

**“We are His Witnesses:  
Our Spirit-Filled Mission as the Church in Southern Illinois”**

**A**

**Pastoral Letter**

**By**

**The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph. D., S.T.D.**

**Bishop of Belleville**

**Pentecost Sunday, 2006**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Jesus Christ has called us to be His witnesses! We are confident that the Holy Spirit truly will be our Advocate, our helper, so that we can be witnesses to Christ’s life, teachings, suffering, death, and resurrection as we carry out our mission as the Church in Southern Illinois, with confidence, with hope, and with joy.

In this Pastoral Letter I would like to speak to each of you about our common lives as witnesses to Christ. In PART ONE I address the challenges to our common efforts caused by tensions in the Church resulting in what I have termed as the decline of Common Meaning. I elaborate on this decline of Common Meaning as it is manifest in the liturgy, the ministry of bishops, the priesthood, women religious, and the impact of doubt. In PART TWO I reflect with you about the unique opportunities for our mission as the Church that presents themselves with the appointment of a new bishop. In PART THREE I explore ways in which we can work together for the unity and effectiveness of the Church by taking steps toward spiritual renewal and the rebuilding of Common Meaning. In PART FOUR, I have included suggested questions that I hope will lead to lively discussion.

**Part I**

**The Decline of “Common Meaning”**

The Catholic Church in the United States, and specifically here in our Diocese of Belleville, has many strengths. I have seen this in every parish that I have visited. All around us are signs of vitality, growth, change, and development. At the same time, we are aware that the Church throughout the world, in this country, and in our diocese, is facing a variety of complex challenges for which easy solutions cannot be found.

Few eras in history have been marked by such rapid and far-reaching changes as those through which we have lived in the Church and in society in the more than forty years since the historic Second Vatican Council (1960-1965).

Almost everyone experiences far more diversity in ecclesial life than in the past. Within this context of unity in diversity many Catholics have experienced a degree of breakdown in their shared understanding of the very nature of the Church. The familiar became unfamiliar. Many did not feel a clear sense of direction. This might be called the

“decline of Common Meaning.” The decline of Common Meaning may be particularly significant for Catholics born and educated in their faith after the end of the Vatican Council in 1965. They have never known the more uniform Church of forty years ago. And yet many of them have developed mature, committed lives of faith. As we will see, the decline of Common Meaning makes it much more difficult for some of us to live as Christ’s witnesses in genuinely loving relationships.

Common Meaning has the power to turn a group of strangers into a community. The nearly three hundred million citizens of the United States are amazingly diverse. Yet, we are held together by the fundamental **experience** of freedom, pluralism, participatory democracy, and government by law. We ask questions that shape our **understanding** of the meaning of this fundamental experience. We make similar **judgments** about whether our understandings of our experiences are correct or incorrect. And, finally, we make the **commitment** lived by our shared experiences, understandings and judgments. Thus, no matter how politically conservative or how politically liberal we may be, we know very well what we mean when we say, “We are Americans”. Common Meaning gives rise to community at the deepest level. It is the radical source of every community’s cohesiveness.

The community, or Common Meaning, of the Catholic Church spans centuries – across continents, cultures, languages, and political systems. When the Catholic members of a family, a parish, a diocese, or a country do not share, at the most fundamental level, the same essential experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Sacraments, worship, Catholic doctrine, Church disciplines, moral principles, or the intellectual compatibility between the world of religious belief and, for example, the world of scientific inquiry, Common Meaning may begin to decline and community is likely to be fragmented. This becomes evident when some lay people, religious sisters, brothers, deacons, priests, and bishops feel as if they are living in different “worlds” from one another, even though they are all members of the one Church.

Anyone who closely observes Catholic life in the United States and in Southern Illinois can see the evidence of the decline of Common Meaning.

The Liturgy: Most Catholics fully accept the right and the authority of the Church to determine what we should and should not do at Mass and in other liturgical celebrations. A small group would like to see the Latin Mass (sometimes even called the ‘true’ Mass) “restored” in all parishes, everywhere in the world, for the unity of the Church and the inspiration of the faithful. Yet another group of Catholics does not believe the Church’s reforms of the Liturgy have been sufficient. While they may acknowledge the Catholic belief that the Liturgy belongs to the Church, not to a specific parish or an individual priest or bishop, some in this group feel perfectly free to change prayers and Scripture readings at Mass to make the language more “inclusive.” In some rare circumstances, Eucharistic Prayers themselves are changed beyond recognition.

