“Joseph Louis Bernardin was simply one of the preeminent bishops of the past century. He achieved that privileged status through his always prudent and authentic understanding and pursuit of the Church’s tradition and her potential. While he enjoyed the confidence of the USA Bishops because of repeated situations in the post-Conciliar era wherein he displayed an extraordinary capacity to bring respected consensus to difficult circumstances, he eventually suffered at the hands of those who chose to pursue an ecclesial vision of intransigence and reaction. I consider myself a fortunate man to have witnessed his faith and pastoral style firsthand and to have learned most of all from his example. He never lost the common touch and this made him both an approachable pastor and a credible church guide. There are few bishops today who might be considered his equal in wisdom or genius. This new biography gives us an excellent perspective on how this extraordinary man of faith and pastoral skill developed those virtues throughout his life. It will only add to his stature and hopefully confirm our respect for this extraordinary shepherd of souls.”

—Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory
Archdiocese of Atlanta

“Joseph Bernardin was one of the most influential Catholic leaders of the second half of the twentieth century. His pastoral, administrative, and teaching ability was clearly evident as he served the Church through some extraordinary times. In this book, Steven Millies informs us of the many issues of Church life and societal complexities the Cardinal addressed and impacted through his forty-four years as a priest and thirty years as a bishop. He was truly a man of peace. From my own perspective, Steven captured well the persona of this wise and gentle leader beloved by so, so many.”

—Monsignor Kenneth Velo
DePaul University
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of First Presbyterian Church of Durham and Duke University generously shared some of his personal mementos and his time with me. He and I met in the home of his mother, Louise, at the table where Fr. Bernardin sometimes used to come have Sunday breakfast after Mass. They both helped me understand Cardinal Bernardin’s life better. The cardinal’s cousin, Anita Orf, provided some of her memories about the Bernardin family. Rev. Mark Francis, CSV, president of the Catholic Theological Union, and Sheila McLaughlin, the director of CTU’s Bernardin Center, also were very generous to share their time and resources with me. Father Al Spilly not only gave an enlightening interview about the cardinal, but provided gracious hospitality at his new home in the Archdiocese of San Antonio. Father Louis J. Cameli of the Archdiocese of Chicago was kind to spend a morning recalling the cardinal with me, and Fr. Richard Rohr found moments in his busy schedule to recall fondly his “Cardinal Protector.” I was pleased to meet an Aiken neighbor, Joan McGinty, who once worked for Archbishop Paul Hallinan and spent an afternoon talking to me about that marvelous shepherd, and Fr. Thomas Nolker spoke to me about his time as Archbishop Bernardin’s assistant in Cincinnati.

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Steven P. Millies
Aiken, South Carolina
August 25, 2015
Feasts of Saint Joseph of Calasanz
and Saint Louis of France
Note on Sources

Most of Cardinal Bernardin’s papers are housed at the Archdiocese of Chicago’s Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Archives and Records Center. The archdiocese’s archival policies dictate that an archbishop’s papers shall not be available for researchers until twenty-five years after his death. For this reason, the Bernardin papers were not fully processed at the time when I viewed them. This creates a dilemma when I cite to these sources, since the organization of the documents is quite likely to be different after 2021.

The “Addresses and Talks” collection most probably will be unaffected by future processing. They are in a digital database, a really marvelous resource. Many of the collections that are cited throughout this book almost certainly will be affected. In consultation with the archival staff, I have elected to identify those collections by these names:

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Subject Files
Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Speeches and Talks
“Our Communion, Our Peace, Our Promise” Series
School Closings Series (1990)
“The Family Gathered Here Before You” Series

I encourage future researchers to bear in mind some of my citations’ transitory condition, even as I hope this book enriches their future work.
In citing works in the notes, short titles generally have been used. Works frequently cited have been identified by the following abbreviations:


NCCB  NCCB Collection. American Catholic History Research Center.

PJH  Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan Collection. Archdiocese of Atlanta Office of Archives and Records.

PSF  Priest Subject Files. Diocese of Charleston Archives.

