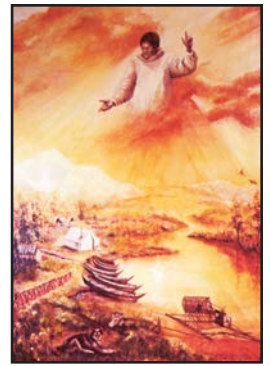




# The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 58 Number 5

Fall School Issue 2020

*Some give by going to the Missions*

*Some go by giving to the Missions*

*Without both there are no Missions*

## The Evolution of Catholic Education in Northern Alaska

*Since the first Catholic school was established in Alaska in the 1800s, Catholic education in the far north has always reflected the needs of its diverse residents—first, serving mostly indigenous youth from villages that lacked schools and later, providing faith-based education to a small number of Catholic families in Fairbanks. Today, the diocese's Catholic schools are adapting yet again, this time offering options that help families safely manage exposure to COVID-19 while still achieving a quality education within a tight-knit faith community.*



In 1942, less than a year after the United States entered World War II, Harold Esmailka's family was fighting its own battle to survive in northern Alaska.

The Esmailkas were Athabaskan, one of the oldest indigenous groups in the far north that lived mainly in the interior region. "The People" had lived off the land for thousands of years, relying on nature's seasonal bounty of salmon, moose, caribou, and berries to care for their families. It was a rich and purposeful life, but gruelingly hard: interior Alaska has some of the harshest environmental conditions in the world, with winter bringing 70 below zero temperatures and up to seven feet of snow. Animal migrations can be unpredictable, too, and some years brought a smaller salmon run or scant caribou herds.

While the Athabaskan people are matriarchal (the family line descends through the mother), fathers literally kept the family alive by hunting and trapping, bringing home hundreds of pounds of nourishing meat and fish year-round. It was a crisis, then, when Esmailka's father, Peter, became deathly ill in spring 1942.

There was no such thing as public assistance back then and Peter knew his wife, Martha, would

**CATHOLIC BISHOP OF NORTHERN ALASKA**  
1312 PEGER ROAD FAIRBANKS, ALASKA 99709  
Phone: 907-374-9532 [www.dioceseoffairbanks.org](http://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.*





*Left: Peter Esmailka with his children, Harold, Mary, and Rudy, pose for a photo in Nulato in 1939, shortly before Harold and Mary left to attend Holy Cross Catholic boarding school. Below: Holy Cross Mission and School on the right bank of the Yukon River and 279 miles upstream from the Bering Sea. Holy Cross Mission was the second mission founded in Northern Alaska. The Nulato Mission was founded the year before in 1887. Holy Cross boarding school opened in 1888 and by the time it closed in 1956, it had seen a total of 727 boys and 730 girls cared for by the mission.*



*Below: On October 14, 1956, Stinson bush planes shuttled 26 children from Holy Cross to Aniak. From there a DC-4 Starliner flew them the 540 miles east to the Gulkana airport, twelve miles from Copper Valley School. The school was closed in May 1971, due to rising operational costs.*

struggle to provide for Harold and his younger sister without him. He died on June 1, having elicited a promise that Martha would send the children to the Catholic boarding school downriver at Holy Cross mission. The Esmailkas were converts to Catholicism and knew the priests and nuns at Holy Cross would care for their children, body and soul. The school also would provide the children with their first experience of formal education. Until then, neither child had gone to school due to the demands of the family's subsistence lifestyle, which had kept them on the river and in the woods gathering food and furs most of the year.

Harold was just 11 when he and nine-year-old, Mary, arrived by boat at Holy Cross that August. "All we had ever known was our village of Nulato and it was hard and lonesome at first," he admits. But the priests and nuns who ran the mission and school soon won over the children, who came to view them as extended family. Fifty years later, Esmailka is still

*Right: In 1894, a boarding school, St. Joseph's, was opened in Akulurak. After the area was decimated by the flu epidemic in 1900, the school reopened in 1905 and renamed St. Mary's. The diphtheria epidemic swept through in 1906 killing many people and leaving orphans in its wake. In 1918 came the great flu epidemic and the Great Depression of the 1930s followed. On August 3, 1951, the mission was moved to a new location on the Andreafsky River. By 1974, the grade school was phased out and the high school, with an average enrollment of 125 students expanded its curriculum to include Yup'ik language, sewing, boat and sled building, and Yup'ik culture and traditions. The school had, as one of its primary aims, to graduate students who could go on to college, and, sooner or later, return to their villages and assume leadership roles. Its basic philosophy was enthusiastically shared by faculty, staff and students. On January 27, 1987, Bishop Michael J. Kaniecki, SJ, made the sad but financially responsible decision to close the school.*







