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Bishop Ronald Hicks. (Video screen grab)



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Pope Leo XIV has picked Bishop Ronald Hicks of Joliet, Illinois, to be the archbishop of New York, one of the most important archdioceses in the United States. The two men share a Chicago background, priestly service in Latin America and a pastoral orientation.

Since Hicks is only 58 years of age, with this appointment, the pope has picked an archbishop who could lead the archdiocese until at least 2042, when Hicks will turn 75 and must submit his resignation. He could serve longer since it is up to the pope whether his resignation is accepted.

As archbishop of New York, Hicks will have a significant impact on the Catholic Church and American life. Many people, including Catholics, look on the archbishop of New York as the leader of the U.S. Catholic Church. Historically, the words and actions of the archbishop of New York are followed by the media more closely than those of the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the official leader of the Catholic bishops. If Leo continues the practice of making the archbishop of New York a cardinal, Hicks could be even more influential.

The appointment of Hicks is clearly a personal choice by the pope. As a cardinal, Robert Prevost (aka Pope Leo) was prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, the office that presents possible candidates to the pope for episcopal vacancies. As prefect, he would have supervised the preparation of the dossier on New York and the possible candidates.

As a Chicagoan, Leo would also have known Hicks, who started his priesthood and episcopal career in Chicago. Hicks was born in Harvey, Illinois, on Aug. 4, 1967. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy in 1989 from the college seminary of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Hicks was ordained a priest in 1994 after receiving a Master of Divinity from University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois, where he also earned a Doctor of Ministry in 2003. While completing his doctoral studies, he was an associate pastor until 1999, when he became dean of formation at the college seminary in Chicago. That he was picked to do doctoral studies and work in seminary formation shows that very early in his career he was seen as someone with leadership potential.

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After studies, he, like Leo, volunteered to work in Latin America, with Leo going to Peru and Hicks to El Salvador, where he served for five years as regional director of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos in Central America, a home dedicated to caring for orphaned and abandoned children.

After returning to Chicago, he served as the dean of formation for four years at Mundelein Seminary until Chicago Archbishop Blase Cupich made him vicar general in 2015. Hicks became an auxiliary bishop in 2018.

In 2020, he was appointed bishop of Joliet, Illinois. He serves on the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and as the USCCB liaison to the Association for the Ongoing Formation of Priests and the National Association of Diaconate Directors. He has also been appointed to the USCCB’s Charter Review Workgroup. He serves on the board of the Catholic Extension Society and the Mundelein Seminary Advisory Board.

The choice of a protégé of Cupich as the archbishop of New York shows that Cupich will continue to be influential in Leo’s papacy, just as he was in the papacy of Pope Francis. Francis had appointed Cupich to the Dicastery for Bishops, where he and Prevost would have worked closely together, especially on appointments in the United States.

What kind of archbishop will Hicks be in New York? I believe he will be very much like Leo. He has a pastoral orientation and a reputation as a good preacher. He appears to be well liked by the priests and people of his diocese.

His positions on public policy are in line with those of the USCCB. He supported the bishops' recent statement on immigration and opposed assisted suicide legislation in Illinois.

Given his earlier work in priestly formation, he will undoubtedly give attention to priestly formation and the archdiocesan seminary.

He also appears to be capable of making tough decisions. After a year of consultation and study, he merged and closed parishes in Joliet, something that may also be necessary in New York.

Only time will tell how Hicks does in New York, but all indications are that Leo has made an excellent choice that will benefit the church in New York and the nation.