



The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 58 Number 2

Spring 2020

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions



The Gift of Our Missionary Priests in Alaska

From the beginning, Catholicism in Alaska has been multicultural. The first missionaries to bring the faith to the region in the late 1800s were from France, Spain, Belgium, and Italy. Almost all were Jesuits whose hearts burned with a desire to “go and baptize all nations,” so they gladly traded their lives of comfort in Europe for the privilege of bringing the Gospel to their indigenous brothers and sisters in the northern territory.

The arctic mission field was not for the faint-hearted, however, and it took an exceptionally robust priest to survive in 60 below temperatures, maintain his sanity in months of inky winter darkness, and depend on nature to feed himself. Father Aloysius Robaut, SJ, who traveled up the Yukon River and founded the Holy Cross Mission in 1887, wrote a harrowing description of life in the Alaskan mission field:

“Those winters of seven months with interminable nights in houses poorly lit and poorly heated were too much for those men that psychologically were not equal to it. It took a strong physical constitution, a nervous system firmly set on an even keel, a healthy sense of humor, a character impervious to moodiness and a zeal for the glory of God. To survive, one had to possess them all and in a heroic degree.”

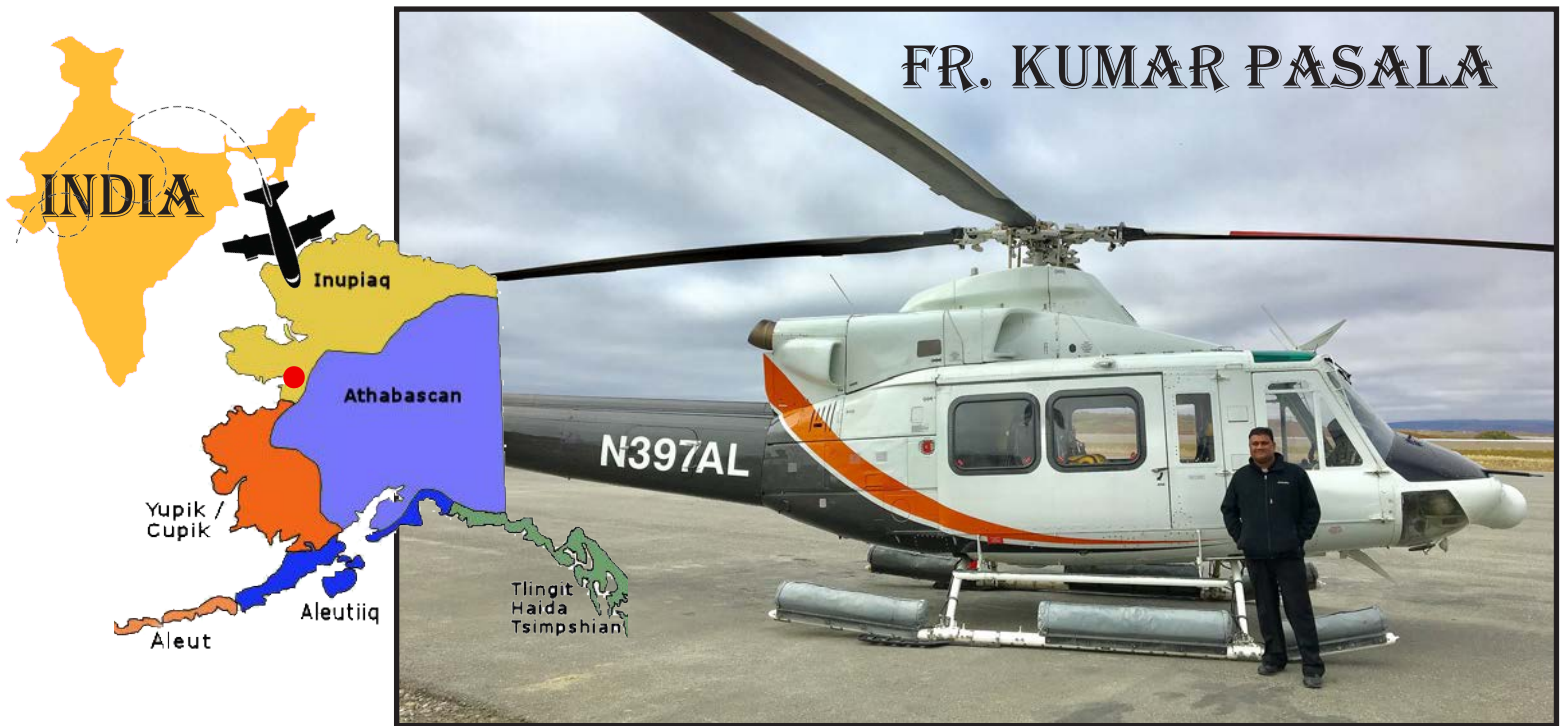
More than a century later, Alaska still attracts “fishers of men” from other parts of the world—priests who gladly surrender the comforts and familiarity of home to bring God’s love to the most northern mission diocese in the United States. With just two incardinated priests, the Diocese of Fairbanks relies heavily on missionary priests and religious from Europe, Africa, Asia, and other parts of North America to serve its 46 churches across an area one and a half times the size of Texas. Here, three of our missionary priests from other continents share about their unique call to serve the faithful in the far north.



