



# The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 52 Number 2

March-April 2014

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

## Franciscans in Alaska Since 1986

**Editor's Note:** Earlier this year, Archbishop Roger L. Schwietz, O.M.I., nominated Franciscan Father Joseph Hemmer and Franciscan Brothers Robert Ruzicka and Justin Huber for the prestigious Lumen Christi Award, an award granted annually by Catholic Extension. The choice of these three men of God as nominees for the Lumen Christi Award called for little deliberation. Collectively, they have by now served the Catholic missions of northern Alaska for over 70 years. These "Northernmost Friars" are on extended mission to the Diocese of Fairbanks from the Franciscan Friars of the Sacred Heart Province headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri. The three, living simple, austere lives, serve at missions located in remote Athabascan Indian villages in Alaska's northern interior.

For what follows below--a glimpse into the lives of three extraordinary Alaskan missionaries--we are deeply indebted to Peggy Frank, our person in charge of grant application submissions, and to articles published in past issues of *The Alaskan Shepherd*. --Patty Walter



Brother Robert Ruzicka, O.F.M., can often be seen on his snowmachine visiting parishioners in Nulato, Alaska. --All photos courtesy of The Alaskan Shepherd Archives and Brother Justin Huber, O.F.M.

In the March-April 1987 issue of *The Alaskan Shepherd*, Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., wrote about the arrival of the Franciscan Friars in Alaska as follows: *Facing a shortage of priests in his missionary Diocese of Fairbanks, and, at the same time, desiring to enrich ministry in it with new apostolic charisms, Bishop Michael Kaniecki invited the Franciscan Friars of the Sacred Heart Province—headquartered in St. Louis—to consider serving the Athabascan Indian villages in the interior of northern Alaska. In September, 1985, Father Dismas Bonner, O.F.M., Minister Provincial, came north to see what all Bishop Kaniecki's invitation involved. Father Bonner spent scarcely two weeks in the Far North, talking with people, reading, visiting mission stations, observing. However, so well did he spend*

CATHOLIC BISHOP OF NORTHERN ALASKA  
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Special Masses are offered throughout the year for you and your intentions by our Missionary Priests. Please pray that God may bless us and our work.

*this time, that he was able to produce a remarkably perceptive and accurate summary report of the conditions and needs in the Diocese of Fairbanks. This informative and forthright report he shared with the members of his Province, hoping to find among them friars who were “ready, able and willing to answer the call to Alaska, not a place for babes in the woods, but a mission demanding a great deal of self-giving and dedication.”*

Brother Robert (Bob) Ruzicka arrived in Alaska in 1986. He will celebrate his Golden Jubilee as a Franciscan in 2016. Father Joseph (Joe) Hemmer began his Alaskan ministry in 1988. He was ordained a priest on June 24, 1954, and celebrates his 60th anniversary as a Franciscan this year. Brother Justin Huber came to Alaska in 2000. He celebrates his Golden Jubilee as a Franciscan in 2015. Before coming to Alaska, he served in Zaire, Africa. Relocating from Africa to Alaska, he says was “like jumping out of the frying pan into the freezer!”

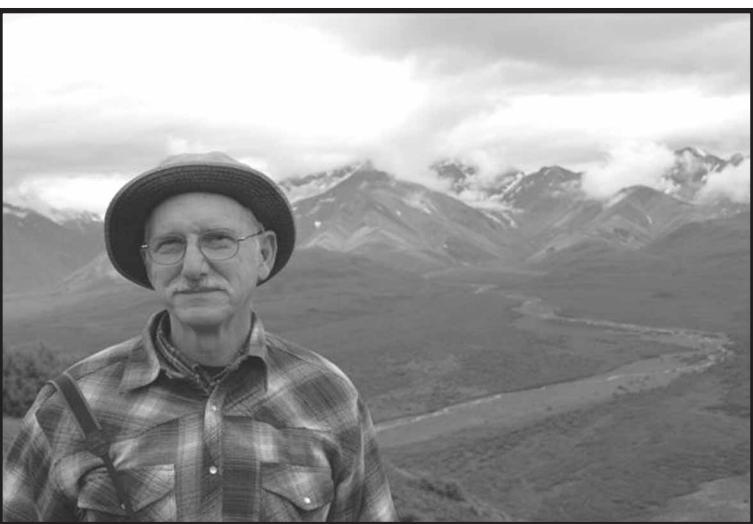
The Franciscans focus their ministry efforts within eight Athabascan villages located along the banks of the Yukon, Koyukuk, Kuskokwim and Tanana Rivers in Interior Alaska. The villages are poor, and the Friars have adapted to the subsistence lifestyle of the Native people.

