

Alaskan bishops share priests across diocesan lines

ANCHORAGE, Alaska – Due to an acute shortage of priests in Alaska, the life experienced by Father Nelson Marilag may become the norm as the practice of sharing clergy across the boundaries of Alaska's three Catholic dioceses becomes more common.

Over the past decade, many U.S. dioceses have moved toward a model of sharing one priest among multiple parishes. Alaska's bishops are experimenting with the idea of sharing priests across whole dioceses.

Father Marilag is already on loan from the Diocese of Cotabato, Philippines, and has been officially assigned to minister in the Archdiocese of Anchorage. However, he is now also helping to serve Catholics in Barrow – the northernmost city in the United States and part of the Diocese of Fairbanks.

Having priests work simultaneously within two dioceses is rare, but the developing arrangement in Alaska is part of a new strategy by the Alaska Catholic Conference of Bishops to help mitigate the impact of a growing priest shortage.

Father Marilag's assignment represents the trial run of the new plan.

"It's true that this plan is in its infancy," Anchorage Archbishop Roger L. Schwietz told the Catholic Anchor, his archdiocesan newspaper, "and we haven't dealt with the details yet."

For now, Father Marilag regularly leaves the more southern Archdiocese of Anchorage to help provide sacraments farther north in the Fairbanks Diocese. He visits St. Patrick Church in Barrow every four to six weeks, spending about 10 days before returning to the Anchorage Archdiocese.

In Barrow, the Catholic population of St. Patrick's is about 80 percent Filipino. This makes the ministry of a Filipino priest all the more relevant for the community, Archbishop Schwietz said.

Barrow, with a population of 4,429, is still more than 60 percent Inupiat Eskimo. Because of the way early missionaries divided up the state, the area has never had a large Native Catholic population.

The influx of immigrants, however, who Father Marilag said work largely in the schools and administrative offices, has brought a need for a greater Catholic presence.

In a phone interview from Barrow, Father Marilag told the Catholic Anchor that he was happy to minister there, despite the fact that the thermometer had dipped below zero and the sun was hidden for most of the day.

But most unusual was his discovery of so many fellow countrymen, he said.

"I was surprised to find the large number of Filipinos," Father Marilag said, "and I could feel that sacramental need."

In just a couple of days in the remote village, he had performed a baptism with more than 100 people attending and celebrated two weekend Masses, which drew about 150 people.

He has also been asked to bless many objects, hear confessions and bless family homes.

Despite a growing need for new priests in his own archdiocese, Archbishop Schwietz said he is pleased to be able to help the Fairbanks Diocese.

"Even though we are short of personnel here, Fairbanks is in more dire straits than we are, and it's good to help," he said.

The Fairbanks region is home to scores of small villages not connected by a road system, and often priests must make connecting flights through Anchorage from Fairbanks in order to reach rural parishes.

"I am very grateful for Archbishop Schwietz's support," Fairbanks Bishop Donald J. Kettler told the Catholic Anchor. "Our diocese is so sprawling and the number of sacramental ministers so few, it is a challenge to serve all of God's people here."

Father Marilag will be a welcome minister to St. Patrick's Parish."

Mary Gore, executive director of the Alaska Catholic Conference, said the bishops have discussed a plan to share priests, even long-term, but the details haven't been settled. For example, she said, a priest from the Juneau Diocese might want a three-year assignment in the Anchorage Archdiocese, or someone from Anchorage might like to give three years to a remote parish in the Fairbanks Diocese. Financial and other considerations of such trade-off remain to be developed, she said.