



Volume 57 Number 5

Christmas 2019

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

A Christmas Message From Bishop Chad Zielinski

We Are Capable of Greater Love

“Peter, Do You Love Me?”

We all have our favorite scriptures or scenes from the Gospel. One most powerful for me comes at the end of John, when after the Resurrection, Jesus finds Peter fishing. I’m sure part of the connection comes from growing up around Lake Huron in Michigan, and enjoying a lot of fishing. I also know how hard it is to fish to feed your family, having seen Native Alaskans along the Yukon River haul in salmon for days to put away for winter.

I find it amazing that after Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples were confused about their mission. Jesus had already appeared to them twice, but they still returned to their familiar livelihood of fishing and had caught nothing. Yet, Jesus remains present amidst this confusion and fruitless work. He gives the disciples simple instructions—toss the net over the other side of the boat—that produces in abundance.

Peter no doubt wanted to keep Christ at a distance, being so ashamed of having denied Him three times. But Jesus looks at Peter man to man, piercing his soul with a forgiving and hopeful gaze. He



Photo by Pat Tam, who writes: We arranged for Bishop Chad to have a blessing of the boats this summer. Kwikpak Fisheries is the processor in Emmonak which buys and processes the salmon caught by local fishers. Jack Schultheis, the general manager of Kwikpak, has been extraordinarily generous toward our parish (Sacred Heart Church). He appreciated Bishop Chad's desire to bless the barges and pick-up boats belonging to the company. Also, there had been a tragic accident on one of the barges not long before the bishop's visit—a young man, Trevor Akaran of Kotlik, working on the boat had fallen into the river and drowned. Later the workers erected a memorial cross. Bishop prayed for Trevor, consoled the family, and blessed the cross before he went to bless the processing plant and fishing boats. One of the workers, Gordon Westlock, Jr., took bishop in a boat and drove him up and down the shore to bless the boats. In this photo, Bishop Chad is blessing Deacon Phillip Yupanik's boat.

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invites Peter to embrace his capacity for goodness with a simple question: “Do you love me?” Each question penetrates Peter’s wounds and reveals his feelings of unworthiness. He could have again said, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” But Peter is instead empowered by the Risen Christ to lead God’s people, having just encountered his own enormous capacity to love.

In this Gospel scene, Jesus demonstrates His unrelenting desire to be close to Peter and to all of us. Every Christmas, we’re reminded that God desires to be so close to us He “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Christ draws near to us even now, especially in the Sacraments and above all, in the Eucharist, where we truly encounter Him and are transformed.

The marvelous truth of the Eucharist is that in choosing to commune with us, Christ announces the goodness of God’s sacred design etched into our very being. Christmas is an invitation to draw closer to Christ, embrace Him, be transformed, and go help others recognize their capacity to love, because goodness lives within all of us.

You see this especially at Christmas, when even non-religious people desire to be generous and kind to others. Once while at seminary, I headed to the city for a few Christmas gifts. I approached the bank ATM (not everyone had a credit card in those days) and was chagrined to see a long line of people. Ahead of me in line was a young man wearing blue jeans, a denim jacket, and chains hanging from his clothing. It was the “punk rock” era, so his hair was shaved on the sides, spiked on top, and sported an array of colors.

I mentally sized him up, negatively thinking that nothing about his appearance reflected the Christmas spirit. Then a man in a car decided he would drive up and try to cut in front of all the other bank patrons. You could see the irritation in people, who had waited patiently for their turn.

Within a few seconds, the “punk rocker” spoke up loudly for all to hear: “I don’t think Santa is going to bring him anything this year.”

I wanted to yell, “You go, punk rock guy! Tell him like it is!” Then I realized I had completely misjudged the man. Despite his appearance, he had demonstrated a keen sense of justice on behalf of us all.

This experience in the 1980s expressed that instinct within each person to move toward the good. God’s desire to show us what is good breaks forth into our world in the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ. Yes, there is a quietness in the birth of Christ. But there also is a cry to the world that our Creator has given us the gift of gifts. As the angel Gabriel proclaimed to the shepherds, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). God is always crying out His love, if we have ears to hear.

As I reflect over the past year, traveling across our vast diocese and the rest of the United States, I see the world crying out in its woundedness. God allows us to choose good or evil and sadly, we too often choose sin and violate the human dignity of others and ourselves. Despite the abuse, violence, and oppression so prevalent today, however, deep down people still desire an encounter with true goodness. At the root of most personal and social problems is an unrequited desire for the One who is all good, Jesus Christ. We sense we are capable of greater love than our sins reflect.

