By CHRISTOPHER BAUGHMAN

Greeted by horns and trumpets and accompanied by church leaders from across the country, Bishop Alfred C. Hughes assumed the leadership of the local Catholic community Thursday.

The bells of St. Joseph Cathedral peeled into the evening after church officials installed Hughes as the fourth bishop of the diocese of Baton Rouge.

Pope John Paul II appointed the 60-year-old Boston native to succeed Bishop Stanley J. Ott, who died last year.

Hughes, acknowledging the area's diverse culture, used four languages to greet some 800 people who defied the rain and crammed into the cathedral for the 2½-hour ceremony.

"I...come as a pilgrim from the Northeast and thank you with all my heart for the welcome you are extending and the home you are offering me in Baton Rouge," Hughes said in English during his homily.

He also read short greetings in French, Spanish and Vietnamese.

Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston as well as 40 bishops from around the country and 200 priests formed a procession punctuated by flag bearers that accompanied Hughes into the cathedral.

Bishops Francis Schulte of New Orleans and Agostino Cacciavillan, the pope's representative in the United States, installed Hughes and concelebrated the Mass with him.

Hughes peppered his homily with humor.

Shortly into his talk, Hughes poked fun at himself, Schulte and Ott by commenting on their small frames.

"Archbishop Schulte told me that all new bishops in Louisiana have to approximate his size and stature," Hughes said to laughter.

"And my ability to wear Bishop Ott's vestments will, I understand, balance the diocesan budget this year," he said.
Hughes continued in a light vein when he said he would have no trouble giving up cheering for the New England Patriots professional football team for the New Orleans Saints.

"Patriotism, after all, is only a natural virtue," Hughes said. "Patriotism is of God."

Hughes continued to pay homage to Ott later in his talk.

He used a reading from St. Paul to tie in Ott's public role in the local pro-life movement.

"Life is sacred from the first moment of conception to the moment when God calls us into eternal life," Hughes said.

"Bishop Ott taught this truth so powerfully not only by his public defense of life, but even more movingly by the way he approached his last illness and death," Hughes said.

Hughes noted that the gospel reading dealt with the concept of redemption after sin, a basic Christian belief.

People in the church are at their best when they have the courage to come to God for forgiveness, Hughes said.

God is compassionate, Hughes said, but that compassion does not make light of sin.

God's compassion "presupposes an objective moral truth which we ignore or dismiss at our own peril. It presupposes the reality of sin," Hughes said.

But God's greatest gift, "after life itself," is compassionate forgiveness, Hughes said.

"I stand here as a sinner, loved and forgiven," Hughes said.

"I stand with you even as I am called to be a minister of God's forgiveness for you."

Before the Mass started, both Cacciavillan and Schulte spoke as part of the 55-minute installation ceremony.

Cacciavillan presented a papal document making official Hughes' appointment.

Cacciavillan, speaking in English, spoke for the Congregation of Bishops approving Hughes' appointment.

"We appoint you, freed from prior bonds ... Bishop of Baton Rouge, with all added obligations and offices which the prescriptions of canon law assign to you as you carry out this office," Cacciavillan said.

Schulte thanked the diocese of Boston for sending Hughes to Louisiana.

And he assured Hughes' friends and relatives that local Catholics have accepted Hughes as their new leader.

Hughes' brother, the Rev. Kenneth Hughes, as well as two sisters, Dorothy Callahan and Marie Morgan, attended the ceremony.

"I want to assure you that this Massachusetts Yankee ... has already found, here on the banks of the Mississippi, a new home," Schulte said.

After Schulte spoke, Hughes, wearing a bishop's miter, strode to the cathedra, the red bishop's seat located at the top of four steps behind the altar.

Hughes grasped his cherry wood crosier, the bishop's staff, which friends of Hughes presented to him at his ordination as a bishop in Boston 12 years ago.

Hughes sat for just a second in the cathedra, left empty except by other bishops since Ott's death.

He stood quickly and embraced Schulte and Cacciavillan.

"God bless you, we love you, we welcome you," Schulte said.