*Above: As early as 1891, the Jesuits ran a “contract school” at Nulato. On September 19, 1899, three Sisters of St. Ann arrived from Holy Cross Mission to open a day school. Classes began on November 2nd with eleven pupils. The Sisters of St. Ann served at Nulato in various capacities, though mainly as schoolteachers, until 1983.*



*Above: The Sisters of Providence staffed a parochial school, St. Joseph's, in Nome, from the fall of 1904 to May 1918. Nome saw the Sisters of Providence again in the summers of 1951-57, when they taught catechism classes there.*



*Above: On April 22, 1918, much of what was at the Marys Igloo mission (in Nome) was gradually moved to the Hot Springs ranch and turned into a mission center and orphanage. Pilgrim Hot Springs became the new Our Lady of Lourdes Mission. The development of the new mission was given particular impetus by the severe influenza epidemic. For two decades, the Pilgrim Springs mission flourished, both as a mission center and as a boarding school-orphanage. By 1941, the mission was in poor repair and there were no longer enough orphans to justify the expense of keeping the mission open—it was closed on July 31, 1941.*



deeply grateful for his Catholic education, which laid the foundation for professional success as a pilot and business owner.

His time at Holy Cross also endowed him with an unshakeable faith that still brings the light of Christ to God's people in northern Alaska almost 70 years later—Harold and his wife, Florence now live in the village of Ruby and are active members of St. Peter in Chains Catholic Church, which they helped build many decades ago.

### **Early Catholic Education in Alaska**

For many Catholics, the term “parochial school” conjures up images of diocesan priests and fully habited nuns running an inner-city school for poor children, a la the 1945 film, *The Bells of St. Mary's*. Catholic schools in Alaska, however, have always had some unique challenges over their counterparts in the lower 48 states.

For one, the Church's earliest schools in Alaska were located in areas so remote you needed a dogsled, boat, or plane to reach them. There were no stores where missionaries could buy building materials, clothing, or groceries; instead, they hauled in the few supplies they could and relied on Mother Nature to provide the rest.

Esmailka still remembers the hard work it took to sustain the Holy Cross school and mission, where practical survival skills were just as important as English, math, and religion classes. Older boys helped hunt moose and fish for salmon, while female students helped gather berries and sew beaver skins into hats and mittens. The mission also received the occasional gift of meat and fish from native families that had moved to the area so their children could attend the day school while living at home, says Harold. Firewood duty was constant—buildings were heated by woodstove, and students helped fell, split, and stockpile the countless cords of spruce and birch needed to keep the school, church, and dormitories warm through the arctic winters. Students also helped maintain large vegetable gardens that provided potatoes, carrots, and beets—root vegetables that kept well during the winter.

*Left: In 1952, Father George T. Boileau, SJ, made one of his priorities the bringing about of a Catholic high school. Named for Father Monroe, Monroe Catholic High School had its beginnings, as did the grade school, in the basement of Immaculate Conception Church, in the fall of 1955, with an enrollment of nine students in the freshmen class. On September 2, 1956, the new high school, built next to the grade school, was dedicated and ready to receive its first freshmen and sophomore classes, numbering 32.*





*Harold Esmailka stands next to his first airplane in Nulato, Alaska, which he purchased for \$1,250. After serving his country in the United States Army, Harold found his calling as a pilot and often transported clergy to the village parishes. In 2011, Harold was awarded 50 years of Dedicated Service in Aviation Safety from the FAA.*

“We ate a lot of potatoes,” says Esmailka. “A LOT of potatoes!”

Attending Holy Cross school set Esmailka on a vocational path that benefited not only him and his immediate family, but thousands of indigenous people across Alaska. As a student, he had often worked in the school’s shop with Br. George Feltes, an early Alaskan aviator who recognized and encouraged the young man’s mechanical aptitude. A few years later, Esmailka would channel these skills into a lucrative job as a heavy-duty mechanic at Eielson Air Force Base, using the salary to purchase his first small airplane for \$1,250 in his mid-20s. In 1970, he made aviation his full-time career and formed Harold’s Air Service. In its heyday, the company had 28 aircraft serving 63 villages across rural Alaska.

