



## DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS

1316 Peger Road · Fairbanks, Alaska · 99709 · 907-374-9500 · Fax: 907-374-9580

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

13 November 2019

### ***Announcement to the Diocese of Fairbanks of status transfer from Congregation of Evangelization of the Peoples to Congregation for Bishops***

Dear Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

I have blessed news! On November 11, Pope Francis announced that the Diocese of Fairbanks will transfer from the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples (CEP) to the Congregation for Bishops. The CEP coordinates the Church's initial missionary work around the world and supports dioceses with few resources to serve their small numbers of Catholics. This is an important milestone for our diocese because it reflects that the faith is now sufficiently established in northern Alaska to carry out our mission without financial help from the Holy See.

The Church in Alaska has a unique history. Thirty years after Jesuit missionaries brought Catholicism to the region in the late 1800s, the Vatican declared Alaska an Apostolic Vicariate--the first stage in the organization of a diocese. Initially, the entire state was considered a mission field and fell under the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, which became the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (CEP) after Vatican II. By 1966, however, Alaska had been split into the Archdiocese of Anchorage, the Diocese of Juneau, and the Diocese of Fairbanks. Around then, many missionary dioceses in the lower 48 states exited the CEP, leaving the Diocese of Fairbanks the only mission diocese in the United States.

In 2016, I attended an orientation course in Rome by the CEP for newly-appointed bishops of mission dioceses. Privately, many bishops asked me why a bishop from the United States was there, since most of them came from severely impoverished dioceses in Africa, India, and Oceania. That was a humbling experience, as the United States is one of the most affluent countries on earth, yet our diocese was still receiving some funding annually from the CEP for missionary activities. After learning that six dioceses in Canada were in the process of transferring out of the CEP and into the Congregation of Bishops, I initiated the process for the Diocese of Fairbanks. Our diocese's Presbyteral Council, the other Alaskan bishops, and the entire United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) supported the move.

Now, with the approval of the Holy See, the Diocese of Fairbanks will transition to the Congregation for Bishops and be part of the USCCB like all other American dioceses. The small grant we received from the Vatican each year now can be distributed to dioceses with much greater needs even than our own. This is a just and meaningful sacrifice given that four of our missionary priests come from impoverished areas in Nigeria and India whose dioceses are still under the CEP.

Financially, the Diocese of Fairbanks remains dependent on its many donors outside Alaska, who provide more than 90% of our funding. We simply could not exist without their generous support. In the official letter confirming the diocese's new status, the CEP and Congregation for Bishops recognized our ongoing mission status, since 38 of our 46 churches still depend on chancery support to

remain open. They also acknowledged our extreme need for clergy and religious, especially in remote arctic communities where two or three parishes share one priest. They echo Pope Francis's urging for the faithful to serve as missionary disciples in areas like ours that have such great needs and challenging circumstances. It is my hope that this change will spur other dioceses--especially those in the United States--to help alleviate our severe clergy shortage.

I am profoundly grateful to the priests, religious, deacons, catechists, and lay people in our diocese who with a missionary zeal continue to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ across northern Alaska. I also thank my fellow bishops for their ongoing financial support and their generous lending of clergy and religious to serve our most remote parishes (only two of our priests are not "on loan" from another diocese or order). I am especially grateful to the Bishops and faithful of the Dioceses of Maiduguri, Nigeria, and Cuddapah, India. These mission dioceses are still part of the CEP, yet they have generously provided us with many faithful and hardworking priests.

This is an historic moment for American Catholicism that we should all celebrate, for the Church is now so firmly established in the United States that it no longer has any CEP dioceses in its ranks. It is my hope that as we build upon the legacy of our past missionaries, who came from home and abroad, that it will spark an even greater desire among the faithful in Alaska to share the Gospel. As always, please pray for an increase in vocations to the priesthood and religious life within the Diocese of Fairbanks.

If you would like to view the original documents from the Holy See, please visit our diocesan website at: <http://bit.ly/36ZcCPw>

Sincerely in Christ,



†Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski  
Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska  
Diocese of Fairbanks



CWZ/mm