The Alaskan Shepherd

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Some give by going to the Missions *Some go by giving to the Missions* *Without both there are no Missions*

IT'S A FRANCISCAN THING

"Take Christ With You Wherever You Go" —*St. Francis*

For Catholics along the Yukon River, there is no better symbol of the faith in Alaska than Bishop's Rock. Located at a sharp bend in the river, the steep rock formation juts out of the landscape like a sword and the spot is notorious for causing ice jams and deadly floods upriver during spring breakup. The rock was named for Bishop Charles Seghers, a Belgian missionary who was murdered by his guide en route 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.

Yet the same landform that can cause so much devastation is also a source of life for the Athabaskan people every summer. Locals string fish nets across the base of Bishop's Rock, then haul their catch of grayling, sheefish, and salmon inland to process at the nearby Yistletaw fish camps—watching out for bears, of course, who are fattening up for winter, too.

Like Bishop's Rock, Catholicism in interior Alaska has remained firm, even when struggling to create an indigenous Church in the far north, all the while giving new life to its people through the Mass and sacraments. While most missions along the Middle Yukon River were established by Jesuit missionaries, today these eight village parishes are led by four Franciscans who collectively have spent nearly a century serving the region's mostly Athabaskan Catholics.

The interior region currently has just two full-time priests—Fr. Joseph Hemmer and Fr. Thinh Van Tran. Father Joe lives in the village of Kaltag but flies to the church in Ruby about once a month, while Fr. Thinh lives in Galena but also serves the villages of Koyukuk and

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Nulato. Two Religious brothers—Br. Justin Huber and Br. Bob Ruzicka—also live in the region, heading ministries at their respective parishes in Galena and Nulato. Brother Bob, who has been in Alaska the longest (35 years), coordinates ministry for the whole region and also serves as pastoral administrator for Our Lady of the Snows Catholic Church in Nulato, the oldest mission in Alaska. With just two priests in residence parishioners in the interior can often go months without attending the Mass and receiving the sacraments.

The Franciscans live in separate villages strung out along the Yukon and it takes a plane, snowmachine, or arduous boat ride to reach each other. Yet God has gifted the men with exceptionally strong bonds. According to Br. Bob, "Most of us feel like this is the best 'community' we've ever lived in. There is a special joy in our group, even though the ministry here is not easy."

And "not easy" might be an understatement. Winter can bring up to six feet of snow, sudden ice storms, and temperatures as low as 60 below zero or more. In spring, there can be ankle-deep mud and sometimes severe floods, while mosquitoes nearly blot out the sun once summer hits. Summer also brings the busiest time of year, as villagers rush to make sure they have enough heating oil, firewood, and food to get through the winter, which starts in October. The Franciscans' ability to weather these rigors, while serving multiple villages and still traveling to meetings throughout Alaska during the year, is even more remarkable, given that Fr. Joe, Br. Bob, and Br. Justin are 70-90 years old. (Father Thinh is the only "young 'un" at just 46.)

More difficult even than the physical privations in rural Alaska, however, are the spiritual difficulties the men take on to bring the Risen Christ to their Athabaskan brothers and sisters. Loneliness can set in and Alaska's long hours of winter darkness can easily depress the spirit. The Franciscans also are ministering to people who often face profound suffering they cannot alleviate because there are few (if any) resources in the villages, such as unemployment, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Sharing the Gospel through the gift of relationships is even more important in these places that don't have a priest every Sunday, say the Franciscans.

It can be easy to forget that while the Catholic Church is 2,000 years old in many parts of the world, it's only 150 years old in northern Alaska, says Br. Bob. Catholic missionaries, then and now, enter a non-Western culture that still has strong spiritual roots in ancient ways of thinking. It is not uncommon for Athabaskan parishioners to perform native traditions—such as burning food to call on the intercession of their ancestors—while praying the

Franciscans (above) Br. Bob Ruzicka, Br. Justin Huber, and Fr. Thinh Van Tran work, live, pray and minister among their parishioners in the interior villages in Alaska.

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rosary, he says. These ways of relating to the world have underpinned native life for thousands of years and reflect a profound humility toward the natural world. For example, a man will say he is going for a boat or snowmachine ride instead of saying he's going hunting out of respect for the animals he will be seeking. A native parishioner might put a fishbone *and* a saint medal in her son's pocket, to protect him against falling through the ice or drowning in the turbulent waters of the Yukon. Early missionaries often condemned indigenous traditions *en masse*, but the native way of seeing the world as infused with divine life is actually one of the people's greatest strengths, insists Br. Bob.

"Native people don't just hunt to take an animal; they hunt to feed their family and then they would never take more than they need," he says. "More would be disrespectful to the Creator who provided all that for you in the first place." Indigenous Catholics have a strong desire for spiritual balance, says Br. Bob, and the Church in northern Alaska is building on that foundation over time.

