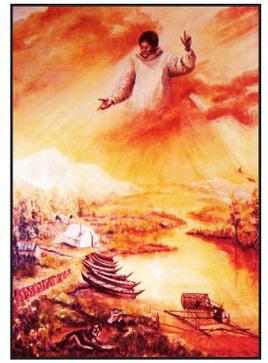




# The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 56 Number 1

Winter 2018

*Some give by going to the Missions*

*Some go by giving to the Missions*

*Without both there are no Missions*

## Fr. Joe Nettekoven A “City Slicker” Priest in Alaska

*Two issues ago, The Alaskan Shepherd profiled Father Jim Falsey, a retired priest from Michigan who is also a pilot. In this issue, we would like to introduce you to another retired pilot-priest, Father Joe Nettekoven.*

*Father Nettekoven spent 42 years serving as a priest in the Diocese of Orange (California). Initially he flew up to Alaska in his own airplane. Now, for the past 20 years, he has visited Alaska numerous summers—flying commercially to Fairbanks or transitioning through Anchorage --to serve where he’s most needed in the villages. Sometimes that’s meant serving at a road system parish so that one of our missionary priests could have a retreat, time off, or attend training classes outside Alaska. Other times, Fr. Nettekoven has flown to village parishes in rural Alaska to minister to the mostly Native Catholics who reside in these small, isolated communities. Despite the rigors of village life, the retired priest insists rural ministry is his favorite way to spend time volunteering in Alaska. In fact, he says his time in these churches is always spiritually rejuvenating.*

*A few years ago, Fr. Nettekoven penned a detailed journal of his time ministering in our mission parishes in the interior. We are deeply indebted to him for sharing his experience. Here we offer you a condensed version of the adventures of this self-proclaimed “city slicker priest.” Through his eyes, we invite you to enter into the fascinating world of a missionary priest in northern Alaska.*



### **From California to Aniak, Alaska—July 19**

My flight from California went well. I flew commercially to Anchorage, and then took a small commercial plane to Aniak, a village of about 500 people, mostly Yup’ik Eskimos. My accommodations above the chapel are just fine. Sure, you can hear water gurgling in the pipes all night and the sound echoes in the toilet, but at least there’s indoor plumbing! The water is yellow and rusty, though, so I need a Brita® filter to drink it. Maybe I won’t need iron vitamin tablets on this trip... I went to the small village grocery store for supplies. This time of year, produce consisted mostly of cabbage, carrots, and potatoes. I bought two frozen pork chops for \$10, frozen green beans for \$4, a loaf of bread for \$6.50, a can of mushroom soup for \$3.50, and lunchmeat for \$7. Oh, and an apple for \$3. I completely understand now why most villagers still hunt, fish, and pick berries, even with access to store-bought food.

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***Carl & Angie Morgan, with Angie's stepmother, Theresa, in Kalskag. Theresa passed away in 2017. Still in Aniak—July 22***

This morning, the deacon-in-training, Carl, and his wife, Angie, visited me. Carl explained that in Yup'ik culture, wisdom is venerated—a person who appreciates the wisdom of elders, of experience, and of nature can expect to live in harmony, while abandoning that wisdom will bring suffering. Yup'ik boys learned survival skills from their male elders, he said, while girls learned domestic techniques from female elders. Around age 12, boys and girls switch and learn the other set of skills.

Carl and Angie helped me set up for tomorrow's Mass. Carl is in his second year of deacon training. It's so expensive to travel between villages that deacon candidates only have classes about four times a year, plus one or two classes during Priest/Sister visits. The rarity of training means it takes five to 10 years for most men to be ordained. Interestingly, Yup'ik men don't decide that the Holy Spirit is calling them to the diaconate, the way we do; a Yup'ik must be nominated by the parish council. As an elder, Carl was selected by church leaders to become a deacon and he readily accepts the call. This strikes me as a truly humble way of gaining servant leaders for the community.

***From Aniak to Holy Cross—July 25***

Thirty-five people showed up for Mass! I hear that's a big group considering the king salmon are running. Kings are 35-45 pounds each. Carl and Angie already caught most of what they need and are leaving the rest for villagers upriver. Yup'ik people try not to catch more than they need...these folks have "stewardship of the earth" down to a science.

There was a small gathering afterwards in the social hall with moose stew, salmon and spinach quiche, and pineapple upside-down cake layered with Spam®. Now there's a meal in itself. There were also cured salmon eggs. I was told never to eat them raw or I'd have to be medivaced to the hospital in Anchorage.



