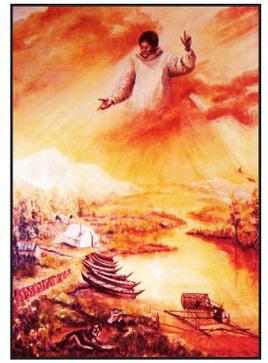




# The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 56 Number 4

Fall 2018

*Some give by going to the Missions*

*Some go by giving to the Missions*

*Without both there are no Missions*

## Traveling with Bishop Chad Zielinski: Four Days in the Village of Emmonak

*In late June, Bishop Zielinski traveled to the village of Emmonak to minister to parishioners at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Emmonak has just 750 residents, most of whom are Yup'ik Eskimo Catholics. Yup'ik culture revolves around the earth's natural cycles, with each season providing what is needed to survive. These indigenous people have an innately sacramental worldview and see all of creation as infused with the divine life of God, which is why they enthusiastically embraced the Gospel when Catholic missionaries brought the faith to northern Alaska in the late 1800s. In fact, the Yup'ik people have embraced Catholicism perhaps more fully than any other Native group in Alaska: Two-thirds of our diocese's rural parishes are located in their villages.*

### June 28--A Belated Funeral Mass

This morning, I celebrated a funeral Mass for a villager named John, who had died after a three-year battle with cancer. Only a few people attended the Mass; most friends and family had already participated in a funeral service led by a deacon two weeks earlier because there was no priest available to celebrate a Memorial Mass.



*Bishop Zielinski blesses a homemade memorial cross for a young Yup'ik man who died in a boating accident in July.*

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The family was so grateful for the prayers of the Church on behalf of the man's soul. It was a stark reminder of how often our remote village Catholics must be buried without full funeral rites because of our lack of priests.

### **June 29--Basking in God's Bounty**

After celebrating noon Mass, I went fishing with one of our deacons, his wife, and their two grandchildren. Fortunately, Fish & Game was allowing subsistence fishing for king salmon today, which has been banned altogether in recent years due to low populations of the fish. Our diocese's lay missionary, Patrick Tam, came on the trip, too. It's hard to believe Pat has lived in Emmonak among the Native people for 30 years, running our Adult Faith Formation program for southwestern Alaska. I learned that a few weeks earlier, the deacon and Pat had hit the motherlode of king salmon, netting more than 60 of the huge fish. Yup'ik families harvest what God provides, but only keep what is needed for their families and share the rest with elders and others who are unable to fish or hunt.

We decided to fish at the mouth of the Yukon River, near one of the summer fish camps. There, we met up with another villager, David, whose wife gave me some dried fish strips. I told her she'd handed me a bag of gold and she smiled with joy. David told us he'd recently had to shoot a brown bear that had come into the village and started charging the dogs and even coming after the children. Alaskan bears spend their summers fattening up on fish and berries to prepare for hibernation and our Native families have to compete with them for this food. You must always be on guard in the wilderness.

A wildlife trooper had checked David's net

earlier and he'd been at his legal limit for kings then, so they gave our group the three fish they'd just caught. We drifted on the river for a while, eventually hauling in two more kings and 10 chum salmon before heading back to Emmonak.

We later processed the fish, canning the chum salmon in jars and filleting the kings and vacuum-sealing them for the freezer. I gave thanks to God for His bounty, especially in a village like Emmonak where nearly a fifth of the people live below the poverty line. It's always been a struggle to survive in rural Alaska, but federal bans on king fishing have made it even harder for these families. Now, more of their income has to go toward store-bought food, which is exorbitantly-priced because it has to be flown or barged into the village. Add that to skyrocketing heating oil costs, and many of my people have barely survived our frigid winters. No wonder so many of our village churches depend on the diocese to stay open.

### **Saturday, June 30--A Village Mourns**

At noon, I celebrated a Memorial Mass for a 23-year-old man who had drowned in the Yukon River about 10 days ago. Dennis had been boating with his friend, Brandon, when their boat collided with a submerged log and ejected the two of them into the river. Sadly, neither were wearing life jackets. A fisherman had tried to help, but Dennis had been overcome with hypothermia and drowned by the time he was done rescuing Brandon. Villagers have been searching for Dennis's body to no avail since the accident, which has only intensified the family's pain.