Brother Bob serves as Coordinator of the Galena Area ministries, providing training and faith formation throughout the Interior region. He is home-based in Nulato, where he serves as Pastoral Administrator. Father Joe is the only priest serving the region regularly. He divides his time between the villages of Ruby and Kaltag. Brother Justin serves the village of Huslia and the city of Galena, as Parish and Pastoral Administrator respectively. He excels in hands-on maintenance skills, especially useful since Galena was deluged with a disastrous flood last spring. Brother Justin is busy helping restore St. John Berchmans Church, and assisting local residents, many of whom lost everything.

The three Friars are a lot alike. They all hail from the Midwest and they heard the call to vocation at young ages. They all like to work with their hands. They all consider, in true Franciscan form, that ordinary “non-ministry” skills and activities, like working with their hands, are as much a part of preaching as are Sunday reflections.

“As a vocation, especially as a brother,” says Brother Bob, “We’re dealing with people not always on a ministerial level as such, but a ministerial level in the workplace. You ‘take Christ with you everywhere you go’ as St. Francis would say. It’s very much a Franciscan thing.”

Brother Bob Ruzicka was born in St. Louis, Missouri. He entered the Franciscans at age 20. He also went to Chicago’s Washburn Culinary School for professional training as a cook. Later, while working in vocations and



*Brother Justin Huber is an accomplished Ham Radio Operator and operates a small 2-milliwatt station, which residents can pick up within a one-mile radius. He also volunteers at the local radio station and handles most of the station’s antennae and tower work.*



parish ministry, he continued cooking for the Friars and others. Brother Bob says God was preparing him for Alaska all along. “It seemed like every place I went prepared me for the next place I was going,” he explains. Though drawn to missions, Brother Bob was not naturally attracted to Alaska at first, but he trusted God’s leading when he said “Yes!” in 1986.

Father Joe Hemmer was born in Cornlea, Nebraska. While still in high school, he entered a boarding school seminary in Illinois. For the first half of his ministry years Father Joe served in various capacities: an inner city high school teacher and principal, a chaplain, a supply pastor. Yet, while still in seminary, Father Joe had an interest in the missions, in “the Church in faraway places,” which he never forgot. When the Franciscans put out the call for the Diocese of Fairbanks missionaries, Father Joe knew it was

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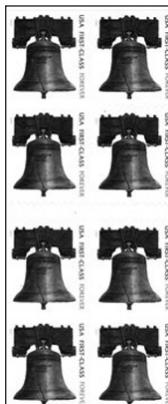
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Thank you for your gift to  
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CATHOLIC BISHOP OF NORTHERN ALASKA

1312 Peger Road, Fairbanks, Alaska 99709-5199

***Please remember the following petitions during the  
Novena in Honor of the Sacred Heart, June 19-27th:***



### **Gift-In-Kind Donations**

Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska, a religious charitable organization, qualifies as exempt under IRS section 501(c)(3). We gratefully accept donations of physical property and provide receipt for Gifts-In-Kind. Contributions of new, unused United States First Class Stamps are especially needed. To receive a receipt for Gifts-In-Kind, other than stamps, please provide fair market value. If your gift is valued more than \$500, please check the current IRS rules regarding donations for Gifts-In-Kind.

***Your first class 49¢ stamp donations  
are greatly appreciated.***

**CLIPPING BOX TOPS IS A GREAT WAY  
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A message from Immaculate Conception School, Fairbanks:

Thanks for supporting our school! Together, we can make a big difference! Please continue to clip Box Tops and send them to the **Alaskan Shepherd** office so we can mail them in and get cash for our school! For more information visit [www.boxtops4education.com](http://www.boxtops4education.com)

