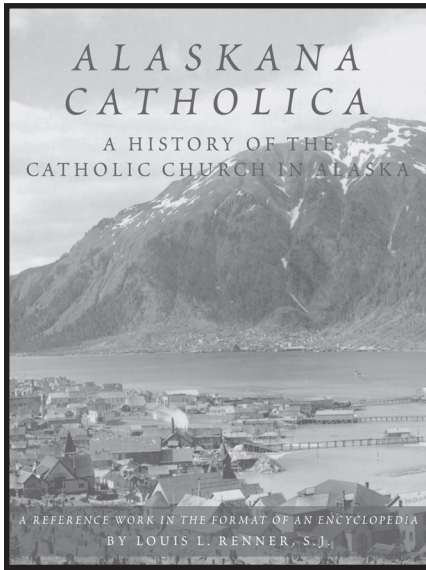
In order to maintain contact with their King Island friends, the Little Sisters asked for a space to put up simple living quarters in the King Islanders' subsistence campground at Woolley Lagoon, about forty miles West of Nome. Beginning in 1979, with permission, the Sisters began camping with a small tent, caribou skins to sleep on--and a succession of borrowed cars that were quite good at getting flat tires. Once, all four tires were flat. Summers at Woolley were a wonderful time for fishing, picking greens, visiting with friends. Occasionally one of



*Little Sisters Damiene and Nobuko (standing) help clean walrus skins on Little Diomed Island.*

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.

*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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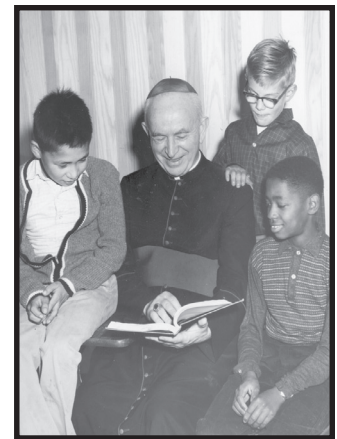
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This personal story of Bishop Gleeson unfolds against the backdrop of early American growth and expansion, with special focus on Alaska as it evolved from a territory, was purchased by the United States and then achieved statehood. This part of the 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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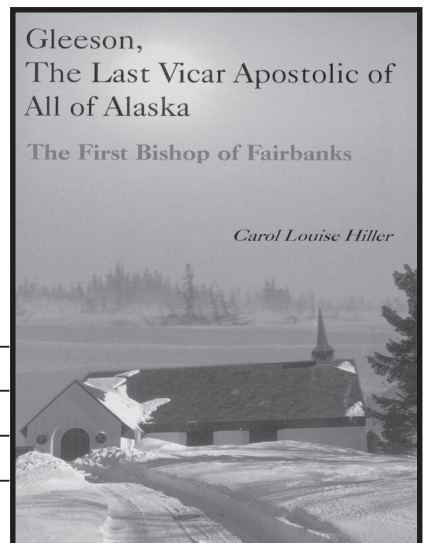
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*Please remember the following petitions during the Novena of Grace:*

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## NOVENA OF GRACE

Each year during the month of March, a Novena of Masses is offered for you, our benefactors, and for your petitions.

The Novena of Grace is so called because countless people have had their prayers answered by God through the intercession of St. Francis Xavier, the Jesuit Apostle to the Orient in the sixteenth century and the patron saint of worldwide missions.

We invite you to send us your petitions. Both you and your needs will be remembered on each of the nine days of the Novena when Mass is offered for you. The Fathers on the missions also will remember you and your intentions in their Masses and prayers during the Novena.

We invite all of you to join us in this Novena of Grace by reciting--from the 4th of March to the 12th inclusive--the following prayers.