There is no longer a shared base of experience, understanding, judgment, and commitment about what the Church is doing when the faithful are gathered together under the leadership of the Church's ordained ministers for public prayer. Because of the decline of Common Meaning regarding Church worship and Liturgy, Sunday Mass, which is such a positive experience of communion for most Catholics, can become for some a painful experience of discord, conflict, and even anger.

The Ministry of Bishops: The bishops of the United States are painfully aware that the crisis caused by the sexual abuse of minors by clergy is the greatest crisis in the history of the Church in this country. In the midst of these tragic events many Catholics may believe that the bishops themselves have contributed to the decline of Common Meaning.

In the face of this turmoil, the fact that the vast majority of Catholics continue to accept the hierarchical structure of the Church and the authority to lead and govern that rests with the Holy Father, the local bishop and the parish pastor, is a witness of their abiding faith, while they may have questions, concerns, and even disagreements with some actions. A small group in the Church expresses disappointment because they believe that the pope, bishops, and pastors do not govern with sufficient firmness. Another small group in the Church takes the opposite position. They see themselves as the church of the "future". Not only do they believe that they should be free to hold these and other positions that contradict Catholic teachings, arguing that through history there have always been different "schools" of theology that did not always agree, they also assert that the only way that the Church will ever adapt fully to the modern world is to embrace democratic structures.

When members of the Church holding such a wide spectrum of views gather for a day of reflection, honest dialogue, which may lead more to argument than to consensus, make the shifting experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments of the participants very apparent.

The Priesthood: In spite of the painful wounds inflicted by the tragedy of clergy abusing children, most recent studies indicate that the majority of American priests are very happy being priests. Recent surveys indicate that most priests enjoy serving the Church and the People of God as priests. A part of the happiness of many priests comes from the fact that they embrace the Church as it is, not as it was, or as some might hope it will be. There are other good and faithful priests who sometimes give the impression that they would like to live in the Church of the 1940's and 1950's, when the role of a Catholic priest in American society was very clear and the status of a priest in the culture was highly respected. There are still other good and faithful priests who sometimes give the impression that they would be happier if they lived in the Church that they think will be in the future, or the Church they thought would have been the Church of the present had the "spirit of Vatican II" been allowed to bring about even greater reforms in the Church.

These men seem happiest as priests in their day-to-day ministry with the people and less happy when they must come to terms with the *magisterium* and the disciplines and doctrines of the larger, hierarchical Church of which they are a part. It is evident that for the priests in these diverse groups the shared base of common experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments needed for Common Meaning is diminishing.

Women Religious: Within a given community it is possible to find sisters who feel strongly that fidelity to the charism of their foundress and the teachings of the Council call them to focus on ministries long associated with their order and to maintain a recognized habit with veil. A larger group may believe strongly that the community is called to discern new and different ministries that are faithful to the “spirit” of their foundress. There may be sisters who consider Pope John Paul’s Apostolic Letter on the consecrated life, *Vita Consecrata*, to be an inspiring and challenging resource for the renewal of their current lived experience as religious. Others, because of their experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments may suggest that the Holy Father’s Apostolic Letter is largely out of touch with their reality. Some sisters may express great discomfort over participating in a concelebrated Sunday Eucharist because there are only men in the sanctuary; many others have no difficulty with this at all. Still others believe all of this is part of the pluralism of the Church of the future: embracing the old and the new.

The Impact of Doubt: As Common Meaning declines however, alienation, mistrust, and doubt become inevitable. The doubt that invades a family, a parish, a religious community, a diocese, or a nation comes in different forms. It may be operational, ideological, ethical, intellectual, or absolute.

**Operational doubt** may be manifest when people attend Sunday Mass less frequently. **Ideological doubt** may be manifest when individuals and groups feel compelled to defend their views against their critics with a forcefulness that was not needed before. **Ethical doubt** may be manifest when people begin to feel in a deeply emotional way that they have been wronged or violated. “Why are so many people allowed to stay ‘in the Church’ these days when they do not humbly accept her teachings as we do?” Since it is associated with feelings of having been betrayed, reason and argument are usually not immediately effective. **Intellectual doubt** is manifest when people begin to question the “truth” of their faith. A person who has not had the opportunity to study scripture seriously reads an article in *Time* magazine suggesting that many scripture scholars think that the star, the exotic magi, the singing angels, and the shepherds found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke might be more symbolic of a deeper meaning and theological truth than a literal newspaper account of the birth of the Messiah. But the reader may conclude that if there were no “three kings,” then the whole story is probably not “true.” **Absolute doubt** – often a combination of all the forms of doubt – can be the final blow. There may be no display of emotions, but it is manifest when formerly active Catholics become apathetic and disinterested in the life of their

parish and the larger Church. Absolute doubt may cause some Catholics to turn away from the Church altogether and, at the limit, embrace agnosticism or even atheism.