At St. Joseph Catholic Church in Nome, Alaska—in one of his four parishes—Fr. Kumar celebrates the Sacrament of Baptism.

CATHOLIC BISHOP OF NORTHERN ALASKA
1312 PEGER ROAD FAIRBANKS, ALASKA 99709
Phone: 907-374-9532 www.dioceseoffairbanks.org

Special Masses are offered throughout the year for you and your intentions by our Missionary Priests. Please pray that God may bless us and our work.



From India to Alaska

Father Kumar Pasala comes from a country where there is no shortage of priests. His home diocese, the Diocese of Cuddapah in southern India, has 186 priests to serve 68 parishes and several hundred men and women religious. This profusion of consecrated men and women is especially impressive given that just 2% of Indians are Catholic.

India actually has some of the oldest Catholic roots in the Church. The apostle Thomas traveled to the country just 20 years after the Resurrection of Jesus; St. Francis Xavier also helped spread Catholicism in the 1500s when he came to India to help Portuguese colonists hold onto their Catholic faith. Indian Catholics view their faith as a gift from missionaries, so they tend to be supportive of sending priests to dioceses like Fairbanks that have a desperate need for clergy, according to Fr. Kumar.

“St. Thomas came to India, St. Francis Xavier came, Mother Teresa came,” says Fr. Kumar, whose home parish in India was established by Scottish priest, Fr. Francis Crumblish. “So now, we go to Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria and yes, Alaska, so other people can have the Gospel and sacraments, too.”

Evangelization has always been a challenge in India, says Fr. Kumar, because most of the country’s billion residents are Hindu or Muslim and Christianity is culturally foreign. To help people more easily embrace the faith, Indian Catholics have retained many traditions that are rooted in the dominant culture. Married Catholic women, for instance, still wear the red dot or “bindi” on their foreheads, a traditional Hindu practice that connotes marital status.

“We are baptized Catholics but we come from a country with a Hindu background and culture, so we practice our faith in a way that resonates with the people,” explained Fr. Kumar.

Respect for other cultures has served him well as a priest, says Fr. Kumar, especially in Alaska, which is surprisingly ethnically diverse. In addition to Yup’ik, Athabaskan, and Inupiat Native people, Fr. Kumar has ministered to Caucasian, African-American, Filipino, Asian, and Latino Catholics during his first few years in the Diocese of Fairbanks. For the past 18 months, he has served as Parochial Administrator of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Nome, a city famous for being the finish line of the Iditarod sled dog race. Once the most populous city in Alaska thanks to the 1899 gold rush, Nome is now home to about 4,000 residents, half of whom are indigenous Inupiat people. Fr. Kumar also serves three other mission parishes in the area, including St. Jude’s Catholic Church on Little Diomed Island.

While it can be challenging to navigate the ethnic, cultural, and language differences he encounters, Fr. Kumar believes his mission remains the same no matter where he serves: to help people experience God’s love through the Church, especially through the Eucharist.

“My job will always be to share God’s love, compassion, and forgiveness with people,” says the priest. “The best thing I can do is to constantly remind them what a gift our faith is and that the God who unites us will always be more real and important than our differences.”

Your first class stamp donations are greatly appreciated.



From Zimbabwe to Alaska

After a dozen years as a priest, the Diocese of Fairbanks' newest missionary from Zimbabwe has a simple motto: "You go where the Lord tells you to go."

Fr. Welcome Chipiro has been on the move for most of his priesthood, having worked in parishes, schools, hospitals, and even a refugee camp. Within six months of being ordained in the Diocese of Mutare in 2008, he was pastoring a parish and Catholic school in the Honde Valley, a lush tropical area along the eastern border of Zimbabwe known for producing some of the best coffee in the world. He also provided pastoral care to 14 additional Catholic communities around the valley. The rigorous schedule—he performed at least five Masses every weekend—was made easier by the gratitude of the people he served, says Fr. Welcome. "They were always so happy to see me, and their kind words kept me going."

