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“Missionary Disciples” is a publication of the Catholic Diocese of Fairbanks which serves northern and western Alaska. Its purpose is to provide a regular opportunity for all ministries throughout the Diocese to share information so that our tremendous diversity may enrich our common mission of service to the people of our Diocese.

If you have questions or suggestions, please contact David Schienle at the Chancery at (907) 374-9500 or library@cbna.org.

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Fr. Stan Jaszek checking fishing nets in Emmonak, Alaska. Photo taken by Pat Tam.
The Nativity through St. Joseph’s Eyes

As a child, I recall the excitement as we approached Christmas. Though decorations did not make it out until after Thanksgiving, we still had time to bake cookies, listen to Advent songs, and decorate the house. We even had Christmas pageants in the public schools proclaiming the birth of Christ.

I especially remember the live Nativity at the Lutheran Church. Every Advent, we’d make the 10-mile trek to town and drive by the real animals, lovely Mary, baby Jesus, and shepherds. One person who always caught my attention was St. Joseph, sitting there in the shadows. How did he experience Christ’s birth?

Who is this quiet man we see captured in sacred art over the centuries?

Silence
Matthew’s Gospel lists St. Joseph at the end of 52 generations from Abraham to Jesus. We see in this genealogy that God remained faithful amidst the brokenness of our world. Yet nowhere in Scripture do we read even one word of St. Joseph, who had such an important place in Christ’s family tree.

St. Joseph is described as a just man betrothed to Mary.

Before they lived together, however, she is found with child. An angel appears and addresses St. Joseph as “[Son] of David.” As a faithful Jew, St. Joseph would have been familiar with God working in the lives of those he called; he was likely fearful of the angel, but his soul was open and listening. He knew the angel and dream were the workings of God.

We see more of this at the birth of Christ, when St. Joseph contemplates the gift of God in the newborn Christ child. Singer Michael Card articulates this beautifully in St. Joseph’s Song:

How could it be this baby in my arms
Sleeping now, so peacefully
The Son of God, the angel said
How could it be

Lord I know He’s not my own
Not of my flesh, not of my bone
Still Father let this baby be
The son of my love

St. Joseph’s pondering reflects a holy response, and invites us to enter into Christmas with that same focus on Christ. At least on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, let’s turn off the phones, gather together, and pray before a simple nativity scene. Enjoy the company of loved ones and revel in the connections you were made for by God.

Trust in God
St. Joseph also demonstrated great trust in God. In Matthew 1:24, we learn he “did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.” His obedience and Mary’s “yes” were the foundation of the Holy Family’s household. Their trust in God would lead them through challenging times.

I have journeyed with many people who faced unexpected challenges like St.
Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. One couple’s doctor told them their child had Down’s Syndrome, then explained the condition as if they were being cursed. He advised them to abort.

“We had no idea what lay ahead,” the couple told me. “But we knew all life was sacred and that if we trusted God, all would be well.” Yes, there were heroic sacrifices, but they said “yes” to God and their son, John, has brought countless blessings to the family.

**Purity**

St. Joseph also gives us a much-needed model of chastity and purity, virtues that have led artists to depict him holding a lily over the centuries. Tradition tells us St. Joseph did not feel worthy to accept the holy Mary as his wife, but instructed by the angel, took her into his home and protected her as a husband. He would have honored Mary daily and that makes him a powerful intercessor for married men. St. Joseph can obtain graces to honor your wife daily and this witness will carry forward across the generations.

We need respect for women more than ever. The biggest money maker on the Internet is pornography, a poison so common the average boy now first experiences this wound at the tender age of eight. This perversion of God’s gift of sexuality destroys our purity of body and soul.

May St. Joseph be that vivid reminder of purity that honors women and the gift of our sexuality that reflects the sacred image and likeness of God.

**Fatherhood**

St. Joseph also provides us with a blueprint for earthly fatherhood, which desperately needs to be redeemed. When Jesus was 12, Mary and St. Joseph experienced what had to be a nightmare when they searched for days for their son. Though they did not understand Christ’s response to their anxiety when he was found—“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”—they returned to Nazareth together.

