News



Pope Francis has removed Bishop Martin Holley of Memphis, Tennessee, from the pastoral governance of the diocese and has named as apostolic administrator Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky. Holley is pictured in a 2017 photo. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)

by Catholic News Service

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Pope Francis has removed Bishop Martin Holley of Memphis, Tennessee, from the pastoral governance of the diocese and has named as apostolic administrator Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky.

Holley, 63, a former auxiliary bishop of Washington, was installed Oct. 19, 2016, as the fifth bishop of Memphis. He succeeded Bishop Terry Steib when he retired.

"I humbly accept the appointment of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, to serve as the apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Memphis, while remaining archbishop of Louisville," Kurtz said in an Oct. 24 statement confirming his appointment.

"I am eager to work with the priests, curia and faithful of the Diocese of Memphis to promote stability, peace and healing until Pope Francis appoints a new bishop. I have admired the church in Memphis for many years, particularly from my time as bishop of Knoxville," he said.

"I ask for prayers for Bishop Martin Holley as he departs from this local church and for the entire church of Memphis. Let us pray for one another during this time of transition," he added.

Kurtz told Catholic News Service in an email message that he had just arrived in Memphis the morning of Oct. 24.

No statement has yet been released by the Memphis Diocese as to what led to Francis' decision to remove Holley from the pastoral governance of the diocese.

Some months after he was installed as bishop there, Bishop Holley came under heavy criticism from clergy and parishioners for his decision to reassign two-thirds of the diocese's 60 active priests, except for five who were slated for retirement.

"No set policy existed at the time Holley arrived, on how long a parish assignment would last," then-diocesan spokesman Vince Higgins told CNS in June.

"The amount of time a priest spends [in an assignment] depends on the location and influence of the parish," Higgins added. "Associate pastors are moved more

frequently, and Bishop Holley has decided to appoint pastors for six-year terms, with a possible renewal of the term for six more years."

Asked about priests' and parishioners' criticism that the changes were not communicated well across the diocese, Higgins stated that "Bishop Holley is always attentive to the needs of the 40 parishes which make up the Diocese of Memphis."

The bishop also was criticized for bringing in a religious order priest, Msgr. Clement J. Machado, to be his vicar general, rather than choosing a vicar general from among the priests of the diocese. Msgr. Machado, who is Canadian and was ministering in Corpus Christi, Texas, is a member of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity.

Local clergy raised questions about whether proper church procedures had been followed for Msgr. Machado's transfer to the diocese. The priest took the post in June 2017 and resigned about a year later.

The complaints about Holley prompted the Vatican -- through the nunciature in the U.S. -- to assign two U.S. archbishops to make an apostolic visitation this summer to the diocese, Archbishops Wilton Gregory of Atlanta and Bernard Hebda of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Citing two unnamed sources in the diocese, The Commercial Appeal daily newspaper reported that Gregory and Hebda visited the diocese June 18-20 for a fact-finding trip. They reportedly talked to between 40 and 50 clergy and a number of laypeople.

No one from the Memphis Diocese or the prelates' respective archdioceses would comment on the visitation when CNS asked for confirmation it had taken place.

However, Holley did confirm the visit had taken place in a June 22 letter to priests; CNS received a copy of the letter Oct. 24.

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"Many of you may have read, seen or heard news this week that an apostolic visitation was made to our diocese," he wrote. "We are respectful of the confidentiality of the apostolic nunciature's process and are thankful that some of you were invited to participate in that process.

"The purpose of an apostolic visitation is to assist the local diocese and improve the local church's ability to minister to the people it serves," he added. "My hope is that we continue that mission here together in our diocese. The goal continues to be for the common good of our local church and the people entrusted to our care."

Before his appointment as bishop of Memphis, Holley was an auxiliary bishop of the Washington Archdiocese for 12 years. There he served as vicar general and was a member of the archdiocesan college of consultors, priest's council, seminarian review board, administrative board. He was chairman of the college of deans, which oversees the 14 deaneries in the archdiocese.

Holley was born in Pensacola, Florida. He attended Theological College in Washington and completed his seminary studies at St. Vincent de Paul Seminary in Boynton Beach, Florida. He was ordained as a priest of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee in 1987.

In Florida, Holley served as a parochial vicar and later administrator of St. Mary Parish in Fort Walton Beach. He also served at St. Paul and Little Flower parishes in Pensacola. He served as spiritual director of the Serra Club of West Florida, which promotes vocations to the priesthood, and for many years was a member of the Joint Conference of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

His ordination as a bishop to serve the Washington Archdiocese took place in 2004 at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle. He chose "His Mercy Endures" as his episcopal motto, after having developed a great devotion to St. Faustina and her message of Divine Mercy during his years as a priest.

He has served on a number of committees for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, including the committees on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth; Pro-Life Activities; and National Collections. He has also served on committees for communications and cultural diversity and subcommittees on Africa, African-American Catholics, Hispanic affairs and migration.

There are 42 parishes and three missions in the Memphis Diocese, which covers 10,682 square miles. Catholics number over 65,000, or 4.5 percent of the area’s total population.