

In advance of Pope Benedict's scheduled April visit to the United States, the letter below is being circulated for signatures. If you would like your name added, please send it to stephen.kobasa@gmail.com by March 16. Include whatever forms of identification you deem appropriate, e.g., organization, vocation, position. Also feel free to circulate it to others who might be interested.

To His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI

Most Holy Father:

In your own words, "today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a 'just war'." Yet, during your upcoming visit to the United States, you are planning to meet with President George W. Bush, whose empty justifications for the violence in Iraq lead to increasing numbers of dead, injured and displaced people. Iraqi civilians still endure the "continual slaughter" which you described in your 2007 Easter Sunday address.

Shortly before the U.S. invaded Iraq, you rightly declared that "there were not sufficient reasons to unleash a war." You've also called attention to the terrible new technologies which cause indiscriminate destruction. Five years later, how much more reason you have to call for an immediate end to this war, and to refuse to meet with the President of the United States until that is accomplished.

If you kneel in grief and outrage before the cross of the tortured Christ, can you offer your blessing to a head of government who excuses the most terrible abuses of human minds and bodies as "legal"?

If meet with him you must, then meet as a prophet should - issuing a warning and an invitation to repentance. Courtesy cannot be used as an evasion of our biblical faith. Ezekiel was repeatedly reminded of his responsibility to admonish those doing evil if he desired to escape sharing in the responsibility for their sins. Shouldn't any of

us who recognize the horror of what is happening in Iraq be condemned if we are silent?

You are scheduled to be in Washington, D.C. on the anniversary of your birth. We feel sure that you will be thinking of the countless children of Iraq who never reached their fifth birthday. In 2005 alone, 122,000 Iraqi children under age five died. There are many, both within the Church and outside of it, who long for your voice to speak for those innocent dead and - face to face with those whose policies denied all respect for their lives - demand that the killing stop.

We are, in faithful hope (among the 430 signatures gathered as of February 21)

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, Archdiocese of Detroit

Kathy Boylan, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker

Stephen Vincent Kobasa

Daniel Berrigan, S.J.

et al.

I don't know who John Chuchman is, but his poems started appearing in my inbox over the winter. I pass them along to you.

Hope

Without confidence (hope),
We could despair and rebel.
Our spiritual leaders are not giving us much hope.
They use our spiritual and economic resources to foster personal goals
rather than the common good and
fail to give hope for positive change.
While elections and term limits provide some hope for needed change,
these are not available in our Catholic Church any more.
Until the Sensus Fidelium (the sense of the faithful) is again acknowledged and honored,
we are hopelessly stuck with the leadership (or lack there of)
foisted upon us.

Pope Benedict recently reminded us (Spe Salve),
that our hope ultimately lies in God's saving love for us
rather than in human leaders or the razzle-dazzle of technology.
But then the Pope's hope-filled words of kindness and peace,
resound against his actions.
Does he reflect God's hope by turning a deaf ear to the sense of the faithful,
or in suppressing subsidiarity and participatory decision making?
Is there any hope in the secrecy of "the private boy's club"?
What hope does he offer by grasping at the power and control of mandatory celibacy
at the cost of neglecting the spiritual needs of the people?
Is there hope in fearfully rejecting the gifts of women,
or living in the 1950's "signs of the times"?
The Latin Mass offers nostalgia for the past,
not hope for the future.

Hope is a community virtue.
Faith and confidence in God's love (hope) is nurtured and reflected
in our community spirit and worship.
We empower each other by our kindness and care and
by reflecting out the love of God within,
and seeing it in others.
Listen hopefully to the words of our spiritual leaders,
but don't count on them for hope-filled, confidence-inspiring, actions.
This mission is simply too important to leave it to them.
Rather, as individuals in community,
we might follow the model of the Good Samaritan for giving and receiving Hope.

Human hope can start with a dream.
Consider Bob Kaiser's dream in his new book "Cardinal Mahoney".

Dutch proposal stirs controversy

By **ROBERT McCLORY**

http://ncronline.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2008a/022208/022208n.htm

Some six months after the Dutch Province of the Dominican order proposed that parishes in Holland should consider selecting lay members to preside at the Eucharist, the winds of controversy show no signs of abating. A spirited debate between the proposal's detractors and supporters is underway.

The Dominican proposal, published in a booklet titled "Church and Ministry" and sent to all 1,425 of the country's parishes, declared that a critical priest shortage justifies a return to an "old tradition," which associates Eucharist more closely with the local community than with top-heavy church authority (NCR, Dec. 14). With this understanding, said the document, "men and women can be chosen to preside ... by the community itself, that is, 'from below.' This does not mean that they do not wish this choice to be followed by a confirmation or blessing of ordination by church authority, in fact by the local bishop."

It was agreed that a rebuttal report on the proposal by a French Dominican theologian, Fr. Hervé Legrand, should be sent to all the parishes in the Netherlands.

That report, published in January, was accompanied by a letter from Azpiroz, who wrote, "While we are sympathetic with the concern for a lack of ordained priests to minister ... we do not believe the solution proposed by our brothers is in harmony with the constant and authentic tradition of the Catholic church."

Legrand excoriated the proposal. While the authors called it an invitation to "open dialogue in which all interested parties would participate," he said, the Dutch document is "in fact a call to action ... contrary to Catholic doctrine with no precedent in tradition" and structured on opposition to the hierarchy. On 22 occasions, he noted, official authority ("from above") is contrasted with grass-roots, community authority ("from below"), and in every case "from below" is viewed as positive and "from above" as negative.

In effect, he said, the proposal disqualifies the bishops from the dialogue. ...

Häring disagreed with Legrand's dismissive view of the Dutch grass roots and insisted the emphasis on church from below -- that is, a church in which the laity choose their leaders -- was not meant to exclude the hierarchy from dialogue. If Legrand understood the 30-year polarization in Holland, during which priests, catechists and religious congregations tried to build bridges with the hierarchy only to be rebuffed or ignored, he would realize the Dutch lack of confidence in the church from above, he said.

Häring then alluded to something transcending the Dutch debate. The situation in Holland is comparable to that elsewhere in the world, he implied, where word and Communion services in

the absence of a priest evolve into a range of secretive and illegal eucharistic services with no priest needed or involved.

Isn't it interesting that the hierarchy feels that they were excluded from the dialogue? Perhaps this will evoke some small amount of sympathy within them on behalf of all those who have felt the same way since windows were closed again after Vatican II.

