



The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 57 Number 3

Fall 2019

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

Kathleen Balko: A Missionary Heart in the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks

Kathleen Balko traveled to Alaska 30 years ago as a young single woman excited to do mission work in the Diocese of Fairbanks. She never imagined she would find a new home and a new family that would give her permanent roots in the Last Frontier.

When most people hear “missionary work,” they imagine someone traveling to distant, foreign lands to share the Gospel. Yet for Kathleen Balko, the mission field is simply wherever God places her at any given time. And for the past 30 years, that has been Alaska.

“I think I’ve always had a missionary heart,” says Kathleen, who performed mission work in Appalachia and on the Navajo Reservation before coming to Alaska in 1989. For nearly 15 years, she has served as the Religion Coordinator for the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks, a role she describes as simply “encouraging the



Kathleen Balko, Religion Coordinator for the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks, gets big hugs—from little Immaculate Conception students—outside of Holy Family Chapel.

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The Balko Family, Jim, Kathleen, Christian, and Michael, pose for a picture at Immaculate Conception Church in Fairbanks, Alaska, on Christmas day in 2018.

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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.**

community to serve God and others.” This can be challenging in today’s self-centered culture, however. “I have the freedom here to make an impact,” she says. “But in the end it’s all about God.”

Strong Catholic Roots

Kathleen was born and raised Catholic in Hamden, Connecticut, a small town just north of New Haven. The middle child in a family of five daughters, she was always

entering middle or high school just as her older sisters graduated. This made her fiercely independent, and taught her to rely on God as much as family and friends.

Even as a child, Kathleen had a strong faith in God that came with a burning desire to share that relationship with others. That included her peers.

“I would have sleepovers for my

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birthday and insist we all go to the Stations of the Cross first,” Kathleen recalls. She loved attending daily Mass with her mom at St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church, and was more focused on living out her faith than the typical interests of other girls her age.

After graduating from high school, Kathleen attended Boston College to pursue a degree in education. Her life was changed when she took a mission trip to Appalachia her junior year. She spent a week volunteering at Nazareth Farm, a Catholic community in rural West Virginia that provides home repair and construction for low-income residents. Kathleen was so drawn to the community’s simple way of living out the Gospel through prayer, fellowship, and service to others that she spent her summer after graduation living at the farm as a staff member.

While the poverty and family dysfunction she witnessed was disheartening at times, Kathleen found that she loved serving the struggling residents of Appalachia through construction work and prayer. She continued her missionary work that fall as a Mercy Corps volunteer, teaching 5th grade at a Navajo Reservation in Arizona. The slower pace of life out west taught her to truly appreciate the Psalm, “be still and know that I am God” (46:10) says Kathleen, who learned the value of being present to those experiencing hardships and suffering. “It’s easy to minister to people whose hearts are open,” she says. “And theirs were open.”

In addition to teaching, she also did ministry

at the local hospital and prison. One day at the prison, a man in solitary confinement reached through the meal slot opening and held out his bloodied hands, which he had injured while thrashing around. He asked for Kathleen to pray with him. Despite her initial shock, Kathleen grasped the man’s hands, and prayed with him without even seeing his face. “It taught me the power of being present to people and to remember that everyone is hurting in some way.”

When her year-long stint with Mercy Corps was over, Kathleen went back to Connecticut and soon found a job as the Director of Religious Education at an affluent Catholic parish. In many ways, she found the new assignment more difficult than mission work in impoverished communities.

“People would put on a good front, but often many families were struggling to pay the bills,” Kathleen recalls. One mother even confessed to carefully removing the brand name logos and sewing them onto her son’s less expensive clothes to maintain the veneer of keeping up appearances. “I saw that no one really has their act together—we’re all struggling with something.”

After a few years in parish ministry, Kathleen was ready to return to the missions. She’d heard Fairbanks was a mission diocese, so she wrote then Bishop Michael Kaniecki, S.J., about visiting to investigate mission work. The bishop welcomed her, so she flew to Alaska and spent two weeks meeting with staff and learning about the ministries offered

in the diocese. She even spent time among the people in the village of Aniak.

While Kathleen was excited about the prospect of serving in the Last Frontier, her family and friends back in Connecticut were less enthusiastic. “They thought I was crazy to move somewhere so cold, where I didn’t know anybody,” says Kathleen. “I saw it as just another chance to rely entirely on God.”

