



# The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 57 Number 4

Winter 2019

*Some give by going to the Missions*

*Some go by giving to the Missions*

*Without both there are no Missions*

## Holding Fast to the Faith in Chefnak

*Chefnak is a small village in southwestern Alaska that is home to fewer than 500 Yup'ik Eskimo Native people, all of whom are Catholic and active in the parish. This remote village's strong faith is especially remarkable given they have had no church for 15 years and only see a priest for the Mass and sacraments a few times per year.*



*The village of Chefnak*

*Photo Credit: Andrea Pokrzywinski*

Flying into Chefnak in summer, it's easy to see why boardwalks crisscross the village: there is water *everywhere*. Located in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region where the arctic tundra meets the Bering Sea, the landscape still bears the marks of its watery yet volcanic past—the windswept tundra is broken by countless waterways and ponds, as well as large igneous rocks that jut out of the ground. An extinct volcano, Tern Mountain, looms in the distance as if to remind residents of their home's fiery origins.

Chefnak's residents, however, see the land through Yup'ik eyes: The tundra and tributaries are beloved friends through which God generously distributes his bounty. Like their ancestors, they still hunt, fish, and gather from the land year-round to survive. Rivers and streams offer up halibut, salmon, and herring, while

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the tundra delivers moose, berries, *quagciq* (greens), and *ugnaraat neqait* (edible roots). Even the ocean contributes, offering nutrient-dense, Vitamin-C rich seal meat and oil to those willing to make the long haul to the sea; a rich menu, which is all organic and free, of course.

But Chefnak is a modern village, too, with a store, post office, power plant, clinic, school, and community center. Residents have TVs, smartphones, and satellite internet, even if the permafrost prevents individual wells and running water for most houses. The village is remote, with no roads in or out of the community, but the airport is busy, with visitors and supplies arriving daily from the nearby hub of Bethel. Half of villagers own a snowmobile or ATV, with many families also sporting a motorized boat to travel the summer “highways.”

Chefnak is also one of the strongest Catholic communities in the Diocese of Fairbanks, with 100% of villagers identifying as Catholic. The parish, St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church, has regular religious education classes, sacramental prep, rosary and prayer groups, and an active parish council. The parish can even boast of having the largest group of youth and young adults (25) confirmed in the diocese last year. Chefnak villagers have impressively maintained their fidelity to Christ and His Church despite having no church building and only seeing a priest for the Mass and sacraments a few times per year.

### Strong Catholic Roots

Chefnak is a relatively young Yup'ik Eskimo village. In the early 1950s, elder Alexie Amagiqchik got tired of the flooding at his home village and moved a mile inland, where he cleverly set up a small general store. Others soon followed and settled modern-day Chefnak. The community was originally called *Caputnguaq* or “something blocking the path” in Yup'ik, which referred to the large line of rocks crossing the riverbed. The village formally incorporated less than 50 years ago, in 1974.

Chefnak's Catholic roots first appeared in 1937,

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*Surrounded by the Bering Sea on one side and tundra on the other, Chefnak is home to 500 Yup'ik Catholics.*

*Photo Credit: Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development; Division of Community and Regional Affairs' Community Photo Library. 4\_Boardwalk to Watering Point\_2008\_Chefnak.*



*St. Catherine of Siena parishioners study the new church building plans.*  
*Photo Credit: Cindy Jacobson.*

with the recorded baptisms of many Yup'ik adults and children. In the 1940s, a Jesuit priest who served several villages in the region visited the village. He was deeply impressed by the piety he witnessed among the Native people:

*“I am miles away from my beloved nest on Nelson Island at a place called Chfrnk [without vowels], where there is no teacher, no postmaster, no white man, but a fine group of Natives, and all of them Catholic, keeping me on the go. The men-folk are away now for mink. The women-folk are wearing out the floor of the church. Can't keep them out of church, daily communicants, etc.; the Eskimos here are living saints.”*

The village's first church was built in 1952, almost as soon as the community was settled. Since losing their church building in 2004, parishioners have held Mass, Communion services, and events such as weddings and funerals in the village community center. They have "made do," but it has not been easy for this devoutly Catholic village to live out its faith in such a small space, according to Cecilia Kinegak, who is a bookkeeper and eucharistic minister for St. Catherine's.

