



Volume 59 Number 6

# The Alaskan Shepherd

**SPECIAL  
ISSUE  
ENCLOSED**



Fall School Issue 2021

*Some give by going to the Missions*

*Some go by giving to the Missions*

*Without both there are no Missions*

## Educating the Whole Child: Beloved Teacher, Marie Willcoxon

*For lifelong Catholic Marie Willcoxon, her newly adopted home state of Alaska offers not just a beautiful and spiritually rich environment to raise her family, but a school family that supports her as a teacher in educating the whole child.*

Five years ago, Marie Willcoxon was traveling up the Alaska-Canada Highway with her husband, Matthew, and three children, when she received a phone call from then principal of Immaculate Conception School in Fairbanks, Amanda Angaiak. Angaiak asked if she could interview the next day.

"I was ecstatic," recalls Marie, who had applied for the job right before starting their 3,800-mile camping trip through the Midwest and then Canada, en route to her husband's new job at Ft. Wainwright. By the end of her first week in Fairbanks, she had a new job and as she quickly discovered, a new home.

"We love it here," says Marie, who has now spent the past four years teaching at Immaculate Conception. The Willcoxons, who have become avid hunters and fishers, by all accounts have fully embraced the adventurous spirit of our great state. In fact, they have decided to make it their permanent home when Matthew retires from the military in December 2021.

"We promised ourselves we would try to really live an Alaskan lifestyle when we moved here so our kids would have that experience," says Marie. "Turns out, we don't need to try—we love this way of life. Alaska is our home."

### Becoming an Elite Athlete

From the beginning, Marie Fjordholm seemed destined for more than an average life. Her American mother and Norwegian father met while working together on a cruise ship. The cruise line was based out of Miami, which is



*Marie shows off her "catch of the day"—an Alaskan King Salmon; but at Immaculate Conception Grade School in Fairbanks, Mrs. Willcoxon is more focused on catching the hearts and minds of her students.*

where the Fjordholms settled and Marie was born in 1983. Her mother became a stay-at-home mom, while her father continued to travel with the cruise line.

As a young child, Marie started gymnastics and showed a strong aptitude for the sport. At age six, she attended a

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*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.*

gymnastics camp in Texas, run by the world-renowned Romanian coaches Bela and Martha Karolyi. Marie was singled out as having tremendous potential as a gymnast and the family made the decision to move to Texas, so she could train with the Karolyis, who had led numerous gymnasts to Olympic gold in the 80s and 90s.

The experience would catapult Marie into the world of elite gymnastics. By her teens, she had competed nationally and internationally and was poised to make the Olympic team in 2000. Then right before qualifying trials, Marie suffered a brutal fall on the balance beam that broke a rib and ended her chances of competing in the Olympics.

From an early age, Marie's Catholic faith had been an important part of her life—she even carried her grandmother's crucifix with her into her first competition—but it became even more important during her teen years. Her relationship with God sustained her during the difficult years of training as a professional gymnast, which often included abuse from her trainers.

"I knew I could call on God and know He was with me," says Marie. "I don't know how I would have gotten through without faith." Her strong faith would prove even more important after she suffered a shocking betrayal by one of her team's most trusted professionals.

"I was one of the gymnasts who survived Larry Nassar," says Marie, referring to the team doctor for the U.S. women's gymnastics team who sexually abused nearly 300 girls and young women over a period of 18 years. Nassar's abuse and subsequent coverup by prominent gymnastics leaders led to a major scandal that finally broke in 2015 and culminated in Nassar's conviction three years later. He's now serving life in prison with no possibility of parole.

For Marie, the injury on the balance beam and disappointment at not making the Olympic team was a blessing in disguise because it caused her to think about more than just gymnastics. In 2002, she was the nation's number one recruit for college gymnastics. Following a recruitment trip to the University of Georgia, she accepted their offer of a full athletic scholarship that same year. She periodically coached to help offset the cost of college for her parents.

"After going through what I did as a young gymnast and seeing the effects of Nassar's abuse on the other victims, I knew I wanted to care for the kids I coached and really build them up," says Marie.