Joseph Bernardin


WCB  Diocese of Charleston Archives, Fr. William C. Burns Subject Files.
Cardinal Joseph Bernardin carried a copy of the Prayer of Saint Francis with him in his pocket. Sometimes he referred to the prayer in his speeches or homilies. At a particularly difficult meeting, when he knew people were going to be tense and the stakes were high, he would pull the text out of his pocket and offer it as an opening prayer. Surely, he had no need to read the prayer from a card. He must have known it by heart:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

Yet, these familiar words of reconciliation were worth getting exactly right. There were two things about Joseph Bernardin that everyone around him knew they could depend on. He wanted to reconcile people, and his precise personality wanted everything to be done just right.
The influence of Franciscan spirituality on Joseph Bernardin at first may be surprising. So far as any part of his well-documented public life tells us, he had no particularly obvious Franciscan connection. But Joseph did feel a deep connection to St. Francis throughout his life. First, Joseph was the son of Italian immigrants. Throughout his life, that heritage remained important to him, and it shaped his spiritual life. It is not surprising that Joseph felt close to the poor man of Assisi, who lived and died just down the Adriatic coast from his ancestral home in the mountains of northern Italy. Then there is Joseph’s lifelong devotion to peacemaking. Joseph Bernardin spent his lifetime bringing people together over their differences, succeeding more often than not because of his always thorough preparation and the genuine respect he showed to everyone. Finally, Joseph’s lifetime in the church was one spent on much the same mission given to Francis: “Go and repair my house.” As St. Francis had reformed the church of the thirteenth century, Joseph’s ministry was absorbed by realizing the potential in the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Joseph was a devoted churchman. He loved the church. More than anything, he wanted the church to be even more relevant to the world we live in and to address more directly the joys and the hopes, the griefs, and the sorrows of the men and women of today. No mission could have meant more to him than to play his role in making that happen.

Monsignor Ken Velo, in the well-remembered homily at Cardinal Bernardin’s funeral, asked the questions over and over: Didn’t he teach us? Didn’t he show us the way? The answers to those questions only can be found in an examination of his life.
CHAPTER ONE

An Immigrant Family (1928–66)

Joseph Louis Bernardin was born in South Carolina—and he arrived there only a short time after his parents.

Giuseppe Bernardin, his father, was a stonecutter and the second-youngest of six brothers who came to the United States between 1907 and 1920 to seek their fortunes.¹ These sons of Maddalena and Gaspare Bernardin all left their home in Tonadico di Primiero, a tiny hamlet fixed in the heart of the Dolomites and, at that time, a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was there that they learned the stonecutter’s trade, against the backdrop of those dramatic, limestone peaks that surrounded their home. Antonio, Giovanni, and Gaspare were the three eldest, and they came first to Barre, Vermont, in 1907. Barre had been attracting stonemasons throughout the nineteenth century, having proclaimed itself the “Granite Capital of the World.” But by 1920, the Bernardins had relocated to South Carolina where rich deposits of blue granite and a need for skilled craftsmen to work the stone made a more attractive opportunity.
Giacomo followed his brothers to America in 1914, then Giuseppe in 1919, and Severino in 1920.

None of these brothers planned to stay in America. Instead, they hoped to make their fortunes and return home. But first came the Depression, then World War II, and by 1945 their families had become so well established that there seemed to be no reason to leave. Indeed, visiting home shortly after the war ended, the Bernardins all felt certain they were better off in America than in war-ravaged Europe. The Bernardins would be Americans after all.

Giuseppe was twenty-nine when he came to the United States, moving into a crowded home with his brothers Giovanni, Gaspare, and Giacomo, and their families. (By 1920 Antonio was living at a different address in Columbia.) At one time or another, all of these brothers worked as stonecutters for the Columbia Granite Company, where Giovanni had risen to manager. Immigration records do not confirm precisely when Giuseppe and his younger brother, Severino, returned to Italy for a visit in the mid- to late-1920s, but both spent their time back in Tonadico courting two sisters—Maria Simion and Lina Simion. Giuseppe returned to the United States on September 21, 1927, with his new bride Maria. The marriage had been celebrated in Italy, and Maria already was pregnant when she arrived in the United States. Joseph Louis would be born just seven months later, practically an immigrant himself.

A dark cloud hung over this happy story of immigrant striving and new marriage. Giuseppe already had suffered from cancer before he met Maria. He had cancerous tumors surgically removed before he emigrated to the United States, but he seemed healthy and fully recovered when he became Maria’s suitor. Even so, he insisted that Maria be fully informed by his doctors in Tonadico about his health prob-
lems before he would hear her agree to marry him. Maria was undeterred, and the marriage went off shortly thereafter. The couple set off for their new home in America looking forward to a happy and prosperous life together. Perhaps even that early, they knew that they already had begun a family.