*"There isn't enough room, even for Mass, so there are always people standing up during services," says Kinegak, who has to keep the parish books and paperwork at her own home. Weddings and funerals are especially problematic—with most villagers related by blood or marriage, these events are likely to be attended by all 450 residents, plus a few dozen others from nearby villages. "We have to move those services to the school gym to fit everyone," says Kinegak. It works, but the community would understandably rather celebrate liturgies and important religious services in a more adequate sacred space, she adds.*

### **A New Church Home**

Since the fire in 2004, the diocese has been raising funds for a new church building. But it's no small feat to raise capital funding in a mission diocese that already struggles to pay high travel costs to fly priests across an area one and a half times the size of Texas. Building in rural Alaska also brings unique logistical challenges, since all heavy equipment and materials must be shipped up from Seattle and barged upriver to the village (see *Building A Church In Rural Alaska*, pg 7, for details). Freight rates of up to \$1.00 per pound increase the total cost by a third when constructing churches in Alaskan villages, according to Cindy Jacobson, the diocese's engineer.

Over the years, St. Catherine's has held annual fundraisers for the new church, usually music and dance festivals that draw visitors from other nearby villages such as Nightmute and Toksook Bay. But even well-attended events only bring in a few thousand dollars, says Kinegak, given that Chefnak's remoteness

makes it a mostly cashless society that relies heavily on subsistence activities and bartering.

Thanks to years of fundraising locally and through the diocese, the parish has raised \$1.37 million of the \$2.5 million needed to rebuild St. Catherine of Siena in Chefnak, which includes a sizeable diocesan contribution. The new church will be a small, modest, no-frills affair, with none of the usual adornment found in Catholic churches—there will be no statues, stained glass, paintings, or tapestries, for example. To maximize the building's use, many spaces in the planned 4,700 square foot church will serve multiple purposes. After passing through the arctic entry, parishioners will enter a lobby/narthex that can be partitioned off from the worship space for meetings, religious education classes, and native dance practice. The church will have a small office and gift shop, too, as well as a sacristy that will double as a cry room during services. Like most residences in Chefnak, the new St. Catherine's will not have running water or an indoor toilet (at least initially) due to the difficulty of accessing groundwater through the permafrost.

The church will be highly energy efficient, however. The sanctuary roof will be vaulted only in the very middle to minimize heat loss and LED lighting will keep down electricity costs. There also will be several heating zones so unused spaces can have the temperature lowered to conserve fuel, an important feature when winter can bring 50 mph winds, six feet of snow, and 30 below zero temperatures.

### **Passing on the Faith**

Like Japanese Catholics who kept the faith going for centuries without churches or priests, the Yup'ik Catholics in Chefnak demonstrate that any faith community can flourish if believers rely on the Holy Spirit to sustain them. A great deal of credit goes to St. Catherine's elders, insists Bishop Zielinski, who have held the line and maintained a strong Catholic village even without a sanctuary or consistent pastoral care.

*"Faith like theirs can only come from a sincere response to Christ Himself in the Eucharist," says Bishop Zielinski, referring to the fact that the village has mostly only*



