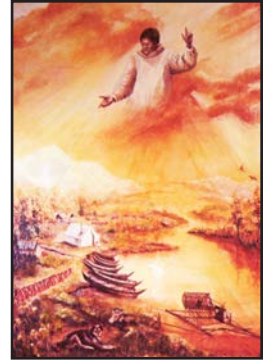




# The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 59 Number 5

Fall 2021

*Some give by going to the Missions*

*Some go by giving to the Missions*

*Without both there are no Missions*

## Bishop Zielinski's Visit to Unalakleet

*Editor's Note: In Part II of Bishop Zielinski's Easter trip to the villages, he visits the village of Unalakleet. After a prolonged absence from our diocese's indigenous Catholics, Bishop Chad Zielinski finally was blessed to visit several parishes along the Yukon River this past spring. For these faith communities, it was their first time celebrating the Mass and sacraments for more than a year.*

**Friday, March 19**

Today was the Solemnity of St. Joseph, and I reflected what a perfect companion this saint was for my own journey to the villages of Alaska, having embarked on his holy journey with Jesus and Mary at the request of an angel. After a nearly two-hour flight from Anchorage, I arrived late afternoon in Unalakleet, a small village of about 700 people located in western Alaska. The name of the village is an adaptation of the Inupiaq word "Una-la-thliq," which means "from the southern side." Unalakleet has long been a major trade center between the interior Athabaskan and Yup'ik Native people and the Inupiat who live mostly on the coast.

It's interesting to show people outside of Alaska aerial views of our villages. Most villages are so isolated there are no roads in or out of the community, so the fastest way to hop between villages is by



*Bishop Chad Zielinski at Holy Angels Catholic Church in Unalakleet, Alaska.*

plane. Alaskan bush pilots have to be exceptionally adept and cool under pressure to fly in the extreme conditions of the arctic. Typically, they take off and land on short, unpaved runways and then must contend with unpredictable weather conditions that either delay flights or suddenly appear once they're airborne.

Unalakleet is no exception, and its airstrip parallels the Bering Sea, which is only about 300 feet away. High winds come from the west

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and frequently present a crosswind challenge for pilots coming in and out of this village. But even with turbulence from bad weather and a rustic, shortened runway, these acrobats know how to tip the wings of the plane just the right way to achieve a mostly smooth landing. There's always an audible sigh of relief from passengers, and I often hear, "Thank God for another safe landing!" As passengers deplane, they will almost always thank the pilot and attendants for the successful flight.

Once we landed in Unalakleet, I was greeted by a parishioner who assisted me with my luggage, then we traveled the short distance to Holy Angels Church. In true Alaskan style, the small church is adorned simply, with just a few religious pictures and objects present in its modest sanctuary. A doorway at the back of the church leads straight to a small efficiency apartment, which provides meeting space for small community gatherings, as well as accommodations for visiting priests.

It was 10 degrees outside with 30 miles per hour winds when I'd arrived, so I was most appreciative that parishioners had turned up the oil-burning stoves ahead of time. I set down my gear, then made a quick trip to the local store a few blocks away to purchase a few staples. No matter how many times I purchase groceries in the bush, I still experience "sticker shock" whenever I check out. I purchased bread, eggs, butter, a small bottle of olive oil, a roll of paper towels, a small block of cheese, and small container of juice. The bill was \$67.

I returned to the church to discover that the apartment's heater was now flashing a warning light and had stopped functioning. Thanks be to God that the church heater was working, but I knew we had just a few hours until the 7 pm Mass, so I called one of the parishioners. She quickly contacted a villager who was knowledgeable about this particular heater, and he quickly came over. After examining the heater, he said it was a miracle it had quit, because it likely would have started a fire if it had kept running. We made arrangements to get the needed parts for the repair from a store in Nome, but flights into Unalakleet wouldn't get the parts to the church until after I departed on Tuesday. Fortunately,



***Holy Angels Church as it stood in 1961 before the new church (below) was built in 1993-94.***



someone loaned me an electric space heater for the apartment area, for which I was quite grateful.

