

Robert James Carlson is St. Louis Catholics' new archbishop



By Patricia Rice, Special to the Beacon

Posted 5:38 a.m. Tues. April 21 - Robert James Carlson is St. Louis Catholics' new archbishop. He's a man from "up river," a native of Minneapolis who holds a Ph.D. in canon, or church, law.

Until the Vatican made the announcement at 5 a.m. today – noon Rome time – Carlson, 64, was bishop of the diocese of Saginaw, Mich.

Carlson will be installed in the cream-colored marble cathedra -- the bishop's chair -- at a Mass in the St. Louis Cathedral Basilica in a few weeks. He is visiting St. Louis today and will give details of his installation Mass at a news conference at the Cardinal Justin F. Rigali Center auditorium in Shrewsbury.

He has been the shepherd of the Saginaw Diocese's 132,000 Catholics for four years. His two previous episcopal appointments were as the bishop of the 125,000 Catholics in the diocese of Sioux Falls, S.D., and as an auxiliary bishop serving his home archdiocese of St.

Paul-Minneapolis. Carlson celebrated his 25th anniversary of becoming a bishop in mid-January at a special Mass attended by about 800 people crowded into St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Bay City, Mich.

CONNECTS WITH PEOPLE

St. Louis' new archbishop is known as genial prayerful man, who is well liked by other U.S. bishops. He was described as dynamic, self effacing and "always kind"



by lay and clerical Catholics in Saginaw in interviews in February. His style of preaching is conversational and approachable.

"He is very normal, always been normal," said his younger sister Cathy Carlson Percival of Minneapolis in a recent interview with the Beacon. He's wonderful with young people whether they are strangers, parishioners or his nephews and nieces, she said.

He shines in talks with students and those about to be confirmed, said JoEllen Linder, vice president of admissions at Presentation College in Aberdeen, S.D., and a former administrator at Mount Mary College in Yankton, S.D., where she saw Carlson in action in the 1990s.

"He's very personable, absolutely can relate to people," she said adding that he is widely known for his success in encouraging young men to become priests. "When that much success happens in getting seminarians you know that he's good with people."

Carlson himself described the ideal effective bishop in an article he wrote in 1999 in *Lay Witness* magazine, published in Steubenville, Ohio.

In Carlson's words: "Kindness, courtesy, meekness, gentleness, humility, patience, prudence and eager concern are the virtues which must describe the pastoral ministry of the

PRESS CONFERENCE

To watch his press conference, go to the [archdiocese webstie](#) and follow the link.

bishop. Bishops must, before all else, be men of faith, outstanding witnesses of the life of the Holy Spirit. They must be dedicated to prayer and the constant reading of Scripture. Only by drawing upon the wealth of the interior life of grace can the ministry of the Bishop effectively take form."

Carlson has been active on the floor of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' meetings. He goes to the microphones and in genial tones makes incisive remarks, never hogging the mike, never the gadfly.

Other American bishops have shown their respect for Carlson by electing him to important conference posts. Some bishops, even archbishops, run and run but do not win high posts. Carlson, however, now chairs the bishops' conference Committee on Priestly Life. Fellow bishops elect hard workers who seem to love being priests to this job. That same joy in being a priest helps them encourage young Catholic men to consider becoming priests. St. Louis native Archbishop Tim Dolan of New York is a former Priestly Life committee chair.

The bishops' conference also elected him to a three-year term chairing its

Catholic Charismatic Renewal committee, which he completed last year. In the Dakotas he had friendly dialogues with leaders of other faith groups and is likely to become active in the St. Louis Interfaith Partnership, one source said.

BRINGING IN SEMINARIANS

Carlson's gifts as a fisher of priests has resulted in his ordaining eight priests since he arrived in Saginaw. Five more Saginaw men are to be ordained this spring. In comparison, some large metropolitan archdioceses will ordain three or fewer this spring. His small diocese has 24 seminarians "in the pipeline."

Just as he did as a young priest, Carlson hangs out with seminarians for a mix of God talk and sports talk over casual meals. He serves as his own diocesan vocations director, which is rare for a bishop. Each year the Saginaw vocation office issues a new artist poster, always rather cool, that parishes and schools post to encourage vocations. At larger Masses and in the diocese's newspaper, much attention is given to its current seminarians.

His St. John Vianney residential house in the Saginaw Diocese lets men considering becoming priests live in community with spiritual direction while they continue working or finish college before determining that they will enter a seminary.

Catholic bishops long have known Carlson's ability to cast the nets wide for young men interested in the priesthood. More than a decade ago, he was one of the two main speakers to address U.S. bishops at a National Vocations Symposium. The other speaker was the late Cardinal Pio Laghi, then head of the Vatican's Catholic education department.

ADULT EDUCATION FOR SENATORS, TOO

In his three previous posts as a bishop, Carlson championed Catholic adult faith education. He suggested, as a starting point, studying a combination of the Bible,



Bishop Robert J. Carlson (left) ordained Prentice A. Tipton Jr., 55, to the priesthood on Dec. 5, 2008, at St. Mary Cathedral in Saginaw. He is the eighth priest ordained for the diocese of Saginaw by Bishop Carlson during the past two years.

the Catholic Catechism and papal documents. In Michigan, he put a Catholic adult education program on television to make it more accessible to those in rural areas and those with prime time constraints.