The celebrant of the liturgy should be the one who, by virtue of charism or ordination, has the capacity to tell the stories and preside over the meal in such a way that the community experiences the presence of Jesus now!

Another poem by John.

Roger Haight, SJ to JAAZ (Jesuit Alumni in AZ) on 2/17/08

How do Catholics Relate to Other Religions

(Christian and Other)

While Retaining Our Identity

As the things that divide and separate
Catholics and Other Christians
are Non-Essential to Our Faith,
We Dialogue with Other Christians
recognizing and accepting
our differences
while Celebrating
our Common Faith.

As God is Present and Active
in All of Creation,
in All Humanity,
as evidenced by Jesus Christ Himself,
We Dialogue with All Others
recognizing and accepting
our differences

while Sharing Our Common Truth.

We treat people of other religions
with Love and Respect
and in no-way as second-class

or

as dependent on Catholicism.

We learn from them
and dialogue with them

as

Equals.

This approach, though not promoted by the Vatican,
not only protects the Catholic identity,

it enhances it.

John Chuchman, MA
Pastoral Bereavement Educator and Companion
Website: www.torchlake.com/poetman

Head of German Catholics considers celibacy "not necessary"

After the arid years in which the German Episcopal Conference was headed by one of the worst prelates in contemporary Catholicism, the new President of the German Episcopal Conference, Robert Zollitsch, Archbishop of Freiburg, shows that he is ready to battle his fellow countryman, the Bishop of Rome - who only last year solemnly confirmed that, in "continuity with the great ecclesial tradition", priestly celibacy "remains obligatory in the Latin tradition" (Sacramentum Caritatis, 24).

HAMBURG – Into his first few days in office - and he even dares to take on a mammoth project: the Archbishop of Freiburg and newly elected chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, **Robert Zollitsch said that he was against "a prohibition on thinking" about the subject of celibacy.** In an interview with Spiegel, the 69-year-old said the link between the priesthood and celibacy was "not theologically necessary."

For the Catholic Church, this statement a radical departure from past practice. Zollitsch is also aware of this: A farewell to celibacy "would be a revolution, in which a part of the church would not take part," he says. A Council that would be needed, because the interior life of the entire church would be affected.

At the same time, Zollitsch advocates an opening of his church towards new social milieus. He went on to distance himself from statements of other bishops about kindergarten care. "Terms like 'Baby Bearing Machine' or 'stove bonus' do not belong to my vocabulary and break down any discussion about the approach. We need nurseries because many parents simply are in need."

He spoke critically about the development of the CDU [the Conservative party, Christian Democratic Union], although that party shares "many Christian values in our sense." But, then Zollitsch added, "The CDU has become closer to more neoliberal theories - and thereby there is a danger in the social market economy that social issues are not kept firmly enough in mind." The proximity between the Catholic Church and the CDU was "very diminished". Furthermore, other parties such as the Socialists and the Greens appreciated "things that are important to us, more than ever before".

The Archbishop of Freiburg also canvassed for a better relationship with the Protestant Church. The Roman statement about what to be a church means triggered resentment among the Protestants. The Protestant Church "is a church. I cannot deny it."

If God is not here, then God is nowhere.

God and Christianity by Michael Morwood

<http://www.newcatholictimes.com/index.php?module=articles&func=display&ptid=1&aid=13>

Australian adult educator bids adieu to the “elsewhere God.”

Just when we Christians were beginning to think the ecumenical movement in our denominations was building bridges, healing wounds and increasing respect and tolerance for the differences amongst us, up pops an issue with potential to divide Christians with even greater impact than the Reformation.

Christianity is presently being split on the most central aspect of Christian belief, our understanding of “God” and how human beings are in relationship with God. Our interpretation of Jesus, our worship, our creed, our understanding of Christianity’s place amongst world religions and our prayer all rest on how we construct this foundational aspect of Christian faith. And the foundation, set in concrete throughout the past two thousand years, is, for many Christians, in acute need of replacing.

Three widespread positions or approaches are to be found amongst Christians today.

God is male and lives “elsewhere’.

Firstly, there are conservative Christians for whom God is a male Supreme Being who basically lives somewhere else, a God who intervenes when he wants to or when asked properly. This God is a lawgiver, a God who has asked to be worshipped, a God who “chooses” people or individuals for special tasks, a God who notes our lack of due respect, a God who will make a judgment as to whether we will spend eternal life with him. This God “listens” to us. This is also the “cause and effect” God which makes many Christians ask, “Why did God do this to me?”

This God reveals himself only to chosen groups or individuals.

Many conservative Christians adopt a literalist understanding of stories in the Bible because the Bible is the “Word” of this God and therefore cannot contain any errors. So the story of Adam and Eve, for example, is actually telling us why pain and sin exist in our world. The story is then used to explain why we need God, in the form of Jesus, to come and save us from the wretched state we humans caused.

Secondly, there are many Christians, still basically conserving the traditional notion of a personal God who is to be worshipped, who have moved beyond scriptural literalism and the notion of a male God. They do not interpret Jesus in the light of a literal understanding of a “fall” from grace at the beginning of human history. They have moved beyond the dualism in which our scriptures and creeds have interpreted Jesus – as if God basically lives somewhere else (heaven) and Jesus’ task was to open access for us to that place where God actually lives. This leaves these Christians not too sure whether Jesus needs to be a special incarnation of God, since this seems to be needed only if we literally accept the story of Adam’s fall from an original state of “perfect grace”. These Christians find themselves isolated from institutional worship, since the language and imagery there is still that of traditional Christian belief in a “fall” and redemption by Jesus.

New cosmology, new questions

Thirdly, there are Christians who have moved quite radically in allowing contemporary knowledge about our universe and the development of life on this planet to shift them from the understanding of God they acquired in their Christian upbringing. They ask awkward questions, like, “If God is everywhere, and we live in a universe with billions of galaxies each with billions of stars, what are we trying to imagine with this word, “God”? “Does this God “listen” to us?” How? What are we imagining?

These are challenging and pertinent questions with which all Christians should wrestle. Just what are we imagining with a belief that “God” listens and responds? And if “God” is always present, everywhere in this vast universe, how is this operative? What would we be looking for on Mars or Venus to show that “God” is present and active there? Or in the star we call our “Sun”? Or on this planet? Or in a carbon atom? Or in all human beings? Again, these are questions that Christians professing to be mature in their faith cannot ignore. What seems clear is that we cannot answer questions like these with the images and notions that second century Christians had about the universe, what “God” was like, where God “lived”, how human life began and from where death and sin emerged.

