



THE ALASKAN SHEPHERD

Some give by going to the Missions. Some go by giving to the Missions.

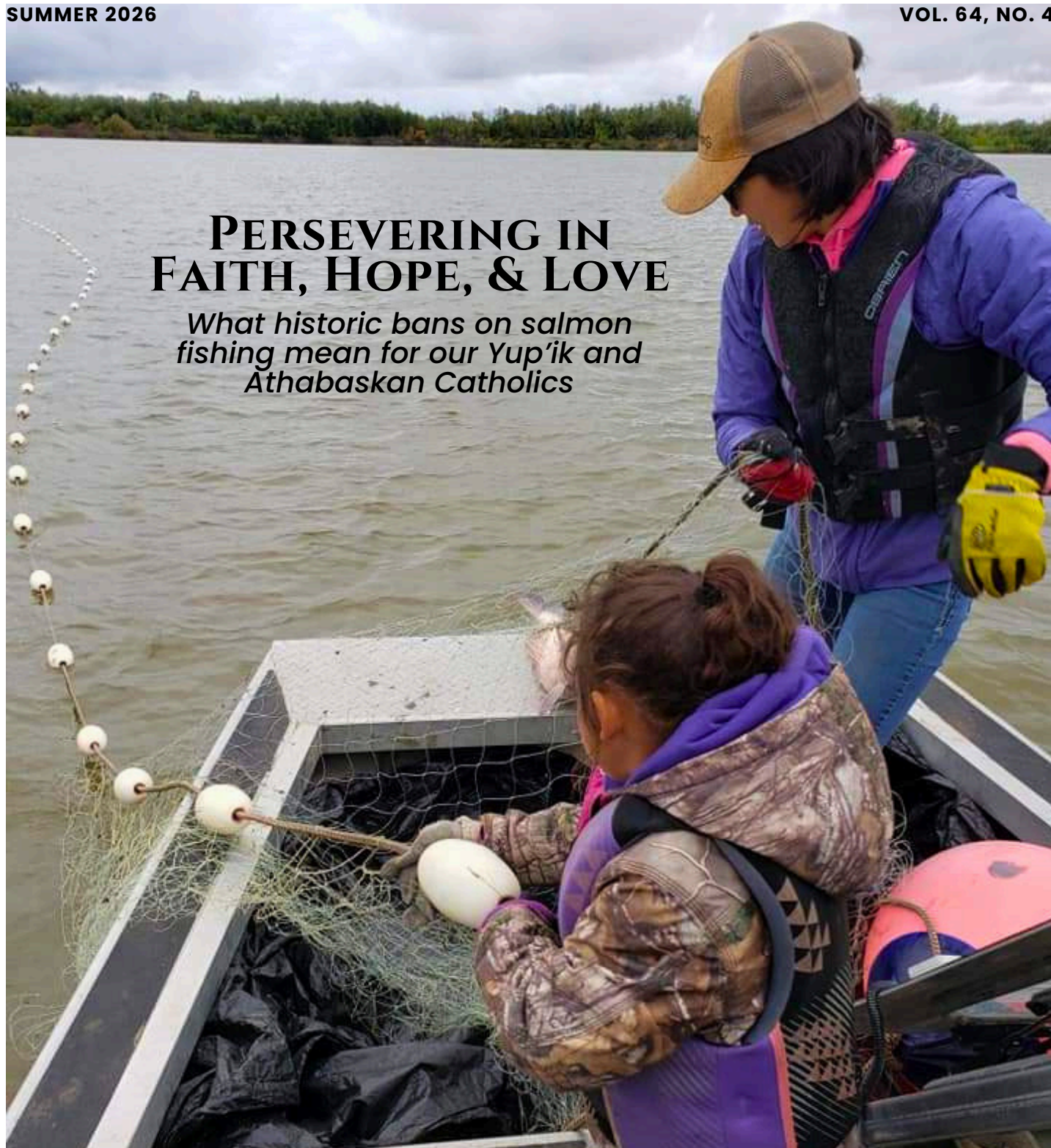
Without both, there are no Missions.

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PERSEVERING IN FAITH, HOPE, & LOVE

*What historic bans on salmon
fishing mean for our Yup'ik and
Athabaskan Catholics*



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LOSING THE SACRED GIFT OF SALMON

As Alaska's historic salmon runs collapse and the state bans both commercial and subsistence fishing, the diocese's indigenous Catholics remain steadfast in faith, hope, and love during a time of unprecedented hardship.