It helps that native spiritual values align well with that of the men's patron, St. Francis, who emphasized the intrinsic goodness of creation, interdependence of life, and simple life of service to others. Brother Justin Huber came to Alaska in 2000 after working in remote communities in Africa, Texas, and Tennessee. Like Fr. Joe, who is occasionally called out for a middle-of-the-night

Brother Bob often travels via snowmachine, boat, ATV and plane to feed the souls in his community but he is also known for his ability to serve up a fantastic meal; after nearly 40 years in rural Alaska, he has become an expert at turning moose, salmon, and berries into gourmet fare. Before Br. Bob took his final profession as a Franciscan Friar he was professionally trained as a cook and baker at Chicago's Washburn Culinary School, after which he cooked at Our Lady of the Angels Seminary in Quincy, Illinois.

Fr. Thinh Van Tran, OFM, celebrates Mass at St. John Berchmans in Galena, in May of 2019.

furnace repair, Br. Justin spends his days "fixing whatever needs fixing." He serves the village of Huslia and his home base of Galena, where he teaches Baptism classes at St. John Berchmans Catholic Church. But he mostly runs a hands-on ministry of service to Galena's 450 residents. Part of his formation as a Franciscan included training in the trades, which he uses to help parishioners and non-Catholics alike in several villages with their boat and snowmachine engines, oil heaters, house repairs, and electrical needs—whether it's 90 degrees or 60 below zero. "There are no good or bad jobs, just what needs to be done," he says, humbly. "I think we just have a 'St. Francis' way of looking at things out here."

Still, ministry in interior Alaska is not for everyone. While hardy Midwesterners like Br. Bob, Br. Justin, and Fr. Joe quickly fell under Alaska's spell upon arriving and have stayed for decades, others have not been able to handle the long winter darkness or high alcoholism and suicide rates that plague some villages. "Some men bring their own unresolved problems to the mission field and then can't handle their own 'stuff" and the needs of the people we serve," says Br. Bob. Being in a village of just a few hundred—Koyukuk has just 70 residents and Tanana just 250—is more like ministering to an extended family than a traditional church. "You can't help but get close to people in a village and that means you share their suffering...their loss is your loss," he explains.

Alaska has the second highest suicide rate in the country and young native men die by suicide more often than any other demographic. Seeing so many promising young people lose their lives made his first year in the interior "very hard," admits Fr. Thinh, who came to live in Alaska two years ago after visiting several times on short mission trips. He grew up in a small farming village in Vietnam and sees echoes of his own people's communal spirit when a tragedy occurs in a village.

Cynthia Erickson (2nd from the left) lives in Tanana. She founded the nonprofit youth group "Setsoo Yeh, My Grandma's House" to battle youth suicide and encourage healthy activity. She is pictured here with her parents, Harold and Florence Esmailka, in Ruby, and a group of young people who have taken the pledge to break the cycle of abuse and live as their motto states: "WE are the ones we've been waiting for!"

Read more about her program on page 7.

"They stick together when someone dies, helping each other with funeral expenses, bringing food," says Fr. Thinh. The tragedies underscore the need for the Church, he insists, because "it is what will bring the greatest healing to the native people."

Father Joe agrees. "You do go through a period where it's really hard to handle the hardships," he says. "We want to change things for the better; that's why we became priests! But you have to be willing to meet people where they are and sometimes, people are in a place of human brokenness. It's not our job to fix people; that's for Christ. All we do is bring Him to them through the Mass and sacraments."

That willingness to walk with people over time and consistently but gently challenge them to embrace a Christ-centered life is what makes the Franciscans so beloved among the diocese's Athabaskan Catholics, says Cynthia Erickson, a parishioner at St. Aloysius Catholic Church in Tanana, who runs the village's only store. The native people are at a crossroads, she says, with one foot in the traditional way of life and another in Western culture and having a church and priests in the village reminds youth especially that God is with them through this difficult transition.

"Many of our young people are not given a good spiritual foundation at home anymore and we're really suffering because of that," says Erickson. "But the Church gives us the graces and morals we need to be our best as a people."

Erickson's parents, Florence and Harold Esmailka, are lifelong Catholics who attended Catholic boarding schools in the 1950s. They helped build St. Peter's in Chains in Ruby and are now active elders in the parish. "It was my father's dream to build that church and he was there from clearing the land to opening the doors," says Erickson, who credits her parents with her own strong Catholic faith. Today, she runs *My Grandma's House*, a nonprofit that combats suicide in the interior by empowering village youth to make healthy, hope-filled decisions about their lives. Each summer, Erickson and a dozen young people take a "healing journey" down the Tanana River, often accompanied by Fr. Jim Falsey, who serves Tanana and has supported *My Grandma's House* since its inception in 2014.

Erickson insists that the Franciscans' willingness to truly be one with the people, to respect and share their way of life—including its joys and sorrows—is what makes their ministry in the interior effective despite the struggles. Says Br. Bob, "We love the people and they know we love them. We bring ourselves to the people, yes, but even more importantly, we bring the son of God into their midst—because He is what is needed here the most."

Upon the bank of the Yukon River, a white cross can be seen on "Bishop's Rock" marking the spot where Bishop Charles Seghers was murdered by his guide on the way to Nulato, the first Catholic Mission in Alaska.