Halfway through college, however, Marie suffered another injury, this time a career-ending one. In fall 2003, she broke her back during a particularly challenging practice session. "I was both devastated and relieved," remembers Marie. "I was upset I didn't get to say goodbye to gymnastics on my own terms, but it also helped me focus



*Whether she's training as a professional gymnast, teaching a classroom of kids, or learning to hunt moose, Marie embodies the adventurous spirit of the Last Frontier. When she's not teaching, she and her husband, Matthew, along with their two boys, have crisscrossed the state to go fishing, hunting, and camping. In just four years, they've visited Valdez, Seward, Kenai, and Homer, with treks to the Russian River and the Arctic Circle thrown in for good measure.*

on finding a new purpose for my life...my self-worth was wrapped up in being a gymnast and it took a while to learn I could be good at something else."

That "something else" was a talent for serving children. After graduating with a degree in Child Development in 2006, Marie moved to Miami for five months, where she coached gymnastics. She then moved to Georgia to help a former gymnastics teammate open her own gym. It was there that Marie met her husband, Matthew. He was working as an off-duty police officer at Marie's apartment complex and convinced management to hold a "meet and greet" for new residents—expressly to meet the pretty young woman wearing a t-shirt of his favorite team, the University of Georgia Bulldogs. The couple married a year later.



### Many New Beginnings

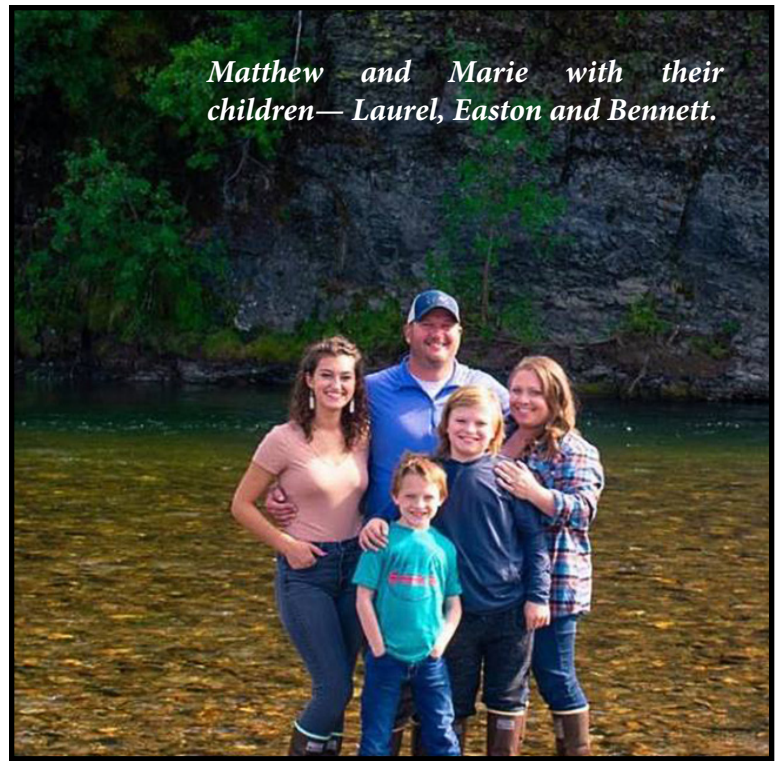
For the first few years of their marriage, Matthew worked as police officer in Savannah, a job that Marie became increasingly uncomfortable with as anti-police sentiments grew around the country. In 2013, Matthew left law enforcement to enlist in the military. After training as a medic, he was initially stationed in El Paso, then deployed in 2014 for a year in Syria. By then, Marie was teaching at a nondenominational Christian school and the couple had two small children, Easton and Bennett.

About a year after returning to El Paso, Matthew got the option to transfer to a post in either Hawaii or Alaska. Marie had been raised in Miami and loved the beach, but her husband didn't. "So, we said, 'Let's do something neither of us has experienced,' and we chose Alaska."

The choice would prove fortuitous for the Willcoxons. En route to Fairbanks, the family camped in a tent along the Alaska-Canada Highway. They were in White Horse, capital of the Yukon territory, when Marie got the call for an interview at Immaculate Conception.