The questions challenge Christians to take seriously a concept of “God” that embraces God’s activity in all places, at all times, in every part of this vast universe. This is the foundation needing to be set in place - and it is hardly new since Christians have always professed this understanding. What is new is the extent to which “all places, all times, every part of our universe” demands we expand and adjust our understanding of God and how God is operative in our universe. And when this understanding is in place, Christians can begin the task of reconstructing a new understanding of how “revelation” works and Jesus’ role in the process of revelation.

For Christians in both the second and third groups, “Revelation” will not be about a Divine Being intervening from outside our world, but a “God” who works in and through what is there to be worked with. So our Scriptures will be understood to emerge from the Spirit of God at work in people and communities in particular places, at a particular time in history, with their cultural beliefs and practices and with their images and beliefs about how human beings are in relationship with God. And at the same time God’s “Spirit” was at work in the Hebrew and Christian communities, the very same Spirit was at work in all places and cultures on this planet, both bound by and able to be expressed by whatever it had to work with.

Where does Jesus fit into this understanding?

The story of Jesus will no longer be a story of someone, unlike the rest of us, who repairs what was lost and had to be God incarnate in order to be able to do so. Rather it will be the story of someone, very much like the rest of us, who opened eyes and minds to the wonder of what always has been and will be: the presence of “God” with us. All Christians proclaim: we live in love; we live in God and God lives in us. However, Jesus did not make that happen. People who lived before Jesus lived in love and they lived in God and God lived in them. What Jesus did was to open minds and hearts. And more: He lived the reality in such a way that people were able to proclaim that in him they had seen the ultimate Mystery we call God in human form. Every age, though, has the task of articulating and even growing in its understanding of who or what “God” is. We are not excused from this challenge and as we respond to it, we will continue to gather around the message and life of Jesus because we believe we discover here the wonder of who we

are and the nature of our relationship with the reality we call “God”.

.Wherever we find ourselves in our understanding of “God”, we may well get on with being Christian and trying to live decent lives. Hopefully we will recognize and respect that this is common ground for all of us. However, none of us is spared the challenge of engagement with how adults in the 21st century shape their understanding of God and the questions that go with that engagement.

We are probably already aware of differences of understanding within families and amongst friends. What seems most important is that we Christians learn from the mistakes of the past 500 years and do not shut off from one another because of these differences but find ways of listening to one another with respect and sharing what we believe and why we believe it. There is no doubt that our understanding of “God” is the most central and crucial issue confronting Christianity today. If we fail to discuss it and fail to marry Christian belief about God with 21st century knowledge and understanding of our universe, people with that knowledge and understanding will relegate Christianity to the museum.

Creating a piece of Cardinal fiction

Phoenix author imagines a changed Catholic Church in America

By LAWN GRIFFITHS TRIBUNE

Forty-five years ago, Robert Blair Kaiser was a young journalist covering the heady and historic Vatican Council II in Rome for Time magazine. Since then, the Phoenix journalist and Jesuit-educated Catholic has written 11 books, including four that deal with a call for church reform in the spirit of that council.

His latest, “Cardinal Mahony,” Kaiser’s first novel, takes the real-life 17-year Roman Catholic cardinal and archbishop of Los Angeles, Roger Mahony, and sets him in November 2008 for a tale of ecclesiastical power turned to give wide authority to lay Catholics.

Mixing facts of the cardinal’s troubled tenure over alleged cover-ups of priest sexual abuse cases, Kaiser has Mahony kidnapped from a California ski trail by three “liberation theologians,” then transported in his own helicopter to a secret southern Mexican jungle compound.

His captors are from a revolutionary group, Para los Otros (For the Others), which calls for sweeping changes in the church. In Mexico, Mahony is put on trial for his failings and sins as archbishop. It is broadcast live worldwide by satellite television, with Vatican officials especially glued to what is said. Six retired Latin American bishops serve as the jury.

Just after Mahony is convicted on all counts, 590 million global viewers hear his fate: “We sentence Cardinal Mahony to become a Christian.” Then moments later, Mexican commandos storm the compound blowing everyone away except Mahony, who suffers a head-grazing injury and is left unconscious. He wakes up in a Los Angeles hospital where he recovers, then embarks on a massive humanitarian mission as a transformed man. He also sets out to bring “democracy” to the Catholic Church in America despite Vatican objections.

“I will encourage the four million Catholics in the Church of Los Angeles to elect my successor,” he declares, noting that his reforms could bring Pope Benedict XVI to put his

archdiocese under interdiction, barring sacraments, Masses, Catholic burial and more.

“Cardinal Mahony” (Humble-bee Press, \$19.95, 256 pages) is filled with real people — 79 in all, people like filmmaker Michael Moore, news personalities Katie Couric, Bill O’Reilly and Matt Drudge, President Bush and influential Benedictine nun and author Sister Joan Chittister, a longtime critic of Vatican stands on social issues.

In one chapter, he has American bishops gathering at The Phoenician resort in Phoenix for four spring days. “The word ‘retreat’ was a cover,” he writes. “At the Phoenician, the bishops did what they had been doing at some of America’s finest resorts for decades: ... gossiping in the sun, eating well, drinking well and (many of them) playing 18 holes every day.”

In his 2004 book, “A Church in Search of Itself,” Kaiser first introduced the idea of an “autochthonous,” or homegrown American church “still in communion with Rome but on a model with the Maronites and Melkites, which have their own priesthood (some married),” as well as their own liturgy, language and polity, or form of governance. “Rome has never tried to rein them in,” he said.

They are “every bit as Catholic,” he said. Before Mahony was named to lead the nation’s largest archdiocese, he was the bishop of Stockton, Calif., where Kaiser said he got to know the cleric well and interviewed him a halfdozen times.

The writer chose Mahony for the main character of his book because of his high profile. “He is kind of a media maven,” he said.

“There’s a good Roger and a bad Roger,” Kaiser said.

After publication of the book, Kaiser left a signed copy at the archbishop’s residence in Los Angeles, and he learned from a National Catholic Reporter review of the book that Mahony read it on a flight to Rome.

Last July, under Mahony’s direction, the Los Angeles Archdiocese approved legal settlements totalling \$660 million to 508 victims of sexual abuse after four years of court battles. The payout was four times larger than in any previous U.S. diocese. It brought fierce calls for Mahony to resign or be removed. “Yes, we’ve made mistakes,” he said at a press conference.

