

A Growing Faith in Northeastern Minnesota

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Recently, a black bear in the backyard served as a not-so-subtle reminder that life in a mission diocese presents unique experiences and challenges. Bishop Paul D. Sirba's ten-county diocese is tucked into the northeastern corner of Minnesota, between Lake Superior and the Canadian border.

"Our diocese encompasses some of the most beautiful parts of the state, including the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, Voyageurs National Park, and the north shore of Lake Superior," Bishop Sirba says. "There's a great quality of life for our people who love the outdoors."

And there is a lot of outdoors to love. The 22,000 square-mile Diocese of Duluth is mostly rural—Duluth is the only city within diocesan boundaries. Catholics make up 13 percent of the population. The diocese uses grants from Catholic Home Missions to support its vocations, priestly formation, and marriage and family life efforts.

Bishop Sirba notes that the church here is challenged by an aging population and a changing economy. "People were drawn here by the '3 Ts': taconite, timber, and tourism,"



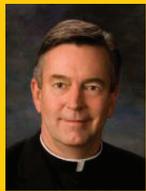
Cross erected by the diocese in 1932 to mark the spot where Bishop Baraga and Louis Gaudin miraculously landed their small boat in 1846 after traveling across Lake Superior in a strong wind.

he says. "The population stayed level for a long time." Automation and downsizing in the traditional industries since the 1980s have driven youth to seek jobs in urban centers away from Duluth.

Today, the economy relies heavily on education, health-care, shipping, light manufacturing, and tourism. Ongoing farming, logging, and mining concerns do not employ as many people as they once did. Catholics are spread among 91 parishes and missions, a number that includes seasonal chapels in popular outdoor recreation areas and worship sites on five Ojibwa reservations. The diocese strains itself to serve its far-flung parishioners, but Bishop Sirba says the faith remains strong.

Faith in Action

The bishop is inspired by St. John of the Cross, who wrote, "Think nothing else but that God ordains all, and where there is no love, put love, and you will draw love out." Bishop Sirba says the people of the diocese share the love of Jesus and provide a "beautiful, powerful witness" through their "great experience of the faith."

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Dear Friends,

With roots in evangelization by French Jesuit missionaries, the present-day Diocese of Duluth covers 10 counties in Northeastern Minnesota. Within the care of the diocese are 56,000 Catholics and 92 parishes. Many of these parishes are located in remote areas and face harsh winter weather conditions. Bishop Paul D. Sirba and his diocesan staff do a valiant job of reaching out to these people, nourishing them with the sacraments and encouraging them through pastoral ministries.

While some home mission dioceses have dramatic stories that easily make headlines, other dioceses quietly struggle with the daily reality of having a small, over-taxed staff and insufficient funds to cover their pastoral ministries. What is inspiring about the people of Duluth is their strong faith, despite many obstacles. This is a testament to the hard work of those in the diocesan offices and can serve as a witness to those of us who live in more prosperous areas of the country.

This year, Catholic Home Missions provided a grant to the Diocese of Duluth that will assist them in the cost of educating their seminarians and providing essential pastoral care to the inhabitants of their diocese. We are able to make this grant because of the great generosity of Catholics like you, who willingly give each year to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal. I offer you my humble thanks for your prayers and financial support. With your help, we will continue to give grants to struggling dioceses like Duluth and strengthen our Church here at home.

In gratitude,

Bishop Peter F. Christensen
Diocese of Superior

The campus ministry program at the University of Minnesota at Duluth is an example of loving faith in action, Bishop Sirba says. Under the enthusiastic direction of Fr. Mike Schmitz, the Newman Center coordinates more than 25 Catholic bible study groups on campus as part of its Focus Ministry. During the 2013 Easter Vigil, 15 college students were received into full communion with the church.

Bishop Sirba says the small Catholic population in the diocese is leaven for the faith, as people live what they believe. In one community, he says a Catholic doctor working at a secular hospital started a chapter of the lay ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation at his parish. As the member families got more involved in its spirituality, they became witnesses to the faith in every area of their lives, Bishop Sirba says.

Catholics in Duluth have two saintly role models whose lives are being studied during the Year of Faith. Although she never visited the diocese, St. Kateri Tekakwitha is honored there. “Her canonization has been a blessing for Native Americans and the whole diocese,” Bishop Sirba says.

