

# Priest brings Mass to the mountain

By Katia Blackburn

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SNOQUALMIE PASS, Wash. The Reverend Englebert Axer swishes a last couple of turns, snaps out of his skis, clomps into the chapel, dons his white robe over ski outfit and boots, rings the church bell and greets fellow skiers with a smile as they file in.

Thanks to Axer, Catholic skiers on Snoqualmie Pass slopes have

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had it all exercise, nature and religion for 30 years.

“It’s a good idea,” said the 74-year-old Jesuit priest, his burred German accent a natural complement to the rustic, Alpine chapel at Snoqualmie Summit resort, about 50 miles southeast of Seattle in the Cascade Mountains.

“The Lord’s work coincides with your enjoyment and activities. At the same time, I’m bringing the church to the people instead of waiting for the people to come to me. Prayer and praise of God is so easy in the beautiful nature.”

“Mass on the mountain is normal to me,” said Margie Hull Fitzpatrick of Seattle, who was 9 years old when she first met Father Axer

after a Snoqualmie Mass with her family. “It’s always so beautiful. Skiing is my favorite thing. For me, just going up to the mountains is a religious experience. It’s such a natural continuation of the whole thing.”

Axer has been saying Mass on mountains ever since he first took a group of Seattle University students skiing one weekend in the early 1940s. He was a beginning skier himself, but soon learned enough to lead the university’s ski club, which he did until about nine years ago.

The diminutive priest, a native of a town near Dusseldorf, left Germany in 1937 to study theology at St. Louis University. He then came to Port Townsend for a year of study review, after which he was offered a job teaching German and French at Seattle U.

He later earned a doctorate in philosophy from Georgetown University, and has taught philosophy at Seattle U. ever since.

At the request of Snoqualmie resort owners Webb and Virginia Moffett, Axer, who has never had a traditional congregation, first said Mass one Sunday in 1956 behind a curtain strung up at one end of the large Quonset hut that served as lodge.

As the services became more popular, larger rooms were used, but it became clear that a special spot was in order.

The Chapel of St. Bernard, built chiefly of wood and surrounded by evergreens, was constructed in the late 1960’s with money from Catholic and Protestant churches, fundraiser proceeds and land donated by the Moffetts.

Today, between 50 and 100 skiers attend a noon Mass each Sunday — a “refreshing” way to take a break from skiing, Axer says. A Protestant service also is provided in the chapel.

The chapel was named after the patron saint of skiers — the saint whose name was given to the St. Bernard Monastery, perched high in an Alpine pass between Germany and Switzerland. It’s the monastery whose monks trained the famous dogs to rescue climbers and skiers trapped by avalanches.

“Father Axer has been the leading spirit of (the chapel) endeavor,” said Moffett. “He’s a remarkable person who hasn’t missed a Sunday except when he wasn’t in good health.”

Fitzpatrick recalls that when her mother had to work Sundays, Axer would drive the Hull children to the mountain in the family car.

“Another priest at Ski Acres would go with us and we’d listen and get involved in their discussions,” Fitzpatrick said. “Those rides formed the basis for all of our political and moral and religious thinking. It was just great. We’d seek him out for advice. It was almost as if he took the place of our own father.”

Now, each Sunday Axer is a passenger in the ski-bound Fitzpatrick family car.

“Father and I talk,” Fitzpatrick said. “I bring up subjects like gay rights, abortion, premarital sex. The (four) children sit in the back seat and they listen. It comes back later. Now we’re forming their views. He had the truth all the time, and the truth hasn’t changed.”