Kaiser, who studied 10 years to be a Jesuit priest but left three years short of ordination, argues that many Catholics are leaving the church or are weakly engaged because “they’ve lost their trust in the pope and their ‘lord bishops.’ ” He says because the church is theirs, they don’t have to leave. “They just have to take it back, insist their lord bishops become servant bishops and do what Jesus told his Apostles to do: Listen to the people and serve the people.”

“Mainly this novel shows how we can get the change that everybody wants,” Kaiser said in an interview.

He conceives of a kind of American church “constitutional convention,” like the one in 1787 in Philadelphia, creating a “constitution to supplant Roman canon law” with three branches, including a legislative branch with a House of Bishops and House of Commons, both filled by the election by voting Catholics.

“Autochthony ’ a heresy.

just a restructuring of power,” Kaiser insists.

“I wrote this novel to help people imagine the possibilities of a listening, serving church,” he said.

Kaiser, who was a contributing editor in Rome from 1999 to 2005 for Newsweek magazine earned a Overseas Press Club Award for his Time coverage of the Vatican Council (1962-65). He calls the pope “the world’s last great monarch” who “makes the laws, he interprets all the

laws, he enforces all the laws and puts his blessing on a particularly narrow kind of 'Roman theology' and no other."

The Pope's Jesus and My Jesus

Bishop Spong

On February 26, 2008, my latest book, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, will be released by my publisher, Harper Collins, in a paperback version. Since its original publication on February 27, 2007, I have traveled extensively to speak about this book, delivering 168 public addresses in 16 states, eight countries and four continents, including two trips into the southern hemisphere.

Two other things occurred, however, during that 365 day period that serve to make the launch of this paperback noteworthy. First, this book has enjoyed record sales even making it to the New York Times' extended best seller list in non fiction and rising to position number 24 on the Amazon daily list of all books sold. It also made the best seller list in Australia. Two foreign publishers, one in Germany and one in Korea, bought the rights to translate this book. It has also been reviewed extensively drawing praise from some, while being almost universally condemned in evangelical and fundamentalist circles. It was arguably the best book launch in my career.

The second thing that happened was totally unanticipated, but has proven to be quite extraordinary. Later in that same year of 2007, another book, entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, hit the bookstands with great fanfare. Written by Joseph Ratzinger, better known as Pope Benedict XVI, this book also climbed the New York Times' best seller list to a higher position than I had achieved and remained there far longer than did my book. I was eager to read it, but when I did I found myself profoundly shocked. The contrast between the Pope's book and mine could not have been more total. Indeed it was as if the Pope's book was line by line a counterpoint to mine. That sense was so apparent that my publisher redesigned the cover for the paperback edition and placed a promotional piece on the back that reads: "The Pope describes the ancient traditional Jesus; John Shelby Spong brings us a Jesus by whom modern people can be inspired."

As if to provide a clue to his understanding, the Pope's subtitle proclaimed that his book was designed to "cover the life of Jesus from his baptism to the transfiguration," words that led me to suspect that the Pope would treat the gospels as accurate historical biographies. He did. That is a point of view that has been all but universally abandoned since the rise of critical biblical scholarship in Germany more that 200 years ago, when Christians first began to take note of the contradictions, exaggerations and elaborations that are present in the gospels and to face new understandings about how and when the gospels came to be written. This field of study has, not surprisingly, included competent Roman Catholic scholars, like Edward Schillebeeckx of the Netherlands, Hans Kung of Germany and America's Raymond Brown, all of whom shaped my own thinking in powerful ways, but who are never mentioned in the Pope's book. A clue to understanding this is revealed when one is aware of the fact that when Benedict XVI was Joseph Ratzinger, the Cardinal in charge of the Vatican's inquisitorial office, he was responsible for the removal of Hans Kung from his position as the Catholic theologian at Tübingen University and for the constant Vatican harassment of Edward Schillebeeckx. Perhaps this also explains why

Raymond Brown had to add to the conclusion of his books statements reaffirming his commitment to traditional Catholic doctrine, even though in the corpus of those same books he had been devastating to the claims that these biblical passages supported the doctrinal conclusions the church had drawn from them, to say nothing of demonstrating that the original authors of the gospels never understood them that way. Benedict XVI is not an unlearned man. Early in this Jesus book he takes cognizance of this critical biblical scholarship, but then he proceeds to dismiss it since it violates his basic and still unchallenged assumption that the faith of the Catholic Church is the ultimate truth revealed by God and that anything that does not undergird that faith must be wrong by definition. So he simply refuses to engage it.

Tellingly, in this book he omits the birth narratives, promising to return to them in a later book. It should be interesting if he ever actually does that, since I know of no reputable biblical scholar, either Catholic or Protestant, who treats the stories of Jesus' miraculous birth as literal history. The narratives of Jesus' virgin birth do not enter the Christian tradition until the 9th decade, or more than 80 years after the fact of his birth. The earlier Christian writings, specifically the work of both Paul and Mark, appear never to have heard of such a tradition. Both of these writers include in their works words that make a miraculous birth an impossibility for them. By the time we come to the writing of John's gospel, the miraculous birth story has disappeared and Jesus is called in that gospel "the son of Joseph" on two occasions (John 1:45, 6:42). Throughout the Pope's book there is the constant assumption that the gospels were eyewitness accounts written from first hand memory or available notes, when they were in fact composed 40-70 years after the crucifixion of Jesus by the second or third generation of Christians. He does not embrace the fact that all of the gospels were written in Greek, a language neither Jesus nor his disciples spoke, and that they all reveal a highly developed interpretation of Jesus that could not have occurred until after his earthly life was over. The Pope treats as literal history the story of Jesus' baptism, complete with the heavens of a three-tiered universe opening to allow the Holy Spirit to drop down on Jesus. He assumes that the words, "You are my beloved son," supposedly spoken by God at the time of the baptism, to be so literal that they could have been recorded for posterity if only such recording devices had been available at that time. Benedict XVI does not seem to recognize that those words were lifted out of Isaiah 42 and were used primarily to wrap the story of the servant figure from II Isaiah (40-55) around Jesus of Nazareth as one of the many interpretive traditions applied to him by his early followers.

