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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

Over the past several years I've spent the months of December and January helping out in the Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay in northern Canada. I worked in this diocese for three years in the mid-90s, and nearly all that time was spent in Iqaluit. Iqaluit, on Frobisher Bay in Baffin Island, is easily the largest town in the region, and when the new territory of Nunavut was carved out of the old Northwest Territories, it was the obvious choice for the capital. It's pretty easy to find: just go to Boston, and then go 1500 miles straight north. In my return visits to the diocese, I had always gone back to Iqaluit, staying there for the entire two months.

Not this year. This year the bishop had something else in mind for me. The pastor of the missions in Igloolik, Hall Beach and Pond Inlet was slated to leave in late December for France and a program of continuing education and formation that would last several months. The plan was that he and I and another priest would play musical chairs with those three communities until late December, when there would be two of us left, with me in the main mission of the trio, Igloolik, for most of January.

Iqaluit is in the far north, but it is below the Arctic Circle, and so it never loses the sun, not even at the winter solstice. Igloolik, Hall Beach and Pond Inlet, however, are all above the Arctic Circle, and they do lose the sun. They had had their last sunrise before I arrived, and I would not see the sun again until shortly before I left the region. These are also very small towns: Igloolik is less than a third the size of

Iqaluit, and the other two are even smaller. These are Inuit communities, and the main language is not English but Inuktitut. I don't speak Inuktitut at all, and only know enough about the language to be able to stumble my way through the prayers of the Mass. Oh, and it is cold up there in winter, with the temperature topping out at -35° most days that I was there.

Wrap all this together and there is the strong temptation not to go out much, nor to do much more than read, a temptation to which I yielded on many a day. I brought books of my own, but when those ran out I turned to what was on the shelves of the various missions. As one might expect, many of the books in those houses were about the North. And within the literature on the North there is a definite subspecies of writing that might be called northern nostalgia, in which the author (whether a white person or an Inuk, for members of both races can play at this) describes life in the North the way it used to be, and then bemoans the fact that it has changed so much in the last fifty years. I found a bunch of northern nostalgia books there, especially at Igloolik which had the largest library, and I dipped into some of them. One doesn't need to read too many of them, as almost immediately they all begin to sound the same.

Certainly the eastern Canadian Arctic has experienced huge changes within a couple of generations. In 1950 nearly all Inuit (the word is the plural form of *Inuk*) lived off the land. No edible plants grow in the barren lands, and so hunting was the only way to live. On the land

the main staple was the caribou, and in the sea there were seals, walrus and whales, as well as fish. None of these animals stays in one place the whole year, and so the Inuit lived a semi-nomadic life, following the caribou herds across the land and moving up and down the coast to be close to the marine mammals. People moved about in very small bands, really extended family units, since the game in any one locality was never enough to feed very many people at a time. For most of the year the dwelling place was the *iglu*, or snow house. An experienced man could carve and fit the snow blocks in several hours; the chinking, or filling in the cracks by patting in loose snow, would take a bit longer. During the brief summer, when there was no snow, they lived in tents made of skins. The family's clothing was all made by the women, also out of skins, usually caribou, although seal skin was used for some items. By 1950 nearly all hunters were using firearms, and had been for quite a while, but some of the older people could still remember when spears and harpoons were the only weapons. The moving about from one place to another was mostly done on foot, with the family's small store of possessions loaded on one or two sleds, which were pulled by dog teams.

That way of life is now gone, and the babies being born now are the third generation removed from it. In the 1960's the government of Canada began to take a greater interest in the North, began to pour money into the region, and began to change everything. Prior to that time, the only white people in the region were mostly missionaries (Roman Catholic and Anglican), Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers, and employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, who traded goods made in the South for fur. Now, however, more white people came up. Schools were established and staffed with teachers. Modern health care centers were built, and these nursing stations were also staffed with people trained in southern Canada. A small family band

could, and had to, travel about the land to feed itself, but you can't drag a school or a nursing station along with you, so permanent settlements were established, usually in places where there was already a church, an RCMP detachment, and a Bay trading post.