***Angie & Deacon Carl Morgan***

Later, I flew to Holy Cross, a much smaller village of about 150 people. The houses are built on the hill, away from the Yukon River, which can flood during "breakup" when the ice melts. After settling into the little clergy house, I took a walk to say evening prayers. I'd been warned not to go near the dump because that's where bears congregate. I tried to walk toward the river but then turned a corner and found myself at the dump! There I was on foot and alone at the local bears' hangout. I quickly turned around and made my way back very quietly to the sanctuary of the church. That night, I discovered my bed was located in the sacristy, next to where penitents kneel for Confession. (Are Confessions so long here the priest needs to lay down while hearing them!?) The toilet made up for the convenience of the bed, however—you have to add a bucket of water to the tank to flush. I found some moose burger in the freezer, so I went to the store and bought a can of stewed tomatoes and pasta to make "moose-sketti." Hard to believe this "city slicker" has now also eaten whale, caribou, and seal in different villages all over Alaska! After dinner, I announced over the CB radio that I was in town and available for Confession, Anointing of the Sick, or home visits. I was excited to get some immediate calls back.

***Back in Aniak—July 27***

Today, I rode an ATV to the airstrip to greet the body of a deceased villager. Once there, I realized I'd forgotten the holy water, so I went back for it. By then it had started to rain, but I had no rain gear so I just wrapped a plastic tablecloth around my legs. I got back right as the family arrived and the plane touched down. By the time they unloaded the body, it was pouring and we were all drenched. I did a shortened blessing, then rode back to the house.

I put on dry clothes and threw my soaked ones in the dryer. Knock, Knock.... "Where are you, Father? Everyone's waiting!" Apparently, the actual ritual is done in the family's home and everyone wondered why I disappeared. I grabbed my stole,

ritual book, and holy water and headed back out. By the time I arrived at their house, the family had transferred the body into a beautiful, homemade casket of varnished plywood. The casket sat open on the living room floor and the deceased's father was wrapping his son's hands with a rosary. Kids and babies played as normal. I learned that someone remains with the body until burial. I'll conduct the funeral, but I'll miss the potluck afterwards, as Carl and Angie said I'm needed downriver in Kalskag—an elderly parishioner is dying of cancer and I need to bring her Communion and anoint her before it's too late. We travelled there by his boat.

### Stopover in Crooked Creek—July 30

Our next visit was for an elderly parishioner, Theresa, 87, who lives 70 miles upriver in a place called Crooked Creek, which sits at a sharp bend in the Kuskokwim River. That meant a 2 ½-hour boat trip. Carl and Angie went with me.

Once at Crooked Creek, we discovered Theresa lives “up on the hill” to avoiding flooding. A few years ago, a spring flood caused quite a few to lose their homes—many floated right off their foundations. I saw tents set up for the homeless; people were staying at the school, too. At Theresa's, we had a Communion service and everyone sang (the people love to sing!). Then the family fixed sandwiches, but I wasn't too hungry so they offered me smoked salmon strips instead. It always amazes me how generous these villagers are with food despite having to work so hard to get it.

We left around 4pm and on the way back, Carl and Angie stopped to check their moose-hunting cabin for needed repairs. They also looked over the blueberries, which were just coming into season. The whole time, they were pointing to places they'd gotten a moose or bear or found a great patch of berries. They also showed me trails and mountains they'd climbed. The tundra is mushy and uneven, so I know they must be in pretty good shape to do those things.

We stopped for fuel at some point and purchased 22

gallons of gas for \$150. Wow—almost \$7 a gallon! I paid for it with donations from parishioners in California. I also bought a Gatorade® for \$3, which is about what I'd pay on a golf course down south. Apparently, Gatorade® is the only thing that doesn't suffer inflation in the bush.

Before we left the fuel stop, Angie asked the vendor's son to bring her some salt. I thought that maybe it was for some Yup'ik ritual I didn't know about, so I kept quiet. Fifteen minutes later, Angie informed me they were expecting me to catch dinner. Now, that's pressure, to be expected to feed Eskimos who live off their fishing. After a few casts, I landed two Arctic Chars, then hooked a large Pink Salmon. The salmon was around 15 pounds and enough for all of us. I pulled him into the boat and secured dinner. Yay for the Californian!

We camped on the riverbank for a few hours for dinner. Angie got the fish ready while the rest of us gathered wood and started a fire. It was something else to watch this Eskimo woman clean and filet the fish; she has quite a technique after working the fish camps for years. We cooked the fish over an open fire. Turns out the salt was just seasoning for the dinner—ha!

We “set the table” with some folded cardboard squares as “paper plates” and used forked twigs we'd whittled down to skewer the meat. As the fish cooked, I noticed Carl put a piece of fish into the fire itself. He told me it helps them remember their ancestors, who taught them to feed themselves from the land.

We cleaned up and got back on the water around 10pm. The sun was still shining in this land of the Midnight Sun, but I was exhausted. I'd visited the sick, taken the Risen Christ to people, and enjoyed dinner courtesy of Mother Nature. And most importantly, been spiritually fed by the companionship and wisdom of these beautiful Catholics.