In the summer of 1989, Kathleen moved to Alaska to accept a job as the Director of Religious Education for Immaculate Conception Church in Fairbanks, a position she held for the next nine years. During the school year, Kathleen ran traditional religious education programs for the parish, then spent three summers earning a Master’s in Pastoral Ministry from Seattle University. Within a few years, she had met and married Jimmy, a lifelong Fairbanksan who was a graduate of Monroe Catholic High School and who later taught there, too. “When I first came to Alaska, I thought, ‘I’ll just be here a few years,’” remembers Kathleen. “Now, it’s home.”

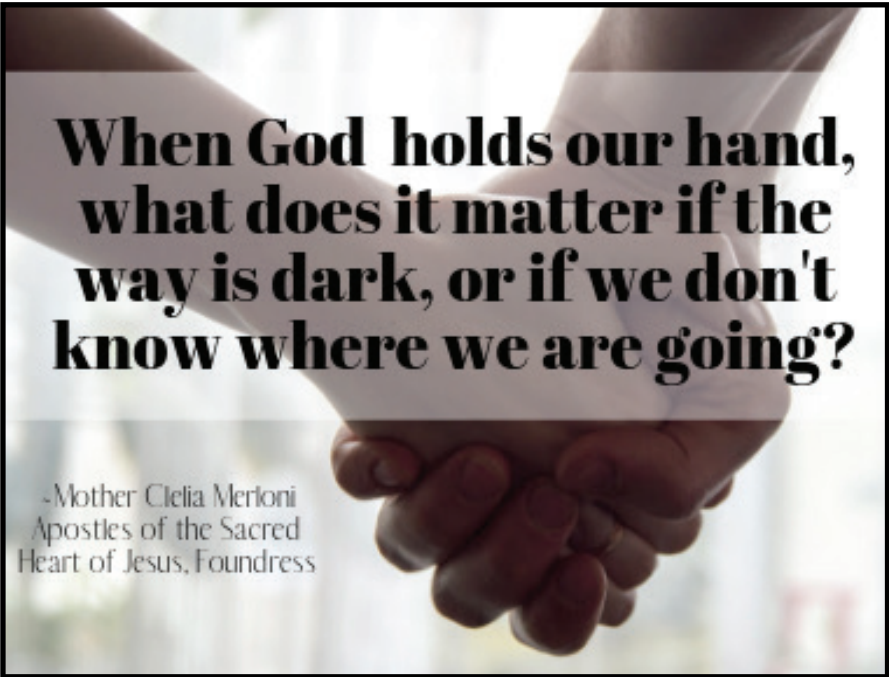
Pointing Others to God

After taking a few years off to raise their three young sons, Kathleen returned to work in 2005 as the Religion Coordinator for the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks. Unexpectedly, it has been in that role that her diverse missionary experiences were able to be used to their fullest.

Whether teaching religion classes for lower grades, coordinating service projects for high schoolers, or supporting staff and faculty members, Kathleen honors people where they are while simultaneously pointing them to a deeper relationship with God, according to Amanda Angaiak, director of the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks. “She constantly invites people to see life’s messiness—including its sorrows—as opportunities to grow closer to Christ,” says Angaiak.

That unwavering belief in God’s providence was tested in May 2016 when the Balko family experienced an unimaginable tragedy--the loss of their youngest son, Joseph, who collapsed and died at a track meet at the end of his freshman year at Monroe.

“Joseph was a beautiful young man with an amazing faith and even in death, he was leading others to Christ,” says Kathleen, who witnessed the faith of others deepen as



**When God holds our hand,
what does it matter if the
way is dark, or if we don't
know where we are going?**

-Mother Clelia Merton
Apostles of the Sacred
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Catholic Schools of Fairbanks' teacher Wendy Anderson shared that "Joseph had an extraordinary faith."

His kindness and sunny disposition enriched the lives of those around him, and his work will live on even as he has crossed the threshold to the life beyond."

they lovingly ministered to the family after the loss. For some staff members, seeing Kathleen console others in the midst of her own pain demonstrated a living, authentic Catholic faith that is arguably her greatest legacy to the schools' students, staff and families.

