

History of the Diocese of Juneau

Compiled by Fr. Patrick Travers, Diocese of Juneau

The Catholic Church was permanently established in Southeast Alaska on May 3, 1879, when Father John Althoff founded Saint Rose of Lima Church in Wrangell. Father Althoff was a young Dutch priest of the Canadian Diocese of Vancouver Island (now Victoria) which, in 1874, had been assigned responsibility for the missions in Alaska. He had been sent by Bishop Charles J. Seghers of Vancouver Island to serve Wrangell and the Cassiar mining district on the Stikine River, as well as the town of Sitka, to which he would travel from time to time and celebrate Mass in an old Russian carriage barn.

Following the discovery of gold at what is now Juneau, Father Althoff moved to the new settlement and celebrated the first Mass and baptism there in the interdenominational "Log Cabin Church" on July 17, 1882. The same year, Father William Heynen, another priest of the Diocese of Vancouver Island, arrived as Father Althoff's assistant. Father Heynen spent most of his time in Sitka, where he built the original Church of Saint Gregory Nazianzen in 1885. He returned to Vancouver Island in 1887. In the meantime, Father Althoff built the first Catholic Church in Juneau in 1885, on the site now occupied by the driveway between the Cathedral rectory and Saint Ann's Hall.

In 1886, he sponsored the establishment in Juneau of the Sisters of Saint Ann from Victoria. The first three sisters -- Sister Mary Zeno, Sister Mary Bon Secours, and Sister Mary Victor had established a hospital and a school within two months of their arrival in Juneau on September 11, 1886. The Sisters of Saint Ann operated this hospital and school, which were both named for Saint Ann and greatly expanded over the years, until the 1960s.

In September 1895, after Alaska had been separated from the Diocese of Vancouver Island, Father Althoff returned to Canada. He died in Nelson, British Columbia, in 1925, at the age of 70. Referring to Father Althoff and to Father Heynen, who died in October 1939, Bishop Crimont stated: "These two men were the pioneers of the Church in Southeastern Alaska."

On July 17, 1894, Pope Leo XIII had established Alaska as an independent Prefecture Apostolic. The first Prefect was Father Pascal Tosi, S.J., and the Society of Jesus assumed primary responsibility for the new Alaskan Church. In 1895, Father John Rene, S.J., the new pastor in Juneau, established Our Lady of the Mines Church and School in Douglas. In 1900, Father Paul Bougis, S.J., would build a larger church, and the Sisters of Saint Ann would found a hospital that would operate until 1916, when the Treadwell mines were flooded and closed. The complex was destroyed by fire in 1926, and another building was bought to serve first as Saint Aloysius Mission and then as Saint Peter's Church, which was closed in 1986. The painting of Our Lady of the Mines from the old Douglas church is now displayed at the entrance of the Cathedral's Saint Ann's Hall. Father Tosi resigned as Prefect Apostolic of Alaska in 1897 due to illness, and died in

Juneau early the next year. He was succeeded by Father Rene, who established his headquarters in Juneau, and served until 1904. In 1898, during the Klondike gold rush stampede, Father Rene and Father Philibert Tumell, S.J., established Saint Mark Church in Skagway. Father (later Monsignor) G. Edgar Gallant, who became the first priest ordained in Alaska on March 30, 1918, at the Cathedral, later built a new church and school in Skagway, which were named for Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus. In 1931, Monsignor Gallant would establish Saint Pius X Mission Home for Native children who were either orphans or from destitute families, staffed by the Sisters of Saint Ann. It would be rebuilt in 1946, and would operate until the 1960s.

After years of celebrating Mass in various public buildings, the Catholics of Ketchikan bought an old schoolhouse in 1903 and converted it into Holy Name Church. This would be succeeded by other churches in 1939 and 1980. The parochial grade school, the only one in the Diocese which is still in operation, was established in 1946. In 1922, Ketchikan General Hospital was established under the auspices of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Peace.



A plaque is placed on the corner of the Shrine Chapel to mark a "time capsule" placed there in 1938. Bishop Crimont kneels at the site.

