

# St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Anchorage, Alaska

## The Beginnings

Rev. Ernest H. Muellerleite

"You can't go wrong," Fr. Kevin O'Connor wrote me from S.E. Alaska in early 1975, "You can't go wrong in starting a parish on Easter Sunday in the Holy Year, the Year of the Woman, with your patroness as one who will soon be canonized the first American citizen saint."

The saint of course is Elizabeth Ann Seton of New York, chosen by Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan (also of New York) when he established this as his youngest parish in the Archdiocese of Anchorage, Alaska. On Easter Sunday he initiated the celebrating of Mass in each of the three locations that served as "church" for us in the beginning: at 7:00 A.M. in the Retreat House Chapel (with Fr. Vincent Kelliher, S.J. and myself as concelebrants), at 11:00 A.M. at our "mission" at Oriental Gardens restaurant (where Hugh Bradley is the generous proprietor), and at 12:30 noon in the O'Malley School Gymnasium. To these sites there was later added St. John's Methodist Church for a Saturday evening Mass, all serving our scattered congregation. Weekly adult inquiry classes were also held Sunday afternoons near Oriental Gardens at the Alaska Chiropractic Clinic. Extension Society of Chicago had given us a start financially with a gift of \$25,000.00 for the parish and another \$25,000.00 gift for its mission.

Early meetings for the establishment of the parish had been called and chaired by Archbishop Ryan: at St. Benedict's rectory on Wednesday, January 22nd, in St. Benedict's Church on Wednesday, February 5th, and in Holy Spirit Retreat House on Thursday, February 13th. Right around the February 5th meeting date I had suggested to him while at the chancery office that our

mission be named after the Japanese Jesuit Martyr, St. Paul Mikki. He thought it over, agreed, and the name stuck.

Home meetings, largely devoted to preparing liturgies and making banners, were held "on the hill side" at Harold and Dorothy Miller's on Wednesday, January 29th (when an outage knocked out the Retreat House power), at Ralph and Mary Hostetter's on Mondays, February 24, March 3 and March 10, and at Gene and Helen McGill's on Friday, March 14. Similar meetings were held "in the valley" at John and Sylvia Taitano's on Monday, March 10 and at Lyle and Mary Welsh's on Wednesday, March 12. Soon all was in readiness for the birth day of our parish on Easter Sunday, March 30th!

"How do we go about building a church?" Gene McGill asked me that same Easter Sunday afternoon after dinner at his home. "First, get from the local authorities (at that time the Burrough) all the rules and regulations with which we must comply", I replied, "and then contact a competent church designer to do some sketching, starting with the interior floor plan." I recommended Wilhelm Wagner (again, of New York) whose services I had enlisted in many building projects over the previous 20 years. Already on the day the parish was born, I felt it would be the part of wisdom to start planning the final church, instead of living for years in temporary structures.

From personal experience I had learned from Mr. Wagner some of the requirements for churches built in the new era. Since the "church" is basically the "people of God", the seating arrangement should be such that those in the congregation can see one another worshipping, participating in the sacred liturgy. The sanctuary is to be divided into two parts — the first for the Service of the Word, on an elevated structure visible to all with the Word of God on display at all times, and nearby the chair of the presiding celebrant with his ministers. Organ and choir should be situated not far away. This first part is modeled somewhat on the synogue service of our Jewish forebearers, just as the second, or Eucharist service, grew out of the Jewish Passover meal celebrated on Holy Thursday by Christ and his apostles. Hence the altar is located on a lower level, the focal point of the assembly, the meal table of God's people, where the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord are rendered sacramentally present. Nearby, in relation to the altar are the wall tabernacle and the baptismal font, placed so as to be visible to the entire congregation.

Originally, the site of St. Elizabeth's Church was to be in a corner of the Holy Spirit Retreat House property. We planned to have the site dedication day coincide with the actual canonization of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton on Sunday, Sept. 14. Earl Korvnta

surveyed the land and John Jensen later cleared brush and cut down a few trees. A television interview on the Norma Goodman show helped publicize the event. Then on the day itself as Charlotte Jensen was pouring for the Silver Tea at the Retreat House, a steady rain started pouring down outside. Undaunted, Archbishop Ryan, protected by an umbrella, blessed the site deep in the woods at which a huge cross had already been erected.

Speaking that day on the life of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, as a part of the celebration, was Fr. J. Thomas Connerly (also of New York), newly appointed "priest-in-charge" of our St. Paul Mikki mission. In record time Fr. Connerly and his people had built a parish center on Huffman and Gander on a 5 acre tract discovered by Ray Allor and which once had served as the headquarters of the notorious "Brothers" gang. The archdiocese purchased the acreage for \$60,000.00. Here it was that the congregation, largely with volunteer labor, had built around the rectory (a modular unit) ample office space with a chapel on the ground floor underneath that could seat 150 people. The overall designer was Michael Bagenski. Long before construction was finished, Fr. Connerly had himself moved onto the site and thus also became the first to offer Mass there.