*Marie and fellow teacher Paige Bickford try to determine whether a handstand is easier to perform on a balance beam or on the Columbia Glacier.*



*Matthew and Marie with their children— Laurel, Easton and Bennett.*

*Spiritually, her relationship with God has been strengthened. "There's less distraction to my spiritual life here," says Marie. "We just have a slower pace of life and that helps me pray more and build that connection to God and the people around me."*

After hurrying into Fairbanks (and showering!), Marie made the interview and got the job.

### Teaching the Whole Child

Since 2016, Marie has taught elementary grades at Immaculate Conception School. As her gymnastics career proved, Marie does nothing by halves and is a stellar educator, beloved by her students and admired by her peers.

Paige Bickford taught at Immaculate Conception until December 2020 when her husband received military orders to relocate to Georgia. As a 5th grade teacher, she worked closely with Marie, who taught a split classroom of 3rd and 4th graders.

"Marie loves what she does and will go above and beyond for every child to make sure they can succeed," says Paige. She recalls a student who wasn't quite prepared for the 5th grade, so Marie spent the summer tutoring him, on her own time and for free. "That family was so grateful," says Paige, who admits she was even a little worried she wouldn't be able to meet the student's needs as well as Marie had.

Immaculate Conception was Paige's first teaching job and she benefited from working so closely with Marie, who was the more seasoned teacher. "You finish your studies and think you know what you're doing, then you get in the classroom and it's nothing like you expected," says Paige.





*Enjoying the beauty of Alaska's great outdoors has made them closer as a family, insists Marie. "It gives us the chance to enjoy being with each other. That's one of the best things about this place—it's easy to step outside, disconnect from your busy life, and reconnect with your family...you learn that it's okay to just sit in silence with each other, too."*

Marie, whose classroom was next to Paige's, was an invaluable guide to the novice teacher. "I saw kids I knew who needed more support, and I knew I could go to Marie in confidence about how best to help them."

Part of what makes Marie such an effective teacher is her insistence on developing the whole child, and not just focusing on academic success, insists Paige. "She really does look at the whole child and asks what he or she needs to be a good, healthy, and successful person. That's the godly thing I see in Marie—her desire to help them become all they are meant to be as a human being." For Marie, her Catholic faith and her approach to teaching are the same: it's about loving relationships.

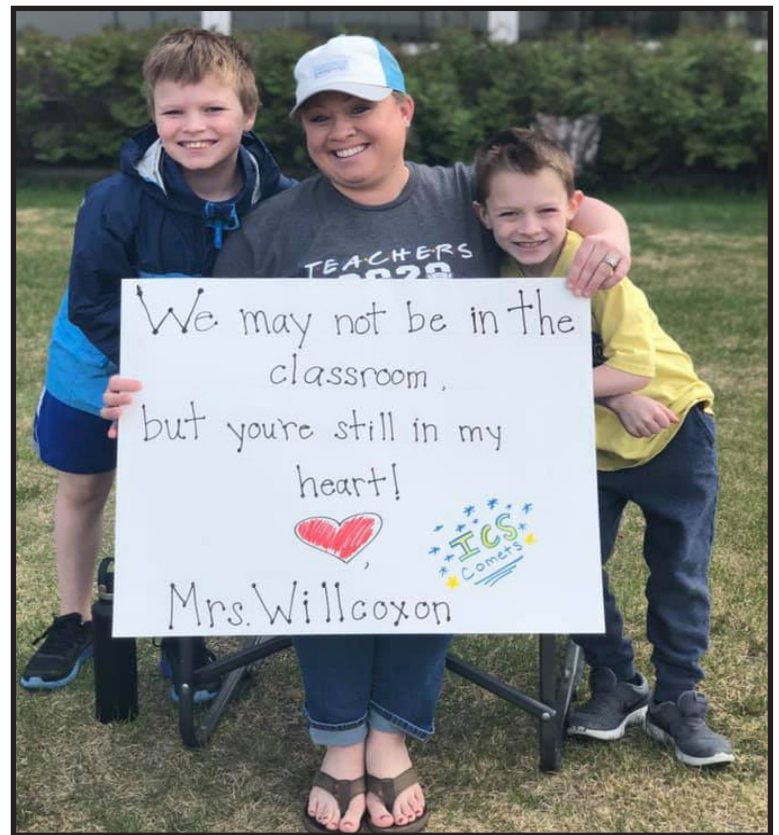
"The most important thing you can do for a child is to have those one-on-one conversations to get to know them on a personal level," insists Marie. "That makes them feel seen and valued and respected, and in turn, they're more likely to give you that respect as their teacher. Establishing a foundation of trust with a child earns their cooperation and then the academics are just so much easier to teach."

Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to foster this more personal approach to education because they

focus on developing the child not just intellectually, but emotionally, spiritually, and even physically. In Fairbanks, the result is more of a family atmosphere than a school, says Paige, a remarkable feat given that more than half of the student body and several staff members are not Catholic.

Friend and CSF Safety & Covid-19 Mitigation Coordinator, Lorna Illingworth, agrees that Marie has a unique gift for bringing out the best in her students. "She has this way of making every student feel exceptional by learning their interests and assessing the best way to connect with each of them. She listens and remembers their hobbies and skills and makes those stories part of the examples she uses in teaching material. Kids feel engaged and special."

For Marie, Immaculate Conception School brings together her love of God and her love for children and gives her a unique opportunity to serve both. "The support I have from the administrators gives me the ability to be this kind of teacher," says Marie. "I'd always wanted a school that supported my philosophy of teaching the whole child, so working at Immaculate Conception has been a true gift from the Holy Spirit."



*When the pandemic temporarily caused the Catholic Schools to resort to virtual learning, the school organized a "drive-by parade." Marie and her fellow teachers gathered with their families on the school lawn while students and parents processed from decorated cars and waved to the teachers they dearly missed.*



# Falling Deeper in Love with God in the Heartland

## Seminarian Update: Josh Miller

One of the diocese's four seminarians, Joshua Miller, spent this past summer preparing for his future vocation at the Institute for Priestly Formation (IPF) in Omaha, Nebraska!

For nearly 40 years, IPF (offered through Creighton University) has provided seminarians with intensive spiritual formation that helps them develop a more intimate relationship with Christ and immerse themselves in the identity of diocesan priesthood. In many ways, the program is a kind of "novitiate" experience for seminarians. IPF's summer program was created to provide formation at a time that wouldn't compete with seminarians' many other activities during the academic year.

The main goal of IPF is to help seminarians fall more

***"The IPF was intensely challenging spiritually, kind of like a spiritual basic training."***

deeply in love with God, since a priest's life is more joyful—and more fruitful—when he lives in constant intimacy with God. The diocese prioritizes the added formation expense of IPF—\$6,500 per seminarian—to ensure its seminarians have the tools they need to deepen and safeguard their relationship with Christ not only during their hectic seminary days, but beyond into active ministry as a priest. An intimate relationship with the Lord is important for every priest, but it can be crucial for missionary priests like ours who serve alone for long periods in remote areas.

"The Institute for Priestly Formation's Summer Program for seminarians was intensely challenging spiritually, kind of like a spiritual basic training," says Josh. "I was fortunate to have two very good spiritual directors, and I experienced spiritual healing and a deepening in intimacy with the Holy Trinity. I learned and grew in ways I know will be with me for the rest of my life."

*(Photos with the Miller family, courtesy of Josh.)*





# Arctic Footprints

News & Ideas for Charitable Giving

Fall 2021

## Adventure, Innovation, and Generosity

Ed Bergschneider doesn't shy away from adventure, innovation, and risk-taking. Though, it's through his many endeavors—dedication to his family and business, helping others, and supporting the missions of northern Alaska—where Ed really shines.

The eldest of nine children, Ed and his wife, Bernice, continued that “numbered” tradition with nine of their own, along with many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

After graduating from college, Ed planned to farm, but a business venture took him in a different, but related, direction. He purchased a grain elevator, and now, 60 years later, Franklin Elevator Inc. is still a family-owned and family-operated business. Although his children currently run the business, Ed is still very involved and always watching for new, interesting opportunities.

Ed's innovative spirit was evident when he bought a retired television station transmitter tower and planned to repurpose it into treehouses for his grandchildren. Although he later sold the tower, first he inspected it—from the top! The

85-year-old loved the thrilling ride up and the spectacular view.

Other adventures include two trips to Alaska; the first, in 1999, was inspired after Ed joined the “Buck a Month” Club with the Diocese of Fairbanks. His generosity to the diocese was born out of a desire to “go by giving” and to support their mission goals.

