News

Bishop Michael Martin concelebrates his ordination and installation Mass as the new bishop o

Bishop Michael Martin concelebrates his ordination and installation Mass as the new bishop of Charlotte, at St. Mark Church in Huntersville, N.C., May 29, 2023. (OSV News/Catholic News Herald/Troy Hull)

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After Bishop Michael Martin of the Diocese of Charlotte, North Carolina, issued a pastoral letter outlining that Catholics are expected to stand during the reception of Communion in the diocese — and directing churches to remove kneeling supports like altar rails — clergy and lay Catholics quickly began reacting both in Charlotte and online.

In the Dec. 17 letter, Martin cited guidance from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, with Vatican approval, in stating that "the norm … is that Holy Communion is to be received standing, unless an individual member of the faithful wishes to receive Communion while kneeling." Martin emphasized that Catholics will not be denied Communion "solely based on their posture." However, the new directive

prohibits diocesan churches from placing kneelers, altar rails and prie-dieus, all used to provide support for those who choose to kneel. The directive is set to take effect Jan. 16.

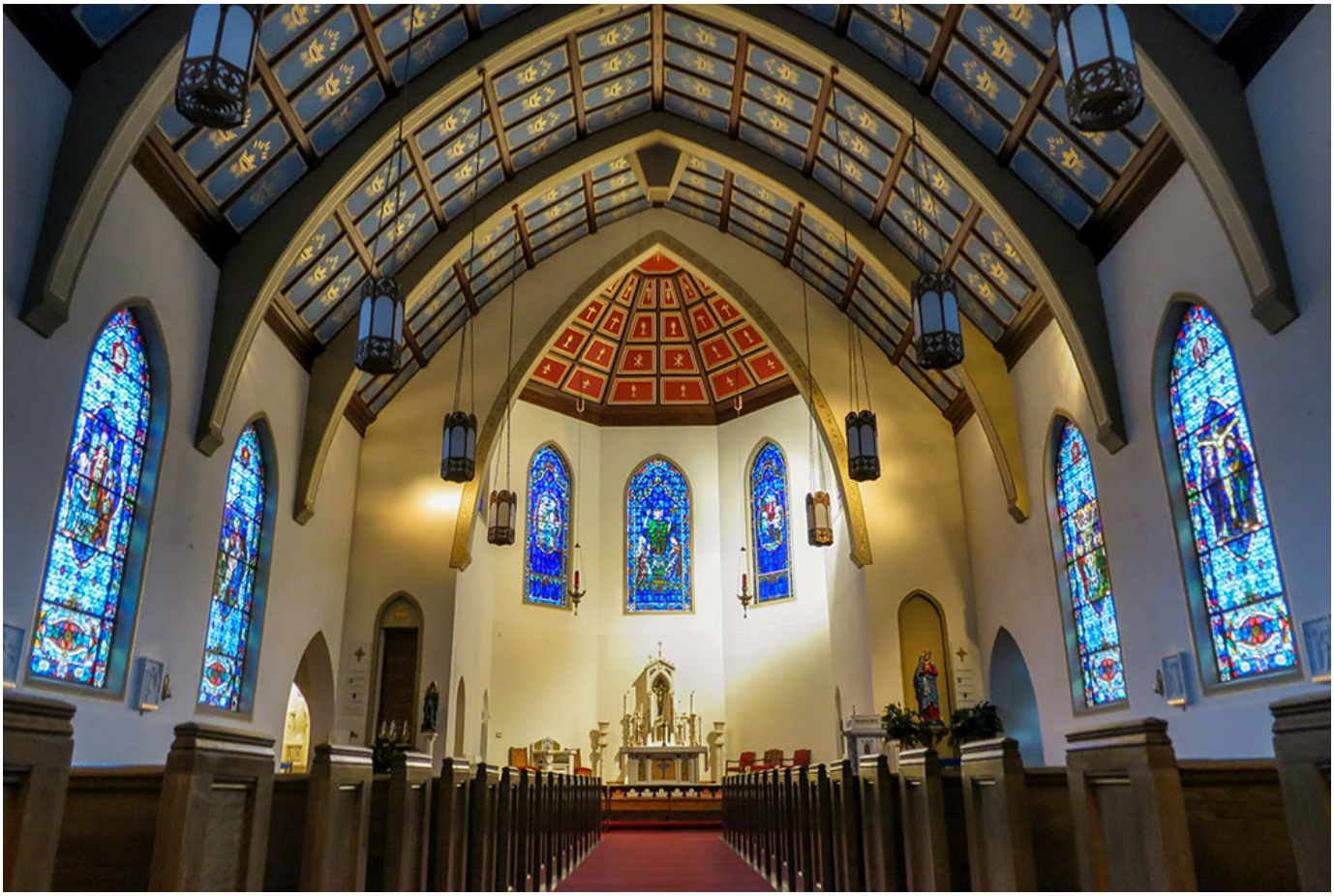
Preexisting, permanent altar rails will not be removed, diocesan officials said. Only temporary or movable kneelers are set to leave churches.