For Esmailka, what started out as a tragedy—the death of his father, the threat of poverty, and separation from his beloved mother—was redeemed and transformed by the Jesuits and Sisters of St. Anne who cared for and educated him at Holy Cross. “They loved us and treated us well,” he insists. “You knew they were dedicated to God and to our people.”

Eventually, Catholic boarding schools like the one at Holy Cross and in the village of St. Mary’s gave way to village-based schools, which enabled native children to receive an education in the midst of their own people and culture. By the time Holy Cross closed its doors permanently in 1956, 42 priests and 58 nuns

had cared for and educated nearly 1,500 children from across rural Alaska.

### **Catholic Education in Fairbanks**

Around the same time the Esmailkas were sending their children down the Yukon River to a long-standing Catholic boarding school, parochial education in Fairbanks was just getting started. In 1946, the city’s first Catholic school was established in the basement of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, with two Sisters of Providence teaching 36 children in grades 1-4. By the next year, enrollment had doubled and only grew as the school added a new grade each year.

Recognizing an increasing demand for Catholic education in Fairbanks, which was now flanked by two military bases, the diocese purchased a small tract of land just north of the church and built Immaculate Conception Elementary School, which opened in 1956. The school initially consisted of six construction camp buildings and an old army officer’s club that had been put under one roof and divided into classrooms.

A year later, the diocese built Monroe Catholic High School, the northernmost Catholic high school



*Masked Immaculate Conception students are experiencing school a little differently this year under the new safety structure. Here they return from the school garden with freshly harvested carrots.*

in the Americas, to educate the now-teen students who wanted to continue their education. The facility was small, new, and bare bones; for its first decade, the “gymnasium” was a small unheated quonset hut made barely habitable in winter even with raging woodstoves. Eventually, Monroe got a real gymnasium, which was flooded with three feet of water just two years later. In true Alaskan fashion, Jesuit priests and brothers just dismantled the gym floor piece by piece, dried the pieces in the parking lot, and re-laid the entire floor again.

By the 1980s, with shrinking numbers of priests and religious in Alaska, both Immaculate Conception and Monroe had transitioned to mostly lay faculty. For the past 40 years, the schools have been a mainstay in the Fairbanks community, offering rigorous academics in the midst of a faith-rich, “family-like” atmosphere that has increasingly attracted even many non-Catholics.

### **Pandemic Heard Round the World**

Just as it has for nearly 150 years, Catholic education in Alaska has continued to evolve. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in March, both Immaculate Conception and Monroe shut their doors and went to online classes like the rest of the schools in Alaska. Initially, most thought the shutdown would last just a few weeks until the country “flattened the curve,” but by mid-summer, it was apparent that staff needed to plan for the long-term and offer something new in fall.

“We saw this as our chance to innovate, to bring something new and even better to Fairbanks,” says Kristy Parrish, principle of Immaculate Conception. It was a challenge to figure out how to serve the needs of so many different families, she admits.

“Our goal in giving families different learning options was to be considerate of both working families and those who felt more comfortable with students learning from home. In particular for elementary students, the social benefits of having in-school learning cannot be replicated at home. We also felt confident in our teachers’ ability to lead online learning, given our tech infrastructure and our experience during spring quarter.”

When Immaculate Conception opened in August, the school offered families three levels of engagement: all-day learning onsite, half-day onsite learning, and home-based learning. Core classes are held in the morning, which enables students to leave school after lunch if they need to minimize social exposure.

Monroe High School also transitioned from having seven classes all five days of the week to a block schedule, where students complete four classes per semester. According to principal Patrick Riggs, a block schedule minimizes the burden on students and teachers if Alaska experiences a spike in coronavirus cases and the school has to shut down again during the school year.

“If we absolutely have to all be at home, it’s a lot easier to teach and keep up with four classes than with seven,” Riggs explains.

Almost as important as maintaining strong academics and a sense of community was preserving mental health for students, according to Riggs and Parrish.

“Depression and anxiety have skyrocketed in kids since they’ve gone to online learning because they’re socially isolated and away from friends,” says Riggs. “We knew that was an even bigger issue



*Plastic barriers help Monroe Catholic High Students stay safely distanced while they enjoy the benefits of face-to-face learning. Work is turned in via iPads to help minimize the possible spread of COVID-19 with the handling of papers.*



in Alaska, especially in winter when it's 40 below zero and dark outside most of the day." For students attending exclusively online, the school has faculty reach out weekly for health and wellness checkups. If the school is forced to go fully online for all students, it will rely on teams of people to maintain the social connections so critical for good mental health.

