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# Why did the bishop of Scranton, Pa., resign?

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 14, 2009

Bishop Joseph F. Martino of Scranton, Pa., right, speaks at a news conference Aug. 31 about his resignation. At left is retiring Scranton Auxiliary Bishop John M. Dougherty and Philadelphia Cardinal Justin Rigali, center. (CNS/The Catholic Light/Terry Connors)

When Bishop Joseph F. Martino resigned Aug. 31 after six tumultuous years as bishop of Scranton, Pa., he left behind a diocese badly divided and demoralized, but, ironically, better prepared for the future than it was in 2003.

Sources contacted by *NCR* said the problem was Martino?s remote, uncommunicative and often authoritarian leadership style, not his decisions to close nearly half the Catholic schools and 40 percent of the parishes in the northeastern Pennsylvania diocese.

One longtime pastor said the parish and school closings and mergers ?were absolutely needed.? He predicted that the basic program of restructuring the parishes, scheduled to be completed by 2012, will continue ?pretty much as planned, with perhaps some fine tuning,? regardless of who the next bishop is. The basic program of school closings is already completed.

For months preceding his resignation -- at the age of 63, 12 years before the usual retirement age for bishops -- rumors flew around the diocese that the increasingly unpopular bishop had been called to Rome in June and had been asked, urged or maybe even ordered to submit his resignation.

No one contacted could offer positive evidence to confirm or rebut the speculation.

?It is very unusual for a bishop to resign at 63 years of age? and the Vatican would accept such a resignation only for exceptional reasons, said Jesuit Fr. Thomas J. Reese, a senior fellow at Woodstock Theological Center in Washington.

At the same time, ?it is extremely rare for the Vatican to pressure a bishop to resign,? said Reese, author of three in-depth studies on how U.S. bishops and the Vatican exercise authority, pastoral leadership and administrative duties.

At the press conference announcing his resignation, Martino said he did so for health reasons, including ?bouts of insomnia and, at times, crippling physical fatigue.? But he also acknowledged that his recent physical ailments stemmed from the stress and sorrow he felt over the lack of 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 the diocese needs a ?physically vigorous? bishop to lead it into the future and ?I am not that bishop.?

?I think the bishop seems to have recognized that there really was a need for new leadership,? said Reese.

?I congratulate him for his courage and willingness? to face that and resign, he added. ?I only wish a few other bishops would do the same.?

**Controversial actions**

In addition to his widely reported reclusiveness and failure to visit parishes and meet with the people, Martino stoked the fires of division in the diocese in the past couple of years with a variety of very public clashes that intensified his image as an authoritarian figure. Among the more notable were:

- His unilateral decision to decertify the Scranton Diocese Association of Catholic Teachers, the union that had represented most of the teachers for 30 years. He replaced it with a new diocesan organization for teachers -- what the teachers? union head, Michael Milz, called ?a company union.?
- His instruction to priests, deacons and lay ministers of the Eucharist that they must not give Communion to those who are unworthy -- widely understood to refer chiefly to pro-choice Catholic politicians.
- His criticisms during last year?s election campaign of those, including other U.S. bishops, who would not call abortion the paramount issue for Catholic voters in the elections.
- His unannounced appearance interrupting a parish forum last fall on ?Faithful Citizenship,? the latest statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on political responsibilities of Catholics. Martino famously told the gathering that he was the church?s sole official teacher in Scranton and ?no conference document is relevant in this diocese.?
- His refusal to meet with the presidents of the four Catholic colleges and universities in the diocese until they offered him, and made public, the complete syllabi of all courses that related to religion, faith and morals.

At last November?s national meeting of bishops, Martino publicly told the bishops that newly elected Vice President Joseph Biden Jr., a Scranton native with a pro-choice voting record as a U.S. senator from Delaware, would not be welcome to receive Communion in Scranton.

He similarly threatened Sen. Robert Casey, D-Pa., with refusal of Communion because Casey -- one of the most pro-life Democrats in Congress -- voted to confirm Kathleen Sebelius, who supports legalized abortion, as U.S. secretary of health and human services.

A longtime pastor in the diocese said Martino?s denunciation of Biden, a well-liked native son, ?didn?t go down too well? among local Catholics.

The pastor declined to be identified by name, citing a diocesan policy that no priest is to speak to journalists without prior clearance from William Genello, diocesan director of communications. The policy itself is indicative of the authoritarian style of Martino cited by many. (Apart from Genello himself, current diocesan officials who were called by *NCR* did not return calls or, if reached, referred the reporter to Genello for all questions.)

The pastor said the distancing of the bishop from the people seemed to have started early on when the closing of a school ?caused a terrible rift in a little town. The bishop interpreted all of the reaction as disloyalty to the church. ... He pulled back [from the critics] and thought he was protecting the church.?

