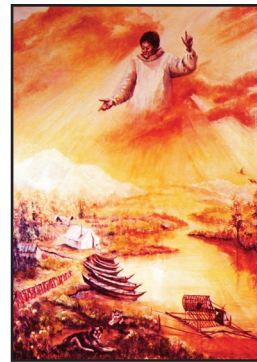




The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 57 Number 2

Spring/Summer 2019

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

Called to be a Missionary Priest: Seminarist Piotr Oprych

Four years into seminary in Poland, Piotr Oprych began to doubt his call to the priesthood. He left seminary, lived as a layman for a year, then discovered God actually is calling him to holy orders—as a missionary priest in the Diocese of Fairbanks.

When Polish seminarist Piotr Oprych arrived at SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Michigan in 2017, he knew just two sentences in English: “Good morning” and “I am Piotr.”

Becoming fluent in his fourth language (he also speaks German and Russian) would prove harder than expected; two years later, the 27-year-old seminarist still relies heavily on his Polish-English dictionary. But like everything else in Piotr’s life, the journey to America provided yet another opportunity to trust in God’s providence.

“It was overwhelming to come to a whole new country and learn a new language,” says Piotr, who is now one of three men preparing for the priesthood in the Diocese of Fairbanks. “I just had to trust God was leading me to the right place, and would help me to be brave.”

Piotr is now finishing his pastoral year at *Right: On a hiking trip in 2012 just outside of Krakow, during his second year of seminary. Piotr attended the same seminary where Karol Wojtyła (St. John Paul II) secretly studied for the priesthood during World War II.*



All photos courtesy of Piotr Oprych

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As a teenager, Piotr spent many hours taking the bus from his small village into Krakow for music lessons. Here he plays the trumpet—a gift from his grandfather—at the Seminary of the Archdiocese of Krakow’s annual concert.

Immaculate Conception Church in Fairbanks. He will need that courage—and flexibility and resiliency—to serve Catholics from diverse cultures across thousands of miles, in some of the harshest weather conditions on earth.

“I know it will be a big challenge to be a priest here,” Piotr admits. “But I have always loved a good challenge.”

An Invitation to Serve

Piotr was born in 1991 in Borek Szlachecki, a small village of about 1,000 people a few miles outside of Krakow in southern Poland. His father was an ironworker, while his mother was a school secretary and bookkeeper. He has one sibling—a sister five years his senior. Growing up so close to St. John Paul II’s

home city ensured the saint played a prominent role in his family and faith, according to Piotr.

“Having a Polish pope was a powerful symbol of the faith for us all,” he insists. Today, Krakow is riddled with churches, centers of learning, and monuments dedicated to the late pontiff. In fact, Piotr attended the same seminary where Karol Wojtyła secretly studied for the priesthood during World War II.

Even in childhood, Piotr leaned toward the priesthood—he would use Legos® to build altars and patens to “play Mass.” His parish priest was a positive role model for the young Catholic. “He was a good moral example and I always wanted to be like him,” remembers Piotr.

The pull toward religious life would wane as he got older, however, and by the time he graduated

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from high school, Piotr wasn't sure about a career path. He wanted to delay college for a year, but his family convinced him to enroll in a two-year program at a nearby university in Krakow for a degree in finance. Within a year, Piotr was disillusioned and left the program.

"I just wasn't at all interested in business," says Piotr. "My heart wanted something more; I just didn't know what."

He began praying for direction and the answer came from an unexpected source: a Dominican poster he saw while walking around Krakow. The poster said, "Jesus is still with us. Will you help Him love the people?" The message resonated with Piotr and he began to think seriously about the priesthood. He spent the next few months talking to friends, family, and priests about whether he was called to be a priest. His rector's counsel finally helped him move forward.

"He told me, 'Seminary isn't a factory for priests; it's a place to discern whether you're called to

the priesthood at all.'" Reassured, Piotr applied and was accepted to Seminary of the Archdiocese of Krakow in 2011. He soon felt confirmed in his calling to become a priest.

