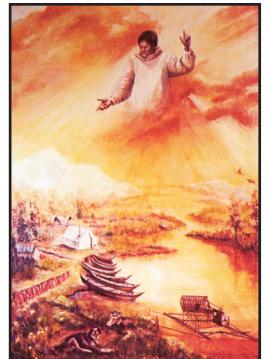




The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 60 Number 1

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Winter 2022

Without both there are no Missions

Saying “Yes” to God’s Call: The Ordination of Deacon Dominic Hunt

In September, the diocese celebrated its first ordination for a rural deacon in years when Bishop Chad ordained Dominic Hunt, a Yup’ik Catholic man from the village of Emmonak. Hunt and his wife, Lala, spent nearly five years preparing for the diaconate, and are a united team in their ministry to bring the Gospel to the Yup’ik people in rural Alaska.

With just 20 priests to serve 46 churches, the Diocese of Fairbanks frequently struggles to provide consistent pastoral care to the faithful. Most priests are assigned three to four parishes each and travel constantly via plane, boat, ATV, and snowmachine to reach the remote parishes they serve. This means the faithful can go weeks or months without seeing a priest; during the pandemic, lockdowns prevented some parishes from celebrating the Mass and sacraments for nearly a year.

This is why the ordination of Deacon Dominic (“Dom”) Hunt was such a joyful celebration when it took place at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Emmonak in September 2021. As a deacon, Dom now plays a crucial role in providing spiritual care for the Catholics in his village. While he cannot celebrate the Mass or administer all seven sacraments like a priest, Deacon Hunt can lead Communion services, marry couples, baptize people, and spiritually counsel those who approach the Church for help.

While deacons in areas flush with priests may seem more “ornamental,” these consecrated men are indispensable to churches in rural Alaska. In addition to leading Communion services and administering some sacraments, deacons also



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serve the dying and their bereaved families in the frequent absence of a priest. Deacons pray over those near death so they can leave life in friendship with God and be assured of his mercy. They also lead the full range of funeral services, a substantial task since the Yup'ik people observe all five prayer services prescribed by the Church when a loved one dies. Deacons pray over the deceased as their body is prepared for burial; lead the family in prayer before, during, and after the funeral; and sometimes lead the funeral itself. Cemeteries are often a good distance from the village, too, and it can take hours to reach the gravesite via boat, snowmachine, or ATV. Even if a priest is available for the funeral liturgy, he may have a pastoral emergency in another village and turn graveside services over to a deacon.

Deacons like Dom also assist those who approach the church for spiritual counseling. This includes baptized Catholics, but many who approach deacons for prayers or advice do not identify as Catholic or have not been active in the faith for years. By listening and directing people toward a relationship with God as well as other resources, deacons meet a critical unmet need in remote villages with no mental health services.

The presence of a deacon can make a profound difference in a parish's vibrancy, says Sr. Kathy Radich, OSF, who has coordinated ministry for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region for nearly three decades. Years ago, Sr. Kathy helped coordinate a survey of the diocese's rural parishes. She discovered that those with the most consistently engaged parishioners and active ministries had one thing in common: they all had at least one deacon assisting the priest.

Despite the tremendous value our rural deacons bring to parishes, formation is a lengthy process that can take twice as long to complete for our indigenous Catholics as it does for candidates from Fairbanks. Alaska Natives believe God's call comes through the community rather than the individual. This means indigenous Catholics must be explicitly called to serve by their parish council before they will consider the diaconate, says Fr. Mark Hoelsken, who directs the diocese's Rural Deacon program. Even then, discernment can take years since culturally, Alaska Natives tend to be innately humble people who take the responsibilities of leadership seriously.

This was certainly the case for Dom Hunt, who was initially approached by Sacred Heart's parish council about becoming a deacon nearly eight years ago. At the time, he and his wife, Lala, still had several children at home, and

Dom was traveling frequently for work in the construction industry. When home in Emmonak, he supplemented the family's income with commercial fishing and subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing, and trapping.