When we hear Christmas carols and reflect on manger scenes, do we hear Jesus’s question, too? Christ asks us, “Do you love me?” because our lives and purpose are important to Him. I suspect most of us would like someone to ask us that question directly, so we can look within ourselves and confirm that deep capacity to love. Maybe our ability to love is wounded in some way, but Christ’s birth brings hope and healing.

As disciples together on the journey, may we take a moment this season to courageously ask one another, “Do you love me?” Let us also assist others to hear and answer this important question, too. In doing so, we acknowledge that Christ has given all people an incredible capacity to love, with Him as our model.

Merry Christmas!

+Chad W. Zielinski

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



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My Visit to Utqiagvik (Barrow)

A bright beacon of hope at the Top of The World

In September, Bishop Zielinski visited St. Patrick Catholic Church in Utqiagvik, formerly known as Barrow, the northernmost community in Alaska. Utqiagvik is located north of the Arctic Circle, and is home to about 4,500 people. More than half of residents are Inupiat Eskimo natives, who have lived off the land for thousands of years.

Friday, September 13

Today started early so I could make a 5:30 am flight from Fairbanks to Anchorage. When I arrived in Anchorage, I had to move quickly since the flight was already boarding for the village of Utqiagvik, once known as Barrow, the northernmost city in the United States. It was a full flight, with many heading back to work on the North Slope, where the bulk of Alaska's oil is produced. Many people who work on the slope live elsewhere and fly to the far north to work two weeks on, two weeks off. The long break is nice, but those with families also face the challenge of being separated from loved ones for a long period, too.

I arrived in Utqiagvik about midmorning and met Fr. Thomas Sagili, a missionary priest from India who has served in the bush for the past two years. He took me to St. Patrick Catholic Church, where I reconnected to the internet and rebooted my cell phone. I saw a text from a family in another village asking for prayers for medical issues. I am deeply touched and humbled when people ask me to pray for them. I think they believe my prayers are stronger because I'm a bishop, but the truth is, their belief in



the power of prayer strengthens my own faith.

After lunch, we took a walk. The shore of the Arctic Ocean is just a few blocks from the church and Fr. Thomas and I had a villager take a picture of us there. He saw our collars and asked if we were priests. Fr. Thomas explained that he lived in Utqiagvik and I was the visiting bishop. The man, Willie, welcomed us most graciously. I noticed he was Inupiaq, so I asked him to help us pronounce Utqiagvik. I botched the word a few times and Willie laughed. I think he was impressed I was making an attempt.

Willie was in his early 40s, and has lived in Utqiagvik his entire life. We chatted about climate changes and he mentioned there should already be snow on the ground by mid-September. (In fact, I had visited the village three years ago in August and it had already snowed.) Now, the polar ice field that usually isn't far from shore has moved 150 miles away, something that has never happened in recorded history. Willie talked about how the warming temperatures were impacting the migration patterns of



Bishop Chad Zielinski with Fr. Thomas Sagili, at Utqiagvik's shore.

the whales, seals, walrus, and sea life they feed on. It was interesting to hear his gritty, real-life perspective on what is usually just a theoretical discussion in the lower 48 states. Willie was not being political, just sharing what he observed as someone who literally depends on the animals of the sea to survive.

Willie is a member of the local Presbyterian church and told us they were gathering to work on translating the Old Testament into Inupiaq. What an incredible undertaking! Father Thomas knew their pastor, having worked with him on some efforts that encouraged the cooperation of local church leaders. I shared with Willie that my grandparents were long-time Presbyterians and had helped found their church more than 40 years earlier.

We continued our walk, then stopped at a coffee shack, where I purchased a small latte for \$7. We were at the "Top of the World" and the prices clearly reflected it!

We ended up at the local supermarket where we met two families from St. Patrick's. They were welcoming and happy to hear I was there to celebrate

Confirmations on Sunday. The supermarket was surprisingly well-stocked with produce and fresh meats, but the prices were significantly higher even than what I see in Fairbanks or the lower 48 states. I bought a can of tuna for more than \$2 and a small can of mixed nuts was more than \$11. It only takes a few items to cross the \$100 mark.

Mass was at 5:30 pm and I preached about the Exaltation of the Cross. The power of the Cross is driven by God's desire to draw closer to humanity through the redemption He offers on the Cross. The sacrifice on Calvary was connected to the offering of the Last Supper and this sacrifice is re-presented in the Holy Eucharist every Mass. And when we hear, "Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours will be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father," we are invited to offer our own sacrifice along with the priest.