For now, Riggs and Parrish are grateful they can offer families an onsite option in the midst of a pandemic, still proving that Catholic education in Alaska remains adaptable and always in service to God's people. "Maybe we couldn't make these kinds of decisions in Seattle or New York," Riggs says. "But this is Alaska, so we can."

Amanda Angaiak, Director of Catholic Schools of Fairbanks, adds, "This school year is both wonderfully familiar, and absolutely "new and different." Grounding our staff and students each and every day is the opportunity to Encounter Christ, Become Scholars, and remain a Catholic school Family during a tumultuous time in our history. I continue to be amazed and grateful for how our teachers and staff center our experience in the "MAGIS" —that is, doing more for God. I can say, truly, that our community is living the Magis; living our mission."



*At Immaculate Conception, masked youngsters enjoy painting where easels provide a fun and safe distancing barrier.*

*This sign greets all who enter the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks.*

**Be It Known To All Who Enter Here  
That Christ Is The Reason For This School,  
The Unseen But Ever Present Teacher In Its Classes,  
The Model Of Its Faculty,  
The Inspiration Of Its Students.**

*By promoting an education in the faith, Catholic Schools of Fairbanks granted me a firm foundation that I continue to reference in my life in the Church.*

*The teachers are committed to promoting the student's understanding of the faith and that instilled in me a desire to continue learning about what we believe as Catholics.*

*CSF provided an environment that remains as a perfect example of the way we are called to live all aspects of our lives.*

**Thomas "Tom" Vorderbruggen**

Monroe High School—Class of 2016

University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK—Class of 2020

*Tom received his degree in August in Japanese Studies and is currently working toward his baccalaureate in Accounting which he will earn in May of 2021. He is employed in Fairbanks at Feniks & Company, LLC. Tom also serves on Sacred Heart Cathedral's parish council and as Sacristan at Mass.*

*The Catholic Schools of Fairbanks provided an enriching experience that has carried me through my personal life and professional career. My education through CSF has strengthened my faith on a spiritual level, and has allowed me to build relationships with friends, colleagues, and the Fairbanks community.*

*As a physical therapist, I strive to practice Jesuit teachings with my patients on a daily basis in order to care for the whole person. I am grateful for a school that gave me more than just an education, but a basis of ethics and values to utilize in my life.*

**Elizabeth "Lizzy" (Bennett) Vandermeer**

Monroe High School —Class of 2010

Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT—Class of 2014

Creighton University, Omaha, NE—Class of 2017

*Lizzy received her degree in Exercise Science at SHU and received her doctorate of Physical Therapy from Creighton University in 2017. She is currently employed in Fairbanks as a Physical Therapist at Equinox Physical Therapy. She is a member of St. Mark's University Parish.*

**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**

Dear Bishop Zielinski,

**F1 S2020 05**

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



**AMOUNT OF GIFT:**

\$15 \_\_\_\_\_ \$25 \_\_\_\_\_ \$50 \_\_\_\_\_ \$100 \_\_\_\_\_  
\$250 \_\_\_\_\_ \$500 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Street No. \_\_\_\_\_

P.O.Box \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**Please call me:** Phone \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Note: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Bishop Zielinski,

**F12 S2020 05**

Enclosed is a special donation to the **Catholic Schools of Fairbanks Annual Fund**, a fund intended exclusively to help alleviate operational costs at the school.



**AMOUNT OF GIFT:**

\$15 \_\_\_\_\_ \$25 \_\_\_\_\_ \$50 \_\_\_\_\_ \$100 \_\_\_\_\_  
\$250 \_\_\_\_\_ \$500 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Street No. \_\_\_\_\_

P.O.Box \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**Please call me:** Phone \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Note: \_\_\_\_\_

Donations by **CHECK** can be made payable to: **Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska or CBNA.**

**CREDIT CARD** donations can be made online at [http://bit.ly/CBNA\\_AK](http://bit.ly/CBNA_AK) OR CALL us at **907-374-9532.**

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

# The Impact of Your Gift

The remoteness of our villages can be a **great hardship**. Villages don't have libraries, theaters, or malls...many don't even have a grocery store or medical clinic.