Joseph Bernardin was only six years old when his father died in 1934. The cancer returned in the form of sarcoma, a malignant growth of the soft tissues such as cartilage, fat, or muscle. Giuseppe’s physician recorded on his death certificate that he suffered from sarcomas on his shoulder, neck, and head. We also know from Joseph’s recollection that doctors tried to remove the tumors once they recurred. In his spiritual memoir, *The Gift of Peace*, Joseph remembered a time when he was very young. Young Joseph had fallen. He had not hurt himself but was frightened in that way that a sudden shock will make small children cry. Giuseppe had just had surgery to treat a tumor in his left shoulder, but Joseph describes a clear memory of his father racing to him, picking him up, and cradling him. From his father’s arms, young Joseph could see the blood soak through Giuseppe’s bandages and shirt from the exertion. “He paid no attention to himself,” Joseph recalled, and “all he wanted was to be sure I was all right.” The truth is that the historical record does not tell us very much more about Giuseppe Bernardin. Like so many immigrants who came to the United States looking for their fortunes, his legacy is less found in the details of his daily life or what he thought about the problems of his time than it is with the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren he left behind. Much like the raw granite he shaped as a stonemason, his descendants bear the imprint of his work, his care, his personality, and the love with which he devoted himself to them. In one sense we
cannot really know Giuseppe from where we are today. There is no record of his life to match the record of his son’s life. But in a greater sense, though he was only six years old when Giuseppe died, we do know him through Joseph and the Bernardin family. There is no doubt Joseph was aware of that, too.

After Giuseppe’s death, life was hard for Maria and her children. Joseph’s sister Elaine was born just months before Giuseppe died. Once the family patriarch was gone, Maria and her two children were left to face life in the Depression. But they were not left alone. They had each other, of course. They also had uncles, aunts, and cousins—all of the members of the growing Bernardin family living in the United States. And, of course, Maria had her sister Lina who had married Giuseppe’s brother Severino. After Giuseppe’s death, the two families lived together for a time. Giuseppe’s children, Joseph and Elaine, grew up together with Lina and Severino’s children, John and Anita. In that home Joseph knew the closeness of family perhaps better than he might otherwise have known it because of his father’s death. That closeness would remain throughout Joseph’s life. He never would lose the ties of intimacy with his Bernardin family. Looking back, Joseph remembered that “the Bernardin family is known to be a very gentle, reconciling influence. I didn’t know my father well, but my uncles and the other members of my family who still reside in Italy are peaceful, calm people who always tried to see good in others and tried to reconcile differences.”

In the years that followed, cousin John Bernardin’s wife, Libby, would echo that description to describe Joseph and his family this way: “He had a wonderfully quiet, gentle way. And patience, that’s another Bernardin trait. They are patient, understanding and loving men . . . the most wonderful men I’ve ever met.” Joseph’s friend and biographer,
Eugene Kennedy, credited Joseph’s Italian Mediterranean heritage for those gentle qualities of personality that Libby ascribed to all of the Bernardins and which figured so prominently in Joseph’s public ministry. But one last note may be worth making about the Bernardin family heritage and how much it was visible in Joseph’s life and ministry. Tonadico di Primiero is not simply another Italian hamlet. The Trento region in northern Italy, where Tonadico is located, sits at a European crossroads. Lying only a two-hour drive from the present-day Austrian border and a three-hour drive from the Slovenian border, the history of this region does not permit us simply to say it is Italian.

When most of the Bernardin brothers left Tonadico, Trento still was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Joseph’s uncle Giovanni Bernardin reported on census forms and ship manifests between 1923 and 1957 that his ethnicity was German, and Giacomo Bernardin’s 1914 record of entry into the United States reports him to have been Magyar. There is no doubt that the Bernardins were ethnically Italian: Joseph and his family spoke Italian, cooked Italian foods, and identified as Italian. But those records about Giovanni and Giacomo help us to understand the complexity of life in the Dolomites. At least three distinct linguistic and cultural groups live there today side by side: Italian, German, and Ladin. It is not uncommon in this region for each town to have a widely recognized German name to accompany its Italian name. (Tonadico also is known as Thunadlich.) These cultures have learned to live together through the centuries, regardless of the political winds that have blown the borders in different directions. German speakers are free to speak German, Italians to speak Italian, and even the Ladin minority can find its heritage represented on the trilingual traffic signs. The gentleness, patience, and willingness to tolerate other points
of view that Libby Bernardin saw among the Bernardin men—and which the world saw in Joseph’s ministry—must have owed something to the climate of a part of Europe, more Alpine than Mediterranean, where so many different people had learned to get along.