In 1904, Father Joseph R. Crimont, S.J., succeeded Father Rene as Prefect Apostolic of Alaska. The church in Juneau, named for the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

because of its connection with the Sisters of Saint Ann, was rebuilt in 1910. In 1917, Pope Benedict XV made Alaska a Vicariate Apostolic, and named Father Crimont as its first Bishop. Under Bishop Crimont's administration, new churches were built and resident priests established in Wrangell and Sitka. Chapels, which eventually became the centers of new parishes, were built in Haines and Petersburg. Missionary work began in Hoonah, Yakutat, and other smaller communities. The Shrine of Saint Therese was established twenty-five miles from downtown Juneau to honor the newly named patroness of the Alaskan Church.



Deacon Gary Horton, then 11 years old, center right, stands on the steps of the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1947. Standing above and to the left of him is Bishop Francis Gleason, S.J.

The Catholic Church blossomed, not only in Southeast Alaska, but also in the rest of the Territory, under Bishop Crimont's forty-one years of leadership. When Bishop Crimont died at Juneau in 1945, he was succeeded for two years by Bishop Walter J. Fitzgerald, S.J., who had been his coadjutor Bishop since 1939. Fitzgerald died in 1947 and was succeeded the next year as Vicar-Apostolic by Bishop Francis Gleason, S.J.

On June 23, 1951, Pope Pius XII established the Diocese of Juneau. The new Diocese consisted of those parts of Alaska east of Shelikof Strait and Cook Inlet and southeast of

Talkeetna, including Kodiak, the Kenai Peninsula, Anchorage, the Matanuska Valley, Cordova, and Valdez, in addition to Southeast Alaska. On October 3, 1951, Father Dermot O'Flanagan, the pastor of Holy Family Church in Anchorage, was ordained and installed as the first Bishop of Juneau. The rest of Alaska remained a Vicariate Apostolic under Bishop Gleeson, who moved to Fairbanks.

During the years leading to Statehood in 1959, the center of population of Alaska shifted decisively to the north and west, even though Juneau remained the capital of the new state. On February 9, 1966, the portion of the Diocese of Juneau lying west of Mount Saint Elias and Icy Bay was detached from that Diocese to form part of the new Archdiocese of Anchorage. When Bishop O'Flanagan resigned in June 1968, there were serious questions whether what remained of the Diocese would survive as an independent entity, and it was administered for more than three years by the new Archbishop of Anchorage, Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan. On September 8, 1971, however, Bishop Francis T. Hurley, who had been ordained in March 1970 as Auxiliary Bishop of Juneau under Archbishop Ryan, was installed as the new Bishop of Juneau. Bishop Hurley, an airplane pilot, greatly expanded Catholic ministry in the smaller and more remote communities of the Diocese, such as Hoonah, where Sacred Heart Church was built. As he implemented the reforms of Vatican II, he promoted more active roles for lay people in the life of the Church. In 1972, Saint Paul the Apostle Church in the Mendenhall Valley, which had been built as a mission of the Cathedral ten years earlier, became the second parish in Juneau.



Newly ordained to the Diocese of Juneau in 1970, Bishop Francis Hurley pilots a plane in Alaska.

Bishop Hurley administered the Diocese of Juneau for three years after being named Archbishop of Anchorage in May 1976. On June 15, 1979, Bishop Michael H. Kenny was installed as the third Bishop of Juneau. Under his inspirational leadership, the Church of Southeast Alaska continued to grow and flourish. Teams of priests and sisters based in the larger towns traveled to the smaller communities to support small groups of Catholics, as well as those of other faiths. The people of Saint John by the Sea Parish on Prince of Wales Island built a church in the village of Klawock. The Native designs incorporated in this church reflected Bishop Kenny's desire to reach out to all the peoples of Southeast Alaska, whether Catholic or not. His bold stands in support of peace and justice were respected even by those who did not agree with him. When he died suddenly on a trip to Jordan on February 19, 1995, he was deeply mourned by people of all faiths and beliefs. Father Michael P. Nash served as Diocesan Administrator after Bishop Kenny's death.

On November 19, 1995, Pope John Paul II announced the appointment of Father Michael W. Warfel of Anchorage as the fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Juneau, ordained and formally installed on December 17, 1996, in Juneau. He served the diocese of Juneau for 11 years, until his assignment by Pope Benedict XVI to the Billings-Great Falls Diocese and was installed there on January 16, 2008.

The Church of Southeast Alaska is now grateful for Bishop Edward J. Burns, ordained in Pittsburgh, PA on March 3, 2009 and installed as the fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Juneau, AK on April 2, 2009 (the Anniversary of the Death of Pope John Paul II).