Raising Jesus, St. Joseph would have spent many hours with his divine son, living out his commitment to care for him and Mary. Unfortunately, many children today have lost the presence of a father, as many men eschew their duty to care for wives and children. The impact on children is devastating when this happens. Fatherless children make up 1:

- 63% of youth suicides (five times the national average);
- 90% of homeless and runaway children (32 times the average);
- 85% of children with behavioral disorders (20 times the average);
- 80% of rapists (14 times the average); and
- 71% of those who do not finish high school (9 times the average)

Do not despair. These are bleak statistics, but they also emphasize how vital it is to reach out to the single mother and her children. It is essential for good men to step in and offer a loving fatherly presence to these families. Please pray for them and try to lighten their burdens.

God is drawing our attention to the quiet simplicity of St. Joseph, a loving earthly father. This saint is a powerful intercessor who wants to obtain for us the graces to embrace God’s gift of fatherhood. He wants to be in the middle of our messy and challenging families, and will be if we ponder his example and ask for help.

As St. Joseph silently embraced his call as the earthly father of Jesus, may we embrace silence as a gift to contemplate the birth of Christ. As a man of faith who trusted God’s plan even in the most difficult moments, may we also trust in Our Lord. As a loving father and husband, who honored Mary and Jesus with great respect, may we also encourage our families. And may we all embrace the joy of Christmas that St. Joseph and Mary carried within their hearts, with the peace of Christ born anew in our families. May we go forth in the joyful, reverent spirit of this great saint to bring hope and healing to our Church and world.

Reference

Feast and Faith
Feast and Faith is a monthly gathering of Catholic young adults 18-35’ish at Miguel’s Restaurant. We gather together for a meal, fellowship and discussions on topics of the faith. All are invited to this event. The meal and beverages are provided. Alcohol is not provided. The next meeting of Feast and Faith will take place on Tuesday, January 8th from 6:00-8:30 PM. For more information contact Fr. Robert Fath in the Office of Faith and Family Formation at (907) 374-9511 or family@cbna.org.

Catholic Beer Club
Young adults are encouraged to join us for an evening of conversation and fraternity. The Catholic Beer Club will meet at the Banks Alehouse on Old Steeese Highway on Tuesday, January 10th from 6:00-8:00 PM. No agendas...just community and relationship. For more information, contact Fr. Robert Fath in the Office of Faith and Family Formation at (907) 374-9511 or family@cbna.org.

Retrouvaille: Healing for Troubled Marriages
This program is for couples with marital problems that want marriage help. Those who are considering separation and those already separated or divorced are encouraged to consider the Retrouvaille Program. There is always hope of reviving your relationship. Some couples come to Retrouvaille during the initial signs of a marriage problem. Other couples are in a state of despair and hopelessness when they attend the program. The next Retrouvaille weekend is scheduled for February 22-24, in Anchorage. For confidential information or to register for the program, call (907) 863-8000 or e-mail anchorage@helpourmarriage.org.

Engaged Encounter Weekend
February 22-24
The Spring 2018 Catholic Engaged Encounter weekend is scheduled for February 22-24 at St. Nicholas Church. This weekend retreat helps to prepare couples for the Sacrament of Matrimony through a series of talks by married couples and priests, individual prayer, and reflection time and conversation with one’s spouse-to-be. Registration is required for this weekend event. Please contact your pastor for registration paperwork.

Saint Therese’s Camp - Seeking Young Men to be Counselors
St. Therese’s Camp in the Archdiocese of Anchorage is seeking young men who love God, love working with kids, and love the Catholic Church. Through fun activities and personable counselors, the camp seeks to communicate and invite campers to meet and walk with Christ in the fullness of the Catholic Church. Counselors work from June to the end of July and are paid a stipend of $1400 for the 8 weeks (6 weeks of camp, 1 week of training, and 1 week off). Interested young men can apply at: https://www.emailmeform.com/builder/form/1lLdb24M56qbdC3kY9fr1T. If you have questions or would like more information, feel free to contact Camp Director, Rudy Poglitsch, at 907-232-2066 or at campdirector@stthereseak.com.
Entering into the Christmas Season

The Evangelist
Also known as the beloved disciple, St. John is the author of the gospel that bears his name as well as three letters. He is the evangelist of the divinity of Christ and his fraternal love. The opening passages of the Gospel of John remind us of the pre-existence of the Word, who by His incarnation became the light of the world.

December 28th
Feast of the Holy Innocents
On this day we remember the young children who were massacred in and around Bethlehem by King Herod as he attempted to find the infant Jesus. They are considered proto-martyrs of the Church, for although they did not meet Jesus or hear his teaching and preaching, they died because of him.