Not surprisingly, **these struggles** leave many of our people vulnerable to domestic violence, substance abuse, even suicide. Native Alaskans take their lives 3x more than other Americans and most victims are teens or young adults.

The Mass and Sacraments can literally mean the **difference between life or death** for Catholics in Alaska. Your prayers, encouragement and donations help us send priests to these northern Alaskan Catholics and bring the Mass and the Sacraments to them. You help maintain their churches and programs and sustain their mission and ministries.

## Current Campaigns

### St. Catherine of Siena Building Fund



Total Estimated Cost: \$2.75 Million  
Current Fund Total: \$ 1.73 Million  
Current Status: On Hold

We sincerely welcome donations toward the rebuilding of St. Catherine of

Siena Catholic Church in Chefornak. The old church, built in 1975, was destroyed in a fire in 2004.

### Seminarian Endowment Fund

CURRENT FUND TOTAL: \$1.66 Million

2020 GOAL: \$300,000

2020 FUNDS RAISED (Through August): \$103,800

The Diocese of Fairbanks is building a permanent endowment that can be stewarded and retained for years to come. The income from this endowment will support the cost of seminarian education in the Diocese of Fairbanks. The annual cost of training a seminarian \$45,000 per year.



*Your first class stamp donations are greatly appreciated.*

## A LOVING GIFT A LASTING LEGACY



Just as you would provide for your own personal family in your will, you can provide for your family of faith as well. Only with a will or trust are your wishes known and followed after death. As Christians, we know that charitable giving is not just a matter of tax deductions, but also a matter of sharing the many blessings God has bestowed upon us. Your thoughtfulness in this matter means so much for the continued growth of this mission diocese in the far northern reaches of Alaska.

If you wish to make a charitable bequest, please use the legal name, Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska. As an example, you may wish to use the wording similar to: "I give the sum of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to the Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska, 1316 Peger Road, Fairbanks, Alaska 99709"; or "I leave all (or a portion) of the rest, residue and remainder of my property of every kind and character, including personal property and real estate and wheresoever the same may be situated, I give and devise to the Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska ...".

If you already have a will, you can add an Addendum or Codicil with similar wording as stated above.

To speak to someone regarding information about **Planned Giving** or **Annuities** part of your estate plans, please contact our **Mission Outreach Coordinator, Dr. Les Maiman** at [mission@cbna.org](mailto:mission@cbna.org) or by phone at **907-888-3722**.

TO DONATE DIRECTLY  
THROUGH YOUR  
DONOR ADVISED FUND





# A Letter from Bishop Chad

Dear Friends of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks and the Catholic Schools,

Seventy-four years ago, in September 1946, under the supervision of Father Edmund Anable, SJ, and the Sisters of Providence, fifty-five 1st-4th grade students began classes in the basement of Fairbanks' historic Immaculate Conception Church. In 1951, six construction camp buildings and the old army officers club were moved to a site on Noyes Slough. These buildings, arranged under a single roof, became the home of Immaculate Conception School and of 115 elementary students.

In 1955, the first 9th grade class met at Immaculate Conception Church. In 1956, a \$400,000 high school, named after Father Francis Monroe, SJ, founder of the first Catholic Parish in Fairbanks, was completed and opened. On May 29, 1959, Alaska was celebrating its first year of statehood, as Fairbanks' Monroe Catholic High School graduated its first senior class, a class of six. By 1978, enough funding had been secured for construction of a two-story elementary school. In 1980, the first parent-funded kindergarten was held.

Today, there are nearly 400 students reaping the benefits of a Catholic education in Fairbanks. Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School comprise the only PreK-12 Catholic school system in northern Alaska. Situated in Fairbanks, just 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle, these schools educate students from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some live within walking distance, others travel 25 miles by bus or car to attend a Catholic school. The **Catholic Schools of Fairbanks** provide an educational environment that is rooted in faith, rich in academic excellence, strengthened by service and nurtured by community.

Until the 1980s, ICS and Monroe employed a large number of Religious, both men and women, and members of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. In the last 40 years, the JVC has turned its resources to other areas and the school no longer has Religious on staff. The Religious and the volunteers donated a tremendous amount of time and energy at a very low cost. The school does enjoy the benefit of visits from our local diocesan priests and our missionary priests when they are in from the villages.