A year later, he found himself at St. Charles Lwanga High School, a boarding school seminary perched at the pinnacle of the famous Skyline Mountains. Once again, in

addition to a parish and school, he ministered to 12 Catholic outposts, driving up to an hour each way on weekends and weekdays to perform the Mass, sacraments, and funerals. Over the next few years, Fr. Welcome would serve as pastor of two more parishes, two schools, and a hospital, before finally settling into a three-year stint as administrator of the diocese's cathedral.

By 2016, the priest was nearly 40 and more than ready for a sabbatical. But God had other plans. The Diocese of Mutare had just gotten a new bishop, who asked Fr. Welcome to stick around for a while to make the transition smoother. Then Fr. Welcome learned that Catholics in the Tongogara Refugee Camp on Zimbabwe's eastern border had no priest. So, he signed up with Jesuit Refugee Services and spent the next two years ministering to the camp's more than 10,000 residents, who were mostly displaced people from the war-torn Congo.

"I lived among the people, celebrating sacraments, counseling them, and just listening to their stories," says Fr. Welcome, who frequently provided pastoral care to non-



Fr. Welcome Chipiro serves the parish of St. Nicholas in North Pole, Alaska.

Catholics, too. To encourage the integration with the wider community, Fr. Welcome organized retreats and singing and sports competitions between camp residents and locals.

Then God sent him on his most unexpected assignment yet: Alaska. *Northern* Alaska, at that.

“I just thank God I came to Fairbanks in summer,” says Fr. Welcome, who has served as pastor of St. Nicholas Catholic Church in North Pole since September 2019. “Because at least then you have hope it will come again when winter hits!”

He admits to being “really cold” when winter arrived last fall, especially since Zimbabwe’s average winter temperature is a balmy 55 degrees. But he quickly adapted thanks to the kindness of his new parishioners. “Alaskans are very generous,” he says. “They were always asking me if I had the right clothes and helping me get the right gear, and I stayed warm.”

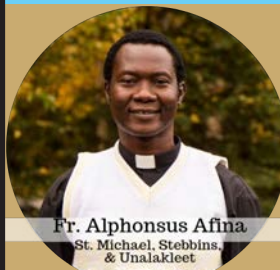
While Fr. Welcome has yet to experience life in bush Alaska among the diocese’s indigenous Catholics, there have still been some interesting cultural differences, even at a “regular” parish like St. Nick’s. “In Zimbabwe, parishioners always sit as a sign of respect, so it’s strange to me that parishioners stand for the Gospel reading,” he laughs.

With the diocese having so few priests, Fr. Welcome will almost certainly be transferred to a village parish at some point during his stay in Alaska. When that happens, he plans to just take it in stride and look forward to the new adventure.

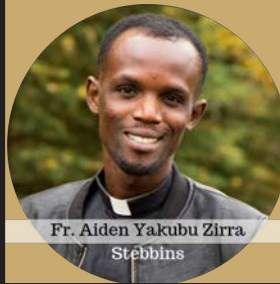
“I’ve spent my whole priesthood moving from place to place and it’s taught me to just surrender to the Lord’s will. You give up your expectations and say, ‘Lord, do with me what you want. Just be with me and show me the way.’”

DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS INTERNATIONAL PRIESTS

NIGERIA



Fr. Alphonsus Afina
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Fr. Aiden Yakubu Zirra
Stebbins

ZIMBABWE



Fr. Welcome
Chipiro
North Pole

POLAND



Fr. Szymon Czuwara
Delta Junction, Tok & Eagle



Fr. Stan Roz
Chefnak



Fr. Stan Jaszek
Alakanuk, Erimonak,
Kotlik, Nuum Iqua

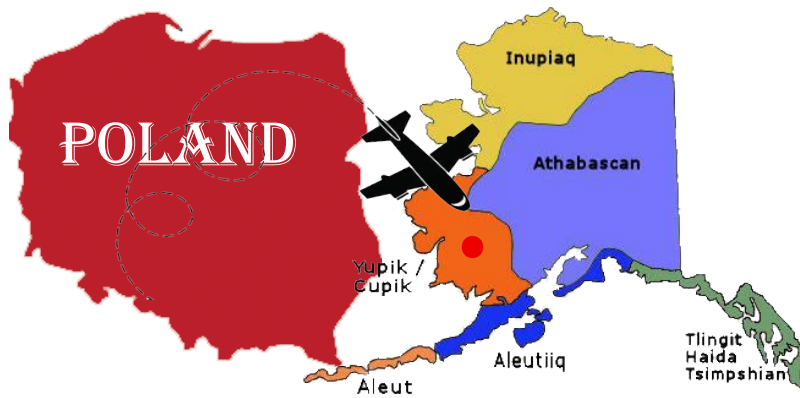
INDIA



Fr. Thomas Sagili
Barrow (Utqiaqvik)