Dom spent three years praying about the parish council's request to become a deacon. More than once, he wondered how a "hands-on guy" like him was going to embrace the increased theological reading and public speaking duties of the diaconate. Even more concerning was his responsibilities to his family—Dom worried he couldn't adequately support them *and* perform the duties of a rural deacon, which are significant.

For Lala, however, her husband's reservations meant he had his priorities straight. They also were a clear sign he would excel as a deacon. "Dom has a servant's heart," says Lala. "He's like many good Yup'ik men—they want to serve the Church, but they need to make sure they can take care of their families, too. They take seriously their role as providers and that comes first."

Eventually, the Hunts' family demands lessened and there was space for Dom to serve as a deacon and Lala to support him. Dom also realized the parish's two active deacons were elderly with health issues and likely to age out of ministry soon, a void that needed to be filled for the sake of the next generation.

"I realized people need help, especially our young people," says Dom. "They need a lot of guidance, and we don't have the mission schools and a lot of priests around like we used to. Someone has to be willing to step up and help our people spiritually."

For Dom and Lala, saying yes to God's call to serve was just the beginning of a lengthy commitment that culminated in Dom's ordination this past fall. The couple spent nearly five years preparing for the diaconate, with training conducted in person and via phone with a diverse leadership team that included two priests, a lay missionary, and even Bishop Zielinski on occasion. In some ways, the pandemic accelerated Hunt's formation, because Emmonak was the home village of lay missionary Patrick Tam and Fr. Stan Jaszek, who assisted with formation. Other deacon candidates in villages with more consistent lockdowns had longer periods between trainings.

For the Hunts, this new chapter as a deacon and deacon's wife comes with the prayer that they can convince others

they have something beautiful to contribute to God's kingdom, too. Says Lala, "Yup'ik are deeply spiritual, deeply grateful people who often feel unworthy of leading people in the faith. But we don't have many priests and missionaries to direct our spiritual lives anymore, so we have to step up ourselves and own the faith as a people." The couple believes many Yup'ik Catholics are willing to serve as catechists, deacons, or other ministry leaders, but they just need encouragement and training, as well as a sense of belonging to a loving faith community.

"Dom and I, we serve because we want to give that to people," says Lala.



Above: Bishop Chad Zielinski ordains the newest Deacon in the Diocese of Fairbanks, Dominic Hunt. Below: Bishop Chad Zielinski stands with newly ordained Deacon Dominic, his wife Lala, and Fr. Stan Jaszek.



The Women Behind Our Yup'ik Deacons



Newly ordained Deacon Dominic Hunt with his wife Lala, children, grandchildren, and long-time friend and Diocesan Adult Faith Formation Director, Pat Tam (back, far right).

Photo courtesy of the Hunt Family

Our deacons' wives contribute significantly to their husband's pastoral work in rural Alaska. In small villages of just a few hundred people, wives tend to have great insight into family dynamics, and this enables them to assist their husbands in meeting people's needs. They also provide moral support, a critical need for village-based deacons who minister to close friends and family.

Carl Morgan is a Yup'ik deacon from Aniak who was ordained about 10 years ago. Aniak only sees a priest a few times a year, so Carl was the go-to spiritual leader for St. Theresa Catholic Church until he retired a few years ago. According to his wife, Angie, the emotional toll of being a rural deacon is substantial.

"Deacons are supposed to be strong for others, so they can't lean on friends and family the way they used to," explains Angie. "This burden is heaviest when the man is called to lead prayers for the dying or during funeral services," she adds.

"As a deacon, Carl led funerals for so many friends and relatives, including his mother, father, and two brothers," says Angie. "It's beautiful because you're serving the people you love, but that also makes it hard. You just have to stay together, always supporting each other, when he's a deacon." The Morgans served their parish for years as Eucharistic ministers, so it was a natural segue for them to continue to work side-by-side once Carl was ordained.

