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New bishop in Oregon a native of diocese

by Dan Morris-Young

Described as a good listener and firm administrator by those who have worked with him at the parish level, Fr. Liam S. Cary will carry with him a track record of pro-life activism as well as Hispanic community outreach when he becomes the seventh bishop of the Diocese of Baker in Oregon.

Cary's appointment by Pope Benedict XVI was announced Thursday in Washington, D.C., by Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganó, apostolic nuncio to the United States.

The 64-year-old priest succeeds Bishop Robert Vasa, who was named coadjutor bishop of Santa Rosa, Calif., in January 2011 and took over leadership of that diocese last June from now-retired Bishop Daniel Walsh.

While born in Portland, Ore., and ordained for the Portland Archdiocese in 1992 by then-Archbishop William Leveda, the bishop-designate grew up in the Baker Diocese in the central Oregon town of Prineville.

During the 13-month interim since Vasa's departure, Bishop William Skylstad, the retired bishop of Spokane and former U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops president, served as apostolic administrator of the Baker Diocese, which is headquartered in Bend.

By most accounts, Cary will head a diocese challenged by polarity, finances, lack of vocations and a small Catholic population spread over an area about one and a half times the size of Tennessee.

The diocese's general population increased significantly in the last decade. However, the number of Catholics dropped from 39,853 in 2000 when Vasa became bishop to 32,799 in 2010, according to the Official Catholic Directory. According to the 2011 directory, Catholics now account for 34,375 people within a total population of 526,760.

Many attributed the decline in church affiliation to Vasa's hardline policies, rigid theological interpretations and what has been described as a markedly top-down leadership style.

Cary has been pastor of St. Mary Parish in Eugene since last spring, moving there from Sacred Heart Parish in Medford, where he served for a dozen years.

His assignments have also included directing the Portland Archdiocese's vocations and faith formation programs (1994-98).

Cary attended high school at Oregon's Mount Angel Seminary in the 1960s and went on to St. Patrick Seminary in Menlo Park, Calif., in 1969, according to a diocesan press release.

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He then "took a long hiatus from priestly formation," reported the archdiocese's newspaper, the *Catholic Sentinel*.

"His work experience between 1970 and 1988 included three years in Chicago as a VISTA volunteer in a legal assistance office," the *Sentinel* reports. "He later spent a summer in Mexico studying Spanish and then worked six months at a clinic sponsored by the United Farm Workers in Salinas, Calif.

"In the early 1980s he began working with St. Vincent de Paul in Eugene, Ore. When he moved back to Eugene, he was involved at St. Mary Parish, where his desire to become a priest was rekindled when the pastor asked him about it."

Cary resumed studies for ordination in 1987 and attended North American College in Rome from 1988-92, earning a Licentiate in Sacred Theology in 1992 from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

According to the *Sentinel*, as a pastor, Cary "came to be seen as a man of principle but also compassion" and "supported the opening of a home for needy young mothers as a way to complement pro-life advocacy" during his pastorate in Medford.

Sacred Heart Parish's pastoral associate Ann Brophy and parish director of administration Marie Chandler both described Cary as a compassionate and hard-working "shepherd."

"The number of Hispanic parishioners increased significantly during Father Cary's tenure, which adds to the complexity of a large parish," said Chandler, who worked with Cary for the last six years. She lauded the priest's "bilingual capabilities" and efforts "to blend two languages and cultural communities."

Shirley Gray, principal of Sacred Heart School, echoed Chandler and Brophy in praise of Cary's willingness to consult and listen.

"I found him to be personable and supportive," Gray said. "Father Liam was almost always in attendance" at school advisory council meetings, where he took a keen interest in issues facing the school, from enrollment challenges to aging facilities, she said.

The tentative date for Cary's installation is May 18, diocesan officials told *NCR*.

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