The Pope suggests that the Sermon on the Mount, recorded only in Matthew (5-7) is "Jesus' Torah." One senses that he would be in full sympathy with my tour guide on an earlier trip to Israel, who showed me the exact spot on the exact mountain where Jesus stood to deliver the Sermon on the Mount. He never acknowledges the fact that no other gospel writer included this sermon. He seems not to know that the Sermon on the Mount is a beautifully crafted piece of work based on Psalm 119, a hymn to the beauty and wonder of the Torah, which was used by the Jews as part of a 24 hour vigil called Shavuot, that marked the Jewish annual celebration of the time when, according to their tradition, Moses received the Torah directly from God on Mount Sinai. Matthew had a clear agenda to present Jesus as the "New Moses."

He treats the transfiguration story as another moment of history despite the fact that it suggests that Jesus actually conferred with Moses, who by that time had been dead for more than 1200 years, and with Elijah, who had been dead for more than 800 years. He does not recognize that

this story was an early Christian attempt to portray Jesus as the one in whom the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) found their fulfillment, another early interpretation by his Jewish followers. He does not see the luminous whiteness in which Jesus is bathed as related to the Jewish Festival of Dedication (Hanukkah), when the true light of God was said to have been restored to the Temple. When the Transfiguration story was first written I suspect the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. had already occurred and Jesus' Jewish followers were beginning to talk about the body of Jesus as the new temple, the new meeting place between God and human life. That idea would grow until Jesus would be quoted in John's gospel, written between 95 and 100, as saying: "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up (2:19)." John adds that they did not realize that he "spoke of the Temple of his body (2:21)."

Perhaps in the most egregious claim of all, Benedict argues that the long discourses in John's gospel in which other messianic images are developed, are authentic quotations from the Jesus himself. This would also imply that the various "I Am" sayings, which appear only in the Fourth Gospel, are also to be understood literally and not as interpretations placed on Jesus' lips by his followers sometime after the expulsion from the synagogue of the Jewish followers of Jesus around the year 88 C.E. The excommunicating Orthodox Party claimed that those whom they called "revisionist Jews" no longer had any part in the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. According to the Fourth Gospel, these excommunicated ones responded to this charge by taking the holy name of God, "I Am" revealed to Moses at the burning bush, and used it as their counter claim that the God of Abraham and Moses was exactly the God they had encountered in Jesus.

The day has long passed when many people in the world will accept the Pope's portrait of Jesus simply because he is the Pope. The struggle for the soul of the Christian Church today is a struggle between those like the Pope, who cannot move beyond their religious ghetto and refuse to examine any idea that contradicts or challenges their "revealed truth," and others like me and those for whom I write, who believe that the reality of the God experience in Jesus must be understood in the light of the knowledge available to each new generation. The Pope's call in his *book Jesus of Nazareth* is to look at a pre-modern Jesus devotionally, the way the Church has always presented him. My call in my *book Jesus for the Non-Religious* is to look at Jesus through the lens of our contemporary knowledge. I do not believe the heart will ever worship what the mind can no longer embrace. I am delighted that Harper Collins has decided to promote my book as an alternative and as a counterpoint to the Pope's. Jesus is bigger and far more profound than Joseph Ratzinger, locked as he is in the past, seems able to imagine.

Archbishop Marini on liturgical renewal

http://www.the-tidings.com/2008/020808/essays_text.htm

Archbishop Piero Marini served for 20 years as papal master of ceremonies before assuming the presidency of the Pontifical Committee for International Eucharistic Congresses this past October. In the years following the Second Vatican Council, he has been one of the most dedicated supporters of its liturgical reforms.

Marini has just published a new book as an expression of his continued fidelity to the council and to Pope Paul VI, who promulgated its reforms. The book is also a rebuttal of those who seem intent upon repealing, or at least neutralizing, those reforms. It is entitled "A Challenging Reform: Realizing the Vision of the Liturgical Renewal, 1963-1975," published by The Liturgical Press.

Archbishop Marini had originally planned to promote the book this month in the United States, but out of deference to Pope Benedict XVI, who will visit the U.S. in mid-April, the archbishop will delay his own visit until November.

He had launched the book in mid-December at the London residence of Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, archbishop of Westminster. Archbishop Marini was interviewed at the time by the National Catholic Reporter's senior correspondent, John Allen.

Excerpts of the interview were published in NCR's Dec. 28 issue. The full text is available in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org.

"Vatican II," the archbishop pointed out in the interview, "was not a revolution" or a "novelty," but a "continuation of this need to adapt the liturgy to the situation of our time." He noted that this was "the first time that an ecumenical council produced a fully composed document on the liturgy, on the necessity to reform the liturgy."

The council affirmed that "the liturgy isn't someone's private property, but it belongs to the entire church. It belongs to the celebrant, but also to the faithful."

In Marini's judgment, the path of liturgical reform taken by the council and approved by Pope Paul VI is "irreversible."

"We cannot turn back.... If you want a lesson about the dangers of going back, I'll limit myself to the woman from the Old Testament who turned around and became a pillar of salt! In the Bible, the Lord is always in front of us ... never behind us."

He reminded us that so much of the liturgical reforms of the Council of Trent and of Pope Pius V in the 16th century took shape in reaction to the Protestants, who rejected the idea of an institutional priesthood.

"The Catholic Church," Archbishop Marini pointed out, "naturally defended this form of priesthood, and created a liturgy, the Tridentine liturgy, which made a sharp distinction between the priest and the people of God. The liturgy became something priests do. Today, Vatican II helped us to rediscover the idea of the priesthood as something universal.

"The faithful," he continued, "don't receive permission from priests to participate in the Mass. They are members of a priestly people, which means they have the right to participate in offering the sacrifice of the Mass. This was a great discovery, the great emphasis, of the council."

The Missal of Pius V, however, made no reference at all to the People of God. Its emphasis was

on the unity of the Church in the face of the Reformation: thus, the insistence on a common Latin language, fixed rubrics and norms for everyone to follow without exception.

What troubles the archbishop nowadays is "a certain nostalgia for the past," one that "seems especially strong among some young priests. How is it possible," he asked, "to be nostalgic for an era they didn't experience?"

Asked why this spirit of nostalgia has taken hold with some Catholics, he replied that perhaps it's because the implementation of liturgical reform has been difficult, giving rise to a yearning to return to a supposedly simpler time.

Although John Allen tried to draw Archbishop Marini into making some comments about Pope Benedict's granting of permission for the Latin Mass, he was careful not to do so, noting only that in the letter accompanying the papal document, the pope insisted that his permission takes nothing away from the authority of Vatican II nor does it detract from the validity of its reforms.

The council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Marini said, contains principles that are "perennial," that is, not bound to any particular historical period. Among those principles are the priesthood of the faithful and the legitimacy of adaptation of language and rituals to changing circumstances.