Her faith is an inspiration to me," says Stephanie Wallace, an administrative assistant at the Catholic schools. "I watched her show love to others while she was suffering this terrible pain and she did it with a real joy in her heart. She has this way of bringing light even into our deepest struggles as Christians."

Part of what makes Kathleen so effective in working with Catholic and non-Catholic students and families is her ability to affirm people in their wounded humanity, says Nancy Hanson, former director of the Catholic Schools.

"Kathleen has such a strong sense of Christ's humanity and she encourages

students to enter into that when she teaches them about the Gospel. You could really see the strength it gave her to draw on that after they lost Joseph."

The Fruits of Faith

For Kathleen, however, grieving the loss of her son and celebrating his brief but full life was simply the inevitable fruit of the faith she proclaims in every Mass. "We believe in the Communion of Saints, so we know he is looking out for us and that we will see him again, and that we can never know in this life all the good God brings about through suffering." She sees her work as a missionary, a teacher, a wife, and a mother through the same providential lens: "Our lives don't belong to us, they belong to God," she says. "We simply have to love others so that they can see God in all things."

With two adult children, both of whom graduated from Monroe, Kathleen is experiencing a new chapter of life as an empty nester. She loves seeing her sons live out their faith through prayer, service and purpose. "My boys inspire me with their passion for the faith," she says. While she loves working at the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks, she keeps an open mind about the possibility of new "mission" opportunities in the future.



The Gift of a Catholic Education

† Most Reverend Chad Zielinski

Two popular figures during my teen years were Pope John Paul II and Mother Theresa of Calcutta. John Paul II had grown up in Poland under communist oppression, and overcame challenges, persecution, and even death threats to say “Yes” to Christ as a priest. He was a great proponent of teaching young people the faith that brings a direct encounter with Christ.

I met John Paul II during a trip to Rome in 2001, when two priest friends and I were privileged to celebrate Mass with him in his private chapel. The pope’s trembling hands and slanted head made it evident he was suffering from Parkinson’s, but he stood erect at the altar and offered the Mass as if able-bodied. We have always felt we celebrated Mass that day with a living saint.

During this same visit to Rome, I visited priests from Michigan who were studying there. One priest shared that he woke daily at 4:30am to celebrate Mass for the Missionaries of Charity, St. Teresa of Calcutta’s order. I was impressed the nuns wanted Mass that early, then later read that Mother Teresa believed the Eucharist “fueled and guided” the order’s work. Like Mary and Martha, the missionaries contemplated Christ and were fed by him *before* heading out to serve his Mystical Body.



“The time you spend with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is the best time that you will spend on earth. Each moment that you spend with Jesus will deepen your union with Him and...will help bring about an everlasting peace on earth.”

—Mother Teresa of Calcutta

The experience brought to mind a documentary I had watched years earlier that profiled the Missionaries of Charity. There was a powerful scene in which Mother Teresa lifted a man who was skin and bones out of a pile of garbage on the street. She was asked, “Why do you, a Christian woman, pick up this dying Hindu man?” She simply replied, “Because I see Christ in him.” The simple nun’s joyful witness to the dignity of every human person is a message needed even more today than it was back then.

All this brings me to the value of Catholic education in our missionary diocese. We have just one PreK-12 Catholic school, located in Fairbanks. As you walk through the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks’ main entrance, you are greeted with bold words: “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.” The students encounter Christ in the school’s daily prayers, faith-based curriculum, and faithful instructors. Most importantly, however, they encounter Christ personally during Mass in their chapel.

In the Eucharist, we receive the Divine Teacher himself as a pure gift and he only asks that we come with open hearts and no grave sin to embrace his living presence. This most intimate encounter with Christ at Mass during the school day is what sets Catholic education apart. It is our students’ transformative encounter with Jesus in Communion that helps them see the living and sacred image imprinted in every person they meet, which is why so many of them go on to service careers and lifelong volunteering. At the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks, we are most blessed to encounter the living God in the Eucharist, be transformed by Him, and go forth as missionary disciples to serve others in love.

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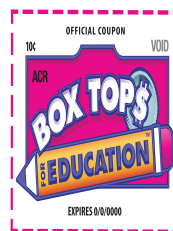
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The Alaskan Shepherd

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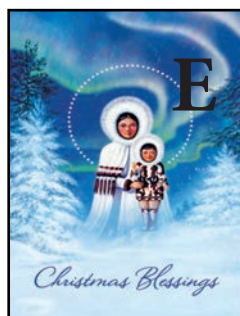
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H



F



Bidding Farewell to Sr. Ellen Callaghan, O.S.F.