### From Back in Kalskag to Holy Cross—August 2

Today, I flew from Kalskag to Holy Cross to anoint Mary, an 89-year-old blind parishioner. The family asked me to bless the house, too, so I did. The house was very simple, with plywood

walls and no carpets except in the tiny living room, typical of many residences. The wood stove looked like a barrel with a front door.

Afterwards, I went to a barbecue at the tribal center. An Official from Fairbanks was explaining that the village could get a grant to help remark the trails before winter so people won't get lost in a snowstorm. During break, I asked 1<sup>st</sup> Chief Edgar to announce that I was in town and would hold Mass on Sunday morning. I told him to add I was available for Confession, too, and not to worry because I don't know anyone and would be leaving soon.

On Sunday morning, I announced again on the CB that Mass would start in 30 minutes. Then I rang the bell. I had no idea how many times was appropriate, so I went with five rings. Then five more at 15 minutes before the hour and another five just before starting. Had 16 people come to



Mass—about one parishioner for every bell! Maybe next time I'll ring it 40 times.

I heard that 16 people was a big showing for this church these days, though at one time, the whole village was Catholic. Holy Cross was established in the 1880s, and priests and sisters ran an orphanage and school here. They housed and educated nearly 500 kids before closing it all in the 1960s.

### Still in Holy Cross—August 5

This morning, a parishioner invited me to dinner, but dropped her mother, Lillian, off earlier at my place for some “elder sitting.” Growing up as a Yup'ik Eskimo in the coastal village of Unalakleet, Lillian's father died when she was three. Her mother later married a man from Wisconsin who moved to Alaska and ran a mink farm about 50 miles outside the village. Lillian loved the farm, but then her mother died and her stepfather got sick, so she was sent to the orphanage at Holy Cross when she was 13.

All things considered, Lillian has a pretty charitable view of spending her teenage years in a Catholic orphanage. She loved what she'd learned there, like playing the organ, which she still does. But she understandably struggles with some of the rules she'd had to live under, too. After several hours, she asked for Confession. (By then, I understood why there's a bed for the priest in the Confessional.) She was so happy afterwards that she played the organ for another hour before we headed up the hill for dinner at her daughter's house.

Dinner was homemade bread, moose short ribs, and rice. Again, no fresh veggies but there were some canned carrots and hey, I didn't have to cook! Kathy, the daughter, is an incredibly resourceful, independent woman who travels a dozen miles into the woods on an ATV to hunt moose. I had a new appreciation for the ribs after learning my host had hunted and butchered the animal herself. Kathy also has her own 20-foot boat, which she uses to net salmon and other fish. She cleans the catch, then smokes or freezes the fish. She has two full freezers of fish and

game and is working on a third.

### Back to Aniak—August 8

I returned to Aniak to a sad situation: A 20-year-old had shot himself, but with no sophisticated medical services here, he died after four hours.

Since a priest can only get to the village about every six weeks, the family decided to baptize the deceased man's recently-born baby while I was available for the funeral. The baby's mother also agreed to go through baptism classes with Carl. The young woman just lost her 24-year-old brother a year ago in a drowning accident. I pray God's grace brings the family more deeply into the faith after these tragedies.

We all processed to the church with the body. Before the funeral Mass, we baptized the baby right in front of her father's uncovered casket. It was such a sorrowful scene, but also a powerful moment to talk about the life-and-death aspects of baptism and the significance of the white funeral pall on the casket.

The whole village turned out for the funeral. I watched after the service as pallbearers put the casket into a boat and started across the river to the cemetery, with people following in their own boats in a funeral procession. At the shore, everyone got out and trudged to the cemetery hilltop. Friends had dug the grave earlier. After the ritual, they lowered the casket into the ground and everyone took turns with the shovel filling in the grave. We left and got back into the boat, thoroughly soaked before we even started the trip back.

### Back in Kalskag—August 12

This morning, I brought Communion to a 91-year-old dying man who spoke little English. He had a picture of the Sacred Heart and a medal of Mary pinned over his heart. His adult son is flying to Anchorage tomorrow to have his heart checked out because he's having chest pains and the man's wife just had heart surgery six months ago. So I anointed all three of them and held a Communion service. Before I left, we had tea, homemade bread, and smoked salmon strips together.

I later visited Maryanne, a 70-year-old parishioner. She said she'd had colon cancer but does not want to ever go through chemo again. Instead, she drinks medicinal tea made from a local plant to keep the cancer in remission. Unfortunately, she also has heart problems, blocked veins, and low blood pressure; even walking the steps to her house is painful. Amazingly, that didn't stop her from traveling to Aniak last week to sing at the young man's funeral.