Fr. Kumar Pasala
Kotzebue, Nome
Stebbins, St. Michael
& Teller



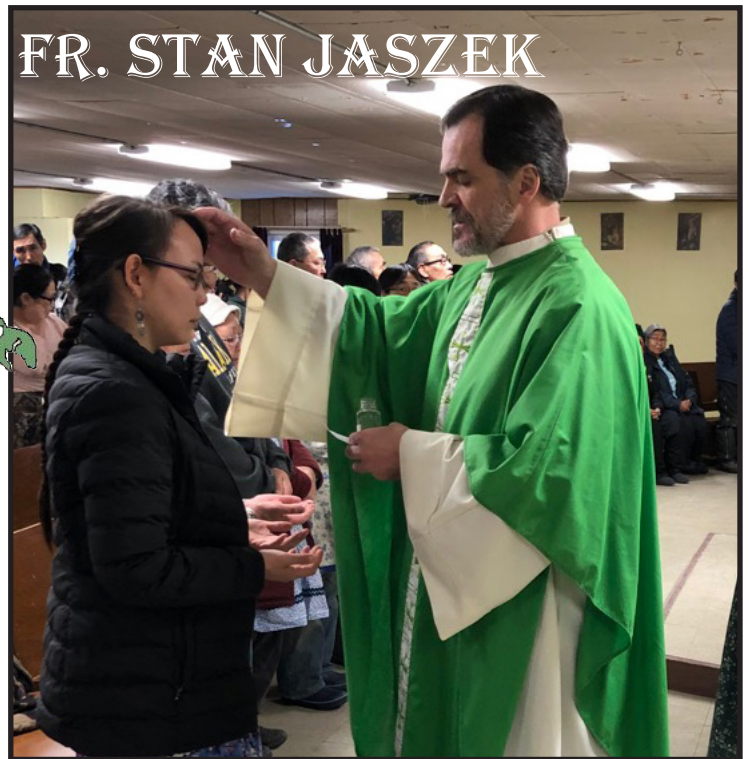
From Poland to Alaska

When Fr. Stan Jaszek arrived in the Diocese of Fairbanks in 2002, then Bishop Donald Kettler asked if he would consider staying for at least 10 years, since the diocese had so few clergy. Exhausted from eight years of serving one main mission and 14 outposts in South Africa, the Polish priest was reluctant to make another lengthy commitment, especially with virtually no time “in country.”

“I told him I really wanted to help and was open to a longer stay,” says Fr. Stan. “But I was also honest that I just didn’t know how long I’d be in Alaska.”

That was 18 years ago.

Father Stan now ministers to Yup’ik Catholics in four villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, a vast area in southwestern Alaska. He has spent a few years pastoring parishes around Fairbanks, but most of his time has been serving missions in “the bush.” He still remembers his first



Fr. Stan Jaszek anoints Bonnie Hunt during a healing Mass in Emmonak, at Sacred Heart Church in February.

Mass in Stebbins, a Yup’ik Eskimo village on the coast of the Bering Sea.

“I had just come from Africa, where people worshipped with great energy, singing and dancing through the Mass,” he says. “In Stebbins, we had the opening song and then I said, ‘The Lord be with you’ and it seemed



Father Stan Jaszek brings the Mass and Sacraments to Catholics in northern Alaska. In winter he travels by both snowmachine and 4-wheeler on the icy river highways; in summer, he visits parishioners by boat.



Fr. Stan Jaszek visits with Emmonak elder, Mary Ann Andrews who asks him to bless a cross after she has just received the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.

like ages before the response came. I thought maybe they hadn't understood my accent. Then we sat down for the first reading and no one stood up for several minutes. I was on fire with anxiety and wondering what was going on," he laughs, adding that he finally asked for a volunteer and someone did come forward to do the reading.

