

STATEMENT - Bishop Steven J. Raica

March 25, 2020

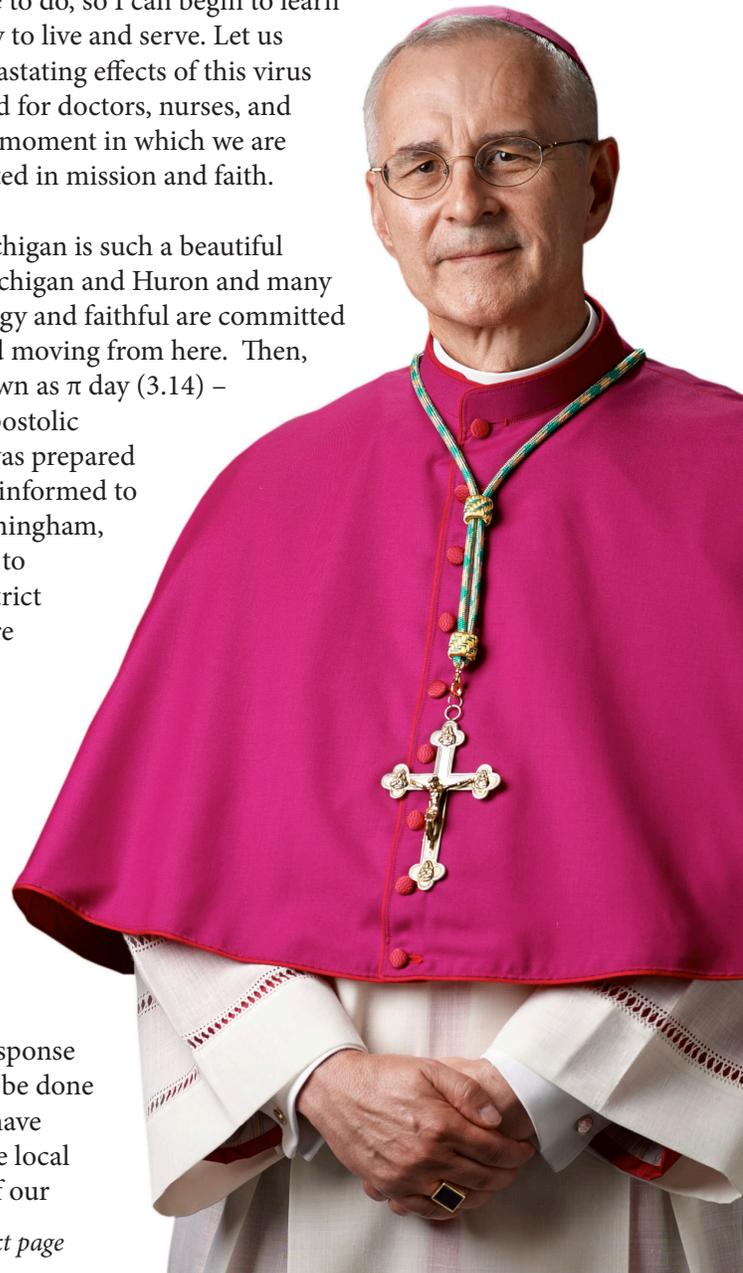
Good morning! Thank you, Bishop Baker for your kind and always thoughtful words of welcome! I understand you recently celebrated your 50th anniversary of priesthood! Hearty congratulations and *ad multos gloriosque annos!* I regret that I cannot be in Birmingham in person because of the current health emergency. Here in Michigan we are under a shelter in place order by the governor in order to contain the spread of the coronavirus. I think we are ok today on the social distancing factor! I am hoping to come to Birmingham as soon as it is feasible to do, so I can begin to learn more about the Diocese where I will have the honor and joy to live and serve. Let us continue to pray for the containment and abatement of devastating effects of this virus in our communities, for those who are suffering from it, and for doctors, nurses, and health care professionals who are on the front lines. At this moment in which we are separated from one another, I pray we can return more united in mission and faith.

The truth be told, the Diocese of Gaylord and northern Michigan is such a beautiful place for ministry with dense forests, the Great Lakes of Michigan and Huron and many inland lakes, skiing and golfing. The faith is strong. The clergy and faithful are committed to the mission of Christ and the Church. I never anticipated moving from here. Then, in the afternoon of Saturday, March 14 – affectionately known as π day (3.14) – I received a call from Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the Apostolic Nuncio. After exchanging some pleasantries, he asked if I was prepared to hear some news from our Holy Father, Pope Francis. He informed to me that Pope Francis was appointing me the Bishop of Birmingham, Alabama! Wow! I didn't see that coming! I have never been to Alabama. I would be there today, except for the need to restrict unnecessary movement during this health emergency we are facing.