Carlson attended Catholic schools and is strong advocate for them. When he was in South Dakota he was "very supportive" of the missions of its two Catholic colleges and its high schools, said Linder the Presentation College administrator. Last year, Carlson called the Saginaw diocese's 23 Catholic grade schools and three Catholic high schools "outstanding examples of fine learning institutions." He stressed that they are schools where faith is "taught boldly, Catholic identity is something at the core and curriculum is cohesive from the very beginning through the 12th grade."

He told Saginaw Catholics that it's through its Catholic schools that "the Catholic faith is going to be handed on and where the next generation of volunteers are going to come."

In 2003, when he led Sioux Falls Catholics, he responded to some lay Catholics' letters to his diocesan newspaper with concern that the writers showed a lack of knowledge of papal teachings. The letter writers were unable to see "the line between Christians' idea of the common good and excessive individual rights" on various matters including abortion, he wrote. Carlson is said to be distressed when he meets Catholics who have worked to advance their knowledge of professional skills and a wide range of topics from politics, hobbies, cooking to sports but have made no effort as an adult to learn about their faith.

Those letter writers showed "clear examples of the erosion in Catholic formation for the last two generations," Carlson wrote. "Today nominal Catholics are often soft on abortion and badly misinformed about other aspects of the faith including the Eucharist and the proper formation of one's conscience," he said.

In 2003, Carlson told the senior U.S. senator in his state, Thomas Daschle, a Democrat, that his general approval of abortion rights was in opposition to centuries of Catholic social justice teachings condemning abortion and wrote urging Daschle to support a ban on late-term abortion.

Daschle, who voted against the ban, went onto the Senate floor and read into the Congressional Record a

BY THE NUMBERS

SAGINAW

The Saginaw diocese covers 11 counties in eastern mid-Michigan. The diocese extends over 6,955-square-miles.

About 132,000 Catholics live in the diocese which is served by 110 parishes and missions. Carlson leads 63 active priests, 38 senior

denunciation of Carlson for speaking in a way "more identified with the radical right than with thoughtful religious leadership."

Whether the bishop would have denied communion to Daschle was never an issue, because the senator remarried after a divorce and had not been eligible under church law to receive communion. Later, Carlson asked Daschle to stop referring to himself as a Catholic in campaigns.

ELECTION ISSUES

Before last November's election virtually all U.S. Catholic diocesan bishops wrote about the issues. Some said that Catholics who voted for a candidate who supported abortion rights needed to go to confession. Carlson was more nuanced about many issues in a letter than ran two full pages long. At the core of his October letter, Carlson wrote:

So, how's a Catholic to vote?" Let me put the matter as simply as I can: Abortion results in the killing of approximately 1 million children in the womb every year. A Catholic can, in good conscience, vote for a pro-choice candidate only if other issues outweigh this one in number and in kind.

What do I mean by "in number and in kind"? Let's take an example. The Church is opposed to the use of the death penalty. But the death penalty does not outweigh abortion because: they differ in number: over 1 million

semi-retired priests and six priests in religious orders and about 100 nuns.

The diocese has 23 Catholic grade schools and three Catholic high schools.

It was formed in 1938 carved from part of the Detroit and Grand Rapids dioceses. French Catholic priests celebrated Mass within the diocese in the 1700s or before.

ST. LOUIS

The St. Louis archdiocese has 555,750 Catholic in 188 parishes.

As soon as Carlson is installed, he will lead 362 diocesan priests, 372 religious priests, 241 deacons, 141 religious brothers and 1,788 nuns. Within the archdiocese, there are nine Catholic seminaries, two Catholic universities, 29 Catholic diocesan and private high schools, and 122 parish and Catholic private elementary schools. The diocese covers an area with a general population of 2,118,721.

French Catholic priests celebrated Mass within the diocese for the first time in 1699 and the diocese was formed founded in 1843. It once included Illinois, Missouri and most of the Louisiana Purchase Territory north and west of Missouri.

Today the archdiocese runs from Lincoln County on the north to Perry and St. Francois counties on the south; and from the Mississippi River

abortions per year vs. less than 100 executions per year, and they differ in kind: the directly willed death of the innocent vs. the directly willed death of those found guilty in a court of law.

The day after Obama's election, Carlson wrote that "This election has shown that any child who is born in America has the opportunity to ascend to the highest political office in the land. We must continue to work and pray tirelessly for the day when every child who is conceived will have the right to live."

SISTERS AND BROTHER WERE EQUALS

Robert James Carlson is a true "war baby," born in June 1944. His mother Jeanne Carlson gave birth to him in Minneapolis. Her husband Robert Carlson was not at the hospital with her that day but serving in the U.S. Navy on a destroyer in Guam.

When his father returned from the war the toddler was 14 months old. Robert Carlson Sr. recalled his first meeting with the boy. "His mom said, 'son this is your father'," The father recalled in a 2005 interview with the Bay City Times. "He took one look at me and said, 'No, this is my dad,' picking up a photo of me. I'll never forget it."