Since childhood, Cynthia Erickson has spent weeks each summer and fall elbow-deep in fish, helping her family catch, process, and put away hundreds of pounds of king and chum salmon. Most years, Erickson's family and others from the village of Ruby would set up temporary camps at key spots on the Yukon River where the salmon run was strongest, since it was easier to harvest the fish at the source.

"Fish camp" was always a joyful time for Alaska Native people, a multi-generational affair that passed the torch to the next generation. Men took children out on the river and taught them to "read" the Yukon to stay safe and bring in a good harvest. Women taught kids and teens to filet and preserve the fish, through traditional methods such as drying racks and more modern techniques like canning. At the end of a long day's work at fish camp, the village was just one big extended family gathered around a fire, enjoying their freshly caught salmon together. Elders shared about the past, stories designed to demonstrate the resilience and resourcefulness of their people, who have thrived for thousands of years in one of earth's harshest environments. At fish camp, you reconnected with family, communed with God, and reminded yourself why you were proud to be Athabaskan or Yup'ik or Iñupiat.

Except now, there is no fish camp. Because there are almost no salmon.

For time immemorial, Alaska's rivers have teemed each spring and fall with salmon, as hundreds of thousands of chinook (king), coho, chum, sockeye,

Cover: Danielle Beaver and her daughter, Sasha, set fishing nets on the Kuskokwim River. *Photo courtesy Danielle Beaver.* **Right Top:** Erickson in previous years, showing off the fresh salmon she's about to filet and can. **Right bottom:** Strips of fresh salmon are draped over racks to air dry and smoke, a traditional technique used to preserve fish and meat before refrigeration. *Photos courtesy Cynthia Erickson.*



and pink salmon migrated inland from the ocean to spawn where they once hatched. For indigenous tribes, the salmon runs were crucial to survival, providing a highly nutritious bounty that sustained them during the brutal arctic winters.

For decades, however, numbers of key species have dropped dramatically. The reasons given for this depend on who you ask. Some blame climate changes, while many indigenous people point to commercial over-fishing and trawler bycatch, the unintended capture of maturing salmon in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands that prevents salmon from getting to their northern spawning grounds. Historically low numbers of the fish prompted Alaska Fish & Game to gradually restrict salmon fishing along the Yukon starting in 2020. It was hoped the restrictions would only last a season or two, and fish processing companies in other parts of the state tried to fill the gap by donating frozen salmon to villages along the river. The extra filets were appreciated, but did little to help families that counted on putting away hundreds of

pounds of the fish each year. By 2024, it was clear the salmon were not recovering as quickly as expected, and the state imposed a seven-year ban on salmon fishing along the Yukon to give the species one full life cycle to recover.

A Perfect Storm

For our Alaska Native Catholics, losing access to salmon has been devastating. No salmon means families are forced to buy more expensive imported groceries, which are often two to three times the cost of urban areas due to freight. The salmon runs also provided many Native families an additional source of income through commercial fishing. Individuals could sell extra salmon to processing plants along the Yukon, netting a significant seasonal income that could then be used to purchase other needed household items, especially vehicles like snowmachines or boats.

Jimmy Kameroff, a Catholic in the village of Emmonak, has been fishing the Yukon River for salmon since early childhood. "I grew up fishing with my father and grandfather, and

Left: Priscilla Kameroff and her daughter, Kandace Fratis, process salmon at fish camp in previous years. **Right:** Jimmy Kameroff and his wife, Priscilla, raised their children and older grandchildren (seen here) at fish camp each summer. *Photos courtesy Jimmy Kameroff.*



got my first commercial fishing permit at 11 years old," he recalls. "My whole life, there was plenty of fish and plenty of work. But the canneries are all closed. Now families have to choose between buying food or medicine or heating oil, and everything else they need." The extended salmon bans are hitting Native families especially hard this summer, as fuel costs in rural Alaska are expected to skyrocket by as much as 80% in some areas, driven by global oil price spikes from the war in Iran.

Many Native families are deeply concerned about how the ongoing salmon crash will impact their communities, and not just economically. Fishing is one of the most effective ways to pass on traditional values and skills to the next generation, insists Erickson. "So much character building happens at fish camp," she explains. "Everybody has a job, from the oldest to the youngest. We teach responsibility and to have a good work ethic. Then at night, we have fresh fish for dinner and tell stories about the people and the village. Fish camp is a practical tool we used to teach our children to love others and to love God, who gave us the salmon."

Without fish camp, Kameroff worries that many of the traditional indigenous skills his people have passed on for millenia will end with the newest generation. "We teach them to fish, then to process. We teach them to build smokehouses. But more than just our

WHAT IS "SUBSISTENCE" AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

One word you'll hear often in Alaska is "subsistence." But what does it mean and why is it important to our indigenous Catholics?