Like Carl and Angie, Dom and Lala Hunt also have a long history of joint service to the Church. The couple served together at Sacred Heart Church in Emmonak as music ministers for decades and have been members of the diocese's Intercultural Dialogue Group for nearly 20 years. Three years ago, they helped form the Rural Families Ministry to identify issues unique to Native families and facilitate resource sharing among parishes. Even before Dom's ordination, the Hunts became the first indigenous directors of the Native Ministry Training Program in 2020. The NMTP trains lay Catholics to lead ministry in the absence of a priest.

"Our village deacons almost always have their wives at their side and that's a great strength," says Bishop Chad Zielinski. Dom and Lala are no exception. Their faithfulness and gracious hospitality have played a large part in preparing the bishop to shepherd Native Catholics whose culture is so different from his own.

"This humble couple has done so much for me since I came to Emmonak four months after ordination as bishop," says Bishop Zielinski. "They've explained Yup'ik culture, of course, but more importantly, they've taken me to their backyard—the wilderness of Alaska—and shown me what it means to live as a Yup'ik family on the Yukon River."

An avid hunter and fisherman, Bishop Zielinski even harvested his first moose while hunting with Dom. "I got out my phone for photos, but Dom gently reminded me that our first duty is to thank God for the harvest and the animal for its sacrifice," recalls the bishop. "It was humbling and reminded me that the Yup'ik way of life is rightly centered around living in harmony with God's creation and with each other." These values were demonstrated a few days later when the men participated in a time-honored Yup'ik tradition: giving away the meat from Bishop Zielinski's first harvest to villagers in need, most of whom were elders. "Elders were their first providers, and the Yup'ik honor that by providing for them now," explains the bishop.

Christ sent disciples out "two-by-two," a maxim still taking place in our village parishes today as deacons and their wives dedicate countless hours of service to building up the Kingdom of God in Alaska. "Quyana Cakneq [thank you!] to the men and women in our villages who have blessed me with their beautiful culture and who keep the light of Christ alive in our churches between celebrations of the Mass," says Bishop Zielinski.



These four couples are the core of the Family Ministry planning team for the Y-K Region. Natalia & Ben Flynn, John & Doris Atchak, Angie & Deacon Carl Morgan, Deacon Dom & Lala Hunt.

The Miraculous Novena of Grace



March 4-12

Saint Francis Xavier Pray for Us!

The Novena of Grace, which begins March 4th and ends on the 12th, the day of the canonization of St. Francis Xavier, owes its origin to the Saint himself. At Naples, in December, 1633, Father Marcello Mastrilli, SJ, was at the point of death. The Saint appeared to him and, bidding him renew a vow he had made to labor in Japan, said: "All those who implore my help daily for nine consecutive days, from the 4th to the 12th of March included, and worthily receive the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist on one of the nine days, will experience my protection and may hope with entire assurance to obtain from God any grace they ask for the good of their souls and the glory of God." The Father arose, instantly cured. So well has the Saint kept this promise that this devotion in his honor became universally known as the *Novena of Grace*.

The Novena of Grace Prayer (Clip & Save)

O most amiable and loving St. Francis Xavier, in union with you I adore the Divine Majesty. While joyfully giving thanks to God for the great graces which He conferred upon you in life and for the great glory with which He has gifted you in heaven, I come to you with heartfelt love, begging you to secure for me, by your powerful intercession, the inestimable blessings of living and dying in the state of grace. I also beseech you to obtain for me the favors I ask in this Novena. But if what I ask is not for the Glory of God, or for the good of my soul, do you obtain for me what is most conducive to both. *Amen.*

**R: Our Father; Hail Mary;
Glory be to the Father.**

**V. Pray for us, St. Francis Xavier,
R. That we may be made worthy of the
promises of Christ.**

Let us pray: O God, You chose to bring into your Church peoples of the Orient through the preaching and miracles of St. Francis Xavier, mercifully grant us that we may imitate his virtues, whose glorious merits we hold in veneration. We ask this through Jesus Christ Our Lord. *Amen.*

Dear Bishop Zielinski,

S2022 01

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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**Please remember these special intentions during
The Miraculous Novena of Grace
March 4-12**

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CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR NEW DIOCESAN PRIESTS

Fr. Dominik Wojcik & Fr. Piotr Oprych

As we prepare for publication of this issue we are also preparing for the January 12 Ordination to the Priesthood of Deacons Piotr Oprych and Dominik Wojcik. This will be the first time in diocesan history that we will have a double ordination.

