

Mission Diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska

“... to this Society [Society for the Propagation of the Faith] be destined all the offerings collected in every diocese, parish, religious community, association and ecclesial movement throughout the world for the care of Christian communities in need and for supporting the proclamation of the Gospel even to the ends of the earth.” Pope Francis, Message for World Mission Sunday, 2016

World Mission Sunday is celebrated in every parish, school and religious community in the world on the 2nd to last Sunday of October. It is a time when the Church reflects its deepest identity as the Church in mission. This important celebration includes a collection that enhances the spiritual and material health of mostly poor and struggling mission dioceses worldwide through the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Prayers and gifts of support have aided over 1,150 dioceses around the world.

“This Jubilee year marks the 90th anniversary of World Missionary Day, first approved by Pope Pius XI in 1926 and organized by the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith.” Pope Francis, Message for World Mission Sunday, 2016

This year, the World Mission Sunday celebration in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis is focusing on the mission Diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska. This is the only pontifically designated mission diocese in the U.S. and uses the tagline “Missionaries in the Last Frontier.” The state of Alaska is divided into three dioceses: Archdiocese of Anchorage, Diocese of Juneau and Diocese of



Fairbanks. Fairbanks is by far the largest and includes northern Alaska which is the size of four Minnesotas with ½ the population of St. Paul. It is a very remote area that reaches up to the Arctic Circle.

The road system is primarily in the city of Fairbanks. All villages and parishes outside the road system are considered bush locations, accessible by small plane or boat. And there are quite a few of them.

There are nine parishes within the area of Fairbanks and 37 bush parishes and villages. Most parishes cannot sustain themselves and rely on the diocese, donors and grants issued

through the Society for the Propagation of the Faith for the most basic spiritual and material needs. And...the diocese has only 15 priests to serve this immense area! It wasn't always this way.

In the late 1880's, the Society of Jesus, Jesuits, began serving and living in Northern Alaska. They played a major role in building the Church in this area. In fact, the first seven bishops serving this vicariate/diocese, which was elevated to diocese status in 1962, were Jesuits. There was a point at which every village at the time had a Jesuit establishing the Church in every community. In many villages, several orders of sisters also helped with subsistence farming and health care.

Since that time, several events have caused the Jesuits to pull back and have cut into the spiritual vigor of the communities. There are currently only 15 priests to serve all these parishes, many not celebrating Mass for more than three months.

There are however, Native deacons and community leaders who help provide spiritual nourishment through Communion services and appropriate sacraments within many villages.

The Native population consists of many various groups with their own cultures including Athabascans, Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Inupiat. In addition, the Diocese of Fairbanks is experiencing growth of many other non-Alaskan cultures who engage in commerce and industry including Latino and Filipino people.



Village conditions are dependent on the success of their cultural livelihood: hunting, fishing and gathering. This dependence, effected by current global warming, means that villagers are often just trying to survive.

The challenges of this diocese include serving the people of this immensely large diocese and the cost of traveling to the many bush villages to serve the Catholic population. Often the changing, dangerous weather conditions delay travel and make for harsh living conditions.

This diocese is a good example of the spiritual and material needs of mission dioceses worldwide that are supported by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith through World Mission Sunday activity. And it is right in our own country. It is truly an example of “Mercy...to the ends of the earth.”