What is that sacrifice? As a priest, do I pause, reflect, and truly offer myself as a sacrifice for the people of God gathered to worship? Do those gathered at Mass reach within and offer themselves as a gift to the Father, as Christ did on the Cross? God truly wants everything within us, I told those at Mass--our joys, thanksgivings, struggles, sins, failures, traumas, and petitions. He wants all of it on the altar. Christ draws all to Himself and through our offering of the bread and wine, He transforms those gifts into his own Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.

The stuff inside of us that we offer Christ also is transformed. Jesus knows we can't do it on our own, so He offers himself in the Eucharist as food for the journey. We consume Christ to become more like Him and to be united as brothers and sisters. That connection through Christ's Body and Blood runs deeper than any genetic connection, I told the Inupiat, Filipinos, Samoans, and Tongans at Mass. What smiles the people had! Many said they found the knowledge that we are so profoundly connected to Christ and to one another hopeful and encouraging.

Saturday, September 14, 2019

The sun peaked through the window at about 7am. The village is losing seven minutes of daylight per day at this time of year. Most Alaskans get excited about the winter solstice, which is when we start

St. Patrick's Church, Utqiagvik



gaining daylight en route to our “Midnight Sun.”

I spent Saturday catching up on emails and putting the final touches on my homily for the next day. I also called my family back in Michigan, since the four-hour time difference makes it difficult to catch up during the week. I prayed my rosary while walking around the village, enjoying the cold breeze sweeping in from the Arctic Ocean. The temperature was a balmy 39 degrees, according to locals, who kept commenting on how warm it was. I saw one man get into his vehicle in shorts and a t-shirt!

Father Thomas and I celebrated a vigil Mass that evening. Again, I reiterated how much God desires to be close to us, an invitation to relationship that is always there. All it takes to say yes to that invitation is a simple turning toward Him with a contrite heart, especially through the sacraments.

Sunday, September 15

Father Thomas and I rose early to have some quiet time before the Blessed Sacrament before the activity began for the Confirmation Mass. The candidates arrived and I was impressed with their attentiveness to their dress, polite attitude, and seriousness of their

faith. They talked about getting homework done and going to college. Utqiagvik is a growing community with the elementary, middle, and high school having around 500 students. Interestingly, rural Alaskan communities are trending younger, with 40% of villagers now being under age 18.

I told the confirmation candidates I would ask the Holy Spirit to give them a double-dose of fortitude to live their Christian faith in a world that seems so counter to the message of the Gospel. I encouraged them to believe with unwavering hope that in their yes to Christ, he would radiate His beauty, goodness, and truth. Just before the final blessing, I had the candidates come forward and gave them a cross that had been purchased in Rome. It was a cross of the Good Shepherd, with an imprint of a shepherd with a sheep wrapped around his neck and the 99 in the background. I explained this was a smaller version of the pectoral cross worn by Pope Francis. Know that Christ always has His eyes on you, I reminded them, so you are never lost.

St. Patrick's is attended by a unique mix of Inupiat, Filipino, Samoan, and Tongan parishioners, so I was excited about the array of ethnic foods that was sure to grace the celebratory potluck after the



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Mass. As I was about to offer grace before the meal, I turned to see the newly confirmed making up the line of servers. Instead of being first in line for food, they had instead decided to be servants to their community. Theirs was a profoundly moving witness.

That afternoon, Fr. Thomas and I attended an extended family's celebration for a young man who was confirmed. The parents' marriage was clearly a merging of cultures from extreme north to south. The mother, Crystal, is proudly descended from a long-time Inupiaq family in Utqiagvik. Her husband, Tino, is from Samoa. Five years as a bishop in northern Alaska has opened my mind and heart to the beauty of Inupiaq culture. My time in seminary also gave me a taste of Samoan culture, since we had about ten Samoan seminarians who shared their island tribal

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culture with our community. I saw these two cultures blended in a most beautiful unity at this family home in the far north.

I spent a lot of time talking with Crystal's mother and father, Gene. Gene has always lived in Barrow and spent his youth in a sod house about 40 miles from the village. In summer, his family was quite nomadic, moving around and living in tents to follow game. When he was six, his family had a house next to the current location of the Catholic church, which was then just a quonset hut given to the parish by the military.