As part of the Year of Faith, the Holy Father gave local bishops permission to designate places as pilgrimage sites, the bishop explains. The parish of Saints Mary and Joseph on the Fond du Lac Reservation had an overlooked shrine to St. Kateri that is being restored and will again house an original painting of her. The image from the painting was reproduced on a holy card for use during the Year of Faith. “We were concerned about placing a burden on the parish by naming it a pilgrimage site, but the people were excited by the designation and we saw a tremendous energy surrounding the events there,” Bishop Sirba says.



Bishop Sirba, bishop of Duluth, blessing the site of a miraculous landing by Bishop Baraga and Louis Gaudin in 1846.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French missionaries brought the faith to Duluth. It was then invigorated by Venerable Frederick Baraga, a Slovenian bishop from Marquette, Michigan. In 1835, he and his guide, Louis Gaudin, crossed the storm-tossed Lake Superior in an 18-foot boat. They erected a wooden cross in thanksgiving for their safe arrival on the other side. Native Americans maintained the cross for generations and now the diocese has a shrine there. Bishop Sirba describes Ven. Baraga’s respect for the Native Americans and his persistence in ministering to the people in the area. “He preserved their language by writing an Ojibwe dictionary. He also travelled 690 miles on snowshoe during the winters to reach his parishioners,” Bishop Sirba says.

An Abundance of Vocations

Fifty active priests and 46 deacons serve Duluth, but many priests are at or near retirement age. Happily,

the diocese is blessed with a vibrant vocations program, which Bishop Sirba attributes to his predecessor, Archbishop Dennis Schnurr. “He did wonderful work encouraging a culture of vocations, through prayer and dedicated priestly service. The Lord heard our prayers,” he says. Last year, Bishop Sirba ordained six local priests, the largest class in recent memory, and he says there are ten men preparing for ordination at seminaries in the U.S. and Rome. As a result of the diocesan focus on vocations, twelve women have entered religious communities in recent years.

For the small mission diocese, the joy of nurturing vocations is balanced by the difficulty of financing the seminary studies for future priests and the faith formation of religious and lay people. Grants from Catholic Home Missions (CHM) support vocations and priestly formation in Duluth. Bishop Sirba, a new member of the USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions, says CHM enables his diocese to form the next generation of clergy and religious. “At one point, one-third of the diocesan budget was supporting the education of future priests. We couldn’t afford to do that without help from CHM,” he says.

This investment in vocations reduces funds available for other important diocesan programs. Overall, less than two dozen full- and part-time staff labor to meet the spiritual, educational, catechetical, and temporal needs of Catholics throughout the diocese. But with funding from CHM, Duluth is re-establishing its Office of Marriage and Family Life. “We see the need to build up and support couples and reach out to those who are struggling. CHM help gives us the opportunity to inaugurate a series of men’s and women’s conferences,” Bishop Sirba



Five Duluth seminarians with Fr. Eric Hasting (on the far right), Diocesan Chancellor, at an event at St. Paul Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

- The Diocese of Duluth covers 22,354 square miles. This includes ten rural counties in northeastern Minnesota.
- The diocese was established by Pope Leo XIII in 1889 to provide for the spiritual needs of immigrants and Native Americans.
- The Catholic population comprises 13 percent of more than 444,000 people living within the boundaries of the diocese.
- Native Americans are 25 percent of the population. Fewer than 25 percent of Native Americans live on the reservations in the diocese. Sister of Divine Providence Marie Rose Messingschlager directs and staffs the diocesan Office of Indian Ministry. She visits families, conducts bible studies, and provides religious education to Native Americans in local parishes and on five Ojibwe reservations.
- The diocese has 12 parish elementary and junior high schools. There are no Catholic high schools.
- Duluth’s 91 parishes and missions are served by 50 diocesan priests and five international and religious order priests. Fourteen are near or beyond retirement age. There are 46 deacons and nearly 100 women religious. There are also 23 retired priests and five retired deacons in the diocese.
- While parts of the country dealt with water shortages, Duluth dug out from under 50 inches of snow in April.



says. The reinstated ministry will promote healthy marriages, defend life, educate about abortion, and provide post-abortive aid.

“We’re challenged, but richly blessed with wonderful people who lead lives of faith in the church up here,” says Bishop Sirba. ■



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In rural Northeastern Minnesota, the Diocese of Duluth faces many challenges, but the people of the diocese are responding with increased faith and an abundance of vocations. Look inside to see how your donations help them strengthen their local Church.

Your generosity to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal supports essential ministries in poor dioceses across the United States and its territories. **THANK YOU** for being part of our efforts to strengthen the Church at home.

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