

# Scranton bishop announces final decisions on parish restructuring

SCRANTON, Pa. – Citing population shifts, dwindling finances, overworked priests and the fact that many Catholics “are not actively practicing their faith,” Scranton’s bishop announced a major parish restructuring plan that will close some parishes and merge others.

In a recorded message played at all Masses the weekend of Jan. 31-Feb. 1, Bishop Joseph F. Martino announced his final decisions in a process that began more than a year ago.

Every parish in the 11-county diocese is affected in some way. At the start of the process, the diocese had 224 parishes.

William R. Genello, the diocese’s executive director of communications, said the number of parishes that will remain open will not be known for at least two years as the communities begin to close, merge or partner in sharing ministries.

Implementation of the plan will begin in July.

Bishop Martino said that some people would probably prefer to leave well enough alone but he explained that was not feasible.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “many of our institutions are not ‘well enough.’ Our society and our diocese are experiencing changes. Populations are shifting. Financial resources are diminishing. Many Catholics are not actively practicing their faith or supporting the church. Our priests are serving too many parishes at one time.”

The plan calls for three levels of diocesan restructuring:

- Parishes retaining their own pastors will begin partnering with others to share ministries and resources such as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, youth groups and religious education with the goal to avoid duplication as much as possible.

- Linking two or more parishes, which would then share the same pastor. Such parishes would remain distinct but would cooperate more closely than parishes in partnerships.
- Consolidating two or more parishes into one parish with the new church serving the members of the closed parishes. A church building could remain open, however, for Sunday Mass, a funeral or a wedding.

Bishop Martino acknowledged that some parishioners would experience sorrow and others would be angry over the closing of parishes.

"I know that you love your churches. But I also know that you love God and your faith even more. You want to see the faith preserved and handed down to future generations," Bishop Martino said. "And so, I believe you will recognize that changes must be made to deal with the realities of the present day."

Scranton diocesan officials and parish representatives began examining the future of parishes in January 2008.

The effort, "Called to Holiness and Mission," looked at the number of priests available for parish ministry, the stress priests were undergoing to minister across the diocese and the financial realities of the northeast Pennsylvania area.

The diocese also restructured its school system in fall 2007.