Eventually, Fr. Stan realized Native Alaskans have a completely different worldview than the jubilant Africans he'd left behind. "It took time to realize I was now among hunters and gatherers, who are quiet people, intensely focused on the present moment," he says. Native Alaskans, he says, rarely plan far ahead because they know nature is unpredictable and they must respect its pace to survive—suddenly, the weather will turn, the salmon will begin to run, or berries will ripen and must be picked and frozen *now*. "So, if I ask a Yup'ik to read at Mass next Sunday, he'll say, 'Sure, if I'm there, I'll read.'"

According to Fr. Stan, indigenous Catholics' more deliberate way of life has helped him better live out Christ's instructions to stay focused on today and not worry about tomorrow (Mt. 6:35). Their profound reverence for nature also has changed him for the better. "When I started to hunt and fish with people, I saw the great respect they have for creation," says Fr. Stan. "They only take what they need and waste nothing."

The harshness of living in Alaska also has imbued indigenous people with a strong Gospel value of selflessness

and solidarity that can be rare in the western world, he says. "One cannot survive out here on his own, but if a family and a village shares what they have, everyone can survive," he explains. "It's why a good hunter in the bush is seen not so much as a good shot but as a good provider."

Having now served in Poland, South Africa, and Alaska, Fr. Stan has come to believe that the Church's diversity is at once its great challenge and great strength. "We shouldn't be afraid to let people live differently or express our Catholic faith in a different way," he says. "Because if humanity teaches us anything, it's that God likes variety." Embracing those personal, cultural, and liturgical differences can only enrich the Church, insists Fr. Stan, and show us the incomprehensible love of Christ, who died for all his Father's children.

To speak to someone regarding information about **PLANNED GIVING** or **ANNUITIES** or how to make the diocese part of your estate plans, please contact our **Mission Outreach Coordinator, Dr. Les Maiman** at mission@cbna.org or by phone at 907-888-3722.



Bishop Zielinski Visits the Villages of Aniak, Holy Cross, and Kalskag

Dressed in a traditional parka and mukluks (skin boots) she had made herself, the 88-year-old Mary said, "Bishop, drop your bags in my sled and we will head to the church." I jumped on the back of her snowmachine, Mary slammed on the throttle, and off we went to Holy Family Catholic Church, about a mile away.

Thursday, December 5

This morning, I flew out of Anchorage en route to Aniak, a small village in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, where two-thirds of our diocese's parishes are located. Aniak is located on the southern side of the Kuskokwim River, and has about 500 residents, most of whom are Yup'ik Eskimo Native people. Not surprisingly, takeoff was delayed due to ice on the wings, a common scenario in Alaska. But once airborne, I was gifted with the sight of the beautiful snow-capped mountains of the Alaska Range.

We arrived in Aniak around lunchtime and I stepped out of the plane into a cool -8°F. I still remember my 2016 visit when it was -34°F, but I've heard it can get to 70 below zero some winters. I was greeted by Sr. Marian Leaf, OSF, Deacon Carl Morgan, and his wife, Angie. Carl and Angie have been pastoral leaders in Aniak for many years and have adopted Sr. Marian as family. We made our way to St. Thérèse of Lisieux Catholic Church, where Sr. Marian lives at the attached residence. She had prepared a nice pot of hot soup to counter the deep cold.

That afternoon, I met with a villager named Allison, who had been meeting with Sr. Marian for months to prepare for Confirmation. A few years back, Allison had an accident that resulted in a serious head trauma; it is a miracle she is still alive and mobile. She lost all vision in one eye and 80% in the other. Allison talked about the struggles of recovery, but her voice was strongest when she talked about her deep faith in God. She thanked me numerous times for coming to Aniak and I was touched by her gratitude for the sacrament.

About a dozen people gathered for daily Mass in the evening. Like many of our villages, Aniak only sees a priest about every six weeks, so the faithful are always so grateful for the opportunity to attend Mass. Afterwards, Sr. Marian and I visited a local family, who served us a steaming hot bowl of moose stew for dinner. Conversation centered around our schedule, since a winter storm warning was forecasted and we were scheduled to fly to the village of Russian Mission to bring them the Mass and sacraments, too.

December 6, Friday

I woke at 5am to make my holy hour and prepare for an early departure. Sure enough, the weather forecasters were correct, and the snow started in the early afternoon and came on strong. Visibility was severely limited and all flights in or out of Aniak were canceled, stranding several of us in the village for the night. Like always, villagers extended their generous hospitality to the stranded travelers...the Yup'ik are always willing to help someone in need find a place to stay and a hot meal.