As a young man, Gene suffered a severe injury from a black powder explosion that caused extensive burns. Father Cunningham, the Catholic priest in Barrow at the time, accompanied him to the

hospital in Anchorage since he was fluent in Inupiaq. Gene was in the hospital for several months and Fr. Cunningham visited him every day, translating back and forth between the doctors and nurses about his care. Gene grew up Presbyterian, but he was deeply grateful for Fr. Cunningham's loving care all those years ago and it had given him a great respect for Catholics. His story was a testimony to a priest who had a true missionary heart for God's people, no matter their faith tradition.

Gene had been a whaling captain who hunted whales for more than 40 years. Whale hunting is not done for sport, but is an important and necessary part of the Inupiat's traditional way of life. After men harvest a whale, they pause and thank God for providing the animal to feed their families. I have witnessed this numerous times among Native Alaskans whenever they harvest a moose or fish. They are deeply grateful for the food and respectful of the animals' sacrifice. The Inupiat primarily harvest bowhead whales, huge animals that are up to 60 feet long.

During his career, Gene was influential in the International Whaling Commission, the global body charged with the conservation of whales and oversight of whaling. Politics aside, whalers in Russia and the United States apparently work well together and even share how many of a particular whale they harvest to ensure good stewardship.

Gene is retired, but I saw a photo on the wall with him and his young son on a whaling expedition. Today, his son has taken over as captain and carries on their traditional way of life to the next generation.

Standing there, surrounded by these amazing people whose way of life is so unique and admirable, I found myself once again humbled and blessed. What a gift it is to be a shepherd in northern Alaska!

+Chad W. Zielinski



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GIVING

End of Year

Leave a 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.



More Information:

Dr. Les Maiman

**Mission Outreach Coordinator
Diocese of Fairbanks**

Email: mission@cbna.org Phone: 907-888-3722
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The Charitable IRA

If you are 70½ or older, you can make charitable gifts directly from an IRA (up to a total of \$100,000 per individual per year; \$200,000 per couple with separate IRAs). These charitable IRA transfers are not taxed and count towards the annual required minimum distribution. Those who qualify should carefully consider the additional benefits of making all or a portion of their charitable gifts directly from an IRA. These tax-free gifts are particularly wise for those who no longer itemize deductions for income tax purposes.



Novena for Families in Honor of Our Lady of the Arctic Snows

December 29-January 6

You are invited to join us on the feast
of the Holy Family, December 29—
and the nine days following—to the
feast of the Epiphany, January 6,
to pray for families
and for your intentions.

Heavenly Father, through the intercession of Our Lady of the Arctic Snows, please bless my family with a shower of graces from your merciful heart. Give us strength to overcome our struggles and guide us to unite ourselves to one another in devotion to the Gospel. May the example of the Holy Family, with the aid of your Holy Spirit, protect us against all difficulties we may encounter and urge us to live truthful, compassionate and faith-filled lives. May the love that binds us only grow stronger as we walk closer with you. Please help us to actively encourage vocations to the priesthood and religious life within our homes. Grant me and my family forgiveness for any sins we have committed and help us to forgive each other. Lord please grant a return to the church and sacraments for any of my family who have drifted away.

During this special family novena to Mary under her title Our Lady of the Arctic Snows, I humbly ask for this special intention:

Amen.

Our Father; Hail Mary; Glory Be to the Father.
Our Lady of the Arctic Snows, Pray For Us.

Please remember my intentions:

Dear Bishop Zielinski,

F1 S2019 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.

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Dear Bishop Zielinski,

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Abundant Blessings

Over the past year, the Diocese of Fairbanks has been truly blessed by Bishop Chad Zielinski. Shepherding a diocese of our size and with our challenges can be daunting. Thank you for your generous donations this past year! It is only with your support and the sacrifices of our priests, religious, and lay ministers that we are able to fulfill our mission to bring Jesus and the Sacraments to the people of northern Alaska.

JANUARY

Bishop Chad attended the Region XII Retreat in Mundelein Seminary in Chicago during the first week of January. One of our seminarians, Josh Miller, attends there. Mid-month he flew out to St. Petersburg, Florida, to conduct a mission appeal at that parish. From Florida he flew into Houston, Texas for a meeting and then to Oakland, California, to attend a Seminarian Fundraiser; a joint event, held in conjunction with the Diocese of Oakland's bishop, Michael C. Barber.

FEBRUARY

Bishop Chad flew to Nome from February 15th to 17th for a series of interviews with KNOM Catholic Radio. On February 19th, he gathered in Anchorage with priests from all three dioceses for the Alaska Priest Convocation. From the 23rd to the 27th, Bishop Chad flew to Chefnorak to celebrate Confirmations.



