

3-15-08 - 45 priests call for Braxton's resignation

Names of priests aren't made public

BY GEORGE PAWLACZYK, Belleville IL News-Democrat

Most of the priests of the Belleville Diocese want Bishop Edward K. Braxton to resign.

They told him so in a strongly worded letter made public Friday that claimed the leader of Southern Illinois' Roman Catholics has lost the "moral authority to lead and govern."

The one-page statement, sent electronically to media at noon, was signed by 45 priests, or about 60 percent of those regularly assigned to the diocese. It was delivered to Vicar General the Rev. John McEvilly on Thursday and presumably forwarded to Braxton.

The names of those who signed the statement were not made public.

Braxton could not be reached for comment. Attempts to reach him at his Centreville Avenue home on Friday were met, via front-door intercom, with a voice that said, "The bishop is unavailable." Braxton has said he does not talk to local reporters.

The priests' statement, which was the result of a meeting Wednesday in Germantown, called on Braxton to step down "for his own good, for the good of the Diocese and for the good of the presbyterate," or priests.

They gave as reasons his misuse of diocesan money and failure to work cooperatively with them. The statement also said that Bill Knapp, chief financial officer of the diocese, should be reappointed. Knapp was the first to call attention to Braxton's misuse of funds, priests have said.

Braxton has publicly apologized for the misuse of \$17,100 donated by parishioners. He bought ceremonial garments and office furniture from international and local accounts earmarked for the poor and for the religious education of children and adults. He said the money will be repaid.

The priests' statement followed a complaint about Braxton last month by the leadership of the Adorers of the Precious Blood. The national nuns group, which has a headquarters in Ruma, asked for "outside intervention" to restore hope and trust in the diocese.

One of the leaders at the Germantown meeting, the Rev. Monsignor Carl Scherrer, said there is no secondary plan of action if Braxton simply ignores the call to resign. Copies of the letter were sent to Cardinal Francis George in Chicago and to the pope's U.S. representative, Archbishop Pietro Sambi in Washington, D.C.

Scherrer said the names of the priests who signed the statement will not be released. He said that others are expected to sign. "That was the agreement we had," he said.

Tom Haney, a parishioner at St. Clare's Church in O'Fallon, asked: "How do we know if there's 45 priests if they won't give us the names of the 45? How do we know they haven't inflated the number a little bit?... If you say you got a full house, put your cards on the table."

Frank Flinn, an adjunct professor of religious studies at Washington University in St. Louis, said, "It's very unusual for that many priests to ask for the resignation of the bishop. I'm sure most of the priests considered the seriousness of their allegations."

While Flinn said such a letter likely would cause some reaction in the Catholic hierarchy, a local priest who has long been critical of Braxton was doubtful.

"Personally, I don't think it's going to do a lot," said the Rev. Marc Stec, pastor of four parishes in southeastern Illinois and a member of the Southern Illinois Association of Priests, a group that has criticized Braxton.

Stec said that at the Wednesday meeting, alternate strategies were discussed that would be used if the letter is ignored. He said many of the 37 priests who attended talked about boycotting meetings called by Braxton or sending donations collected locally to the national Catholic offices, bypassing the Chancery in Belleville.

But Stec said there was no agreement on such measures.

Flinn, who wrote "The Encyclopedia of Catholicism," said, "The deep root behind a lot of this, not just in the Belleville Diocese but around the world, is that the papacy has appointed CEO types to be bishops. Bishops should be primarily pastors. To be a pastor, you have to communicate with the parishioners.

.. If you don't, you are just failing in your office."

Flinn said Wilton Gregory, formerly the bishop of Belleville and now archbishop of Atlanta, was highly regarded because "he was a good preacher."

The call to Braxton to resign was lauded by a national Catholic reform group, Call To Action, based near Chicago.

"We applaud the courage of the Catholic priests in the Belleville Diocese," the group said in a released statement. "This action, done in times of church crisis, only occurs in rare instances such as when a group of Boston priests similarly came together to call for Cardinal Law's resignation after massive revelations of sexual abuse."

Cardinal Bernard F. Law resigned a few months after he received a "no confidence" letter signed by 58 Boston area priests, a relatively small percentage of those assigned to the urban area.