As this issue arrives in your mailbox, the new priests will be serving their first Masses in the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks. Please keep them both in your prayers.

Thank you to those who have asked where to send congratulatory cards. They can be sent to their attention at:
1316 Peger Rd, Fairbanks, AK 99709



St. Catherine of Siena Church, Chefornak

Total Projected Cost: \$3.9 Million

Funds Raised: \$2.76 Million+

Status: Dedication August 2022

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 to provide access to all. There will also be room left for growth in the future. The Diocese of Fairbanks welcomes gifts toward the rebuilding of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church. To donate, please designate "St. Catherine of Siena Church" on your check, donate via http://bit.ly/CBNA_AK or call the Diocesan Donation Office at 907-374-9532.



Thank you for your donations and prayers for the building of St. Catherine's of Siena and for the people of Chefornak!

Sister Marita Soucy, CSJ

October 4, 1931-November 11, 2021

Sister of St. Joseph teacher, principal, and Alaskan missionary, Sister Marita Soucy, CSJ, passed away early on the morning of November 11, 2021 at Bojnowski Manor in Connecticut. There was a graveside service (in Connecticut) hosted by the Sisters of St. Joseph on November 13. On December 7, Bishop Chad Zielinski along with Fathers Ross Tozzi and Robert Fath celebrated a Memorial Mass for Sister Marita Soucy, CSJ, at Sacred Heart Cathedral, in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Sister Marita first arrived in Fairbanks, Alaska in 1986. She spent three years teaching the middle grades at Monroe Catholic High School and for the next four years, she served as principal of the elementary school, Immaculate Conception. After seven years, she retired from the academic world to begin a pastoral ministry serving in the hospital, prison, and long-term care facilities. In 1993, she spearheaded and served as Director of the Stephen Ministry Program—a very successful lay outreach program within the diocese—for ten years. In 2003, along with Sr. Marilyn Marx, SNJM, they answered a call to co-direct the catechetical-training center dedicated to Kateri Tekakwitha and located along the upper Yukon River. The center served the villages of Galena, Huslia, Kaltag, Koyukuk, McGrath, Nulato, Ruby, and Tanana.

In 2007, she returned to Fairbanks to take on a new ministry of Director of Urban Native Ministry. In 2010, she returned to her beloved Sisters in Connecticut to build a program to assist the Sisters residing in assisted living and in the infirmary. She had been an active member during that time—never formally retiring. She is survived by her sister, Claire Desrochers, who resides in Fairbanks. In 1986, she founded the Associates of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Fairbanks. It is an active lay spirituality group that boasts one of the largest in the country, numbering nearly 40 members now. The group shares the charism of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambéry, which is "Love of the Dear Neighbor"—a charism and sentiment that was the very embodiment of Sister Marita Soucy. She will be dearly missed and long remembered.

Her fellow Sisters of St. Joseph wrote: *Sister Marita loved family, friends, and her Sisters in Community without distinction, evidenced by her cheerful disposition, loving greeting, and happy smile. Even these last years, as physical diminishment and the aging process set in, Sister lived the present moment as if it were the best moment of her life. She immensely enjoyed life, and her infectious laughter was a direct sign of the exuberant joy she felt in her heart. Sister Marita often said that if she were to have a coat of arms, it would read from St. Peter: "Cast all your cares on the Lord, knowing that God cares for you." She also would mention that her name Soucy meant "care." She cared for all with whom and for whom she ministered.*

The photo was taken at Sr. Marita's farewell party in 2010, in Fairbanks.

Bishop Chad's Summer Visit to Parishes Along the Middle Yukon River



Passing "Bishop's Rock" landmark (the white cross on the hill), Bishop Chad steers the Hewescraft 200 upriver toward the village of Ruby. On board are three Franciscans, Brothers Bob Ruzicka and John Nuesser, and taking the photo—Father Thinh Van Tran.

