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Pope Francis greets Bishop Edward J. Weisenburger of Tucson, Ariz., during a meeting with U.

Pope Francis greets Bishop Edward Weisenburger of Tucson, Ariz., during a meeting with U.S. bishops at the Vatican Feb. 13, 2020. The bishops were making their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican to report on the status of their dioceses to the pope and Vatican officials. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis on Feb. 11 tapped Arizona's Bishop Edward Weisenburger as the new archbishop of Detroit, Michigan, appointing a staunch defender of migrants and an environmental advocate to lead one of the historic centers of American Catholicism.

Weisenburger will succeed retiring Archbishop Allen Vigneron, 76, who has led the archdiocese since 2009. Vigneron, a theological conservative, was elected as vice president of the U.S. bishops' conference from 2019-2022 and previously served as its secretary and chairman of the doctrine committee.

A native of Illinois and a priest of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, Weisenburger has served as the bishop of Tucson, Arizona, since 2017. Previously, he was the bishop of Salina, Kansas.

During his early years as a priest, Weisenburger was involved in prison ministry. Following the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, he also served as an on-site chaplain for rescue workers.

The 64-year-old canon lawyer, who is known for his reserved manner, made headlines in 2018 when he suggested the possibility of U.S. bishops imposing "canonical penalties" — including denying Communion — to Catholics who participated in the first Trump administration's policy of separating immigrant families along the U.S.-Mexico border.

This past December, he joined with other Arizona Christian leaders to express "grave concern" over Trump's mass deportation plans that could include arrests at places of worship.

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In recent years, Weisenburger has become a leading voice calling for the U.S. hierarchy to respond to the climate crisis.

Following Francis' 2023 apostolic exhortation, *Laudate Deum*, where the pope singled out U.S. contributions to climate change, Weisenburger was one of the first American prelates to thank the pontiff for calling out "irresponsible" U.S. lifestyles.

"I'm a very proud American, but I was so grateful the Holy Father had the nerve to go after us," Weisenburger commented at the time. "Gently, politely, with the greatest of kindness, but he said, 'America, you're causing a huge amount of this, now get with the program.' "

"I heard that and it resonates within me," Weisenburger continued. "And so I want to be a part of that program."

Later that year, he also joined a group of U.S. bishops who met at the White House to discuss the pope's environmental concerns with Biden administration officials.

In Detroit, Weisenburger will take over an archdiocese once turbocharged with energy from the Second Vatican Council that has experienced a precipitous drop in membership that mirrored the city's own population decline.

In 2023, the archdiocese's Catholic population dropped below 1 million for the first time in 70 years, shrinking by almost 40% in a 20-year period. Just last year, however, after decades of decline, the city experienced its first population growth and there have been early signs that the local church is eager to participate in Motor City's urban renewal efforts.

In 1969, the Detroit Archdiocese held a pioneering synod aimed at implementing Vatican II reforms, with a particular emphasis on lay leadership. Today, however, it is home to one of the Midwest's largest seminaries, Sacred Heart, which has been a bastion of anti-Francis resistance in the U.S. Catholic Church.

At present, more than 20 U.S. dioceses are led by bishops older than 75, the age when prelates are required by church law to submit their resignation to the pope. With Weisenburger's departure from Tucson, seven U.S. dioceses are now without a bishop and 11 dioceses will have bishops that reach retirement age during 2025.

These openings present the 88-year-old Francis with an ongoing opportunity to reshape the U.S. hierarchy and imprint his legacy on an American episcopacy that has been reluctant to embrace his pastoral priorities.

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