News

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Bishop John Bonnici knocks on the door of the cathedral ahead of his installation Mass as the 10th bishop of Rochester, N.Y., at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester March 19, 2026. He was previously an auxiliary bishop in New York. (OSV News/Jeff Witherow, Catholic Courier)

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Making three ceremonial knocks on the center doors of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Bishop John Bonnici signaled his desired entrance into the building — and, more significantly, his new designation as leader of the Rochester Diocese.

Twenty minutes later, amid the applause of an overflow congregation, Bonnici officially assumed that role when he was seated in the cathedra, or bishop's chair.

The historic occasion occurred in the early afternoon of March 19 as Bonnici, 61, began his tenure as the 10th bishop of Rochester during a festive, nearly two-hour installation Mass.

"My heart is filled with love and gratitude," Bonnici, the liturgy's principal celebrant, said during his homily. "Each and every one of you is a precious gift."

Shortly after the Mass began, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, outgoing apostolic nuncio to the United States, read aloud Pope Leo XIV's Jan, 7 apostolic letter appointing Bonnici as Rochester's bishop and releasing him from his duties as auxiliary bishop of the New York Archdiocese, a position he had held since 2022; and as pastor since 2021 of the Catholic Community of Larchmont in Westchester County.

Bonnici was then escorted to the cathedra by Pierre and New York Archbishop Ronald Hicks. The two prelates were among many bishops, priests, deacons, religious, dignitaries, family and friends in attendance from the Rochester Diocese, the New York Archdiocese and beyond.

Among the other notable people in attendance were Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the now-retired archbishop of New York who was Bonnici's longtime superior in the New York Archdiocese; and Bishop Salvatore Matano, whose 12-year tenure as bishop of Rochester has concluded as he assumes emeritus status.

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Matano, 79, received a standing ovation during the Mass as well as praise from Bonnici: "You are definitely a hard act to follow," he told the bishop, who plans to assist in Auburn-area parishes going forward.

Early in his homily, Bonnici paid tribute to each of the previous nine bishops who have served the 12-county diocese, from Bishop Bernard McQuaid (1868-1909), Rochester's first bishop, to Matano (2014-26). Among the nine is Venerable Fulton Sheen (1966-69), a sainthood candidate who was declared venerable in 2012 and whose cause will proceed to beatification, the Vatican announced Feb. 9.

The bulk of the bishop's homily focused on his longtime adherence to what he calls "the four Ls": listen, learn, love, live.

"These four spiritual guideposts have remained with me throughout my life. They are simple, yet profound," Bonnici said. He then described how St. Joseph — whose feast day coincided with his installation — lived out those virtues.

He emphasized to the congregation that in a "very noisy world" filled with such challenges as polarization and misinformation, it's more vital than ever for Catholics to follow the four Ls in living out their faith.

"Despite all these obstacles, Christ-centered living is truly possible," he said.

Judging from the warm reception Bonnici received, it appears Catholics in the Diocese of Rochester are already embracing their new shepherd, according to Thomas DiNapoli, New York state's comptroller.

A practicing Catholic, DiNapoli has been a fan of Bonnici for many years and jumped at the chance to travel from Albany, the state capital, to Rochester and support him.

"I wanted to be here to be a part of his downstate admirers who were cheering him on," DiNapoli explained. "Obviously, he's a man of deep spiritual faith and conviction. He's going to be a very good shepherd. He has a wonderful way with people."

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The installation Mass inspired a flurry of emotions in many of those present at the cathedral, noted Mary-Jo Karpenko and John Robb of Charlotte's Holy Cross Parish.

On the one hand, Karpenko was sad to witness the end of Matano's time as head of the diocese. At the same time, she was excited to welcome Bonnici and to be a part of a historic moment.

"It was just very emotional. I found myself in tears a couple times. It was just joyful, really moving," Karpenko told the Catholic Courier, the news outlet of the Rochester Diocese.

"It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life," said Linda Tamburello of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Spencerport. "I have never been to the installation of a bishop, and probably won't again."

Jeff and Kim Kelly had an extra reason to enjoy the installation Mass. Their son, Fr. Aaron Kelly, has been appointed priest secretary to Bonnici and played a key role in the liturgy. It was an honor to witness their son, who was ordained in 2022, living out his vocation, they said.

"He's always known he wanted to be a priest. We've just watched him as he's said yes to whatever path God has chosen. We're just sitting back and watching that path continue," Kim Kelly said.