

The Alaskan Shepherd



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Christmas 2017

Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

A Christmas Message From Bishop Chad Zielinski Encountering Christ in the Silence

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In November, I had the joy of returning to Mt. Angel Abbey and Seminary in Benedict, Oregon, where two of our four seminarians are being formed. Between meeting with a dozen other bishops and diocesan vocations directors, I led the seminarians in a Day of Recollection on November 2, All Souls Day. I offered Mass that morning, then gave two presentations that reminded them we are “Called to be Disciples of Christ.”

The entire day, we kept silent. We ate our meals in silence, prayed in silence, and walked the beautiful hilltop that overlooks the Willamette Valley in silence. The beauty of Mount Angel Abbey, the bells ringing five times a day for the monks to gather as they pray for the world, led me to more deeply contemplate the call to discipleship. I could see why Mount Angel’s founding



monks from Switzerland settled on this site in 1882—they choose a tranquil environment where they could drink in the silence that has been there for centuries.

Like those monks, I found that this encounter with silence ignited a craving within me

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for even more. I began to reflect upon the fact that our world is filled with noise, constant movement, and distractions. A disturbing recent study by the Chicago-based data research firm dscout [*yes, the firm's name is all lowercase and spelled like this*] found that people touch, type, swipe, or click their screens an average of 2,716 times per day. Our computers, phones, tablets, and televisions emit rapidly-changing sounds and images to create an emotional response that can easily become an addiction. During a recent trip, I saw a man watch a movie on a tablet while listening to music through headphones and reading the newspaper. On another trip, a woman was simultaneously watching a movie and playing a game on her tablet. For many of us, electronics now serve as the guide to our entire day and this constant distraction seems only to be accelerating.

Like many others, I also frequently use these gadgets. It's almost impossible not to, since they are a necessary part of getting things done in the modern world. But when I travel to a village without cell service and cannot receive calls, texts, or emails, I feel incredibly free. Life's constant noise is replaced with a deep inner silence. At first, that silence is a bit uncomfortable, but once I settle into it, I can encounter Christ more fully. The barriers and distractions in my prayer life disappear and my soul can better focus on the Sacred Scripture or spiritual reading that is directing me toward Christ. I can hear Our Lord more clearly; I can sense His presence more strongly. There is an indescribable closeness between us then that begs me to sit and spend more time with Him.

The quietude also helps me better connect with the people I serve. I especially enjoy the peaceful time I get to spend sitting with elders in villages across rural Alaska. These men and

women have taught me much about silence. You can sit in their presence, have a brief conversation, and there is a great deal of silence. Most of us become fidgety and nervous when there is a lot of silence in a conversation...we don't know what to do or say. Native elders, however, will sit patiently in silence, sometimes for several minutes. There is often a smile on their faces that radiates from the core of their person, that reflects a true inner peace. Then in a soft and barely discernible voice, the elder will offer a few words that are insightful and profound. At the right moment, wisdom was born from silence.

The silence that follows their words is fruitful, too. It focuses my senses and leads me to meditate on their gift of ancient wisdom. This understanding then takes root in my soul and goes with me as I interact with others. Ultimately, the world is blessed by this ancient wisdom that could only be created and shared in silence.

I can't help but believe that silence played a similar role for the Holy Family in Bethlehem on that first Christmas. There were no distractions as Mary and Joseph fixated on the Son of God, who entered our world in silence. As an infant, the Savior was unable to speak, but Mary and Joseph nonetheless recognized the unparalleled manifestation of beauty, truth, and goodness in the Christ child. Then the heavens burst forth in rejoicing to announce His arrival to the most simple of folk, the shepherds, who spent their entire lives listening to the voice of their sheep. Like Mary and Joseph, the shepherds were drawn to the birth of the Good Shepherd, whose voice would soon fill them with eternal wisdom. These men would stop their work for a moment to pay homage to the newborn Christ child, and drink in the silence

and joy that surrounded Him. The shepherds surely carried this encounter within them always, just as I will always carry within my heart the wisdom gleaned from elders in our Alaskan villages. And just as I do each time I return from the bush, the shepherds in Christ's time also shared their wisdom with others so it could be born again and again in the hearts of the faithful.

Every year, almost before the celebration of Thanksgiving is over, we are reminded that there are only so many shopping days left until Christmas. This Advent, I invite you to join me in removing some of the distractions from your life so that you may enjoy a more spiritually fruitful silence. Can we give up 30, 20, or even just five minutes a day of television, radio, cell phone, or tablet? Let us instead spend that saved time in prayer and in truly listening to our loved ones, especially our older family members, whose stories and experiences can help wisdom be born anew in our homes this season.

Even more importantly, I invite you to stop, listen, and meditate on Christ as our Savior. What wisdom does He bring to your family? What wisdom of His will you pass along to others? What wisdom will be born from you as a gift to the world to make it a better place to live?

This Christmas, give the gift of silence to yourself, to your family, and to Our Lord. And embrace the gift of Christ's wisdom that must be born in silence to be shared with others. "Keep silent, and I will teach you wisdom." (Job 33:33)

Yours in Christ,

+Chad W. Zielinski

†Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski
Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska
Diocese of Fairbanks



Wishing you a Very Merry and Blessed Christmas!

A YEAR OF BLESSINGS

Over the past year, the Diocese of Fairbanks has been truly blessed. Here are just a few of the gifts the Risen Lord has bestowed upon us in 2017.

JANUARY

Pittsburgh seminarian Brendan Dawson spent two weeks in the village of Emmonak, ministering to and learning from his Yup'ik Catholic brothers and sisters at Sacred Heart Catholic Church.