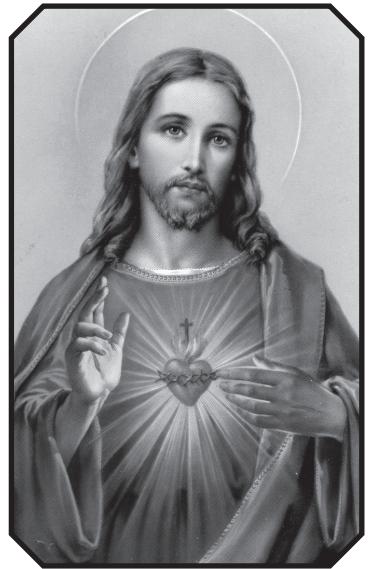


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***Campbell's labels  
are also gratefully  
accepted!***

# NOVENA IN HONOR OF *THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS*

To the friends and benefactors of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks: On each of the eight days preceding the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and on the feast day itself, June 27th, a novena will be offered in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and for our benefactors and their intentions. You are invited to submit petitions to be remembered during the novena. No offering is necessary. Any received will be used to support our ministries here in Northern Alaska.



*The mission parish (left) in Emmonak, Alaska, is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as is the Cathedral (right) in Fairbanks, Alaska.*

## CLIP & SEND BACK



*Please remember the following petitions during the Novena in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus:*

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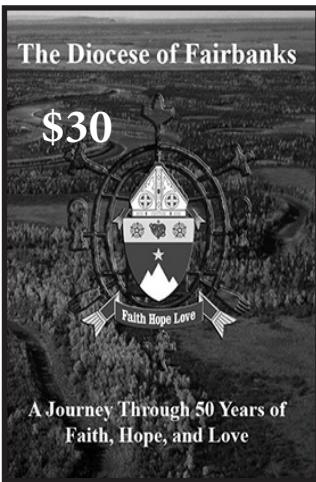
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## CLIP & KEEP

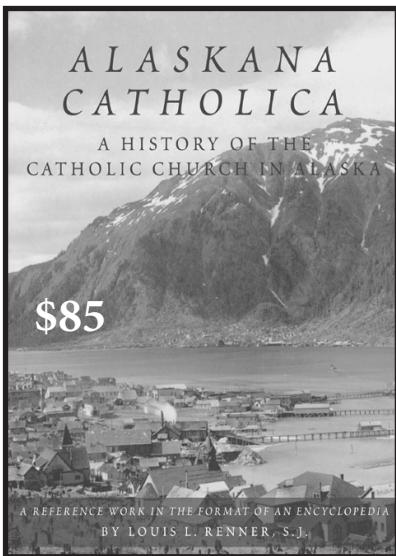
### Sacred Heart Novena Prayer

You are also invited to join us on the novena days (June 19th through June 27th) inclusive by praying the following prayer:  
O Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, you said: "Ask, and you shall receive; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." With confidence in your loving, compassionate Heart, I come to you as the fountain of every blessing. I ask you to make my heart humble and holy like yours. Grant me to live a holy life and to die a happy death. During this novena I humbly ask also for certain spiritual and temporal favors:  
Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on me!

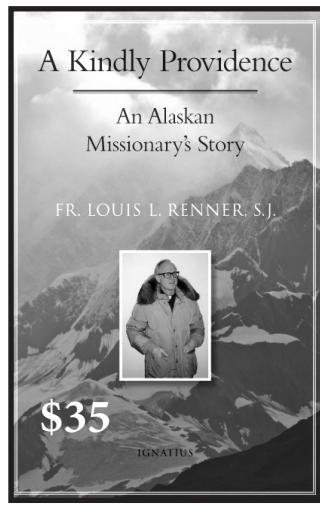


**A Journey Through 50 Years of Faith, Hope, and Love**, in softcover, spans 178 pages with full color illustrations.

**Alaskana Catholica**, in hardcover, spans 702 pages including close to 400 images.

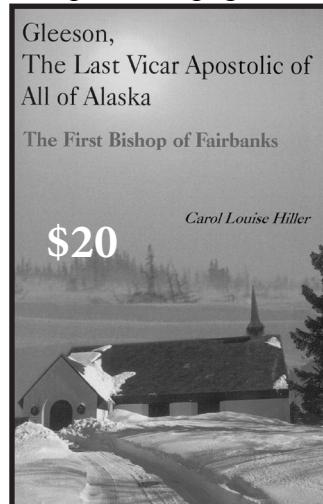


**\$85**



**\$35**

**Gleeson, The Last Vicar Apostolic of All of Alaska**, in softcover, spans 345 pages.



**\$20**

*A purchase of any of the books featured above helps to alleviate expenses in the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks.*

Yes, please send \_\_\_\_ copy(ies) of

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Through prayer we are joined together with those who generously support this Missionary Diocese.