Maryanne invited me to dinner that evening, so I brought over some leftover stew, which she claimed to like even though it had brussel sprouts. She contributed homemade “frybread,” salmon strips, and a rare piece of chicken. I asked how she got her salmon to be so sweet and she

*Continued on page 7*



*A dinner of freshly caught salmon is prepared by campfire on the riverbank in Aniak.*

# The Miraculous Novena of Grace

## March 4 - March 12

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, S.J., 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.



### Clip & Keep

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.

*Clip & Send: 1312 Peger Road, Fairbanks, AK, 99709*

***Please remember my intentions:***

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*Douglas Redfox, of Emmonak, shows Fr. Joe how to mend a net.*

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shared the full, elaborate regimen of soaking and drying and smoking the meat, which involved a potato in some way. She told me she's not afraid to die. She has 26 grandchildren and 28 great-grandchildren and her walls are full of holy cards, holy pictures, and pictures of her family. How beautiful that these villagers have so few of what we in the rest of the world would consider essential, yet they have such a deep and holy faith.

As I said my prayers that night, I thought about what a blessing it's been to serve in rural Alaska. I've spent several summers here, but I still don't see myself as a full-fledged "missionary priest" or "bush pilot" at all. My brother and I once met a guy in the Yukon Territories (he looked remarkably like the old western film star, Gabby Hayes) who told us you become a "local" only after you've spent a full winter in Alaska. And I haven't endured a full winter of endless nights, severe cold, and isolation, nor the full-time lack of conveniences we take for granted in the lower 48 states as the villagers do. I greatly admire these people who live here. They are an inspiration to me. And the priests, who do this year-round and who serve them daily are my heroes. The Diocese has a saying: "Some give by going to the Missions. Some go by giving to the Missions. Without both there are no Missions." It is so true. I am honored to be a part of the missionary effort to serve these good people in in the Diocese of Fairbanks.



*The Kuskokwim River*

*The village of Holy Cross, shown below, was formerly called "Koserefsky." It grew up around a Catholic mission and school established in the 1880s by a Jesuit priest who came to Alaska across the Chilkoot Trail. He brought with him a cross and a promise. The cross belonged to a retired bishop of Idaho, who gave the missionary party his pectoral cross containing a relic of the true cross. The promise was that a Northern Alaska mission be given the name "Mission of the Holy Cross." In 1912, the name of the town was changed to "Holy Cross" after the mission.*



# MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT

## From Poland to Alaska

Father Szymon Czuwara is the pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church in Delta Junction, about 100 miles southeast of Fairbanks. Ordained in Poland in 2005, Fr. Szymon arrived in Alaska in fall 2017, but says “only God knows” how long he’ll serve in the Diocese of Fairbanks. We caught up with him between Masses to learn about his vocational journey.

### **What strongly influenced your faith growing up?**

I grew up with Religion in my family—my mother’s uncle was a priest and a female relative was a nun. My mother was a Catholic doctor who had a lot of priests as patients, too, so there were many clergy around. In Poland, everyone is at least nominally Catholic.

### **How did you know you were called to the priesthood?**

As a child, I’d put a blanket around my shoulders and pretend to celebrate Mass; I even took up a collection from siblings! But as I got older, I didn’t really consider the priesthood—in my mind, I wasn’t ready to be a priest. After college, I started to think maybe I was called so I prayed and even went on a pilgrimage to Rome, but I was still conflicted. One day I asked a parish priest’s opinion said I was probably too old at 24, since most Polish men start seminary right after high school. But I decided to go and see for myself. I enrolled in seminary and within a month, I knew it was the right decision to stay.

### **How did you end up in Alaska?**

It was really a series of Providential signs. I pastored in Ireland for three years, then my bishop called me back to Poland. He tried to mollify me in his letter by saying I could visit Fr. Stan Jaszek, who is one of our diocese’s priests working in Alaska, if I was still interested in English-speaking countries after spending a few years at home. In 2012, Fr. Stan actually invited me to visit, but I was really enjoying my work in a large parish in Lubin, Poland. But God kept Alaska before me: I gave a ride to a man listening to music from *Into the Wild*, a movie about traveling to Alaska; then my brother recommended that movie! Eventually, I was transferred out of Lublin and had a hip replacement; I started to think God was calling me to something new. Then I found the bishop’s old letter from Ireland. I told him I wanted to work in Alaska and he couldn’t believe it—unbeknownst to me, Bishop Zielinski and Father Stan had just visited him in Poland two months before! We took that as a sign I should be here.

### **What advice would you give a young Catholic trying to discern his vocation?**

If you think you may be called, just go to seminary and see for yourself. If you’re called, God will let you know and you’ll want to stay. But if you aren’t, you can always leave. Even if one day you conclude it’s not for you, that time of formation will never be a waste of time.