In parishes where the decline of Common Meaning is widespread and the manifold forms of doubt have taken hold, many individuals and groups in the Church may begin to feel at a loss. The judgments and decisions of those in positions of leadership are questioned. New, sometimes extreme, unofficial organizations and groups are formed that set out to “reform,” “oppose,” or, “defend” the Church. Once the decline of Common Meaning and subsequent doubt gain influence in a community, the Church may be perceived as merely a “political institution.” People are labeled “liberals,” “conservatives,” “right-winged,” “left-winged,” “true Catholics,” even “heretics.” There is less and less talk of faith, prayer, sin, salvation, grace, the need for Confession and Communion, apology, seeking forgiveness, forgiving, and reconciliation. Spirituality all but vanishes as the focus turns to “power,” “influence,” “control,” and “winning and losing battles.” These are the circumstances in which we must remind ourselves that the Risen Christ, to whom we bear witness, never abandons us individually or collectively. The Holy Spirit is ever present with “warm breath and Ah! bright wings.”

## **Part II. A New Bishop: Our Spirit-Filled Mission**

The bishop of a diocese undertakes his ministry with the words of the great St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan and Doctor of the Church, “The Church of the Lord is built upon the rock of the apostles among so many dangers in the world; it therefore remains unmoved. The Church’s foundation is unshakable and firm against the assaults of the raging sea.” Every bishop is inspired by this Profession of Faith which he must make his own. At the same time he hears very clearly the contradictory, contemporary voices that surround him in the era in which he lives, and in the local Church entrusted to his pastoral care.

When I was installed as your Bishop on the Feast of St. Thomas More, June 22, 2005, I told you that with God’s grace and your support I would strive to be the best human being, Christian, priest, and bishop that I could be. I have received many extraordinary expressions of welcome, support, encouragement, and gratitude.

They are a reminder that it is Christ Himself, and not us, who makes us witnesses. It is His Providential Spirit that brings our lives together giving us unique opportunities to collaborate for the sake of the Gospel. The Church of Belleville has not been immune to the decline of Common Meaning and the fragmentation of community. In the midst of the diverse voices in his diocese, a bishop may be asked: “Whose side are you on?” The bishop is on the side of the Gospel; on the side of Christ Himself, whose grace is present in the lives of all of his people no matter how intense their differences may be.

I must be at the side of each and every person in the community of faith. My goal is to nurture the fruitfulness of grace and to call the members into greater unity. The fact that I am firmly at the side of each of you does not and cannot mean that I can agree with those who oppose or reject the teachings of the Church. What I mean is that I—at the very

core of my being where I find my radical self, my identity as a person-I believe and hold what the Church believes, holds, and teaches. This is the key to the understanding of my approach to my pastoral ministry as your bishop. Nevertheless, I must keep striving to be the first listener, hearing the views of diverse groups and even opposing points of view.

As I have told you on several occasions, the arrival of a new bishop to his diocese is very similar to the arrival of a new pastor to his parish. The vast majority of parishioners respects the choice of the bishop and happily welcomes their new pastor, knowing that he will serve as well as he can, even though his way of doing things will be different from his predecessor. A few, basing their judgment on rumor and speculation, may bring a negative attitude to their very first meeting with the pastor. In these circumstances the new pastor must avoid the temptation to counter attack with attack, public criticism with public criticism. If he knows Him in whom he has believed (cf. 2 Tim. 1:12) at the end of the day he can say as Blessed John XXIII did, "I've given you my all this day. It's your Church, Lord. I'm going to bed."

I am very aware that in spite of the various gifts with which God has blessed me, I am a flawed, imperfect, and sinful person, with many limitations. It is my prayer that, by the grace of God, throughout my pastoral service as your bishop, I will be able to treat each of you with graciousness, courtesy, and Christian love. On this feast of the outpouring of the Spirit of God's unconditional Love, I wish to express my regret and sorrow for anything I have done or said that has in any way harmed anyone in this diocese. If anyone who is reading this Pastoral Letter wishes forgiveness from me for something you may have said or done that has harmed me or my ministry, know that I happily extend that forgiveness

## **Part II.**

### **A New Bishop: Our Spirit-Filled Mission**

I would like now reflect with you about our Spirit-filled mission as a community of faith.