Additionally, we will remember you, each and every week, during our staff Mass and in a special way during our annual Novenas.

*Novena in Honor of The Divine Mercy April 18-April 26th (2014)*

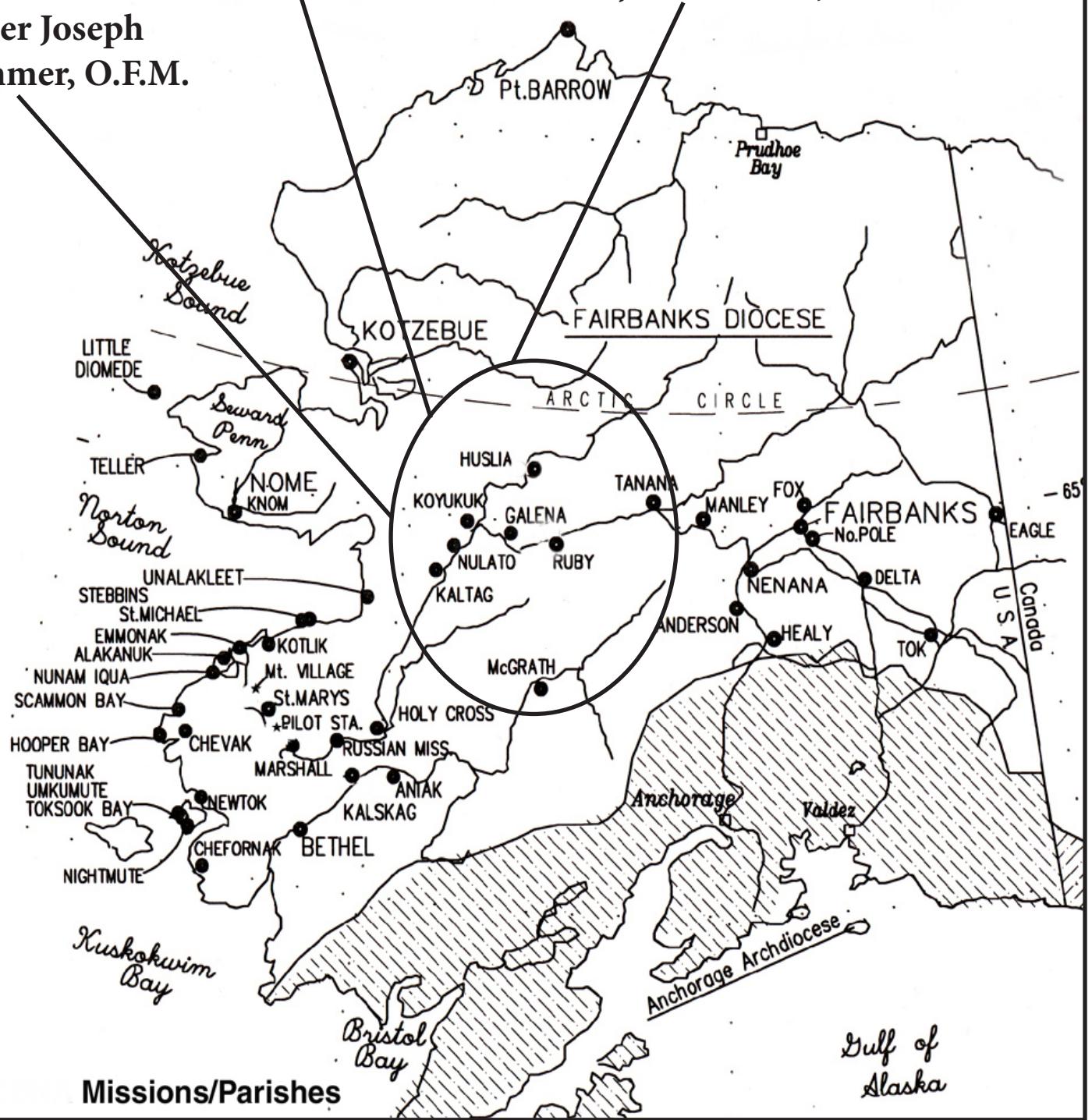
*Novena in Honor of the Sacred Heart May 30-June 7th (2014)*

*Novena in Honor of St. Therese September 23-October 1st (2014)*

Brother Robert Ruzicka, O.F.M.