In 2013, the Diocesan school ensued a partnership that would fully recognize the historical roots of their Jesuit connection by receiving an official endorsement from Jesuits West. At the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks, one hears the traits of **Graduate at Graduation**, commonly called "Grad at Grad." These are **Religious, Loving, Intellectually Competent, Open to Growth and Committed to Doing Justice**. These traits are part of student's curriculum at the **Catholic Schools of Fairbanks** and the core of their actions.

The increases in educational costs have gone largely to paying teachers and staff. And this year, COVID-19 presents more challenges in terms of costs to keep the students safely distanced and provide technology to meet the needs of learning and teaching in this new environment.

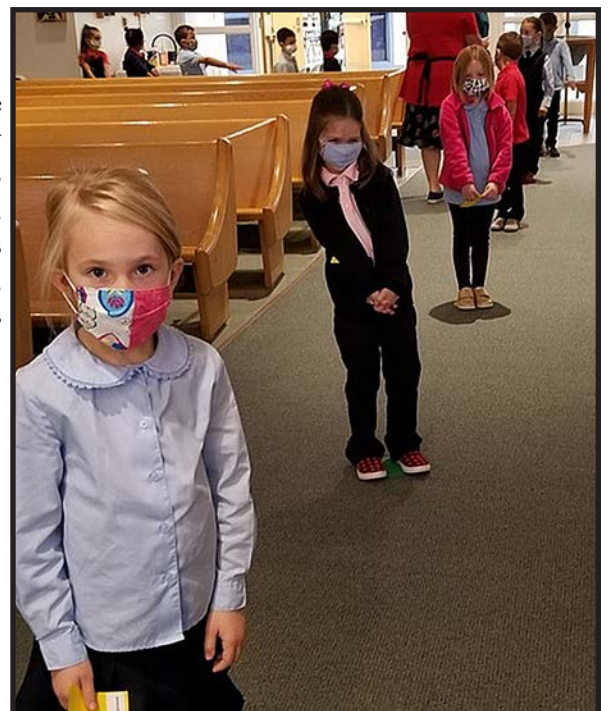
That is why we find ourselves knocking at your door. Contributing to the **Catholic Schools of Fairbanks** will ensure that the schools will be able to pay for textbooks, computer supplies, salaries, maintenance costs, and other expenses associated with running a school, particularly during a pandemic. Additionally, your donation will help keep tuitions at affordable levels so that more families will be able to have the choice of a Catholic education for their children. Finally, you will be part of a tradition of giving—dating back to 1946, when the schools opened in the basement of Immaculate Conception church.

Thank you for your prayerful and financial support.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Chad W. Zielinski

† Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski  
Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska  
Diocese of Fairbanks



# Flying priests, deacons, nuns, and bishops!

## The End of an Era



*Bishop Michael J. Kaniecki, SJ, received his pilot's license in 1964 and was ordained a priest a year later. He was ordained a bishop in 1984 and continued to serve the missions as a pilot and bishop until his sudden death, a heart attack, on August 6, 2000, in the village of Emmonak.*

Alaska is a state that has been transformed by aviation. Outside of Anchorage and Fairbanks, most villages and other settlements were so remote you could only reach them by boat in the summer or dogsled in the winter. While the territory's first commercial air service was started in 1927, the company serviced just a few coastal areas and none of the smaller, remote villages in the interior. As air service by "bush pilots" became more common in the 1940s and 1950s, rural Alaskans finally began to enjoy regular delivery of mail and supplies and were able to travel to other parts of the state for medical care, education, and jobs.

Planes also played an important role in spreading the faith in Alaska. Early missionaries had traversed the wilderness on foot to reach remote communities, suffering unimaginable hardships and even death to bring the Gospel to native people and gold rush miners. Air travel was a godsend, offering a far more efficient, safer, and cost-effective way to travel the hundreds of miles between village parishes.

Over the past 100 years, the Diocese of Fairbanks has relied heavily upon air travel to bring the Risen Christ to the faithful. At times, the diocese had its own aircraft and pilot clergy and even had its own small fleet of planes in the mid-1970s. Most recently, the diocese has relied on a single small plane, a donated Cessna 182, to bring the Mass and sacraments to its rural parishes. However, the Diocese of Fairbanks has decided it is finally time to say goodbye to "Yellow Bird" and clergy traveling for their ministry by small, private aircraft.

