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Bishop of St. Cloud, Minn., retires; Alaska bishop named successor

by Catholic News Service

Washington — Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Bishop John Kinney of St. Cloud, Minn., and named Bishop Donald Kettler of Fairbanks, Alaska, to succeed him.

Kinney, who has headed the St. Cloud diocese since 1995, is 76. Canon law requires bishops to turn in their resignation at age 75. Kettler, 69, has been the bishop of Fairbanks since 2002.

The changes were announced Friday in Washington by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, apostolic nuncio to the United States.

During a Friday news conference in St. Cloud, Kettler, whose installation Mass is scheduled for Nov. 7, said he was pleased to be appointed to the diocese and believed he would be up to the task, because he already sensed "so much support."

The bishop, who was born in Minneapolis and graduated from St. John's University and St. John's School of Theology in Collegeville, Minn., said he had a sense of "coming home" with this appointment.

At the news conference, a statement from Kinney was read by Fr. Robert Rolfes, diocesan vicar general. The bishop was hospitalized for what diocesan officials described as "existing medical condition" but they reported he was "doing well."

Kinney in the statement wrote that he had been "anxiously awaiting" news of his successor but had also "been on edge about this day" because of his love for the St. Cloud diocese.

He said described Kettler as a "true pastor and a bishop who loves and serves the poor."

Kettler, ordained in 1970 as a priest in his home diocese of Sioux Falls, S.D., served there for 31 years before he was appointed bishop of Fairbanks in 2002.

As bishop of Fairbanks, he oversaw a difficult period in the diocese's history when almost 300 people accused priests, religious, employees and volunteers of sexually abusing them in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Kettler filed for Chapter 11 reorganization in federal bankruptcy court in 2008. The diocese emerged from bankruptcy almost two years later, in January 2010.

The bishop noted that during his years in Fairbanks he enjoyed meeting people of many different cultures but he also noted that the 22 hours of darkness during the winter "was a little bit difficult."

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In a letter Friday to diocesan Catholics in Fairbanks, he said he was "sad to say farewell."

"As you know, the missionary life in the north is full of challenges. Meeting them together as God's people has forged unbreakable bonds of love and friendship between us."

He described Kinney as a longtime friend and confrere and also noted that with the new appointment he would be closer to his family, including his mother, who turned 100 this year.

Kinney, a native of Iowa, was ordained to the priesthood on Feb. 2, 1963. After serving as assistant pastor of a Minneapolis parish from 1963 to 1966 and as vice chancellor of the archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis from 1966 to 1968, he studied for a doctorate in canon law at the Lateran University in Rome.

Upon completing his studies in 1971, he resumed the post of vice chancellor and was named chancellor in 1973. He was serving in that post and as pastor of St. Leonard of Port Maurice Parish in Minneapolis when he was named an auxiliary of St. Paul-Minneapolis in November 1976.

He was appointed bishop of Bismarck on June 30, 1982. In 1995, he was named to head the St. Cloud diocese.

Over the years, he has taken an active role in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, coming to prominence as the chairman of what is now called the bishops' Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People. He has chaired the bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate and the Ad Hoc Committee on Bishops' Life and Ministry and served as a member of the bishops' Task Force on Food and Farm Policy; what is now the Subcommittee on Native American Affairs; and the board of directors of Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency.

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