At one early point in the restructuring of the schools Martino addressed the issue when he celebrated Mass in one of the affected parishes, and afterward people came up and shook his hand, the pastor said. ?But it never got repeated,? he added. Instead the bishop started to avoid visiting parishes when possible.

The restructuring of the school system -- in which the diocese closed five of the nine Catholic high schools and 13 of the 33 elementary schools -- was completed in 2007.

Still more school closings might have to take place under a new bishop, the pastor said, ?because we never really aggressively raised tuition. There are still all kinds of problems around that.?

Mary Ann Paulukonis, who recently retired as Scranton diocesan family life director, said that when Martino first arrived in October 2003, ?he came with a vision that excited most of us. ... Initially he was friendly and open and easy to dialogue with.?

But that started to change as the problems of the diocese emerged, she said. ?I don?t think he expected? the serious financial problems that were facing the diocese and its schools and parishes.

?There were parishes in debt? with no way to pay it off ?and some of the schools were bleeding,? she said.

**Reorganization**

Just one month after his arrival, Martino announced to the staff that one of his first priorities was going to be restructuring to tackle the debt problem, Paulukonis said, and that winter he announced his intention to reorganize the schools.

In the meantime he also began reorganizing diocesan offices to cut administrative costs and installed four regional episcopal vicars to serve as his chief deputies on all church matters in those parts of the diocese.

The regional vicar model is widely followed in large and medium-sized U.S. dioceses -- Scranton, with about 350,000 Catholics and 180 active priests serving 200 parishes, would be considered a medium-sized diocese -- but Paulukonis said the difference was that Martino essentially deputized the episcopal vicars to handle everything, and no one could get to the bishop?s ear except through his or her regional vicar.

?We used to have big staff meetings once a month? involving heads of all diocesan executive and curia offices and diocesan departments, she said. ?Those meetings improved when he came. There was a lot of information-sharing and he would dialogue with us.?

But about six months later, after he installed his regional vicars, those monthly staff meetings ?just stopped,? she said. Martino would meet regularly only with his episcopal vicars and central curia officials. Department heads and others had to funnel any questions or comments to the bishop through the appropriate vicar or curial official.

?When troubles started occurring, he wasn?t available. A leader who is invisible is the enemy. People started misinterpreting [things Martino said or did]. ... He was a villain? in people?s perception of him, she said.

She, Milz and the pastor who asked not to be named all said the bishop?s unilateral decertification of the Catholic teachers? union in January 2008, right after the schools had all been consolidated and regrouped administratively under four regional diocesan structures, marked a new turning point in the bishop?s souring relations with the faithful -- most of them descendants of Irish, Polish, Italian and other immigrants who owed their entry into the American middle class to church-supported unions.

**Union factor**

Scranton?s union history is a major factor here. In the mid-19th century, the city grew rapidly because of iron ore veins in hills a little to the south, substantial anthracite coal deposits to the south and north, and the steel industry in town that melded the two natural resources.

Northeast Pennsylvania was the birthplace of the United Mine Workers, and founder John Mitchell converted to Catholicism largely because of local church support for coal mine workers? efforts to unionize and obtain better living standards. Mitchell is buried in the Scranton cathedral?s cemetery and there is a monument to him next to the Lackawanna County Court House in Scranton, scene of a key decision ending the historic 1902 strike of anthracite coal miners in the area.

Paulukonis said that before Martino?s unilateral move to impose a diocesan association for teachers to replace the teachers? union, many Catholic teachers outside of Luzerne County, the union?s stronghold, were indifferent to the union or opposed to it. She said that shortly after his action a teacher friend of hers told her that before the decision ?she had no interest in the union,? but now she was at the point that she would probably go on strike if asked to.

A longtime theology professor at one of the local Catholic universities who is involved in many Catholic activities and organizations locally and nationally -- who also asked to remain unidentified, not for personal concerns but for fear of diocesan repercussions for the university where he teaches -- said the longtime union culture in the diocese was one of the key factors in the division between Martino and his priests and people in the past couple of years.

The theologian said the religious conservatism and the history of ethnic tensions of Catholics in the Scranton diocese -- including the century-old Polish National Catholic church schism from Roman Catholicism, which started with an Irish-American bishop?s insensitivity to a Polish national parish in Scranton -- are also major factors that have to be taken into account in any assessment of the complex negative response of local priests and laity to Martino?s style of governance.

In many cities in the diocese, national parishes for Poles, Italians, Irish or other Catholic immigrant groups that were established in the late 19th or early 20th century, sometimes within two or three blocks of one another, still existed when Martino arrived, even though membership numbers had dropped dramatically over recent decades because of deaths, suburban emigration and other factors, the theologian said.

