

New Zealand's Catholic chaplains embrace Antarctica

CHRISTCHURCH, New Zealand – Not many changes from his last trip to Antarctica, reported a priest from New Zealand: The ice runway is nearer to the base, it's colder than 10 below zero, but the sky is blue, he added.

"I'm watching a DVD – I was up last night with someone who was not well," Father John Harrison of the Diocese of Dunedin said in a telephone interview from Antarctica's McMurdo Station.

The U.S.-run station has Antarctica's only church, the Chapel of the Snows, and this year marks the 50th anniversary of Catholic priests working there alongside Protestant ministers of the U.S. Navy.

The Diocese of Christchurch has supplied chaplains to Antarctica for 40 years. Today, chaplains serving there come from plentiful applicants around New Zealand and are funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation. They need good health, adaptability, ecumenical experience and an ability to get out among the workers. Most priests say they love the stimulation Antarctica offers.

The chapel is a tribute to faith. McMurdo Station was built by the U.S. Navy and opened in 1957. At first, there was no plan for a chapel among the Quonset huts being erected. Engineers immediately thought this was wrong and reduced the length of each hut by about a yard. From materials saved they built the first chapel, St. Dismas, named for the criminal described as the good thief crucified alongside Jesus.

That chapel eventually burned down, as did the second while the third was being built. Fire is a huge hazard in Antarctica, since the coldest place on earth is also very dry.

With the U.S. pouring resources into Antarctica, numerous U.S. ships visited Lyttelton, New Zealand, in 1957. Friendships with local sea chaplains led to a request for a priest to assist the Protestant chaplain at McMurdo over Christmas.

Father Ron O’Gorman of the Christchurch Diocese traveled on an icebreaker and was the first New Zealand priest to celebrate Mass in Antarctica, Dec. 25, 1957. The next year Father Ted Brosnahan became the first priest to fly the three-plus hours to the smaller U.S. base at the South Pole.

In 1969 Monsignor James Harrington was there when the first women went to the South Pole. It was minus 57 degrees Fahrenheit that day.

Father Dan Doyle is an 11-season veteran of Antarctica and coordinator of New Zealand’s ice chaplain program.

“When I went there first, people had tragedies, imagined tragedies, and they were feeling the pain of being away from home several months at a time without any easy contact,” he said, recalling the earlier years. “They got three minutes once a month on a ham radio – talking to the whole world.”

Chaplains had to pass on all bad news, a task since eliminated by e-mail and direct phone calls.

But Father Doyle said the chaplain’s role has not decreased.

“As the communications improved, so the number of people got bigger – at first there (were) 400, now there are 1,000-plus. You are dealing with more people, but less intensively. When it was 400 you knew everyone,” he said.

For the past three years the Blessed Sacrament has been reserved all year at both McMurdo Station and the South Pole, where respectively 100 and 30 people spend the winter.

In terms of international law, Antarctica is no man’s land. With no territorial authority, marriage certificates cannot be issued, but new relationships multiply. Women number about one-third of base workers and do all sorts of jobs.

When a couple breaks up, they still need to live and eat in the same place, and chaplains do much relationship counseling. They also drop in on people at work.

“The chaplain’s the only person who can go anywhere at any time,” said Father

Doyle. "Some who are lost and lonely sit on their own at night ... a lot of chaplaincy takes place in the dining room, where people gather. It's a very privileged position. We get an entry into people's lives."

Awesome and unforgiving, Antarctica can get into the blood: Lured by the pastoral challenge, Marist Father John Jolliffe is returning for season five.

"The pastoral opportunities and the need are very big when people are away from home in an isolated place, in close quarters with others," he said. "If someone dies in their family, they may not be able to get off the ice, and it's helping them in their grieving. If we weren't there it would be very difficult - they wouldn't want to bring down the morale of those they are so close to.

"People get 'Dear John' letters. Stuff they haven't dealt with, like divorce, comes up when they are away from distractions of life. ... It's like the soul can be opened up," he said.

Risks are high in Antarctica, and chaplains train in critical-incident stress management.

Father Jolliffe said he was in a tracked vehicle that began to sink on the ice. The same day three tourists died when their parachutes failed on a jump.

Father Doyle said, "People fall down crevasses, get lost outside and freeze to death, and there are aircraft accidents."

However, adventure beckons. Father Jolliffe has led 11-hour tours for flight crews, volunteered on the deep-sea diving team's safety line, and run in the annual International Round the World Race.

"You run three-and-a-half kilometers (about 2.2 miles) round the South Pole with your survival gear on. It's 10,000 feet above sea level and very cold - heavy clothing, thin atmosphere. So I can say I have represented New Zealand to the extent of completing the course. Not many New Zealanders have done that," he said.

New Zealand chaplains are valued in Antarctica. Creagh Glacier and Coleman Peak are named after deceased former coordinators, Fathers Gerry Creagh and John

Coleman.

“We are trusted by the Americans: We have a name for confidentiality, good common sense and pastoral care,” said Father Jolliffe.