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New Savannah bishop introduced to diocese

by Michael J. Johnson by Catholic News Service

SAVANNAH, Ga. -- The Conventual Franciscan pastor who will become Savannah's bishop Oct. 18 observed at his introduction July 19 that it will take a helicopter to reach the far-flung ends of the diocese.

Bishop-designate Gregory John Hartmayer was introduced that morning by retiring Bishop J. Kevin Boland at a news conference in Lafayette Square, opposite the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist.

In the shady square, Bishop Boland placed a magenta bishop's zucchetto atop his successor's head, symbolically transferring the diocese to Bishop-designate Hartmayer on the 161st anniversary of its creation.

He joked about "naively" wondering that morning as his retirement became official, whether angels would come down and transfer responsibility.

"I am now like an automobile running out of fuel and I want to get the very last value out of the moment," he said of his last official act as bishop.

Pope Benedict XVI accepted his resignation July 19, the same day he named his successor. Bishop Boland is 76; he turned in his resignation at age 75 as required by canon law.

Bishop-designate Hartmayer, 59, expressed gratitude to the pope for his confidence in selecting him for the position. In his remarks, he said that since he got word of the impending announcement July 5, "my head and my world have been spinning in opposite directions."

His episcopal ordination is scheduled for Oct. 18 in the Cathedral of John the Baptist.

Currently serving in the Archdiocese of Atlanta, Bishop-designate Hartmayer is the pastor of St. John

Vianney Parish in Lithia Springs. Immediately prior to that, he was the pastor of St. Philip Benizi Parish in Jonesboro, Ga., for 15 years.

A native of Buffalo, N.Y., he was ordained for the Conventual Franciscans in 1979 and has worked as a guidance counselor, teacher and principal at schools in Baltimore, various cities in New York and in Florida.

He has held posts within his Province of St Anthony of Padua, and as a delegate to provincial chapters.

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Bishop Boland noted that he is just the second Conventual Franciscan to become a bishop in the United States in the past 100 years -- and that the previous one became a cardinal.

Bishop-designate Hartmayer holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy from St. Hyacinth College and Seminary in Massachusetts and three master's degrees: in divinity from St. Anthony-on-Hudson in Rensselaer, N.Y., in pastoral counseling from Emmanuel College in Boston, and in education from Boston College.

Bishop Boland is a native of County Cork, Ireland, who studied for the priesthood in Dublin and came to the United States to be ordained for the Savannah Diocese in 1959. After various parish positions and administrative jobs in the diocese, he was named bishop of Savannah in 1995.

On the national level, Bishop Boland has most recently served as member of the U.S. bishops' Subcommittee on Pastoral Care of Migrants, Refugees and Travelers.

Bishop-designate Hartmayer said he looks forward to meeting and working with the priests, religious and laity "of the parishes in the 90 counties of south Georgia. I think I am going to need a helicopter instead of a car to get to all those counties."

"My life is going to be very, very different," he told The Georgia Bulletin, Atlanta's archdiocesan newspaper. He said his 16 years in the Atlanta area have been a wonderful period of growth.

"As a priest, I grew up. I learned so much from the people. Their generosity and their faith made me a different person," he said in a telephone interview from Savannah on the day of his appointment. "It is hard for me to put into words."

As head of the Savannah Diocese, Bishop-designate Hartmayer will be the spiritual leader of about 84,500 Catholics out of a general population of nearly 3 million. About 104 priests, 56 permanent deacons and 114 religious sisters and brothers serve in the diocese.

Atlanta Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory applauded the appointment, calling Bishop-designate Hartmayer an "outstanding priest and pastor."

"He will bring with him the great spiritual heritage of St. Francis of Assisi and the pastoral experience to be a zealous and effective shepherd for the church in south Georgia," the archbishop said. "He will build upon the loving and well-respected ministry of Bishop J. Kevin Boland who has been a vast blessing to the people of Savannah for more than 50 years."

Bishop-designate Hartmayer in the phone interview said that after he received word of his appointment in

early July, he told his mother about the news. She protested when he swore her to secrecy to not speak about it, even to his siblings. He has two brothers and a sister.

"Well, you shouldn't have told me," he recalled his mother saying. "She was so excited for me, as a mother would be."

Mary Mauldin, director of faith formation who has worked at St. Philip Benizi Church for 26 years, remembers when Bishop-designate Hartmayer first arrived in Jonesboro in 1995.

"I think the people of Savannah will love him just as much as we do," she said, adding that the diocese is "going from one good bishop to the next."

Bishop-designate Hartmayer said he will bring his spirituality as a Franciscan to his new appointment. It is one of "simple living, joy and humility. It's become a part of me," he said.

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Contributing to this story were Andrew Nelson and Stephen O'Kane in the Atlanta Archdiocese.

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