*O most amiable and loving St. Francis Xavier, in union with you I adore the Divine Majesty. While joyfully giving thanks to God for the great graces which He conferred upon you in life and for the great glory with which He has gifted you in heaven, I come to you with heartfelt love, begging you to secure for me, by your powerful intercession, the inestimable blessings of living and dying in the state of grace. I also beseech you to obtain for me the favors I ask in this Novena*

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*But if what I ask is not for the Glory of God, or for the good of my soul, do you obtain for me what is most conducive to both. Amen.*

**Our Father; Hail Mary; Glory be to the Father.**

**V. Pray for us, St. Francis Xavier,**

**R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.**

*Let us pray: O God, you chose to bring into your Church peoples of the Orient through the preaching and miracles of St. Francis Xavier, mercifully grant us that we may imitate his virtues, whose glorious merits we hold in veneration.*

**We ask this through Jesus<sup>4</sup> Christ Our Lord. Amen.**



the priests from Nome would come to say Mass. Often some of the KNOM volunteers would come along. The Sisters always had jobs for the volunteers to do—like hauling logs for the wood stove, when they were too heavy for the Sisters to carry. The Sisters have vivid memories of the Sunday afternoon, when all would eat together on the beach. Dinner was potluck and often featured fish. Usually there was a fire and stories and laughing. Sometimes there was also Eskimo dancing. The Little Sisters eventually built a small cabin there and they continue to camp there each summer.

In 1954, two Sisters visited Little Diomed Island to see about a future foundation. In 1955, they bought one of the semi-subterranean houses that were the only type of house on Little Diomed. Sisters came to stay there for a few weeks each winter. The dwelling was furnished à la Eskimo, complete with seal oil lamp and a skin skylight to let the light into the interior. The Sisters were always well taken care of and looked after by the Little Diomed people. Gradually, we learned the skills needed to actually live there. In 1958, the Sisters tore down the old house and built one of the very first frame buildings on the Island. The first Sisters embraced the American “do it yourself” mode of living and literally built all their homes—the one in Nome, the camp at Woolley Lagoon, and the house on Little Diomed Island.

On Little Diomed, their lifestyle was totally one of subsistence. Most of the Sisters learned to eat and like walrus, seal and bear meat. It was not difficult to learn to like eating King Crab. As a newcomer on Little Diomed, Sister Alice Ann did not realize that going to watch the men butcher the meat meant that your family was hungry and you needed some meat. One day, as she was standing and observing the scene, a young man strode up and presented her with an enormous armful of oogruck (bearded seal) meat. She staggered back to the house with enough meat to last for weeks. Wild birds and eggs were also part of the diet. Some of the Sisters learned to skin seals and to tan and work the skins to prepare them for sewing. In those early years, the Sisters themselves learned skin sewing, and some were able to help the women sew the walrus skins for the boats. Later, when Federal law allowed only Alaskan Natives to own and work skins, the Sisters took up knitting and sewed the parka covers for the hunters.

Due to the extreme isolation on Little Diomed, Little Sister Nobuko, who came from Japan in 1970, and Little Sister Damiene, took up the task of helping mothers prepare their children for First Communion and assisted the adults in forming a parish council. Visits from the priest, usually stationed in Nome, became more and more rare. Communion service became the norm.

Most often the Little Sisters flew out to Little Diomed in the winter, when the planes could land on the ice. They returned to the mainland in the summer with the Diomeders by skin boat. Some of these trips became epic journeys. Sometimes, due to bad weather or engine problems, the Sisters, along with the people, spent days - -with only a partially overturned boat for shelter--on some remote area of the mainland beach. Transportation is much easier these days, especially since the building of a helicopter pad on the island.

In 1993, the Little Sisters spent their last full winter on the island. They continued their presence there periodically in the winter months. Finally, in 2004, due to increasing age and lack of new recruits, the Sisters had to sell their house on Little Diomed Island and continue their ministry of friendship with the Diomeders, while they were in Nome for shopping or medical visits. In early years, Nome, and especially Little Diomed Island, were considered rather excessively isolated, remote. Accordingly, the need of a third community in a more urban area with medical facilities and a place to have a retreat was felt by all. In 1960, the Little Sisters started a house in Fairbanks, considered, at the time, the hub city of Alaska.