The Yukon is enormous and extremely powerful. The river level is high this year, so currents are fierce and most likely the young man was pulled under. It can be hard for people

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in the lower 48 states to imagine just how cold our water is here, even in summer. In fact, most water-related deaths in Alaska occur because of hypothermia--you go into shock within minutes of being submerged in our glacier-fed waters, losing the use of your muscles and even falling unconscious within 30 minutes.

It was standing room only at Sacred Heart Church during the Mass. The first reading spoke about how we must not give in to sadness, doubt, and fear, but must remember the goodness of the Lord. I learned from Dennis' family that the young man had become very interested in praying the rosary and talking about faith in the weeks before his death. He became more loving toward others and his sense of peace seemed to increase. He drew closer to Christ near the end, without even knowing his time was drawing to a close. This is a powerful example of a soul cooperating with God's grace.

After the Mass, I was moved to see people stay for more than an hour to greet the family and offer prayers and condolences. Time is different for the Yup'ik people; it's not about the clock or day of the week or even the calendar date. Instead, time is being fully present to the individual or family before you. This is part of why I find visits to the villages so therapeutic. There isn't the crazy rush of the world as people greet one another superficially, then move on to the next activity. Or the constant buzz and distraction of cell phones and computers. There is a slower pace of life among the Yup'ik that makes room in one's soul to bask in God's presence and connect to the people around you.

Later, around 70 of us boarded boats and traveled down the Yukon. When we got to the place where Dennis had drowned, everyone alighted to the riverbank. The young man's uncle had built a beautiful memorial cross that featured a plaque with Dennis' birth and death dates, which the family quickly installed on the



*In bush Alaska, waterways are the roads between communities. Summer funeral processions, then, are made up of boats instead of the customary line of cars.*

riverbank. I blessed the site as a memorial, but also asked God to watch over all the men and women fishing and traveling on the river.

After the riverside memorial, we gathered at the village community center for a shared meal. I love potlucks in the Native villages! The table was covered with variations on freshly-caught salmon. I also got to try herring eggs on sea kelp for the first time, which was most tasty. I'm sure a fancy restaurant would have charged an outrageous price for this delicacy. There also were some great moose and caribou dishes. And for the brave: seal oil. Seal oil is an acquired taste and I'm still acquiring it. They also had my favorite kind of *agutuk* or "Eskimo ice cream."

The dish is a hearty mixture of Crisco, salmon berries, whitefish flakes, and a little sugar.

### July 1--God's Marvelous Timing

The Church was quite full this morning for Sunday Mass. I offered a simple homily of three points: 1) You are a big deal, being created in the image and likeness of God; 2) Your life matters; and 3) God has a purpose and mission for you. I don't always hit a home run with my homilies, but I knew it was successful when an older person and a younger person both said they connected with the message.

As people exited the Church, they thanked me with such intensity. Their gratitude seemed to soar from the core of their being when they said, "Quyana!" the Yup'ik word for thank you. It packs a wallop when it hits your heart. Marianne is about 4'9" tall and in her 90s. With a strong Yup'ik accent, she said, "Thank you for

coming all the way out here just to have Mass for us. You have no idea how much this means to us. Quyana!" I could see tears in her eyes.

