



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

In Alaska, Permanent Deacons Are “Primary Spiritual Leaders” in Remote Villages

Left: Newly ordained Deacon Dominic Hunt of Emmonak gets a warm greeting from his grandson Anderson.



Right: Deacon Dominic Hunt leads graveside prayers.



By Rhina Guidos

Franciscan Sr. Kathy Radich knows urban churchgoers find it hard to understand how some Catholic communities in the United States can go weeks, months, and sometimes a year—or more—without seeing a priest to celebrate Mass.

But that’s exactly what it’s like in geographically large, rural areas like the Diocese of Fairbanks in Alaska. Fewer than a dozen priests cover more than 409,000 square miles, two-thirds of the state of Alaska, making it the largest US diocese in size.

If the population of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region all lived in one place, the diocese would not have much of a problem. But with a flock spread across two dozen small villages scattered over a tundra the size of Oregon, those who tend them have been challenged to find solutions.

To be sure, much beauty can be found in winter in the diocese’s snow-blanketed plains, which contrast with the expanse of the sky. But the diocese’s greatest asset, its space, also causes some of its greatest challenges.

For the Catholic Church, the biggest challenge is how to spiritually tend to such a large area with so few human resources. “These churches typically only see a priest for Mass every one to three months,” said Sr. Kathy. She is part of the diocese’s creative solution in addressing that challenge, a solution that hinges on identifying a crucial vocation in places such as Alaska: the permanent diaconate. Permanent deacons, who can be single or married, can witness marriages, preside at funerals and burial services, distribute Holy Communion, and celebrate baptisms.

...continued on page 2

Neighbors

ISSUE 1 2024

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

...continued from page 1



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The dioceses that receive support from Catholic Home Missions are often ones that have small Catholic populations spread out over large areas, with harsh

terrain and limited resources that can isolate those living there. The Diocese of Fairbanks in Alaska, where all of those factors come together, is a perfect example of a home mission diocese. Covering over 400,000 square miles, with 46 parishes and fewer than a dozen priests to serve them, the diocese relies on hard-working, dedicated permanent deacons to minister to the ongoing pastoral needs of its people.

For more than 50 years, the diocese has nurtured vocations and trained permanent deacons through its Rural Deacon Program, which focuses on training pastoral leaders from among the Yup'ik people to serve this Alaskan Native community. This program began in 1970 as the Native Deacon Program to accompany candidates through the formation and training process, which can take up to five years. Once ordained, the deacons often become the main spiritual leaders in their villages.

In this issue, you'll read how your support for Catholic Home Missions plays a critical role in sustaining the faith of rural Alaskan Catholics by helping to form the next generation of permanent deacons. I am,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight
Bishop of Jefferson City
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on
Catholic Home Missions

As coordinator of rural ministries, Sr. Kathy arranges priests' visits to the diocese's 46 parishes in more than 20 villages. She also operates the diocese's Rural Deacon Program, "originally known as the Native Deacon Program," founded in 1970, says the diocesan website.

Sr. Kathy said the Church in Alaska relies on the special calling of permanent deacons to carry the local community's spiritual load between the rare visits by the team of priests, who are continually going from village to village, tending their flocks. One priest may be assigned to serve three parishes, but because of the distance, he usually must travel via small plane, snowmobile, or boat, spending two weeks in one place before going to another. "So you may not see him for another month again," said Sr. Kathy. "Between priest visits, parishes depend on lay ministers and deacons to lead communion services and other ministries. In the absence of a priest, deacons are the primary pastoral agents for their churches."

Rural communities rely on deacons like Joe Avugiak, who has served the Yup'ik people in his ministry since 1998 at St. Catherine of Siena parish in Chefnak, a village in southwestern Alaska. Chefnak, population 500, is predominantly Catholic. Deacon Joe can carry out all the duties of a permanent deacon as well as offer spiritual counseling. But he said that sharing the Word of God with his community on Sundays is one of the most blessed moments of his ministry. Even so, it's hard to pick one moment, he admits, because he loves a lot of "little things" about his ministry.

These days, Alaska's Rural Deacon Program has about 11 active permanent deacons, said Sr. Kathy, who provides training for them. Depending on

the candidate, training can take three, four, or five years. Often English is a candidate's second language, as many still speak one of the Indigenous languages of the region. Translating dense church material into simpler English for them has taken "a little while," she said. These deacons serve communities as small as 500 people. The largest is 1,200, while the average is about 800, she said.

Jesuit Fr. Gregg Wood arrived in Alaska in 1996 and now is based in Bethel, a village with no roads in or out. Like the other priests in the diocese, he travels from village to village by snow machine, all-terrain vehicle, or even a single-engine airplane for longer distances. He said permanent deacons provide crucial support to the Church's mission, undeterred by the harsh landscape.

But although permanent deacons can perform baptisms, weddings, and funerals and distribute communion, only priests can administer important sacraments like Anointing of the Sick. Even though villages have great need for these sacraments, deacons cannot administer them. On many occasions, with distances too great and too few priests who can get there in time, many have died without receiving the sacrament, she said.

While priests have regular contact with parishioners, said Fr. Gregg, a deacon's constant presence "means that the permanent deacon is the primary spiritual leader in the village." He has emphasized this fact with the deacons, reminding them that he spends about 25% of the year in the village, while they tend to the flock the other 75% of the time.