Liz Chandler, director of communications for the Charlotte Diocese, said only a small number of the diocese's 93 parishes currently use such kneelers. "We don't have a solid count but it's a small number," Chandler wrote in an email to RNS. "There's no cost associated since those being removed are not fixed to the floor."

However, as the Jan. 16 implementation date approaches, the letter has exposed divisions in the Charlotte Diocese over liturgical authority, leadership style and worship practices that predate Martin's letter.

In May, the National Catholic Register reported on a leaked draft of new liturgical norms attributed to Martin that outlined restrictions on altar rails and kneelers, using Latin, ad orientem worship and other traditional practices, igniting backlash online.

While diocesan officials frame removing the kneelers as a reaffirmation of universal Catholic norms, critics — including Charlotte priests, canon lawyers and some local Catholics — are questioning the bishop's authority to mandate them. The debate has also played out online, demonstrating how social media has amplified internal church disputes that historically took place largely outside of public view.



A Communion rail can be seen before the altar in the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Charlotte, N.C., in a 2016 photo. (Wikimedia Commons/Nheyob)

Reaction to the pastoral letter has become a popular topic in Catholic online spaces, drawing commentary from Charlotte and beyond, with one X user writing this week, "The incoherence of the Charlotte diocese's ban on altar rails." Another asked, "If a parish wants to use the rails, why is this a problem? Doesn't it encourage piety?"

And on Jan. 5, The Pillar, an independent Catholic news outlet, reported that more than 30 priests in Charlotte had submitted a formal request to the Vatican seeking clarification on the bishop's authority regarding the directive. The request, known as a dubia, asks the Holy See to weigh in on questions of episcopal authority over liturgical practice.

"I don't think I've experienced anything like that, where there is this questioning of the bishop's authority to Rome," said Fr. Patrick Cahill, pastor of Charlotte's St. Matthew Catholic Church, which has about 12,000 registered families, making it the largest parish in the diocese.

Cahill said he believes Catholic faith is, in part, belief that God has given the community the right leader at the right time. "It's kind of a confusing sign to me," he said. "Rome is the one that put this bishop here last year. So, it's kind of like, ask them if they're sure, I guess." He plans to obey the bishop's directive.

Ellen, a lifelong Charlotte resident and Catholic who has attended the same parish in the diocese for six years, did not want her last name published due to the intensity of the reaction to the issue and concerns about protecting her family. "I can't say I've ever seen a bishop treated like this before," she said. "But perhaps social media is just giving more public avenues for it."

At her parish, Ellen said the directive itself has had little practical effect. "Everyone at the Masses I attend stands anyway," she said. "I truly don't think I've seen a single person kneel for Communion at my parish." Ultimately, Ellen said she supports the bishop.

