



The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 59 Number 4

Summer 2021

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

FINALLY! Bishop Zielinski's Visit to St. Marys, Pilot Station, and Mountain Village



Bishop Chad Zielinski in St. Marys, Alaska, in front of the Church of the Nativity—his first pastoral stop during his Easter visit to three villages.

While communities in the lower 48 states have gradually relaxed restrictions as COVID-19 cases have waned, Alaska Native villages have been forced into prolonged lockdowns due to their remoteness and lack of medical resources. Villages have just a few hundred residents served by one small, basic clinic and medical emergencies require a flight to Anchorage or Fairbanks. Even then, harsh weather often grounds planes and minor situations can escalate quickly. 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.

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(1 priest for every 21,500 square miles.)

- 1 bishop**
- 2 brothers**
- 1 sister**
- 8 urban deacons**
- 11 rural deacons**
- 3 seminarians**
- Many lay volunteers**

Editor's Note: Throughout this account you will notice that the village of St. Marys is written without an apostrophe, which is the correct and accepted spelling; historically, it has always been recorded as such. The absence of the punctuation mark, used to indicate contractions or possessives, could be linked to a tradition established by the United States Geological Survey, which, since its inception in 1890, has discouraged or disallowed the use of the possessive form in place names. According to the USGS: the "Board does not want to show possession for natural features because, 'ownership of a feature is not in and of itself a reason to name a feature or change its name.'" Apostrophes have been officially approved for use in this country only in five place names: Martha's Vineyard, Mass. (1933); Ike's Point, New Jersey (1944); John E's Pond (with no period after the initial), R.I. (1963); Carlos Elmer's Joshua View, Arizona (1995); and Clark's Mountain, Ore. (2002), which was "approved at the request of the Oregon Board to correspond with the personal references of Lewis and Clark."

Tuesday, March 23
Flight from Fairbanks to St. Marys

I just arrived in the village of St. Marys to provide the Mass and sacraments to parishioners at the Church of the Nativity, who have not seen a priest for more than a year. The parish's regularly assigned priest, Fr. Aiden Yakubu, left to visit his family in Nigeria in late 2019 and has been repeatedly detained from returning to Alaska because of immigration issues and then pandemic travel restrictions. Franciscan sister, Kathy Radich, is stationed in St. Marys, where she coordinates ministry for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. Fortunately, even with restrictions, she has been able to lead small parish groups for sacramental preparation and First Communion this year.

As I was walking around the village today, I was thinking about what a difference a year makes. Last March, right as the pandemic hit the United States, villages went into lockdown,

with state-mandated COVID-19 mitigation protocols. No one was allowed in or out of these communities except for emergency services. Our priests and ministry staff were grounded in their home villages and churches were closed, as tribal councils enacted bans on public gatherings. Even if I had wanted to keep our churches open, I wouldn't have been able to because each village's response was dictated by the state and tribal council. They still are, which is why I had to get express permission from the councils to make these visits to the villages.

Right now, our diocese is suffering a severe priest shortage, especially in rural Alaska. The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region is home to 24 of our churches and has just five priests to bring the Mass and sacraments to the people. Most serve three to four churches and normally would be traveling constantly between parishes. But with everything shut down for most of 2020, many villages did not see a priest at all last year. While we are doing our best to get clergy to our rural

parishes, it's still a challenge because of village quarantines and the skyrocketing costs of air travel. It's truly devastating to me to think that our faithful Catholics have been without the Eucharist, Confession, Anointing of the Sick, and full funeral rites for so long.

But at least I'm here now and I must take consolation in that. This evening, we celebrated a Memorial Mass for a deceased villager, which I know was a great comfort to their loved ones. Afterwards, we had a potluck supper and parishioners brought fish chowder, caribou stew, and other Native dishes that I got to enjoy. It was a truly joyful occasion to be together with our indigenous Catholics again!

Wednesday, March 24: St. Marys

I spent this morning visiting the homebound and they were so grateful to receive Holy Communion, Anointing, and Confession. All of us have been impacted by COVID-19 in a variety of different ways and I fully understand the caution and concern, especially for the most vulnerable. But as I saw the loneliness of the homebound, I can't help but worry about the long-term psychological and spiritual impact the pandemic will have on many individuals.