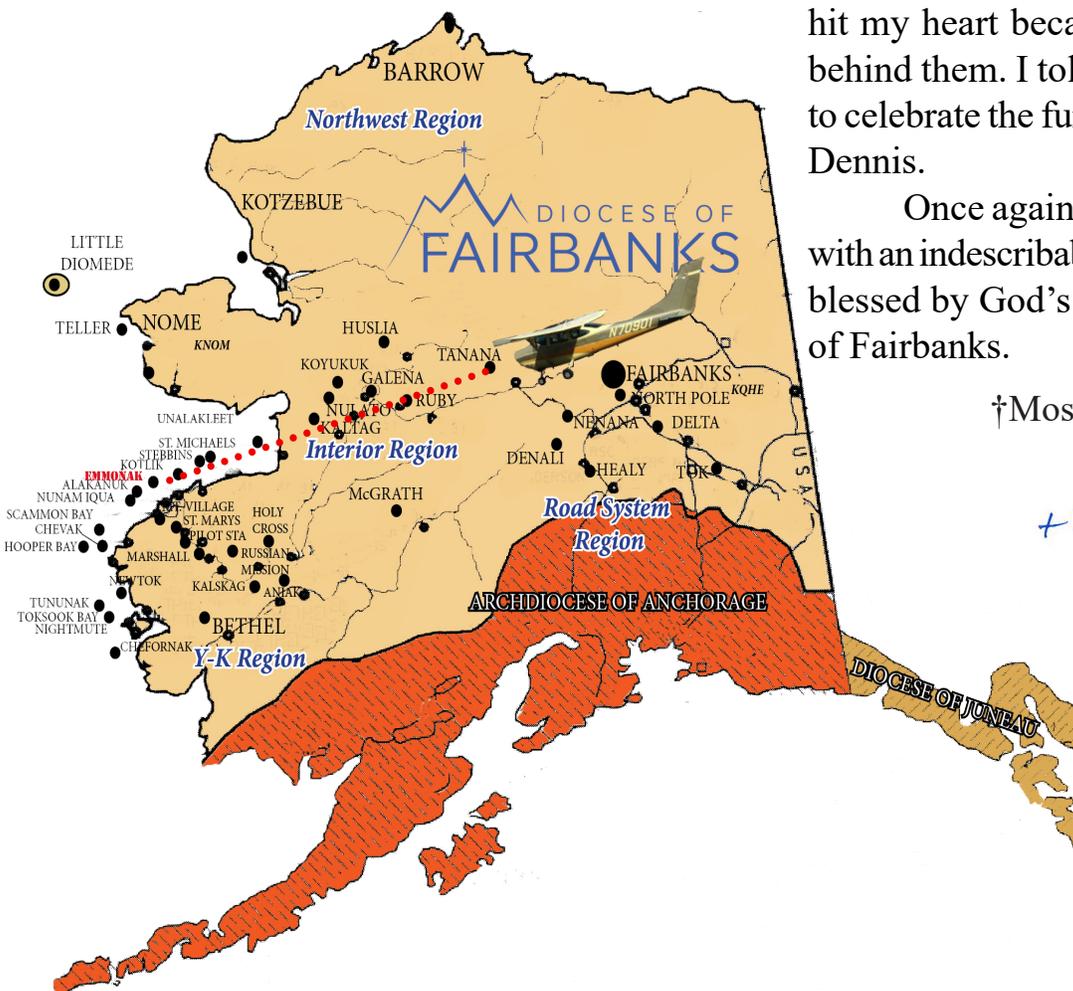
That night, as I checked my luggage and loaded totes of frozen salmon onto the airplane, I marveled at the Providential timing of my visit. When I'd placed some dates on the calendar four months earlier to visit Emmonak, I couldn't know God would be sending me to shepherd these Native Catholics at a time when they had such a deep need for spiritual consolation from the Church. I do love fishing, and have since I was four years old. But God has called this fisherman to be a "fisher of the flock."

As the pilot called my name to board the Piper Navajo twin-engine plane, the survivor of the boat accident, Brandon, walked up to me. He said, "I really want to thank you for coming out here for us." He is a quiet and reserved young man of few words, but those words hit my heart because I knew the deep feeling behind them. I told him it was an honor for me to celebrate the funeral Mass of his good friend, Dennis.

Once again, I was returning to Fairbanks with an indescribable feeling of being profoundly blessed by God's call to shepherd the Diocese of Fairbanks.

† Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski

*+ Chad W. Zielinski*



# Rural Deacons—The Unsung Heroes of Our Mission Churches



*Deacon Joe Asuluk and his wife, Pauline, are from St. Peter the Fisherman Church in Toksook Bay.*

With most American dioceses seeing a shortage of priests, ordained deacons have become increasingly important to the life of the Church. In fact, the number of deacons in U.S. dioceses has soared since Pope Paul VI restored the permanent diaconate in 1967: the United States now leads the world in ordaining deacons, with more than 18,000 deacons serving in nearly 200 dioceses. Other countries, typically those with plenty of priests, have embraced the diaconate less enthusiastically. Poland and India, for example, which are flush with priests, only ordained their first permanent deacons in 2003 and 2006, respectively.

