

3-21-08 - Braxton says he won't resign
Belleville News-Democrat, BELLEVILLE (IL)
By Tim Townsend, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Bishop Edward Braxton rejected calls for his resignation Thursday and claimed priests attempted to blackmail him three years ago.

The charges are contained in a letter to be read or distributed to Catholics in the Belleville diocese on Easter weekend or the weekend after.

"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," Braxton wrote in the letter.

The letter also says Braxton received threatening, anonymous phone calls to his residence. And he recounts a secret meeting with his priests — one "perhaps unprecedented in the history of the Church in the United States" — in which he was blackmailed.

Braxton sent an e-mail to his pastors and parish-life coordinators Thursday, asking them to read or distribute the letter to their parishioners this weekend or next.

The first part of the letter is an acknowledgment of, and thanks for, the many condolences the bishop received after the death of his mother last month.

The bishop then recounted "one experience ... that is unknown to you ... something that I have kept to myself for nearly three years."

Braxton wrote that in the days before he was installed as bishop in 2005, he met with "a group of priests who I did not know at all." At the meeting, according to the letter, the priests told him to reject his appointment to Belleville, cancel his installation ceremony and "step aside so that a more suitable Bishop could be chosen."

Braxton wrote that, for more than two hours, "these priests told me that there was a 'firestorm of hatred' against me in Belleville." The priests told him he was not welcome in Belleville, the bishop wrote, nor would he ever be.

They told him, he wrote, that "they had incriminating information against me which might be released, if I did not heed their words."

Braxton's letter says he told the priests he was "obedient to the Holy Father .. and that it was my intention to serve the Diocese faithfully for as long as the Holy Father wanted me to do so," a pledge he repeats for Belleville's Catholics in his letter.

Shortly after the meeting with the priests — whom the letter does not name — Braxton wrote that he received an anonymous phone call on his private line.

"The message was simple," the bishop wrote. — "'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."

Last week 45 priests, including 60 percent of the diocese's resident parish pastors, signed a statement asking Braxton to resign "for his own good, for the good of the Diocese and for the good of the presbyterate."

The statement from the priests came two months after Braxton, 63, publicly apologized for spending about \$18,000 from restricted diocesan and Vatican funds, which he said he paid back with "a secured gift."

Not since 2002, when 58 Boston priests called for the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law during the clergy sex abuse scandal, has there been such a clerical revolt in the American Catholic church.

Braxton could not be reached for comment Thursday. Three priests confirmed that they received the letter from Braxton, but declined to comment, citing respect for Holy Week.

In his letter to the Belleville faithful, Braxton calls himself "a redeemed sinner" and says that he, "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."

Such things are, he writes, "inevitable because of the human condition and original sin."

Braxton wrote, "Only Christ is perfect."