Holy Angels Church is rather small and normally can only accommodate about 30 people. The city council had asked the parish and other facilities to practice COVID-19 mitigation protocols, however, so everyone wore a mask and sat in family groups. In my homily, I referenced Pope Francis's document, "Patris Corde" (With A Father's Heart) to speak about the beautiful role and gift of St. Joseph in our lives.

The Mass was well attended and before starting, I heard "Quyana Cukneq" (Thank you very much—in Yup'ik) and "Thank you, Bishop, for being here!" many times. It had been 17 months since these Native Catholics had last celebrated Mass, and their gratitude was apparent in their rapt attention during the liturgy. Afterwards, many parishioners shared that they had never realized how much they missed attending Mass and receiving Christ in the Eucharist; they also realized in a more profound way how important and edifying it was to



gather as a community of faith. As a priest who is able to celebrate daily Mass wherever I am, their words made me realize how easy it is for me to take the Lord's Body and Blood, the very "source and summit of our faith," for granted.

### **Saturday, March 20**

This morning was rather quiet, which provided time for prayer and putting the final touches on my homily. Near lunchtime, I headed to the home of a local married couple, both teachers, who had invited me over for some homemade salmon chowder. The rich, savory soup hit the spot and warmed my body for the chilly walk back to the church.



*As Sacraments are finally received, there is much cause for joy in Unalakleet!*



The Sunday Vigil Mass was scheduled for 5 pm, so I made myself available all afternoon to meet with individuals and provide an opportunity for Confession. The people's thankfulness for Confession after nearly a year and a half reminded me of my deployments as a military chaplain. Since there is a significant shortage of Catholic chaplains in the military, I often went two to three months before I encountered a brother priest to hear my Confession.

I think the community must have come to some sort of agreement to split up attendance at the Mass between Saturday and Sunday to ensure as many people as possible could attend Mass in the small worship space during my short visit. This kind of thoughtfulness is quite common in Native villages.

After Mass, several people dropped off home-cooked meals. An elder brought a caribou stew made from a fresh harvest from one of the young men in the village. Their scrumptious meals were greatly appreciated.

### **Sunday, March 21**

Mass was scheduled for 10 am, and I was impressed to see so many people arriving via snowmachines, ATVs, and SUVs despite the raging snowstorm and high tundra winds. The community was there to support a family that was having three of their children baptized. The parents and grandparents' faces were wreathed with smiles of indescribable joy when the children finally received the sacrament and became adopted children of God.

There was a small gathering after Mass to celebrate the baptisms, complete with yummy homemade goodies. Again, countless people thanked me and each seemed to pierce my heart and soul. Gratitude is a core value for the Yup'ik and Inupiaq people and is reflected in their relationship not only with each other, but with the natural world. Alaska Natives rely heavily on the land to survive and out of gratitude and respect for God's bounty, are committed to using the whole catch or animal. They will eat the fish and game, then turn their hides and skins into waterproof clothing and other useful objects such as dance drums and skin boats. Nothing is wasted.

### **Monday, March 22**

I wasn't scheduled to leave Unalakleet until the next day, so we arranged Mass for 7 pm, which allowed



*The smiling faces of Holy Angels' parishioners.*

those working to attend an evening service. I spent the afternoon walking around the village since it had warmed up to 20 degrees and the winds had subsided somewhat. Everywhere, people waved and said hello to me, despite us being strangers.

Alaska tends to be like that—full of fiercely independent, resourceful people who are nonetheless so warm and friendly, even toward those they don't know. A friend who had moved to Fairbanks from the lower 48 states once told me that she'd gone over an embankment one winter after hitting a block of ice on the interstate. In the hour while she was waiting for a tow truck, 17 citizens stopped to check on her and offer aid. When she said she was fine and help was on the way, they each moved on without question.

More than one visitor to our state has noticed this interesting dichotomy about Alaskans. Author Marcus Sakey perhaps said it best: "Nobody is accidentally in Alaska. The people who are in Alaska are there because they choose to be, so they've sort of got a real frontier ethic. The people are incredibly friendly, interesting, smart people—but they also stay out of each other's business."