But nowhere do deacons serve a more indispensable role than in the missionary Diocese of Fairbanks. Our diocese was actually the first in the nation to reestablish the diaconate after the Second Vatican Council. With just a handful of priests to serve 46 churches across such a vast area, the diocese recognized that deacons could help provide more consistent pastoral care to our rural Catholics who only see a priest a few times per year. Today, our diocese has 23 rural deacons serving nearly a dozen village churches across northern Alaska.

While deacons cannot celebrate Mass or hear Confessions like a priest, they can conduct and preach at Communion services, baptize people, marry parishioners, and conduct funeral rites. Our rural

deacons also are trained to lead prayers for the sick and dying when clergy isn't available for Anointing of the Sick, which is a blessing to village churches that rarely see a priest. Deacons also are equipped to meet the pastoral and even temporal needs of villagers who seek help from the church, which may be the only Christian presence in the village. While most deacons are only responsible for their home church, a few cover multiple parishes. Deacon Peter Boy Scout, for example, travels 20 miles each way between the coastal villages of Chevak and Hooper Bay on snowmachine or ATV to minister to both faith communities.

Without a resident priest, churches in rural Alaska look to deacons as their main pastoral leaders, according to Father Mark Hoelsken, SJ, who heads the diocese's Rural Deacon Program out of his home village of Bethel. However, recruiting and forming deacons in Alaskan villages is radically different than in most dioceses in the lower 48 states, he says. For one, indigenous



*Deacon Elmer Beans poses with Bishop Chad Zielinski. Deacon Elmer serves at St. Lawrence Church in Mountain Village.*

Catholics in Alaska have a communal worldview. This means God's call to serve comes through the community, not to individuals.

"A Yup'ik man would never nominate himself for the diaconate," says Father Hoelsken. "That would be considered prideful."

Father Hoelsken relates how the typical discernment process for deacon candidates just doesn't work with Yup'ik Eskimo Catholics. "I would ask, 'Michael, do you believe the Holy Spirit is calling you to be a deacon?' And he'd say, 'Yes...if the parish council wants me to.' Then I'd say, 'No, Michael, do YOU believe you're called to be a deacon?' And the man would say, 'Sure...if the council wants me to.'"

The natural humility of Native Catholics also makes it difficult for the men to accept the parish council's nomination to serve. "They have to be asked several times to serve, because they insist they're not worthy," according to Father Hoelsken.

Deacon Joe Asuluk's journey to the diaconate bears that out. The parish first asked him to be a deacon in 1972. Then again in 1981. Finally, in the mid-80s, he accepted. Asuluk was finally ordained in 1989, and the now 75-year-old elder has served St. Peter the Fisherman Church for nearly 30 years.

Even if the parish council can convince a man to serve, however, deacon formation in bush Alaska poses its own challenges, says Father Hoelsken. It's prohibitively expensive to gather candidates in one location, so Father Hoelsken must instead take a plane, snowmachine, boat, or ATV into villages to conduct one-on-one training with deacon candidates and their wives a few times per year. Between these visits, priests instruct the couples during their periodic trips to the village. This expensive, lengthy formation process is why it takes the Diocese of Fairbanks five to 10 years to ordain a rural deacon candidate, instead of the usual two to three years in more urban areas.

In addition, indigenous people in Alaska place great importance on the wisdom of their elders. Consequently, men must possess significant life experience before the parish will nominate



*Deacon candidate Phillip Kusayak and his wife Theresa are from St. Joseph Church in Tununak. Phillip is in his third year of formation.*

them for the diaconate. Most of the diocese's rural deacon candidates are in their 50s or 60s when nominated. Adding that to the years needed to convince a man to serve, then a lengthy formation period, and deacons are typically advanced in age by ordination.

"Recruitment of new deacon candidates in the bush is constant because we're always losing deacons who are aging out of ministry," says Father Hoelsken.