This suffering is especially acute in our Alaska Native communities, whose communal culture is so deeply rooted in their intimate social connections. The primacy of

relationships—of both immediate and extended family—are virtually stamped into their DNA as a people and everything they do centers around that. It has struck me to the core of my being to see the pain of those who have lost a loved one during this pandemic, who were prevented from visiting them in the hospital or at the nursing home to say goodbye. Nor could they hold a funeral liturgy where they could begin processing the loss and receive the emotional support they needed from Christ and others. The sacraments give supernatural grace, but God designed us as social creatures, and we have an innate need for connection and for those end-of-life celebrations that facilitate healing and hope. If we ever experience another pandemic, I pray that our society will do a better job of addressing the devastating effects of isolation, which has led to skyrocketing rates of substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide. We cannot allow the cure to be worse than the disease.

In the afternoon, I celebrated a small, private baptism for a child with medical issues, whose parents are scheduled to fly to Anchorage for medical treatment. Then that evening, the parish celebrated a Memorial Mass for a villager who passed away during lockdown. The family was clearly touched to hear the name of their loved one remembered in the prayer intentions.

Thursday, March 25: St. Marys

This morning, I found out that flights were delayed because of the snowstorm that has continued to pelt the village. That meant



In St. Marys, Bishop Chad celebrates one of 39 total baptisms during his trip. On the left are: Clarence Johnson and Lillian Johnson—parents of Katelyn (the mother) who is holding baby, Braxton, and her daughter Kyra is standing in front. To the right: Leo Aguchak (the father) holding Mila, and Leo's mother Tammy Aguchak.



During the evening of baptisms at the Church of the Nativity, Bishop Chad takes a picture with more of Lillian Johnson's growing family. Lillian attended St. Marys boarding school and now serves as the director of the Bilingual Education Yup'ik program for St. Marys School District. Her daughter, Celina Johnson, is holding her grandson, Reuben, who is wrapped in a blanket and Baptism dress made by the Ursuline Sisters at St. Marys for Lillian's own baptism and has now been passed on to the 3rd generation. To the right of Bishop Chad are Joseph Beans and Aaron Tyson. To the left of Lillian are her daughter, Katelyn Johnson, and granddaughter, Kyra.

the family whose child was baptized yesterday could not get to Anchorage for treatment. It was a grim reminder of why our Alaska Native villages have been so cautious about COVID-19—these communities rarely have more than a basic clinic and more complex medical care requires a plane ride to Anchorage or Fairbanks. Some rural air carriers have gone bankrupt in the past year too, or limited their number of available flights, and that combined with the unpredictable weather means getting surgery or treatment for an ongoing condition can be a logistical nightmare. Many of us in urban areas get impatient if traffic is even slightly heavier and delays us for an extra five minutes. But travel delays are just a way of life for rural Alaskans.

I visited more of the homebound today and was then present for nearly three hours in the church for Confessions. Parishioners then gathered at 7pm to celebrate the Solemnity of the Annunciation. It was a beautiful celebration of the feast day and even with social distancing, we still had nine children baptized! Words cannot describe the “holy glow” on the faces of their parents and elders as the children were immersed in the waters of Baptism and became adopted children of God.

Friday, March 26: St. Marys

Today, I visited more homebound parishioners, performed several house blessings, and then heard Confessions at the parish. We also celebrated an evening Mass with another five baptisms. One of the children baptized was an infant who was there with his mother and his grandmother, Lillian. Many decades ago, the village of St. Marys was the site of a Catholic boarding school run by religious sisters. Lillian attended the mission school and graduated from there. She is now the director of the Yup'ik program for the high school. The family shared that the white blanket in which the baby

was wrapped and the dress was actually made by the mission school's nuns, who had made it for Lillian's own baptism. In many parts of the world, the Catholic faith is centuries if not millennia old. In Alaska, however, Jesuit missionaries brought the Gospel to the territory as recently as the late 1800s. So, to have this blanket made by our missionary nuns 60+ years ago now wrapped around a third generation Yup'ik Catholic child... that was a special moment for all of us.