Discerning a New Call

At first, Piotr enjoyed the seminary's rigorous schedule, and even felt his vocational call strengthened with each passing year. But things began to change during his fourth year of formation. He sensed a growing dissatisfaction with the prospect of life as a parish priest, which was intensified by the seminary's heavy initial focus on theology and philosophy. (Most American seminaries now favor a more holistic approach to formation, with men developing their intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral gifts throughout the process.)

"It's just a different model, but I thought differently and felt limited by it."

Looking back, Piotr now sees how upheaval in his personal life fueled his interior struggles at the time. "My grandmother had had a stroke and I had lost a friend to suicide," he says. "I knew I wasn't satisfied in seminary and I was really confused about God's plan for me."

Unable to resolve his doubts, he left the seminary and moved into an apartment in Krakow. He eventually got a job as a security guard at Wawel Cathedral, where he worked for the next year. He even started dating.

"I was lost; I was young and stupid," admits Piotr. "I was trying to lay out my life according to *my* plan, not God's."

But God was not finished with Piotr, and working at the cathedral put him in just the right place to untangle his spiritual confusion. He sought counsel from the older, more experienced priests at the church. He also had time to pray between shifts, and found it deeply moving to talk to God in the 900-year-old cathedral that had seen some of Poland's most celebrated monarchs and saints crowned and ordained over the centuries (including St. John Paul II). He prayed often to St. Stanislaus, the cathedral's patron saint who was martyred in the 11th century while celebrating Mass.

"St. Stanislaus helped me find my way back to Christ's plan for me," says Piotr.



After a year of spiritual counseling and prayer, Piotr came to understand that he was called to the priesthood after all. Unlike most of his fellow seminarians, however, he was not called to serve as a more traditional priest leading an urban or suburban parish in Poland.

“I slowly discerned that God was calling me to missionary work,” says Piotr. “I realized there are places in the world that don’t have enough priests for the Mass and I knew that that was how God wanted me to serve Him as a priest.”

North to the Future

One day while sharing his new insights about mission work with a fellow cathedral worker, the man mentioned an acquaintance who had traveled to America and became a priest through SS. Cyril & Methodius Seminary outside of Detroit. Founded in 1885, the seminary is the only one in the United States dedicated to preparing foreign-born seminarians (mostly Polish men) to serve as priests in American churches. Piotr applied, was accepted, and started classes at the seminary in fall 2017. He quickly learned that deciding *where* to serve as a priest loomed large in the minds of his fellow seminarians.

There were endless discussions about, “Should I serve in a large or small diocese? Is the climate too harsh in that place or would I do better in warmer weather? I’d like to do the Tridentine Mass, but is it popular in that diocese?” he recalls.

For Piotr, however, location, weather, and traditions were unimportant: “I just wanted to go where I was most needed.”

As usual, God intervened. Piotr learned his mentor priest at the seminary had served briefly in Alaska 20 years earlier and that the state was immense with a severe shortage of priests. Another friend then mentioned that the new bishop of Fairbanks—Bishop Chad Zielinski—was from

Michigan. All signs pointed north, so Piotr arranged to visit the diocese during his spring break in 2018.

He spent nearly two weeks with Fr. Stan Jaszek, a Polish missionary priest who was then pastor of St. Nicholas Catholic Church in North Pole, about 15 minutes outside of Fairbanks. Piotr was immediately drawn to serving as a priest in northern Alaska.

“Alaska is an incredible place, a whole different world,” says Piotr. “When I got off the plane, I looked out over the snow and knew the whole state is a contemplative monastery. It’s fresh and free and I can be myself here.”

He returned for a week at Easter, which confirmed his decision to become a priest for the Diocese of Fairbanks. He was accepted as a seminarian, then returned to Fairbanks in July to start his pastoral year. For a few weeks, he was stationed at Sacred Heart Cathedral, where he was touched to see the people praying for more priests after each Mass.

“I then understood why I’m here—because these people had prayed for me. God truly is with us.”