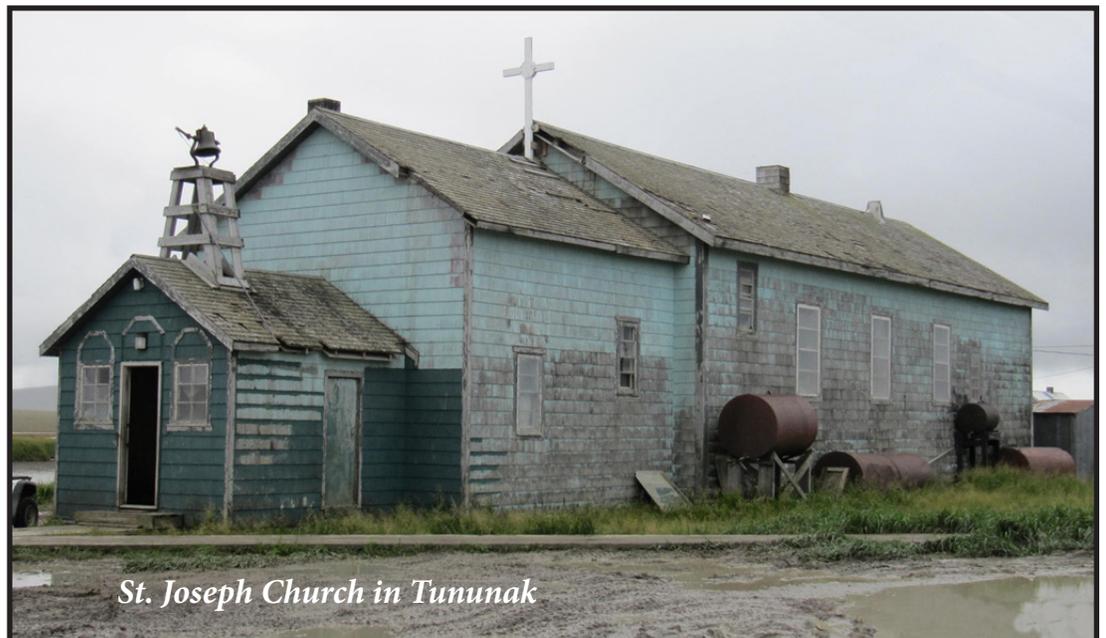
Culturally, the diaconate is appealing to Native Alaskan men because deacons can be married. Yup'ik Eskimo people strongly value marriage and family, and these connections are even more pronounced in a village of just a few hundred people. While deacon's wives are not ordained, the diaconate in bush Alaska is, practically speaking, a "couples" ministry, with wives contributing significantly

to the success of their husband's pastoral work as a deacon.

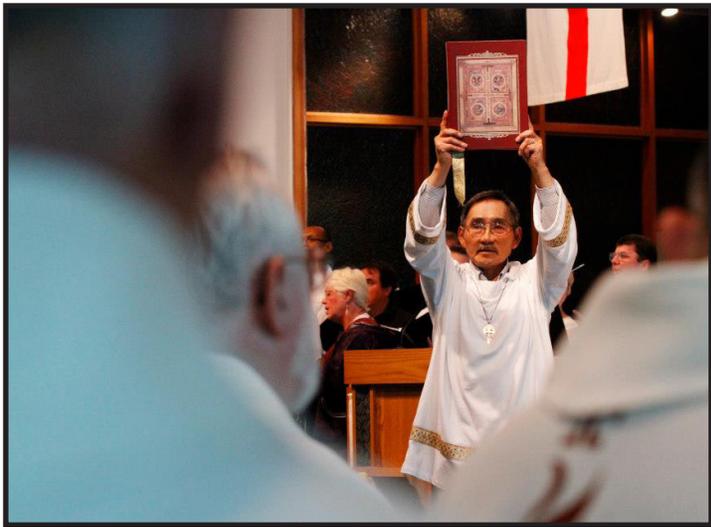
"My wife helps me prepare for the Communion services," says Deacon Asuluk. "We talk about the meaning of Scripture and she helps me practice the preaching. She knows about the families and helps me give good advice to the people."

