Bishop delights crowd at his installment

By EDWARD PRATT and JULIE KAY

Bishop Robert W. Muench had more than 1,000 people laughing in the aisles at St. Joseph Cathedral just minutes into his installation speech Thursday afternoon. It was his famous sense of humor spilling out.

Then, the fifth bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge reached out to Catholics, pledging his love for them and promising to give “the best of my ability.”

“You are a great example of what it means to be the Body of Christ,” he told parishioners, state and local government officials and clergy packed into the downtown cathedral. “It is a singular privilege and consummate honor to become your shepherd.”

The colorful ceremony included a procession of more than 50 priests and bishops from across Louisiana and the country. Also in attendance was Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo, the pope’s ambassador to the United States. He read the proclamation from the Vatican officially naming Muench bishop of the Baton Rouge Diocese.

The 59-year-old Muench, who spent the past six years as bishop of the Diocese of Covington, Ky., succeeds Bishop Alfred C. Hughes. Hughes, now the archbishop of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, was one of the installating bishops.
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"The Diocese of Baton Rouge will always be close to my heart," Hughes told the audience.

Hughes, who led the local diocese for six years, joked with Muench, saying, "When I saw that proclamation (naming the new bishop), I did see my name ... but I didn't see your name."

Muench, who carried the crosier, or wooden staff, of the late Bishop Stanley J. Ott with him Thursday, said he was doing so "to honor and remember" the popular third bishop of the diocese.

He walked into the audience to personally thank an elderly wheelchair-bound nun, Sister Mary Alice Russell, whom he said was among several people who "specially encouraged me to be a priest. I thank God for them ..."

The 86-year-old nun whispered after the installation, "I told him not to wait until after high school to make his decision" to go into the priesthood.

Muench, who was reared and educated in New Orleans Catholic schools, brought considerable levity to the solemn occasion.

He said some people have "some curious notions about us," referring to his Louisiana roots.

When he became bishop of Covington, Ky., he received a note from a second-grader who wrote: "Dear Bishop Muench: Welcome to Kentucky. How was it in Louisiana? I think you will like it here — in America."

He said he told a nephew attending LSU "now that I will be in Baton Rouge, I will be glad to help chaperone your college parties. He assured me: 'Oh, I don't have parties at my apartment.' So in just want to announce if anyone gets invited to a party at the apartment of Clifford Morse, don't go; it's got to be a hoax, because Clifford told me he doesn't have parties there."

Muench wasn't finished. He said he went to the Sugar Bowl and helped root LSU to its 47-34 win over Illinois. While at the game in New Orleans, he struck up a conversation with a Tiger fan from Galliano.

"I said I soon would be transferred to Baton Rouge. He said: "Which parish will you be in charge of?" I replied: 'I guess you could say as bishop I will be responsible for all 70 parishes of the diocese.' To which Chris responded: 'Can I get you a beer?"

Before moving on, Muench said, "Let me add words of backing for Southern University, which also has a deservedly loyal following, of which I will be happy to be a part."

Muench will be overseeing 217,000 Catholics in the diocese that includes 70 church parishes and 12 civil parishes. He led some 89,000 Catholics in his former diocese in northern Kentucky.

He told the parishioners, "I cannot guarantee that I will be able to be or do everything everyone would want, or to attend every event, function, meeting or appointment... But what I do pledge to you is that I will strive to the best of my ability to serve."

In his first act as bishop, Muench reappointed the Very Rev. John Carville as vicar general (second in command) of the diocese. Carville served in the same position under Hughes.

Muench reached out to lay leaders, parishioners and volunteers saying "your continuing service will be invaluable."

To the children, he said, "you are a special gift from God to the Church, the world and to me personally. All of us completely and unreservedly rededicate ourselves to your care, development and well-being."

He looked into the sanctuary and told the parishioners "beginning today, I will endeavor to prioritize my identification with you, my assimilation of you and my connection with you. This cannot be achieved instantly or quickly. But know it is a first priority for me."

"From the depth of my heart," he told the audience, "I say to each of you: 'I love you and I always will love you."

Dora Piniero stood outside after the service talking with friends. She called Muench's appointment "wonderful. He seems very nice and he has a good sense of humor. I like that."

Marsha Morse, one of Muench's three sisters, said her brother's humorous side "is just him. That's typical him... You need to be able to laugh."

Cynthia Wynne, whose son is a seminary student, said she wanted to meet Muench's mother. "It looks like her prayers are pretty powerful. Her son is a bishop."

The Rev. Douglas Brougher of New Orleans, a seminary classmate of Muench's, said, "He's one of the friendliest persons you'll meet, but (he's) also good with business."

Brougher, the chaplain at Touro Infirmary, said, "He's just a real person people. You can see he has a sense of humor and I think it's going to be a good fit."

LSU System President William Jenkins said he was "very impressed" by Muench. Jenkins said Muench appears to be "a warm, eager and loving shepherd."

After the ceremony, Muench was standing outside the cathedral with a group of well-wishers as the church bells rang. He asked: "What's going on. Did they name a new pope?"
The three sisters of Bishop Robert W. Muench bring gifts of bread, wine and water to the altar during the installation ceremony. The sisters, from left, are Marsha Morse, Mary Pringle and Jo Ann Talken.