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Portland Archbishop Vlazy retires; Michigan bishop named his successor

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Pope Benedict XVI has accepted the resignation of Archbishop John Vlazny of Portland, Ore., and named as his successor Bishop Alexander Sample of Marquette, Mich.

Vlazny, who has headed the Oregon archdiocese since 1997, is 75, the age at which bishops are required by canon law to submit their resignation to the pope. Sample, 52, has been Marquette's bishop for eight years.

The changes were announced Tuesday in Washington by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, papal nuncio to the U.S.

The Mass of installation for Sample is scheduled for April 2.

"It is my prayer and hope that together we can gaze on the face of Jesus Christ and show forth his light to the generations of the new millennium," the new archbishop said at a news conference in Portland.

He said he had been to Oregon once before -- a boyhood salmon fishing trip to the mouth of the Columbia River. He caught nothing then.

"Now I am brought here as a fisher of men," he said. "Hopefully, I'll be more successful at that."

As in Michigan, bringing Christ to others is the primary mission in western Oregon. Michigan's Upper Peninsula is about 24 percent Catholic, while in western Oregon, the number is 12 percent. The new archbishop is not fazed by the region's famed religious nonaffiliation.

"I see it as rich, fertile ground for the planting of the new evangelization," he said, explaining his belief that Christ is what people of all kinds long for, even if they don't yet realize it.

Social media must play a significant role in showing people Christ, he said.

"We have to be there. We have to be where the people are," he said. "We can't be afraid of using those means."

A native of Kalispell, Mont., Sample was born Nov. 7, 1960. He was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Marquette in 1990. He was named chancellor of the diocese in 1996. In 2005, he was named bishop of Marquette.

He holds Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees in metallurgical engineering from Michigan Technological University in Houghton and a licentiate in canon law from Rome's Pontifical University of St. Thomas, known as the Angelicum.

He is vice postulator for the sainthood cause for the Marquette Diocese's first bishop, Bishop Frederic Baraga, a 19th-century missionary who ministered to miners and Native Americans on Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

On the national level, Sample is a member of the U.S. bishops' subcommittees on Native American Catholics and on the Catechism.

Vlazny, born Feb. 22, 1937, in Chicago, was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1961. He was named an auxiliary bishop of Chicago in 1983, and bishop of Winona, Minn., 1987 and 10 years later was appointed to Portland.

He has been chairman of a number of U.S. bishops' committees, including the vocations, evangelization and the national collections. He has been a member of many others, including the Administrative Committee and the Committee on Migration and Refugee Services.

He holds a licentiate in sacred theology from the Gregorian University, Rome; a Master of Arts degree in the classics from the University of Michigan and a Master of Education degree in educational administration from Loyola University, Chicago.

The Portland Archdiocese was founded July 24, 1846, as the Archdiocese of Oregon City. It is the second oldest archdiocese in the United States after Baltimore. The name was changed to the Archdiocese of Portland in Oregon on Sept. 26, 1928, by papal decree.

The territory of the archdiocese covers western Oregon, stretching east and west from the Cascade Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and north and south to Washington state and California. It has 124 parishes and a Catholic population of more than 415,000 out of a total population of about 3.3 million people.

Ed Langlois, staff writer for the Catholic Sentinel, *newspaper for the Portland archdiocese, contributed to this story from Portland.*

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