

Alaska bishop named to head Montana diocese

WASHINGTON – Pope Benedict XVI has named Bishop Michael W. Warfel of Juneau, Alaska, as the bishop of Great Falls-Billings, Mont.

The appointment was announced in Washington Nov. 20 by Archbishop Pietro Sambi, apostolic nuncio to the United States.

Bishop Warfel has headed the Juneau Diocese since he was ordained its bishop in December 1996.

The Great Falls-Billings Diocese has been vacant since June 2006, when Bishop Anthony M. Milone retired at age 73. Canon law requires that all bishops submit their resignation to the pope when they turn 75.

Bishop Milone announced he was retiring early because of health reasons. He said his struggle with his health had hampered his ability to travel around the diocese, go to meetings or simply be “with the people of the diocese.”

The diocese covers more than 94,000 square miles and serves about 51,000 Catholics in 66 parishes and 44 missions in the eastern two-thirds of the state.

In a statement released by the Great Falls-Billings Diocese, Bishop Milone said: “I am so pleased and grateful to our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, for this appointment. I know that the Catholics of the diocese will receive Bishop Warfel with openness and great hospitality.”

“It has been a time of great anticipation for the last 16 months, and I could not be more pleased with this new appointment,” said Father Jay H. Peterson, who has been diocesan administrator since Bishop Milone’s retirement.

“Bishop Warfel will bring a unique set of gifts and experiences that prepare him well for ministry in eastern Montana,” he said in a statement.

Bishop Warfel, 59, will be installed Jan. 16 at Holy Spirit Church in Great Falls.

On the national level, Bishop Warfel is in the second year of a three-year term as chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Home Missions. He is a former chairman of the bishops' Committee on Evangelization.

Michael W. Warfel was born Sept. 16, 1948, in Elkhart, Ind., in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend.

Despite the Catholic and Baptist backgrounds of his mother and father, there was little religious practice in the Warfel home. As a youngster Michael decided he would attend church. He took catechism classes at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, where he was baptized at age 12.

He attended elementary and secondary schools in Elkhart and studied music for a year at Indiana University. He served an 18-month tour in Vietnam, followed by 13 months in Korea.

After completing military service, in 1972 he entered St. Gregory's College Seminary in Cincinnati, where he received a bachelor's degree in philosophy. He completed graduate theological studies at Mount St. Mary's Seminary of the West in Cincinnati in 1980.

As a seminarian, Bishop Warfel visited his sister in Alaska during the summers. After deciding that he wanted to live and minister in Alaska, he obtained permission to change from studying to be a priest of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend to study for the Archdiocese of Anchorage.

He was ordained an Anchorage archdiocesan priest April 26, 1980. His assignments included parochial vicar of St. Benedict, Anchorage, 1980-85; pastor of Sacred Heart, Wasilla, 1985-89; and pastor of St. Mary, Kodiak, 1990-95. He became pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Anchorage, in 1995.

At Kodiak, then-Father Warfel encountered Spanish-speaking parishioners. He learned Spanish, becoming fluent through studies in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Mexico. He inaugurated a Sunday Mass in Spanish and began outreach programs to the Spanish-speaking in Kodiak.

In 1990, he earned a master's degree in theology with a specialization in Scripture

from St. Michael's College in Winooski, Vt.

In the years he has been bishop of Juneau, he has periodically returned to Elkhart to visit family members and to help with confirmations throughout the Fort Wayne-South Bend Diocese.