Subsistence is living off the land: hunting, fishing, gathering, and using natural materials for shelter, clothing, and other activities. For our Yup'ik, Athabaskan, and Iñupiat Catholics, however, subsistence encompasses much more—it's a worldview and way of life that includes their history, culture, traditional values, and customs. At its heart is a spiritual connection to their Creator, who provides for their families through the environment. This is why Alaska Native people have a profound, innate respect for the natural world and consider it sinful to take more from the land than needed to survive.

"Hunting and fishing are religious activities for Native people," says Ricko DeWilde, a resident of Huslia. The Catechism agrees,



Ricko DeWilde prioritizes teaching his children traditional skills that honor their Athabaskan heritage and teach harmony with God and creation. Here, he shares how to set a traditional trap for muskrat, a beaver-like animal prized for its meat and fur. Photo courtesy Ricko DeWilde.

stating that "Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator...requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation" (CCC 2415).

livelihood is at stake; this is a threat to our very culture as Native people.”

Despite these unprecedented struggles, our Native Catholics are holding fast to their faith in Christ, and looking to the Gospel to guide them through these hard times. Villagers who live in other parts of the state where salmon fishing is permitted will often share part of their family’s catch with relatives along the Yukon. Precious salmon is also reserved for elders and those with disabilities. Witnessing such generosity among people who are struggling financially themselves reminds Erickson that “even this can make us stronger as a people if we rely on God to get through it.”

Accompanying the diocese’s indigenous people through the loss of their sacred gift of salmon also will require the Church’s ministers to be patient and share their loss, says Father Yakubu Aiden, a priest from Nigeria who spent six years serving parishes along the Yukon.

“Salmon fishing is a big part of how Native people transmit their culture to the younger generation,” says Father Aiden, who often fished with villagers and even visited fish camps to offer Scripture reflections and catechetical lessons. “At camp, there aren’t TVs or phone, just fishing and family. They’ll tell stories and even practice traditional drumming and dancing. Families and communities are stronger for it.”

The crisis around salmon has deeply impacted the Church’s mission in the



In years past, Jimmy Kameroff taught relatives, including his nephew, Howard Westlock, Jr., and grandson, Jesse Kameroff, how to build smokehouses for salmon at fish camp. The structures used driftwood for framing and could hold up to 400 salmon filets. These traditional skills are at risk of not being passed to the next generation due to ongoing bans on salmon fishing along the Yukon River. Photos courtesy Jimmy Kameroff.



bush, says Father Aiden, who witnessed smaller congregations and lower donations to parishes in the wake of the bans. "Some are moving out of the villages for jobs, so there are fewer at Mass," explains the priest, who is now pastor of St. Nicholas Catholic Church in North Pole. "And when there was plenty of salmon, people were able to donate more to the church. By the time I left the bush in 2022, donations had dwindled to almost nothing in some churches because people were struggling so much financially."

A plentiful salmon run also brought people to the parish who might not otherwise attend Mass, he recalls. "If someone announced they were bringing salmon to next week's potluck, more people would

Left: Before salmon bans, Father Yakubu Aiden would join villagers for fishing along the Yukon River, as well as at fish camp.

LOW SALMON RUNS IMPACT FAMILIES ON THE ROAD SYSTEM, TOO

Alaska Native people aren't the only ones impacted by the salmon crash—Catholics around Fairbanks are feeling the loss, too. The cost of living in Alaska is 33% higher than the national average, and many families rely on hunting and fishing to lower the grocery bill.

"Before the crash, we brought in about 100 salmon a year, which saved us around \$2,500 on meat," says Pete Smith, a parishioner at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in North Pole, a small town just south of Fairbanks. "Now, we barely get 30, and they aren't kings." The family's annual fishing trip to the Chitina River used to put salmon on the menu at least once a week. According to Pete's wife, April, "Salmon made it easy to keep meatless Fridays. Now, it's more fish sticks and pizza. It's just not as healthy as the salmon we used to catch ourselves."



In years past, Pete Smith hauled in enough salmon to provide one meal a week for his family of 12.

show up...I would even see kids come to church two hours early because they were so excited about the salmon being served afterwards. There's a reason all cultural celebrations involve food, because food brings people together. For Native people, that food is salmon."

In many ways, our indigenous Catholics' innately sacramental worldview has prepared them to carry this new cross, says Kameroff.

"Even before the missionaries, our people knew *Cillam Yua*, which means 'God of the Universe,'" explains Kameroff. "We always looked to the Creator and that way of living in the Bible, of God taking care of us through the land and us sharing what's given to us, that was and is Native culture."