Finding a New Family

Piotr has spent the past year at a church in Fairbanks under the guidance of Fr. Tom Kuffel, another missionary priest on loan from the Diocese of Lincoln



Visiting Valdez, Alaska in October 2018. According to Piotr, “the whole state is a contemplative monastery. It’s fresh and free and I can be myself here.”



In October 2018, Piotr and Deacon Chuck Bowman visited Holy Family Catholic Church in the village of Newtok, a small village of just 350 Yup'ik Eskimos.

(Nebraska). Father Kuffel spent nearly two years serving Inupiat Catholics in Nome and Kotzebue, as well as our most remote parish on Little Diomed Island.

Working with the diocese's 20 priests—especially those serving rural parishes—has impressed upon Piotr just how difficult it will be to meet the spiritual needs of Catholics in 38 villages across northern Alaska. He will almost certainly have to serve multiple parishes, traveling vast distances via plane, ATV, snowmachine, or boat to reach his parishioners. He will stay in poorly-insulated churches with no running water or indoor toilet. He will minister to mostly indigenous Catholics who have a completely different worldview than he was raised with as a European Catholic. Far from discouraging Piotr, however, the sacrifices he has witnessed the diocese's priests make to serve God's people has inspired him and confirmed his missionary calling.

"I am humbled to see the priests here trying to double their strength to reach every man and woman

with the Word of God and Holy Communion."

Piotr also will have to depend heavily on lay people and deacons when he works in the bush, who run the diocese's rural parishes in the frequent absence of a priest. "I will never make it as a priest without their help; they are the backbone of the Church," he says. "God works through all the faithful to build up His kingdom, but especially in Alaska."

After his pastoral year ends this summer, Piotr will head back to Michigan for a final year of studies at SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary. He will be ordained a transitional deacon in 2020, then ordained a priest in 2021. As he moves toward Holy Orders, he is excited to bring the Risen Christ to Catholics in the far north, many of whom only see a priest every few months for the Mass and sacraments.

"Living here is hard, yes, but I want to help people carry their crosses as their priest," he says. "Alaskan Catholics are a beautiful spiritual family. I've always looked for that family—and now I've found it."

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(excerpt of message given to visionary, Mirjana Soldo on January 2, 2017)

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Please remember my intentions:

Bishop Zielinski Visits the Faith-Filled Village of Chefnak

In February, Bishop Zielinski visited the village of Chefnak, where nearly all 400 Yup'ik Eskimo residents identify as Catholic and are active in their faith. The village has many young families—nearly half of its residents are under 18. Other than the church, St. Catherine of Siena, Chefnak has just one small store, a post office, a school, and a community center. A small power plant provides electricity, but there is no running water in the usual sense. Most villagers collect rainwater for drinking, cooking, and household needs, while a “washeteria” provides laundry and shower facilities for the whole community.

Despite these challenges, Chefnak is a beautiful village, with its smattering of houses connected via raised boardwalks to keep people, bicycles, and ATVs from sinking into the muddy tundra. Most houses are on stilts to keep them safe from seasonal flooding. The village is located on the Kinia River, and boats are a frequent sight around many homes. Tern Mountain, an extinct volcano that has deposited big chunks of igneous rocks across the tundra, can be seen in the distance.



Photo Credit: Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development; Division of Community and Regional Affairs' Community Photo Library. Boardwalk and Arctic Pipe_Chefnak28_2008