*The Alaskan Shepherd* Newsletter

### Evangelizing through Aviation

The Diocese of Fairbanks' history of flying missionaries began in 1929, when donors from across the country helped then Bishop Joseph R. Crimont, SJ, purchase a six-seater plane specially customized for arctic winter flying. As the first diocesan plane commissioned for missionary work in Alaska, the "Marquette Missionary" was supposed to have heralded a new technological era, in which missionaries could reach their flocks in a fraction of the time it would take to travel on land. Instead, the plane tragically crashed just one month after it arrived in Alaska, killing the pilot and two passenger priests on board.

The fatal crash had a chilling effect on missionary aviation in Alaska, and it would take another 25 years before Bishop Francis Gleeson began once again to use planes to transport priests and other religious between missions. Once reintroduced, however, air travel became the norm and by 1977, the diocese owned five small planes and had nearly a dozen pilot priests and deacons.

Then in the mid-1980s, Fairbanks gained its first flying bishop, Bishop Michael J. Kaniecki, SJ. Anxious to ensure his people received the Mass and sacraments as often as possible, Father Kaniecki had become a pilot just a year before his ordination in 1965. In 1984, the now Bishop Kaniecki continued to fly to numerous villages during each of his short visits to the bush. In a 1992 travel journal, he wrote, "By having my own plane, I was able to cover two villages, bringing people the Holy Week and Easter services and attending the Alaska Christian Conference in Bethel and Stick Dance ceremonies in Nulato. By the time I landed in Fairbanks, I had made 18 takeoffs and landings, had flown 12.8 hours, and had logged over 1,400 air miles."

Bishop Kaniecki flew across Alaska until his untimely death in 2000 at age 65. He had flown to the village of Emmonak and was about to celebrate Mass when he suffered a fatal heart attack. With no other pilot priests or deacons available, the diocese returned to its reliance on commercial air travel for the next decade to send clergy to its 38 most remote parishes.

That would change in 2014, when Ralph and Beverly Holzfaster of Nebraska donated a Cessna 182 to the diocese and Fr. Jim Falsey of Michigan generously offered to spend his "retirement" as a volunteer pilot-priest in Alaska. For six years, Fr. Falsey flew *Yellow Bird* to village parishes across the diocese, serving mostly Athabaskan Catholics in the interior region. In addition to serving parishes that only see a priest a few times a year,





*Ralph Holzfaster generously gifted the Missions with his Yellow Bird, a Cessna 182, in 2014. Retired priest Jim Falsey gifted the Missions with his generous offer to spend his retirement volunteering as a pilot. For the past six years, he has greatly increased our ability to bring the Mass and sacraments to the people of northern Alaska and to transport Missionaries between and to the mission villages.*

Fr. Falsey often flew to villages for pastoral emergencies—to anoint a dying parishioner or perform funeral rites. He brought the Mass and sacraments to thousands of indigenous Catholics, bringing hope and healing to remote communities often suffering high rates of unemployment, substance abuse, and suicide.

### **Mounting Reasons to Sell**

While Alaska has avoided the civil unrest that has swept across many lower 48 states, our great state still has been profoundly impacted by COVID-19's economic downturn. In 2019, Alaska emerged from the state's longest recession on record, but that recovery was derailed by the pandemic. Tourism in particular, which accounts for one in eight Alaskan jobs and infuses nearly \$2.5 billion into the state's economy annually, came to a screeching halt for most of the year.

Like the private sector, the Church has not been immune to the economic effects of coronavirus. With many supporters struggling with their own loss of income, donations dropped significantly after March and the diocese anticipates a 20% decrease in donations over the next year.

With tourism hobbled and travel still restricted by many villages, there has been less demand for air service in Alaska and many carriers have struggled to survive. Not all have made it; some companies have gone under and the largest airline serving rural Alaska declared bankruptcy this past spring, laying off 1,000+ employees.

Even before the pandemic, rising maintenance costs had made it difficult for many companies to stay in the black. There is a national shortage of pilots and aircraft mechanics,

and it can be difficult to lure these professionals to the far north, even with high salaries. Maintenance in Alaska also poses its own unique challenges...getting a needed part or sending someone with the expertise to install it to a remote village can be an expensive and logistical nightmare.

Flying in Alaska can be treacherous due to the rapidly changing weather, topography, and the extreme environment. Alaska in particular has seen an unusually high number of aircraft crashes in recent years and now has one of the highest fatal crash rates in the nation.