Saturday, December 7

I woke early again this morning, having not yet recovered from my return from the East Coast a few days before. I had attended a USCCB meeting in Baltimore, then spent two weeks in Michigan visiting my family. It was a much-needed break since it had been a full year since I had been able to take a vacation.

Late morning, Sr. Marian and I talked about the Saturday evening Mass and Confirmation for Allison. I checked the

weather and it had completely changed—instead of a storm, the sky was clear! Sister Marian said with a laugh, “We have changed our plans four times and we are sticking with it this time.” The familiar wisdom of many Native elders echoed in my ear: “Bishop, be patient, the weather is the boss.”

The Mass went well, and Allison’s face beamed with joy as she received Confirmation, then thanked Sr. Marian for being her catechist and the community for its support. We also celebrated the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and Sr. Marian renewed her religious vows, since it is a tradition in her community that the sisters renew their promises on that feast day. She has been a religious for 40 years, 13 of those serving the people of northern Alaska.

December 8, Sunday

For once, the weather was good, the plane and pilot were ready, and everything was a go, so Sr. Marian and I were able to take off for the village of Holy Cross on time this morning. Holy Cross has a rich and interesting history. The village grew up around a Catholic mission and school established in the 1880s by a Jesuit priest who came to Alaska across the Chilkoot Trail. He brought with him a

cross and a promise. The cross belonged to a retired bishop of Idaho, who had given the missionary party his pectoral cross containing a relic of the True Cross. The missionaries had promised to establish a Catholic community in northern Alaska and call it the “Mission of the Holy Cross,” which became the village’s official name in 1912.

Villagers first constructed a small, two-story log cabin that was intended to serve as a priest residence, but that was quickly converted to a convent due to the surprise arrival of three Sisters of St. Ann. The sisters started a boarding school that would eventually serve 300 students in its heyday, who were taught religion and the “three Rs,” as well as more practical skills like mechanics, carpentry, and sewing. With hundreds of staff and students to feed, gardening and fishing were particularly important to the mission.

Upon landing in Holy Cross, Sr. Marian and I were greeted by two women on snowmachines, Mary and Connie, who were there to pick us up. Dressed in a traditional parka and mukluks (skin boots) she had made herself, the 88-year-old Mary said, “Bishop, drop your bags in my sled and we will head to the church.” I jumped on the back of her snowmachine, Mary slammed on the throttle, and off we went to Holy Family Catholic Church about a mile away. Even at nearly 90 years old, this woman was still taking the arctic winter in stride!

After getting settled and warming up with a cup of tea, Sr. Marian and I headed to Mary’s house for a visit. Mary was born in Nulato in 1932 and came to Holy Cross Mission School when she was 10 years old. She spoke warmly about the sisters and priests who had served the school and village back then, saying they had treated her well and had become like family over the years.

It was clear from some of the family’s stories that living in rural Alaska requires a person to be tough and resourceful. Mary’s grandson told me that a few years back, Mary was driving their boat to fish camp alone when she saw a large bull moose at the edge of the river. The elderly woman stopped the boat, sighted her rifle, and dropped the moose in its tracks, promptly securing hundreds of pounds of meat for her family to help them survive the harsh Alaskan winter.

Not surprisingly, Mary is strong in her faith, too: “You can never, ever give up,” she told me. “You must believe in God and that Mother Mary will help you.”

Like many Native elders I talk to during my visits, Mary is deeply concerned about the next generation and worried



On the occasion of Allison’s Confirmation celebration in the village of Aniak at St. Thérèse of Lisieux Catholic Church.



Parishioners of Holy Family Catholic Church in Holy Cross, Alaska, join Bishop Zielinski for evening Mass.

that Holy Cross has lost most of its young adult Catholics, who seem to have little interest in attending Mass or being part of the Church. Mary spoke with sadness, not condemnation, and is understandably worried about the survival of Catholicism in her village. It is true that ethnic abuse and crimes committed by Church personnel in past decades caused deep wounds for the Native people, but faithful elders like Mary insist that the living relationship with Christ offered through the Church and her sacraments can bring hope and healing to the present.

About 15 people gathered for the 5pm Mass and it was encouraging to see the elders with their young grandchildren, who seemed keenly interested in the singing and prayers.

The readings from both the Old and New Testaments spoke about hope for people held in bondage and I emphasized the hope that Christ offers us. In my travels, I see so many of God's children burdened with darkness and pain and they yearn to hear a message of reconciliation and hope. They need to be reminded that God's grace invites us toward a deeper relationship with him through the sacramental life of the Church, that begins with turning from sin to follow Christ's path.