If there is a crisis in the Church today, he concluded, it is "in part because there's a crisis in the liturgy." His new book addresses that crisis in a straightforward and *constructive fashion*.

Father Richard McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

A New Initiative from the Center of Concern

"In their patriotism and in their fidelity to their civic duties Catholics will feel themselves bound to promote the true common good; they will make the weight of their convictions so influential that as a result civil authority will be justly exercised and laws will accord with moral precepts and the common good."

—*Second Vatican Council, Apostolicam actuositatem 14*

The materials on this page (<http://www.coc.org/election2008/>) are meant to help you participate actively in the current political campaigns as an informed and faithful Christian. The materials posted here can help you deepen your own analysis, make your own evaluation of the programs and candidates, and engage your local communities.

Future postings in this Center initiative will be made on the 1st and 15th of each month. Topics will include immigration, international relations, jobs and outsourcing, poverty, Iraq and

security, health care, and climate change. Other topics may be developed as the campaigns evolve.

The issues are framed in the context of globalization and a commitment to the common good faithful to the universalism of the Christian vision. They reflect the conviction that merely national solutions to security, health, poverty, employment, migration, the ecology and life itself cannot provide more than short-term fixes.

Select, download and use the materials that are most helpful to you in your context. You will find:

Common Good Framework Resources

Immigration

International Relations: Voting the Common Good

Let us know how you are using them, what is helpful in them and what could be better for your setting.

The Center of Concern provides many fine resources to help us educate ourselves in preparation for November.

The two articles which follow consider the state of priestly life and vocations within the Roman Catholic Church.

COMMONWEAL MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 23, 2007

The Other Health Crisis

Why Priests Are Coping Poorly

Paul Stanosz

It's been a rough year in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, where I have been a priest since 1984. Recently the archdiocese announced the closing of the academic program at its 151-year-old seminary. Its central offices -on forty-four acres of prime real estate- are for sale to pay clergy sexual-abuse claims, and bankruptcy looms because a Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling in July opened the possibility that the statute of limitations on abuse cases may be extended.

Among priests, meanwhile, there is much talk of high stress, poor health, and low morale. More and more are battling burnout and depression as well as suffering heart attacks and dying prematurely. Two have committed suicide in recent years. At the archdiocese's spring assembly of priests last May, I heard a lot of talk about how the limitations of canon law and parish structures add to the administrative burden and stress experienced by priests. There was a keen sense of the many pitfalls and the growing personnel crisis within the priesthood, and of the polarization that exists between recently ordained and long-time priests-what some call JP II priests and Vatican II priests, respectively.

After attending a number of meetings of the Milwaukee Archdiocese Priests Alliance, I talked with my archbishop, Timothy Dolan, about the low morale of priests. He subsequently asked me to join the archdiocese's Wellness Committee, which seeks to promote the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of priests. (More than 60 percent of all large- and medium-size U.S. employers have wellness programs, and dioceses are getting on the bandwagon too.) The committee meetings made clear that while there are no easy solutions to the malaise afflicting

priests today-as a group we struggled even to name the problem and its causes-certain facts must be acknowledged if progress is to be made.

First, our bishops must be honest about the crisis of health, morale, and collegiality among priests. At a recent Milwaukee Council of Priests meeting, the vicar for clergy announced that “the wheels are falling off the wagons,” and that he was overwhelmed with the problems of priests under fifty years of age. Such bluntness is rare. Many people are afraid that speaking about the problem will affect vocational recruitment.

In any case, simply ordaining more priests will not resolve the malaise. Bishops in recent years have been too quick to fill seminaries with fervent men who may or may not have genuine vocations. As a result, our seminaries now house a new breed of unsuitable candidates, men with poor relational and leadership skills. Ordained into a U.S. church that is losing its vitality, these men often seek to turn back the clock by embracing disciplines and devotional practices that flourished in the middle of the last century.

In my research as a sociologist I have interviewed many who see the priesthood as a refuge from a depraved secular world, a place where their personal limitations and modest abilities are no obstacle to advancement (see “More on the Seminaries: Let’s Be Candid about the Candidates,” *Commonweal*, December 1, 2006). All too frequently these men are filled with a sense of their own sacred status, and are prone to conflict with the laity and fellow priests. Such men, my research suggests, are more likely to become unhappy and disgruntled when their sense of chosenness and elevated status no longer sustains them through the more prosaic ups and downs of the priesthood. (According to a study by Dean Hoge, one in seven priests ordained since the 1990s resigned in his first five years of ministry-a very steep attrition rate). Worse still, their unhappiness often leads priests to break their vows of celibacy or fall into addictive behaviors. Another problem lies in the haste with which bishops appoint the recently ordained to pastorates. Priestly formation after ordination used to begin with many years spent learning the ropes as an associate pastor or parochial vicar under the tutelage of a pastor. Increasingly, however, ordained priests with only two or three years of experience are being thrust into pastorates. They have little opportunity to learn about administration. Studies by Katarina Schuth and Hoge found that most priests felt unprepared for financial administration and personnel management. Fortunately, some men who come to the priesthood after another career bring these skills with them, but many do not. And seminaries, which have already increased the time candidates must spend studying philosophy, see little chance to expand already bulging curricula.

The morale of priests would be improved, and stress and polarization reduced, if dioceses invested more in postordination training. Presbyters and church officials should accept that life-long formation and training are essential. Most dioceses require continuing education of their priests. In Milwaukee, priests receive \$1,000 a year for this purpose, and though that is more than what many dioceses provide, it is dwarfed by what U.S. corporations spend on continuing education for their employees. In addition, where corporations are highly directive in determining what continued schooling, conferences, and conventions employees attend, there is little direction given or accountability for priests regarding continuing formation. Unfortunately, some priests also believe the ontological change and sacramental faculties conferred by ordination render any further ministerial training unnecessary.

Yet even if these institutional problems are addressed, the morale of priests will improve only if we understand more fully the larger sources of the current crisis in the church. Churches are inevitably shaped by external economic, social, and cultural conditions, and many factors have contributed to the general weakening of Catholic practice. No longer a shunned, ghettoized,

immigrant minority, Catholics today are largely a suburban population, better educated and more affluent than their grandparents. They have succeeded in joining the cultural mainstream, sending their children to public schools, and abandoning Sunday Mass in favor of soccer, TV, or shopping. These competing influences are not easily overcome by the latest chancery or central-office program for increasing Mass attendance, evangelization, vocations, and stewardship. In Milwaukee, archdiocesan officials often mandate well-intentioned programs to slow the drift away from the church. Parish priests, pushed by diocesan officials to implement these new programs, feel frustrated when the end result is the same: the people aren't filling up the pews or supporting the church financially.