After nearly a decade of supporting the Diocese, Ed wanted to help the bishop and priests share the Mass and the sacraments with the people of northern Alaska. He and a friend drove to Fairbanks from the Midwest. Ed was able to meet many of the local priests, attend Mass at multiple locations, tour the chancery which was the original Jesuit residence (built by Jesuits) located on 1316 Peger Road, and witness first-hand, the day-to-day operations of *The Alaskan Shepherd* newsletter and the mission's staff. He has continued serving as a co-missionary through his many years of prayers and support.

The second time Ed traveled to Fairbanks, he flew up to join the Diocese's 50th Anniversary Mass and celebration in 2012.



**Ed Bergschneider**

He had hoped to experience Alaska's shortest day in December of 2020, but Ed had to delay his trip due to the pandemic. He plans to reschedule soon and looks forward to another visit to Alaska with the staff at the Diocese of Fairbanks.

Ed Bergschneider carries the spirit of adventure in his heart and helps to bring hope and success to the missions with his generosity and prayers. At the same time, he has always modeled stability, consistency, and a strong work ethic within his family. In sharing the fruits of his labor with his family and missions, Ed makes a real difference.

### Inside:

- Maximize Your Year-End Gifts
- Teaching Life's Financial Lessons





# Maximize Your Year-End Gifts

Fall is traditionally when we think about making gifts to support our favorite charities, like the Diocese of Fairbanks. There are many options for tax-effective giving both for those who can continue to itemize their deductions and for those who will no longer itemize.

## Making your gift with appreciated securities

When you give appreciated securities owned for more than a year, the gift can be made at a lower cost than an equivalent gift of cash. By giving this way, your tax deduction is based on the current value of the stocks, not just the amount you paid for them. No capital gains tax will be owed on the increased value, and if you itemize, you may claim an income tax deduction for their full value at the time of the contribution.

## Making your gift from your IRA

If you are 70½ or older, you can make qualified charitable distributions (QCDs) directly from individual retirement accounts (IRAs) using funds that might otherwise be taxed when withdrawn. Gifts can be made in any amount up to a total of \$100,000 per individual per year. The benefits of a QCD are reduced for those who continue to make deductible IRA contributions.

Because you are giving directly from your IRA, you won't increase your adjusted gross income and possibly subject your Social Security or other income to higher levels of taxation. These tax-free gifts are particularly wise for those who no longer itemize deductions for income tax purposes. Consult your financial or tax advisor for more information.

## Seminarian Update

From the desk of Fr. Robert Fath, JCL

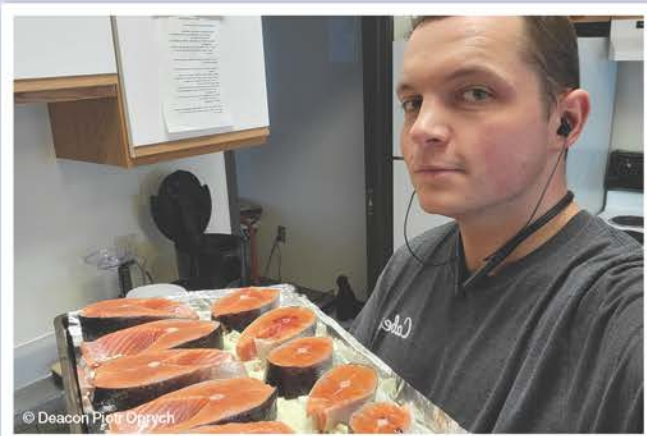
As we move toward the beginning of another academic year, our seminarians will start the next chapter of their formation. Deacons Piotr and Dominik will head back to SS. Cyril & Methodius Seminary after having spent the summer in the remote Yup'ik villages. This will be their last semester of seminary before ordination, God willing, in mid-January 2022.

Josh Miller was at the Institute for Priestly Formation in Omaha, Nebraska, for an intense summer of spiritual formation. After two weeks of Army Reserve training in Hawaii, Josh will return to Fairbanks to begin his pastoral year.