Later, we had a meal of fish, game meat, and other scrumptious dishes. Sister Marian was hosted by a generous parishioner for the night, so I had the church apartment to myself and enjoyed a peaceful, quiet evening.

Monday, December 9

Knowing that we would have an early afternoon departure, I offered Mass for the Immaculate Conception at 11am for a small group of about seven people. I love the small church at Holy Cross mission, which is dedicated to the Holy Family and serves as a lasting memorial to the missionaries who sacrificed so much to bring the Catholic faith to their Native brothers and sisters in the far north.

Immediately after Mass, Sr. Marian and I cleaned the residence and gathered our gear to head out. As we were finishing up, Sr. Marian received a call that the plane was nearly to Holy Cross. Two villagers on snowmachines soon arrived and took us to the airstrip. Within 10 minutes, the plane had landed, a full 45 minutes early. Such is air travel in rural Alaska—you can wait hours (or days!) for a flight or nearly miss the plane when it arrives an hour early.

Continued on page 11

Bishop Zielinski remembers you and your intentions every Friday at Mass. Please list them here and enclose them in the envelope provided or send to Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska, 1312 Peger Road, Fairbanks AK, 99709:

DIOCESAN PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

Heavenly Father,
Your divine Son taught us
To pray to the Lord of the harvest
To send laborers into His vineyard.
We earnestly beg You,
To bless our diocese and our world
With many priests and religious
Who will love You fervently and gladly
And courageously spend their lives
In service to Your Son's church,
Especially the poor and the needy.
Bless our families and our children,
And choose from our homes
Those whom You desire for this holy work.
Teach them to respond generously
And keep them ever faithful
In following Your Son Jesus Christ,
That under the guidance of the Holy Spirit
And with the inspiration of
St. Therese, patroness of the missions,
St. John Vianney, patron of parish priests,
And St. Kateri Tekakwitha
The Good News of redemption
May be brought to all. Amen



In our Diocesan Chancery building, from the window of our chapel, parishioners can attend 24-hour Adoration.

On Fridays, Bishop Zielinski offers his Mass for our Benefactors and for their intentions. He finishes the celebration of every Mass with the recitation of the prayer to St. Michael.

Please join our Diocese in praying for vocations.

St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

Dear Bishop Zielinski,

F1 S2020 02

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.

AMOUNT OF GIFT:

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CREDIT CARD donations can be made online at http://bit.ly/CBNA_AK OR CALL us at 907-374-9532.

OR share your phone number (above) and we will call you.

Sr. Marian Leaf, OSF, accompanied Bishop Zielinski during his visit to the villages. Sr. Marian will retire to her Congregation in June after having served the people of Alaska for 13 years of her 40 years as a religious.



We had the same pilot as the day before. As we were boarding, he told us that things would probably be bumpy once we were airborne, due to the high winds. "But it will be a safe flight," he assured us. Taking no chances, Sr. Marian and I spent the flight praying our rosaries and asking the holy angels and Blessed Mother to intercede for us. The flight back to Aniak was turbulent, but we landed safely. The pilot even remarked that the flight was much better than he had anticipated. "And the prayers certainly helped," he said.

Tuesday, December 10

I rose early at 6am and spent a peaceful holy hour with the Lord. I love praying the Liturgy of the Hours with a hot cup of strong coffee at dawn...there is no better way to greet the Lord and thank Him for the gift of a new day.

I packed my gear and Sr. Marian and I were off to the airport again by 8:30am. We were soon in the air in a Cessna Grand Caravan and set down just 15 minutes later in the village of Upper Kalskag, a small village of about 60 Yup'ik families. "Upper," as the local call it, was formed when Russian Orthodox residents moved two miles downriver in 1940 and formed Lower Kalskag. Today, the two villages are linked by a single two-mile dirt road.

Yesterday, the temperature rose to 44°F in Aniak and Kalskag, which melted some of the snow and ice. Overnight, however, the temperatures dropped to below freezing, so by the time we arrived, the tarmac and walkways were pretty much an ice rink. Sister Marian is a seasoned traveler and packed her ice grippers that she attached to her boots. Mine (of course) were left in Fairbanks, since I was sure I wouldn't need them on this trip. Fortunately, we were greeted at the airstrip by Mabel, who had a warm pickup waiting to take us to Immaculate Conception Catholic Church.