The beautiful hot summers of Fairbanks and the big lot their house was located on encouraged the Sisters to develop a rather large garden. When the Sisters came from Nome or the island, it was with great relish that they ate the fresh produce of the garden. Completely surrounding the house were peonies of a various colors. From deep red, to peach and pink to pure white—they were a sensation for the neighbors and for the Little Sisters. The Sisters developed many close friendships with the “old-timers” of Fairbanks, and particularly with Bishop Francis D. Gleeson, who came to say Mass at the house every day. None can forget the day he arrived to sit heavily



*A group of women on Little Diomed Island sewing walrus skins together to cover the frame of a skinboat. Little Sister Monique is lending a hand.*

in his chair and in a downcast voice tell them that Bishop George T. Boileau, S.J., had died. Another time it was the news of the fire at St. Mary's. It was Bishop Gleeson, who, in a letter to Father Murphy, in 1952, wrote that he was, "very happy to have the Little Sisters in Nome," and "To my mind these Little Sisters are grand and not afraid of any situation. They are liked very much universally throughout the town."

In spite of their friendships in Fairbanks and their love for the place, the Sisters decided that, in order to keep up contact with their friends from the coast, they would need to move to Anchorage. Anchorage had become by that time the new hub city of Alaska. In 1988, the Little Sisters moved there and have been very happy with the fact that they can visit with friends at the Alaska Native Medical Center, which treats people from all over the state. Of course, they have another beautiful garden.

Increasingly, Anchorage has become a multi-cultural city. The Sisters' parish of St. Anthony has had a Korean choir and now a Samoan choir and a Gospel choir. In addition, St. Anthony's hosts the Alaskan Native community for Mass once a month.

It is unique to the Little Sisters community that once they, as individuals, are established somewhere, they can choose to stay in that spot until the end of their lives. Most religious communities have a circulation policy—so many years in a place—and then they move on. There is, however, a group of nine Little Sisters, who have stayed in Alaska almost all of their adult lives. Some of the original "founders" are still here. The friendships within the order span several generations. The Sisters have witnessed change and growth in the lifestyle of rural Alaska and in the way of the Church. With very few priests in the rural areas, lay leadership has developed. The community, too, is changing. From a past emphasis on rather extreme "insertions"—places for fraternities—such as Little Diomed Island, the Sisters are moving more



*Little Sister Alice Ann leaves Woolley Lagoon headed for the mainland. The Sisters cabin is the one just above the boat. To the right, the frame of the tent-chapel can be seen.*

towards a presence in the multi-ethnic neighborhoods of cities all over the world. The Sisters most recent foundation in North America is in Paterson, NJ, just outside of Newark, in a Moslem neighborhood. Due to Brother Charles' life and death in North Africa (technically one fourth of the Sisters communities are in Moslem communities) the Sisters are renewing an emphasis on this connection with their historical past.

In 1959, Little Sister Yvonne-Mary became an American citizen, in Nome. In 1980, Little Sisters Damiene, Joseph, and Odette, too, became American citizens, in Fairbanks. Some years later, Little Sister Solange Mae did the same, in Anchorage. Six of the first Little Sisters retired from salaried work in Alaska, as of the year 2004. They continue to live their lives of presence, friendship and prayer among the people, believing that such lives can be signs of hope and healing in a broken world.

The Little Sisters recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their presence in Nome—a truly golden moment. Each Sister treasures the years she has spent in Alaska. It is a true witness of the Faith in Alaska. The



*Little Sister Monique with a group of women on Little Diomed, picking greens.*



*From left to right, Little Sisters Damiene, Odette, and Alice Ann, pose for a group shot on their sun porch in Nome.*

Sisters have learned tremendously from the spirituality of the Eskimo and Athabascan people. They are grateful and happy to have had the opportunity to live among them.

*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.*

*Special thanks to those of you who have sent stamps! These 39¢ first class gifts are of great use to the Alaskan Shepherd.*