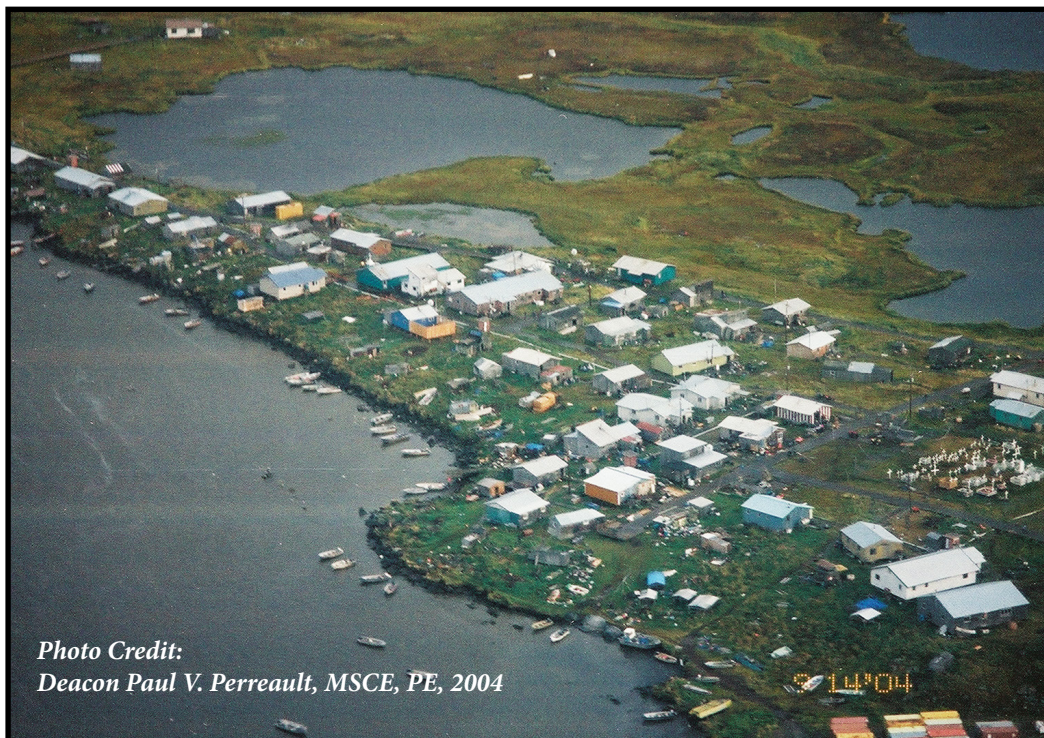


Photo Credit:
Deacon Paul V. Perreault, MSCE, PE, 2004

Saturday, February 23

I arrived in Chefnak about midday. I had tried to get to the village to spend Christmas with these Yup'ik Catholics, but weather had kept me grounded in Bethel the whole time. Shortly after I arrived, I was greeted by the Kinegak family. Edward Kinegak had taken a full-sized Toyota Tundra pick-up and added a conversion package that outfitted the wheels with snow tracks. The truck went along more slowly because of the track system but I was impressed by its ability to navigate over the rough snow, slush, and ice.

Due to climate change issues, the weather in rural Alaska has been abnormally warm over the past year. Our faith leaders in “the bush” actually have had almost half their scheduled travel canceled because fog and snowstorms have suddenly rolled in, grounding air travel. This happened to me at Christmas—temperatures were near zero but quickly rose to freezing, causing sudden fog and snowstorms for days.

This visit, temperatures hovered between 30°F and 34°F, putting just enough precipitation in the air to make flying small aircraft dangerous. The tundra also thaws at that temperature, making it challenging to take off or land in villages with dirt runways. Ground travel is difficult, too, if not impossible—Edward said he couldn't make his usual trek to nearby Bethel this past winter, even with snow tracks, because the ground was too soft.

Within 20 minutes of my arrival, I was already meeting with Edward's wife, Cecilia; parish administrator, Aggie Kairaiuak; and Deacon Joe Avugiak to plan my visit. They decided we would have a Saturday evening Mass, Sunday morning Mass, parish council meeting and Confirmation practice Sunday afternoon, and Confirmations Monday evening. There would be no grass growing under my feet! But these faithful Catholics only see a priest about every three months, so I understood their desire to pack as much as possible in our limited time together.

I remembered from my visit two years earlier that Chefnak parishioners are very fond of Confession, so we announced on the radio that I would be hearing Confessions starting at 3pm in the Community Center, followed by Mass. The parish has been holding services in the center since their church burned down in 2004. I heard Confessions for nearly three hours, then celebrated Mass at 6pm. I am always moved by the strong faith of this village.