It would be "almost unthinkable" to ordain a rural deacon without his wife being on board, according to Sr. Kathy Radich, who has coordinated ministry for churches in southwestern Alaska for nearly 30 years. Deacons' wives often bring a keen awareness of family dynamics that assists their husbands in providing effective pastoral care to parishioners. That these ministerial teams are instrumental to the health of our rural churches was born out a few years ago when parish surveys showed our most active churches had at least one deacon couple.

The success of the diocese's Rural Deacon program indicates significant cultural buy-in from the Yup'ik people that could have important implications for the future of the Church in northern Alaska, says Father Hoelsken. For the Church here to truly take root, priests must rise up from among the Native people to lead their own. Having Native



*St. Joseph Church in Tununak*



*Deacon Peter Boy Scout serves at Sacred Heart Church in Chevak.*

Catholics embrace the diaconate as church leaders means they're taking ownership of the faith as a people, says Father Hoelsken, who believes that openness to ordained life is likely to seed our first priestly vocations among the Yup'ik, Athabaskan, and Inupiat people.



*Above, Elizabeth Joe from St. Marys assists with Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion service. These services are celebrated on Sundays when a priest is not in the village. At this time, on any given Sunday there are at least 16 of the 24 parishes in the Y-K Delta region that celebrate LWHC. In parishes where there are deacons, the deacon leads the service. In parishes that do not have deacons, lay women and men lead the services.*

## Prayers for Our Seminarians

Each spring, seminarians around the country prepare for their annual evaluations. In mid-March, Father Robert Fath, the diocese's Director of Vocations, began traveling to the seminaries where our four men are currently in formation. Nick Shamrell and Ben Doudna are studying at Mount Angel Seminary in Saint Benedict, OR; Josh Miller is studying at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary in Mundelein, IL; and Piotr Oprych is studying at Saints Cyril & Methodius Seminary in Orchard Lake, MI.

This year is particularly important for two of our seminarians as they prepare for various transitions in their formation. Ben has been assigned to Saint Nicholas Church in North Pole, where he will complete his pastoral year, while Piotr will spend his pastoral year at Immaculate Conception Church in Fairbanks. Josh returns to Mundelein for Theology II and Nick starts at Mount Angel for Theology I.

Please continue to pray for the discernment and success of our four men in formation, as well as for those who are continuing to discern their call to enter the seminary in preparation for the priesthood. It is only through continual prayer, conversation, and encouragement that we will help the seeds of vocation germinate and flourish in the Diocese of Fairbanks.

*Shown below: Piotr Oprych, Ben Doudna, Father Robert Fath, Josh Miller, and Nick Shamrell.*



# End of Year **GIVING**

## *Will the New Tax Law Change the Way You Give?*



## *Leave a Legacy*

Just as you would provide for your own personal family in your will, you can provide for your family of faith as well. Only with a will or trust are your wishes known and followed after death. As Christians, we know that charitable giving is not just a matter of tax deductions, but also a matter of sharing the many blessings God has bestowed upon us. Your thoughtfulness in this matter means so much for the continued growth of this mission diocese in the far northern reaches of Alaska.

If you wish to make a charitable bequest, please use the legal name, Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska. As an example, you may wish to use the wording similar to: "I give the sum of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to the Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska, 1316 Peger Road, Fairbanks, Alaska 99709"; or "I leave all (or a portion) of the rest, residue and remainder of my property of every kind and character, including personal property and real estate and wheresoever the same may be situated, I give and devise to the Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska ...".

If you already have a will, you can add an Addendum or Codicil with similar wording as stated above.

Recent tax law changes have left many with questions such as: How will the new law impact making my charitable gifts? What are now some of the most effective ways to make my gifts to the Diocese of Fairbanks this year and in the future?