The ability to get along probably served young Joseph Bernardin well as an Italian and a Catholic in South Carolina only seventy years after the conclusion of the Civil War. The narrative of the South’s noble, lost cause already had hardened a sense of southern identity not just against the North but also against all outsiders. At the end of a period in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that saw tens of millions of immigrants flood into the United States, the 1930 census found that South Carolina was home to the lowest number of persons with foreign parents (6,477—about 0.3 percent of the population) in the nation, with North Carolina and Georgia not far ahead. The same census found that South Carolina was home to only 188 persons born in Italy, and records show that less than 1 percent of the state’s population was Catholic at that time. Looking back on those years, however, Joseph would recall that “we experienced ecumenism in Columbia then at the practical and personal level long before people in other parts of the country.”6 Surrounded by Protestants, in a southern culture that must have regarded them as outsiders, the Bernardins learned to live with other people just as the Italians had learned to live alongside the Germans in Tonadico. Joseph hardly was alone to look back fondly on the opportunities he had growing up in such diverse circumstances, perhaps sometimes seeing the world from the perspective of an outsider. In 1983 Joseph’s sister Elaine looked back to say that “I’m satisfied we were much better off than [if we had grown up] in a big city neighborhood with nothing but other
Italian Catholics.” Her brother agreed, and “said he was never aware of feeling any prejudice as a Roman Catholic.”

Through his father’s illness and death, in the strange way that it happens sometimes in life, this perspective on a different, more diverse world outside the comfort of an Italian Catholic enclave opened for Joseph. Of course, without the gentle influence of his father and his family, young Joseph would not have been a person who recognized the opportunity that different perspective gave him.

But personality and natural dispositions count for something, too. Every available report tells us that Joseph was a serious and thoughtful boy. His aunt, Lina Simion Bernardin, recalled that “I never had to spank him.” His sister recalled that Joseph was “well-rounded,” and, “He worked at odd jobs around the house and in the neighborhood. He had a lot of friends and he had time to spend with everyone, young and old.” Perhaps it could not have been otherwise. To have lost a father and find his mother depending on him when he was only six years old must have had an impact on young Joseph. Eugene Kennedy wrote, “Joseph learned as he grew up that hardship was not softened by escape,” and “this bred a deep, spiritual sense into Joseph Bernardin’s bones, I understood after we became friends.”

Little surprise, then, that Joseph began to nurture a vocation to the priesthood while he was a young man. Much later, his executive assistant in Chicago, Monsignor Ken Velo, would remember the influence of priests Joseph knew in Columbia as a young man. Eugene Kennedy named, in particular Fr. Charles Sheedy and Msgr. Martin Murphy as priests Joseph had remembered to him. But Joseph, himself, was careful to give credit also to “The Sisters of Charity who run the hospital [Providence Hospital in Columbia]—Sister Mary Julia in particular” for encouraging him to consider the religious life.
Joseph’s path to the priesthood was not an easy one. Graduating from Columbia High School in 1944, he earned a scholarship to the University of South Carolina and decided to enter the premed program. Perhaps it is not surprising that a young man who saw doctors and nurses tend to his ailing father, who came to know the sisters at Providence Hospital so well, thought about becoming a doctor. But as Joseph told the story, two priests he knew helped him to understand that his desire to become a physician signaled a desire to serve others. Those priests nurtured the idea that Joseph could follow through on that desire and help people even more meaningfully if he became a priest. It was one thing for Joseph to come to that understanding; helping his mother to understand that was quite a different thing.

Maria was like a lot of immigrant parents who came to the United States and wanted a better life for their children. As Maria regarded her only son: “Becoming a doctor was a pathway up; becoming a priest was a continuing commitment to poverty.” One family member recalled “a tense scene on the steps of St. Peter’s Church where Maria Bernardin bawled out Msgr. Murphy for having an undue influence on Joe’s decision” to pursue the priesthood. Maria had not changed her mind even after young Joseph had a successful interview with Charleston Bishop Edmund Walsh for admission to the priesthood. A few days after that interview, Joseph wrote to the bishop saying, “My mother is not in favor of my entering the seminary,” and asking whether he could delay admission. Joseph wrote, “While she would not force her will upon me in such an important matter, nevertheless, she tries to dissuade me from entering. She will not succeed and she half knows it. I had hoped to enter the seminary this coming September. That would have given me plenty of time to make her see things my way, or
to soften the blow a bit.”¹⁷ Despite those difficulties, however, Joseph entered St. Mary’s College in Kentucky to begin his study for the priesthood in September 1945.

Compared to his classmates, Joseph began seminary at a disadvantage. Having spent his first year of college preparing to study medicine at the University of South Carolina and having attended a public high school, he had no Latin. At this time, twenty years before the Second Vatican Council, no one could be a priest without at least a working knowledge of that otherwise little-used language. In fact, even to study for the priesthood in those days demanded some Latin. It was for that reason that Walsh selected St. Mary’s in Kentucky for the young seminarian, Joseph Bernardin. It was a place where Latin would be taught, rather than a place that assumed Latin was already known by seminarians. Joseph made rapid progress in his studies. His grade reports were uniformly excellent, and he was bold enough in April 1946 to write to Walsh that his Latin was better, asking whether he might study philosophy at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Walsh sent him to St. Mary’s in Baltimore instead, where he studied until 1948.

