News



Bishop Robert J. Baker of Birmingham, Ala. and other U.S. bishops from the southeast concelebrate Mass in the crypt of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 5, 2019. Pope Francis accepted his resignation March 25, 2020, and has named Bishop Steven J. Raica of Gaylord, Mich., his successor. (CNS/Paul Haring)

by Catholic News Service

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Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Bishop Robert J. Baker, head of the Diocese of Birmingham, Alabama, and has named as his successor Bishop Steven J. Raica of Gaylord, Michigan.

Baker turned 75 on June 4, the age at which canon law requires bishops to turn in their resignation to the pope. He has headed the Birmingham Diocese since 2007. Raica, 67, was named bishop of Gaylord in 2014.

Birmingham's new shepherd will be welcomed with solemn vespers June 22, the night before his installation. Both the vespers and his June 23 installation Mass as the fifth bishop of Birmingham will take place at the Cathedral of St. Paul in Birmingham. Until then, Baker will serve as apostolic administrator of the diocese.

In a statement, Baker welcomed his successor and pledged his "support, prayer and collaboration" to the diocese's new bishop.

"While this is a loss for the Diocese of Gaylord, we rejoice with the people of Birmingham. Our prayers accompany Raica during this time of transition for him as well as for both dioceses," said Deacon Kevin Endres, chancellor of the Michigan diocese.

"We also want to take this moment to thank Bishop Raica for his dedicated and pastoral care of our diocese, our clergy and the lay faithful," he said in a statement.

Endres also noted Raica had urged that "given the uncertainties" in this country due to the coronavirus pandemic, his installation be delayed a month. "Normally the transfer of a bishop to another diocese takes place within two months," the deacon said.

So the installation was delayed until June 23, and "in this way, Bishop Raica will remain here to accompany the people of Gaylord through this current health situation," he said.

Michael P. Warsaw, chairman and CEO of the EWTN Global Catholic Network, also congratulated Raica on his new appointment. The Eternal Word Television Network's headquarters are in Irondale, Alabama, which is in the Birmingham Diocese. EWTN's operations include radio, TV, cable platforms, Catholic News Agency and the National Catholic Register newspaper.

Warsaw said this appointment "comes as very good news in a very difficult time."

"I also look forward to welcoming him to our EWTN campus in Irondale and sharing with him the great work of evangelization that EWTN is doing around the world," he added.

Before Francis appointed Raica as Gaylord's fifth bishop in 2014, he was chancellor for nine years of the Diocese of Lansing, Michigan, his home diocese. It was his second tenure as chancellor, having first served in the post from 1997 to 1999.

After his ordination as a priest for Lansing Oct. 14, 1978, then-Father Raica had several pastoral assignments, including as co-rector of St. Mary Cathedral in Lansing and chaplain of Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan.

He also served the diocesan tribunal as the promoter of justice, a tribunal judge and a prosynodal judge. He was on several boards, including that of Faith Catholic, and as vice postulator of the sainthood cause of Antonietta Meo, an Italian girl who, in 1937, died of cancer at age 6.

Pope Benedict XVI advanced Antonietta's cause by signing a decree Dec. 17, 2007, acknowledging that her life was one of heroic Christian virtue, giving her the title "Venerable."

In 1988, Raica began studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, earning a licentiate and a doctorate in canon law. After completing his studies in Rome, he returned to Michigan in 1991 and became pastor of St. Mary Parish in Charlotte, Michigan, until 1993.

From 1995 to 1997, Raica was pastor of St. Ann Parish in Bellevue, Michigan, which was followed by his two years as chancellor. In 1998 St. John Paul II named him a monsignor.

In 1999, he began a six-year term as superior of Casa Santa Maria in Rome, which is the graduate studies house of the Pontifical North American College. During his time in Rome, Raica also served as a spiritual director and adjunct faculty member at the NAC.

He returned to the Lansing Diocese in 2005, when he was again asked to serve as the diocesan chancellor. Then nine years later came his appointment as Gaylord's

shepherd.

Steven John Raica, was born Nov. 8, 1952, to Mary and Steve Raica in Munising, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The elder Raica died in 1987. The bishop has a younger brother, Joseph, who cares for their 93-year-old mother near the bishop's hometown.

At age 17, he enrolled in college at Michigan State University in Lansing, earning a bachelor's degree in mathematics. He went on to attend St. John's Provincial Seminary in Plymouth, Michigan, where he received a master of divinity degree. He also earned a master of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Detroit.

Raica is fluent in American Sign Language and has been involved in ministry to the deaf. He also has conversational ability in Italian and Polish and has reading capability in Spanish, French, Latin, and German.

The Diocese of Birmingham covers about 29,000 square miles in the state of Alabama, and has a Catholic population of nearly 105,000 out of a total population of over 3 million.

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