"Communion isn't the place to make a spectacle of yourself to be a distraction to the priest or to other parishioners," she said.

Fr. Noah Carter, director of liturgy for the Charlotte Diocese, said his initial response to the letter was simply obedience. At his own parish, Holy Cross Parish in Kernersville, two long kneelers were constructed in 2021 by a parishioner but will be moved to the front of the sanctuary and not used for Holy Communion, Carter said. "By our conformity with the bishop's letter, we're removing them," he said.

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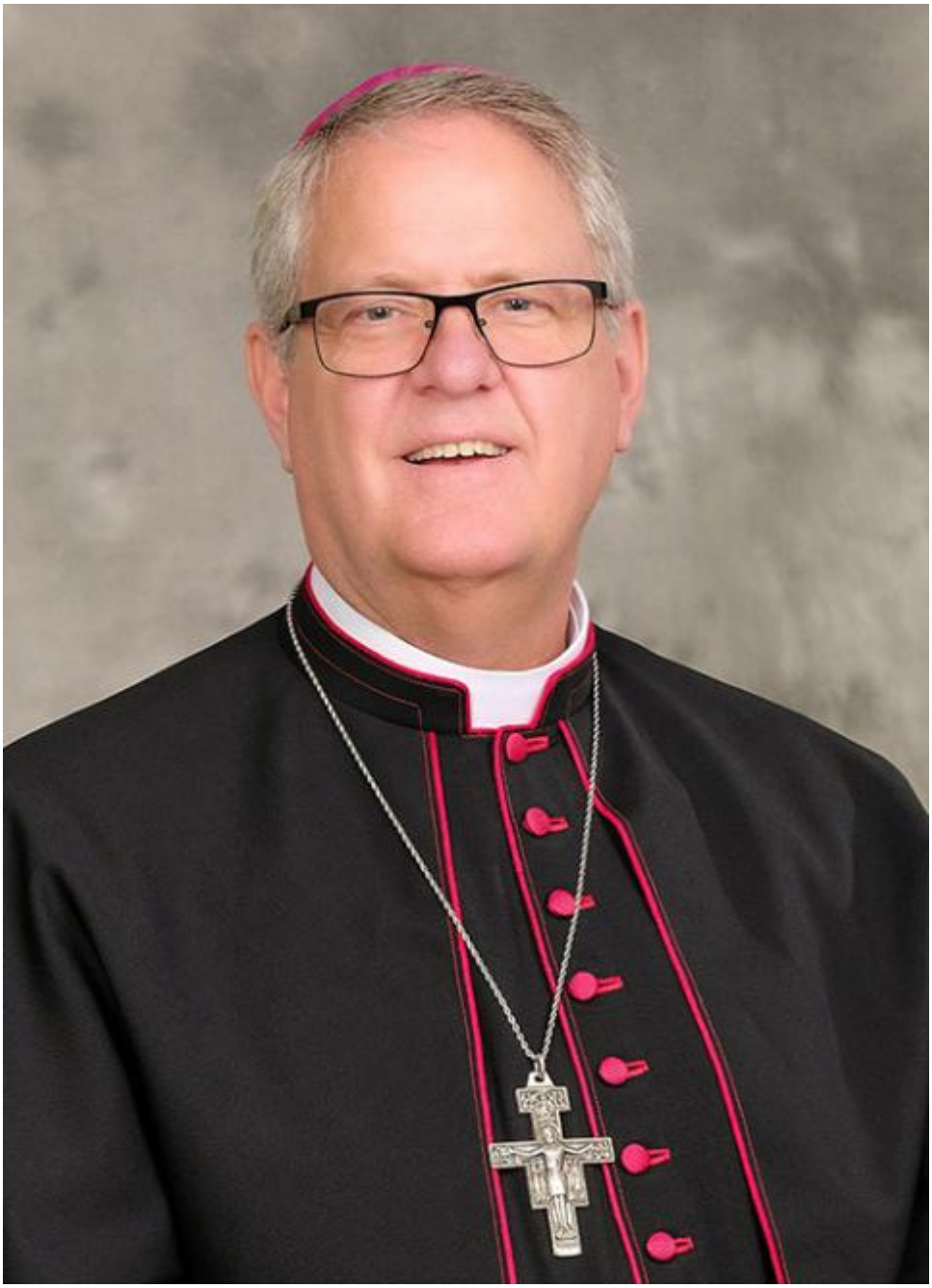
At Holy Cross, which has 2,700 registered families, approximately 45% of whom are Spanish-speaking, Carter said he does not closely track how parishioners are positioned while receiving Communion. "I can't give a number or even say whether it's a majority or minority," he said. "I don't really pay attention to the posture of people who come up to receive Communion."