An important piece of the puzzle, if the permanent deacon is married, is to include his wife in the decision to pursue this ministry vocation, Fr. Gregg



said. In the Fairbanks diocese, more often than not, permanent deacons are married. “It’s always been this way, and the permanent diaconate then becomes a ministry of two in the sense that the deacon and his wife, both of them, need to want the man to become a permanent deacon” because of the demands of the vocation, Fr. Gregg said. But the distinction, made clear to the deacon, is that “family always comes first,” Fr. Gregg added.

If the deacon needs training, goes on retreat, or takes part in any ongoing formation, the wife often accompanies her husband, Sr. Kathy said. The program makes sure that the training includes the building of community with other deacons, their wives, and families in the region. “They can’t do things in isolation,” Sr. Kathy said.

“We depend on permanent deacons (and also lay ministers) to keep the faith alive in those communities. If weren’t for them, we would not have a Catholic community here.”

Deacons are obligated to pray the Liturgy of the Hours daily. Often the permanent deacon and his wife pray together, so formation material is provided for each of them.

Chefornak’s Deacon Joe said the ministry has “helped my family be closer to God but also closer to each other.” “We have especial blessings from God helping us as a family be together,” he said.

Local deacons have been a boon for evangelization in the area, said Fr. Gregg, and the difference in attendance is noticeable with local leadership. But as with the priesthood and consecrated life, the numbers of permanent deacons are dwindling. Many in the Fairbanks diocese are reaching retirement age, and some are dying. The declining presence

affects the life of the Church, Fr. Gregg said.

Just like priests, the diocese doesn’t have enough permanent deacons for every village, so some help anywhere they are needed. When a deacon is not around, Fr. Gregg said, it is easy to tell things are “not working well and the numbers drop, and when it is working well, it’s just the opposite.”

“We depend on permanent deacons (and also lay ministers) to keep the faith alive in those communities. If weren’t for them, we would not have a Catholic community here,” added Sr. Kathy.

In 1970, the Rural Deacon Program became the first of its kind in the United States. In 2020, the US Church overall counted 587 new permanent deacons—but also recorded the retirement of 410 from active ministry, while another 378 died, according a 2021 report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).

“As is the case with priests in the United States, there are not enough new permanent deacons being ordained to make up for the numbers who are retiring from active ministry and dying each year,” said the CARA report. That makes the situation in rural and less populated places such as Alaska a bit more urgent, as maintaining the permanent diaconate can be costly. “Probably the largest expense is travel,” said Fr. Gregg, given the obstacles posed by the Alaskan tundra and its distances.

Making the expense tougher is that the diocese is among the poorest in the country. Just eight of Fairbanks’s 46 parishes and missions are self-supporting, according to its website.

When COVID-19 arrived in 2020, it left behind even more financial hurt. Travel became even more expensive, given new health regulations related to the pandemic, Sr. Kathy said. That expense has added urgency to maintaining the number of

deacons, because priest visits are becoming even more scarce. “COVID-19 travel restrictions have left about half of our churches without a priest for more than a year,” she said.

But Catholic organizations, including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Catholic Home Missions, have stepped in to help with costs of sustaining the permanent diaconate.

“We’re just very grateful for the support we’ve received, we couldn’t do this ministry without it,” said Sr. Kathy.

“It allows us to function,” said Fr. Gregg.

The work of the deacons, which has kept the Church alive in many ways in rural places like Alaska, is essential in an area hungry for the Word of God, she said. “The Yup’ik are people of great spirituality, and they had spirituality before missionaries came,” said Sr. Kathy. “Their values command respect for person, for land, for Earth. They support one another. You don’t find a homeless person. They take care of one another.”

When people support vocations to the Rural Deacon Program, they provide crucial resources for permanent deacons, including training, ongoing formation, and any other support the deacon and his family may need, Sr. Kathy said. “Without this kind of support, we wouldn’t have this ministry and we wouldn’t have the Church we have here,” she said. “I’m really glad for the support.” ■



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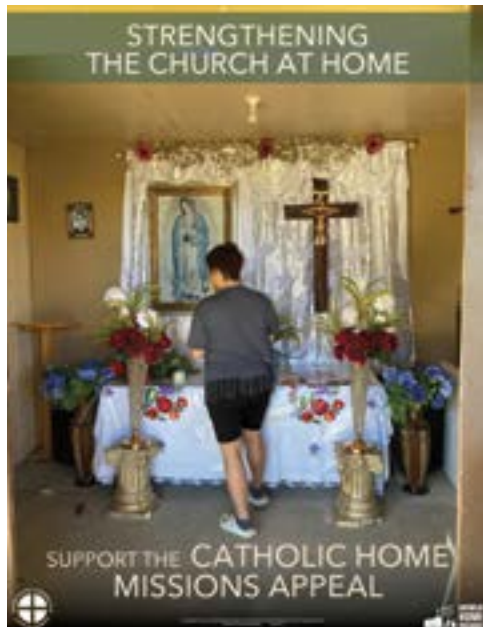
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DID YOU KNOW?

- The Diocese of Fairbanks is the largest diocese in the United States in area, covering more than 409,000 square miles.
- While the diocese is geographically large, fewer than a dozen priests serve its 46 parishes.
- Permanent deacons are the diocese’s primary pastoral ministers.
- With support from Catholic Home Missions, the diocese’s Rural Deacon Program forms permanent deacons, including many from the Yup’ik people, to minister to the unique, ongoing pastoral needs of their communities.

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in U.S. parishes. If you missed your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | PO Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal. iGiveCatholicTogether also accepts contributions to support the Catholic Home Missions program: <https://usccb.givecatholictogether.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-home-missions>

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