



BY PAT SUMMERS

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A little story about a man's new house sparked opposition that's still growing after its publication last Sunday in the Trenton Times. The man is the bishop of the Trenton Diocese, and his house-to-be is in a semi-rural area of Lawrence Township virtually next door to Princeton. In fact, it has a Princeton address.

No, Bishop David M. O'Connell will not be living in Trenton, where the neediest of his flock probably live. Instead, the plan is for him to move into an "austere" home on Carson Road in Lawrence. Located on a wooded road with occasional large houses on sizeable properties, the house reportedly has four bedrooms, 3½ baths, a family room, dining room, eat-in kitchen and a vaulted LR — all on 5.8 acres.

The diocese, which includes the counties of Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean, reportedly paid cash — \$550,000, or more than a half-million dollars — for the spread. This occurred a short time after Bishop O'Connell publicly appealed for \$1 million to support Catholic education.

Since 1924, Trenton Diocese bishops have lived at 903 W. State Street, Trenton, in a large, three story brown brick building on a corner lot. According to the Times story, the house has "ornate trim, large glass windows and sweeping verandas." External signs of its "spiritual ties" include a cross carved into a piece of embedded stone and a statue of St. Francis.

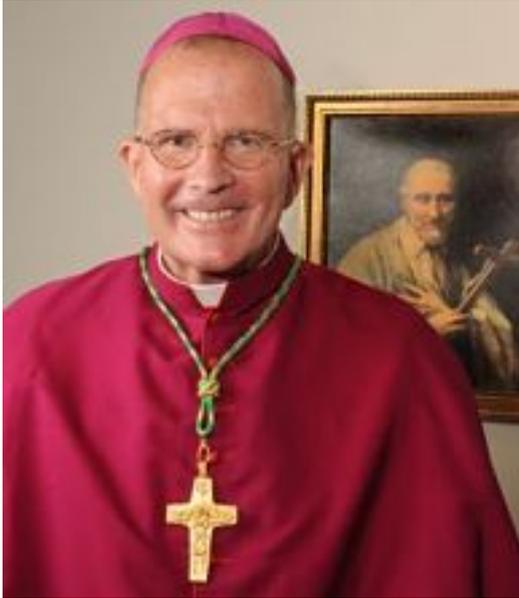


Retired bishop John M. Smith lived there for the past 13 years, and Bishop O'Connell is living at the rectory of St. James, Pennington, while the new house is being painted. Diocese spokesperson Rayanne Bennett, quoted in the Times story, said that "The West State St. house is in disrepair and would take a considerable sum to update" and Bishop O'Connell "did not want . . . that money spent on a house he didn't want to live in."

She said, "Bishop O'Connell prefers a smaller, more austere home and he found one that he likes and will be more comfortable in."

Following the Jan. 16 publication of the new-house story, the Times printed three letters of objection. Individually, each was strong; together, they made a powerful case against the bishop's move out of the city.

The first writer, a woman who describes herself as "a long term resident of Trenton by choice" — she has lived less than a block away from the State St. bishop's house since 1977 — became incensed about the projected move because "I live in this neighborhood and he's doing it dirt!"



Dr. Jane Elaine Rosenbaum, an adjunct English professor at Rider University since the 70s, described Bishop O'Connell's decision as "self-serving." She theorized that if he is not comfortable with the Trenton house, he may not be comfortable with the kind of diversity that Trenton represents either.

The neighborhood he's abandoning, she wrote, "is a white, black, Hispanic, professional, working-class community of owners and renters," in sharp contrast to the "racially homogeneous, property-owning community of means" where he's moving.

Referring to Trenton taxpayers who have long subsidized municipal services for the tax-exempt property "now being abandoned," she also cited the seeming contradiction between the diocese's identification of ethnic diversity as a priority and Bishop O'Connell's move out of the city after his predecessors lived there for 87 years.

"The US bishops are becoming both irrelevant and poor examples of the 'Good Shepherd,'" wrote David L. Ziegler of Hopewell Twp., in the second letter to appear. He described the move as "most disturbing on so many levels," including the "spending of \$550,000 of Trenton Diocese (read, our contributions) funds."

The move, Ziegler wrote, "sends a terrible message to the people of Trenton, who need visible signs of church support, not retreat from the city."

Titled "the new austerity," the third letter, from Rosemary Dey of Hamilton asked, "Is it any wonder that the Catholic Church is in crisis, closing schools and combining parishes, when we read [about the house purchase for \$550,000], considered "buying down"?

Does this set a good example for parishioners struggling to get by in this economy, who donate money to the church every week, Dey wrote; will they be glad their bishop has a Princeton mailing address? "Perhaps he could put a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter on his 5.8 acres."

Her letter was just the first step for Dr. Rosenbaum. Contacted by numbers of people who applauded it, she has been mustering support for further action against the bishop's move. It starts with rounding up 1,000 signatures on a petition (text follows).

A group of Catholics who also object to the bishop's new house are drafting a message observant Catholics may put into their collection envelopes in lieu of donations.

Rosenbaum advises those who want details on the campaign against the bishop's move, including sites where the petition can be signed, to check this Facebook community page: "Keep the Catholic Bishop in Trenton!"

TEXT OF PETITION

To the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi:

We, the undersigned, respectfully request that the newly appointed Bishop of Trenton be asked to reconsider his decision to move to a semi-rural home on six acres in an exclusive neighborhood. He should choose instead to make his home in the City of Trenton where the Diocese's bishops have lived and served for the past eighty-seven years. Purchased in 1924 for this specific purpose, 903 West State Street has a cross etched into its brick work, a magnificent private chapel, and a stately presence for all to see. In the spirit of Catherine of Siena, we ask that he return to his rightful place, among all of the people — black, white, brown, yellow, rich, poor, working-class, professional — to serve as a symbol of unity and beacon of hope for a city that he is now seeking to abandon for greener pastures. Let not "Lawrenceville with a Princeton address" (the house at 53 Carson Road) — be the Diocese of Trenton's

Babylonian captivity.