Still, Carter said the directive aligns with Catholic practice. "No one in the Catholic Church celebrates Mass in their own way," Carter said. "We follow universal norms and local standards."

Before the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, Catholics typically received Communion while kneeling at altar rails, which were standard fixtures in churches across the United States. Although most Catholics today receive Communion standing, kneeling and other traditional postures have become more common in some parishes in recent years, a trend sometimes associated with the so-called "trad Cath" movement — a popular subject for both news outlets and online communities.

Ellen and Cahill said that in Charlotte, some of the local backlash reflects an adjustment to Martin's leadership style. Martin, a Franciscan appointed by Pope Francis in 2024, succeeded Bishop Peter Jugis, who led the diocese for more than two decades and was regarded as more conservative in liturgical matters.

"You have a new bishop come in a year and a half ago, who has a completely different style," Cahill said. "He's focused on renewal, poverty, simplicity ... which is completely different from the previous mission. That has kind of heightened this whole conversation."



Bishop Michael Martin (OSV News/Courtesy of Diocese of Charlotte)

During his tenure, Martin has also reduced the number of parishes permitted to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass from three to one. The Chapel of the Little Flower in Mooresville is now the only parish in the diocese authorized to offer it.

The pastoral letter does not explicitly address the traditional Latin Mass, but diocesan officials clarified that the directive does not apply to the Chapel of the Little Flower. Fr. Brandon Jones, the chapel's pastor, declined to comment and directed

RNS to Chandler.

For some Catholics, the directive raises legal questions about canon law. Dominican Fr. Pius Pietrzyk, a canon lawyer based in Washington, D.C., questioned whether the pastoral letter carries the legitimacy of binding law.

"For the most part, when the Mass gives options, the universal authority, the church has vested those options in ... not the bishop, [but] the priest celebrant," Pietrzyk said. "It's not clear that his document is that, and it does seem to lack some of the indicia one would normally expect of a legislative act."

In his view, Pietrzyk said he sees the directive as Martin enforcing his liturgical preference. "It's very clear that the bishop has a certain personal taste in liturgy, and what it seems that he's doing is imposing his personal taste in liturgy on his diocese," Pietrzyk said.

Martin was unavailable for comment, Chandler said.

Within the Catholic Church, bishops are charged with ensuring that Mass is celebrated according to universal norms, though the Vatican has not indicated whether it will respond to the dubia submitted by Charlotte priests.

Timothy O'Malley, the academic director of the University of Notre Dame's Center for Liturgy in Indiana, said he has been following debates in Charlotte for over six months regarding the issue and that online backlash has complicated an already sensitive situation.

"Bits and pieces of this pastoral letter have been leaking out over the last several months," O'Malley said. "I wish these conversations were happening between priests and their bishop — that's the healthy thing."

"I don't know who's at fault," he said. "But this is not a healthy way to proceed."

Ellen said she hopes tensions will ease and that online commentary will not affect the future of the local Catholic Church.

"I hope the bishop has the fortitude to stay the course," she said, "and stop the local church from being dragged backwards."