Like his fellow Franciscans, Br. Justin is truly a "jack of all trades," well-trained to keep his ministry and the parishes entrusted to him repaired and functioning. Below he is shown installing tension cable between pilings on a garage ramp in Galena.

Among his many talents you can add loom-beading—seen here below working on an image of Our Lady of the Arctic Snows—and, Br. Justin is also a skilled ham radio operator.

Br. Justin Huber, OFM, Fr. Joe Hemmer, OFM, Fr. Thinh Van , OFM, and Br. Bob Ruzicka, OFM, in Galena, at St. John Berchmans Catholic Church. The Franciscans are well-known for their ability to "roll-up their sleeves" and work, pray, grieve, and celebrate among the people.

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 ...".**

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To pray to the Lord of the harvest
To send laborers into His vineyard.
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With many priests and religious
Who will love You fervently and gladly
And courageously spend their lives
In service to Your Son's church,
Especially the poor and the needy.
Bless our families and our children,
And choose from our homes
Those whom You desire for this holy work.
Teach them to respond generously
And keep them ever faithful
In following Your Son Jesus Christ,
That under the guidance of the Holy Spirit
And with the inspiration of
St. Therese, patroness of the missions,
St. John Vianney, patron of parish priests,
And St. Kateri Tekakwitha
The Good News of redemption
May be brought to all. Amen

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Cynthia Erickson, founder of Setsoo Yeh' also serves on the Alaska Suicide Prevention Council, the Alaska Commission for Human Rights and on the St. Aloysius Catholic Church board in Tanana. The nonprofit has been honored by the Alaska Federation of Natives and received the 2014 Alaska Volunteer of the Year Award. Cynthia was also honored by Alaska Senator Dan Sullivan for her outstanding volunteerism.

Setsoo Yeh' means My Grandma's House in Athabaskan Indian.

Prayers are greatly appreciated for the volunteers, youth and for their families.
You can read more about Setsoo Yeh' at www.mygrandmashouseak.org and you can write to Cynthia Erickson at cynthia@mygrandmashouseak.org
My Grandma's House is on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter

MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT

SISTER KATHY RADICH, OSF

THREE DECADES OF SERVICE IN ALASKA

The moment Sister Kathy Radich stepped off the plane in Alaska more than 30 years ago, she thought, "This feels like home." For the past two decades, she has overseen planning, personnel, policies, and ministries in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, which is home to 24 of the diocese's rural parishes.

1. What had the strongest influence on your faith growing up?

Definitely my family. Our whole family—including all nine kids!—always prayed the rosary every night. What I remember most about my parents is that they had a spirit of service...there was always room for someone else, whether they needed a meal or a place to stay. They taught us by doing. Their faith was so solid and woven into daily life, too. For example, my mother had a statue of Christ the King on her desk and she would place all the bills under it as an act of faith. Somehow, they always got paid! My grandfather, too, would always insist we couldn't open presents on Christmas Eve until he walked the two miles to church to go to Confession. This all made a deep impression on me and made faith seem like a very natural, attractive part of life.

2. How did you know you were called to religious life?

Quite a few things happened during college that led me to this vocation. As a sophomore, I had a friend enter a religious community and one of her sisters asked if I'd ever thought about it, too. Then another sister gave me a book about vocation simply titled, "Come." Finally, I witnessed the joy of the Franciscan sisters who showed up on campus, who would eat with the students. One of them also asked if I'd considered religious life. After all that, I thought, "Well, I guess I should at least try it out and see if I have a calling. " I can only say I've been "trying it out" since then! For me, it was just a strong sense of being called, of sensing that this is the path God wants me on.

3. How did you end up in Alaska?

After I became a Franciscan, I worked as a youth minister at a progressive parish in California. The parish was ahead of its time—lay women were on staff and worked closely with the priest to run the community. After six years, I felt it was time to move on but feared no other place would ever measure up to the collaborative spirit of that church. Then I saw an ad for a position with the Diocese of Juneau and that appealed to me because it was so different. I landed in Ketchikan for the interview and when I stepped off the plane, I thought, "This feels like home." When I told my mother about it later, she informed me that my grandfather had once started a cannery in Alaska! I spent six years in Juneau, doing pastoral work for parishes, then worked in Anchorage for three years as a therapist for Catholic Community Services. Eventually, the archdiocese closed down the program and I needed a job. I got a call from the late Fr. Ted Kessler,SJ, who told me the Diocese of Fairbanks was "desperate" for people to lead ministry in rural Alaska. Again, it sounded different, so I decided to give it a try. That was 1997 and I've been in "the bush" ever since.

4. What advice would you have for a young person who may be called to religious life.

Religious life is so different today. I'm encouraged by movements I see of different religious communities living and working together, collaborating yet still respecting their own unique charisms. I think those considering religious life need to ask a bigger question first—why is a religious community important to the Church? Then, "How will it help *me* serve the way I feel called to serve?" My Franciscan community walks with me in my work and in prayer and I need that kind of support; another woman might not need a religious community to build up the Kingdom with her specific gifts.

Issue Writer: Misty Mealey
Editor: Patty Walter
Photos: The Alaskan Shepherd & Diocese of Fairbanks Archives, Br. Justin Huber, OFM