Saturday, March 27

Snowmachine from St. Marys to Pilot Station

This morning, we celebrated a Healing Mass that included Anointing of the Sick. The village has many who are chronically or seriously ill and with no priest, they have not been able to receive Anointing for more than a year, so many people were in attendance. They were all deeply grateful to receive the sacrament, and I was humbled to be able to give them strength for the journey.

It had “warmed up” to 5 degrees by late morning, so I hopped on the parish snowmachine and headed to the nearby village of Pilot Station. Martin, a young man in his early 20s, escorted me during the one-hour trip, and he knew the trails like the back of his hand. The day was clear and sunny, but it was still a bumpy ride since the tundra winds had whipped the snow into drifts that look like “snow waves.” I am amazed that people pay thousands of dollars for a massaging recliner when a ride on a snowmachine over the Alaskan tundra does the same thing!

We arrived at St. Charles Spinola Catholic Church, in Pilot Station, at 1pm. The Mass was scheduled for the next day, so there was no evening liturgy. Some parishioners still arrived to greet me and extended their deep thanks that I'd made the trip. I spent several hours that afternoon hearing Confessions.



not bosom buddies, hence the barking. It is not uncommon to find moose wandering through villages in winter. This year, the area has had a lot of deep snow, so the wolves will try to separate and attack moose as they struggle through it. This pushes the moose into villages where they feel safer.

Monday, March 29: Pilot Station

Even though I'm in a remote village, life and work at the chancery in Fairbanks continues. I spent the morning chatting with chancery staff, answering emails, and addressing future scheduling issues.

Then in the afternoon, I met with parents for a baptismal preparation class, since there will be seven children baptized at the Easter Vigil Mass on April 3. Our village churches have truly suffered from lack of clergy in the past year. Not only have most not had a priest, but even those few with deacons and catechists were not able to perform ministry. Alaska Natives highly value elder wisdom, which is why they usually insist their leaders be older folks. Yes, that brings a richness of life experience to ministry, but it also means that most of our lay ministers were vulnerable to the virus and were under an even stricter quarantine than the rest of the village. Even when churches opened back up, older Catholics were understandably reluctant to return to ministry. For most of our rural churches, formal catechesis has all but stopped and the parish has not been able to offer religious ed classes, sacramental prep, or adult faith formation. Hence the impromptu baptism class, to give people at least a basic understanding of the sacrament before they receive it.

I also visited homebound parishioners named Peter and Mary, who find it difficult to navigate the snow on foot. They were most appreciative of my visit, and I heard powerful stories of faith from them both. Peter related that he had seen a clear, vivid image of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the sky over Pilot Station some years back.

Later on, we had a Memorial Mass for several individuals who died during the COVID-19 lockdown when no deacon or priest was available. While I know many in the lower 48 states have not been able to have funerals for loved ones because of the pandemic, I wondered how often that happens because there isn't a priest available, like it does here. It makes me sad to think about all the Catholics who were buried during the COVID-19 restrictions without the benefit of a full Mass.

Tuesday, March 30 Snowmachine Pilot Station to St. Marys

I returned to St. Marys via snowmachine this morning, escorted by a villager named Fred who wanted to visit family in that

The apartment I stayed at was well-heated. Villagers had told me in advance I would have to boil any water I consumed at Pilot Station, so I had hauled a few gallons of water with me from St. Marys.

At my home base in Fairbanks, I enjoy cooking and often make extra servings that I vacuum seal into single meal portions that I then freeze. When I travel to the bush, I will just grab several of these frozen meals to take with me. Once in a village, I just need to pop them into a pot of boiling water for a little while and voilà! I have a tasty, home-cooked meal of moose stew or moose Bolognese (or smoked pork ribs and salmon strips given to me by parishioners). This is gourmet food compared to the MREs I had on deployment as a military chaplain.

Palm Sunday, March 28: Pilot Station

It had been 14 months since parishioners had celebrated Mass, so we had many gathered for the Palm Sunday Mass. I heard loads of comments that it was so good to be "back to church." They echoed the sentiments of many Alaska Natives, whose villages had just lifted their COVID-19 restrictions a week or two earlier.

I made an afternoon visit to the village's Russian Orthodox priest, Fr. Stan Heckman, and his wife, Anna. As bishop, I have been fortunate to have a very good working relationship with the Russian Orthodox in our state. Sadly, their Archbishop David Mahaffey died of cancer this past November, and the Orthodox community is awaiting the appointment of a new bishop.