FEBRUARY

The diocese started its second formation program for deacons that will serve its eight road system parishes. Of the original eight candidates, two men have solidly discerned a calling to the diaconate. The men currently meet once a month for a full weekend of intensive formation with Father Robert Fath, diocesan vocations director. In addition, the men are being trained as Stephen Ministers so they can begin serving the spiritual needs of parishioners and the community even before ordination.

MARCH

The Alaska Anthropological Association hosted a presentation on Father Jules Jette, a missionary priest who came to the state in 1898 to work among the Athabascan native people. Between sharing the faith and celebrating the Mass and sacraments, Father Jette recorded a voluminous dictionary on Koyukon, the most widely spoken Athabascan language. Today, fewer than 300 people on earth speak Koyukon and the language is in danger of dying out, making Father Jette's linguistic contribution an anthropological treasure.

The Catholic radio station in Fairbanks, KQHE, hosted a Lenten Mission at Sacred Heart Cathedral in which a priest, a brother, and two sisters from the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in the Bronx visited with parishioners and young adults. (FFR was founded by the late Father Benedict Groeschel.) The visit from these religious has prompted several young adults in our diocese to begin discerning whether they are being called to religious life or the priesthood.

MAY

The Native Ministry Training Program for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region hosted an educational workshop for 17 deacons, deacon candidates, and Eucharistic ministers. Attendees traveled to a retreat center in Bethel from eight villages. Travel is so expensive in the bush that it takes our rural deacon candidates five to 10 years to become ordained. Deacons are the primary pastoral



JANUARY

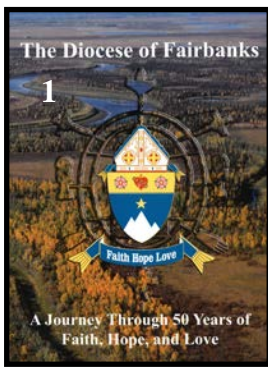


MARCH



MAY

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Continued from page 4

agents in villages that only see a priest every few months.

JUNE

Father Kumar Pasala and Father Thomas Sagili arrived from India. They will be with the diocese for at least three years.

AUGUST

Nearly 100 people gathered under tents in the front yard of the Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati House in Fairbanks, where three of the diocese's four seminarians shared their stories and talked about the stages of the priest formation process.

SEPTEMBER

The three Franciscan clergy who minister to our parishes in the interior region celebrated their Jubilees—Father Joe Hemmer celebrated 60 years as a priest, while Brother Bob Ruzicka and Brother Justin Huber each celebrated 50 years of ordained life.

Father Yakubu Zirra Aiden and Father Alphonsus Afina arrived from Nigeria; Father Szymon Czuwara arrived from Poland.

OCTOBER

Bishop Chad shared the story of Catholicism in northern Alaska on the Catholic Answers Radio Show in California.

The diocese gained a fourth seminarian! Originally from Minnesota, Josh Miller was stationed at Ft. Wainwright for three years, then spent nine months discerning his vocation in Fairbanks, at the Pier Giorgio Frassati House. He started his formation at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois this fall. Josh is co-sponsored by the Diocese of Fairbanks and the Archdiocese for the Military Services USA.

Three volunteers from Michigan spent almost a month in rural Alaska performing maintenance on numerous village churches. Volunteers willing to share their time and talents with their rural brothers and sisters save the diocese significant money that can then be put toward flying clergy into villages to celebrate the Mass and sacraments.

NOVEMBER

Bishop Chad traveled to Baltimore to gather with his brother bishops during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) annual Fall General Assembly.



MISSIONARY SPOTLIGHT



From India to Alaska

Father Balaswammy Gangarapu, affectionately known as Father Bala, is currently the Parochial Vicar of Immaculate Conception Church in Fairbanks. Fr. Bala was ordained in India in 1991, and has spent the past 17 years in Alaska. Here, he shares a little about his journey as a missionary priest in the far north.

What cost strongly influenced your faith growing up?

In India, I lived literally across the street from our parish, and later attended a Catholic boarding school run by priests and nuns. One day, I heard a sister speculate that I was “going to be a priest.” The school taught spiritual discipline, with daily catechism, rosary, and Mass. It kept me close to the Lord and His Church.

How did you know you were called to the priesthood?

The nun’s prediction stayed with me, but I also grew up watching the priests and their dedication was a powerful example that made me think about whether I had a calling, too. My family was initially against me becoming a priest, but I told them, “This is my life, not yours. I have to answer to God for this.” They came around!

I knew it for certain after the 2nd year of novitiate in seminary, though, when we focused on developing prayer life and going deep into the Scriptures. That was so enriching and inspiring that I knew I would never leave the priesthood.

How did you end up in Alaska?

I really wanted an experience outside of my country and I knew of another priest (Father Kaspar Mallavarapu) who had come to Alaska to serve, so I joined him in 2000 to serve in the Archdiocese of Anchorage. Then I saw that there was a desperate need for priests in the northern part of the state. The people here are truly thirsting for shepherds; they really want the Mass and sacraments. I came for the experience, but I couldn’t leave once I saw how much I was needed.

What advice would you give to a young Catholic today who is trying to discern his or her vocation?

Start your day with a little bit of quiet time for prayer. Read the Scriptures and reflect on them. Go to Mass an hour early and just be in His presence. Today, we listen to reply to the other person. But when you’re with God, be quiet and listen to truly understand. Spend time with the Lord and try to genuinely listen to Him to hear what His plan is for your life.