December 29th
Feast of St. Thomas Becket
A martyr of the Church in England, St. Thomas is honored during the octave because of his devotion to the Church and defense of the faith against the secular government. He was archbishop of Canterbury and served for a time as Lord Chancellor of England. He was slain in the Cathedral of Canterbury by knights loyal to King Henry II.

The Sunday of the Octave of Christmas
Feast of the Holy Family
This feast day is a reminder to us that when our God took on flesh in the Incarnation that he did so in a human family with Mary and Joseph. It is an opportunity for us to focus ourselves on the importance of family life and the fact that the “domestic church” is where we are first taught about a life in Christ and where we first find sanctification.

January 1st
Feast of Mary, Mother of God
The solemnity of Mary, Mother of God is celebration of Mary’s motherhood and harkens us back to one of the oldest titles given to the Blessed Mother, that of Theotokos. Pope St. Paul VI explained that this feast day “is meant to commemorate the part Mary played in this mystery of salvation.”
St. Dominic Savio died at the age of 14 in 1857. When he was canonized a saint in 1954 by Pope Pius XII, he was (and remains) the youngest person ever to have been canonized a saint by the Catholic Church without being some sort of martyr.

Born and raised in Italy, Dominic showed signs of sanctity early on. When he was just 4 years old Dominic was frequently found by his parents in solitary prayer. He learned to be an altar boy at age 5, and if he got to the church before the priest unlocked the doors in the morning, he would kneel (in the mud, snow, whatever) until the priest arrived. When he was just 7 years old, he wrote in his journal that he had four rules:

1) I will go to Confession often, and as frequently to Holy Communion as my confessor allows.
2) I wish to sanctify the Sundays and festivals in a special manner.
3) My friends shall be Jesus and Mary.
4) Death rather than sin.

He happened to attend the school of St. John Bosco and John became a mentor for Dominic.

As a pre-teen, he experimented with severe physical penances (putting rocks in his bed, wearing a hair shirt, etc), but when his superiors found out, they forbade him from continuing them. Instead, he decided to simply perform all of his duties with as much love and humility as possible, which he summed up with the motto, “I can’t do big things but I want everything to be for the glory of God.”

Unfortunately, he contracted a lung disease and died soon after. After he died, St. John Bosco wrote a biography of Dominic, which was instrumental in Dominic being canonized.

St. Agnes was born to a noble Christian family in A.D. 291. She was a beautiful young girl and, combined with her of noble background, had many suitors. She had intense devotion to her faith, however, wished to remain a virgin for the kingdom of God, and showed little interest in the suitors. Offended, some of them reported to the Roman authorities that she was a Christian.

When she refused to renounce her faith, a Roman official ordered that she be stripped naked and dragged through the streets to a brothel. In one version of her story, her hair miraculously grew long and covered her body. At the brothel any man who tried to harm her was immediately made blind.

Undaunted, she was eventually tried in court and sentenced to death. Soldiers tied to her to a stake, but when they lit the fire, she wouldn’t burn. A Roman officer stabbed her with his sword, finally killing her.
Be Watchful

“The watchful person is one who, in the noise of the world, does not let themselves be overwhelmed by distraction or superficiality, but lives in a full and conscious way, with a concern above all for others. With this manner we become aware of the tears and the needs of neighbors and we can also understand their human and spiritual strengths and qualities. The heedful person then also turns toward the world, seeking to counter the indifference and cruelty in it, and taking delight in its beautiful treasures which also exist and are to be safeguarded.”—Pope Francis

Pope Francis reminds us what is expected of us as Catholics in our world today. We are an Advent people, not separated from the world but mindful and appreciative of what we have and what we can offer to others in relationship. We are in this world here and now.

With the coming of Advent, are we preparing ourselves for the coming of Jesus? This preparation need not be only a spiritual journey but one that reaches out to our neighbor as well. Therefore, be watchful of others just as Jesus would do if he was walking beside you today. Jesus would help our neighbors. He would help those who are hurting and struggling with issues or a lack of love and support. Are you being sensitive to those around you who could use a helping hand?

One way to prepare for His coming is by being watchful in assisting our neighbors. Do they need a step repaired, a door adjusted, a trip to the grocery store, a walk way shoveled, or a new hat or a ride to church? The list could go on and on. Sometimes just a simple treat of cookies, homemade bread, a cooked meal or a short visit to chat is truly a blessing for a person in need. They feel loved and cared for because you remember them with kindness.

Be watchful this Advent season and consider lending a helping hand to your neighbor. Your small acts of kindness may mean the world to the those in need. Jesus would be very pleased with your efforts at following His way. Happy Advent.