There are actually more Orthodox churches in Alaska than Catholic, a legacy of the three centuries during which Russia colonized and then claimed the territory. Father Stan and Anna have always been gracious and hospitable to me during my visits. I mentioned that barking dogs had been keeping me awake during the night. The Heckmans can see the Catholic church from their house, and Anna said she had seen a young bull moose wandering around the parish. Moose and dogs are



Bishop Chad and Martin Minock set off for Pilot Station from St. Marys—which is a distance of about 20 miles.

village. It was another bumpy ride and quite chilly at just 1 degree above zero, with the windchill making it feel much colder. Fortunately, I wore my beaver fur *mukluks* (boots) and beaver mittens, as well as a marten fur hat given to me by an Athabaskan family. All these Native furs kept me incredibly warm in the subzero temperatures.

Sister Kathy invited me to dinner. I had brought some fresh vegetables and fruit with me when I flew to St. Marys to share with the staff there, and she made a vegetable soup that truly hit the spot after the cold snowmachine ride. Then it was early to bed.

Wednesday, March 31 **Snowmachine from St. Marys to Mountain Village**

This morning, another gracious young man named Morgan escorted me via snowmachine over to Mountain Village. Mountain Village is one of our larger villages, with almost 800 residents, nearly half of which are children. Like many places in Alaska, the climate swings from one extreme to the other during the seasons—from 40 below zero in January to the high 80s in July. But unlike many villages farther inland, Mountain Village is situated on solid ground and not surrounded by swampy tundra that makes boardwalks necessary.

When I arrived at the village, I was greeted by Charlotte, and three children of the family who assist with running the local store. The group was removing the snow drifts on the church steps. Oh, the days of untiring youth, that seem to have passed

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by so quickly! Word traveled quickly that I had arrived, and I was still bundled in snowmachine gear when my cell phone rang with a request for a baptism. Since an evening Memorial Mass was scheduled for 5:15pm, we decided to have an impromptu baptism class immediately afterwards.

After Mass, the parish's deacon, Elmer Beans, reminded me that the last Mass in the church was celebrated 16 months earlier by me and their now-missing Nigerian priest, Fr. Aiden. The parishioners were so excited to have Mass again and had cleaned the church until it was gleaming. There was an outstanding showing for Mass! Everyone wore masks and I heard *Quyana Cukneq!* (Thank you so much!) countless times. There was great joy among the people and many had tears in their eyes because they could finally return to worship in their Father's house again. Their tears and voices conveyed that the Mass was for them a healing balm for the dark, isolated days of COVID-19.

Holy Thursday, April 1: Mountain Village

I met with various parents this morning to discuss baptism for Easter Sunday, and they were quite excited to finally have their children baptized. In the afternoon, I again visited some homebound parishioners. It was humbling to witness the strong resilience of these souls during the pandemic. Many shared that they have a robust, daily prayer life that sustains them in the most challenging times. I pray our society never forgets its elders who have sacrificed much. And may we never let their wisdom fade into the past because we are in such a hurry to embrace a future with the most advanced gadgetry. Alaska Native cultures still hold their elders in high regard. I pray the rest of our society would embrace that value and better appreciate the wisest and most experienced among us.

Many gathered for the Holy Thursday Mass. We did not do the foot washing because of the virus, so that was strange to me, but I gave my homily on how Jesus washed the feet of his apostles. I discussed the servant leader role of Jesus who commanded his disciples to do as he has done. We are invited to wash feet of those around us, yet who among us doesn't have "dirty feet" or sins that need to be washed away themselves? Who doesn't need the healing and anointing touch of Christ? Jesus instituted the Mass and the priesthood on Holy Thursday to nourish us with his Body and Blood and with that grace, we are empowered to serve as he served. We have the strength to go forth and serve his Mystical Body. What a gift it is as Catholics to receive Our Lord—indeed, the very fullness of life—in the Holy Eucharist!



Good Friday, April 2

Snowmachine from Mountain Village to St. Marys

A midday departure back to St. Marys presented another bumpy ride down the snowmachine trail on the Yukon River. I'm beginning to understand the physical endurance of the local people who have to contend with the constant pounding of water when boating or snow when on a snowmachine. It certainly takes a toll on one's body over the years. I only have to do this for two weeks. As someone in my mid-50s, I can see why "youth prevails" in such an environment.

