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Bishop Kevin Vann appoints Fr. Bao Thai as new Rector of iconic Christ Cathedral in Diocese of Orange

Description

February 22, 2022

Very Rev. Christopher Smith, the Cathedral's first Rector, to retire after helping transform the campus into an important center of Catholic worship on the West Coast.

The media is invited to a press conference with Bishop Kevin Vann, Bishop Thanh Thai Nguyen, Very Rev. Christopher Smith and Rev. Bao Thai on Friday, Feb. 25 at 2:30 p.m. at the Cultural Center, located on the Christ Cathedral campus in Garden Grove. Members of the media are asked to RSVP to Bradley Zint (bzint@rcbo.org) and Tracey Kincaid (tkincaid@rcbo.org). For more information, call (714) 282-6052.

Fr. Christopher Smith
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Fr. Christopher Smith

Fr. Bao Thai
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Fr. Bao Thai

Garden Grove, Calif. (Feb. 22, 2022) — Bishop Kevin Vann has appointed Reverend Bao Thai, Pastor of St. Cecilia Catholic Church in Tustin, to succeed Very Rev. Christopher Smith as the new Rector of Christ Cathedral, the spiritual home of the Bishop of Orange and a major center of Catholic worship on the West Coast.

Fr. Christopher's retirement, effective July 1, when he will be 70, will complete his transformative 10-year tenure as Episcopal Vicar and Rector of Christ Cathedral, which was dedicated in 2019 after the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange purchased the campus and its buildings in 2012 from Crystal Cathedral Ministries, led by the late Rev. Robert H. Schuller.

Under Fr. Christopher's leadership since 2012, the Cathedral — formerly known as the Crystal Cathedral — was completely renovated and updated to suit the liturgical needs of Orange County's

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Catholics, which includes a diverse population of Hispanic, Caucasian, Vietnamese, Filipino, Samoan and Korean parishioners.

Fr. Christopher is a member of the Diocese of Orange's first class of seminarians who were ordained priests on June 3, 1978. After July 1, he will retain the title of Rector Emeritus of Christ Cathedral and Episcopal Vicar of Special Projects, including the establishment of the St. Callistus Chapel to be built within the cathedral undercroft (the lower level of the cathedral).

"I have discerned that this is the right time to make this change," Fr. Christopher said of ending his full-time responsibilities, which included sharing in the administration of the entire Christ Cathedral campus and pastoring the large parish.

"My life has been transformed by the patience, generosity and zeal of parishioners and all who have been part of this great journey," he added. "This is not the end of the journey for me, but rather a redirection of focus and responsibility. I'm grateful to Bishop Vann and to all parishioners for their care, trust and love for me during my 10 years of service at Christ Cathedral."

Fluent in Vietnamese and English, and with a good knowledge of Spanish and Italian, Fr. Bao, 51, was ordained a priest in June 2003.

"I thank God for the new mission entrusted to me," Fr. Bao said. "I'm grateful to Bishop Kevin Vann and his Episcopal Council for having such confidence in me."

Bishop Vann, the Diocese's bishop since 2012, said it has been a blessing to minister with Fr. Christopher. He noted that he and Fr. Christopher arrived at Christ Cathedral several months apart. Both have similar backgrounds in church music, playing organ and piano.

"I believe our backgrounds were used by the providence of God to help us both lead the historical transformation of the Crystal Cathedral to Christ Cathedral," Bishop Vann said. "Most importantly, we have become good friends in these years. It has been a remarkable journey of faith that has enabled us both to grow in our ministry and priesthood."

Fr. Bao's tenure in the Diocese has included serving as parochial vicar for the parishes of San Francisco Solano (2003-2005), St. Anthony Claret (2005-2007), Holy Family Cathedral (2009-2012) and Our Lady of La Vang (2012-2015). Fr. Bao also served concurrently as parish Administrator of La Purísima Catholic Church for a six-month period in 2020.
Bishop Vann appointed Fr. Bao as Administrator of St. Cecilia in July 2015 and as Pastor in 2017.

Fr. Bao is on the board of the Orange Catholic Foundation and has served two terms on the Diocese's Priests' Personnel Board. He has also served as spiritual adviser for Magnificat and Viet Respect Life, and as chaplain for the Orange County chapter of the Knights of Columbus.

He was also instrumental as an advisory board member for the July 2021 dedication of Christ Cathedral's Our Lady of La Vang Shrine, a contemporary outdoor display devoted to the Virgin Mary as she is believed to have appeared before a group of Vietnamese Catholics in 1798.

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Bishop Vann noted that he spent considerable time at St. Cecilia with Fr. Bao a few years ago while recovering from a surgical procedure.

“My time there helped me to not only know Fr. Bao, but to see his love for his parishioners as their pastor,” Bishop Vann said. “And I got to see firsthand his ability to work with the Vietnamese, Hispanic and Caucasian parishioners of St. Cecilia, which is the same ethnic mix at Christ Cathedral.”

Fr. Bao, who was born in Saigon, Vietnam, is the fourth Vietnamese-American Rector of a Cathedral in the United States, following the appointments of Msgr. Thuong Xuan Le (Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston), Fr. Hanh Van Pham (Diocese of Corpus Christi) and Fr. Quang Minh Dong (Diocese of Oakland). He holds a bachelor’s degree in computer science from Saigon University, a bachelor’s in philosophy from Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon, and Master of Divinity and Master of Arts in spiritual theology from St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo, Calif. He also holds a licentiate of sacred theology in spirituality from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (the “Angelicum”) in Rome.

About the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange
With 1.3 million Catholics, 57 parishes, five Catholic centers and 35 schools, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange is one of the largest and most diverse faith communities in the United States. The Diocese empowers Catholics across Orange County to have an active life of faith that is integrated and woven into the fabric of their daily lives through the community and sacramental life of the Church. Under the leadership of Bishop Kevin Vann, the Diocese works to establish and support dynamic, vibrant parishes and schools welcoming all to live the Gospel with faith, joy, charity and unity. Christ Cathedral, the spiritual home of the Bishop of Orange, was dedicated in July 2019.

Learn more about the Diocese of Orange at **www.rcbo.org**.

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