Still, Joseph would go to Washington. The diocesan chancellor, Msgr. John L. Manning, wrote to the rector of Theological College on the campus of Catholic University in February 1948 to plead for Joseph’s admission. “This young man has made such good grades in his studies,” wrote Manning, “that the Bishop would like to have him in Washington for theology, and at the same time to have him work for a Master’s degree in Education at the Catholic University.”¹⁸ To pursue the degree in education was, in fact, Joseph’s request. Walsh, through Manning, obliged happily, with Manning adding, “We have no doubt that he will be able
to do this.” Later, Joseph would find himself a teacher at Charleston’s Bishop England High School and enmeshed in educational issues during his ministry as a bishop. His interest in education as a way of helping people was plain even at this early moment.

The academic work at Theological College was more challenging than the work Joseph had done at both St. Mary’s. His grades reflect the greater challenge, especially in homiletics and even in scripture. Little surprise, though, that this man who would grow to become a consummate church administrator earned an A in Administrative Church Systems, shown on a January 1950 grade report. By March 1950 Joseph would apply to Charleston’s new bishop, John Joyce Russell, for tonsure and admission to minor orders, and he was well on his way to the date of his ordination.

The arrival of Bishop Russell in Charleston was an important event in the priestly career of Joseph Bernardin, though no one could have known it in 1950. Edmund Walsh had been bishop of Charleston since before Joseph’s birth, consecrated and installed in 1927 at the age of thirty-five. Walsh’s assignment to Youngstown, Ohio, in 1950, the event that brought Russell to Charleston, ended more than two decades of stability in the Diocese of Charleston and precipitated a remarkable fifteen-year period that would see four bishops rotate in and out of the diocese by 1965. In his later years, upon his appointment to Atlanta as an auxiliary bishop, Joseph would look back to recall all that he had learned from the four bishops of Charleston he served as a priest. To have been made America’s youngest Roman Catholic bishop, Joseph observed, was due to reasons “completely unrelated to personal qualities.” Rather, being a young priest of unusual administrative ability, Joseph had found himself in the right place at the right time—in a diocese that said goodbye to
three bishops in seven years. Joseph Bernardin had been the indispensable man in the Diocese of Charleston, he had learned much from it, and church leaders had noticed.

But before any of that could begin, Joseph would need to be ordained a priest, which took place on April 26, 1952, at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Columbia. Preparations for that happy event began more than a year earlier, even before Joseph’s ordination to the diaconate in October 1951 by Washington’s Cardinal Patrick O’Boyle. In January 1951 St. Joseph’s pastor Fr. Alfred Kamler began writing to Russell to secure an ordination date at St. Joseph. No doubt, the Bernardin family’s Columbia roots had much to do with Kamler’s insistence. Kamler renewed his request in November 1951. Still with no reply, perhaps in part to remind Russell, he wrote again on December 9, 1951, to ask whether Joseph might preach at Midnight Mass and distribute Communion while home from Theological College for Christmas. Thus, Joseph Bernardin preached his first homily at the Midnight Mass of 1951 (though Russell found “no grave reason for Mr. Bernardin to give Holy Communion”). Russell finally confirmed the ordination date in February 1952, and the ordination took place on Kamler’s preferred date. Father Joseph Bernardin celebrated his first solemn High Mass the next day, the Third Sunday of Easter.