If you look at a map of Alaska, you'll see that most of the villages are located along rivers, which are a source of life for the community. It not only provides an important traditional food source (fish), but serves as a "highway" between villages, traversed by boats in summer and snowmachines in winter. But our rivers also are powerful natural forces that can easily claim a life and often do, especially in rural Alaska. The risk of drowning is exacerbated by the frigid water temperatures—a person who falls into the water is shocked by the cold and within minutes, begins to lose the use of their muscles. Within 30 minutes, they cannot feel their limbs and hypothermia sets in, resulting in drowning if they are not rescued. It's why Boy Scouts and other Alaskan youth groups who do water activities must all complete cold-water training, even in summer, before they're allowed out in the rivers and lakes.

I arrived safely at St. Marys to join the parish to pray the Stations of the Cross at 3pm. During Lent each year, I find that the Lord focuses my attention on something different. This year, I was deeply taken by Station V when Simon of Cyrene helps carry the Cross with Jesus. This has jarred my conscience to look at others who carry heavy crosses and see what I might do to care for them as my brother and sister. Of course, it also made me think about what I have said, done, or not done that

Continued on Page 9

Dear Bishop Zielinski,

S2021 04

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Please remember these special intentions:

St. Catherine of Siena, Chefnak
Total Projected Cost: \$3.9 Million
Funds Raised: \$2Million+
Status: Construction Contract Signed



An update from our Diocesan CFO, Susan Clifton: April was an exciting month as we signed the contract for the construction of St Catherine of Siena! Building began this summer when the river opened up and the materials barged out. The build will likely take two years as construction season is very short. It is our hope that we will at least get the rectory built and the foundation for the church complete before the snow flies this fall. One of the unforeseen challenges is the shortage and increased price of building materials as a result of the pandemic. However our contractors have been working for months to secure the necessary materials so we are cautiously optimistic that this will not slow us down!

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!

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may have contributed to the weight of the cross others carry. Through Simon's example, the Lord has spoken loudly about our duty to be companions on the journey for those around us. I hear so many stories of people who carry heavy burdens such as medical issues, family challenges, lack of resources, financial constraints, and addiction. I am always deeply humbled when someone graces me with a disclosure about their deepest struggles... it is an invitation to walk on sacred ground with them as a brother and companion. I can't help but notice that in Native culture, hardships are simply a way of life and you sense that they are simply sharing facts about their lives, not complaining. Challenges and difficulties are to be expected, so they turn to God as a source of strength. Alaska Native Catholics practice their faith amidst some of the harshest conditions on the planet and their spiritual and physical resilience is impressive to behold.

We gathered at 7pm for the Good Friday Service, for which there was a good showing. I enjoyed the reading of the Passion from John's Gospel, and it brought to mind memories of being a child and my excitement to go to church to participate in the reading. The narrative just makes the Passion of Christ come alive and through the eyes of a child, it seemed even more real because I was saying the words aloud.

The veneration of the Cross was definitely different. After 50+ years as a Catholic, it seemed odd not to be kissing or touching the feet of the corpus on the crucifix, but people still were so respectful to our Lord crucified on the Cross. I could see that their eyes were fixated on the Cross. It's interesting that during these days of mask wearing that one tends to look more closely at people's eyes and focus on what they are likely thinking rather than doing. Blessed Catherine Emmerich had visions of the Passion of Christ and describes them in great detail in her writings. I wonder what Christ saw in the eyes of the onlookers as he suffered and then hung on the Cross. His repeated requests that the Father "forgive them" conveyed that even when he saw hatred or cowardice reflected in the faces of others, his own eyes only poured forth mercy upon those gathered around during his torture.

Good Friday! The only day of the entire year when Mass is not celebrated. As one who is faithful to daily Mass, this always grabs my attention for the right reason. It helps focus on the fasting required and the power of the Mass. This always causes me to reflect on my great privilege as a priest—the ability to receive Holy Communion every day. It is a stark contrast to the spiritual privations of many in the Diocese of Fairbanks, who even pre-pandemic were only able to celebrate the Mass every few months. For our most remote parishes, they are now going on almost two years of being without the Mass and other sacraments.