As always, be watchful of our children and vulnerable adults. We care about them and count on your help to ensure they stay safe and loved. A new Safe Environment training program will be available soon. Blessings in all that you do! ~ Barbara Tolliver, Safe Environment Coordinator, (907) 374-9516.

Annulment

What is an annulment? “An annulment is a declaration by a Church tribunal (a Catholic church court) that a marriage thought to be valid according to Church law actually fell short of at least one of the essential elements required for a binding union.” (USCCB) The annulment process is frequently misunderstood. Not all marriage situations require an annulment process.

If you are unable to receive the sacraments due to a prior marriage, contact either your pastor or this office to receive more information on what to do. The sooner you get started, the sooner you can complete the process. Call or e-mail us and ask us what we can do to assist you. The Tribunal Office telephone number in Fairbanks is (907) 374-9516 and the e-mail address is tribunal@cbna.org. Blessings of the Advent season! ~ Barbara Tolliver, Administrator
Guidelines for Meeting One-on-One with Youth

Safety Bulletin from Praesidium

Sadly, hundreds of thousands of kids are sexually abused each year and the abuse is usually at the hands of someone the child knows. Normally this abuse occurs when the adult seeks time alone – or privacy – with a single child. As a result, Praesidium generally recommends that organizations prohibit one-on-one interactions between employees/volunteers and youth. However, Praesidium also knows that sometimes, one-on-one situations are unavoidable (like after programming when only one youth remains, etc.) and sometimes, one-on-one situations are part of the program design (like with tutoring, coaching, mentoring, etc.).

In those situations where one-on-one interactions are either unavoidable or approved, staff and volunteers should follow additional guidelines to manage the risk of abuse or false allegations of abuse.

**Choose a Public Setting**
If the one-on-one situation is unavoidable, move to an open space, like a central gathering space in your organization’s location. The ideal spot is in full view of other adults.

When the one-on-one situation is part of the program design, follow the same general rule of finding an open and observable environment. If you need a more private space to talk, choose a room that is accessible to other staff members and volunteers, like an office in a central hallway. Keep the door propped open and position yourself and the youth in a way that you’re both visible to passersby. Alternately, meet in a room with unobstructed windows facing indoors. Ultimately, your goal is to choose a space where you can have an effective meeting but also be easily observed by others.

**Involve Your Supervisor**
If the one-on-one situation was unavoidable, let your supervisor know as soon as possible. You never want the parent to be the one to inform the supervisor of a prohibited interaction.

If the one-on-one situation is part of the program design, the supervisor should review documentation of the meetings. The supervisor should also know where the meetings are taking place and stop by from time to time.

**Use Appropriate Contact**
Some kinds of physical affection can be misinterpreted or make the youth feel uncomfortable. Avoid giving hugs or resting your hand anywhere on the youth’s body. Limit all shows of affection to pats on the shoulder, high fives and handshakes.

**Arrange Random Checks**
Rely on your fellow employees and volunteers to help you protect yourself and any youth you meet with. Ask these adults to randomly drop in at least once during any one-on-one meeting. You can let the youth know that “X will be stopping by at some point,” as reassurance that you’re being monitored and not truly alone together. When done as standard practice, these random checks are useful in holding adult staff and volunteers accountable.

**Document Everything**
If there’s ever a dispute about something inappropriate happening to a youth you’ve met with, it can be useful to have detailed records about every meeting. If the one-on-one situation was unavoidable, make sure you tell your supervisor and document it. For scheduled one-on-one situations, keep notes about the time and place of each meeting, as well as everything that’s discussed and any conflicts that arise.

And if anything unusual or troubling comes up during the meeting, report it to your supervisor immediately. Report-worthy incidents include disclosures of abuse or maltreatment, behavior problems (and a report of how they were handled) and injuries. Furthermore, immediately report the details of any interactions that the youth could interpret as inappropriate, such as an accidental brush of your hand across the youth’s leg.

These strategies will help protect you and any youths you
meet with, without disrupting your ability to accomplish the goals of your meetings. Make them your standard operating procedure and hold other employees and volunteers to the same standards.

Fr. John Martinek 1952-2018
by David Schienle

The Diocese learned this fall that Fr. John Martinek had passed away. For the last five years, in retirement, Fr. John had been traveling by motor home throughout Mexico and the United States. On November 2nd, friends and colleagues gathered to remember Fr. John during a memorial service held at Sacred Heart Cathedral. Bishop Donald Kettler concelebrated with Bishop Chad Zielinski. Bishop Kettler delivered the homily where he remembered the life, priesthood, death and new life of Fr. John Martinek.