While politicians, commercial fishermen, and indigenous leaders continue to wrestle with policies surrounding commercial and subsistence fishing along the Yukon River, Kameroff's solution is spiritual before all.

"We need people to pray for us," he says. "Pray the salmon returns plentifully. Pray for government to make just policies that include the Native people. Just pray for us, because we know God answers prayers."



Sasha Beaver holds a salmon filet she caught with her family on the Kuskokwim River near Bethel, Alaska. Photo courtesy Danielle Beaver.



“ THIS IS LIKE ASIANS NOT HAVING RICE OR EUROPEANS NOT HAVING BREAD. ”

—Billy Charles ”

Billy Charles was a lifelong Yup'ik fisherman who spent decades advocating for subsistence rights, sustainable salmon management, and greater local control over fisheries resources. He was a primary contributor to this issue, but passed away before publication. He was a member of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in the village of Emmonak.



FEEDING THE FAITH OF OUR YOUNG ADULT CATHOLICS

Through game nights, hiking and canoeing trips, fellowship dinners, and spiritual activities, the diocese's Office of Faith & Family Formation is helping our young adult Catholics around Fairbanks live an "embodied" faith sustained through community.

It's an exodus that has affected nearly every Catholic family: young adults leaving the faith of their childhood. According to the most recent Pew Research study (2025), 43% of baptized Catholics now leave the Church before age 30.

Fortunately, there are also signs of great hope, particularly among Generation Z ("Zoomers"), whose members are flooding OCIA programs and attending Mass in increasing numbers. In fact, 18- to 25-year-olds now attend church more often than Millennials, Gen X, or Boomers. Many have been drawn to Catholicism through online sources, which have clarified Church teachings and offered compelling reasons to follow Christ. To ensure this newfound faith is durable, however, young people must embrace an "embodied" faith that is lived alongside others in real relationships, insists Pope Leo.

A sense of community might be easy to achieve in the city or suburbs, but being a young adult Catholic in northern Alaska brings unique challenges. "The Catholic population is small here, about 12%, and there's an even smaller number of young adults," explains Michael Olsta, STL, director

of the diocese's Office of Faith and Family Formation, which oversees faith formation for youth and adults throughout the diocese. Olsta, a single man himself, understands the challenge of maintaining friendships in a place with nearly six months of winter. "Most young adults are here for jobs or school and separated from extended family, and it can be pretty isolating when it's 40 below zero and you're stuck in your house again," he says. To encourage people to gather, Olsta leads spiritual and recreational events such as Bible studies, game nights, retreats, and trips to the movies for adults. In summer, this means hiking trips, canoeing, and camping together. During the school year, Olsta leads events at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) as well as "Feast & Faith," a monthly gathering at a local restaurant that includes a talk about topics like artificial intelligence or Christian persecution in other parts of the world.

For those who participate in the OFFF's events, the support can be a lifeline. Kyle Ketchell converted to Catholicism in college after encountering FOCUS missionaries, then moved to Alaska three years ago after getting a job at UAF. He'd

had easy access to Catholic resources at university, but parishes in Fairbanks are significantly farther apart and attending OFFF events gave him the sense of community he'd been missing. "It's great to just be surrounded by people who share your values," says Ketchell, who says that some of the most impactful moments have occurred during casual moments. "Once, at a hockey game, Michael and I just got a beer and talked about bioethics for an hour."

Ketchell sees the OFFF playing a crucial role for younger Catholics by supporting them during the years they're making critical life decisions. "My career path was intuitive, but it isn't for everyone, and there's a lot of discernment going on for people in their 20s. I see these events as so helpful because you're meeting people from all walks of life, from agriculture to medicine to priests, and they bring different perspectives that can help you figure all this out."

For some individuals, that discernment may lead to embracing the Catholic faith. Danika Winslow was attending UAF as a freshman when a Catholic friend invited her to Mass and to meetings of the Catholic Student Association, led by the OFFF. There, she met passionate young Catholics whose witness led her to become Catholic this past Easter.

"I love being social; I love meeting new people in learning their stories," says Winslow. "Being part of these groups brings me into the community and lets me meet other young Catholics to get different points of view."

Top: Danika Winslow with the Servidoras after converting to Catholicism this past Easter. **Middle:** The Catholic Student Association at the University of Alaska Fairbanks consists of about 15 students who love their faith and want to share it with others. **Bottom:** Olsta (front) regularly organizes outdoor events for young adult Catholics throughout the year, including hiking, canoeing, and camping trips.