Joseph’s first priestly assignment came at St. Joseph’s in Columbia, where he had been ordained and where Kamler had been so keen to bring him on board. Columbia was comfortable for Joseph, near his mother and his sister, and by then St. Joseph was their home parish. Even these early years of his priesthood were not quiet. Before 1952 was over, Joseph was appointed the diocesan director of the CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) and the director of vocations. Even more unbelievably, in 1952 Joseph joined the faculty
at Bishop England High School, located one hundred miles southeast of St. Joseph’s, near Charleston. In those days when priests were more plentiful, Joseph’s duties in Columbia at St. Joseph’s probably were rather light. Perhaps he spent the week in Charleston at Bishop England and returned to Columbia for weekends. But what seems most clear is that Joseph, who had asked to study education while he was at Catholic University, was a priest whose ministry was being tailored to serve young people. That began to change after only a year, when Joseph was transferred in 1953 from St. Joseph’s to the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Charleston. Perhaps the transfer was to ease Joseph’s travel, but its effect was to bring him more closely into the administrative functions of the bishop’s office, the chancery. Joseph kept his role as CYO director for another year, remained director of vocations until 1960, and became the chaplain to Catholic students at The Citadel, a military academy near Charleston, when he came to St. John the Baptist. While he was in Charleston, Russell began to notice that this young priest had a talent for administration. An abrupt change in the direction of his ministry would take place barely two years after Joseph’s ordination, and that change of direction would be the first step in a pattern of increasing responsibility that followed him throughout the rest of his life. In 1954 Joseph would be appointed vice chancellor for the Diocese of Charleston, and he became chancellor in 1956. (In the language of the twenty-first century, a diocesan chancellor would be like a chief operating officer.) Just four years after his ordination, Joseph Bernardin was administrating the Diocese of Charleston on a day-to-day basis.

The event that would begin to shape the rest of Joseph’s life took place on July 3, 1958, when word came that Russell
would leave the Diocese of Charleston, having been appointed the bishop of Richmond in Virginia. As a result of Russell’s leaving, Joseph would meet the man who became the eighth bishop of Charleston, Paul Hallinan. Hallinan became a mentor and a father figure to Joseph for the rest of his life and also would be responsible for his becoming a bishop. Hallinan was appointed bishop of Charleston on September 9, 1958, and first met Joseph about three weeks later in Richmond, at Russell’s installation Mass. The two carried on an active correspondence between September and November, full of Hallinan’s questions about the diocese and Joseph’s detailed replies. Later, when Joseph looked back on this time, he was still “impressed with the new bishop’s inquisitive mind and his desire to learn all he could” about the Diocese of Charleston.  

Hallinan would be the second of four bishops to preside over Charleston between 1958 and 1964. All four would depend on Joseph’s help, but Joseph would hold none in the affection he reserved for Hallinan. Bishop Hallinan’s curiosity about the diocese resonated well with young Joseph’s detail-oriented work ethic. Joseph wrote appreciatively in 1962: “When Bishop Paul J. Hallinan first received notice of his appointment as the eighth Bishop of Charleston on September 9, 1958, South Carolina was little more than a name for him. . . . When he walked down the aisle of the Cathedral for his solemn Installation two months later, Hallinan had learned much more about the diocese.” Hallinan was a man accustomed to taking his work seriously. He began a PhD in history in 1953, many years before he came to Charleston. Progress on his degree was slowed considerably by his ministry as bishop, but Joseph recalled later how “Hallinan kept two desks in his study, one for diocesan business, the other for historical research to which, often late at night, he would turn his
attention after he had fulfilled his episcopal responsibilities for the day.”23 Western Reserve University would award Hallinan’s degree in 1963, ten years after he had begun it, making Hallinan the only sitting archbishop in history to earn a doctoral degree from an American university.

As time went on, it became clear that the affinity between Hallinan and Joseph would cover a lot more ground than just their serious devotion to hard work. Hallinan came to South Carolina as a northerner, born and raised in Ohio. His introduction to the American South of the midcentury included an indoctrination in its peculiar social structures. In his diary Hallinan recorded that visiting the parish in a small South Carolina city, he found “two Catholic churches, two schools, and two halls (one for whites and one for blacks), and he admitted that he found the reality of segregation even more confusing than the theory.”24 More disturbing, in 1959 Hallinan learned about Catholic hospitals turning away patients because they were African American. In a letter to the administrator of St. Francis Xavier hospital in Charleston, he described “a woman who was criticized in Confession because she did not have the fetus baptized in a miscarriage, and when asked by the priest why she had not gone to a Catholic hospital, had to reply: ‘I couldn’t—I’m Negro.’ ”25 Confronted with these embarrassing injustices, Hallinan embarked on a firm course toward racial integration in his diocese. In Joseph he found a willing and helpful ally.

In an undated talk titled “The Church and the Negro,” Joseph described the history of African American Catholics in South Carolina. Joseph pointed toward the work of nineteenth century bishops England and Lynch, as well as other efforts to reach out to African American Catholics. Joseph was rather frank about the prospects in his own time, at one
point saying, “There will have to be a lot of soul-searching on the part of many white Catholics. Certainly the events of the past several years in the field of race relations have raised problems of conscience for many. Ultimately, in order to resolve these problems there will have to be a change of mind and heart. The virtues of justice and charity will not co-exist with some of the thinking that is now prevalent.”