As commercial insurance premiums have become more expensive, Alaskan airlines have become even more conservative about risk. Pilots are newer, with less experience flying in arctic conditions, and with fewer mechanics, companies are grounding planes more often during inclement weather. Last year, up to half the flights the diocese's priests and faith leaders in the bush were scheduled to take were canceled because of extreme cold, fog, or ice. Bishop Zielinski was even stranded in a village for five extra days due to bad weather.

The risks associated with flying a small private aircraft in our vast region, combined with a lack of priests who are pilots, and the diocese's anticipated funding cuts, has led Bishop Zielinski to make the difficult but necessary decision to sell the diocese's Cessna 182. Proceeds of *Yellow Bird* will be used to cover the costs of commercial air travel for our 16 priests, about half of whom serve village parishes in the bush.

Having a diocesan plane offered a great advantage to the Church during its early efforts to bring Catholicism to Alaska, but air service between villages is consistent now, even if there are fewer flights because of the pandemic. With the infrastructure in place to shift the burden of insurance and maintenance to the private sector, selling the plane and having priests travel commercial not only reduces risk but just makes the most fiscal sense, according to the diocese's Chief Financial Officer, Susan Clifton.

Most of the Diocese of Fairbanks' income comes from donations, adds Bishop Zielinski, and the chancery regularly receives letters containing checks from seniors on fixed incomes and from benefactors located in the lower 48 who were in tears when they learned that some Catholics in Alaska go months without the Mass and sacraments.

"I'm sad we have to let *Yellow Bird* go; it's the end of an era," he says. "But it's the only way we can be good stewards of the limited resources we have and honor the sacrifices of the people who make our work possible."

# MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT

## Fr. Thinh Van Tran From Vietnam to Alaska



*Father Thinh Van Tran grew up in a small farming village in Vietnam, where every resident was a practicing Catholic. After emigrating to the United States in 2001, he joined the Franciscans, whom he had witnessed faithfully serve the Vietnamese people as a child and young adult. Today, Fr. Thinh is one of four Franciscans serving the eight mostly Athaskan villages in the interior region.*

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

I was blessed to grow up after the Vietnam War ended, in a small village in south Vietnam about 50 miles from Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Our little farming community was tight-knit and 100% Catholic. My whole family consisted of Catholics who truly lived out their faith; my parents and grandparents would wake up at 5:30 am every morning and the whole family would walk to Mass, even during the rainy seasons, to pray before school or going to the fields. Those were the days of knowing the faith by memorization, like they used to with the Baltimore Catechism. All that, plus the dedication of my hometown parish priests and the Franciscan priests and brothers who served our village and those nearby really made a strong impression on me about the importance of living your life for Jesus Christ.

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

My vocation was born in Vietnam. Growing up, I was interested in becoming a lot of things—farmer, nurse, tractor driver—but I was raised among the Franciscans and that always stayed with me. My whole family slowly emigrated to the United States starting in the mid-1980s and I followed in 2001. By then, I was 27 and knew God was calling me to the priesthood. I also knew that the Franciscan friar's life was attractive to me, so I contacted the Franciscan Province of the Sacred Heart in Chicago soon after arriving in America and they accepted me.

### How did you end up in Alaska?

My order sent me to Alaska 14 years ago on a mission trip. I spent two weeks here, visiting villages across the interior and doing maintenance on the churches. Two years later, I came back for another trip and finished building some of the furniture I had started on the first trip! To a lot of people, Vietnam and Alaska may seem very different and they are, but in some ways, I was well suited to being a missionary in bush Alaska—I grew up in a small rural village, where you had to be self-sufficient yet still take care of each other to survive. Plus, the summers are spent pretty much the same—dealing with the mosquitoes and out on the river fishing!

### What advice would you give a young man discerning a call to the priesthood?

Don't be afraid of Lord's call; open your heart and challenge yourself to try new things because the Holy Spirit will guide you and work through you. Every year I've been a priest has come with challenges. My first winter here, for instance, I made a snowmachine trip down to Kaltag from Nulato, alone on an unfamiliar trail. On the way back, I got caught in a snowstorm, turned over the snowmachine, and was stuck walking back Kaltag to get help. I found my way back to Nulato just as the search and rescue team was about to go looking for me! We must be ready to "Cast out into the deep" with Jesus, who has rich and wonderful surprises for our lives if we do.



**Issue Writer:** Misty Mealey  
**Editor:** Patty Walter

**Photos:** The Alaskan Shepherd & Diocese of Fairbanks Archives, JR Anchetta, Charlene Hendricks