Sunday, February 24

The Church was quite full this morning for Mass. Unlike many of our villages, where the native tongue is being lost to the younger generation, in Chefnak, Yup'ik is well known among the young and old. The parish has a small choir and I loved hearing the people joyfully singing hymns in a mixture of English and Yup'ik. Several people asked for healing prayers after Mass; we announced that I was available for additional prayers at 7pm.

At the parish council meeting that afternoon, the discussion centered around the village's need for a new church. The community center where they currently hold services is a workable but less-than-ideal arrangement—not having a dedicated worship space is especially inadequate for celebrations of life such as weddings and funerals, because the entire village attends these events and the hall cannot fit everyone. The parish has patiently waited for a new church, but it is exorbitant to construct churches in rural Alaska because barging in construction materials from Seattle increases the cost by a third.

The parish is continuously fundraising for their new church and it was moving to hear these indigenous Catholics pledge part of their spring and summer to help construct the building once we have adequate funds. I know the time they spend volunteering will mean less time to hunt, fish, and gather from the land to feed their families. How many of us would make those kinds of sacrifices for our faith?

Peter Matthews, an elder in his 80s, suggested simplifying the current design to make it more affordable so they can get a church sooner. As I listened to parish members share how much their hearts burn for a dedicated church, I saw a deep faith reflected in the worship and prayer that



Above: The first Chefnak church burned to the ground on March 4, 1972. In 2004, a devastating fire destroyed Chefnak's second St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church. The parish, a village of nearly 400 Yup'ik Eskimo Catholics now awaits the building of their new church, as pictured in the third rendered photo. The community is active in fundraising and has donated many hours of labor but with a subsistence lifestyle and the high cost of living a new church can only be realized with additional help.

takes place in our parishes. Peter asked if the new church can look like the old one, with similar Stations of the Cross and statues of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. “This is important to us,” he said. I asked if he wants to see the church before God calls him home and he smiled and nodded. Peter and the other elders clearly want to leave an edifice to God to pass the faith on to the younger generations, for they recognize there are many temptations in this world drawing their loved ones away from their Catholic faith. They want the village church to be a place where their children and grandchildren can find strength, hope, and refuge. Their profound love for God and desire to have Him present in their village is inspiring.

Later, we had Confirmation practice with 25 young people, where we talked about the sacrament and their Confirmation saints. I talked about the gifts of the Holy Spirit and how they are real, just as the Holy Spirit is a real person. I reminded them that they will face many temptations in life and that the devil wants to destroy God’s plan of salvation for us all. I shared that the priests of Alaska had just gathered in Anchorage for a Convocation and we had listened to talks from a priest who is an exorcist. The young people were riveted when I talked about Satan, demons, and evil in our world. I reminded them that Christ is more powerful, though, and that the exorcist said the most important thing we can do to combat those influences is regular Confession and Mass. In Confession, we place our sins, struggles, and weaknesses into the hands of God to be forgiven, instead of letting the devil convince us we are unforgiveable and that there is no hope. Jesus always forgives, lifts us up, and points us forward to a new way, a renewed relationship with Him. Several parents and sponsors afterwards requested I repeat my words at the Confirmation Mass.

Later that night, I was amazed that nearly 50 people showed up for healing prayers. The people asked that I pray for them or their entire families to be healed of physical, emotional, and psychological wounds. They also asked for prayers for reconciled relationships, freedom from addiction, and healing from trauma. There were tears and much joy and I heard “Quyana” (thank you in Yup’ik) many times throughout the evening.

Monday, February 25

Today, I recorded video interviews with Cecilia, Aggie, and a few other parishioners. They shared the history of their village and how much having a new church means to them. It seems the faith has always been strong in this village—a few years ago, they had Mass at 7am on Sunday, and most of the village still attended.

Later, as I celebrated the Confirmation Mass, I realized Chefnak has the largest group I have confirmed in my nearly five years as a bishop in northern Alaska. Afterwards, we had a potluck at the community center to celebrate the sacrament. I always enjoy village potlucks because I get to sample a variety of traditionally native foods. This time was no exception—salmon, halibut, musk ox, moose, and seal were on the menu. Every event is finished with a bowl of *agutuk* or “Eskimo ice cream,” a dessert made of seal oil or Crisco, a little sugar, tundra berries, and some kind of white fish. Lots of great food!

