

Scranton's Martino moving to retreat center

Tom Roberts | Aug. 27, 2009 NCR Today

The [Scranton Times-Tribune reports](#) [1] today that Bishop Joseph F. Martino is moving out of the traditional downtown residence for Scranton bishops at the rectory of St. Peter's Cathedral to a rural retreat center that once served as a diocesan seminary.

The 63-year-old Martino's six-year-tenure has been distinctive for an almost non-stop round of battles with Catholic academics, Catholic teachers' union, Catholic politicians and a range of other groups, including his own peers among the Catholic hierarchy.

This past week I've been on the telephone trying to confirm reports in Washington, Philadelphia and Scranton about impending changes within the diocese. Is this the change that was suggested? Is there more coming? I've made repeated attempts by phone and e-mail to contact diocesan spokesman William R. Genello, but he has refused to return calls.

Why the move from downtown to the former seminary in Dalton? Is the move permanent? Does the bishop intend to conduct diocesan business at the retreat center? The presumption is that the diocese will offer an explanation and answers sooner than later.

Martino, highly regarded by the Catholic right for his rigid anti-abortion stance and repeated condemnations of President Obama and other pro-choice politicians, once famously arrived unannounced at a discussion in a parish of a document on political responsibility that had been passed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to declare: "No USCCB document is relevant in this diocese. The USCCB doesn't speak for me."

He told the assembled crowd that "The only relevant document ... is my letter," referring to a letter on politics he had mandated be read at all Masses on a given Sunday. "There is one teacher in this diocese, and these points are not debatable."

He has urged priests and eucharistic ministers to deny Communion to politicians whose views on the abortion issue differed from those of the bishop. He placed an official notice in the diocesan newspaper informing eucharistic ministers that they had a duty to refuse Communion to anyone whose "unworthiness" to receive was publicly known. The notice emphasized Catholic politicians.

He threatened to bar U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, a long-time anti-abortion Democrat, from Communion for voting to approve former Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius as federal Health and Human Services secretary.

He has battled with officials at Misericordia University, a Catholic college in the diocese, for hosting author Keith Boykin, a gay rights advocate, and sought to close down the institution's program on diversity.

In February, Martino sent a letter to the leaders of three Irish-American organizations threatening to close the cathedral during St. Patrick's Day celebrations if the groups "honor pro-abortion officials" by inviting them to

Speak or otherwise be honored during events in which the church might be involved.

Ultimately the Mass was held, but not before he again threatened to shut down the Mass if members of the local Catholic teachers' union were invited to march in the St. Patrick's Day parade. Martino has refused to recognize the union.

Meanwhile, we all wish the bishop rest and good health and some time at the retreat center may be just the right move at the moment.

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[1]

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