

WARFEL, Bishop Michael William

Michael William Warfel—one of five children, two girls and three boys—was born on September 16, 1948, in Elkhart, Indiana, of Robert K. Warfel and Josephine E. Rumshas Warfel. His father came from a Pennsylvania Dutch/German background; his mother had Lithuanian roots. His religious roots are unusual. Though his father was a baptized Baptist and his mother a Catholic background from her Lithuanian ancestry, there was little religion practiced in the home. One day, young Michael announced that he planned to be attending services at the new Lutheran church being built down the street from the family home. Within a week he found himself enrolled in catechism classes at the local Catholic parish, St. Vincent de Paul. His mother's Catholic roots had kicked in. At the age of twelve, he was baptized in the Catholic Church.

Michael received his early education in Elkhart. While in high school, he participated in cross-country running and track and field. Wrestling, however, was his sport of choice, and he excelled in competition. He was also heavily involved in the school's music program, singing in its chorus and playing the trumpet in its band. In 1966, after completing high school, he began studies—principally in music—at the University of Indiana in Bloomington. However, shortly into his second year—now attending Indiana University at its South Bend campus—he enlisted in the U.S. Army. He served in Vietnam for 18 months and in Korea for 13. He was honorably discharged, in 1971.

Following his military service, Michael became interested in Religious life and considered the possibility of becoming a Religious Brother. His pastor, however, urged him to consider the diocesan priesthood instead. Accordingly, in 1972, he entered St. Gregory's College Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, as a seminarian for the Diocese of Fort Wayne/South Bend in Indiana. After earning a B.A. degree in Philosophy from St. Gregory, he went on to graduate studies in theology at Mount St. Mary's Seminary of the West, also in Cincinnati.

While Michael was in seminary studies, his sister had moved to **Alaska**, where he visited her during summer months. From the outset, he found himself in love with Alaska and its people. When the time came for him to profess candidacy for Holy Orders—a step that formally commits a seminarian to a particular diocese—his heart was in Alaska, and he knew it was in Alaska that he wished to live and minister as a priest. He contacted Archbishop Francis T. **Hurley**, Archbishop of **Anchorage** at the time, in hopes of being accepted for that diocese. Bishop Hurley, in turn, contacted Bishop William E. McManus of the Diocese of Fort Wayne/South Bend, to inquire about the seminarian Michael Warfel. With great generosity of heart, Bishop McManus replied: "He is just the kind of priest I am looking for here; but, if he wants to go, I am willing to make that sacrifice for the mission of Alaska." The change of dioceses took place.

The first summer that Michael had become affiliated with the Archdiocese of Anchorage was 1978. He resided that summer at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton parish in Anchorage while working for Catholic Social Services. The following summer, he found himself at St. Mary parish in **Kodiak**. At the end of that summer, in St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

church, Archbishop Hurley ordained him a deacon. During his last year at the seminary, Michael, now a deacon, served for six months at St. Michael parish in Fort Laramie, Ohio. On April 26, 1980, in St. Matthew Cathedral in South Bend, Indiana, he was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Anchorage by Archbishop Hurley.

Father Warfel's first assignment as a priest was to St. Benedict parish in Anchorage, where he served as Associate Pastor with Father Stanley J. **Allie** for four years and with Msgr. Francis A. Murphy for one year. While at St. Benedict, he also served as visiting priest to St. Michael parish in **McGrath**, from 1983-85. During his second year as such, he visited McGrath on the third Sunday of every month. He also spent Christmas and Easter there. This he did to "provide a sense of continuity among the people and to give them a sense of belonging."

In 1985, Father Warfel was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart parish in **Wasilla**. After four and a half years there, he, in 1990, became pastor of St. Mary parish in **Kodiak**. In order to be able to minister more effectively to his Hispanic parishioners there, he learned Spanish, studying it in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico. With a working knowledge in that language, he introduced Masses in Spanish and an outreach program to Kodiak's Spanish-speaking community. In 1995, he was named pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish in Anchorage, where his Spanish language skills proved to be a most valuable asset.

