

So this is how it happened. It begins, actually, a long time ago, back in the early seventies before I was an Assumptionist. I had finished a program in political science at Boston College, was living in the North End of Boston and wanted to start teaching, but until then, to make ends meet, got a job at the Chart House Restaurant that had just opened up on one of the piers at Boston Harbor. I didn't feel at home either with the other restaurant people or with the clientele, which at the time seemed to me unpleasantly demanding and unreasonably snooty. For hours every night I'd be wiping clean their tables. And that's how it happened.

The tables, fitting in with the nautical theme of the Chart House, were inlaid with nautical charts of the whole watery world and its coastlands. The landmasses were colored green, but as a place set apart from all of them was Greenland--because of its icecap Greenland was represented as white.

The image of that clean, white and distant land, showing up every night at work in the vaguely sleazy environment of the restaurant, worked its way into my imagination, and after work, night after night, I had dreams of flying to Greenland, sailing to Greenland, climbing the coastal mountains up to the icecap of Greenland...

The impression never left me, and for the next forty or so years it seemed that part of my heart was permanently turned north.· About ten years later, in 1985, the other part of my heart was turned powerfully toward Jerusalem, where over the years afterwards I traveled many times. That's another story...but the long and the short of it is that Jerusalem and the North· became the two poles of my life. For the northern part I ended up spending two years as pastor in the tiny village of Parent, in the Abitibi of Quebec, and then four years on a Passamaquoddy reservation in Washington County, Maine.· But the ultimate goal of Greenland ("Ultima Thule," as my college Latin prof Joe Sheerin said it was called by the ancient Romans) seemed never

part of a real itinerary. I flew over it once...the stewardess let me know when we would be above it so I could find a window and see it for the first time... Once I happened to be in Labrador and stood on the shore, imagining Greenland across the Davis Strait...but getting there for real seemed like something that would never happen.



Then, this past summer, I was asked by the Assumptionists to preach for the mission coop program in Wellington, a rural town in Ohio.· So to Ohio (never a part of my imaginary inner life's itinerary) I went.· St. Patrick's parish there was a wonderful place--a very sweet congregation, and Father Jim the pastor, 90 years old, a one-time flight navigator over Japan in WWII, a strikingly vital and good-hearted guy.· It was a surprising delight to me.

Sunday morning as I was getting ready for mass, a Kathy Murowsky came into the sacristy to

greet the pastor.·· Fr. Jim introduced her to me and said, "Kathy is a world traveler; she just got back from Greenland."· I turned to her and said, "Greenland!· I've wanted to go there for my whole life!"· She looked at me hard and long and then, very deliberately, she said, "Then...you Go!"

Her words hit me with real force.· When I was back to Worcester I thought that she was right, that before I die I should take at least some sort of action on this long-lived desire.· But it's not that easy to get to Greenland and there was no way I could go just as a tourist.· There had to be some real reason why I OUGHT to go.· I wondered if they needed a priest there.· Groping around on the web, I found out that there was a small community of Catholics in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, who were served by a community of the Little Sisters of Jesus (founded in the spirit of Charles de Foucauld) and that there were three priests from South America working there with them.· I figured then that there was no possible need for me, but I was still resolved to take at least some symbolic action, given that command to "Go!" that came to me in Ohio.

I decided to contact the sisters in Nuuk.· I had neither their e-mail not postal address but, like sending off a letter in a bottle, I addressed a note to "The Little Sisters of Jesus, Nuuk, Greenland," and put it in the mailbox on campus.
I thought, "Here goes nothing..."

Five days later I received an e-mail from the sisters.· The community of priests who were in Nuuk, they said, were very poorly suited to the situation, with the result that the Catholic community there, already quite fragile, was in a state of serious crisis.· (The Bishop--his diocese is Copenhagen and includes Greenland--corroborated the judgment of the sisters.)· They were desperate for someone to come and replace those three priests.

So, corresponding to Kathy's "Go!" there was the Little Sisters' "Please, Come!"· When I got their e-mail, and a day later a phone call from them, I felt an explosion of joy and knew that I had to go.

I was ready to go over Christmas break; by then the South Americans had been sent home, and the Bishop had found someone to help out in Nuuk for the mid-winter.· This was was a little discouraging to me and I thought maybe I wasn't much needed there after all.· But then two things happened.· Kathy Murowsky, who had been following these events, asked if I would be free to go over spring break.· And at the same time, the newly appointed pastor of Nuuk, Fr. Christian Noval, let me know that he needed someone in Nuuk at just that time.· (He is very

often compelled to be away from Nuuk, and there are few priests in Denmark willing to do time there.) But I doubted that I'd get the go ahead from my community for an expensive flight to Nuuk for merely the length of spring break...
But then Kathy offered to pay my flight!· When she said "Go!" she meant it!
So I was going to Greenland.

What would it be like?· Would I have a role there?· Would I maybe hate the place once it left my imagination and I saw it for real?· I said to myself, "This will be my attitude:· I know nothing, I expect nothing, I accept everything.· Let's just see."



So here it is: I loved the place, felt immediately and perfectly at home.· English is the language spoken by most of the parishioners, many of whom are foreign professionals.· I met the sisters and the core parishioners and found that we were able to work very well together. We had mass every day, an ecumenical prayer service with the other Christian communities in town; I participated in the wake of a Catholic doctor from Poland who had taken sick and died in Nuuk;·

I even got to team teach a class with a theology prof at the little university there in Nuuk.· A parishioner, whose Inuit roots he can trace back for 800 years in Greenland, gave me a lift to the airport when it was time to leave...and asked me please to return.· I told him I would surely try.·····For me it was all a wonderful, even miraculous experience.

I love teaching at Assumption.· It's a permanent joy for me.· But the teaching I do has everything to do with my life between the two poles of Jerusalem and the North.· Or another way to put is that what I teach is the Word that comes forth from Jerusalem and that is sent out to the poor and to the "far distant islands," as the Scriptures put it.·· I want my students here at Assumption to receive that Word, and also to look out to the distant horizons of the poor to whom they too are called.· I always wanted to be an Assumptionist; I never wanted to be just an academic!· The best kind of teaching includes more than the merely academic!· The Scriptures that I had discovered for the first time in Israel impel us instead to the best kind of teaching.· For me that means an eye set on the North, the distant coastlands...and a foot and a hand set there, too.
Anyway...the pastor (representing the Bishop) and the Catholic community in Nuuk have asked me to return for the first six weeks of the summer.· If I get permission from the community here, that's what I would most eagerly do!

Fr. Barry Bercier, A.A.