

Letter from Bulletin of September 21, 2003

Dear Parishioners,

Since February of this year our Diocese has had **two Bishops**. In addition to Bishop John Cummins who has been our Diocesan Bishop for 25 years, we have now had in place a “coadjutor”, Bishop Allen H. Vigneron.

A coadjutor-bishop is defined as a special bishop – assistant to the Diocesan Bishop. Unlike “auxiliary” bishops which are more common and numerous in large Archdioceses (S.F. has two; L.A. has five), a coadjutor is appointed at the initiative of the Vatican, has the right of succession and is normally appointed for circumstances that are personal to the Diocesan Bishop like age and health; in this case Bishop Cummins, while in excellent health, has passed his 75th birthday at which all bishops are automatically requested to submit their resignation.

After eight months of being here we expect Bishop Vigneron to take over in early October. Once Bishop Cummins’ resignation is accepted by the Vatican, Bishop Vigneron will become the third Bishop of Oakland – no ceremony, no official documents. All that was put in place when he was appointed as **“Coadjutor Bishop with the right of succession”**.

We have only had two other bishops in the history of this relatively young Diocese. In 1962, under Pope John XXIII, the counties of Alameda and Contra Costa were separated off from the Archdiocese of San Francisco to which they had belonged since 1853.

Bishop Floyd Begin was our founding Bishop. He was an auxiliary bishop in Cleveland before he was appointed to the new Diocese of Oakland. He had never been west of the Mississippi before. Rumor has it that when he was asked if he would agree to be the bishop of Oakland, he replied, “Yes. Where is it?”

Our second bishop, John Cummins, is a native of Oakland who was Dean of boys at Bishop O'Dowd High School when Bishop Begin chose him as the first chancellor of the new Diocese. From there he moved on to become Executive Secretary of the newly formed California Catholic Conference, a statewide arm of the Bishops of California, enabling them to speak as one to state office holders and government. That appointment was fairly significant for me since I was then appointed to be his successor as Diocesan Chancellor.

Soon after, John Cummins was appointed auxiliary bishop of Sacramento; in few years he succeeded Bishop Begin who died three days before his official retirement at the age of 75.

The two bishops we have had were quite different men with very different styles, both a blessing to our Church. The fact that no one on the west coast knew anything about Bishop Begin and he knew nothing about us did not create a problem; we were all mutually engaged in setting up a new Diocese and implementing and adjusting to the massive changes of Vatican Council II. He had a fairly autocratic and canonical background and head, with an enormously generous and pastoral heart. It took a while to know when to take his adamant statements literally and to know when there was still plenty of room for discussion and even reversal. He is the Bishop who ordained me to the priesthood. I will always have good memories and a warm place for him; his rich pastoral sense, his enormous energy for the Church and his trust in God's providence was remarkable. Everyone has a few humorous stories about Bishop Begin, some of which he would tell on himself; most of which are absolutely true.

Bishop Cummins has been a good friend and brother since I was first ordained. He has been a wonderful example of the kind of servant leadership called for by Vatican Council II. When I read Msgr. Phil Murnion's deathbed plea to U.S. bishops for "dialogue, dialogue, dialogue", and his statement that "consultation, listening and dialogue only enhance true authority", I could not help but think of Bishop Cummins' 25 years of leadership among us. He has been open and courageous, consultative, and trusting of the views and good will of others. He has been highly sensitive to the ethnic groups of our Diocese, to the place of

women in the Church and its governance, to the importance of Catholic Schools, and to teaching that is both forward looking and faithful to our tradition.

Bishop Cummins has not given rise to too many humorous stories, but to an enormous amount of good will from Catholics and non-Catholics alike. He has had a wonderful relationship with the institutions of higher learning in the Diocese. He has brought together major thinkers from the University of California, the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory and the Graduate Theological Union; he has connected our Diocese and the U.S. Bishops with the Church and people of Asia, from Indonesia to Mongolia. With the able assistance of his Chancellor, Sr. Barbara Flannery, he dealt with the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and developed a caring outreach to victims well before the recent scandal and media attention ever surfaced.

He leaves the Diocese in good health and with great vitality for his successor and for all of us.

In a future letter I'll tell you about the third Bishop of Oakland, Bishop Allen Vigneron.

Your Pastor,
Brian Joyce