

# DIocese OF SAN BERNARDINO



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## **Bishop Alberto Rojas takes leadership of Diocese after Vatican announces Bishop Gerald Barnes' retirement**

*Pope Francis has accepted Bishop Gerald Barnes' letter of resignation, signaling the start of Bishop Alberto Rojas' ministry as the third Ordinary Bishop of San Bernardino.*

SAN BERNARDINO— Exactly 25 years to the day after Bishop Gerald Barnes was appointed to be the second Bishop of San Bernardino, the Vatican announced that his retirement has been accepted by Pope Francis and his successor, Bishop Alberto Rojas, now assumes leadership of the nation's fifth largest diocese.

A statement released by the Vatican Press Office early Monday morning declared that "the Holy Father has accepted the resignation from the pastoral care of the Diocese of San Bernardino, United States of America, presented by Bishop Gerald Richard Barnes. He is succeeded by Bishop Alberto Rojas, until now coadjutor of the same diocese."

The announcement automatically triggered the installation of Bishop Rojas as the Ordinary Bishop of the Diocese of San Bernardino. An Ordinary Bishop assumes full responsibility for the teaching, sanctifying, and governing of a diocese, and reports only to the Holy Father. Bishop Rojas was announced as the Coadjutor Bishop of the Diocese on December 2, 2019. A Coadjutor Bishop works alongside the Ordinary Bishop for a period of time before succeeding him upon his retirement.

"In God's name and forever grateful, I begin my ministry in the Diocese of San Bernardino as Ordinary Bishop," Bishop Rojas said in a recorded message to the faithful released Monday. "While continuing to listen and learn more about our large and diverse Diocese, I would like to build on the momentum that is clearly present here."

Per Church law, Bishop Barnes submitted his letter of resignation to Pope Francis last June 22, his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. He had been informed by the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, that his time as Ordinary Bishop of San Bernardino would be extended up to a year beyond his retirement age.

Bishop Barnes released a statement Monday on his retirement, expressing gratitude for his years leading and working with the local Catholic community. He now holds the title Bishop Emeritus of San Bernardino.

"Thank you for all you have shared with me," he said. "Thank you for your prayers, your support, the sharing of your gifts and for your constructive criticism."

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“I move on now to retirement and with you I greet our new leader, Bishop Alberto Rojas. May he experience the joy, the faith and the hope that our Diocese has to offer, and may we all continue to impact family, neighborhood and society with the Gospel so that people’s lives are filled with hope.”

At the time of his retirement, Bishop Barnes was the longest serving bishop in a single diocese in the United States. A native of East Los Angeles, he served as a priest in the Archdiocese of San Antonio for 17 years before returning to Southern California to become the first Auxiliary Bishop of the young Diocese of San Bernardino in 1992. Three years later he succeeded Bishop Phillip Straling to become the second Ordinary Bishop in the history of the Diocese.

Under Bishop Barnes’ leadership, the Diocese of San Bernardino became nationally recognized for its development of adult faith formation and education programs, the integration of diverse cultures into the life and leadership of the local Church, and for the implementation of comprehensive policies and actions to address and prevent the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and lay church employees. Bishop Barnes also has played a prominent role in the U.S. Catholic Church’s advocacy for comprehensive reform of federal immigration law. He served as Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee of Migration and Refugee Service from 2004-2007.

Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, offered praise and prayers for both bishops on the day of the announcement.

“I want to personally thank Bishop Barnes for his ministry, and I wish him many happy years of prayer and service as he continues his priestly ministry in his retirement,” Archbishop Gomez said in a statement. “As he begins his new ministry, I entrust Bishop Rojas to the tender heart of Our Lady Guadalupe. May she watch over him and help him in his mission to share the love of God and his mercy.”

Bishop Rojas takes the reins of the Diocese after a tumultuous year caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The 93 parishes of the Diocese have been unable since March of 2020 to hold Mass in their churches at full capacity. This has interrupted the traditional flow of income to the parishes and the Diocese – the weekly collections taken at Mass. As a result, some parishes and Catholic schools have had to lay off employees and the Diocese has instituted a weekly furlough program to cut costs.

In his message, Bishop Rojas acknowledged the difficulties facing the Diocese as he begins his time as Ordinary Bishop. He said the dynamism of the people of the Diocese and his own experience of faith will help carry the Diocese.

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“In my years of ministry, from the seminary days to serving as priest and then as a bishop in Chicago, I have encountered many new challenges,” he said. “I have always trusted in God’s plan for me to serve His Church, and that He will give me all that I need to do his work. When I reflect on this, I have great joy and hope for our future together sisters and brothers!”

An Auxiliary Bishop in the Archdiocese of Chicago for eight years prior to coming to San Bernardino, Bishop Rojas began his ministry in the Diocese in February 2020. Despite the emergence of the pandemic just a month later, Bishop Rojas established a leadership presence in the Diocese throughout 2020, traveling to parishes to celebrate weekend Masses, confirming thousands of young Catholics during the summer months, ordaining permanent deacons and, recently, Transitional Deacon Ian Hollick.

Bishop Rojas also established a strong digital presence in his first year in the Diocese. Along with Bishop Barnes, he offered a weekly livestreamed Mass from the diocesan seminary during the months that local churches were completely closed; he led a livestream of the Re-Consecration of the Diocese to the Blessed Virgin Mary; released video recordings of himself praying the Rosary, offered video messages of encouragement (along with Bishop Barnes) regarding the pandemic; and released weekly multi-media reflections during the Season of Advent.

Bishop Rojas was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico and emigrated to the United States in 1994 to complete his seminary formation at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois. He was ordained a priest in 1997, working in parish ministry and then as a teacher at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary. He was ordained a bishop in 2011, serving Episcopal Vicar in Vicariate III and then Vicariate I. He has fulfilled a number of key assignments on national committees for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) including Hispanic Affairs, Liturgy, Catholic Home Missions and, most recently, as lead bishop for Region VII of the V Encuentro, a reflection and dialogue of the U.S. Church on the growing prominence of Hispanics in the Church.

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