Missionary Spotlight:

FATHER ED MICHELINI

After serving as a religious brother for three decades, Father Ed Michelini was surprised to find himself called to a second vocation as a priest at age 55. In 2022, the then 76-year-old New York City native started yet another adventure when he arrived in the Diocese of Fairbanks to help alleviate our priest shortage. He now travels to Alaska several times per year to ensure our Native Catholics can celebrate Mass as often as possible, especially during Christmas and Easter.

What had the strongest influence on your faith growing up?

It was many things, but it definitely started with my family. I grew up in New York City with many extended family members living in nearby New Jersey— they were all practicing Catholics. My father died when I was young, and my mother wanted my brother and I to stay in the city. She continued to enroll us in the parish Catholic school run by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. In the summers, she sent us to Camp Don Bosco, which was run by the Salesian religious order. I was raised in a religious atmosphere everywhere I went, from family to school to summer camp. It gave me a strong foundation, and I never left the faith because of that foundation.

How did you know you were called to be a priest?

I was interested in the priesthood and religious life in elementary school because I had Salesian priests at summer camp and De La Salle Christian Brothers in school.

Because of that, I entered the day-junioriate formation in 9th grade. I left the program at the end of one year only to reapply for the Brothers after two years of college. I pronounced first vows in 1965 and served as a Christian Brother for 36 years, primarily working as a teacher and coach in Catholic high schools in New York City, Syracuse, and Buffalo. I later earned a doctorate and taught at university. I also was principal of a Brothers high school in New York.

After my mother died, I went back to teaching at a diocesan high school in Hazelton, Pennsylvania. One day, I was walking down the hall when I saw a vocations poster with seminarians, and in the corner was a man with gray hair. That really struck me. The poster read, "What are you doing with the rest of your life? Call the vocation director." I thought, "Why should I call him?" Then there began a back-and-forth volleying between me and the Holy Spirit. After a while, I thought, "I'm not going to call him; I'm sure the vocation director is busy." And I heard, "What are you afraid of?" I stubbornly responded, "I'm not afraid of anything!" I went to the main office, asked for an outside line, and called the vocation director. It turned out he was on a mission trip, so I thought that was the end of it. But I couldn't shake this feeling that I was called to be a priest, even in my 50s.

After going on a discernment retreat and continuing to speak with the vocation director, I applied to seminary through the Diocese of Scranton. I was dispensed from my vows as a Brother and completed priestly formation at Pope St. John XXIII National Seminary near Boston. It was a seminary for older seminarians, and most of us were in our 30s or older. That whole time, I just had a sense that this is what God wanted me to

do. It didn't matter if it took 5 or 15 years, because I was going to follow his will. I was ordained on June 25, 2005 at age 59.

How did you end up in Alaska?

In 2017, three Christian Brother friends and I took a land-cruise trip to Alaska, and we got to Fairbanks a day before the tour began. We went to Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral, and I saw a brochure there that described how the diocese needs priests. When I retired from parish work at 76, I wanted to stay active, and was weighing whether to work as a chaplain on a cruise ship or at a Catholic school, with the Brothers, or as a fill-in priest back in Scranton. In considering Alaska, I had no idea what serving "in the bush" really meant. I connected with Father Ross Tozzi, who asked me to come up for a brief trip in winter to ensure I could handle the cold, dark, and isolation before making a longer commitment. I first visited in September 2022 and started with churches around Fairbanks before flying to Galena and then Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow). I stepped off the plane in Utqiagvik, and it started to snow, which was an eye-opener for somebody from the East Coast. Since then, I've been coming back to help several times a year, sometimes staying several months if that's needed.

What advice would you have for a young man who thinks he may be called to the priesthood?

I'd say talk with an inspiring priest or religious. After all, if you're considering being a doctor, you don't talk to a mechanic! Too often today, young people are being discouraged from even considering religious life by peers and even family. But what they need is people who will present this way of life frankly, realistically, and positively.



Toksook Bay Project Update

A generous donor has agreed to match the first \$100,000 raised for renovations to St. Peter the Fisherman Catholic Church in Toksook Bay. To date, the diocese has raised more than **\$58,959** toward this goal, funds that will provide a new roof, vinyl siding, lead paint and asbestos remediation, and structural beam replacement for the main sanctuary. **We send a heartfelt *Quyana* (thank you in Yup'ik) to every donor whose gift is making these upgrades possible.** To contribute, scan the special QR code below or contact us through any of the donation channels listed to the right.



In the Diocese of Fairbanks, 38 of our 46 mission churches depend on chancery support. We appreciate gifts of any size to our general fund to cover the cost of priest salaries, air travel, and utilities for our village parishes.

5 WAYS TO DONATE:

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