I'm a northern boy, having grown up in Michigan's Upper Peninsula in a small town on the shores of Lake Superior. Most of my priestly ministry was served in the Diocese of Lansing in south central Michigan since my ordination in 1978 in Michigan until the present time. Eleven of those years, however, were spent in Rome, Italy.

Today is the Solemnity of the Annunciation! The announcement came to Mary through the Archangel Gabriel that she would conceive and bear a son. The world waited for her response ... which was so simple and straightforward: "*Fiat!*" "Let it be done to me as you say!" The request of Pope Francis, to whom I have pledged my loyalty and respect, comes as he discerns for the local community of Birmingham in Alabama. Like the witness of our

Continued on next page



Lady, and with devotion to her, I too say “*Fiat!*” It is my “yes” – not to my plans but to the Lord’s call at this moment. As far as I can remember, I have never received an appointment that I ever asked for. My only desire is that God’s will be accomplished.

To all my friends and colleagues at the Pastoral Center here at the Diocese of Gaylord and the priests, religious and lay faithful, I thank you for mentoring me with great patience and wisdom. I have treasured ministry here. I know the presence of Christ is here. When I erred, you were never afraid to correct me. When I stumbled, you lifted me up. I cherish every moment: the joyful ones and, yes, the challenging ones. I would never reduce our Catholic faith down to the mistakes and errors one makes, but by the efforts to stay true to Christ and the Church! “We are not the sum of our errors,” as Pope St John Paul II said. “We are the sum of the mercy of God and the infinite love of Christ.” Each person bears an infinite dignity and it is the place where the icon of Christ is presented to the world.

In one sense, this announcement comes at an awkward moment. We are in the midst of a health emergency that has impacted literally everyone. I love the people of God here in the Diocese of Gaylord with all my heart. To announce that I am being transferred right now might lead one to think there is an abandonment. While a bishop is to take possession within two months of the announcement, I have asked that there be a delay in the installation until we are well on the downside of the health emergency. I don’t wish to abandon the clergy, religious and faithful of Gaylord at this critical moment. As it is right now, the installation will take place on June 23. In that way, I can continue to be present here during this unprecedented moment we are living.

To my new home in Birmingham, if my conversations with Bishop Baker are any indication, I think I will relish the warmth of southern hospitality and develop many new friends and colleagues. Bishop Baker was so gracious in my initial conversations with him. Again, I thank him for his faith-filled leadership, his love for the power and centrality of the Eucharist, and his desire to foster missionary disciples committed to witness the power of Christ in northern Alabama. I am also mindful of his care for the poor and the most vulnerable throughout the diocese. He may be a hard act to follow! I thank him for his faithful dedication in teaching, sanctifying and shepherding the people of the Diocese of Birmingham.

For those in the pastoral center: Your work is needed and appreciated. A bishop cannot do all the things he’s supposed to do without your help. I thank you for your generosity in helping the bishop’s mission go forward. I do look forward to working with you to ensure the message of Christ is radiant throughout the 39 counties of northern Alabama.

For the faithful of the Diocese of Birmingham I pledge my life to you. Christ is the center of my life. I also know that the Church today, as Pope Francis noted, is a lot like a field hospital – more needs than one can satisfy. Now with onset of COVID-19 ravaging our communities, we are experiencing the fullness of those prophetic words. But we also know the Lord remains with us. Although our public celebrations are suspended, our discipleship is not. It requires even greater intentionality to live the joy of the Gospel in the context in which we find ourselves.

My one plea is this: Please be patient with me as I embark on this new ministry. Allow me to look about and see how the Lord has blessed the Diocese of Birmingham and appreciate the radiance of your faith. I look forward to find my way around central and northern Alabama and learn first-hand about your

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history and your dreams as a people of faith. Then, we can accompany each other on the journey of faith as we boldly share the joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Since I learned about this appointment, I have been praying for the priests, deacons, religious and faithful of both dioceses. I entrust everyone to the maternal care of our Lady. Whenever one leaves an assignment, especially a first assignment, it is hard to say “Goodbye.” I will dearly miss so many of the priests, deacons, religious and people throughout northern lower Michigan whom I’ve had the privilege and honor to accompany in the faith! They are truly amazing. There is a lot to love in the Diocese of Gaylord. At the same time, I am also confident that the Lord will provide a new and exciting journey of faith in Birmingham. Together we will see and experience the Lord doing some astonishing things in northern Alabama. To those who await my arrival in Birmingham, I pledge that I will give my all to you to accompany you on this amazing adventure of faith entrusted to us. If my first impressions are any indication, it will not be long before I too can say – or sing: Sweet home Alabama!

Thank you!



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