Brother Justin Huber, O.F.M.

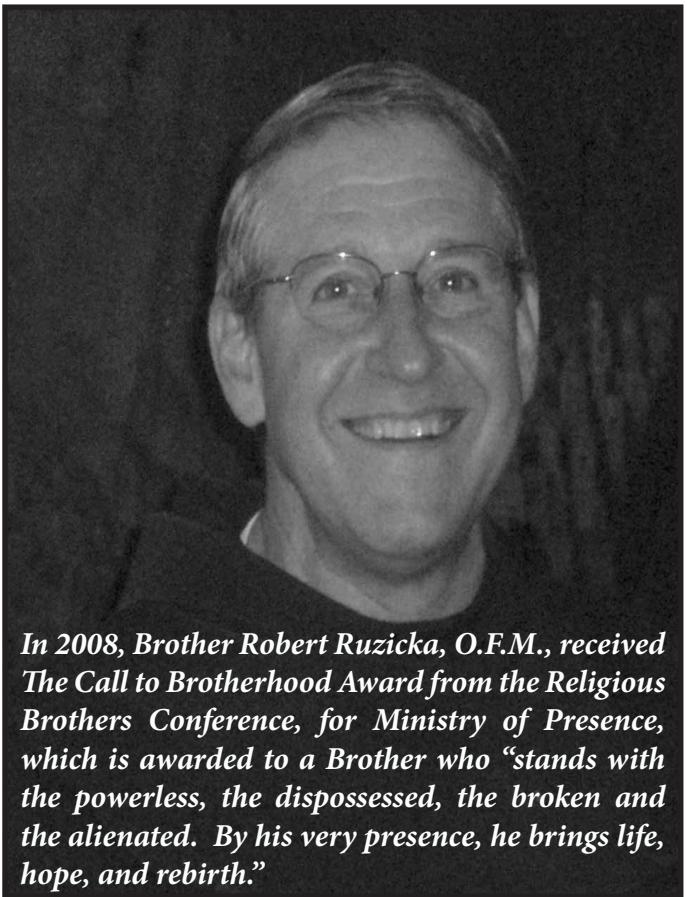
Father Joseph  
Hemmer, O.F.M.



Missions/Parishes

*"I am delighted to nominate three outstanding Franciscan missionaries for the 2014 Catholic Extension Lumen Christi Award: Fr. Joseph Hemmer, OFM, Bro. Robert (Bob) Ruzicka, OFM, and Bro. Justin Huber OFM, of the Franciscan Friars of Sacred Heart Province. Fr. Joe, and Bros. Bob and Justin have nearly 70 years combined service in Alaska missions. They minister among the remote Athabascan villages of rural sub-arctic Alaska where they truly let the Light of Christ shine through the Far North's darkest, coldest nights. Thank you for the opportunity to recognize these humble servants with the 2014 Lumen Christi Award nomination."*

--Archbishop Roger L. Schwietz, O.M.I.



*In 2008, Brother Robert Ruzicka, O.F.M., received The Call to Brotherhood Award from the Religious Brothers Conference, for Ministry of Presence, which is awarded to a Brother who “stands with the powerless, the dispossessed, the broken and the alienated. By his very presence, he brings life, hope, and rebirth.”*

for him. He boarded a plane bound for the Northern Diocese in 1988.

Brother Justin Huber was born in Lakewood, Ohio. He entered the Franciscans at age 19. Before coming to Alaska in 2000, Brother Justin served in such varied locales as Zaire, Africa, and the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee. Besides ministerial work, Brother Justin accomplished hands-on maintenance and/or repair work, or built something, wherever he went. He is gifted in mechanics, electronics, plumbing, even locksmithing. According to his fellow Friars, Brother Justin can do wonders with the repair and maintenance of heaters, a skill that comes in handy in Interior Alaska!

About that “Franciscan thing,” taking the light of Christ with you wherever you go, Brother Justin says humbly, “It’s just maintenance. It’s the sort of thing I’ve done all my life. It’s a good door to get in with people too. You help people. Maybe you can make things a little easier for them.” And, the Franciscans do make things easier for the people of Interior Alaska.