Certainly, one of the dangers a priest can face is taking the offering of the Mass for granted. We are human; we get tired and distracted and complacent. But we are nonetheless ordained to act "in persona Christi," and each of us must always try to enter into this sacrifice and truly make its reality present to ourselves and those at the Mass. Otherwise, we simply just go through the motions. Yes, the Mass is still valid, but surely, we cannot encounter the most profound spiritual effects of worship and of Holy Communion unless we empty ourselves like Christ did on the Cross.

Holy Saturday, April 3 Snowmachine from St. Marys to Pilot Station

I think my theme song for this Yukon venture should be "On the Road Again." Willie Nelson's song from 1980 was about life as a traveling musician, but I think it applies to villagers in remote Alaska, too. So, another midday departure with my reliable escort, Martin. Another snowstorm rolled through the area last night, so the trail was blanketed with loads of fresh, heavy, wet snow. It was a little slower going but at least the trail was smoother, which will save time on the way back. After an hour of scooting across the white tundra and crisscrossing the river channels, we arrived back in Pilot Station. I unloaded my waterproof duffle bag at St. Charles Spinola Catholic Church. After six years of traveling the Alaskan bush in summer and winter, I've learned that waterproof gear of every sort saves the day. All it took was one experience of unloading a duffle bag of wet, frozen clothes to set me straight!

A villager named Abraham saw my yellow Skidoo snowmachine arrive and then called to invite me to his house for a late lunch of fresh caribou. Many sportsmen in the lower 48 come to Alaska to hunt big game, but those hoping to hunt caribou and moose could find that window closing soon. In April, the Department of the Interior proposed closing 60 million acres of federal land in northwest Alaska to all but subsistence hunters who are local and hunting to survive. The area is home to the Western Arctic Herd, the largest caribou herd in the state, but the herd is shrinking and is now down to less than half the numbers of animals it had in 2003.

As I walked into Abraham's kitchen, my eyes caught sight of caribou heart, liver, and a big chunk of meat on a piece of cardboard on the kitchen table. He walked up with a large knife and started carving away and said, "You are going to have a great lunch!" His children sat around watching, rather quiet. After the meat was prepared, Abraham asked me to bless the food and then insisted I be first in line. I took a few pieces of heart, liver, and meat from the pan. As I sat at the table, the children stared at me, no doubt wondering, "Is he really going to eat it?!" They didn't know that I grew up on a farm

in Michigan, where we ate every edible part of an animal we harvested. So, this was not my first rodeo with wild game! It was worth it to see their pleased faces as I praised Abraham for providing me with such a hearty, outstanding meal. I knew I was going to be up until the early hours of Easter morning because of the vigil, so the fresh caribou was good fuel for the long night.

Late afternoon, I headed back to the church to start preparing for the most beautiful liturgy of the year. Parishioners had decided they wanted the Mass to start when it was truly dark, 10pm. While starting at sundown typically allows parishes in the lower 48 states to start their vigils in darkness by 8pm, Alaska's "midnight sun" is well on its way by early April. This Easter, the sun wasn't going to set in Pilot Station until well after 9pm, with dusk lasting for another hour. Since I'm usually in bed by 9:30pm, I downed several cups of coffee to stay awake.

There literally was a blizzard raging outside, which would have easily blown out a wooden fire, so we had a small fire fueled by rubbing alcohol poured over rock salt instead. (Alaskans are incredibly resourceful!) St. Charles Spinola was quite full as we had nine children and one adult lined up for baptism. With such a late start, the children's responses to the sacrament were typical—some slept through their baptism, while others grumpily protested that they wanted to be left alone. A few bolted upright from sleep with a full-throated scream when we started to pour water over their foreheads! Most responded with a smile, though. After the rite is finished, I love belting out an "Alleluia" and the community echoed this beautiful declaration of Christ's rising.

The adult who was baptized was a 63-year-old man who, for some reason, had just plain missed Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation over the years. His peers urged him to get baptized since he has regularly attended Mass for all these years. As I baptized James, there was this thunderous clapping after the pouring of the water. The entire community was beaming with joy, and this very quiet and shy man had this holy glow about him. The Holy Spirit certainly pierces to the depths of our soul in Baptism to imprint that permanent seal and you could practically see that indelible mark on James's face.

