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Appointment inspires hope in beset diocese

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Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia looks on as Bishop-designate Joseph C. Bambera talks to the media Feb. 23 after being named bishop of the Scranton, Pa., diocese. (CNS)

The beleaguered diocese of Scranton, Pa., has a new bishop, a native son who wasted no time in his first news conference in setting a tone distinctly different from that of his predecessor.

Msgr. Joseph Bambera, who has been handling the day-to-day running of the diocese since the abrupt and early retirement of Bishop Joseph F. Martino in August, was named the 10th bishop of the diocese.

?We have a new age in this town,? said Sr. Margaret Gannon, a professor of history at Marywood University. ?Hopefully everything?s going to be just fine.?

That seemed to be the reaction of many to the appointment of the new leader of the diocese in this heavily Catholic, 11-county area of northeast Pennsylvania.

At a news conference, Bambera appeared to acknowledge the tumultuous recent past in the diocese when he said, ?I think our goal right now is really to move forward, based on the struggles we?ve experienced and based on the hard work that?s been done thus far. I know from my own experience that the Lord is deeply rooted in the people of this diocese.?

It is his connection with people -- a perception by many of a deeply pastoral personality -- that kept coming through in assessments from people in Scranton.

According to a story by Laura Legere of The Times Tribune of Scranton, the new bishop gets high marks from Joseph Grieboski, a Scranton native who runs the Institute on Religion and Public Policy in Washington. ?He has already exhibited such an openness and such an approachability to both the clergy and the people of the diocese,? said Grieboski. ?I think that?s one of the things that after the last few years the diocese really, really needs.?

In recent years the diocese often found itself in the news because of controversy stirred by Martino, who earned a national reputation as an uncompromising conservative churchman and staunch antiabortionist who picked

often bitter public fights with the local Catholic teachers? union, Catholic service groups, public officials, and Catholic colleges and universities. He also oversaw a substantial downsizing of the number of parishes and schools in the diocese. Martino was often described as aloof from the people of the diocese and was rarely seen in social settings. He retired at age 63, an unusually early age for bishops who are only required to submit a letter of resignation at age 75 and often remain longer in their posts.

The difference between Martino and Bambera was immediately evident. The bishop-designate spoke of the ?great value in dialogue.?

?I?ve learned from my experience as a pastor and also over the last six months that there is a wealth of knowledge that we derive from one another. There?s a wisdom that comes from many and sometimes unexpected places.?

Martino, on the other hand, had publicly declared himself the only teacher in the diocese. At one point he threatened to close down the cathedral on St. Patrick?s Day if local organizers of Scranton?s celebration honored politicians who upheld abortion rights; he asked four local Catholic universities for documentation proving they did not provide contraceptives to students; and he wanted Misericordia University to close its Diversity Institute following an appearance of a gay-rights advocate at an annual fundraising dinner.

When asked at the news conference about Catholic colleges and universities, Bambera, who was a member of the board of directors of the Jesuit-run University of Scranton from 2003-2009, said he would fulfill his role in assuring that Catholic doctrine is upheld in such institutions by ?dialoguing with those universities and working with them.?

Such an approach stands in stark contrast to that taken by Martino, who once arrived, unannounced, at a parish forum discussing a document published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on how to approach elections. Martino declared at the time: ?No USCCB document is relevant in this diocese. The USCCB doesn?t speak for me.? Martino, who said abortion is the single issue on which politicians should be judged, a position at variance with the document, said, ?There is one teacher in this diocese, and these points are not debatable.?

Gannon, the history professor, was a member of a panel that day and at the time remarked that she didn?t know the bishop didn?t support the national conference of bishops.

Of Bambera?s appointment, she said, ?I think a lot of us were happy and relieved that it is somebody we have some confidence in. People are giving him a big welcome and have a lot of hope, so we?ll see where it goes.?

Jesuit Fr. Matthew Ruhl of Kansas City, Mo., a member of the University of Scranton board of directors whose term overlapped with Bambera?s, described the bishop-designate as ?extremely cordial, very open and a great listener. He is widely and well liked.? Ruhl said the university community was ?ecstatic over the appointment.?

Jesuit Fr. Scott R. Pilarz, president of the university, released a statement describing Bambera as ?a great pastor -- a very thoughtful man who is tremendously patient and exercises exceptional judgment. I personally appreciated his advice and wise counsel on several matters.?

Msgr. Joseph Quinn, a longtime and popular pastor in the diocese now working as a vice president at Fordham University in New York, told the Times Leader that Bambera is ?the right choice at the right time. He is what the diocese of Scranton needs at this very juncture.?

Bambera, who will turn 54 on March 21, is a native of nearby Carbondale and attended Catholic schools in the diocese. He graduated in 1978 from the University of Pittsburgh before attending a now-closed seminary in the diocese. He also took classes at the University of Scranton. He was ordained in 1983 and has held a host of

positions in the diocese, including pastor of several parishes, vicar for priests, and diocesan director of ecumenism and interfaith affairs.

His ordination as bishop is scheduled for April 26 in St. Peter?s Cathedral.

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