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Tuesday, January 6, 2009

Native son returns to lead Detroit archdiocese

Vigneron to take over for Maida later this month

Francis X. Donnelly and Mike Wilkinson / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- Even as an 8-year-old, Archbishop-elect Allen Vigneron had always wanted to be a priest and would pretend to celebrate Mass in the basement of his parents' southeast Michigan house.

Now Vigneron (pronounced VIN-yer-on) is returning home but in a position much higher than the one he imagined as a boy.

He will become the archbishop of Detroit, making him the spiritual leader of the region's 1.4 million Roman Catholics, it was announced at a news conference Monday. He will replace Cardinal Adam Maida, who is retiring, on Jan. 28.

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"Nothing surprises me about him," said his mother, Bernadine. "It's all he wanted to be."

In a religious career ranging from Detroit seminary rector to Vatican administrator to bishop of the Diocese of Oakland, Calif., Vigneron, 60, was described as a media-smart if conservative church leader.

He's deliberate, one who likes to weigh his options before making a decision, associates said. Once he's committed to something, they said, he throws himself into it.

"It is a great blessing to have him return back to us," Maida said.

Vigneron acknowledged that the state and region have changed in his absence, with a long run of economic trouble that could test the faith and charity of church members.

But he's never been one to duck a challenge.

"I know what this means," he said. "We're going through some tough times. It wouldn't keep me away."

Facing challenges in Calif.

After becoming bishop of Oakland in 2003, he immediately faced several daunting tasks. Among them was a stalled project for a downtown cathedral and dozens of lawsuits charging local priests with sexual abuse.

He visited every parish where abuse complaints were made and publicly apologized to church members.

The move drew kudos from some but one group would have liked to see him do much more.

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said Vigneron allowed diocese attorneys to block the lawsuits on technical grounds.

"He certainly talks a great game," Clohessy said. "In our experience, being a media-savvy bishop doesn't mean you're a compassionate or effective

bishop."

Vigneron's handling of the cathedral project shows his trademark style, acquaintances said.

After becoming bishop, he deliberated over the project, buttoning church staff with questions. Once he decided to support it, he vigorously sought and secured financial backing for the \$131 million deal.

That type of work ethic goes back to his childhood, said family members.

"He's a dedicated man," said his brother, Gary. "He puts his blood, sweat and tears into everything."

To improve his understanding of congregants in Oakland, which has a heavy concentration of Hispanics, he spent a summer in Mexico taking a crash course in Spanish.

Vigneron's ascension to archbishop marks a homecoming for him.

Roots in Anchorville, church

Raised in Anchorville, just east of New Baltimore, he always knew what he wanted to be, family members said.

The oldest of six children, the quiet youth wasn't as interested in sports as his four brothers and sister. His views were more heavenly. "He's very religious," Bernadine Vigneron said. "And he's not one of those

off-the-wall priests, either."

The onetime altar boy is one of four priests in his extended family, along with an uncle and two cousins. His ancestors helped build the Immaculate Conception church in Anchorville in the 19th century.

Vigneron was remembered as a studious student who made good grades.

"He was thoughtful and always took care of his brothers and sisters," said Jane Petitpren, who attended Immaculate Conception parish school with the new archbishop.

He went on to receive a doctorate degree in psychology. He was ordained a priest in 1975 and became a bishop in 1996.

Vigneron's resume includes stints as rector of Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, work in the administration section of the Vatican Secretariat of State and associate pastor of Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish in Harper Woods.

Msgr. Patrick Halfpenny, pastor of St. Paul on the Lake in Grosse Pointe Farms, has known Vigneron for nearly 30 years.

"He knows how to ask a question that gets to the heart of the matter," he said. "What he doesn't know, he knows enough to listen."

In addition to having to reach out to a young adult population that has become too busy to focus on faith, Vigneron will have to decide how to balance outreach between the rich and poor, urban and suburban parts of the archdiocese, religious observers said.

It's a lot like what he had to deal with in the 560,000-strong Oakland diocese.

And Vigneron will be seen as an heir to Maida's acknowledged reputation as a builder of relationships with other faiths, particularly the region's large Muslim population, observers said.

"There's an interesting interfaith mix here," said John Staudenmaier, assistant to the president for mission and identity at University of Detroit Mercy.

'We have a lot of diversity'

"We have a lot of diversity and we do have a very strong Islamic presence," he said. "Maida's done well with outreach. It can grow."

Vigneron acknowledged the challenges he and Detroit will be facing in the coming years.

He said he will emphasize the graces of hope and wisdom to inspire the faithful and pointed to Metro Detroit's own strengths -- resiliency of the people and the commitment of its priests -- as a foundation from which to work.

"With God's help we can figure out a way to get through this and come out better," he said.

On a more relaxed level, when asked about his own interests, he said he liked to read -- history and literature. But he offered that prayer was an important part of his life.

"I would find my life impossible without prayer," he said.

Vigneron was overwhelmed by rousing applause from dozens of fellow clerics, lay people and employees of the archdiocese who welcomed him back to Michigan. Many beamed at the selection, considered somewhat rare, of a local man they knew well as a former Detroit auxiliary bishop who also taught and helped run the Sacred Heart College Seminary on Chicago Boulevard.

"He brings to us the hope and the peace and the tranquility," said Sister Mary Finn, who has known the archbishop-elect for years. "Now we're blessed by his coming."

After the introduction, Vigneron sought out Finn and greeted her with a warm embrace.

"Can you believe how funny God is?" he joked with Finn and asked her if she, as she had in the past, made the sign of the cross on his back during their hug.

She had.

The Associated Press and Staff Writer Jim Lynch contributed.

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About Vigneron

Name: Allen Henry Vigneron
Age: 60
Hometown: Anchorville, Mich.
Education: Sacred Heart Seminary High School and College, Detroit; Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome; Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

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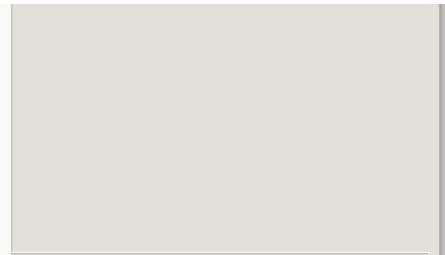
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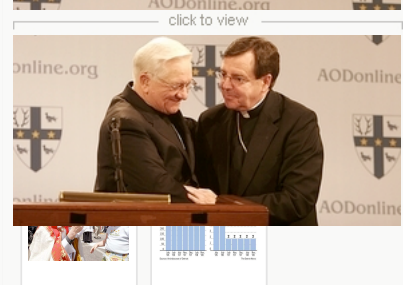
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Cardinal Adam Maida, left, introduced his successor, Archbishop-elect Allen Vigneron, on Monday at Sacred Heart Major Seminary. (Wayne E. Smith / The Detroit News)



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