

# A Jesuit in Alaska:

*The Tertianship Experience of Fr. Bob Reiser, SJ*

The scenery  
was some of the  
most amazing I  
have ever seen  
in my life!

I arrived in Bethel on Saturday, April 1st, and was greeted at the airport by Fr. Chuck Peterson, SJ, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church. Although it is the hub of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Bethel is still a pretty simple town. The parish community is a mix of Yup'ik Eskimos

and "Gussock" Caucasians from "downstates." There is a community of Jesuit Volunteers in town, and I had the chance to tag along with them for some of my time in Bethel. After Mass on Sunday, some of the volunteers and I went to the frozen slough behind our church and watched a dog-sled race. We even had the chance to mush a bit!

I flew up to Hooper Bay where Fr. Gregg Wood, SJ, picked me up on his snow machine. The church in Hooper Bay is The Little Flower of Jesus. Some 350 households are in a village of about 1000, sitting along the Bering Sea. The temperatures ranged from around -50 F when I first arrived to around +20 F. In the beginning, existence outdoors required snow pants, insulated boots, the usual winter gear, and goggles.

I celebrated a daily Mass, visited elders in the village, and presided at the liturgies of Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter. We were to have thirty infant baptisms on Easter Sunday, but a major blizzard hit. We gave the people the option of having their babies baptized on

Monday, and about half did so. The church could never have accommodated the families and friends of all 30 babies.

Life was pretty rustic in Hooper Bay: no running water or plumbing. But the lessons I learned from the Yup'ik Eskimos were some of the most important in my life. The snow was so high that it covered



*Little Flower Church, Hooper Bay*  
some houses completely. Children would climb onto roofs and use the peaks as hills from which to slide.

Albina Joe administrates the parish. She gets fuel for the building and helps coordinate the liturgies. She also made a great Easter dinner and I joined in an Eskimo dance on Easter Sunday. On my last night in Hooper Bay, I was awakened by a dramatic drop in temperature. Not even my sleeping bag could keep me warm. Before I knew it, Franklin Joe, Albina's youngest, was at my door with some stove oil in hand. I realized on this cold night that God was somehow inviting me to trust - to trust in God and in those with whom God surrounds me.



*Easter Sunday  
at Hooper Bay*

Back in Bethel, I found out that I would be celebrating a funeral. A Yup'ik funeral includes the wake at the house, the wake in the church, a very long funeral, a trip to the cemetery and then a *feed* at the homes of relatives. The people prepare the body, dig the grave and preside at all gatherings and prayer services. There is no hiding from death!

I provided clothing to the homeless, helped out at a First Reconciliation day, celebrated the sacrament with the children and then joined members of the youth group raising funds so a JVC volunteer could serve as a youth minister.

News arrived that a young man had taken his own life. I flew to Tununak, a small village on Nelson Island along the Bering Sea, to preside at the funeral. It was important for a priest to be present, given the circumstances of death. Suicide, along with alcohol and drug abuse, is a significant issue for the youth of the Y-K Delta. Some believe that most suicides are somehow linked to experiences of sexual abuse in youth. There is a real sense of hopelessness



## *The lessons I learned from the Yup'ik Eskimos were some of the most important of my life.*

among teenagers, given the remote nature of the villages and the extreme weather. Younger people also struggle because they value Yup'ik culture but are also lured by the excesses of Western culture.

At the boy's home, the body was laid out in the living room. The casket had not yet arrived from Anchorage, and so the family used a simple mat on which to place the body. They surrounded him with family pictures, flowers, holy pictures and rosaries. It was one of the most heartrending experiences I have ever had. The family had to wait until the casket arrived before they could dig the grave, otherwise they would be digging "another person's" grave. We transferred the body to the church and had a Mass of Resurrection so relatives could have closure before returning to their villages. All in all, the boy's parents and family were able to find some relief in the midst of their grief.

At Saint Mary's, I participated in a Rural Ministry Training workshop on lay preaching. Thirty people from the Y-K villages attended. There are few priests up here (5 for 17 villages), so lay people serve as administrators, Eucharistic ministers, catechists, etc. They preside and preach at Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. It was a great weekend because it was a very hope-filled experience! These lay women and men keep the Church alive. Churches are not being closed; rather, new ways of serving God's people are being born. Again, I was being pushed to trust.

I left on Sunday for Marshall, a village of about 250 (1/2 Catholic; 1/2 Russian Orthodox), sitting on a slough of



the Yukon River. The terrain is different from the coast and there are trees and pussy willows throughout the village. I celebrated the sacraments for two weeks and, along with daily recitation of the rosary, I also presided at a May Crowning, a graduation blessing, and a Mother's Day celebration.

Immaculate Heart of Mary, the parish in Marshall, is well organized. Clara Shorty, the administrator, has a good handle on things. I asked Clara to give a reflection at the Mother's Day liturgy and she did an excellent job. She showed how the ancient Yup'ik custom of sharing food with widows and the poor is evidence that Jesus' ministry is alive in her people. She invited the Yup'iks to remain true to their ancestors and thus remain true to Jesus. As I listened, I wondered if I could do the same. Could I trust that God is alive in my community? How would I look for God within? How could I help others do the same?

Back in Bethel, winter was gone and springtime was finally here. I departed on the 18th and enjoyed a few days of R&R in Anchorage. We flew over the Alaska Range and were able to see Denali, Mt. McKinley, off in the distance. As I was being absorbed by the magnificence of Denali, it hit me. God loves me. God took care of me for two months that were extremely challenging in the confusion of Hooper Bay and Tununak; and extremely consoling in the hope of Bethel, Saint Mary's and Marshall.

For a Jesuit, tertianship is often called the *schola affectus*, or "the school of the heart." I came to know that I am a man who is loved, a man who is cared for by God. In other words, I am a Jesuit. And I have the Yup'ik Eskimos to thank. God loved me in them; on the banks of the Bering Sea and along the sloughs of the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers in the villages of southwestern Alaska.



*Fr. Bob Reiser, SJ, completed Tertianship, the final phase of Jesuit formation, in the Spring of 2006. He is now the President of St. Peter's Prep in Jersey City and will profess Final Vows as a Jesuit on March 12, feast of the canonizations of Sts. Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier.*



*Some children of Marshall, Alaska*



*Aerial view of Bethel, Alaska*