News



San Diego Auxiliary Bishop Michael Pham appears at a press conference on May 22, when he was announced as the new head of the San Diego Diocese. (Ken Stone)



by Ken Stone

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Michael Pham recalls tear gas in the air when he was a child in South Vietnam. "It was hard to breathe," he said. "It was very difficult."

Born in Da Nang, Pham at age 8 in 1975 fled the North Vietnamese Army with his family, jumping on a rice barge and spending several days at sea with no food or water. As the seasick Pham was leaving the boat, he saw many people on its floor.

"I thought they were sleeping," he told the Southern Cross, "but I came to realize that they were dead."

A half-century later, Pham, a longtime San Diego priest who had been made an auxiliary bishop for the diocese in 2023, was announced as Pope Leo XIV's first appointment of a bishop in the United States. Pham's appointment also makes him the first Vietnamese American to lead a U.S. diocese.



San Diego Auxiliary Bishops Felipe Pulido (left) and Michael Pham (right) with then-Cardinal Robert Prevost, the future Pope Leo XIV, at the Vatican in September 2024 (Courtesy of Felipe Pulido)

"It was such a thrill for me when Apostolic Nuncio Christophe Pierre gave me a call," Pham, 58, told a press conference at the San Diego diocesan center on May 22.

He's held the secret since May 14, when the cardinal called and surprised him with the question: "Are you by yourself?"

Pham says he got nervous — but soon learned he was being appointed to lead the San Diego Diocese, succeeding Cardinal Robert McElroy, who became the eighth archbishop of Washington, D.C.

"This was great news — that I get to stay home in my own diocese," Pham said. He thanked God and expressed gratitude to McElroy for "laying the groundwork" in the diocese and for "following the vision of Pope Francis," including McElroy's focus on synodality.

Asked if McElroy had influenced Leo to pick him, Pham said: "I think, with his voice, I'm sure he had some sort of thumb on that [scale]."

Pham called it "wonderful news" that he would represent his heritage leading the diocese. (He will be formally installed July 17.) "Hopefully as a church we come to recognize multicultural [values] so we can all come together ... that we can all celebrate our faith, united in Christ."

He hoped his election would be a sign of "beacons of light" and hope for the country and society.

Pham takes over the San Diego Diocese, which spans 8,852 square miles and has a population of about 3.5 million, of which about 1.4 million are Catholic, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said.

According to the Pew Research Center, 30% of Vietnamese Americans identify as Catholic. A recent survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate found 4% of priests ordained in 2022 in the U.S. were born in Vietnam.



San Diego Auxiliary Bishop Michael Pham celebrates a Mass for the Missionary Childhood Association in San Diego in an undated photo. (Courtesy of San Diego Diocese)

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Pham's own hopes began at age 13 after having moved to a small town called Lam Son, where his large family survived by farming and fishing.

"In 1980, with his older sister and a younger brother, he fled to Malaysia aboard a small boat packed with 119 passengers," said the Southern Cross, the diocesan newspaper.

"At sea for four nights and three days, he said the boat was pursued by authorities of the Communist government, pummeled by massive waves that he likened to something out of the film 'The Perfect Storm,' and even boarded by pirates."

A collision with the pirate ship damaged the refugees' boat, splitting the bow almost in half, the diocesan paper said.

Pham lived in a Malaysian refugee camp with his older sister and younger brother for about seven months before an American family sponsored them and they relocated to Blue Earth, Minnesota, in 1981, says the Southern Cross.



Michael Pham (third from right) and his family in April 1983 when the Pham family was reunited in Mankato, Minnesota, for the first time in two-and-a-half years (Courtesy of San Diego Diocese)

A few months later, another sister joined them. By 1983, his remaining four siblings and his parents arrived. In 1985, the family moved to San Diego, lured by the warmer weather they encountered during a visit to relatives there.

On Thursday, Pham recalled seeing San Diego as "heaven on Earth. I came out here for a visit. We said: 'This is the place.' "

He graduated from San Diego High School and San Diego State University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering. He began working on a master's, but didn't finish before entering St. Francis Seminary at the University of San Diego.

He finished his training at St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park with a bachelor's in systematic theology and a Master of Divinity. In 1999, Pham was ordained a priest of the San Diego Diocese. In 2009, he completed a Master of Science in psychology. And in 2020, he earned a Licentiate in Sacred Theology.



Then-Fr. Michael Pham (center) poses for a photo with his family at his ordination June 25, 1999. (Courtesy of San Diego Diocese)

Later in San Diego, Pham was associate pastor of St. Mary Star of the Sea Parish and pastor of Holy Family, St. Therese and Good Shepherd parishes.

He has served on the diocese's College of Consultors, Diocesan Finance Council, Presbyteral Council, Personnel Board of Priests, Seminary Board, Priests Retirement

Pension, Diaconate Council and Executive Board. He was vicar for ethnic and intercultural communities and vicar general.

After serving as one of three auxiliary bishops in San Diego — and leading multicultural Pentecost Masses — Pham recently was elected diocesan administrator.

His mentor McElroy was an outspoken disciple of Francis' focus on saving the planet from the climate crisis among other issues, including immigrant rights, positions that some in the church labeled "liberal" or "progressive." McElroy had called for less stress on abortion as the preeminent matter.



San Diego Auxiliary Bishop Michael Pham, left, with Cardinal Robert McElroy in an undated photo (Courtesy of San Diego Diocese)

The National Catholic Reporter asked Pham if he were concerned about how he might be criticized by the church's right wing.

"I hope that people can remember me or see me as a person who stays focused on Christ and we move forward," he said. "Life is very important, and we need to ... stay focused on how we take care of other people of God in our life and society today."

On abortion, Pham said: "Life is important from the beginning to the end. We need to look at the whole spectrum. It's not that it's not important, but to consider that all life we need to take into consideration."

He said that as McElroy "processed his thought" on those issues, it "was very, very good."