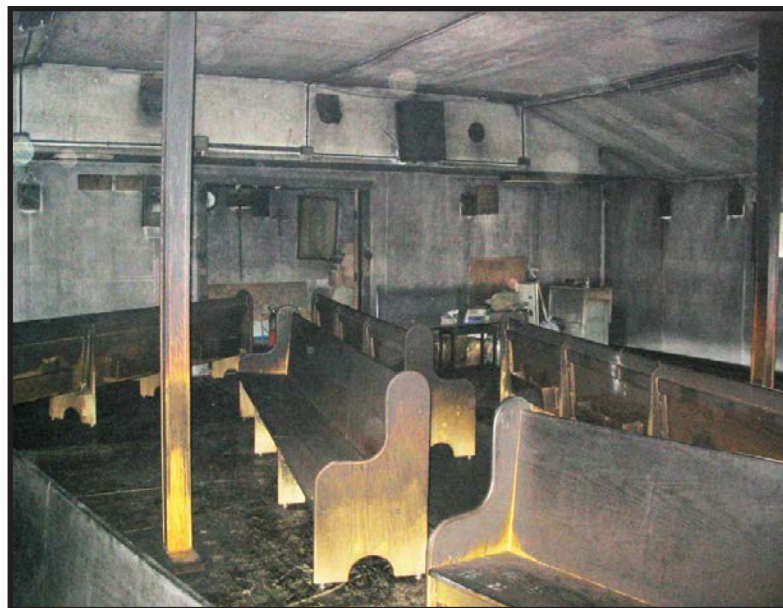
*had Communion services in recent years due to the diocese's lack of clergy. Priests who visit Chefnak have to spend hours hearing Confessions and Mass is always full, even if the liturgy is held at 7am or 11pm, Bishop Zielinski says. During his last visit, nearly 50 people stayed for healing prayers after Mass. "These Catholics really do lead by example."*

But keeping the faith—even in a village that clings as tenaciously to Catholicism as Chefnak's residents do—is not without its challenges. The diocese only has 18 priests that rotate—traveling to serve its 46 parishes—so in years past, the village was only able to see a visiting priest a few times per year for the Mass, Confession, Anointing of the Sick, and full funeral rites. Fortunately, a new missionary priest from Poland, Fr. Stan Roz, was just assigned to serve Chefnak and nearby Newtok, so parishioners at least have the Mass and sacraments two weeks out of every month. Between priest visits, 68-year-old Deacon Joe Avugiak is available to baptize people, lead Communion services and funerals, and provide spiritual counseling for every family.

Not having a priest in residence, combined with the introduction of corrosive Western influences (mostly through technology), has made it harder for the Yup'ik to pass the faith on to the next generation, says Agnes Kairaiuk, who was born and raised in Chefnak. And having no church hasn't helped.

*"We have a whole generation of young people in the village who have never had Mass in an actual church," says Agnes, who has served as the parish administrator at St. Catherine's for more than 20 years. "They have no idea how special it is to attend Mass in a real house of God."*

Fortunately, that is likely to change in just a few years—with the most recent donation, the diocese finally has enough funds in hand to at least start construction, according to Jacobson. She will travel to Chefnak this fall to meet with church elders and will set a tentative construction schedule that incorporates volunteer efforts from villagers, who are



**St. Catherine of Siena Church interior after the fire in 2004.**  
Photo Credit: Deacon Paul Perreault

anxious to contribute to the building of their new church. Pilings should be installed in spring 2020, with building construction started that summer. After that, the diocese must raise another \$1.2 million as soon as possible to finish building the new church.

*According to Bishop Zielinski, "When the Yup'ik baptize their children, they take very seriously the promises they make to raise their children in the faith. A new church would serve as a visible symbol of that commitment to Christ and equip them to live out those promises even more effectively than they already do. I pray we can make this a reality for these faithful Catholics."*

The Diocese of Fairbanks welcomes any donations toward the rebuilding of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church. To donate, please use the coupon on the next page or call the Diocesan Donation Office at 907-374-9532. You can also donate online at [dioceseoffairbanks](http://dioceseoffairbanks) or at <http://bit.ly/ChefnakChurch>.