### **Tuesday, March 23**

Instead of taking a commercial flight back home, I had prearranged with a good friend in Fairbanks who is a pilot to get picked up in Unalakleet in his private airplane. Two parishioners, Luci and Rose,

joined me to greet him at the Unalakleet airport around noon. There were no extreme cross winds this time, so my friend had a perfect landing. He taxied in, then refueled the plane for our trip to St. Marys. The ladies profusely thanked my pilot friend for making the trek and shared how blessed they felt to be able to participate in the Mass again after so long without the sacraments. After unloading some items for the parish (including a tabernacle!), my pilot friend and I took off for the village of St. Marys. Within a short time, a snowstorm had surrounded the plane. Visibility began dropping rapidly and had gone from 7 miles to just over a mile within 10 minutes. My friend's plane is equipped with the most up-to-date navigational instruments, and I was impressed with his focus on maneuvering through the snowy weather.

There are two sets of rules for flying aircraft: Visual Flight Rules (VFR) and Instrument Flight Rules (IFR). Weather usually dictates which rules a pilot chooses. Flying VFR requires high visibility and you must be able to keep safe distances from other aircraft; in some airspaces, you also must be able to see the ground. Unlike VFR, IFR flights usually require filing a flight plan ahead of time and the flight path isn't entirely at the pilot's discretion. Relying on instruments instead of the pilot's own vision allows flights to take place in lower visibility conditions, which is common in Alaska's arctic climate. Surrounded by near white-out conditions, my pilot friend flew IFR and relied on his instrumentation to get us safely to our destination.

When we finally set down at the St. Marys airstrip, we were greeted by Sr. Kathy Radich, OSF, who



*Bishop Chad Zielinski*



coordinates ministry for the diocese in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. She laughingly said, “This airport could be seen three miles away 10 minutes ago...did you guys bring this snowstorm with you?!” After just a few minutes, my friend launched back into the air and made his way back to Fairbanks.

The flying world in Alaska is like one big family—Luci’s son, Yuri, is a pilot for the school district and my pilot friend’s son, Nick, is also a pilot in Nome. I called Nick to let him know his dad had departed and was now 9,000 feet above us and heading back to Fairbanks; I also texted my friend’s wife. Nick, Yuri, and Luci were all tracking the flight through the Internet. There is this prayerful concern that captivates the heart of a spouse or mother of a pilot, knowing that their loved one is doing a necessary but dangerous job in service to others.

It had taken me less than an hour to get to St. Marys, and the private flight had saved me many days of travel time. Since the pandemic, direct flights into many villages have been rerouted through the major hubs of Bethel, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. Had I tried to get to St. Marys through a commercial carrier, I would have had to depart Unalakleet on Monday, spend the night in Anchorage, fly to Bethel and stay overnight until I could take a flight to St. Marys on Wednesday. Not only that, but the quick onset of a blizzard would have almost certainly delayed me for several additional days in Bethel and ruined my plans to visit additional villages.

But with a private plane, we had been able to scoot into St. Marys just ahead of the storm, and I was able to bring the Mass and sacraments to the faithful in several surrounding villages for the first time in more than a year. Praise be to God for this pilot’s generous gift of time, talent, and airplane!



*Sunset over Unalakleet*



*(Left) In Nenana, when the rivers melt and cause the tripod to tip—"Breakup" has officially begun. (Below) Alaskan children excitedly wait for the rivers and lakes to "break up" each spring, so anxious to enjoy the outdoors again after months of winter that they often will swim in the still-iced over waters on warm, sunny days.*



## A Nenana Tradition that Marks the Official Start of "Breakup"

After months of arctic temperatures, Alaskans understandably look forward to their brilliant summer. But before our winter wonderland gives way to the marvelous Midnight Sun, we must first endure that rough transition between seasons called "breakup."

Breakup—not spring!—is what Alaskans call the period each year when the thick layers of snow and river ice finally begin to melt. A lot rides on the pace of the thaw—if the snow melts too slowly, the long periods of standing water will breed millions of extra mosquitoes and make summer a misery. Those years, the mosquitoes are so thick the swarms can make kids look like "Pigpen" from Peanuts® as they walk down the street. If the snow melts too quickly, however, the water creates miniature lakes, with some people's yards submerged so deeply that waterfowl can be found paddling through it for a few days.