MARCH

On March 10th, Bishop Chad celebrated the Rite of Election at Sacred Heart Cathedral, in Fairbanks. From the 11th to the 20th, he made pastoral visits to the villages of Tununak, Toksook Bay, and Nightmute. March 22nd-29th found him first in Washington, D.C., and then in Phoenix, Arizona, to attend a Native American Listening Session meeting with the USCCB and two Alaskan representatives. In March, we welcomed the arrival of Fr. Stanislaw Roz, a religious priest with the Divine Word Missionaries, originally from Poland but ministering in Africa for many years prior to his arrival.

APRIL

Bishop Chad traveled to the road-system parishes in Delta and Tok to celebrate Confirmations from April 6th-8th. The diocese celebrated its annual Chrism Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral on April 9th. Bishop flew out to Bethel on the 10th of April to celebrate Confirmations and to distribute the Holy

Oils. He celebrated Holy Week and Easter in Fairbanks. On the 25th of April he celebrated a Healing Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Fairbanks and on the 29th he confirmed candidates of Immaculate Conception parish in Fairbanks.

MAY

May had Bishop Chad extremely busy celebrating Confirmations in the Interior's road system: May 2nd, St. Raphael's in Fairbanks; May 4th, St. Nicholas in North Pole; and Holy Mary Guadalupe in Healy, and St. Theresa in Nenana—both on the 5th. From May 7th through the 9th, our priests traveled into Fairbanks to attend Spiritual Formation Days. On May 10th, Bishop celebrated, at Monroe Catholic High School, the Baccalaureate Mass and Graduation for the 61st graduating class. From the 11th-23rd, he traveled to Minnesota and Texas to conduct mission appeals.

JUNE

Sacred Heart Cathedral candidates were confirmed on June 2nd and from June 3rd-6th Bishop Chad traveled to Anchorage with diocesan youth to attend the Alaska Catholic Youth Conference. From there, he traveled to Baltimore for the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops meeting. On June 15th and 16th, he conducted mission appeals in California. He flew to the villages of Emmonak, Kotlik, and Scammon Bay, on June 20-28th for pastoral visits. In June, we bid goodbye to Fr. Bala Gangarapu who returned to India. Father Bala served the Diocese for five years. Sister Ellen Callaghan, OSF, who spent 22 years serving the Diocese of Fairbanks, left for semi-retirement departing to Delaware. We also bid goodbye to Teresa Chepoda-USibelli, who served for 8 years in the Office of Stewardship and Development, and took a position "down the street" at University of Alaska.

JULY

The entire month of July saw Bishop Chad visiting the village parishes of Nulato, Galena, Koyukuk, Kotzebue, Nome and Teller. While in Kotzebue he celebrated the parish's 90th anniversary and he celebrated Confirmations. Communications Manager, Misty Mealey, moved with her family to Nebraska, but we are fortunate to still employ her as grant writer and Shepherd writer.

AUGUST

Bishop Chad attended the 4th annual Seminarian Benefit Dinner at Birch Hill Ski Center, in Fairbanks on August 13th. He attended the Regional Council Picnic on August 18th at Sacred Heart Cathedral. On August 20th, Bishop Chad celebrated a service of internment for Fr. John Martinek. Father John died in July of the previous year. Bishop hosted Spiritual Formation Days for priests August 20th-22nd.

SEPTEMBER

Effective September 1st, Bishop Chad assigned Fr. Welcome Chipiro to serve at St. Nicholas Parish in North Pole. In

September, Bishop Chad attended the Regional YK-Delta Staff Meeting in Bethel. On September 10th he celebrated a Gold Mass at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. On the 13th to the 15th he visited Utqiagvik and St. Patrick's parish—the most northern parish in the Diocese. He traveled to Anchorage on the 19th and then out to Nome, Teller, and finally to Little Diomed Island from the 23rd to 25th. This was an historic moment for Bishop Chad because it marked the last of his 46 parishes he has visited pastorally. (Read more about this trip in this issue!) From the 26th to 29th, he attended the Rural Deacon Retreat in Bethel. At the end of the month, he attended the Alaska Catholic Conference of Bishops meetings in Juneau. Also, at the end of the month we bid farewell to Fr. Kasparaj Mallavarapu who returned to India after serving the Diocese of Fairbanks for 11 years and the Archdiocese of Anchorage for 10 years and to Fr. Fred Bayler who will retire. Barbara Thieme Tolliver served 30 years in the diocese beginning with youth ministry and culminating as Tribunal Administrator, Safe Environment Coordinator, and Victim Assistance Coordinator. In September, Barb moved on to assist her husband in his outfitting and guiding business on Adak Island in the Aleutians.