Dear Bishop Zielinski,

**F1 S2019 04**

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Dear Bishop Zielinski,

**F179 S2019 04**

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**AMOUNT OF GIFT:**

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\$250 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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*The Alaskan Shepherd* Newsletter

Volume 57 Number 4

Winter

Page 5

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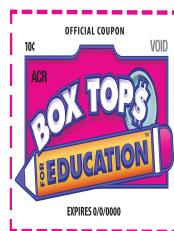
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The Alaskan Shepherd

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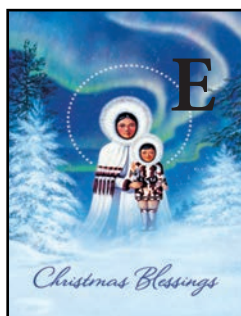
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# St. Catherine of Siena Church ~ Overcoming Challenges



## *Building a Church in Rural Alaska*

• Catholics in the small village of Chefnak have needed a new church since their building burned down in 2004. The diocese is raising funds to build a new church—we're halfway there!—but few people outside of our vast state can appreciate the unique struggles that come with building larger structures in rural Alaska.

• To begin, our villages are so small and isolated there are no roads leading into or out of the communities. There are no building supply vendors, either, which means all construction materials and heavy equipment must be barged into the villages. Because of these factors, as well as those listed below, it can take the diocese several years and millions of dollars to build even a small church for a few hundred Native Catholics.

## *Transportation Factors*

• All materials and equipment must be barged up from Seattle; most villages also require the barge to travel up an interior river (or two) to deliver supplies. These freight costs comprise a third of the total cost of church construction in northern Alaska.

• Barges only visit villages once or twice a year, in spring and fall. An especially dry summer can lower river levels, causing the barge company to cancel its fall shipment to the village. Construction would be delayed another nine months while waiting on materials to arrive in late spring.

• In western Alaska, vehicles can't travel on the rocky, swampy tundra. In Chefnak, there is a single road between "downtown" Chefnak and the airport three miles away (the village has one truck that is used to transport people and goods to and from the airport). This means building materials must be laboriously transported through the village to the construction site via all-terrain vehicles.

## *Environmental Factors*

• In the lower 48 states, most buildings have poured concrete foundations. This is impractical in rural Alaska due to the shifting permafrost, as well as the high cost of transporting

heavy gravel and cement into remote villages. Using pilings instead will allow the church's foundation to penetrate through the permafrost into solid ground, then stick out above ground to protect the building from seasonal floods. Elevating the building also ensures that the building's heat doesn't melt the permafrost and shift the foundation, causing structural damage over time.

• Villages are located near rivers and the ground tends to be swampy and waterlogged in spring and summer. Once heavy equipment arrives via barge, the ground must be sufficiently dry or frozen to handle the equipment's weight. Construction can be delayed for weeks if the ground is too soft to get equipment from the riverbank to the building site.

• Alaska's frigid and unpredictable winter weather limits our construction window to just four to five months of the year. In addition, barges only start delivering equipment and materials in late May/early June, further shaving six to eight weeks off our time to build. On occasion, the diocese will need to have materials and equipment delivered in fall and overwinter them in the village so construction can restart as soon as possible the following spring.

## *Labor Factors*

• Most villages in rural Alaska have just a few hundred residents, with a school, clinic, and tribal hall as the main public spaces. There are no restaurants or hotels. This requires the diocese to import the skilled labor needed to build the church. Engineers and construction workers must be flown to the village, then fed and housed in temporary work camps during summer months.

• In Chefnak, every villager is an active Catholic and the parish is the heart of the community. These Catholics strongly desire to help build their new church, even if it means giving up some of the hunting, fishing, and gathering time that feeds their families. Training villagers to help with construction will add some time to the construction schedule, but their commitment reflects a true faith that the diocese intends to honor with opportunities to volunteer.



# MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT



## From Sultry Nigeria to the Frozen North

### Father Yakubu Aiden

*Father Yakubu Aiden is a 34-year-old missionary priest who came to Alaska in 2017 from war-torn Nigeria. Today, he ministers to mostly Yup'ik Catholics who live in St. Mary's, Mountain Village, and Pilot Station, three remote villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region.*

#### **What strongly influenced your faith growing up?**

My family and village were my strongest Catholic influences. Our village, Wula-Mango, is 95% Catholic and our church is the only one. My father actually wasn't raised Catholic; his family practiced the African traditional religion. When he was about 10, he left the village and went into town, where he lived with some Irish Catholic missionaries. (Among my people, boys are allowed to be independent at around 10; girls at 15.) The missionaries educated him and eventually, he became Catholic. When he was 20, he went back to his home village and married my mother, who later converted to Catholicism. They had nine children and raised us all to be faithful to the Church. My father is now retired, and is basically a full-time Catholic, volunteering for almost every ministry in the parish.

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

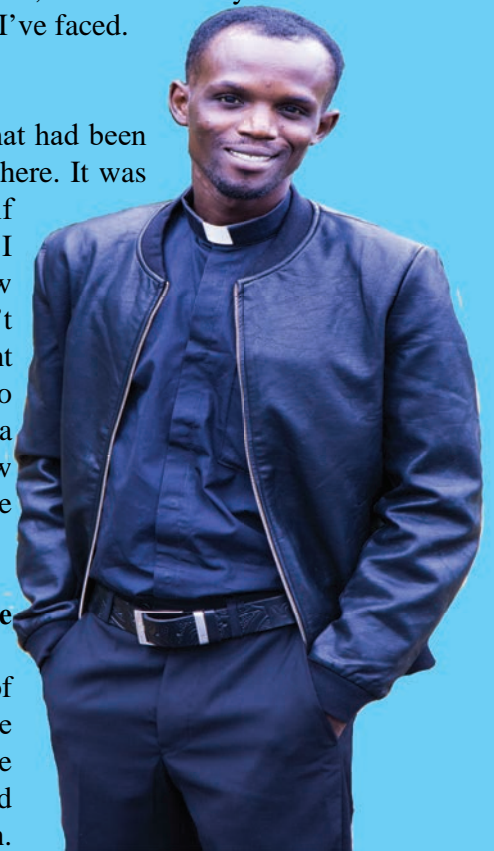
I didn't. My father, however, believed I was meant to be a priest and insisted I go to junior seminary (what you call middle and high school). I didn't want to go, but figured I could make some good friends at the school and I did. When I graduated, my parents wanted me to go to major seminary and I said no. My mother was the one who convinced me to give it a try, telling me that if I was really unhappy, I could always leave. Once I was in seminary, though, I made very good friends who became like brothers. I did wrestle with my calling after I was ordained a transitional deacon, but I eventually found that I was at peace with being a priest. That peace has stayed with me, despite all the challenges I've faced.

#### **How did you end up in Alaska?**

I was ordained in 2013 and soon afterwards, my bishop sent me to two villages that had been ravaged by the terrorist group Boko Haram, because no other priest would serve there. It was harrowing to see people suffering like that and I worked there for a year and a half before returning to serve my own people. A while later, my bishop called to ask if I would think about going to serve in Alaska since the Diocese of Fairbanks had so few priests. I said I didn't have to think about it, because the answer was no. It wasn't anything against Alaska—I wasn't even afraid of the cold, really—but I just didn't want to leave my people. Two weeks later, he called again and asked if I would at least go and try it, and assured me I could come home if Alaska wasn't for me. I have taken a vow of obedience to my bishop, so I agreed to come serve. I can really see now how much the Yup'ik people need and want the Mass and sacraments, so I'm glad I can be here for them.

#### **What advice would you give a young man who thinks he may be called to the priesthood?**

I would tell him that he must love Jesus above all things, and be able to see the hand of God in every difficulty and challenge. I would encourage him to seriously consider the struggles he'll face as a priest, too. If he's American, he should consider that the abuse crisis will make it harder to be trusted and lead souls. The priesthood is for big-hearted men and you must be ready to bear heavy burdens to serve Our Lord in this vocation.



*Issue Contributors: Misty Mealey & Fr. Yakubu Aiden*

*Editor: Patty Walter*

*Photo Contributions: Andrea Pokrzywinski, Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development, Cindy Jacobson, David Schienle*