The stakes are even higher for communities along the major rivers, as a spate of sudden high temperatures can break the ice into massive chunks that cause catastrophic floods. In May 2013, a fast breakup on the Yukon River caused an ice jam at a bend in the river called Bishop's Rock, named for Bishop Charles Seghers, a missionary who was murdered en route to establish a mission in the village of Nulato. The ice jam caused water to back up and flood Galena, damaging at least 90% of homes and businesses—including St. John Berchman Catholic Church—as house-sized chunks of ice mowed down birch trees and ripped buildings off their pilings. The event forced nearly all 475 residents to evacuate by air to Fairbanks and Anchorage, as waters quickly rose and local roads became impassable.

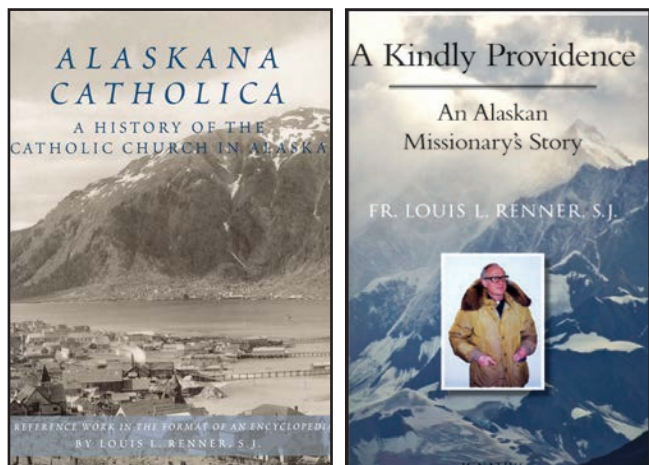
Fortunately, breakup is usually a gentler process that takes place over several months and brings great joy to Alaskans, who know that it means summer is on its way. But for one small town about 50 miles outside of Fairbanks, breakup is measured more precisely. Down to the minute, in fact, as part of a century-old competition called the Nenana Ice Classic.

The contest began in 1917 when railroad engineers in Nenana put up \$800 as a prize for the person who most closely guessed the exact date, hour, and minute that the Tanana River would break up. Today, the tradition continues, with the contest run by a nonprofit that hosts an annual lottery that comes with a prize of several hundred thousand dollars. Every fall, Nenana residents build and plant a painted wooden tripod in the Tanana river ice between the highway and railroad bridges, about 300 feet from shore. The tripod is connected by a string to a clock on shore. Come spring, when the river ice breaks up and moves the tripod, it pulls on the string and stops the clock, signalling the unofficial start of breakup for locals. In 2021, the clock stopped on April 30, at 12:50 pm and a handful of winners split the \$233,591 jackpot.



# INSPIRATIONAL AND HISTORICAL BOOKS

**ALASKANA CATHOLICA:**  
*A History of the Catholic Church in Alaska*  
By Fr. Louis L. Renner, SJ  
(Hardcover 702 pages) \$70.00 includes shipping.



**A KINDLY PROVIDENCE:**  
*An Alaskan Missionary's Story*  
By Fr. Louis L. Renner, SJ  
(Paperback 507 pages) \$30.00, includes shipping.

In *Alaskana Catholica*, Fr. Renner offers a thorough picture of the Catholic Church's ministerial activity in Alaska from its beginning in the nineteenth century to the present. In his autobiography, *A Kindly Providence*, he tells the story of a dedicated missionary priest. A scholar, a teacher, and always a Jesuit priest, he taught German and Latin at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, edited the Catholic newsletter *The Alaskan Shepherd*, and served as pastor of two different Indian villages on the Yukon River during his 40 years in Alaska. He was a recipient of the "Governor's Award for Friend of the Humanities," in 2002. The two books, both richly illustrated, are available from *The Alaskan Shepherd*. The books are perfect gifts, whether to give or to receive! We have limited quantities of these books on hand.