After the war, the family expanded to include two daughters.

"He had to make his bed like the rest of us," said his sister Cathy Carlson Percival of the Twin Cities area. In the 1950s some parents valued girls and boys differently, not her parents, she said. All three were equals.

The archbishop's parents never pressured their children about the socio-economic advantages of various careers, she said. Their father, who was a Prudential insurance salesman for 43 years, would point out individuals in their

on east to the western borders of Warren, Franklin and Washington Counties on the west.

LINKS

Carlson won't have to be coached on how to spell several downtown streets. The Saginaw Diocese includes Gratiot County named for St. Louis native Brig Gen. Charles Gratiot Jr., a grandson of St. Louis' founding couple Pierre Laclède and Madame Marie Therese Chouteau. In downtown St. Louis, Gratiot Street is named for the general's father.

Like St. Louis, the Saginaw diocese earliest white settlers were French Catholics. The two regions have links from early fur trading exchanges, and continued with railroad, logging and eventually summer resort development.

Today Carlson adds another connection.

community who were making a contribution to society and were happy.

"They'd say this person is happy, whether he was the garbage collector or a teacher," Percival said.

St. Louis' new archbishop went to a Twin Cities Catholic high school sponsored by the Christian Brothers. He played football, was a popular leader and went to "all the proms and dances," Percival recalled. He liked girls and liked sports. The qualities that made him good with young people still work today, she said.

In 1966 he obtained his college degree in philosophy from St. Paul Seminary. Then, in 1970, he got a master's degree in divinity from the same archdiocesan seminary and was ordained a priest.

He moved to Washington, D.C., to enroll in the Catholic University of America and become a canon lawyer. After he got his degree, he served on the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocesan tribunal, the church courts, while doing pastoral work the remainder of the week.

One of his many pastoral assignments was at St. Thomas University. Among his assignments at the Catholic college was chaplain to his hockey team. He worked with a group of St. Thomas students, including hockey players, to buy a house for \$1 in a distressed area and fix it up for a residential Christian community. He lived with them. The students prayed together, helped each other with class work, cheered for each other at games, shared grocery shopping and cooking chores.

"He was right in there cooking with the rest of them," Percival said recalling her visits to the house.

Decades later, some of those students came to the bishop's parents' funerals and wakes and brought news of their own children and stories of how the young priest influenced their lives. "From the start, he was good about helping young people," his sister said.

EARLY ORDINATION AS BISHOP

Just 14 years after Carlson's ordination, when most priests are about half-way through their first post as a senior pastor, Carlson was ordained bishop. He was consecrated as a bishop on Jan. 11, 1984.

Carlson served his home archdiocese for a decade until he was appointed as coadjutor bishop of the Diocese of Sioux Falls, S.D. Coadjutor describes a bishop-in-waiting who is mentored by an aging or ill prelate, Bishop Paul V. Dudley in the Sioux Falls case. Coadjutors typically spend a year to 18 months

getting to know a diocese before becoming bishop. And, after 15 months, Carlson succeeded Dudley and became the seventh bishop of Sioux Falls.

At the end of 2004, Pope John Paul II appointed Carlson to lead the Saginaw Diocese. He was installed at its Cathedral of Mary of the Assumption Feb. 24, 2005.

Earlier this month Carlson said a special Mass to mark the first anniversary of his father's death. His mother Jeanne Carson died in 2004 after the couple celebrated its 62nd wedding anniversary.

This morning's papal announcement brings to an end nearly nine months of speculating about whom Benedict would send to lead the St. Louis Archdiocese.

ST. LOUIS EXPECTATIONS

Pope Benedict has moved away from several of John Paul II's bishop-picking standards including that the Vatican won't make a man an archbishop in his native diocese. Benedict has returned popular "hometown" priests who had been bishops of smaller dioceses to fill the bishops' chairs in Detroit and Pittsburgh.

Many St. Louis Catholics had held out a slim hope that the pope would name St. Louis native Timothy Dolan, with his gift for spreading joy, as St. Louis archbishop. And when Benedict named Dolan to lead the New York Archdiocese, expectations were raised for the new St. Louis archbishop.

It was the talk of Lenten prayer group gatherings and Friday fish fries. "St. Louis deserves to get as good as we give away," said Jim Sullivan of St. Joseph Parish in Manchester who knew Dolan as a boy. "We deserve a man of the people who's a pastor, a loving pastor. The archdiocese can hire all the bookkeepers and lawyers it needs, we need a shepherd to pray here in St. Louis."

Carlson succeeds Archbishop Raymond Burke, a Lacrosse, Wisc., native who completed his three-and-a-half year tenure as St. Louis Archbishop June 27. Benedict called Burke to Rome to run the Vatican's tribunal of last resort: the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura.

During the eight month interim, Bishop Robert L. Hermann, 74, served as archdiocesan administrator. Though Carlson today is the St. Louis archbishop, until his installation Mass, Hermann will hold the reigns while consulting Carlson.

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[Close Window](#)