



Bishop James Ruggieri is seen at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, Maine, during his May 7 installation as head of the diocese. (Courtesy of Diocese of Portland, Maine/McKenney Photography)

by Greta Gaffin

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

June 11, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

A priest from Providence, Rhode Island, known for heading a food outreach ministry for those in need was ordained as the new Catholic bishop of Portland, Maine, on May 7.

Bishop James Ruggieri was born in Providence and was ordained as a priest there in 1995. He served as the pastor of St. Patrick Parish for more than 20 years, where he ran a ministry that served the hungry of the city every week. They had an in-house kitchen once a week, and would drive into the community to bring food to those in need three times a week.

"I don't cook, but I could drive the truck," Ruggieri told NCR in a recent interview. "Everyone brought a little something."

Fr. Joe Brice, who worked with Ruggieri at St. Patrick, praised his dedication to ministry.

"He didn't wait for people to come to the church, he went out into the streets for the people," said Brice. "The biggest impact is how he ministered to the people as a father, and that he portrays a sense of peace by his very presence."

Ruggieri is excited for new opportunities in Maine, but it will also be a big adjustment for him — he doesn't have one parish now, but dozens.

"I feel like a student, learning so much about the local churches that all bring their beautiful nuances," he told NCR. "As a pastor, I knew what the needs are, but as a bishop, it's magnified. I can't do that myself. Can't just say — I want a soup kitchen! I have to work with the pastors."

Advertisement

Ruggieri said he hopes to strengthen the already existing social ministries of the Portland Diocese, including a soup kitchen [hosted by the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception](#).

"My approach will be to continue to observe needs and get to know priests and the community," he said. "What is the Holy Spirit asking us? I have dreams, but what do people need? What does God want? People in leadership here have insights I don't have."

One growing need in Maine is Spanish language ministry for Latino immigrants in Portland. Ruggieri said he was pleased by a large turnout at a recent Spanish language Mass he celebrated, which also drew some of the members of the

Burundian and Rwandan community. He hopes to continue to work with immigrants as he did in Providence.

In Providence, Ruggieri also turned St Patrick's former elementary school into a high school, providing 100% financial aid to all students. He sees schools as a great way to evangelize, but acknowledges that tuition can present a barrier.



Bishop James Ruggieri is seen at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, Maine, during his May 7 installation as head of the diocese. (Courtesy of Diocese of Portland, Maine/McKenney Photography)

"That's one of the challenges I see as a church — we have great schools, but how do we make them accessible to our families?" he asked.

Maine has nine Catholic grammar schools and two high schools.

"Direct service to the poor and the needy is part of the fiber of the church, and Catholic education is part of that," Ruggieri said.

Fr. Jack Dickinson, the Portland Diocese's judicial vicar, said people in Maine are "very excited" about Ruggieri's appointment.

"He comes with a lot of zeal, and he's very aware of the needs of a parish," said Dickinson, who is also the pastor of St. John Paul II Parish. "He wants to put Jesus Christ as our first and foremost, and work on bringing Jesus to all people."

One particular area Dickinson hopes that Ruggieri can make ground on is vocations, which the new bishop has voiced as a priority. Portland, like many American dioceses, has been ordaining fewer priests than it needs to keep its existing parishes going.

"It's recognizing that vocations don't come out of thin air, and it's not just some magic program — it's helping people grow in their faith," said Dickinson.

The Portland Diocese comprises the entire state of Maine. It is a suffragan diocese of the Boston Archdiocese, and Ruggieri was consecrated by Boston Cardinal Seán O'Malley. Portland has 48 parishes, many of which contain several churches, and about 200,000 Catholics.

Ruggieri has a bachelor's degree from Providence College, and attended St. Mary's Seminary in Maryland. He was ordained to the priesthood by now-retired Providence Bishop Louis Gelineau.

In addition to his long service at St. Patrick, he also served numerous other parishes in the Providence Diocese earlier in his career. He was as vicar forane for Providence Central City and was a member of the diocesan council of priests and the priests'

personnel board.

Ruggieri's episcopal [coat of arms](#) has pine cones for Maine, an anchor for Providence, bread loaves and fish to represent his desire to feed others as Christ did, and the motto "Auspice Maria," Latin for "under the protection of Mary."