A few years later, the Knights of Columbus posed a more pointed problem, and Joseph was perhaps even more pointed in reply. Resistance to integration of the Knights across the South had been so widespread that a separate organization was created for African American Catholics, the Knights of St. Peter Claver, which by 1950 had grown to 11,000 members. Joseph delivered this message in person to the state council and local councils of the Knights for South Carolina:

If we are going to stay in step with the Church; if we want to continue our status as an organization which is officially approved by the Church and one which works with the Church in accomplishing her mission, then we must face up to our moral responsibility in this matter and welcome as a member any Catholic men who qualifies [sic] according to the standards which have been accepted for membership in the past. While I am realistic enough to realize that such a policy will not immediately find acceptance by the entire membership, it is the only course of action which will bring honor to the Church and to the order.

Certainly Joseph was encouraged by Hallinan’s determination to integrate the Diocese of Charleston. But there can be little doubting Joseph’s own instinctive inspiration to strike out against racial discrimination.

By 1960 Hallinan had resolved to pursue integration as speedily as prudent across the diocese. In a pastoral letter
issued together with the bishops of Atlanta and Savannah, Hallinan promised that “Catholic pupils, regardless of color, will be admitted to Catholic schools as soon as this can be done with safety to the children and the school. Certainly this will be done not later than the public schools are opened to all pupils.”

Joseph watched all of this unfold up close, observing the courage of Hallinan that marched hand in hand with pastoral sensitivity. Even as a time came when Joseph feared that Hallinan would waver under the pressure, Hallinan reassured him: “I have only started and I never give up.”

In 1961 Joseph became the director of Catholic cemeteries for the Diocese of Charleston. Being a leader in the church is not only a matter of writing homilies and pastoral letters, after all. The church has more practical needs that come with attending to the spiritual needs of people or confronting social injustices. Schools and hospitals, shelters and soup kitchens do not just support themselves. They require stewardship. Joseph had a chance to learn this sort of stewardship when he was faced daily with the responsibilities of making business decisions as the director of cemeteries.

Before 1962 ended, two important things happened. Hallinan left Charleston, having been appointed archbishop of Atlanta. But before Hallinan left Charleston, it seems that he had arranged for Joseph to be named Domestic Prelate of His Holiness—in plainer English, barely ten years after his ordination, Joseph now was Msgr. Bernardin at the tender age of thirty-four. The title probably was a sign of Hallinan’s personal regard for Joseph as much as it was the traditional reward in those days for a priest who had built a new parish building or, in this case, one who had opened a new cemetery. The year 1962 would be another one of uncertainty in Charleston as Hallinan
gave way to Bishop Francis Reh, and the transition would bring another opportunity for Joseph to demonstrate his administrative skill.

Bishop Reh was named to the Diocese of Charleston on June 4, 1962, and installed on July 18. Scarcely two months later, Reh named Joseph as vicar general for the diocese. In canon law, the vicar general is second in authority only to the bishop. (Thinking of the diocesan chancellor as a chief operating officer, the vicar general like a chief executive officer.) In Catholic theology, a bishop holds three offices as the shepherd of his diocese—to teach, to sanctify, and to govern. The vicar general is the bishop’s primary assistant with respect to governing and, for Joseph Bernardin, this opportunity to govern in Reh’s name came at an important time. The Second Vatican Council kept Reh out of Charleston for long stretches. Reh’s lengthy absences left his young vicar general in charge of the Diocese of Charleston. For the period while he was in Rome at the council, Reh delegated to Joseph the authority:

- to appoint parochial vicars & assistants
- to remove parochial vicars
- to issue dismissorial letters
- to inflict penalties ad homine
- to absolve in external forum apostates, heretics, and schismatics.31

Needless to say, Joseph’s authority covered a lot of ground! Certainly, the list demonstrated that Joseph was growing accustomed to governing a diocese much as a bishop does—and his fortieth birthday was most of a decade away. As his father’s death left Joseph with a lot of responsibility for his family at a young age, here again Joseph exercised responsibility for the
pastoral needs of a diocese at an age when many priests still were living in their first rectory.

Circumstances beyond his control put Joseph in that position of responsibility. The quick succession of bishops, from Russell to Hallinan to Reh, was one thing. But the Second Vatican Council opened wide the doors and windows to the world for Joseph Bernardin as much as it did for the church. The council met in Rome for four sessions from 1962–1965, each session lasting about two or three months. In practical terms, accounting for travel time and time spent in Rome preparing for sessions to begin, this meant that Reh was away from his Charleston diocese for five of the twenty-six months he was bishop. While it was true that during this period Reh took the unusual step of appointing Msgr. Martin Murphy to be co-vicar general (“when the territory of a diocese is extensive, Canon Law allows the appointment of more than one Vicar General”), Joseph found himself spending much of the conciliar period functioning as a bishop.32 Perhaps it was with this in mind that Joseph would recall later that his “entire episcopal ministry has taken place in [the Council’s] shadow.”33 Indeed, in a way we can say it began with the council.