Bishop Kettler stated, “He was a good, caring, and effective priest and pastor. That’s why I wanted to be here today. To say to you and to Father John, thank you for your priesthood, your pastoral care and for bringing your people to God through the sacraments, preaching, teaching, and your presence. Today we are reminded that as Christians we have been created for citizenship in Heaven. Father John has claimed that citizenship. Today we look at life, death and life again, we are reminded of the words from the Gospel, ‘Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.’ On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will provide for all peoples... ‘Let us rejoice and be glad that God has saved us.’ Father John, on the mountain the Lord provides for you and for all the people you served, let us give thanks, rejoice and be glad.”

From Archive: The altar at Holy Cross Church decorated for Christmas 1947.
One hundred years ago the Seward Peninsula was struck by the infamous Spanish Flu. Two Jesuit priests, Frs. Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J., and Frederick Ruppert, S.J., witnessed firsthand the devastating effects. It was estimated that one-third of the world’s population became infected with the virus and at least 50 million died worldwide. Of the 1,113 influenza deaths in Alaska between 1918-1919, 820 deaths were in the Seward Peninsula as the first wave of the pandemic hit the area in November 1918. The two priests were in the center of the hardest affected area of Alaska and were desperate to care for the sick and dying.

Nome had a population of about 700 non-Native people and 300 Native people when the steamship Victoria arrived on October 20, 1918. An additional 80 military personnel were stationed at Fort Davis, three miles away. At the time, Fr. Ruppert was one of two Jesuit priests in the Seward Peninsula. While Fr. Ruppert was ministering to the residents of Nome, Fr. Lafortune was establishing a new mission at Pilgrim Hot Springs, 80 miles north of Nome.

Even with a quarantine, the disease was transmitted by the crew of the Victoria during the transfer of mail to Nome’s residents. As the ship prepared
to leave, Nome’s only doctor came down with double pneumonia. This left the military doctor at Fort Davis as the only physician in the area. Four days later, there were so many cases of influenza that the doctor reported he could no longer handle the situation. An emergency meeting was called by Nome’s mayor and town council where they decided to reopen the abandoned Catholic hospital to handle the sick. Fr. Ruppert reported to his superior, “They asked me to be superintendent, which meant to keep a chair warm in the office and dispense a few words of cheer to the sick. But I felt I had some noble traditions of the Society in the service of the plague stricken to uphold, and with God’s help tried to do my bit. The hospital is a large one and was soon filled to its capacity for what nurses were available. The staff, the first month, was an uncertain one. All were without training or experience, and one hardly ever knew who could be counted on from day to day. However, the Lord always provided so that at all times we were at least able to get along.”

By chance as the number of sick increased, Fr. Lafortune unexpectedly arrived in Nome. He made quick work visiting the sick everywhere. Fr. Ruppert recalled, “Day by day things got worse. It was estimated that about fifty percent of the non-Native population was down with the flu before the middle of November.” He continued, “Father Lafortune was indefatigable in working for the Eskimos. He was seen constantly hurrying to and fro and from one end of town to the other on his dog team. His example spurred the others into action. Soon many hands were stretched forth for relieving the deplorable conditions, but the awful plague had wrought frightful ravages. Most had died or were dying, some had frozen to death; for the most part, only children were left. What remained was only the wreckage. Of, the Nome Natives, a population of less than three hundred, about fifty children remain and fifty adults.”

Fr. Ruppert ended his report with, “After two months and a half of work, I had become worn out. The doctor told Fr. Lafortune to take me away for a few weeks rest. So, when the hospital closed January 19, I went away with Fr. Lafortune and remained at the Springs about three weeks. I am feeling well again, thank God. Fr. Lafortune is the best of health. Both were spared from the flu.”

It would take time for both priests to recover from the crisis. They would spend the next several years building an orphanage at Pilgrim Hot Springs. Fr. Ruppert would freeze to death in 1923 while, attempting to deliver by
dog sled, oranges as Christmas gifts to the orphans at Pilgrim Hot Springs. He is buried in a small cemetery at Pilgrim Hot Springs, close to a mass grave of those who died during the pandemic. Fr. Lafortune would continue ministering in the Seward Peninsula, especially to the Native population. He would spend another 20 years moving back and forth between Nome and King Island. Fr. Lafortune suffered a stroke while celebrating Mass in Nome in July 1940, and died on October 22, in Fairbanks.