On Christmas day lines were drawn and St. Paul Mikki became a parish of its own. Just 9 months after coming into being, St. Elizabeth's had become a mother parish. I announced that this was an "obstetrical miracle," for the way the new parish lines had fallen, the child was larger than the mother! An even greater miracle was that Fr. Tom Connerly had the previous year been pastor of our own mother parish, that of St. Benedict. It was as if the grandparent had become the grandchild. It could only happen in Alaska.

Growth means change, and St. Elizabeth's parish underwent both in the months that followed. Archbishop Ryan was transferred back to New York to serve as Coadjutor in the military Ordinariate. In July of 1976 his successor, Archbishop Francis T. Hurley, was formally installed as second Archbishop of Anchorage. When, in the following year, Fr. Connerly returned to his home diocese of Albany, New York, I was moved to the St. Paul Mikki Parish Center and given the pastoral case of both parishes.

Actually, this was only one in a series of several moves that helped bring our parish to where it is today. Long before the beginning, in the summer of 1972, Archbishop Ryan had stopped over in Sitka in S.E. Alaska and had asked me to come to Anchorage to build a church and start a parish. At that time it was to have been called St. Jude's. Almost simultaneously a group of St. Benedict's parishioners were holding study meetings to determine where the division for the new parish could best be made.

That fall I moved into the retreat house one day and out the next!—out to Palmer in the valley for a two year stay—for the Archbishop had discovered he could not yet spare a priest for this new task. In Palmer I was joined by my mother and eventually her little dog, Copper. "Pray that your flight be not in the winter," scripture says. But it was on a Saturday evening, the first of December, 1974, at the very beginning of Advent, with a wintry storm blowing us out of the valley, that we drove to the Holy Spirit Retreat House and settled in the trailer there. We were welcomed during the next month with 3 earthquakes and a week of 30 below zero temperatures which froze our pipes and gave us a good initiation into life on the Hillside. With each earthquake, the trailer leaned a bit more toward the ravine, so that when my mother pulled a cake out of the oven, it too was slanted toward the south! Copper, our poodle, enjoyed the 70 foot run in the trailer, although he and Collie, Fr. Kellher's canine companion, never quite became real friends. Some 8 months later, on a rainy day, we moved from the trailer to the "upper one", the modular unit which surmounts the conference hall. With no interior stairway, my mother used a ski-pole to help her climb up and down the hill from road to entrance. Here too for some time we celebrated in the front room the Saturday evening parish Mass.

Then in May of 1977, after a series of joint meetings with St. Elizabeth's and St. Paul's representatives, as called by Archbishop Hurley, we moved to the new parish site on Huffman and Gander. It was not long after this, while visiting at her home in Minnesota, that my mother suffered a stroke which impaired her speech and paralyzed her right side. For a long time she was in a critical state and her condition necessitated my making many trips "commuting" from Alaska to Minnesota and back.

But growth of the two parishes continued—at first side by side and then gradually the two merged into one. St. Paul's had provided the site and built the parish center. St. Elizabeth's had brought as her dowry a substantial building fund to start construction of the Church, and eventually gave the name to the reunited parish.

"I want a building committee that builds", said engineer Gene McGill, the chairman, and once again it was our own people who were involved in construction. Many of those who had helped with the parish center joined the committee. Ron Reiland was engineer for layout and plot plan as well as septic system. Virgil Leveret designed the mechanical heating system. Shirley Germaine presented us with a scale model of the church. Carl Luch-singer became general contractor. Wayne Boedecker was electrical designer and Tim Bridgman was engineer for cost control.

Gary Postlethwait made and analyzed financial projections. Paul Nangle, Frank Piffner and Russ Holland provided us with legal aid. Jeanine Erhardt became our interior decorator and Bob Combs provided sanctuary furnishings. Michael Bagenski gave us a ground floor covering design and coordinated the exterior siding and entrance of the parish center with that of the parish church.

On Christmas Eve, 1978, with a congregation of 500, Archbishop Hurley celebrated the first Mass in our new church. By cutting a ribbon in the passageway that unites the two buildings, he symbolically wedded Elizabeth and Paul.

The opening of the church was followed soon after with a "Golden Plate Luncheon" at Oriental Gardens with Hugh Bradley as host, with Margie Mullins designing the plates, and with Bea Combs firing many of them in her kiln. A series of photos taken during construction were hung on display.

At first our new church had only what was promised—it was basically a "warm, dry building", yet even this relieved us from the crowded conditions in the St. Paul Miki chapel and removed us from the rather drab surroundings of "St. O'Malley's" gym. Although the parish now had a sizable debt of over \$200,000, our further completion of the church was done on a "pay as you go" basis—adding a sound system, carpeting, tiling, room dividers, cabinet work, sanctuary furniture, and eventually the luxury of a parking lot.