Last summer, Bishop Zielinski spent a week visiting parishes along the middle portion of the mighty Yukon River. The arduous, 300-mile boat trip through overnight sunshine, driving wind, and at times, bone-chilling rain highlighted the unique experience of sharing the Gospel in our remote Alaskan villages. Bishop Chad also witnessed the ongoing resilience of our Athabaskan Catholics, who remain faithful despite the hardship of low salmon runs, which has historically provided their families with a significant portion of the food they need for the year.

Thursday, July 1: Arriving in Nulato

I arrived in the village of Nulato at 3pm and was greeted by Br. Bob Ruzicka, OFM, the diocese's Interior Region Coordinator, along with Fr. Thinh Van Tran, OFM, and Br. John Nuesser, OFM. Brother John is still in formation with the Franciscans and was spending two months in the interior as his mission experience.

For years, I've traveled to our Middle Yukon parishes around this time for a pastoral visit. Normally, early July is the peak of the salmon run, but the numbers of king, chum, and coho salmon were at their lowest levels on record. This signals a troubled ecosystem likely impacted by overfishing and climate changes. Chum salmon numbers were dangerously low: Fish & Game projected around 99,000 fish this year compared to a historical run of 870,000. This prompted the state to ban commercial and subsistence fishing.

It's difficult for people outside of Alaska to appreciate what a salmon fishing ban means for our Native families. Villages are isolated, with just a few hundred residents. In western Alaska, one in five people are unemployed, and 39% live below the poverty line. The high cost of transporting items into these remote areas means food in village markets tends to be exorbitant, with perishables like milk, bread, and vegetables costing three to four times what they do in urban areas.

For families that live off the land, not being able to stock their larders with fish means they'll need to spend even more at the grocery store and make hard decisions about prioritizing food, medicine, and heating oil to survive winter. In true Alaskan style, commercial fishermen from Bristol Bay have been donating sockeye salmon to many villages along the Yukon River to compensate for the low salmon runs.

Word around the village was that sheefish were running, so after Mass, I traveled to the Nulato River with Fr. Thinh, Br. John, and a villager named Neil to give it our best. For the first hour or so, we caught nothing. Then Neil caught a sheefish, and the bite was on. We ended up with 10 fish before heading back to the village late that evening with our haul.

Getting back to the rectory reminded me of something that surprises most visitors to the bush: despite the vastness of our great state, village homes are typically small and built only for one or two people. It's easy to see why when you consider the high cost of barging in building materials and the expense of heating a large home in 50 below zero. The four of us sorted

out sleeping arrangements, with two on the rectory beds and two on the church floor. (I actually prefer a mattress on the floor due to back issues.) I'm amazed by how resilient our priests and religious are in these challenging situations...everyone is always willing to make sacrifices for the mission.

Friday, July 2: Another Day in Nulato

I was up early to greet the daylight, which wasn't hard because it doesn't really get dark outside at this time of year. (Fairbanksans celebrate the constant daylight every June with the annual "Midnight Sun Run," a 10K that *starts* at 10pm!) By early July, there are a few hours of dusk but even then, it's so bright you can sit outside and still comfortably read a book. However, once past the summer equinox, the light starts waning and we lose about seven minutes of daylight each day until the winter solstice in late December. Then we start gaining daylight again. It's part of the unique beauty of living so far north.

For Alaskans who endure the long darkness of an arctic winter, there's no joy like our long summer days. One of my favorite summer experiences is to rise early and greet the day with a nice, hot cup of strong coffee while praying the Liturgy of the Hours. As I was praying this morning, I realized that priests, religious, and

lay faithful from around the world were joining me in praying the official prayer for the Church, each in their own language. What a joyful and holy dialogue with God throughout the Mystical Body of Christ! The first parish in Alaska was established in Nulato, and it's beautiful to think that the Liturgy of the Hours has been prayed here continuously since the late 1800s.