That evening, I was pleasantly surprised to see the church nearly full for Mass. Sister Marian had suggested I offer the Mass for Mabel and Dwayne's son, Carson, who had died about six months earlier. The young man was a special child of God who had been harassed for years about his speech impediment and other issues. Eventually, these wounds led him to end his own life. Sister Marian offered a lovely reflection about Carson, citing his love for his family and service to the Church in his youth.

It was painful to see Carson's mother, Mabel, crying through the entire Mass. The Blessed Virgin Mary knows the pain of losing a child so intimately and I am convinced she intercedes with profound grace for parents like Mabel and Carson who carry this burden. May God console their broken hearts.

Wednesday, December 11

Sister Marian and I were hoping to get a flight to the village of Russian Mission during this trip, but due to the erratic weather and ever-changing travel schedule, it just didn't happen. Hopefully, I will be able to make it there in a few months. Instead, I caught a midday flight back to Anchorage and was back in Fairbanks by bedtime.

As I reflected on my visit to Aniak, Holy Cross, and Kalskag, I thought about the homily I had given the day before. I had emphasized the words of Isaiah: that we are invited to change our hearts and God will provide the grace we need to make that change. He also gives us the promised hope of a savior, Jesus Christ, who will bring us to salvation. As I recall the villagers who gathered to celebrate the Mass with me in each community, I was reminded of Jesus saying that through Him, "the poor have the Good News proclaimed to them." The Native Catholics I visit on these trips to "the bush" are truly good people who earnestly long to draw close to Christ, who humbly acknowledge their own need for God's help...I just wish we could provide them with Mass and sacraments more often.

As always, I returned to Fairbanks grateful and inspired by their faith—and most richly blessed to be their shepherd.

Chad W. Zielinski

MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT



Father Mark Hoelsken, SJ An Unexpected Call to the Far North

Father Mark Hoelsken, SJ, has spent all three decades of his priesthood ministering to indigenous Catholics in northern Alaska. Today, he lives in the village of Bethel and heads the diocese's Rural Deacon program, which recruits and forms men to head ministry for rural parishes in the frequent absence of a priest.

What had the strongest influence on your faith growing up?

Catholic education probably had the strongest influence on me. I grew up in Denver in the 1960s in the middle of a large, extended Catholic family. And because I also went to parochial schools, the faith was just the water I swam in as a child. I know some people have had negative experiences with Catholic schools, but mine were positive and I thought the sisters that taught me were great. I also lived through the Church's transition after Vatican II, and those changes were exciting to me and drew me deeper into the faith.

How did you know you were called to the priesthood and how did you end up in Alaska?

I had no early ambition toward religious life and never expected to become a priest. My mother even tried to get me to train as an altar server as a kid, but I knew that just wasn't for me. Then during my freshman year of high school, another student gave a presentation on her mission work in Central America and I was riveted. I thought, "I'm going to do that, too." Then, of course, I forgot all about it! I graduated, went to trade school, and became a factory technician. I really enjoyed my work but kept feeling like something important was missing. That brought up the idea of volunteer work again and I applied to the Peace Corps. Nothing came of it, then my cousin suggested I contact Jack Morris, the Jesuit priest who founded the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in 1956. I wrote to Jack and once they saw I was interested in the Catholic radio station, KNOM, they sent me to Nome to work as a broadcaster. Soon I was doing engineering, too. It was 1974 and I was 24 years old.

I spent three years in Nome, and I loved it...I loved the lifestyle, the Native people, and living for others and not just myself. But there was still something missing. I'd met some Jesuit priests working in Alaska at the time and I just kept coming back to the idea of fully dedicating myself to a life of service, as they had. But the discernment was painful and confusing, because I had fallen in love with a young woman who was volunteering at the station, too. Finally, I decided I was called and entered formation in Portland, Oregon to become a Jesuit, later studying philosophy at Gonzaga University in Washington and theology at Regis College in Toronto. I was ordained in 1991 and the Jesuit superior asked me to go back to Alaska, which I welcomed.

I'm grateful God sent me to the bush, because I've never been one of those men with rock-solid certainty about his vocation. I've had doubts; to say otherwise would be false. But being here, ministering to the indigenous people in the villages, has given me hope as a priest and kept me going even through the doubts.

What advice would you give a young man discerning a religious vocation?

The first advice I'd give is, of course, to pray about it. Then I'd tell him to get a spiritual director he trusts to help him through the process. Most of all, though, I'd tell him to trust the journey...trust where you feel led by the Holy Spirit. Because no matter what your path is, God is with you and will open the paths that are best for you.