After celebrating the sacraments of initiation and the Eucharist, I extended a final blessing and the Easter dismissal. Each family of the newly baptized wanted a photo and there was an extensive line snaking down the main aisle as people requested an individual blessing from me. It was 1am by then, yet people could not get enough graces!

As the last person departed the church, I looked toward the sanctuary and had a profound sense of joy amidst my exhaustion. The Lord poured forth a special grace of a deep slumber before I had to rise again at 6am for the Easter morning services.

Easter Sunday, April 4 Snowmachine from Pilot Station to Mountain Village

I woke early—grateful to the smell of freshly brewed coffee—knowing I needed to get an early start back to Mountain Village. My escort, Edwin, was coming in from Mountain village and just at 6am, he texted to see if I was up and about. He said skies looked clear, but there appeared to be a ground storm on the river. A ground storm is created by high winds that swirls about the dry, fallen snow and reduces visibility for travelers.

After coffee and praying the Liturgy of the Hours, I gathered my gear together and prepared for Edwin's arrival at 8:30am. My next Mass was schedule for 11am in Mountain Village, so we had plenty of travel time. For the first part of the trip, we made our way on a narrow winding trail through the woods and then downhill. It was beautiful to see the sun starting to rise, casting its rays through the trees. A moose was trotting down the snowmachine trail and jumped off when he heard us motoring along.

I was glad that the moose left on its own. While moose tend to be skittish and generally run away from people, these



Little Reese is baptized at St. Lawrence Catholic Church, in Mountain Village by Bishop Chad with parents Michelle Peterson and Jeremy Miller.



huge animals weigh an average of 1,500 pounds and can be dangerous if provoked, especially females protecting calves. In February, wildlife troopers had to put down a moose near Anchorage after a woman posted a Facebook video of herself feeding and petting the animal. The moose showed no fear of humans and even walked right up to the trooper who approached it. The animal appeared thin and showed signs it had been fed by humans for some time. Wild animals used to being fed will lose their ability to fend for themselves and become aggressive if they encounter people and are not provided with food. For this reason, troopers had to dispatch the animal and donated its meat to charity.

We made a quick stop at the St. Marys boat launch, where Edwin met his sister to pick up a box of Easter gifts. We arrived in Mountain Village by 10:30am and parishioners began filtering into the church as it approached Mass time. Deacon Elmer had recruited and prepared 10 young children for baptism and it was a beautiful scene to see them all lined up at the edge of the sanctuary. Easter joy radiated from the faces of many parents as they witnessed an ontological change in their child. Now and forever, their child would be claimed by Christ as a child of God, born into a new life of the Holy Trinity.

Following Mass, I took photos with the families and blessed those who requested additional graces. Deacon Elmer offered to escort me back to St. Marys for the 3pm Easter Mass. The 64-year-old deacon is a quiet and humble man who is always so polite in his demeanor. He quietly said to me, “Bishop, I am not sure how used you are to driving a snowmachine, but we will be moving along.” I was not quite sure what he meant, but I soon discovered that “moving along” meant scooting along quite quickly. Many of my escorts on this trip were in their mid-20s, but Deacon Elmer arguably got us from point A to B the fastest. I arrived safely and well within time for the afternoon Mass. I thanked Deacon Elmer for his escort and for all the time he has devoted to serving the good people of God. Our rural deacons are unsung heroes, especially in their ministry of leading Communion services in the frequent absence of a priest.

After three hours on a snowmachine and a 90-minute Mass, I was definitely feeling tired. The worship space at the Church of the Nativity at St. Marys is small, so we scheduled the 15 baptisms across two Masses to keep from overcrowding the church. At this Easter Mass, I baptized a young child, confirmed a young adult, and another young adult received her First Holy Communion. Even through the masks, “Alleluia!” rang out loudly and joyfully, as the people gratefully celebrated the Resurrection after the long isolation of COVID-19.

Sister Kathy and I teamed up for Easter dinner. I had brought some ribs that I had smoked back in Fairbanks, and Sr. Kathy prepared twice-baked potatoes and roasted veggies. I offered to bring a dessert. At the local store, I found a pot of gold—a caramel apple pie-flavored gelato, which was a perfect finish to our celebratory dinner.