The answers to these questions will depend on your individual circumstances, so it is always wise to discuss any giving ideas with your accountant or other advisors. Generally speaking, there are a number of positives in the law where charitable gifts are concerned:

• **The charitable income tax deduction was preserved, and the amount a person is allowed to deduct was expanded for some.**

• **Fewer people will be subject to the federal estate tax than ever before.**

• **The tax advantages of giving from retirement plans and giving certain types of assets remain the same.**

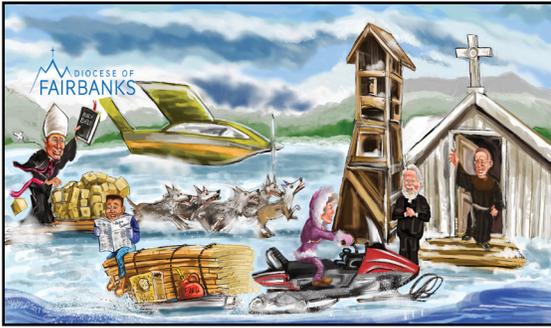
For example: If you are age 70½ or older, you can make tax-free gifts directly to the diocese from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA). This is a tax-effective way to make charitable gifts—in any amount totaling up to \$100,000 per person per year—whether or not you deduct your gifts on your tax return. You can even count these gifts toward any amount you are required to withdraw each year.

Another example: Making gifts of stocks or mutual funds that have increased in value may be particularly attractive. When you give this way your tax deduction is based on the current value of the shares, not just the amount you paid for them. As an added benefit, no capital gains tax will be owed on the increased value. This also allows you to conserve your cash for other uses.

## *More Information:*

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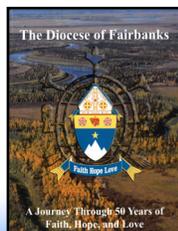
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SALE Church Cards pk 12		\$5.00	
SALE Pinecone Card pk 12		\$5.00	
SALE Snowflake Cards pk 12		\$5.00	
A Journey...History Book  A JOURNEY THROUGH 50 YEARS OF FAITH, HOPE, and LOVE. In softcover, 178 pages, full color.		\$5.00	
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# MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT



Heading North for Some R&R:

## Father Joe Townsend

*Father Joe Townsend's biography is fascinating: one-quarter Choctaw Indian, the now-Catholic priest grew up in Oklahoma as a Southern Baptist, but was so attracted to the faith he converted as a teen. Many priests attracted to missionary work in Alaska mistakenly assume they must commit to serving for years, but Father Townsend is only spending six months in our diocese as part of a one-year sabbatical from his home diocese, the Diocese of Tulsa. He demonstrates that it's possible to spend even a small amount of time on a "working vacation" in the Diocese of Fairbanks.*

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

My mother was Southern Baptist and her strong faith made a deep impression. Faith was a verb for her that was truly lived out. I'd been interested in Catholicism from a young age and she was actually the one who encouraged me to contact a priest to learn more about the faith when I was 16. She'd grown up hearing all sorts of things about Catholics in the summer tent revivals, but had never believed it. She looked past all that to let me explore the faith. I'm still the only Catholic in my family, but my siblings are all supportive of me as a priest.

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

After high school, I got my teaching degree, then taught history for a few years. But I always had a strong connection to Fr. Shank, the priest who baptized me into the faith at 18. I also spent time getting to know the priests around me and I could really see myself as one of them. I wasn't sure I had a call, but in 1983, at 24, I decided to go to seminary to find out. I was ordained in 1988.

### How did you end up in Alaska?

My father was a traveling pipefitter who came to Alaska to work on the pipeline in the 1970s. When I was 16, I spent a summer working with him at Thompson Pass, a gap in the Chugach Mountains northeast of Valdez. Then, after college, I got offers for three teaching jobs, one of which was in Unalakleet, Alaska. I decided to teach in Oklahoma, but I was always sort of haunted by the "What if...?" I've also visited Alaska many times over the years. I just celebrated the 30th anniversary of my ordination and I'm spending half of my yearlong sabbatical here. I'm helping out at the Cathedral, but mostly I'm just here to see Alaska, pray, rest, and restore my soul.

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

Being a priest is a great way to live your life for Jesus, and serve Him and His Church. There's so much joy in this vocation! But if you're not sure, go to seminary for a year. Try it out. In my previous role as Associate Vocations Director for the Diocese of Tulsa, I had 23 men enter seminary, but only seven became priests. And that's okay! Even if you decide you're not called to be a priest, that time can only make you a better Catholic man.