Tuesday, February 26

Today was spent waiting around, as one flight after another was delayed due to snowstorms and ice issues. Paralleling the stop-and-go waiting for my flight was the intermittent working of my cell phone. I took advantage of a brief window of signal to call my father in Michigan and wish him a happy 79th birthday. He was excited about the call, but more excited about the meal and dessert my family had prepared for him. Being surrounded by family means so much to him since he moved into an assisted living home a few years ago.

I departed Chefnak just as the sun was setting. I made it to Bethel and the Alaska Airlines counter just three minutes before they were set to close the flight to Anchorage and Fairbanks. It was a late night, but I made it home!

I left Chefnak such a blessed man, grateful for my time with these deeply spiritual Yup’ik Catholics. I am always humbled when people of such deep faith as theirs approach me as a priest, confident that the Holy Spirit will work through me—a mere sinful vessel—to bring them a special anointing through my ordination. I look forward to the day God will provide these indigenous Catholics with a new parish in which to praise and worship Him.

† Bishop Chad Zielinski



St. Catherine of Siena parishioners cleaning the Tabernacle after the 2004 fire.

MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT



From Nebraska to Alaska “A Comfortable Life is Boring” Father Tom Kuffel

Father Tom Kuffel is a missionary priest “on loan” from the Diocese of Lincoln (Nebraska). After more than two decades as a parish priest in the Midwest, he came to northern Alaska and spent 18 months serving parishes in Nome, Teller, Kotzebue, and Little Diomed Island. He is now the pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Fairbanks. Having served in Rome, New Mexico, Nebraska, and now Alaska, Fr. Kuffel has been privileged to share the Gospel with many different cultures over the years.

WHAT HAD THE STRONGEST INFLUENCE ON YOUR FAITH GROWING UP?

I grew up in a strongly Catholic culture in Milwaukee—my father was Polish, so all of my extended family was Catholic, too. Then I went to a Catholic high school and college. I was part of a group with strong core values and I really felt those values challenged in high school for the first time. Fortunately, I knew what was right and true because of my family, so my faith held.

HOW DID YOU KNOW YOU WERE CALLED TO THE PRIESTHOOD?

I really wasn't sure what I was called to do. I graduated from Marquette University with a philosophy and English degree, then joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and spent a year teaching 4th and 5th grade in a very poor area of New Mexico. After that, I went to Rome for a seminary discernment program, where I spent three years studying and praying about whether I was called to the priesthood. Being a priest just seemed like a natural fit given my background and interest in the faith and philosophy. I was ordained in 1989 in Rome but stayed for three more years to complete a graduate degree in Thomistic theology. I also worked as a chaplain for the Missionaries of Charity there. In 1992, my pastor in Milwaukee became the bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska, and invited me to serve there as a priest. I said yes, then spent nearly 25 years in various assignments.

HOW DID YOU GET TO ALASKA?

Soon after his ordination, Bishop Chad Zielinski reached out to Bishop James Conley in the Diocese of Lincoln and asked if he had any priests willing to serve in Fairbanks. At that point, they had just about 17 priests for 46 churches. I'd always been intrigued by Alaska, so I flew to Nome in summer 2015 to experience the “real Alaska,” then came back in winter 2016 to Kotzebue see if I could handle that season. I committed to serving here for three years and spent my first 18 months pastoring churches in northwest Alaska. There are so many different cultures but so few resources...every day is an adventure in the bush and you're always living on the edge!

ADVICE FOR A MAN CONSIDERING A VOCATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD?

I would say what Pope Benedict XVI said to German pilgrims in April 2005: “The ways of the Lord are not easy, but we were not created for an easy life, but for great things.” A comfortable life is boring! God challenges us to greatness to test and develop the talents he gave us. Be open to a religious calling, because that may be how God is planning to turn you into the best version of yourself.