Last summer a regional Alaska Native conference, the Denakkanaaga Elder and Youth Conference, was hosted by the village of Ruby. Father Joe was featured in the conference publication “Tlaa Ologhe,” (place around the bluff). In the article, writer Katie Kangas asks, “Who knew that this little farm boy would grow up and dedicate his life to God and one day minister to the Athabascan People of Alaska?” Father Joe told Kangas that he has learned many things, while living among the Athabascan people. He has developed a great appreciation for local, traditional foods especially salmon strips and blueberries. He values traditional ways: the importance of handing down knowledge and skills, the importance of family and loyalty, the permanence of relationships. The importance of reaching out to other people at all times and circumstances wherever there’s a need, on the trail, at home, during times of disaster, in sickness.

The cross-cultural acceptance didn’t come quickly, but the long-standing presence of the Friars has made a long-lasting impact among the Athabascan people. There were barriers to overcome. Both Father Joe and Brother Justin recall the struggle to be accepted. When Father Joe first came some wondered aloud how long this latest “Cheechako” (tenderfoot/greenhorn) would survive bush Alaska’s long, dark, very cold winters, or the mosquitoes that swarm in summer.

Brother Justin says the people do slowly accept newcomers. “It takes time,” he says, “And I don’t like mosquitoes, but at least they don’t carry malaria like in Africa. That’s a plus.”



*In September 2007, St. Peter in Chains in Ruby, Alaska, was the first parish in the Fairbanks diocese to install renewable electric energy using solar panels. Ruby generates its own electricity using diesel generators. The city and parish credit Father Joe Hemmer, O.F.M., and the Ruby electric utility for recognizing the benefits by installing solar panels to generate renewable energy.*



**Fr. Joe Hemmer, O.F.M., and Rose Ambrose pause for a piece of cake and a chat at a parish potluck at St. Teresa parish in Kaltag, Alaska.**

Once you're accepted by the community though, you're in. After a generation of baptizing, marrying, and burying, the Friars are definitely in.

The challenge will be the next generation of Church in Interior Alaska. The Fairbanks Diocese suffers from the priest shortage. When priests and religious become fewer, the laity is challenged to step forward and care for the spiritual needs of the communities. It is not always easy. "We need leaders; we need prayer leaders and ministry leaders and administrative leaders to care for the spiritual and temporal needs of their churches; to grow in their faith and spirituality; and to learn enough of their faith to be able to teach their children. As coordinator of the region," says Brother Bob, "My biggest calling is to find those leaders and to find good leaders, leaders with the right spirit and a good heart. We come from a background that says we have a Father or a Brother or Sister who will lead us. It's hard to put people in a frame of mind to say now we need to take over the leadership of the Church, to make them feel comfortable to serve, realizing that yes!, they are worthy."

The legacy of this generation of

Franciscan Friars could well be the calling forth and training of the laity of Interior Alaska to keep the Church not just functioning in the absence of professional ministers, but flourishing in the faith of Christ.

The Diocese of Fairbanks is the best place on earth to be, if you are looking for ministry opportunity. It is challenging, but rewarding work. There are breathtakingly beautiful vistas to behold, but there are often great distances between parishes and difficult terrains to cross and harsh climates to endure. Some remote villages have dusty roads within them, but there are no roads connecting villages to one another. The village parishes are extremely poor. There's a huge shortage of priests, and precious few men and women religious to help. Some of the rural villages don't have running water, or dependable power sources. The cost of living is outrageously high. The winters are dark and long. The needs are great indeed, but the people are extraordinary. Without the work of the Franciscan Friars, the beautiful people of Interior Alaska would be without Sacraments, sacramental preparation, ministry training and spiritual leadership.

Brother Bob reflects, "You know we pray for vocations from the local places that we're at, but sometimes we have to face that fact that we're not at that point yet. And so we have to say, I have to say, or part of my family has to stand up and say, we need to be leaders of the next church."

In our most northern missionary diocese, it is easy to see the work of St. Francis reflected in the lives our Franciscan Friars, who seldom need to use words to preach.



**Franciscan Brothers Bob Ruzicka and Justin Huber pose for a photo in front of the Alaskan Pipeline, near Fairbanks, Alaska.**