In addition to his interest in Spanish, Father Warfel has had an interest in and a love for Sacred Scripture. In 1990, he received a M.A. degree in Theology from St. Michael's College in Winooski Park, Vermont. Subsequently, he participated in the Jerusalem Scripture Study Program offered by St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

On February 19, 1995, Michael H. **Kenny**, Bishop of **Juneau** at the time, died suddenly while on a trip to Jordan. The Diocese of Juneau was now vacant. On Tuesday, November 19, 1995, Pope John Paul II announced the appointment of Father Warfel as the fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Juneau. Soon after the appointment became public, Archbishop Hurley made the following comments concerning it: "I am most thankful to Pope John Paul II for selecting Father Warfel to be the next Bishop of Juneau. The Holy Father not only recognizes Father Warfel as an excellent priest, but pays honor to Alaska and to the Archdiocese of Anchorage by selecting one of our own."

On December 17, 1996, in Juneau, Michael William Warfel was ordained a bishop by Archbishop Hurley, and formally installed as the fourth Bishop of Juneau. This was the first time a Catholic bishop was ordained in Juneau. It was not long before the people of Southeast Alaska were aware that—in the words of Archbishop Hurley—they had "a pastoral bishop, a zealous and prayerful priest, and a wise and humorous person to carry on the tradition of making the gospel and the Church alive."

From the outset of his tenure as Bishop of Juneau, Bishop Warfel showed himself to be a man of keen insight, honesty and forthrightness, easily approachable, a good

listener and gifted with a sense of humor that puts people at ease in his presence. When asked what will he most miss about living in Alaska he responded quickly, "I'll miss the people!"

While taking his responsibilities as a bishop very seriously, he knows how to relax. He enjoys cross-country skiing, biking and hiking in the wilderness. He has passed through many areas of the Alaskan wilderness, hiked on the High Sierra Trail in Sequoia National Park and circumnavigated Mt. Blanc in France and Mt. Rainier in Washington.

On August 6, 2000, Michael J. **Kaniecki**, S.J., died suddenly of a heart attack at the village of Emmonak. The Diocese of **Fairbanks** was now without a bishop. Within four days, Father Richard D. **Case**, S.J., was elected by the Diocesan Board of Consultors to serve as Diocesan Administrator until such time as a new bishop would be installed. In the third week of October, 2001, however, Rome decided to appoint Bishop Warfel as interim Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Fairbanks--while remaining at the same time Bishop of Juneau. As interim Apostolic Administrator, he assumed all the rights, faculties and duties of a diocesan bishop for the Diocese of Fairbanks. The appointment was made in order to lighten the weight of responsibility that had been placed on Father Case, as well as to enable him to resume some of his former pastoral duties. By October 23rd, Bishop Warfel was in Fairbanks—on the first of his more or less monthly visits to Fairbanks--to meet with chancery personnel and other pastoral staff of the Diocese of Fairbanks. He asked Father Case to stay on as his assistant. Father Case found him "easy to work for," adding, "He has a pastoral style that looks for the good of the people he leads. He places great emphasis on evangelization and the proclamation of God's word." At this same time, Bishop Warfel was serving as Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Evangelization, and as a member of the Administrative Committee for the USCCB.

A month after Bishop Warfel was appointed interim Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Fairbanks, he wrote a letter to its people. In it, he revealed his pastoral concerns: "As far as my vision for parish life," he wrote, "it is one that provides for authentic and heartfelt worship, especially through liturgy and a level of religious education that is truly formational. Thus inspired, members are moved to acts of charity, justice and peace. Obviously, this is a tall order, but I believe it is the vision that must be kept before the Church." He went on to stress that "ministers in the Church, whether ordained, religious or lay, must strive to be holy," adding, "after all, holiness of life is our greatest and most effective tool, if the Church is going to be effective in its essential mission of evangelization."

Bishop Warfel currently is Chair of the Bishop's Subcommittee for Catholic Home Missions and is a member of the Committee for International Policy and Committee on National Collections.