Pilgrim Hot Springs Cemetery. Fr. Ruppert’s grave lies close to the mass graves of the 1918 flu pandemic victims.

Cross stands by the unmarked graves in Pilgrim Hot Springs Cemetery.

The hospital in Nome where Frs. Ruppert and Lafortune cared for the sick.
Visit to Newtok

Deacon Chuck Bowman and Seminarian Piotr Oprych went to Newtok to remodel the rectory and visit the local people. They spent 10 days doing a lot of physical labor while working in the vineyard of the Lord. They also held Communion services and even handed out Halloween candy to the children. ~ Fr. Tom Kuffel
Recently the Alaska Mission team found itself in Galena, Alaska, more than 300 miles from Fairbanks as the raven flies, or as our own Ravn Alaska plane flew. While I had flown in small planes a couple of times previously, this was a new adventure for my mission sisters. I may have shared a little too much of my excitement. One of my sisters told us that there were a couple of times when she thought we were going to die. But I digress… Why were we in Galena? Going out to work and witness in the bush villages of rural Alaska has been one of the main goals of the mission team from its very beginning. Visiting the people of Galena was the first step towards fulfilling this objective. I deeply desire to go out and encounter my brothers and sisters in so many other remote villages; to help them come to a deeper realization of the Love of Christ and the joy that living in Him can give.

Due to the fact that Galena is a larger village, Fr. Robert Fath thought we would do well to start there. We hope to return to spend more time
with the high school kids and a proposed spring retreat is part of that tentative plan. This trip was made possible through some limited funds set aside through the Diocesan Office of Faith and Family.

We arrived on Friday in the late afternoon and were met by Agnes Sweetsir at the airport. She was very welcoming and showed us the older village plots that were destroyed by the recent flood in 2013. She brought us to a spacious house where we could relax a little and stow our bags. After telling us that she would make sure that someone would bring a truck over for our use during the weekend, she left. I was surprised at how quickly that truck showed up, and also thrilled, because I love driving trucks. We drove to Claudette Green’s house. After that, following her in our vehicle, I watched my foot disappear way into what felt like the depths of the engine whenever I had to use the brake and joked that if one of the shorter members of our team were to drive it we might lose them down there. Claudette was a very gracious host, and she provided a delicious salmon casserole for our dinner. After dinner, we headed out again, and went over to the church to meet with Fr. Thinh Van Tran, O.F.M., and to prepare to greet the kids. Friday night we welcomed about 15 high school youth for a night of introductions and games.

Saturday was the big day-retreat. It started in the morning at 10 AM, and after greeting the kids at the church, we walked over to the high school for the witnesses, talks, discussion groups, and to make use of the beautiful gym for our games. The high schoolers were really great that day, and even though we covered a lot and the day was very full, they stayed with us through all of it. I was really impressed. Our theme was developing a relationship with each member of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and how that impacts our lives. The day ended with an hour of adoration and the Sacrament of Confession made available by Fr. Thinh. It was a day packed with different encounters, different challenges, and different graces as well. Praise God!

Sunday morning we knew was the last time we would have an opportunity to see these kids again, at least for a few months. We honestly were all questioning whether anyone would be awake and show up at the church when we got there. What a blessing to see at least half of the kids who had been with us the previous days gradually come into the church. We were so happy to have a chance to say goodbye, and to give them some small gifts to let them know that we would be praying for them, and to show them how grateful we were for the chance to get to know them over the short weekend. The closing Mass with the entire parish was a beautiful expression of the tight-knit community that Galena appears to be. We wish to extend many thanks to all of the parishioners who helped in so many silent ways with the food, lodging, and other activities. We are very grateful for their support. I pray that God will give us the means to return to visit with these wonderful young people and also to go out to other areas in the coming months and years.
The Alaska Ministry Team hosted a Christmas Party in North Pole, Alaska at St. Nicholas Parish on Sunday, December 9th. The Ministry Team provided children’s games along with eggnog and other Christmas treats. The various parishes in the diocese provided gift baskets for auction items to help the Ministry Team with fundraising for travel to the remote parishes and provide educational services.