**Thanks to your generous gifts to the Seminarian Fund**, we have the means to support these young men as they move closer to their ordination as Catholic priests to serve in the Diocese of Fairbanks. The current Seminarian Fund balance has reached \$2.04 million and allows us to fully fund the cost of one seminarian each year. Thank you for your continued financial support and your prayers.



**Bishop Chad Zielinski (right) and Fr. Robert Fath, JCL, Director of Vocations**



**Seminarian Deacon Piotr Oprych prepares king salmon, fished fresh from the Unalakleet River.**



# Teaching Life's Financial Lessons

A survey by AARP Financial revealed grandparents spend about \$600 annually on their grandchildren, but 79% feel that kids don't understand the value of a dollar. The good news is grandparents can help the younger generation learn lessons in finances, which may be one of the best "gifts" kids can receive.

- A grandparent may offer to fund a grandchild's IRA if the grandchild works a part-time or summer job. A \$6,000 contribution if invested for 45 years will grow to \$82,590 (assuming a 6% rate of return), even if no further contributions are made.
- Grandparents can buy the grandchildren shares of stock in corporations whose companies are

paying regular dividends. The grandchildren can be encouraged to watch how the shares in "their" company can grow over time as dividends are automatically reinvested.

- Grandparents who don't wish to give money outright to young grandchildren can put funds in accounts under the Uniform Gifts to Minors Act or Uniform Transfers to Minors Act. It's important to check with a trusted financial advisor about whether these funds will affect the child's eligibility for college financial aid.

## Chefornak, St. Catherine of Siena Church Update

From Jacob Baugh, Diocesan Engineer



There was much excitement in late July when the materials arrived by barge in Chefornak. The delivery marked the long-awaited start of construction.

Forecasted completion is scheduled for April 2022, and Bishop Chad Zielinski is hopeful that dedication of the new church, St. Catherine of Siena, will take place later that year in August. This is wonderful news! I want to especially thank our benefactors for their continued support of funding the new church and ask that you keep those involved and the parish in your prayers as we work to keep on schedule and adhere to the safety protocol under the virus mitigation.

The St. Catherine of Siena New Church Fund balance has reached \$2.72 million. Thank you for your continued support throughout this next year and into 2022, which will help us meet the full cost of the project—\$3.9 million.



Chefornak—even in the absence of a building and amid a health crisis—continues to be an active and entirely Catholic community. The new church building is designed to seat 134 in the main worship area with space for an additional 24 in the lobby/social area. Design improvements include increased lighting, a beautiful worship space, room for social functions and religious education classes, storage and office, enhanced heating options to conserve fuel, as well as a ramp and stairs to provide access to all. There will also be room left for growth and added facilities in the future.





## Considering a Bequest?

If you are considering making a gift to the Diocese of Fairbanks through your will or trust, we sincerely thank you. These gifts make a profound difference in our ministries. Here is some language you may want to share with your attorney:

"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, 1316 Peger Road, Fairbanks, Alaska 99709."

## Is Your Will Up to Date?

To make certain your assets are distributed in ways you see fit—and in the most tax-wise manner, you may want to update your will with the following in mind:

- **Name an executor of your choice.** You may want to name a family member, friend, trust company or a combination of these. In your will, you can waive the bond that might otherwise be required by the probate court.
- **Customize your plans for a loved one with special needs.** The state's will does not provide more for family members who require additional help. Update your will to direct funds to a special needs trust that preserves other sources of assistance.
- **Make gifts in the most tax-efficient manner.** Certain assets in your estate may have different tax consequences for loved ones. For example, if you own U.S. savings bonds with untaxed appreciation, family members will owe income tax when the bonds are redeemed. Some choose to name the Diocese of Fairbanks to receive the bonds instead and leave less heavily taxed assets to loved ones.
- **Remember friends and charities you've supported during your lifetime.** Your will can remember the important people and charities in your life with a thoughtful gift through your estate.

If you have any questions about updating your will, contact your advisor or clip and return the reply slip below for more information about the charitable aspects of your plans.



TO DONATE DIRECTLY  
THROUGH YOUR  
DONOR ADVISED FUND



### More information

Diocese of Fairbanks  
Mission Outreach Contact  
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Fairbanks, AK 99709-5168

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Website: <http://dioceseoffairbanks.org>



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Name \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ Please send me a complimentary copy of your booklet "Giving Through Your Will" without obligation.
- ☐ I have included ☐ I would consider including the Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska in my estate plans.
- ☐ Enclosed is my gift of \$\_\_\_\_\_.



