

## **Bishop Braxton's letter to Belleville priests' statement**

(Sent to Belleville Parish Priests on Holy Thursday)

**Sent:** Thursday, March 20, 2008 8:12 AM

**Subject:** Immediate Attention: From the Office of Bishop Braxton

Dear Father; Dear Parish Life Coordinator,

I would like the substance of this letter to be communicated to your parishioners this weekend. You may duplicate it and insert it in your bulletin or have it distributed to the faithful and placed on tables at the entrance to the church. You may choose simply to read key paragraphs. Knowing that this is a very busy weekend, you may choose to distribute it next weekend. If that is the case, I would ask you to communicate the substance to your parishioners this weekend.

"Bishop Braxton has sent a letter to all the parishes expressing his deep gratitude to all of those who have written to him to share their sorrow on learning of the death of his mother, Evelyn K. Braxton. In the same letter he states that, though he is aware that he is a "redeemed sinner" like all other Christians, it is his intention to continue his service as Bishop of Belleville for as long as our Holy Father wishes him to do so."

This letter will also appear in the next issue of the Messenger.

Appreciatively yours in Christ,

+Bishop Braxton

---

(Appeared in Belleville News-Democrat on Good Friday)

Holy Thursday 2008

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Peace be with you!

During these difficult days in which I have been mourning the death of my Mother Dear, Evelyn K. Braxton, I have spent more time than usual alone and with my family and dear friends, who have known me and my family for a lifetime. At the same time, I have felt very close to the faithful Catholics of the Diocese of Belleville. For nearly three years you have been aware of my mother's failing health and you have often expressed your concern for her and for my family. Since her long, full, and happy life in this world ended on Sunday, February 10, 2008, I have been deeply moved by your outpouring of support and your many expressions sympathy and condolence. I want you to know that I have read every letter, note, card, and electronic message and cherished every telephone call. I have particularly appreciated the many letters of sympathy

from children in our Catholic schools. The flowers, plants, good things to eat, the many offers to be of assistance to me, and your contributions to dementia research have also been appreciated. However, it has been your promises of personal prayer, and the arrangements you have made to have the Sacrifice of the Mass offered for my mother and for all of us who love her and miss her so deeply, that have touched me the most. Please allow me to use this letter to express my profound gratitude to every one who has reached out to console me and my dear ones. I have been particularly moved by those who wrote that I had called or written to them when their loved one has died and that they wanted to return the kindness.

Because of her failing health, my mother never visited me here in Belleville. But she was very aware of my ministry here. She knew that March 15<sup>th</sup> was the third anniversary of the announcement by Pope John Paul II that he had appointed me to be the eighth Bishop of this Diocese. She also knew that on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Feast of St. Thomas More, I will be marking the third anniversary of my Installation in the Cathedral of St. Peter. I have many happy memories of the celebration of my Installation on June 22, 2005. It was a great joy to have family members and friends from the “old neighborhoods” of my life join with me as I committed myself to the pastoral ministry of serving as Shepherd of this Local Church. I particularly remember the warm welcome of so many people from the faith communities here in Southern Illinois. I remember also the cards, letters, gifts, promises of prayers, and the enthusiastic support from the great gathering of the Christian Faithful in the Cathedral during the Mass of Installation. I have continued to experience that same welcome and prayerful support from so many of you as I have carried out my ministry in the Diocese each day.

There was, however, one experience associated with my Installation celebration that is unknown to you. It is something that I have kept to myself for nearly three years. I now think it might be helpful for you, the Christian Faithful, to know about this experience. Just days before my Installation, the Administrator of the Diocese informed me that a group of priests wanted to meet with me in the rectory of what would soon be my Cathedral Church. I went to the meeting with no knowledge of what the meeting was about. The meeting was with a group of priests who I did not know at all, having never met them or spoken to them before. They certainly did not know me. To my surprise, the purpose of the meeting was to inform me that I should reject the appointment by the Holy Father to be your Bishop that I should cancel the Installation ceremony and step aside so that a more suitable Bishop could be chosen. For a period of more than two hours, these priests told me that there was a “firestorm of hatred” against me in Belleville, that I was not welcome here, that I would never be welcome here, that very few people would attend my Installation, and that they had investigated my history and could not find even one person from anyplace where I have served around the country who had anything positive to say about me. They also told me they had incriminating information against me which might be released, if I did not heed their words. They were quite insistent that I had no choice but to leave.

I listened to their entire startling presentation without interrupting any of the speakers. Before I spoke, I asked if everyone had finished with their comments. I then informed them that it is the unique ministry of our Holy Father, the Pope, to appoint and transfer bishops, or to ask for their resignations. No one else in the Church

has the authority or the responsibility to do so. I told them that in my life as a Priest and as a Bishop I have always sought to be completely obedient to the Holy Father and completely faithful to the *magisterium* of the Church. I stated clearly that it was my intention to serve the Diocese faithfully for as long as the Holy Father wanted me to do so. I now repeat to you today what I said

to this group of priests. It is my intention to serve as Bishop of the Diocese of Belleville for as long as the Holy Father wants me to do so. Shortly after this meeting, perhaps unprecedented in the history of the Church in the United States, I received an anonymous phone call on my private line. The message was simple. "We will not rest until we get rid of you." Recently, I received the same message from the same anonymous caller. I have shared this experience with you with some hesitance. However, it may help you to understand more recent experiences.

In my Pastoral Letter, "We Are His Witnesses" I told you that I am very aware that I, like every other Christian, am a redeemed sinner, redeemed by the Blood of Jesus Christ. This means that I, like other bishops, priests, deacons, brothers, sisters, and lay people make mistakes, err in my judgment, offend people, disappoint those who look to me for leadership, and sometimes do things that are wrong. This is inevitable because of the human condition and original sin. I believe, however, that when differences, disputes, and conflicts emerge in the Church these differences are best addressed prayerfully, with God's grace, within the Church family. For this reason when I have concluded that a priest, deacon, religious, lay person, committee, or consultative body has erred in some way, or that I simply disagree with them, I have always sought to examine the matter quietly with that individual or group. It has been my wish never to say an unkind word, make negative comments, or offer public criticisms about any member of the Church in any circumstance. I do not see the Church in political terms of opposing parties competing for power in an adversarial relationship played out in the secular media. Flawed as we members are, the Church remains the Body of Jesus Christ. The imperfect priests who serve the imperfect People of God are members of College of Priests. An imperfect Bishop is appointed by the Vicar of Christ to be the Head of this College. Only Christ, the Good Shepherd is perfect.

During the past three years you have shown your appreciation for me and my ministry in so many ways. You have written to express your gratitude for my efforts to bring international priests to our Diocese so that our parishes might have priests. You have thanked me for my work to increase vocations to the priesthood and for my efforts to strengthen Catholic education and the Catholic identity of our schools. You have applauded my teaching of the faith through my pastoral letters, adult formation classes, and homilies. You have written to me often about my personal outreach to you and to our priests during times of sickness and death. In recent days I have received a great outpouring of support from many of you.

I believe that this Easter season is a good time for all of us to pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We need an increase in wisdom and understanding which will help us to make the necessary efforts to find more effective ways of communicating, cooperating, and collaborating for the good of the Church. I hope that after Easter we can initiate conversations with our priests about things we can do differently and better for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. During my Installation Mass on the Feast of St. Thomas More three years ago, I quoted the words of the martyred Lord Chancellor of England. Once again I make his words my own. My hope is to "say none harm, think none harm, and do none harm."

Let us continue to pray for one another. I look forward to being with many of you and your children for the great Easter Sacrament of Confirmation during the weeks ahead.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton

Bishop of Belleville