By Sr. Kathy Radich, O.S.F, and
Marilyn Sipary

Reprinted from Missionary Disciple

It is with great honor that we humbly extend our admiration and gratitude to Sr. Ellen Callaghan, O.S.F., for her 22 years of ministry as the Director of the Native Ministry Training Program (NMTP) in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region. Also, for the past five years, she has served as the Parish Facilitator for two parishes – St. Charles Spinola in Pilot Station and Immaculate Heart of Mary in Marshall.

Many people in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region have had the pleasure and blessing to meet and get to know Sr. Ellen from the NMTP workshops she had tirelessly coordinated. During workshops, she provided support and faith formation for parish administrators, catechists, Eucharistic ministers, parish councils, and presiders of Sunday services and funerals. She also offered children's religious education through hosting a Jesus Camp in the summer that introduced Jesus to our youngsters and offered positive ways to live like Jesus by learning and following the ten commandments.

The NMTP was established to train and support the 24 remote Native Catholic parishes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region allowing lay parish leaders to take responsibility for faith formation in their communities.

Sr. Ellen coordinated with ministers for the annual Oils Mass held in Bethel and helped with the Y-K Rural Deacon Program retreats. She also helped with the Adult Faith Formation Program.

Achievements she has made through NMTP are many:

- Working with Rural Ministry staff in developing the Sharing the Word Reflection Booklet to encourage deacons and Eucharistic Ministers as they planned homilies during Holy Communion services.
- Giving lay ministers opportunities to become certified in their ministries.
- Creating easy to use binders for five Liturgical Seasons and major feast days. Native deacons and Eucharistic Ministers use these binders when no priests are available for Funeral Rites for both an adult and a child, all Triduum services, and



Sunday celebrations.

- Gathered Native head catechists to develop a culturally appropriate catechetical curriculum manual with detailed lesson plans and activity sheets and with a Confirmation and Reconciliation Curriculum.
- Gathered Native musicians and singers to record all 70 songs in the 1950 Eskimo Hymn Book to preserve them for future generations. The set of CD's are still available at the NMTP office.
- The NMTP has earned National recognition for its truly unique and pioneering ministry, creative, culturally appropriate continuing education for parish ministers serving in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region.

Sister Ellen, *quyana caknek* for teaching all of us and caring for our culture and mostly nurturing our spirituality growth. We are most grateful for you being so very encouraging, patient, helpful, and supportive to the Native people; you have become a part of their families and of ours. We will miss you dearly as a friend and mentor. *Quyana* (Thank you)

WELCOMING Fr. Welcome Chipiro

Reprinted from Missionary Disciple



My name is Fr. Fungai Welcome Chipiro. I grew up in a family with 8 siblings. My father was a peasant farmer, hunter, and headman. My mother is a peasant farmer. She is the one who looked after the family after the passing of our father in 1987.

We used to enjoy game meat when my father was alive. We had 3 big orchards of mango trees which provided our income from this cash crop production. When the missionaries arrived in our village my father gave them a plot of land for free so they could build a mission. In my father's mind, this meant the villages around the area would have a nearby Secondary School.

I went to Mazowe Spiritual Formation House for 18 months with a group of 48 seminarians of my Country, one Diocese of South Africa, and two Dioceses of Botswana. I attended 3 years Philosophate at St. Augustine Philosophate and pastoral year at St. Peter's Mission, Checheche. I went on to Theologate at Chishawasha Regional Seminary for 4 years. We were a group of 37 by the time we finished Theology.

My ordination to the priesthood was on the 27th of September 2008. It took place at my home parish of St. Patrick's Mission, Nyanyadzi in the Diocese of Mutare.

Since then I have been attached to various parishes and missions. The average size of each mission was more than 500 parishioners. My joy is in my work and keeps me going.