Meanwhile we struck a bonanza—the gift of a parish school! Sr. Andrea Nenzel, C.S.J. together with Sr. Marilee Murphy, C.S.J. had moved up from Ketchikan into a trailer, intent on establishing *somewhere* in Anchorage what so many people were requesting, a parochial school. At the same time the Reetz Foundation was in search of a site to construct a parochial school building. It took many meetings of our budding parish council and of our building committee with the Archbishop and Sr. Andrea plus the complicated process of gaining approval from the municipality, but eventually the unbelievable happened. In the spring of 1980 ground was broken and in the fall the building, designed by our architect James Trimble and constructed by Carl Luch-singer, was occupied by the first 100 pupils. Most of the church builders and engineers also gave of their talents in the planning and erecting of the school, but in addition to these and to the architect we usually had at our meetings: Eileen Trimble, widow of Angie Reetz whose memorial foundation provided us with the means to build; Jim Trimble, her husband, structural and civil engineering coordinator; Holly Trimble, her daughter, consultant for special education for the neurologically impaired, and Sr. Andrea. Thus,

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, foundress of the American Catholic school system, became the patroness of Anchorage's first parish school.

All this growth meant that our parish staff too increased by leaps and bounds! Our very first helpers were a group of 6 Dominican novices who lived at the retreat house during our first summer, took up a house by house census of the principal families in the parish, and helped us in our Sunday liturgies. With the novices' aid, Sylvia Tartano and Jan Smith took on the music ministry at Oriental Gardens, while the Dr. John Muth family continued to provide outstanding music at O'Malley School. When these families left, their successors were the Don McKenzies and now Carol Ryan Aube and Margie Mullins.

Sister Clare Lentz, S.P., served us for 6 months in 1977-1978 as our first parish associate, giving us vision and direction, particularly in the field of adult education. She was followed by Sr. Mary Faith, B.V.M., the heart of hospitality, who happily continues to serve up to the present time.

The opening of the school brought with it a staff of 3 more sisters and 3 lay teachers. Together with Sister Andra, the principal, this includes Sr. Nan Ross, B.V.M., Sr. Patricia DeCosta, B.V.M., Barbara Kearney, Delena Tibbs, and Patricia Seidel.

Almost simultaneous with the opening of the school came the appointment of our first associate pastor, Fr. Steven Moore of Fairbanks. In December, came a second associate, Fr. Hugh Robbins, C.S.V., of Kankakee, Illinois. Also three men of the parish, Ray Allor, Robert Larroque, and Lyle Welsh, are studying for the permanent diaconate.

In the very beginning Sr. Eleanor, R.S.M. of St. Benedict's parish directed our entire catechetical program. Now, in the year of the family, we have combined the resources of St. Elizabeth's (originally headed by Helen Boedecker) with those of St. Paul's (originally headed by Sylvia Tartano) into a total family religious education program directed by Yvonne Adam. 1980 too brought about the election of a parish school board, chaired by Dr. Dale Trombley, as well as the formation of our first genuinely elected 12 lay member parish council, headed by Paul Fischer.

A further development of parish religious education has been our Summer Schools of Bible and Liturgy, held first of all at O'Malley School, then at Service-Hanshew High School, and now most recently at our St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish Church. Prominent in our summer school work have been Leslie Lent, Bonnie Porter, and Barbara Husereau together with seminarians Dan Hiebert, Bill Goehring, and Henry Eymann.

For secretarial help, we owe much to Ann Magstad, Marie

Grunewald, Lorna Dingley, Jean Nilson, Hazel Woods, Mary Welsh, Shirley Germaine, and Veronica Baker.

Parishioners Bernard and Dan Droege of the A-1 Chemical and Cleaning Service have been doing professional cleaning on a regular basis for church and parish center.

In recent months societies have been springing up right and left, including the Altar Guild, the Youth Club, the Mardi Gras Committee, The Magi Group, and the St. Elizabeth Service Club. Each is contributing in its own way to St. Elizabeth's parish life and growth.

Actually, the first of our parish groups, one that includes St. Benedict's and that antedates all others, is the Wednesday morning prayer group, now known as Bethany. Kaycee Schilke and Bonnie Porter are the co-founders.

Generally, we think of St. Elizabeth's as a city parish, although its outlying areas include many "bush type" residences, and its hinterland of 1000 square miles includes untold numbers of mountains, valleys, and glaciers. Michael Warfel, with us one summer as a seminarian, spent five days in a glacial crossing exploring this "back-yard" of our parish! This outlying area includes Indian, Bird Creek, Girdwood, and Whittier. Girdwood with its Alyeska Ski Resort is the largest of these communities and has been visited for weekly Mass first by Fr. Connelly and more recently by myself and now by Fr. Steve Moore, Mass has usually been celebrated in the Methodist Chapel there.

Alaska is a land of frustration, and a land of opportunity. St. Elizabeth's, in its young life, has experienced both the ups and the downs. But as Archbishop Francis T. Hurley dedicates both church and school on her feast-day, Sunday, Jan. 4, 1981, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton will surely be looking down from the midst of God's saints, pleased that in our parish life as in her own short span of years, what once seemed impossible has, with the grace of God, happened!

And this is only the beginning.