Hardly anything of the old life remains. Men still hunt, but their hunting trips usually last only a few days, and then the return home. Homes now are built of modern materials, wood and fiberglass insulation, that are shipped up from the South in the summer months when the waterways are ice free. The modern way of life requires electricity and running water, and every community has its power plant and its municipal services. Water in outdoor or underground pipes would freeze, so each house is equipped with two large, ingeniously designed tanks, one for fresh water and

one to hold the sewage from toilets, showers, sinks and washing machines. The service trucks come by during the week, filling the one tank and draining the other. The children all go to school, and the school year is pretty much what it is in the South. The only clothing you see most days is of modern make, brought up from the South and sold in the stores. Skin clothing is still made by some people, but it is not any more for everyday wear; you usually only see it in "fashion shows" which are held on special occasions. A lot of the meat eaten is game from the land, "country food," but most of the food consumed on most days is the frozen meat, pasta, canned and frozen vegetables, and sort of fresh produce that started out elsewhere and ended up on the shelves of the Northern and Co-op stores. In every village you will see some dogs, but nearly everyone gets around now, both in town and on the land, by snowmobiles, and late into the night on weekends you can hear the younger people cruising the streets on them, just as their counterparts in the South do with cars. Indeed, very little of the old life remains.



Thus, those who write within the northern nostalgia genre have a point when they insist that huge changes have taken place in the North and these at a speed seldom seen in human history. They are also right in saying that these changes are the main source of the terrible social problems that afflict the people of the region: drug use, alcoholism, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and school dropout rates, to name a few.

They lose it, however, when they romanticize the old ways as “natural” and vilify the new as “artificial” and therefore inauthentic. For the truth is that if “natural” means that which is simple and happens virtually automatically, then there was nothing “natural” in the old way of life, and the accusation of the artificiality of modern life is a red herring, a distraction that hides the fact that all of human life is artificial.

Hunting in the old days was not done “naturally,” using the teeth and claws we are born with, for humans are pitifully endowed by nature in that way. Spears, harpoons, snares, nets and other devices were employed, that is manufactured tools, and tools that required a high order of sophistication to make. Replacing these with rifles and shotguns is not replacing the natural with the artificial, but the replacing of one artificial technology with another, one that is more effective and therefore more highly prized. An *iglu* neither falls down from heaven with the snow nor grows out of the earth – it is a manmade thing, requiring materials (a certain, specific kind of snow) and human skill. The newer houses use materials imported from a distance, but other than that, it is hard to see how the older housing was any more “natural” than what is done now. You can follow the same line of reasoning with just about all the other obvious focal points of change. Skin clothing was never simply stripped off the animal’s carcass; it had to be made, carefully and meticulously, the finished product looking very little like the raw material of the skin. Dogs must be trained and formed into teams. Everywhere you look into the old ways, you see ingenuity, creativity, industry and artistry.

We are here bumping up against a truth that

was seen by Edmund Burke in the 18th century when he wrote, “Art is man’s nature.” The “art” he refers to is not primarily the fine arts of music, painting or literature, but anything that is made, anything that is not naturally occurring, in ourselves or the world, anything that we make using our intelligence and whatever is to hand. For every other creature, their nature, their repertoire of behavior and their range of possibilities is fixed, most of it specified in the gene code, and invariant over time. What is most important about them is the same for all the members of the species, wherever they are found.

It is not so with us. Our life, our nature is not a given and certainly not fixed. As Burke saw, art, the root word for both *artifice* and *artificial*, is our nature, and this makes possible both freedom and variety, and not only within the realm of material culture. In matters of the heart and of the spirit as well, our lives are not fixed or determined by a stable, invariant nature. Some things about us are indeed the same for all humans, but how we use them and what we do with them is not. Building blocks are provided, and the rest of it is a construction project, much of which is carried forward in and by the community to which we belong, and some of which is specific and unique to each individual. Every child born has the words “Some Assembly Required” stamped into him, not on the skin where it can be seen, but in the heart and soul of him where it will be a working principle all of his life, one that must first be dealt with by his parents and then later on by himself.

Northern nostalgia, it turns out, is only a part of a greater nostalgia deception and problem. We want to believe that we can have a life that is purely and simply natural, one lived in total and complete harmony with the world as it was when it was untouched by human hands, a life in which the things of nature are used as they are and not modified or exploited or reshaped to meet our needs. Much of the radical environmental movement has this as its motive force. It is at base a nostalgia for Paradise, a perversion of the religious sensibility that is found in the first chapters of the book of Genesis. Its allure is understandable, but it is not in the end very

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ (*Immediate family, parents and children*)