The below photo is of Heidi and Dave Doudna with their two children, Ben and Melody. Melody is part of the Alaska Mission Team and is the Youth Minister at St. Nicholas Parish. Ben is a seminarian for the diocese and is assigned to St. Nicholas Parish during his pastoral year.
The Prodigal Son wanted all that his father had, so he asked for his inheritance. Then, he took the money, and ran. Yet, he could not outrun his father’s love. Nor could he outrun his father, for the father’s very identity was woven into his son’s very being. This is the crisis of today. Who am I?

First, we are our Father’s child. Today’s identity crisis is shocking in that some 50% of children born today do not know or have a relationship with their biological father. Worse yet, those who do not know their biological father, struggle even more trying to identify God as their heavenly Father. This crisis of fatherless children is revealed in the behaviors of the prodigal son.

He threw his life away for the powers, pleasures, and possessions of this world, that is on greed, gluttony, and lust, only to find his identity while in his depravity of the pigsty where the pigs were considered more precious than he was. He decides to return home and become one of his father’s slaves, for he could not see nor accept his identity as a beloved son. His father did not restore his dignity, for the son never lost it. The son, as so many people do today, just never valued it, never realized it. God does not exile and expel us because of our sins and weaknesses. He does not destroy us, because we sin. He heals us.

If we are going to see God as the Father who fathers us with a divine love, we must see that the Father sends his Son, our very brother, into our lives to fight, battle, and even die for our love. That is why the second son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is so devastating. He complains to his father he never gave him a goat for a party. Did the second son ever ask his father for a party?

Filled with selfishness, the second son saw himself as a slave doing what the father told him – not out of love and sonship, but out of fear and slavery. This is worse than the first son, for the second ruled his own little kingdom and only saw his needs.

The third crisis is the absence of being beloved. The Beloved. This word means precious, adored, and cherished. How many persons enter a friendship, marriage, or family and after a time, they leave feeling molested, neglected, and battered. We have lost trust in each other for we have lost our identity in Christ and hence, we no longer are beloved but hated. A person cannot enter into a healthy, happy, and holy relationship that is filled with joy, generosity, and harmony when that person has not been fathered by our Father’s love. Today we no longer know how to love one another, for we have not experienced the true love of our heavenly Father, nor our Brother, Jesus, Who goes to battle for us daily.

God fights for our hearts by sending his Son into the world to free us from the snares of sin. He defends us from lust, gluttony, and greed, the sins of the first son. When we fail, He enters into our very woundedness which causes us to sin and He offers his truth which corrects our faults. The Son of Man also opens the traps that the second son suffered: pride, envy, and anger. Once again, Jesus, our brother, embraces us and forgives us even if we are undeserving of it. His humility is greater than our pride. His friendship transforms our envy into joy. His justice swallows up our anger.

We, whether or not we have been fathered by our human fathers, and whether or not we had an older brother who went to battle for us, need to know and experience the Father’s unconditional love that comes to us through the Son as He gave his life as a ransom for many. We are the many who beg for mercy despite our sins, knowing that no sin, not even all the sins, of all the people, of all the ages, is greater than his mercy which welcomes us home and gives us all that He has.
The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church. In a variety of ways, she joyfully experiences the constant fulfillment of the promise: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Mt. 28:20) But in the Holy Eucharist, through changing the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity. (CCC 1374)

I sit this Sunday feeling empty and sad that I will not be able to attend Sunday Mass. I will not be able to receive the Eucharist today. There is a persistent bug being passed around our community and my wife has been fighting it off for a few days. And today, I have a scratchy throat and post-nasal drip, too, so no Mass for us.

What if not being able to go to Mass, except for the rare occasion, was the norm? Do you think about how infrequently our brothers and sisters in bush Alaska have a priest? The Diocese of Fairbanks is a unique diocese within the United States. Its geographical vastness, lack of roads, extreme temperatures and topography, and shortage of clergy present very real barriers to the regular celebration of the Mass—and consequently, the reception of the Holy Eucharist—for many of our brothers and sisters in rural northern Alaska. This very real separation from our priests, our liturgy, our Eucharist, is a great cross for many of the faithful. We should pray for those who are not able to commune with the Lord Jesus regularly. We should also pray for an increase in vocations for our diocese, as well as safe travels for our priests, deacons, and Bishop Zielinski.

We should also strive to remember that Jesus is always with us: “Yet he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:27-28) We have our being in Christ. He is our life, our breath, our love. So, we must do our best to be open to the presence of the Lord in each moment of our lives. Even if circumstances beyond our control keep us from receiving Communion, Christ is constantly inviting us to contemplate and continue to live within the moment that we receive His Body and Blood. He invites us to take that moment with us and to continue to adore him in thanksgiving. We can remain in communion with God even if we are separated from the celebration of the Mass for one Sunday or for many Sundays, because in him we have our being.

