

“I am the good shepherd, says the Lord; I know my sheep, and mine know me” (Jn 10:14). 73 years ago, one of the great shepherds in our diocese passed away. Fr Bellarmine LaFortune, S.J. suffered a stroke while celebrating Mass in Nome in July. He died on the 22nd of October, 1947 at the Catholic hospital in Fairbanks. 6 days later he was buried in the Clay Street Cemetery. He spent the better part of 4 decades living in the Seward Peninsula and serving the Natives from Teller, Mary’s Igloo, King Island, Little Diomedede and Kotzebue. Many tales could be told of his heroic efforts to learn the King Island dialect, build churches, and establish a mission in the village of Ukivok. Those stories must wait for another day.

102 years ago, the Seward Peninsula was suffering from the deadly effects of the Spanish flu. Deadlier than the coronavirus, estimates speak of up to 50 million deaths worldwide. In Alaska, the Spanish flu had its most devastating impact on the Seward Peninsula. 820 of the territories 1,113 influenza deaths were in the Seward Peninsula. Fr Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J. along with Fr Frederick Ruppert, S.J., witnessed firsthand the devastating effects of the pandemic.

While Fr. Ruppert ministered in Nome, Fr. Lafortune was establishing a new mission at Pilgrim Hot Springs that would later provide a home and a school for native children orphaned by the flu. Although quarantines were in effect to limit the spread of the virus, commerce and travel continued. As ships brought necessary goods to Nome, the crew of the Victoria had contracted the flu and catastrophically transferred more than just the mail to Nome’s residents.

October 20, 1918 is when the flu first hit Nome. It spread like wildfire in less than a week and there were so many cases of influenza that the doctor was overwhelmed. The military doctor at Fort Davis was the only healthy physician to provide medical care. Civic leaders reopened the abandoned Catholic hospital and tried to staff it with whomever was available.

Fr. Ruppert reported “They asked me to be superintendent, which meant to keep a chair warm in the office and dispense a few words of cheer to the sick. But I felt I had some noble traditions of the Society in the service of the plague stricken to uphold, and with God’s help tried to do my bit. The hospital is a large one and was soon filled to its capacity for what nurses were available. The staff, the first month, was an uncertain one. All were without training or experience, and one hardly ever knew who could be counted on from day to day. However, the Lord always provided so that at all times we were at least able to get along.”

Fr. Lafortune returned from Pilgrim Hot Springs at a crucial juncture when he was most needed. Strong and hardy, he visited the sick everywhere he could. Fr. Ruppert recalled, “Father Lafortune was indefatigable in working for the Eskimos. He was seen constantly hurrying to and fro and from one end of town to the other on his dog team. His example spurred the others into action. Soon many hands were stretched forth for relieving the deplorable conditions, but the awful plague had wrought frightful ravages. Most had died or were dying, some had frozen to death; for the most part, only children were left. What remained was only the wreckage. Of, the Nome Natives, a population of less than three hundred, about fifty children remain and fifty adults.”

Both priests provided pastoral care to the sick and dying without catching the flu themselves. When the hospital closed in January of 1919, Fr Lafortune was able to return to Pilgrim Hot Springs and bring along a very worn out Fr Ruppert for a few weeks of rest.

Over the next several years under the direction of the Jesuits, the mission at Pilgrim Hot Springs took shape providing a home and school for the orphaned children. Fr Ruppert would freeze to death in 1923 when he lost his bearings trying to deliver oranges as a Christmas gift to the orphans at Pilgrim Hot Springs. He is buried in a small cemetery at Pilgrim Hot Springs.

Fr. Lafortune who had a deep and abiding love for the flock entrusted to him, would continue ministering in the Seward Peninsula until his untimely stroke in 1947. In the Gospel of John, Jesus asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Simon Peter answered him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus replied by asking the apostle to feed and tend to his sheep. Fr. Lafortune had the heart of an apostle and loved the native communities. He consciously chose to spend as many winters as he possibly could on King Island.

The psalmist encourages us to “Proclaim God's marvelous deeds to all the nations.” No Jesuit knew the native tongues better than Bellarmine Lafortune. He never tired of sharing his love of God with the people he loved to serve. One of his fellow Jesuits commented on his passing. With his death, “One may say that an era came to an end. It was the era of the giants. When he died, everybody knew there was a new saint in heaven” (Renner 373).

Let us honor the memory of Fr Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J. by doing all in our power to help those who are sick and suffering from the coronavirus.

Sources:

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