

Bishop Brennan named to lead Wheeling-Charleston diocese

Pope Francis named Bishop Mark E. Brennan as bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, which encompasses the state of West Virginia. The July 23 announcement was publicized in Washington, D.C., by Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States.

Bishop Brennan, 72, had been a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington until his appointment in December 2016 as an auxiliary bishop of Baltimore. He was ordained a bishop Jan. 19, 2017, at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore.

He will become the ninth bishop of the diocese, which had been the Diocese of Wheeling from its founding in 1850 until 1962, when it became the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori, who has been apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston since September 2018, praised the appointment.

"I offer my deepest gratitude to our Holy Father, Pope Francis, on the naming of Bishop Mark Brennan as the new bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston," Archbishop Lori said. "The Archdiocese of Baltimore has been blessed these past two years by his service as auxiliary bishop. During that time, I have witnessed his pastoral love for the people of God, who have accepted and embraced him for his kindness, humility and joyful witness to the faith.

"These gifts and so many others will bring healing and hope to the church in West Virginia, which deserves a shepherd who bears so many of the qualities possessed by Bishop Brennan. While we are saddened to lose him here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, we extend our gratitude and prayers to him in his new role," the archbishop said.

Bishop Brennan said, "I am deeply honored to be appointed the new bishop of the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese and am grateful to the Holy Father, Pope Francis, for his confidence in me to now lead the Catholic faithful here in West Virginia in a

spirit of true Christian service.”

He noted that his parents, now deceased, retired to the state, so “I am no stranger and, in fact, a great admirer of the beauty of its landscape and people.

“Even as we work toward bringing about true healing and renewal here in this local Church – work begun so well by Archbishop William Lori – I am full of hope and confidence for what we can accomplish together,” he said.

Bishop Brennan said he was “very, very surprised” upon hearing the news from Archbishop Pierre that he had been selected for the post.

He said, “My reaction was: I grew up thinking lightning never struck twice in the same place.” But for him it did. “Once was an old dog like me being made a bishop. But it happened again. Bishop of a diocese? Who can believe it?”

He said he asked the nuncio if he was sure that he was the choice, and the archbishop confirmed it.

Bishop Brennan talked with Archbishop Lori at length after receiving the news and the archbishop noted that priests and bishops have to put personal preferences behind the needs of the church, and the diocese needs someone who can go there soon. “It’s been dragging on a long time. ... The archbishop is willing that I go.

“I’ve accepted it,” Bishop Brennan said. “I’m going and I’ll try to go with a good spirit and do the best I can.”

Bishop Brennan will face important issues as bishop of Wheeling-Charleston. He acknowledged that West Virginia is an epicenter of the nation’s fight against opioid addiction. It is also home to some of the poorest people in the country.

The bishop said he understands that Catholic Charities in West Virginia is doing something to address the opioid crisis, “but I think our Baltimore Catholic Charities probably is doing more. I’d like to see if Baltimore could give us some kind of assistance in developing a robust plan to do whatever the church can do to assist people afflicted with this terrible problem,” he told the Catholic Review.

Bishop Brennan also follows Bishop Michael J. Bransfield, who resigned in September 2018 amid allegations of sexual harassment and financial malfeasance.

Archbishop Lori announced in March that a preliminary investigation into the allegations against Bishop Bransfield had been sent to the Vatican.

As a result of that investigation, the Apostolic Nunciature to the United States sent a communique to the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston that was posted July 19 on the diocese's website noting that based on the findings of the investigation into Bishop Bransfield, Pope Francis has decided disciplinary actions for the bishop.

Bishop Bransfield will be prohibited from living in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and prohibited from presiding or participating anywhere in any public celebration of the liturgy.

The communique also said Bishop Bransfield would be obligated "to make personal amends for some of the harm he caused; the nature and extent of the amends to be decided in consultation with the future bishop of the Wheeling-Charleston."

Bishop Brennan understands that an important part of his ministry will be healing.

"I hope I can be a bishop who listens to people and tries to help them make sense of their experience and honors what they've gone through, and who works with them to try to get to a better place," he said.

"Can I personally bring healing? I don't know - and I believe God's the one who brings healing - but can I be an instrument in doing that? I hope and pray I can."