I am an adult convert, who discovered the beauty of the Catholic faith after a long spiritual journey. After my
conversion, I decided to study for a graduate degree at Mt. Angel Abbey in Oregon. While there, I had a wonderful spiritual director who helped me grow in my knowledge of the Church and develop a deeper spiritual life.

During my first year at Mt. Angel, my wife and I had our first child, a beautiful daughter we named Cora. After a few months of being a dad, I tearfully told my director that I couldn’t picture life without my daughter. I couldn’t imagine continuing to live or even existing anymore, if anything ever happened to her. I asked the director what I would do if I ever lost my beautiful daughter. After a moment, she said, “You would just give thanks to God for the time you had with her.”

It took some time to realize the true wisdom of the director’s statement. All things—even all people—pass away. How sad it is when a child goes to God ahead of his or her parent. Yet in all things, even in the most tragic loss of a child, we are called to give thanks for the wonderful times we shared with God’s gift to us of our child.

The only gift that never passes away is the ultimate gift of love, the gift of God’s son, Jesus, who is present to us in the Holy Eucharist, and remains with us in our being. He truly is with us always, not just to the end of life, but beyond, in heaven.

The Eucharist Christ offered in the upper room is “the source and summit” of the Christian life. (CCC 1324-1327) Most of us have the great privilege, joy, and obligation to receive Jesus in the Eucharist every Sunday; we even have the opportunity to partake of the holiest of blessings near the altar during the weekdays, too, in daily Mass. But not everyone is blessed to have such frequent access to the sacraments, including our brothers and sisters in the bush. Please remember to pray for those in our diocese not able to receive our Blessed Savior in the Eucharist on a regular basis.

“When you have received Him, stir up your heart to do Him homage; speak to Him about your spiritual life, gazing upon Him in your soul where He is present for your happiness; welcome Him as warmly as possible, and behave outwardly in such a way that your actions may give proof to all of His Presence.”

-St. Francis de Sales

Additional Reading:
MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT

Coming Soon: The Diocese of Fairbanks’ First Alaskan Grown Priest

Seminarian Ben Doudna

Ben Doudna is in his third year of formation for the priesthood, and is currently serving his pastoral year at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in North Pole, Alaska. Once ordained, Ben will have the unique distinction of being our diocese’s first-ever completely “homegrown” priest, since he was born and raised in Alaska. Between his duties at St. Nick’s, he shared with the Alaskan Shepherd about his journey to the priesthood in his home diocese.

What most strongly influenced you as a Catholic growing up?
I grew up in a close-knit, homeschooled family. My father also runs a business out of our home, so we were always together. We were immersed in the faith—we learned about it through our schoolwork, prayed the rosary most days, and by the time I was 11, the family was attending daily Masses several times a week. In fact, the liturgy became a big part of my life as a teenager because I was often altar serving during the week. There was a strong movement of grace within our family.

How were you called to the priesthood?
I first felt the call when I was about eight and watching the priests renew their vows of obedience to the bishop at a Chrism Mass. Definitely, however, it was a retreat I went on my last semester of college that firmly put me on the path to being a priest in this diocese. I was at a cloistered Carmelite monastery to discern whether I was called to join their community, when a family with children came in to attend the Mass. I watched the parents trying to keep their children focused and it suddenly hit me what a battle good Catholics have to pass on our beautiful faith to their kids, especially in our culture. I knew then I needed to be on their side of the grille instead of cloistered, to help families as a diocesan priest.

How did growing up in Alaska influence your desire to be a priest here?
My father’s business is selling freight sleds and a lot of his sales are to people in bush Alaska. So I always had a strong awareness that our diocese was vast and had a lot more churches than just around Fairbanks. I’ve also always liked being in the outdoors; even when I considered other paths as a teenager, I was drawn to “careers” like full-time trapping or being a bush pilot. Loving Alaska, being close to my family, and knowing we desperately needed more priests… it all played into my decision to serve here.

What advice would you have for a young man who thinks he might be called to the priesthood?
First, pray before a crucifix, often. That has kept me on track so many times. Talk to Jesus and he will let you know the next step. That’s all you really need, even if you don’t know the whole plan. Second, try seminary, even if you’re not sure. If you honestly desire to give your whole life to God, he will honor your willingness to try it out and will tell you his plan for your life.