

Press Release



Alaska Conference of Catholic Bishops
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

(ANCHORAGE, AK) For the first time in the history of the Roman Catholic Community in the state of Alaska, all the Priests from the three dioceses of Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau gathered in Anchorage for a multi-day convocation from Monday, March 8 until Wednesday, March 10, 2010.

Anchorage Archbishop Roger L. Schwietz, OMI; Fairbanks Bishop Donald J. Kettler and Juneau Bishop Edward J. Burns were joined by 47 priests from around Alaska for this first-ever statewide gathering as part of the worldwide Year for Priests which was announced by Pope Benedict XVI on June 19, 2009.

Travel itself included some challenges for the priests since they came from islands in the southeast and from throughout the interior of Alaska. Two priests who started out by car had to return to their point of origin due to an avalanche and sought air travel in order to attend the conference.

The main presenter at the convocation was Monsignor Stephen Rossetti, who is an author, educator, psychologist, retreat master and expert on psychological and spiritual wellness issues for Catholic priests. He served as President of Saint Luke Institute in Silver Springs, Maryland from 1996 to 2009. Rossetti currently teaches Pastoral Theology in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University in Washington, DC.

Msgr. Rosetti said, "I am very impressed with the wonderful turnout of the Alaskan priests for this convocation. I am astounded that everyone showed up, and for many, it was not an easy journey. This says a lot about the dedication of the priests of Alaska and their desire for priestly fraternity."

The Roman Catholic Church has a long history in Alaska. Spanning vast distances and accessible in many places only by air or water, Alaska is served by three Catholic dioceses. In 1916 the Vatican made the entire state an Apostolic Vicariate (a special kind of mission diocese) which was administered by Jesuit Father (and later Bishop) Joseph Crimont.

In 1951 the Vatican established the Diocese of Juneau which took in southeastern and southcentral Alaska. The Apostolic Vicariate continued on in northern third of the state.

In 1962 the northern third of the state became a diocese in its own right. Uniquely in the United States, the Diocese of Fairbanks was established as missionary diocese under the direction of Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome.

In 1966 the Diocese of Juneau was divided into the new Archdiocese of Anchorage which encompassed Southcentral Alaska and the much smaller Juneau diocese which took in Southeast Alaska.

In reference to this historical gathering, Anchorage's Archbishop Schwietz said, "That they may all be one, as you, Father are in me and I in you.' (John 17:21) These words of Jesus praying for his disciples have come to mind at the March gathering of the priests and bishops of the three dioceses of Alaska. What a great experience! I am convinced that the Lord is at work among us, calling us to greater holiness for the sake of the Gospel. In particular I felt the prayerful support of the people we serve herein Alaska. For this, and for my fellow priests, I am deeply grateful.'

Bishop Kettler of Fairbanks indicated, "Unity and peace are foundational goals for the Catholic Church in Alaska. The gathering of all of the priests ministering in Alaska (the three dioceses) enabled us to experience and build unity and peace. Our days together were significant, enjoyable and hopeful."

The topic for this gathering was "Priestly Ministry in Alaska: Serving God's People in the Last Frontier". Msgr. Rossetti presented statistics on priestly life in America. In these statistics, 94% of the priests in the US state that they are happy as a priest and a great majority (75%) indicated that despite its challenges, celibacy has been a grace for priests personally. The topics addressed during the gathering also included the sacramental life of priests, priest wellness, priest/bishop relations, steps to holiness, priestly morale & burnout and issues relative to the clergy sexual abuse scandals.

Bishop Burns of Juneau pointed out, "This first multi-day convocation of all the priests in Alaska was a wonderful experience for me personally and for the priests. It was filled with prayer, fellowship, Church related matters and personal development. The presentations by our guest speaker, Msgr. Rossetti, demonstrated that priests are happy in their vocations and fulfilled in their ministry. This time together was established to help strengthen the priests in their resolve to serve the Lord and the people of God entrusted to their care."

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