Next to the current church and residence is an old convent that used to house the nuns who served in one of the earlier missions. The chancery archives contain beautiful pictures of these sisters dressed in full black habits overlain with fur-lined parkas. The convent is now called "Bishop's Attic," and villagers have turned it into a clothing closet where locals donate gently used clothing that is available to anyone who stops by. It's a great outreach ministry that also solves the problem of what to do with outgrown clothing that can't be easily hauled away from the community.

After prayers, Fr. Thinh and I returned to the Nulato River for another try at the sheefish. We caught five more, and upon our return, Br. Bob quickly processed all 15 with his handy fillet knife. For breakfast, we had freshly fried sheefish and sheefish eggs, which were scrumptious. Sheefish are the largest whitefish in Alaskan rivers and can grow up to 60 pounds, though those caught in interior rivers tend to be much smaller.



In Ruby, at St. Peter in Chains Church, Bishop Chad Zielinski celebrates Mass with parishioners. Br. Bob Ruzicka, OFM, is on his left, Fr. Joe Hemmer, OFM, is in the middle, and Br. John Nuesser, OFM, is in the back row, right side, by the window.

The meat is white and flaky, with a succulent, clean taste like cod or halibut. It's considered such a delicacy that some Alaskans refer to sheefish as "the lobster of the north" and fish for it all year round.

Saturday, July 3: Heading to Ruby

Brother Bob, Fr. Thinh, Br. John, and I loaded up early this morning on the "parish boat," en route to the village of Ruby about 100 miles upriver. The sturdy, open-bowed Hewescraft 200 had been built for the parish by the Hewescraft Corporation. The company has built several boats for the villages in need over the past few decades and they have served us well. This "pickup truck of the Yukon" easily accommodated the four of us plus all our gear.

On the way to Ruby, we passed Bishop's Rock. Located at a sharp bend in the Yukon River, the steep rock formation juts out of the landscape like a spear, and the spot is notorious for its ice jams that cause flooding upriver during spring breakup. The rock was named for Bishop Charles Seghers, a Belgian missionary who was murdered by his guide on his way to fulfill a promise he'd made eight years earlier to the people of Nulato, to return and establish a permanent mission in their midst. Today, the spot still sports a white cross, reminding us all of the ultimate price some pay to share the beauty, goodness, and truth of the Gospel.

We took a short break about two hours upriver and alighted at the village of Galena, where we visited briefly with Br. Justin Huber, our third Franciscan who serves the interior region. A quiet, humble man, Br. Justin has spent nearly 20 years in Alaska after mission assignments in Tennessee, Texas, and Africa. In Galena, he has a reputation as someone who "gets things done," whether that's teaching baptism classes or fixing a boiler in 40 below zero. According to Br. Justin, "If God puts you somewhere and there's a job that needs to be done, you just do it." This simple, self-sacrificing worldview is common among our wonderful Franciscans.

Back on the water, it took another two hours to reach Ruby, where were greeted by elder Harold Esmailka and Fr. Joe Hemmer, OFM. Like Br. Justin, Harold and

Fr. Joe are unassuming, humble men, but their long-standing and unwavering dedication to the faith has made them role models for Alaskan Catholics. Father Joe has spent the past 30 years of his "retirement" serving in the interior, and is a great witness to what it means to be a "warrior missionary" in an extreme environment like Alaska. He lives alone and has pastoral oversight for St. Peter in Chains in Ruby and St. Teresa's in Kaltag.

We celebrated evening Mass, then enjoyed a "covered-dish to pass." Potluck dinner consisted of moose stew, fresh sheefish, and even "muktuk" (whale skin and blubber) from a visitor from Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow). Muktuk is a traditional Inuit food made from the skin and blubber of the bowhead whale, though beluga and narwhal can be used. It's often eaten raw or even frozen, but the woman who brought it to the church had boiled the meat, and it was quite tasty. I was amused to see the ever-present macaroni and cheese on the table for those with less adventurous palates.