Dear Bishop Zielinski,

**S2021 06**

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:** \_\_\_\_\_

\$25 \_\_\_\_\_ \$50 \_\_\_\_\_ \$100 \_\_\_\_\_ \$250 \_\_\_\_\_ \$500 \_\_\_\_\_ \$1,000 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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To receive announcements from Bishop Zielinski about ongoing campaigns or special needs for the diocese, please leave us your email:

**EMAIL** \_\_\_\_\_ **PHONE** \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Bishop Zielinski,

**S2021 06 F12**

Please accept this additional gift to the **Catholic Schools of Fairbanks Annual Fund**, a fund intended exclusively to help alleviate operational costs at the school.



**AMOUNT OF GIFT:** \_\_\_\_\_

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

P.O.Box \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

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**.

***Catholic education is above all a question of communicating Christ, of helping to form Christ in the lives of others.” –Saint John Paul II***

Seventy-five years ago, in September 1946, 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 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 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 350 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 Alaskan Shepherd Newsletter**

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 increases in educational costs have gone largely to paying teachers and staff. And this year, as it did last 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.

A gift 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, “of communicating Christ”—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**





# Missionary Spotlight

## Fr. Stan Jaszek Named Lumen Christi **FINALIST**

The Diocese of Fairbanks is proud to announce that one of its own missionary priests, Fr. Stanislaw Jaszek, has been named a finalist for Catholic Extension's Lumen Christi Award!

Since its inception in 1978, the Lumen Christi Award has been given to priests, women religious, and lay people from across the nation who exemplify Christ's call to serve others. Nominees typically have dedicated their lives to serving those on the margins of society, in forgotten, hidden places in America that still need the light of Christ. The initial group of 30+ nominees are whittled down to just 10 finalists before Catholic Extension chooses a single award winner each fall.

While our diocese is certainly biased, it's easy to see why Fr. Stan was chosen as a Lumen Christi finalist. The Polish priest has spent almost his entire vocation serving as a missionary, first in Africa and then in Alaska. For nearly 20 years, he has served mostly Yup'ik Eskimo Catholics in village parishes across western Alaska.

Father Stan cites the experience of growing up in Communist Poland as having a profound influence on his faith and call to serve as a priest. After witnessing how Catholicism united his people against that totalitarian system and gave them hope of defeating it peacefully, he experienced a call to the priesthood as a young man.

"Seeing Polish Catholics overcome Communism—mostly through prayer—taught me that God works gently, and change takes time, but grace always brings forth positive results," says Fr. Stan.

While Stan felt God's call to ordained life clearly, he also experienced "a call within a call" —a strong pull toward missionary work. With little knowledge about seminaries or orders that specialize in mission work, he entered the diocesan seminary in Lublin, Poland, as a young man. There he found like-minded seminarians who were also interested in missionary work. Stan was ordained in 1988 and traveled to Peru less than a year later. The experience would cement his desire to share the Gospel with people on the margins. "The months I spent in the Andes convinced me I was definitely called to be a missionary priest," says Fr. Stan.

Five years after ordination, Fr. Stan transferred to South Africa, arriving just as apartheid ended. He worked in a poor area that exclusively allowed native Africans as residents. The people lived simply, surviving through small gardens and livestock. Father Stan served one main mission and 14 outposts, traveling



constantly between villages to celebrate the Mass and sacraments and to provide pastoral care to the people.

At one point, Fr. Stan's cousin from Canada visited him in Africa and asked if he intended to stay there forever. "I said no, then joked I might go somewhere totally different, like Alaska!" recalls Fr. Stan. After returning home, his cousin mailed Fr. Stan a book about Alaska, which intrigued the priest. "By then, I was exhausted and looking for something different. I loved the people, but I knew I needed a change, or I was going to burn out." He wrote to the bishop of Fairbanks and within a year, was serving in northern Alaska.

