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Scranton's Martino resigns, citing insomnia, fatigue

Jerry Filteau | Aug. 31, 2009

A screen capture of the video stream of Bishop Martino at the Aug. 31 media conference where he announced his resignation.

WASHINGTON

Citing "insomnia and at times a crippling physical fatigue," Bishop Joseph F. Martino, 63, announced Aug. 31 that Pope Benedict XVI has accepted his early retirement as bishop of Scranton, Pa.

The pope named Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia apostolic administrator of the Scranton Diocese until a new bishop is appointed.

The pope also accepted the resignation of Scranton Auxiliary Bishop John M. Dougherty, 77, who reached the normal retirement age for bishops in April 2007.

At a televised press conference that was almost immediately posted as a video stream on the Scranton diocesan Web site, Martino frankly acknowledged that lack of support for changes he initiated in the diocese, including parish and school closings, played a role in his decision to retire.

When he was installed as bishop of Scranton in October 2003, he said, it was apparent to him that ?at the very least, something had to be done to halt the rapid financial deterioration of our diocese.?

He inaugurated a ?Called to Mission and Holiness? program to revitalize the new evangelization in the diocese and to restructure parishes, schools and the distribution of clergy. The program ?unfortunately became identified with parish closings,? he said.

?For some time now there has not been a clear consensus among the clergy and the people of the Diocese of Scranton regarding my pastoral initiatives or my method of governance,? he said.

?This development has caused me great sorrow, resulting in bouts of insomnia and at times a crippling physical fatigue,? he added.

He said the diocese needs to respond to the church?s call ?to engage in the new evangelization.?

?To do so, however, the Diocese of Scranton requires a bishop who is at least physically vigorous,? he said. ?I am not that bishop.?

Citing the song lyrics, ?You have to know when to hold them, know when to fold them,? he said that stress had lowered his immune system. In recent months, he said, he had three bouts of flu -- ?something that?s never happened to me before? -- and has been physically weakened by lack of sleep.

While acknowledging the unpopularity of parish and school closings under his leadership, Martino defended his actions as difficult decisions that were needed to restore the diocese to financial health.

Nationally Martino was known for his vigorous opposition to abortion, including threats to withhold Communion from Catholic politicians whose votes did not conform to church teaching on the issue. Last year he told Catholics in the diocese that abortion was the crucial issue that should determine how they voted in November.

Rumors of Martino?s imminent resignation were fueled in the days preceding the announcement when the diocese said Aug. 28 that the bishop was moving from the cathedral rectory in Scranton to a Catholic retreat house in Dalton, about eight miles north of Scranton.

To handle day-to-day affairs of the diocese until a new bishop is appointed, Rigali named Msgr. Joseph Bambera, pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Mary of Czestochowa parishes in Archbald, as his delegate with the faculties of a diocesan vicar general.

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[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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