Monday, April 5—Home to Fairbanks

After all the festivities of the past few days, I was in bed early last night. I then rose early this morning to pray the Liturgy of the Hours and to get my gear ready to go. Thanks be to God the weather was nice. After a short 40-minute flight to Bethel for a transfer, I boarded Alaska Airlines for another 50-minute flight to Anchorage. I texted Sr. Kathy to let her know I had safely arrived, and she responded that my departure was perfectly timed since it was now snowing quite heavily at St. Marys. I spent the next two days resting and visiting some friends, including Archbishop Roger Schwietz (Emeritus) and Archbishop Andrew Bellisario, the newly appointed Archbishop of Anchorage-Juneau.

As I reflected on my adventure across our remote villages, I realized what a joy and honor it was to have baptized 39 young people, confirmed two, and distributed the Eucharistic Lord in a First Holy Communion. I had heard countless hours of Confessions, blessed numerous houses, and met so many saintly souls on my homebound visits. As always, I returned to Fairbanks as the most blessed among men.

(We have great news! At time of publishing—Fathers Alphonsus and Aiden have both returned to Alaska and to their parishes!)



Missionary Spotlight

Cynthia Erickson, Founder of My Grandma's House

Seven years ago, fed up with seeing so many Alaska Native youth suffering from substance abuse and suicide, Cynthia Erickson started My Grandma's House, a nonprofit focused on providing indigenous teens and young adults with the support and resources they need to heal from generational trauma and make life-affirming choices. Cynthia, a lifelong Catholic who lives in the village of Tanana, is a member of St. Aloysius Catholic Church.

What had the strongest influence on your faith growing up?

I'd say it was both my parents and how I was raised. My father attended the Catholic mission boarding school in Holy Cross until he graduated high school. He loved the priests and nuns there so much that he called them his other "moms and dads." In fact, when he got out of the U.S. Army, he went back to Holy Cross even before returning to his home village of Nulato because he was so proud to share with them that he was a trained mechanic and a licensed pilot. Growing up, both of my parents were strong Catholics with great respect for the Church, and they always invited visiting priests or nuns to dinner, so we were surrounded by the faith. Another big factor is that I was raised in a close-knit, deeply spiritual environment without the outside influences that affect our youth today. Ours was a small village and everyone was "family," so I grew up doing all kinds of outdoor activities with friends and relatives. We were such a close community that whatever happened at the church—like a Baptism or a First Communion—was a very big deal for everyone, and the whole village celebrated with you, whether they were Catholic or not.

What prompted you to start My Grandma's House?

I was seeing so many kids losing their lives to alcohol and suicide, and I wanted to do something about it, but I struggled to find someone who wanted to really address the underlying reasons why and start to deal with them. God has always given me these "premonitions," and then one day after yet another suicide, I heard the Lord tell me that it was going to be up to me if I wanted something to change. So, I started My Grandma's House in 2014.

How does the organization combat substance abuse and suicide in Alaskan villages?

Most of the time, we just do everyday village things, like going fishing or berry picking. Other times, we focus more intentionally on mental health and the kids will talk about their problems or journal about their experiences. It helps them to know they aren't alone, that every family has trauma or addiction or dysfunction. Twice, we've taken a whole "Healing Journey" down the Yukon River, stopping at villages and sharing our message. More than anything, though, we combat suicide by helping these kids feel valuable and loved and helping them see that they do have options and they can make good choices. We spend a lot of time communicating via text, chats, and social media with Native youth across Alaska, not just listening and counseling, but connecting them with resources in their own area. It can be transformative for those who take advantage of the support. One very troubled young man came to us at 15 from a severely dysfunctional family. Over the years, he's struggled; he's been suicidal. But he's survived and gotten stronger. He graduated from high school, got a scholarship to Alaska Christian College, and just finished his second year there. He was just a lost kid who wanted to be loved. It's a long road, but we're teaching our Native children the value of life and faith and family, and they're going to go back to their villages and have the tools they need to raise their own families in a healthier way. And that's going to affect everyone.

To learn more about My Grandma's House or to donate,
visit mygrandmashouseak.com.