OCTOBER

The first days of October found Bishop Chad in Juneau for the ACCB. On October 1st, he celebrated Mass at the Shrine of St. Therese, in Juneau. On the 9th he was back in Fairbanks for a Finance Council meeting. On the 11th, he celebrated Mass at the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks in Holy Family Chapel. On the 12th, he attended the Catholic School's fundraising auction, HIPOW, on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, opening the event with prayer. He celebrated Mass again at CSF on October 16th. Also, on the 16th he celebrated Mass at the Alaska Federation of Natives Conference (AFN) held in Fairbanks. From the 21st to the 25th, he traveled to Oregon to Mt. Angel Abbey, where seminarian Nick Shamrell attends, to participate in the Episcopal Consultors Board. From October 26th to November 3rd, Bishop Chad flew out to the villages of Mountain Village, Pilot Station, and St. Marys for pastoral visits and Confirmations.

NOVEMBER

Bishop Chad hosted Spiritual Formation Days for our clergy in Fairbanks, November 5th through 7th. From the 8th to the 14th he was in Baltimore attending the USCCB meetings and subcommittee meetings on Native Affairs.

DECEMBER

Bishop Chad will make pastoral visits to Aniak, Kalskag, Holy Cross, and Russian Mission from December 3rd to 11th. He plans to spend Christmas in Nulato and Koyukuk.

MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT



Brother Bob Ruzicka, OFM Roots in the Midwest—Heart in Alaska

Brother Bob Ruzicka initially had no interest in coming to Alaska when a previous Fairbanks bishop sent out a call among the Franciscans for missionaries. But as a surprise even to himself, he volunteered anyway. Today, after nearly 35 years in interior Alaska, he is deeply grateful for the Holy Spirit's inspiration to serve his Athabaskan brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Fairbanks.

What had the strongest influence on your faith growing up?

I grew up in St. Louis to two hardworking Catholic parents who were just simple, beautiful people. My father worked in a beer factory, sometimes seven days a week, but he always made time for Sunday Mass. He really had a servant's heart, too--when he married my mother, he swore that "No wife of mine will ever scrub a floor!" And he made good on that by cleaning the floors for her until we kids were old enough to help. My mother was so gentle and kind that my non-Catholic cousin said she was a major factor in her conversion. She said that if being Catholic meant being like my mother, then she wanted to be Catholic. We also lived next door to a parish run by Franciscan priests and brothers. I was always hanging around the church and these men made a strong impression on me because they were constantly working and seemed so happy when they were serving others.

How did you know you were called to religious life?

Even when little, I always wanted to be close to God...I used to say I could hold his hand, he felt so close. Then one day in high school, I strongly felt like I was in the presence of the crucified Christ. That has stayed with me, and made it easier for me to see God in all people. I also had a powerful experience where a man who was under the influence of alcohol came up to me on the street, hugged me, and said, "You're a good kid." It helped me realize people who abuse alcohol and drugs are hurting and that's how they're trying to cope with the pain. It gave me a compassionate heart for them. As I got older and started to discern a calling, I was very attracted to St. Francis because he never turned anyone away, so I became a Franciscan. I now realize that the person I really wanted to follow was Christ himself, through St. Francis.

How did you end up in Alaska?

It was definitely God who drew me here. I'd been a Franciscan for about 10 years in Ohio when someone suggested I could use a change. Then our Provincial shared a letter from then Bishop Kaniecki of Fairbanks, asking for missionaries. The six-page letter went over every hard thing you could expect in Alaska, like the cold, darkness, and loneliness...he didn't sugarcoat things. Well, none of that sounded appealing, but oddly enough, with no real forethought, I told my Provincial I wanted to go. A week later, I reread Bishop Kaniecki's letter and it all hit me...I was sure I had made a mistake! But I got to Alaska and the moment I arrived in the villages, it just felt right, I was home. I know this is where I'm supposed to be.

What advice would you have for a young person who is discerning a vocation to religious life or the priesthood?

God wants each of us to know who we are and that we're loved. Anyone who has a calling to a religious vocation should have a strong desire in his or her heart to help others see how much they're loved by God, too. That's really the essence of all religious vocations--living the joy of the Gospel so fully that you just want to give that joy to others.

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