Tomorrow is Independence Day, and we did hear a smattering of late-night "bangs" to usher in the holiday. July 4th is a little different in Alaska than in the lower 48 states, where people stay up late for spectacular fireworks displays. For us, it's just too bright outside in July to get the full experience, so we save our big fireworks shows for New Year's Eve.

Sunday, July 4: Back to Galena

It was a quiet morning as many folks slept in who had been up late enjoying July 4th festivities. Later this morning, I celebrated Sunday Mass and was impressed by the number of people who attended. Ruby is a smaller village, with fewer than 200 residents, but St. Peter in Chains has a dedicated group of faithful who attend Mass whenever a priest is available. Currently, Fr. Hemmer is based in Kaltag, and between his duties there and travel to Fairbanks for medical care, he's only able to visit Ruby for about one week each month.

We departed Ruby early in the afternoon for our return trip to Nulato, intending to stop for longer at Galena this time. I was invited to pilot the boat and noticed that

moving with the current enabled us to travel 6-7 mph faster, with an occasional bump in speed if the wind was in our favor. Traveling the Yukon River brought back memories from growing up in Michigan. We ran boats in small lakes on the Great Lakes, whose waters could be very rough at times.

Navigating the Yukon is different. For a first-timer like me, I needed the corporate memory of the Franciscans to guide me away from hidden underwater obstacles like sandbars. This is no small feat since sandbars change locations annually in response to the current and water levels. Seasoned boaters always carry a tool kit and spare prop in case the motor gets tangled in a log or hits a rocky sandbar.

Our competent Franciscans got us to Galena without incident, of course. We arrived with time to prepare dinner, share some great stories of our adventure, and discuss the Middle Yukon Regional meeting that was to take place on Tuesday.

Monday & Tuesday, July 5-6: A Longer Visit in Galena

I celebrated evening Mass on Monday, then on Tuesday, we held a gathering of lay leaders from villages up and down the Middle Yukon. Most attendees were older women who have been the “keepers of the faith” for decades in their villages. They are in large part responsible for keeping our parishes going between the rare visit from a priest by serving as parish administrators, catechists, sacramental preparation leaders, and of course, Communion service presiders. They, along with our rural deacons, make profound sacrifices to ensure the Gospel remains rooted and grows in the far north, and they truly are our unsung heroes.

One highly discussed topic was recognizing the work of elders, who are cornerstones of Yup’ik, Athabaskan, and Inuit culture. Interestingly, not every senior is considered an “elder” among Alaska Natives. Elders are individuals who are not only of advanced age but who possess a wealth of cultural history and knowledge that will benefit younger generations. A role model, if you will. To honor these important community members,



Franciscans Br. John Neusser and Fr. Thinh Van Tran are greeted by Br. Justin Huber, OFM, in Galena.

our group decided to plan a regional celebration in Galena next October 11 on “Indigenous People’s Day” that will honor elders who have served as prayer leaders and catechists for many years.

Wednesday, July 7: Stopping by Kaltag

We departed Galena early since we had an almost 3-hour boat ride to the village of Kaltag ahead of us. It was rainy and despite being the height of summer, quite chilly. We decided to stop briefly at Nulato about halfway into the trip to eat lunch and have a hot cup of coffee to warm our bones. I think our lengthy river adventure along the Yukon had maxed out Br. John’s resilience because he decided to stay in Nulato.

It took us another hour to make it to Kaltag, where we met up with Fr. Joe again. This amazing 93-year-old “super trooper” sat on a metal chair in his own boat, bundled up in winter coat and hat. It might sound strange to hear about someone wearing winter gear in July, but the Yukon River is only about 40 degrees Fahrenheit, even in summer. Then, the constantly-blown wind delivers a biting cold to exposed skin.

Thursday, July 8: Departing Nulato



Bishop Chad Zielinski and Fr. Joe Hemmer, OFM, celebrate a baptism in Kaltag, at St. Teresa Church.

Alaska's lakes and rivers can be fatally cold, and the state has more than 10 times more drowning deaths than the rest of the country. The shock of the cold water is so severe that about 20% of people who fall into our waters die within minutes, and even strong swimmers start to lose muscle control quickly. Our priests have led many funerals after our frigid waters tragically claimed a villager's life. It's especially heartrending when a child or teen drowns; those losses are particularly painful and the community suffers a deep spiritual wound.