*Proceeds benefit the Catholic Missions of Northern Alaska.*

Dear Bishop Zielinski,

S2021 05

I want to help you and the missionaries ministering in Northern Alaska to bring the Mass, the Sacraments, religious education, and training to the people of Christ. Please accept this donation to your **General Fund** and use it where most needed.

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I am enclosing \$70.00 for each book, which includes shipping.

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**Both books written by Father Louis L. Renner, S.J.**

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**Please remember these special intentions:**

## St. Catherine of Siena, Chefnak

**Total Projected Cost: \$3.9 Million**

**Funds Raised: \$2 Million+**

**Status: Construction Materials Have Arrived**



***An update from our Diocesan Engineer:  
(At time of writing) ...materials are due to arrive in  
Chefnak slightly before I arrive there at the end  
of July. Along with a site inspection I am looking  
forward to meeting with parishioners, parish priest,  
Fr. Stan Roz, and Parish Administrator, Agnes  
Kairaiuak, to provide them with the latest updates.***

***As of this moment, forecasted completion is  
scheduled for April 2022 and Bishop Chad is hopeful  
for a dedication of the new church, St. Catherine of  
Siena, later that year in August. This is all very good  
news! I want to especially thank our benefactors for***



***their continued support of  
funding the new church  
and ask too that you  
keep the parish and those  
involved in your prayers  
as we work to keep on  
schedule.***

***Gratefully, Jacob Baugh***

Chefnak—even in the absence of a building and amid a health crisis—continues to be an active and entirely Catholic community. The new church building is designed to seat 134 in the main worship area with space for an additional 24 in the lobby/social area. Design improvements include increased lighting, a beautiful worship space, room for social functions and religious education classes, storage and office, enhanced heating options to conserve fuel, as well as a ramp and stairs to provide access to all. There will also be room left for growth and added facilities in the future.

**The Diocese of Fairbanks welcomes any  
donations toward the rebuilding of  
St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church.**

**To donate, please call  
the Diocesan Donation Office  
at 907-374-9532.**



**Thank you for your gifts to and prayers  
for the building of St. Catherine's of  
Siena and for the people of Chefnak!**



## Finding ‘Family’ in the Far North: St. Theresa’s Catholic Church in Nenana

*The Catholic community in Nenana has always been small. Fr. Francis M. Monroe, SJ, built a church at Nenana around 1918. The Nenana mission was listed for the first time in The Official Catholic Directory in 1923 as St. Theresa, the name by which it is still known. It is not clear, however, which Theresa was meant. Nenana Catholics have long considered their patroness to be St. Therese of Lisieux, “the Little Flower,” whose name is spelled differently, and who was not canonized until 1925. Some say the original patroness may have been St. Theresa of Avila.*



*St. Theresa’s Catholic Church in Nenana is one of the diocese’s rare churches “on the road system,” accessible via car about an hour outside of Fairbanks. Remarkably, despite only seeing a priest to celebrate the Mass once a month, the small community of Catholics has forged tight bonds among its members, as well as with other local Christians.*

Penny Forness was just 22 when she wrote to the principal of a school in the small town of Nenana, Alaska to inquire about a teaching job. After a phone interview, she was hired, then excitedly made the long trek north to begin her first professional job as an educator. Having grown up in the suburbs of Chicago, Penny knew the school would be a little smaller than what she was used to, but she still looked forward to honing her skills as an educator amidst the school’s staff of 35.

Then she got to Nenana and learned the truth: There weren’t 35 staff members, but 35 *students*. From kindergarten through 12th grade.

This was 1963, in the midst of the Cold War, just two years after completion of Clear Air Force Station about 25 miles away. While the new radar station was cutting edge—it could detect and give an early warning of ballistic missiles launched at the United States by Russia—Nenana was significantly more primitive back then.

“The streets were mud and there weren’t any sidewalks,” Penny recalls. On the other side of the Tanana

River, there was a dirt road that led to Fairbanks, but the bridge that would eventually span the river and connect the Golden Heart City with Anchorage hadn’t yet been built. A ferry was available to transport cars across the river in summer, and in winter, the ice was thick enough to drive across. But twice a year, in spring and fall, the river wasn’t yet thawed or solid enough for travel. “You couldn’t get in or out of Nenana for at least a month,” says Penny.

