

# Utah's faithful praise S.F.'s new archbishop

## He blends church teachings, everyday issues

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**(02-08) 04:00 PST Salt Lake City -- Correction:** This story originally misstated the title of George Niederauer, who will be San Francisco's next Catholic archbishop. Niederauer is archbishop-designate for the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

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When Archbishop-designate George Niederauer leaves the Catholic Church in Utah to become San Francisco's archbishop next week, he will instantly become a principal decisionmaker, negotiating the intersection of faith, dogma and homosexuality.

[\[Listen to podcast of Wyatt Buchanan's interview with Archbishop-designate Niederauer\]](#)

Gay Catholics have praised Niederauer's appointment to lead the San Francisco church because of his progressive stances on some issues, but local gay and lesbian parishioners will be disappointed if they expect the new archbishop to contradict the church on same-sex relationships.

"It is the constant teaching of the church that sexual activity outside of marriage is a serious offense," Niederauer said during a wide-ranging interview with The Chronicle on Friday. The church, he added, also believes marriage is only for heterosexual couples, and he could not foresee either of those positions evolving anytime soon.

"The words of Christ in the 10th chapter of Mark are not going to change miraculously," he said in reference to Jesus' description of the holy union of a man and a woman becoming "one flesh."

In practice, Niederauer is skilled at blending church teaching with the issues people face every day, an attribute noted by several of the parishioners who packed Salt Lake City's Cathedral of the Madeleine for his farewell Mass Sunday.

During his 11 years in Utah, Niederauer made friends and won admirers across traditional social and religious boundaries. The state's governor, who is Mormon, attended the farewell service with his family.

In interviews, parishioners, priests and other church leaders in Salt Lake City praised Niederauer and his work in the diocese. They described him as personable, charismatic and intelligent -- he is a film and classical music fan and holds a doctorate in English literature from the University of Southern California, where he extensively studied the works of his favorite author, Flannery O'Connor.

He appreciates humor, too.

After his grand final procession into the cathedral Sunday that included a brass orchestra, a choir and a legion of caped and sword-carrying Knights of Columbus, Niederauer's first words to the congregation were, "Just another Sunday. An ordinary Sunday."

Niederauer arrived in Utah as its bishop in 1994 after serving two years at a retreat center for priests in Los Angeles and spending 27 years before that teaching English literature at St. John's seminary in Camarillo (Ventura County).

He will arrive in San Francisco four months short of his 70th birthday, replacing former San Francisco Archbishop William Levada, who now serves as the doctrinal watchdog for the Vatican.

"We're going to miss him a great deal. It's San Francisco's gain, truly," said Peggy O'Connor, who attended the farewell Mass.

A gay man -- 60-year-old Adrian Ruiz, an Eastern Orthodox Catholic -- called Niederauer a "great and wonderful man," citing the bishop's openness to people and his pastoral care.

He ministered to -- and praised -- gay and lesbian Catholics while serving and teaching in Los Angeles and is knowledgeable of the gay community's history, referencing in conversation events like the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City that started the modern gay rights movement.

Niederauer comes to San Francisco at a time when many in the city's gay and lesbian Catholic population are demoralized by Vatican statements on homosexuality, including the instruction on gay priests published in November that some conservative bishops claim bars all gay men from the priesthood. Niederauer disagrees. The Vatican instruction, which is a clarification of the church's teaching, states that men "who are practicing homosexuals, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called 'gay culture' " should be barred from entering seminaries and the priesthood.

"I have read the document several times, and I certainly don't hear the document saying, 'Please engage in a witch hunt,' " Niederauer said. He said he doubts it will be necessary to change the

admission policies at St. Patrick's, the Menlo Park seminary he will oversee, and believes a gay man can meet the criteria of the Vatican document and effectively minister.

In San Francisco, Niederauer said, one of his top priorities will be recruiting and training new priests. He noted that Jesus was the first to mention a priest shortage when he said, "The harvest is great, but the laborers are few."

Niederauer said he will meet with staff and faculty of St. Patrick's soon after his installation as archbishop to discuss seminary policies, including the admission of gay men.

The Vatican instruction "is important, and we must pay attention to it, and we must see it in the context of the entire program of priestly formation," Niederauer said.

Since the announcement of his selection as archbishop in December, Niederauer has spent his time preparing the Diocese of Salt Lake City -- which covers the entire state -- for his departure.

"I'm going to have a fairly steep learning curve when I get there," he said of San Francisco. He said he didn't know whether the archdiocese would be forced to sell more property to settle the 11 remaining sex abuse cases in which the church is the primary defendant.

Priests working under Niederauer describe him as a hands-off leader who knows when and how to intervene in conflicts and controversies.

In 2004, Niederauer and the diocese publicly opposed a constitutional amendment, approved by Utah voters, to ban same-sex marriages.

"All three candidates for the office of attorney general ... had opposed it, including the Mormon Republican incumbent. They did so because they thought it was poorly drawn," Niederauer said.

"I did not urge people to vote no, I said I would not endorse it, I would not ask them to vote yes." He also said the law was also unnecessary because same-sex marriages already are outlawed in Utah.

Niederauer said his 11 years in Salt Lake City taught him humility.

"The single most important lesson I learned is how unimportant ultimately I am all by myself," he said. "The example I use sometimes is a symphony -- the conductor is important, but he's the only person on stage not making a sound."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/02/08/MNG6CH4RGT1.DTL>

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