That observation raises another point. Joseph was ordained in 1952, and he was a priest for ten years before the council even began. Perhaps it is difficult to imagine Joseph Bernardin chanting in Latin at the Mass while facing away from the people, but it happened many times during his young priesthood. He was a well-established priest when the council began. Those who knew him as a young priest remember his presidential style at Mass was formal, even a bit rote, in the style of the pre-Vatican II liturgy. Already, he was a monsignor when the council began, and many men in the priesthood would be comfortably set in their ways
by that time. Yet Joseph embraced the council. The event transformed his ministry and his life. That transformation could be seen in the change that came over his celebration of the Mass, after he had grown through the council into “an effective preacher and presider.” Joseph’s close relationship with Hallinan helps this make more sense. Hallinan was a passionate advocate for liturgical reform, and his years as bishop of Charleston were “a period during which an intensive effort was made to give the laity a greater appreciation of the significance and beauty of the liturgy,” beginning in 1958 even before Pope John called for an ecumenical council. Hallinan understood keenly that “the chief transformation” that would accompany the liturgical renewal would be one having an effect on the people “personally, on the parish, on the Church.” Joseph was moved by the liturgical renewal, and by the way it transformed life inside the church. Shortly after the council, he said, “Within the framework which has been established by lawful authority, we should always be looking for new, imaginative ways of making the Liturgy more understandable, more relevant to our lives.”

It was more than renewal of the liturgy or changes in the church that animated Joseph during these critical years. Opportunities for contact between the Roman Catholic Church and other religious traditions, brought out of the shadows by the council, seized Joseph’s imagination and would stay with him for the rest of his life. “My vision,” he said, “certainly has been expanded as a result of Vatican II.” He embraced a spirit of reconciliation at a meeting of the Council of Churches in Beaufort, South Carolina, around 1965, describing a “new spirit of fraternal charity” that made it possible for the church “to admit that, because of the frail human element in the Church, we are as responsible
as anyone else for the difficulties which have resulted in a divided Christendom.” Over time he extended that reconciling impulse not only to include fellow Christians, but to launch an extraordinary outreach to the Jewish community that culminated in his historic journey to Israel in 1995. All of this began in Joseph’s willing “yes” to the council, his assent of mind and spirit that changed his priesthood and charted a course for the rest of his life.

In 1965 barely two years after arriving in Charleston, Reh left to become rector of the Pontifical North American College in Rome. A new bishop arrived, the last bishop Joseph would know as a Charleston priest and the bishop who would bring Joseph to be a part of the final session of the Second Vatican Council. For this transition, Joseph was named the administrator for the Diocese of Charleston.

Bishop Unterkoefler would remain in Charleston until his retirement in 1990 and, though he reappointed Joseph to be vicar general, Joseph would not be in Charleston for much longer. In late 1965 Joseph was away from the diocese to attend the final session of the Second Vatican Council as an assistant to Unterkoefler. Only a few short months later, he would depart for Atlanta. Joseph wrote about the Second Vatican Council in the decades that would follow, but very little about his own experience apart from pointing out that “I never spoke during the sessions and I had no role in the work. . . . I was overwhelmed, and I wondered why I had been invited, but I was delighted to be there.”

Archbishop Paul Hallinan of Atlanta, Joseph’s friend and mentor who had been bishop of Charleston, contracted a severe liver infection during the first session of the council. His illness had left him unable to administrate the archdiocese on his own, and his petition for an auxiliary bishop was granted. Joseph would leave Charleston in 1966 to become
auxiliary bishop and rector of the Atlanta Cathedral. A new era was beginning in the church, and a new era for Joseph Bernardin, too. Having spent fourteen years gradually taking on more and more responsibility, he was ready to become the youngest Catholic bishop in the United States.

He would tell the story many more times throughout his life about the day when he was ordained a bishop. “My mother and I happened to meet each other outside the Charleston Cathedral about an hour before the episcopal consecration began,” he would remember. “After making a few remarks about the festivities that were soon to follow, she gave me this advice: ‘Now, Joe, when the ceremony begins, walk straight and don’t look too pleased.’” 41 Joseph certainly was ready to become a bishop, whether or not he was pleased.

Maria Simion Bernardin, an Italian immigrant widowed with two children only six years after she arrived in the United States, surely beamed at the man her son, Joe, had become.