Still, the town had a rustic charm and Penny loved her students, many of whom were Alaska Native children. Providentially, she met her husband, Jack, on Good Friday, March 27, 1964 after an earthquake struck Alaska halfway between Anchorage and Valdez. The megathrust earthquake had a magnitude of 9.2, making it the second most powerful earthquake ever recorded. Penny and Jack joined dozens of other residents who were glued to the radio all night, listening to news of the burning port city of Seward and distress calls coming in from Valdez.

“Some people from Seward were staying in Nenana, and they were desperate to find out whether their friends and family were okay,” Penny remembers. Such experiences often make people reflective and turn their hearts to God, and Penny and Jack were no exception. By June, the couple had married and decided to settle in Nenana to raise their family. “It’s just an unpretentious place and you can live the way you want,” she explains.

The Fornesses, who celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary just two months before Jack passed away in 2014, were active members of Nenana’s only Catholic church, St. Theresa’s, where they raised their two sons in the faith. Just as it does for many Alaskans who are separated from extended family, the small Catholic church became a spiritual and social anchor for the family in their adopted home in the far north.



*Fr. Bala Gangarapu, a former missionary priest from India, prays over the Easter Vigil fire at St. Theresa’s Catholic Church in Nenana.*

“A lot of us come from places outside of Alaska, so your neighbors and church friends just become your family,” says Penny, who spent 20 years as the parish’s administrator before stepping down due to health problems.

While most of the Diocese of Fairbanks’ churches are in villages so remote you need a boat or plane to get to them, St. Theresa’s is one of just a handful of parishes located on the “road system” in or around Fairbanks. In fact, Nenana is somewhat unique in that the small community of just 400 people is accessible via road, air, railroad, and river, no longer as remote as when Penny first arrived. The community sits on the north side of the Alaska Range and on clear days, residents can see Denali, the largest mountain in North America that was formerly called Mt. McKinley. “The Tall One” appears as a giant boulder in the horizon, dwarfing the other vistas and peaks that reveal God’s majesty in creation.

St. Theresa’s is located just a short walk from the Tanana River. In true Alaskan fashion, the church is humble, its tan siding and well-kept yard making it seem more like a residence than a parish. Its modest sign is topped by a bell (donated by the fire department) that is rung every Sunday before Mass.

The parish has a rich and interesting history, starting with its name. For decades, parishioners have debated which female saint is the church’s original patron. Some elders point to an early sign posted by the Jesuits that referenced St. Teresa of Avila, while those on “team Little Flower” believe the French nun was given the honor preemptively, as a special grace from God. Alaska’s first bishop, Bp. Joseph Crimont, SJ, had a strong devotion to St. Therese of Lisieux and even knew some members of her family. Humbled by his appointment to head such a vast missionary territory, Bp. Crimont immediately declared “St. Therese” the patron saint of Alaska. He also chose to place on his coat of arms the words, “la rose effeuillée,” (the rose unpetalled). This was four years before she was even beatified and six before her canonization.

Bishop Crimont’s decision raised some eyebrows among his fellow Jesuits. Writing in 1919 to another missionary priest serving in Alaska, Fr. Jules Jetté, SJ, said of Sister Therese, “Though I admire her virtues and holiness, I cannot help thinking that our good bishop has made a rather hasty move in selecting a ‘patron saint’ that is not yet beatified.” Father Jetté’s concerns dissolved in 1925 when Bp. Crimont traveled to Rome to witness Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin raised to the altars and heard her decreed by the Sacred Congregation for Missions as the “Queen and Patroness of Alaska.” The Little Flower has been the official patron saint of Alaska ever since, and the rose has appeared on the coats of arms of all subsequent bishops.