He said that even though many of those parishes were no longer viable, James Timlin -- bishop of Scranton from 1984 to 2003 and the first Scranton native to head the diocese -- did not have the heart to begin the process of closing them.

Paulukonis, who said she served as a facilitator in the restructuring process for more than 20 of the parishes around the diocese, described the process itself as an excellent model of consultation and sharing of responsibility in decision-making.

By the end of the process, she said, there were few cases left in which the parish cluster and the planning

committee were still at odds.

**Issue of connectivity**

The only thing wrong with the process, she said, was ?the bishop?s lack of connectivity with the people.? Because he was not a visible part of the process, ?many were seeing him as the enemy.?

?People needed to get to know Bishop Martino. He was a good and holy man,? she said.

The theologian said he believed, but had no hard evidence, that the Vatican may have pressured Martino to resign, because he knew that complaints from people in the diocese have flooded the Vatican?s apostolic nuncio in Washington and various Vatican offices in Rome in recent years.

Michael MacDowell, president of Misericordia University, run by the Sisters of Mercy in Dallas, Pa., said presidents of the four Catholic higher education institutes in the diocese -- Misericordia, the Jesuits? Scranton University, the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters? Marywood University in Scranton, and King?s College in Wilkes-Barre run by the Congregation of Holy Cross -- had all ?first individually, then collectively? sought meetings with Martino without success.

The bishop agreed to meet with them only if they first provided him with ?course syllabi? providing a detailed outline of all content of every course related to religion or Catholic teaching, and then to ?make those documents public,? MacDowell said. He said Misericordia found that demand impossible to meet because the syllabus of a course is the property of the professor who teaches it.

Holy Cross Fr. Patrick Sullivan, executive secretary and chaplain of the Boston Labor Guild, told *NCR* that the Holy Cross community at King?s College, with which he has had connections, was pressured by diocesan officials to issue a public apology after he publicly criticized the way Martino had dealt with the local Catholic teachers? union.

Sullivan, who recently turned 80, is one of the last surviving ?labor priests? of the generation epitomized by the late Msgr. George G. Higgins, and he has written extensively on the church and the labor movement. He told *NCR* that when Martino decertified the local teachers? union, he first wrote to the bishop asking him to reverse his decision in light of Catholic social teaching on workers? rights to collective bargaining.

When he got no response from Martino, Sullivan said he wrote to Archbishop Pietro Sambi, papal nuncio to the United States, expressing his concerns. He said he next sought to discuss the issue with Martino by telephone but was rebuffed. When he finally went public with a statement to Scranton media decrying Martino?s union-busting actions, he said, diocesan officials pressured the Holy Cross community at King?s College to issue a public apology for his statement.

Genello, the diocese?s communications director, declined to comment on the rumors that the Vatican had asked or urged Martino to resign, saying only that the bishop?s statement, citing health reasons, spoke for itself.

Genello also declined to predict the future of the parish reorganization plan set in motion by Martino and now in its final stages of implementation. But he provided data on the demographics, personnel and other factors behind the plan.

He said that back in the mid-1960s the number of active priests had peaked at more than 450. Before the annual major announcement of assignment changes in July 2009, he said, the number of active priests in the diocese available for parish duties was 180.

The July announcement reported the retirement of nine pastors and the appointment of two newly ordained priests to new assignments, along with scores of other new assignments and transfers among the clergy of the diocese. Genello said the diocese projects that by 2012, when the number of parishes in the diocese are to be reduced from 200 to 120, the number of active priests available to serve those parishes will have dropped to 147.

**Rigali role**

Reese said another major question in Martino?s resignation is what role Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia played and continues to play in the still-unfolding drama.

Reese noted that the cardinal, who spent much of his priestly career as a Vatican official -- first as a member of the English-speaking section of the Vatican Secretariat of State and later as secretary of the Congregation for Bishops and as head of the Ecclesiastical Academy, the Vatican?s graduate school for papal diplomats -- is quite familiar with Vatican procedures and is well-known to current Vatican officials, including those in the Congregation for Bishops, which rules on episcopal appointments in the United States and throughout the world.

As a longtime Vatican official -- and currently possibly the chief kingmaker on U.S. episcopal appointments -- as well as the metropolitan archbishop immediately responsible for archiepiscopal oversight of the Scranton diocese, Rigali probably had a major say in the Vatican decision to accept Martino?s unusual early resignation, Reese said.

As Catholics in the diocese reflect back on Martino and his leadership, perhaps one comment by a local pastor sums up current thinking best. Although Martino is a good man, ?he doesn?t have the gift of being a diocesan bishop,? the pastor said.

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