A priest in Washington

Bishop Brennan was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington May 15, 1976. He served in three parishes as parochial vicar (associate pastor), 1976-1988.

During that time, he spent 14 months in 1985 and 1986 studying Spanish language and culture, principally in the Dominican Republic and Colombia.

Bishop Brennan served as director of priestly vocations for the Archdiocese of Washington from 1988 to 1998.

He served as pastor at St. Thomas Apostle, Washington, 1998-2003, before taking on his assignment as pastor of St. Martin of Tours in Gaithersburg in June 2003.

In December 2016, Bishop Brennan said he is not a complicated person – what people see is what they get. “Through my parents I learned how to work hard. Thank God I’ve had the health and stamina so far to do it,” he said.

In remarks at his ordination as a bishop, he acknowledged his parents, who were both deceased, for having taken him and his brother, Paul, to Mass and confession.

“They grounded us in the Catholic faith in a very simple and unpretentious way,” he said.

Bishop Brennan is known for his pastoral sensitivity, with a special emphasis on respect for life. He prays daily for a list of expectant parents and greets news of the babies’ delivery with joy.

Immigrant communities

He also spends a lot of his time addressing the needs of immigrant communities. St. Martin Parish in Gaithersburg, where he served as pastor for 13 years, was involved in welcoming people of many cultures and reaching out directly to the poor and marginalized.

At the press conference announcing his appointment to Baltimore in December 2016, he said he has “a special regard and love for our immigrants from Latin America in particular, but from other parts of the world as well.”

The bishop was immersed in Spanish language and culture during his time in the Dominican Republic. He decided to become more fluent in French, which he had learned in high school, when he began hearing confessions from immigrants from French-speaking African countries who were members of St. Martin Parish.

Six weeks after his ordination as a bishop, Bishop Brennan led one of the workshops at the 38th annual Archdiocesan Social Ministry Conference. “My long-term goal,” he said, “is that the Hispanic Catholics here and around the country become a leaven in the dough of our culture. ... Hispanic immigrants bring things to the table

worth having (such as) a focus on family life. They enrich our lives.”

In July 2018, two days after the 50th anniversary of the release of “*Humanae Vitae*,” Pope Paul VI’s encyclical on married love and procreation, young adults gathered in Fells Point to discuss its relevance with Bishop Brennan.

He said Pope Paul VI “exercised a prophetic office” in predicting some effects of the widespread use of contraceptives, such as increased adultery within marriage; the devaluing and objectification of women by men; a possible increase in government control of reproduction, such as the one-child policy China implemented in the late 1970s; and the danger of thinking all human problems can be solved with technology.

Bishop Brennan said Pope Paul VI did not raise additional ramifications, including separating the union of spouses – especially in regard to procreation – which gave greater credence to the concept of same-sex relationships.

“When you override nature itself,” he added, “you don’t respect it.”

‘A people’s servant’

At a reception following his ordination as bishop in 2016, friends and parishioners from St. Martin recalled the bishop’s pastoral nature.

Deacon Kenneth Barrett, whose family was for a time one of two African American families at the parish, called him “a people’s servant.”

Tina Kent and her husband, Leo Motter, brought four of their five children to the ordination. Kent said Bishop Brennan had a profound impact on her faith, leading her to be received into the Catholic Church.

“He taught me a lot about Catholicism, the Eucharist and confession,” Kent told the Catholic Review, noting that then-Father Brennan presided at their wedding.

For additional comments from Bishop Brennan about his appointment, read Bishop Brennan prepares to address issues in West Virginia.

Facts about Bishop Mark Edward Brennan

Born Feb. 6, 1947, Boston, Mass.

Seminaries: Christ the King, Allegany, N.Y. and the Pontifical North American College in Rome

Degrees: Bachelor's in history, Brown University, Providence, R.I.; bachelor's in sacred theology and master's in pastoral theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome

Ordained: Deacon, May 10, 1973; priesthood, May 15, 1976

Pastor, St. Martin of Tours Parish, Gaithersburg, in the Archdiocese of Washington, 2003-16

Speaks three languages: English, Spanish and French

Appointed auxiliary bishop of Baltimore Dec. 5, 2016.

Ordained bishop: Jan. 19, 2017, Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, Baltimore.

Episcopal motto: "Docente omnes gentes" (Latin for "Teach all nations")

Appointed bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va.: July 23, 2019