Today, Fr. Stan serves four parishes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, which are located in small, isolated villages so remote you need a boat, snowmachine, plane, or ATV to reach them. During a typical year, Fr. Stan makes 60-80 trips between his assigned villages to serve the diocese's Yup'ik Eskimo Catholics, spending about two weeks at a time in each community. In addition to more traditional ministry activities such as celebrating the Mass and offering the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick, Fr. Stan also performs funeral rites, house blessings, and helps form rural deacon candidates.

A significant part of Fr. Stan's ministry—and arguably, why he is so effective as a missionary priest—is that he shares



# Fr. Stan Jaszek Named Lumen Christi Finalist

## Missionary Spotlight continued

completely in the subsistence lifestyle of the people he serves. The Yup'ik Eskimo people are traditionally hunters and gatherers who depend on the earth's natural cycles to provide for their needs: spring is caribou season, summer brings the salmon, and fall and winter provide berries, moose, and bear. Father Stan regularly goes hunting and fishing with villagers, whether they are practicing their faith or not.

"Father Stan has always understood the power of working alongside people, of sharing in their lifestyle and hardships," says Sr. Kathy Radich, OSF, who coordinates ministry for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. Upon first arriving in Alaska, Fr. Stan was assigned to serve three coastal villages in western Alaska. Instead of spending his first year establishing new parish programs, he instead quietly immersed himself in Yup'ik Eskimo culture—he asked villagers to take him hunting, fishing, and berry picking and learned to mend fishing nets and process salmon, as well as the many other skills needed to survive in 60 below zero.

That a white, foreign priest would share so intimately in Alaska Natives' way of life has deeply impacted the growth of the Church in northern Alaska, says Sr. Marian Leaf, OSF, who worked closely with Fr. Stan for nearly 10 years in rural Alaska.

"A lot of priests come to the villages and stay pretty close to the church," explains Sr. Marian. "Father Stan is different. He's constantly out, walking around the village, doing the things you have to do to survive out here, whether that's fishing or hunting or just making sure someone has the right gear for 40 below. He truly shares in the Native lifestyle and doesn't hold himself apart, so of course, that's really broken down so many barriers to faith for people."

In addition to this "ministry of presence," Fr. Stan has helped foster enculturation in rural Alaska—marrying the faith and culture for the Yup'ik Eskimo people. While most early Catholic missionaries to Alaska loved and respected Alaska Natives and recognized that "in every nation the one who...does what is right is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:35), others brought racist attitudes along with the Gospel. These missionaries mistakenly believed Alaska Natives had to be "westernized" to be able to properly receive the Gospel, which led to profound ethnic and psychological abuses against their people, who were taught that their native language, traditions, and worldview had to be denounced to get to heaven. Naturally, this led many early indigenous converts to internalize the idea that they could be Yup'ik/Athabaskan/Inupiat or Catholic—but not both. Later missionaries to Alaska inherited the damage done by this false dichotomy, which had sown apathy and even open hostility toward the Church in some communities.



Father Stan, however, has a different approach to sharing the Gospel, one that resonates with the Native people he serves. The priest regularly integrates saints, devotions, and liturgical practices such as Yup'ik hymns and drumming into Mass. He organizes potlucks in honor of St. Hubert, the patron saint of hunters, where parishioners share Native foods such as bear, whale, quagciq (greens), and ugnaraat neqait (edible roots). Like Christ, who entered into the human experience to demonstrate God's love and to show us how to live righteously, Fr. Stan has entered into our indigenous Catholics' way of life to lead them to Christ. In doing so, he affirms their dignity and invites them into a fuller relationship with Christ and his Church.

Says Sr. Kathy, "Fr. Stan has entered into the lifestyle and cultural rhythm of the Native people and that endeared him to them quickly. His interest in their way of life sends a clear message: 'I see you and I understand that you have something beautiful and valuable to teach me.'"

While Fr. Stan may have started out his ministry in Alaska learning practical skills from the Native people, it has been the spiritual lessons they've offered him that he appreciates the most.

"The people here have brought spiritual growth to my soul that I never expected, especially after coming from the jubilant Africans," he insists. "The Yup'ik are gentle and quiet, and they have a profound sense that we are all immersed in God's world and entirely dependent on Him. They live life at a slower, more deliberate pace and that's been hard for me, but also very important. They have taught me to better understand St. Paul's words, that God "is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).