My first two months after ordination, I served at St. Barbara's Mission on Sundays, driving from the Bishop's house. Then I was posted to St. Columba's Mission, in the Honde Valley as a Priest-in-Charge for a year. The parish was made up of 14 stations. I would start my Sunday Masses on Friday so that each station would have at least one Mass per month. In that parish, I enjoyed the active participation of parishioners during Mass. The church was fully alive. Part of the mission had a primary and secondary school. In that area around the parish were tea plants in the beautiful evergreen landscapes with agricultural activities going on. The locals mainly grew tea, coffee, bananas, yams, and maize. It was such a nice place with ever-cheerful people. Normally when you get used to the parishioners a new assignment was around the corner.

I was then transferred to St. Charles Lwanga Minor Seminary Secondary School in Chimanimani to be the Priest-in-Charge and Rector. This was in a beautiful place with pine and gum trees. However, the parish had less active parishioners. The parish had 12 stations. We started cattle and pig rearing to utilize the versatile land of the mountainous mission farm. The place was affected by Cyclone Idai causing a landslide in March 2019. The dining room, toilets, and part of a hostel were razed to the ground. One student and a security guard were killed in the landslide; we prayed for the souls departed. That event led to the closure of the boarding section and minor seminary.

I was then transferred to St. Michael Mission, in Tanda. The church had a primary day school, hospital, and a parish. The parish had 10 stations. I was the Priest-in-Charge with a curate. The land was flat and home visits lifted my heart. I would meet with parishioners in their homes and small Christian communities for prayers and getting to know each other as a community. I was not at that community long because there was a need in a much bigger mission that had two boarding schools, a primary school, and a secondary school with a hospital. Mt. Melleray was a place with flowing streams located on the foot of Inyangani range of mountains. With the highest mountains in Zimbabwe at 8,500 ft, missionaries used to call it the goose that laid a golden egg. The schools were well-nurtured in Catholicism in their liturgy and administration and they had farms for cattle range and crop production. It was not long when we started to do farming for parish fundraising, that I was transferred to replace the Vicar General who had gone for canonical studies in Kenya. I was appointed to be the Administrator of the Holy Trinity Cathedral for 3 years.

Soon after my term, I moved to work with the Jesuit Refugee Services in Tongogara Refugee Camp with asylum seekers and refugees from the Great Lakes.

The refugees were from Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Mozambique's, and a few from other countries. There were up to 14,000 refugees and asylum seekers living in the camp. I most enjoyed their music, dance, and cooperation even though the refugees had no means. Their hearts would always give me the strength to do work among them. I always liked to celebrate Mass and make some home visits at the camp. I then started to learn Swahili and celebrate the sacraments in Swahili because it was the main language spoken in the refugee camp. Then I started taking French lessons because Swahili was always branded with French words. However, I did not finish my French course because I was moving to Fairbanks.

I heard about the Diocese of Fairbanks through a brother priest who worked in the Diocese of Gaylord, Michigan. He is the one who connected my home diocese with the Diocese of Fairbanks. The bishops of the two dioceses began to talk about the possibility of having missionaries from the Diocese of Mutare go to Fairbanks, Alaska. Bishop Chad once visited the Diocese of Mutare in this regard. He also met with Bishop P. Horan in Rome.

The main reason we agreed was that, as Africans, we came to know Christ through missionaries from Europe and America. Why would we say no to an open invitation by God? Priests of the Diocese of Mutare met and chose me and another priest to come for the Mission. The first attempt was impossible due to unforeseen administrative issues. Then in the second attempt, the diocese decided to send one priest. I hope shortly that we may have another priest from Zimbabwe.

I am praying to see some active young men and women participating in Church activities because they are the future Church. I like the administration of the Diocese of Fairbanks which I see as well organized, receptive and always ready to assist.



Fr. Welcome is seated in the center with the St. Joseph's Guild members at St. Michael's Church in Zimbabwe.

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Diocese of Fairbanks' Seminarians

MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT



30 Years Among the Yup'ik People of Northern Alaska Patrick Tam

Pat Tam came to the village of Emmonak in 1981, expecting to spend a year among the Yup'ik Eskimo people as a lay missionary. Then he heard God's call to serve permanently. He has spent the past 30 years living among the Yup'ik, and now heads the diocese's Adult Faith Formation program for 24 parishes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region.

What most strongly influenced your faith growing up?