For Catholics in Nenana, however, debates about the church’s eponymous saint has given way over the years to more pressing issues, such as whether they will even have a priest available to celebrate the Mass and sacraments for them. During its earlier days, before the diocese’s current priest shortage, St. Theresa’s had its own priests in residence, with the bishop even maintaining a residence in Nenana for a short time in the early 1950s. Back then, getting to villages was even more difficult than it is now, and with Nenana being a hub for barge operations on the Yukon River, Bishop Gleeson would have been able to more easily travel to visit mission churches from there. Things changed in December 1952 when a raging fire burned down both the church and the bishop’s residence, which had just been remodeled the year before. The bishop rebuilt the church, then moved the chancery to Fairbanks, where it has remained.

Since then, St. Theresa’s has periodically had a dedicated priest, but now mostly sees visiting priests from Fairbanks. Currently, the parish is served by Fr. Thomas Kuffel, a missionary priest “on loan” from the Diocese of Lincoln. Like most of the diocese’s priests, Fr. Tom serves several parishes, including Immaculate Conception Church in Fairbanks and Holy Mary of Guadalupe Church in Healy, about an hour south of Nenana. The priest travels to Nenana once a month to celebrate the Mass; on other weekends, a deacon from Fairbanks visits St. Theresa’s to lead Communion services.

According to Fr. Tom and Penny, St. Theresa’s great strength has been its ability to foster close relationships among parishioners while also welcoming and serving those in the wider community. The church’s 40 or so parishioners are dedicated to each other and most stay for hours after services on Sunday to talk, study the Bible together, or catechize the children. As a result, the small congregation has strong bonds between its members, particularly between elder parishioners and children, says Penny.

And in the true spirit of family, parishioners do not hesitate to share each other’s burdens. A few years ago, a parish family adopted a baby that had numerous health problems due to his biological mother’s drug addiction when pregnant. The adoptive family had to travel to Fairbanks an hour away for medical appointments and surgeries for the child, which was a hardship because the couple already had 10 biological children. Not surprisingly, other parishioners from St. Theresa’s pitched in.

“Parishioners gave the family gas money for their trips to Fairbanks for appointments three or four times a month,” recalls Penny, adding that older teenagers at the parish also volunteered to babysit the couple’s children when surgeries for the infant required the mother and father





***In her “Kentucky Derby” hat, Penny Forness has spent more than 50 years as a parishioner at St. Theresa’s, with 20 of those as parish administrator.***

to stay overnight in Fairbanks. When the baby was baptized, the event was attended by the entire parish.

“It feels like little Kateri belongs to the whole church, because we all prayed and helped the family through so much to get her healthy,” says Penny.

While having so few members makes it difficult to carry on formal parish-based ministries, St. Theresa parishioners have a strong social justice ethic that they live out by serving each other and the wider community. “Ministries” include visiting the homebound and sick in Nenana and driving those without transportation to appointments in nearby Fairbanks—regardless of religious affiliation.

Like Penny, former parishioner Gerrie Jauhola migrated to Nenana from the lower 48 states. Gerrie and her husband, Carl moved to Alaska in 1971, settling in Nenana. Carl wanted to reconnect with his uncle, who had moved north twenty years before. He also wanted their children to grow up enjoying the great outdoors, as he had in Minnesota as a hunter, fisher, and logger. The supportive environment the family enjoyed as residents of Nenana and members of St. Theresa’s reflected the broader frontier spirit that characterizes Alaska as a whole, says Gerrie, who moved with her husband to Arizona a few years ago.

“At St. Theresa’s, people aren’t so much concerned about the formality of the church as they are the spirituality of loving God and each other as they should,” she insists. Parishioners will mow lawns or chop wood for town elders and regularly delivered food, clothing, and other items to those who were vulnerable during the pandemic. Once, a parishioner visited another resident and noticed that the family didn’t have steps to get up to their elevated front door. So he built and installed new ones, for free.

Such benevolence is common among the Catholics in Nenana, Gerrie insists. “It’s hard for people to understand, but when it’s 60 below zero for weeks on end, you have to rely on each other to survive.” When she and Carl first moved to Alaska, they discovered her husband wouldn’t get paid for his logging job until spring. Over the winter, parishioners and other residents periodically brought by a whole king salmon or moose hindquarter to see the family through. The local general store, Coghill’s, also was generous to them during that lean time.