Today, the ambient temperatures on the Yukon were in the mid-50s and rain was abundant. Alaskans live for their gloriously sunny summer days, but some years bring an unexpectedly cold and rainy season, and this was one of them. Shortly after tying up our boats in Kaltag, we ran inside to brew a big pot of coffee. Cold driving rain and wind were the perfect combination to create a thirst for hot brew.

We celebrated a 5:30 pm Mass with a joyful baptism of a child, then enjoyed a parish potluck dinner. Brother Bob and I checked the weather forecast and saw that it was supposed to be cold, foggy, and rainy again, so we decided to depart Kaltag that evening since the rain had subsided and the wind died down. We made the trip in under an hour. At this point, we had covered just under 300 miles on the Yukon River in five days. I was exhausted and slept well that night!

I rose early this morning and confirmed out the window that it was cold and rainy again. It was also so foggy you couldn't see the opposite side of the river, so I knew Br. Bob and I had made a good call about traveling back to Nulato last night. We celebrated a late morning Mass attended mostly by faithful elders, a few of whom brought grandkids.

About a month earlier, I had made an emergency trip to Nulato to officiate the funeral for a good friend, Henry "Junior" Agnes. Junior suddenly died of a suspected heart attack. He had served as a good friend and mentor to me over the years, teaching me all about navigating the Yukon and how to catch salmon with a drift net. A few years back when the salmon population was at healthier numbers, I spent time fishing with Junior and Br. Bob and we caught 37 king salmon in just about 90 minutes. Junior was one of many kind souls who taught me about our Athabaskan brothers and sisters, and there is so much to learn I suspect I will always be climbing that curve.

Prior to my departure, I had a nice chat with Junior's widow, Sherry. In talking with her, I was reminded of the words of Simeon in the Gospel: "And a sword will pierce your heart." Sherry was shocked by the sudden loss of her husband, and her grief was palpable. She thanked me for making the trip to Nulato to celebrate Junior's funeral. In my seven years as Bishop, I have officiated at many village funerals and am always amazed by the imprint those who have died make on their communities...with such close bonds, their loss is felt far beyond their immediate family members. Like so many of our Native people, Junior has left sacred footprints in my heart that I will carry with me always.



Fr. Stan Jaszek Is Awarded Catholic Extension's Lumen Christi Award

On November 3rd, Fr. Stan Jaszek was officially awarded the Catholic Extension 2021-2022 Lumen Christ Award for his missionary work in northern Alaska where he lives and ministers among the Yup'ik people. The president of Catholic Extension, Fr. Jack Wall, presented Fr. Stan with the award at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Fairbanks during a special Mass celebrated by Bishop Chad Zielinski and his fellow priests.

Fr. Stan, in his usual humble manner, expressed his great gratitude for the award but asked that “the focus of the award remain on the true source of light, who is Jesus Christ for without Him, we can do nothing.” Fr. Stan also relayed his gratitude to all the ministers who serve alongside him.

He explained, “Lumen Christi means ‘Light of Christ.’ If you split white light with a prism, you will see a rainbow of colors that make up that white light. That white light is made up of so many colors, but we can’t see them all at once. It is a reminder that this award is not my achievement; it represents all the work of all the ministers both past and present who have served in the missions of northern Alaska.” —*Photos courtesy of Catholic Extension*



Above: Fr. Stan Jaszek receives the Lumen Christi Award from Catholic Extension's President, Fr. Jack Wall.

Below: Fr. Stan Jaszek, in Sacred Heart Cathedral in Fairbanks Alaska, accepts the Lumen Christi award and thanks Catholic Extension and his fellow Alaskan missionaries.



Above: Fellow priests of the Diocese of Fairbanks concelebrate with Bishop Chad Zielinski on the special occasion.

Below: Fr. Stan Jaszek with Fr. Jack Wall and Bishop Chad Zielinski.



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.

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