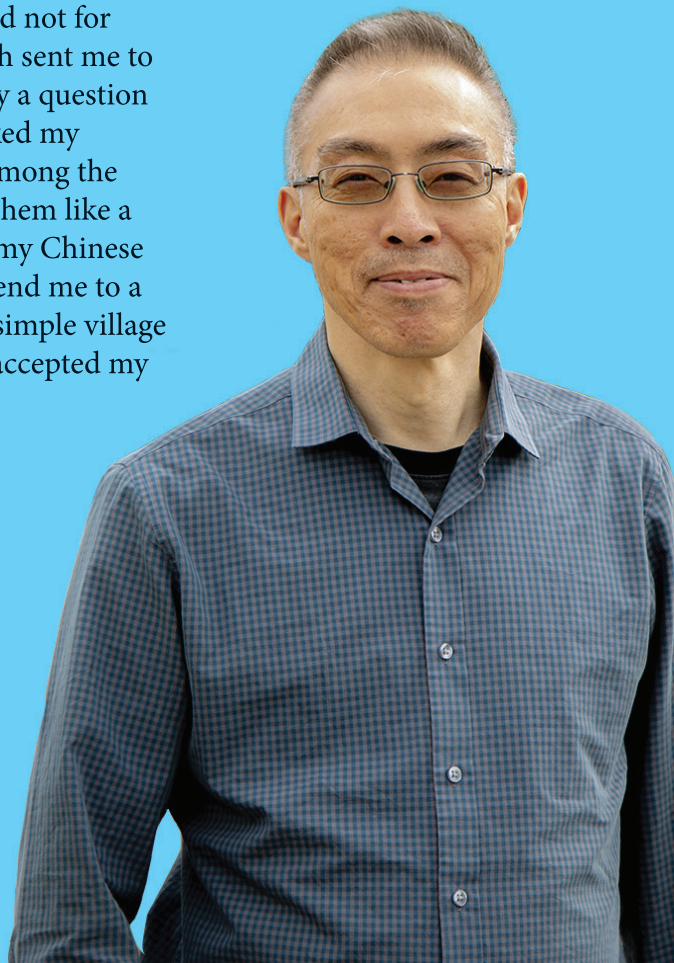
My mother's faith was very important to my own spiritual journey. She'd grown up in China, and had witnessed the Communists oppress and even murder Christian missionaries, which impacted her deeply. Once she emigrated to Hong Kong as a young woman, she converted to Catholicism and has remained a strong Catholic her whole life. I have memories of her getting up early and kneeling before a small statue of Mary to pray her daily rosary. Later on, once we moved to the United States, she took on extra work doing alterations to pay for me and my siblings to attend Catholic schools. Her faith wasn't showy, but was more of a quiet witness to those around her. It even led to my father's conversion just a few years ago, in his 70s. We're all Catholic because of her.

How did you discern your missionary call and how did that lead you to Alaska?

My last year of college, I sort of realized I had been living for myself and not for others. I decided to spend a year with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, which sent me to Alaska, to the small Yup'ik Eskimo village of Emmonak. I was struck by a question villagers would ask me over and over: "When are you leaving?" It pricked my conscience, and made me think that God might be calling me to stay among the Yup'ik people and serve them with my whole heart instead of treating them like a "missionary experience" and then moving on. This didn't sit well with my Chinese mother, of course, who struggled with the fact that she'd sacrificed to send me to a Catholic high school and a Catholic college, only to have me choose a simple village life in remote Alaska! After three decades, my family has pretty much accepted my calling, but I still think my mother holds out hope I'll eventually "come to my senses" and move into a more traditional career. I don't know what the future holds—my parents are older now and I may need to leave Emmonak and take care of them some day. For now, the Yup'ik people are the family God has called me to live among and serve.

What advice do you have for someone who thinks she or he may be called to missionary work?

I'd say to stop thinking about it and just go experience it. One thing I've learned from the Yup'ik is that you learn best by doing it yourself, even if that means making mistakes along the way. God's call can be heard in prayer, yes, but it can also be heard simply through the real-life experience of loving people. If you think you're called to serve, go serve. He will tell your heart if that's where you're meant to be.



Issue Contributors: Bishop Chad Zielinski, Fr. Welcome Chipiro, Sr. Kathy Radich, OSF, Marilyn Sipary & Misty Mealey

Photo Contributions: David Schienle & Catholic Schools of Fairbanks

The Alaskan Shepherd Newsletter

Volume 57 Number 3

Fall

Editor: Patty Walter

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