St. Theresa’s informal ministry of service also has forged strong ecumenical ties among Nenana’s Christians, says Penny. Every year, parishioners and their visiting priest join Protestant Christians from the town’s four other churches at the river to honor and pray together for victims of water-related accidents. Parishioners also assist with another church’s live nativity scene during Advent.

Gerrie still remembers how the local churches would share one organ for their Christmas services. “On Christmas Eve, St. Theresa people would go get the organ from the Assembly of God church, then we’d have Episcopalians Winifred Coghill play the songs for Christmas Eve Mass,” she recalls. “Then we’d have to hurry up and take it back to the Assembly of God church for their services.” The organ would pinball between the churches so everyone could have music for Christmas.

“That’s just the way it is in Alaska,” insists Gerrie. “It’s rare to see that kind of *agape*, that selfless love, but it really is there among the people, especially the people in Nenana.”



***Though St. Patrick may have used the shamrock to explain the Trinity, for Catholics at St. Theresa’s parish in Nenana, this stained-glass intertwined salmon is more apt.***

# Missionary Spotlight

## Fr. Gregg Wood: From the Pacific Northwest to Northwest Alaska

*In the mid-1990s, Fr. Gregg Wood made his way north to spend a few months ministering to Yup'ik and Cup'ik Catholics in southwestern Alaska. He quickly found that the indigenous people's deeply intentional, more natural lifestyle dovetailed perfectly with his own spirituality as a Jesuit priest who had grown up in the Pacific Northwest. Father Gregg has now spent 25 years serving Alaska Native Catholics in the villages of Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay, and Chevak.*

### What had the strongest influence on your faith growing up?

It wasn't any one thing, but a series of influences over time. I grew up around Portland, Oregon in a Catholic family, and my mom especially kept us connected to the faith by getting everyone to Mass and leading the rosary. In fact, my French Canadian grandmother was legendary in our family for having walked five miles to Mass in Minnesota in the deep snow, while pregnant no less! God really just put the right people in my life at the right time, and those spiritual guides each brought me along a little more. As I've heard from the Yup'ik and Cup'ik people many times, "There are no coincidences," and those people were an intentional gift from God that grew my faith.

### How did you know you were called to be a priest?

Well, originally, my younger brother was supposed to be the priest, and I was going to become a doctor, like my father. But then I went to college at Gonzaga University and got drawn into two universes—the tiny world I saw through the microscope as part of my pre-med studies and the larger universe I saw during nighttime walks staring up at a sky full of stars. Those experiences started growing my relationship with the Creator and that coalesced into a deep gratitude and desire to give back. I'd say, though, that my call wasn't so much to the priesthood per se, but to the Jesuit order. At my Catholic high school, I'd been taught by Jesuits and there was a unique spirituality and camaraderie to how they lived and worked together. Once I felt the call to religious life, I knew that was where I should be.

### How did you end up in Alaska?

Around the mid-1990s, I was given opportunities to explore ministering to indigenous people through several two-month visits to Montana, Washington, and Alaska. In spring of 1996, I went to Alaska and spent a few months in the village of Hooper Bay. The last Sunday I was there, I told the people that I didn't know when I would be back, but that "I just know I will be back." My voice cracked on the second half, and I was suddenly in tears. Then I went back for a year so that another Jesuit serving in Alaska could go on his tertianship to the Philippines, and that assignment just kept getting extended. The Alaska Jesuits also would have retreats in Anchorage and seeing the occasional cow and moose on the grounds or hearing about trail encounters with lynx or other wild animals reminded me of the unique beauty of rural Alaska. Eventually, my Provincial told me I could stay as long as my health lasted, so I'm still here, still ministering in the villages where I began ministering all those years ago.

### What advice would you have for a young man who says he is discerning a call to religious life?

I probably wouldn't give him advice, but invite him to tell me about it with questions: "Tell me more about this...how did the idea start? How do you feel about it?" When you're willing to listen to someone talk about what's important to them, that experience usually is beneficial for both of you. At least that has been my experience with guides along my own journey.