The steep decline in religiosity among Catholic youth is also evidence of an acute crisis. Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith's analysis of the recent National Study of Youth and Religion is sobering. The massive study ranked U.S. Catholic teenagers well behind their Protestant peers in adherence to their religious tradition's beliefs, norms, practices, and commitments. Smith attributes this trend to a decline in practice among parents, a paucity of full-time youth ministers, the demise of Catholic schools and their replacement with weak CCD programs, and to the upward mobility and acculturation of a once largely working-class immigrant population. According to this account, the financial success, social mobility, and cultural mainstreaming of American Catholics have led to the end of the urban parish-school-neighborhood enclaves that formed and cemented the communities and the faith of immigrant Catholics.

In other words, large social, cultural, and economic forces-and not simply internal forces such as the alleged dilution of Catholicism by Vatican II reforms-have contributed to Catholicism's decline. And that decline is not about to reverse itself. It seems unlikely that young people who have only the foggiest understanding of the Catholic tradition will suddenly return to the church as adults. Furthermore, the rate at which Catholics marry outside the church is skyrocketing. As a result, Roman Catholicism in the next two decades will almost certainly face the sort of enormous decline that mainline Protestant denominations suffered in the 1960s. Even Hispanic Catholics are drifting away at a rate of about 1 percent a year, largely to Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations.

There are no simple answers to these problems. Catholics will not be returning to their cultural ghettos, of course. And while I doubt that a return to preconciliar practices would reenergize the church and halt its decline, neither am I convinced that the progressives' agenda-women's ordination, married clergy, same-sex unions, the easing of divorce restrictions, and the acceptance of abortion under certain circumstances-would revive moribund parishes and bring a return to Sunday Mass. One widely shared perception is that it is precisely those mainline Protestant denominations that have embraced such positions that face the steepest declines in membership, while strict groups such as Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and Mormons continue to grow rapidly. Sociologists such as Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Christian Smith, and others have advanced the theory that stricter religions, the ones that maintain a higher level of tension with the surrounding culture, are more likely to flourish. When newly arrived Catholics were seen as foreigners and dangerously different from the Protestant mainstream in the first half of the twentieth century, Catholic practice was high, and so was conformity to church teaching. As Charles Morris shrewdly observed in *American Catholic*, "The old-line bishops instinctively understood that strength lay in a prickly apartness from America's great leveling engine, a proud declaration of difference." Not surprisingly, as Catholics have succeeded, and embraced the mores of their surrounding culture, many have ceased to attend Mass or embrace the church's teaching.

An aging presbyterate should not exhaust itself in implementing new programs that are at best only Band-Aids. Instead, we must acknowledge the magnitude and the complexity of the forces that lie behind American Catholicism's loss of vigor, and stop blaming Vatican II or the bumbling bishops who shielded pedophiles and failed to protect children. We should avoid blithely scapegoating "the culture of death" and the evil of the secular world. After all, there are currents of sin and grace in both the church and the world. An eagerness to blame "the world" may keep us from seeing our own failure to embody the compassion and virtue of Jesus Christ. Catholicism will evolve; it always has. In the past, missionary efforts, charismatic figures like Francis of Assisi or Ignatius of Loyola, dynamic leadership, global population shifts, new discoveries, and even catastrophes have led to renewed religious vitality. What will eventually stem the current decline cannot be known yet. In the meantime, we must learn to be a different kind of church. We've made progress in overcoming our pretensions to being a triumphal, all-knowing, sinless church. But more progress remains to be made; and paradoxically, it begins with acknowledging-and in a certain sense accepting-the decline of U.S. Catholicism.

My archbishop likes to say that we are in the hope business, but we must not be in the false-hope business. For me personally, acknowledging that the church and priesthood are in decline will lower my expectations of my bishops, brother priests, and my parishioners. So, I'll be pleasantly surprised and moved by the faithfulness of the Catholics who remain-and ecstatic when bishops do things right. I'll learn to say "no" when diocesan officials ask me to take a third, fourth, or fifth parish. I'm not advocating apathy in the face of decline; I'm merely recognizing that the decline began before me and will continue after me. Even Pope John Paul II, with all his vision, courage, and tenacity, was unable to return the masses to the church. The new evangelization he called for remains to be undertaken.

And so I anticipate ministering to a shrinking Catholic flock as I grow old. This does not mean that the work and mission of the presbyterate will be increasingly irrelevant. On the contrary, it will be all the more pressing and challenging. Embracing this reality decreases my anxiety, sharpens my vision, makes my expectations more realistic, and makes my spirit less likely to burn out; it leads me to care for my health, so that I will be able to care for those entrusted to me. To restore health to our pastoral function, we priests first need to admit our own pain and disorientation in a foundering church.

Though much will change in the U.S. church and its priesthood in coming decades, these changes need not bring additional stress, depression, overwork, heart attacks, early death, or intergenerational conflict for priests. As I see it, the greatest threat to priests' well-being is denial. We priests know we are in trouble, even if bishops are reluctant to admit it. The problems are embodied in the worn, torn, aging, and overweight colleagues I observed at my diocese's recent assembly of priests. The crisis is right there in front of us, and the forced optimism of those afraid of appearing insufficiently orthodox-or disloyal to Rome-strikes me as a failure of perception, honesty, and faith. Overcoming such denial will be the beginning of a renewal in the church and in the morale of its priests.

Catholic Church faces priest shortage

By Tony Castro, Staff Writer

Article Last Updated: 11/10/2007 12:18:46 AM PST

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Rev. Jim Forsen talks about the need for priests and the... (Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer)

On a recent Sunday, the Rev. Robert J. McNamara of St. Bernardine of Siena Parish in Woodland Hills found himself baptizing four babies - all boys - and quipped that perhaps they would all grow up to be priests.

"The joke bombed," McNamara recalls. "The parents looked at me stone-faced. I even tried the joke a second time. It bombed a second time."

But it is no laughing matter in the Roman Catholic Church, which today finds itself with an all-time shortage of priests - so much so that many dioceses in the country are looking to Latin America to recruit seminarians.

