



Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski Biography

The Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski was ordained and installed as the sixth Catholic bishop of the Fairbanks Diocese on 15 December 2014. Bishop Zielinski was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1964 and is the oldest in a family of five children. His parents, Donald and Linda Zielinski, moved to Alpena, Michigan, in the mid 1960's, where the future Bishop grew up on a 120-acre farm. The family belongs to St. Bernard Parish where Chad received the Sacrament of Confirmation in 1979.

After graduating from Alpena High School in 1982, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and while stationed in Idaho, attended Boise State College and Park College. At this time he felt a call to serve God as a priest. Having completed his tour of duty in 1986, he entered Mount Angel Seminary in St. Benedict, Oregon where he earned a bachelor's degree with honors in Philosophy in 1989. He was accepted as a seminarian for the Diocese of Gaylord and entered Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit to complete his spiritual formation and theological studies, receiving his Master of Divinity degree in 1996. He was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Patrick R. Cooney at St. Mary Cathedral in Gaylord on June 8, 1996.

Bishop Zielinski's first priestly assignment was as Associate Pastor of Immaculate Conception parish in Traverse City. In 1998, he was appointed Pastor of St. Philip Neri in Empire and St. Rita-St. Joseph in Maple City and was elected to the diocesan Presbyteral Council in 1999. In 2000, he was also named Pastor for Administrative Affairs of the diocesan Mission to Hispanics.

Following the terrorist attacks of 2001, future Bishop Zielinski felt a special tug on his heart to serve God by ministering to the men and women who protect our country. Aware of the great need for Catholic military chaplains, Bishop Cooney released him to serve in the Archdiocese for the Military Services. In 2002, he began his chaplaincy at Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota. From 2003 to 2005 he was stationed in Suffolk, England, before returning to the U.S. and being assigned to HQ Air Force Recruiting Service at Randolph Air Force Base in Schertz, Texas. In 2009, Bishop Zielinski was appointed Roman Catholic Cadet Chaplain at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In 2012 he was called to Alaska to serve as Chaplain to the 354th Fighter Wing at Eielson Air Force Base in Fairbanks, where he was recently contacted by the Apostolic Nuncio telling him of the Pope's decision that he serve as the Bishop of the Fairbanks diocese.

In the course of his military career, Bishop Zielinski served three tours of duty in war zones, including Iraq and Afghanistan. “I guess the Church has prepared me for the military and the military has prepared me for the Church,” he wrote. “We receive orders and we go, whether coming from a general or the Pope.” He has received numerous military awards and decorations for his service, and was promoted to the rank of Major in July of 2013. After his installation, Bishop Zielinski served two years in the Reserves at Eielson Air Force Base and retired on January 1, 2017 as a Major.

As an avid fisherman and an experienced participant in aircraft maneuvers, Bishop Zielinski would seem to be a natural to head a diocese such as Fairbanks where the geographical spread is the largest in the U.S. and where activity in nature is just a snowball’s throw away. Contemplating the future, he wrote “No human person could ever script something like this. I certainly would never have thought in a thousand years this would ever happen to me, as I have never wanted something like this... My simple approach to this call in life is to love the Lord my God with all my heart, all my soul and all my mind, and serve my brothers and sisters in the diocese of Fairbanks. I say this fully knowing I need God’s grace and their talents and abilities to climb a very steep learning curve. We will walk together as sisters and brothers, disciples of Christ, showing His kindness, mercy and compassion as we share the joy of the Gospel.”