"We, unfortunately, are typical of the trouble the church is having in recruiting men for the priesthood," said the Rev. Jim Forsen, who was ordained 28 years ago and is now vocations director for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Forsen makes the rounds of parishes, speaking during the homily about the joys of a religious vocation with the charisma befitting a college football recruiter.

At St. John Eudes Church in Chatsworth, for instance, he summoned all the children at the Mass to the altar and asked who among them wanted to be a lawyer, a dentist, a firefighter, a teacher, a doctor or a veterinarian.

Children eagerly raised their hands at each profession.

"How many of you want to be a priest?" Forsen finally asked.

He was greeted with a round of nervous giggles and laughter - but no hands.

He then prodded the altar boys. Still no takers.

"Don't you want to be a priest?" he asked one of the boys who shrugged. "Sure? Maybe? No way?"

Los Angeles, the largest archdiocese in the country, has fewer than 400 diocesan priests to minister to more than 4.3million Catholics, according to its Web site.

In the next five years, the San Fernando Region of the diocese, much of which is made up of the San Fernando Valley, will have an estimated 40percent fewer pastors than it does today.

At St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, the seminary for the Los Angeles Archdiocese, only 45 of the 92 seminarians are earmarked as future priests for this archdiocese, which encompasses L.A., Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

"For almost all men who are considering the priesthood," Forsen is quick to acknowledge, "the main difficulty is celibacy."

But that's only one of the issues for the priest shortage. Across the country, religions that don't require celibacy are experiencing a shortage, as well.

Jewish synagogues and Protestant churches are reporting similar problems in recruiting rabbis and

ministers. Some Episcopal and Presbyterian churches have a clergy shortage, and some congregations of Reform Judaism and the modern Orthodox wing of Judaism are without full-time rabbis.

For Protestant denominations, the declining clergy population has been blamed on the attraction of more lucrative careers in the private economy as well as retirements. For Jews, until a few years ago there were more rabbis than congregations, and officials say recruitment was not emphasized, causing their shortage.

But the Byzantine rite Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, which allow their priests to be married before ordination, get plenty of vocations.

For the Roman Catholic Church, however, the clergy number across the country has been falling some 26percent since 1980, according to reports.

The archdioceses of Omaha and Atlanta, each of which serves about 250,000 Catholics, average around seven vocations a year each. In 1999, the Los Angeles Archdiocese recruited three men for the priesthood. Since then, the number has varied from none in 2001 to six in 2000 and 2004. St. John's ordained nine seminarians in September, five of whom were assigned to Los Angeles. According to a study by the Georgetown University-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, celibacy ranks as the main reason for the dwindling numbers of priests, along with the attraction of successful, private lives.

"Our culture also places an emphasis on living a full, active sexual life; the priesthood calls one to chaste celibacy," Forsen said.

"The priesthood is, as it always has been, countercultural - not anti-cultural but clearly countercultural. The more countercultural our parishes and families become, the more likely it is that young people will want to live committed countercultural lives as priests and religious." Lost in concerns over the priest shortage and the reasons behind it is the belief that the priesthood is a calling from God.

"Let us at least begin to see it as a possibility that God may be calling some of the young people we know to serve him as a priest or sister," McNamara wrote in his church's Sunday bulletin about his recent experience with parents who didn't want their infants growing up to become priests.

But Forsen says the challenge the church faces is connecting with youngsters. He tells the story about a high school principal who cautioned him about reaching out to her students for vocations.

"Good luck, Father. You priests do not live in the imagination of the young," the principal told Forsen. "They dream about being astronauts, or professional ballplayers, or rock stars, or even video-game designers.

"But they don't dream about being priests. You're not even on their radar."

Possible solutions, Forsen says, include taking steps to make Catholic life in general, and priestly and religious life in particular, attractive and spotlighting vocations as priorities - undoubtedly made more difficult in the wake of the clergy sex-abuse scandal that has rocked the church.

"A lot of people see only the sacrifices that go into the priesthood - the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience," he said. "There are people who ask, 'How can you be a priest?' And to them I say, 'How can you be married?' My point is that when you love, there is no sacrifice at all.

"It's the same with a priest. I feel that as a priest, I am trying to change the world for the good, and I am doing it for the same reason as people who are married. You are doing it for your kids." tony.castro@dailynews.com

[Is the changeable law of celibacy the only reason that Roman Catholics are not gravitating toward ordination? What do you think?](#)

Statement from the Priests in the Diocese of Belleville March 12, 2008

As priests serving in the Diocese of Belleville, we have become increasingly frustrated by the lack of collaborative and consultative leadership of Bishop Edward K. Braxton since his installation in June 2005. Our repeated attempts to work cooperatively with Bishop Braxton through the Presbyteral Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, Diocesan Finance Council, Priests' Personnel Board and annual Priests Convocation have proven futile. Because of the Bishop's

lack of cooperation, consultation, accountability and transparency, it is the judgment of a great number of the presbyterate that he has lost his moral authority to lead and govern our Diocese. Therefore, it is requested that Bishop Braxton resign from his office as Bishop of the Diocese of Belleville for his own good, for the good of the Diocese and for the good of the presbyterate. Recent revelations of Bishop Braxton's misappropriation of funds have only intensified the lack of trust the priests, religious and laity of our Diocese have in our Bishop. We believe that his spending patterns, his pursuit of outside donors to cover these expenditures and his lack of transparency in finances and other areas has resulted in a total lack of trust.

We also publicly affirm our trust in the integrity and competence of Mr. Bill Knapp, Chief Financial Officer of the Diocese. We believe it is imperative that Bishop Braxton renew his contract for another term if any trust is to be restored. Mr. Knapp has earned our confidence during his 10 years of dedicated service to our Diocese, and without his presence in the Diocesan Finance Office, we fear that Bishop Braxton will not be held accountable for his administration of the temporal goods and finances of the Diocese.

We also take this opportunity to encourage all members of the Diocese of Belleville to give their generous support to the 2008 Catholic Services and Ministry Appeal so that we can continue the essential pastoral, educational, social and outreach ministries that make Christ visible in Southern Illinois . We pledge to ensure all these funds are closely monitored and used only for their intended purposes.

We make this statement as advocates for all the people of God in the Diocese of Belleville, whom we are privileged to know, love and serve. We also hereby re-commit ourselves to being more collaborative, consultative and transparent in our own pastoral ministries. We will continue to work and pray for healing and reconciliation in our Diocese.

(Forty four priests –60% of active incardinated pastors– signed this statement.)

It's inspiring when people don't wait until they've retired to make a statement.