Our Priests: I am deeply grateful to the priests of our diocese who have welcomed me as the head of the College of Priests with such kindness, graciousness, and support in the manner of Christ Himself. Like every bishop, I am deeply aware of the essential importance of the priests, diocesan and religious, who faithfully serve our people day after day. Because of the "decline of Common Meaning," it is not surprising that priests of the Belleville Diocese, like other local Churches, are not of one mind on all the concerns of the Church today. These differences can, at times, be very helpful because they provide diverse perspectives that contribute to the final understanding of the best course of action. At other times the differences among priests on matters such as the nature of the Church, the authority of the pope, the bishop, the *magisterium*, the proper ways of celebrating the Eucharist, the meaning of celibacy, the importance of working for vocations to the priesthood, the role of women in the Church, and other pastoral and theological issues, can be a source of painful divisions. These divisions can make it difficult for some priests to see themselves as co-workers with their brothers. I

am always gratified when I see our priests making extraordinary and successful efforts to overcome these differences, by building on our foundation of faith.

Sharing the hope of the Gospel, I believe that the Holy Spirit, dwelling deep within the being of every priest, has a great power to heal. God is more than we know. If we are to cooperate with the healing power of the Spirit, it is essential for us who are priests to strive to be faithful to fundamental spiritual disciplines, including maintaining a closeness to Christ through a genuine love for the Mass and Scripture, frequent prayer in the presence of the Eucharist, annual retreat, regular spiritual direction, confession, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, active participation in a priest's support group, continuing education, and personal time.

International Priests: Our diocese has been blessed in recent months by the arrival of international priests sent by generous bishops who are aware of our circumstances. Perhaps by God's grace, faith-filled, generous priests who come to us will inspire young men from our communities to consider the priesthood during their service here. These good priests are not in any sense "foreign" priests; they are welcome brother priests. Since in Christ there is no north or south or east or west, the fraternity of the worldwide priesthood is one. Because these fellow-workers in the harvest come from different countries they may be called international priests. As we learn about the Church in their countries our catholicity is enriched. In turn, their catholicity is enriched by their sojourn with us.

Parish Clustering: For a number of years now the parishes in the diocese have been aligned into thirty clusters. Every parish has been asked to discuss and prepare cluster proposals that include basic considerations in critical areas of parish life that each parish and cluster will need to address as we move into the future. The current planning efforts look ahead to the year 2008. However, we are already looking beyond that year to 2010 and 2015. While we cannot predict the future, the evidence at hand clearly indicates that in the Diocese of Belleville parishes will need to share the services of a smaller numbers of priests. In time some parishes may conclude that it is best to ask the diocese to merge their parish with a nearby parish. Others may conclude it is best to ask the diocese to suppress their parish altogether for the good of the larger Church.

The goal of the clustering process is to provide as many parishioners as possible with the opportunity of participating in the ongoing discussions about what is best for their community of faith. This means that possible proposals must be examined, discussed, debated, revised, and refined in the hope of developing the best recommendations for me with the broadest support. I will study the suggestions carefully and consult with others before making a final decision about cluster proposals in light of the overall mission of the Church. No reorganization will go into effect until it has been approved by the Diocese and the parish involved has received a letter from me.

I urge all of our people to generously involve themselves in this cluster dialogue process. This will help us work, pray, think, and reflect together in an effort to develop a variety of responses to the pastoral challenges we face.

Deacons, Religious, Lay Leaders, and Parish Life Coordinators: As our priests and parishioners grapple with the clustering process, and many other pressing issues in our parish communities today, our gifted and dedicated deacons, religious, lay leaders, and Parish Life Coordinators are making an indispensable contribution to the overall pastoral service of the Diocese. I have enjoyed my meetings with the deacons and their wives and I have encouraged them to pursue the best theological and pastoral formation and continuing education possible so they can exercise pastoral leadership with renewed confidence and effectiveness.

We are fortunate to have so many religious sisters serving in Southern Illinois in education, health care, social services, community outreach, and other ministries. I am enjoying the opportunities of meeting them personally and learning firsthand of their pastoral service.

The Christian Faithful who constitute the majority of our Church members have experienced a profound renewal in our collective understanding of their ecclesial identity and role in the Church. The People of God have been called to life in the Church in which they are not passive recipients but active participants.

One of the most important ways in which deacons, religious, and lay leaders have contributed to the life of the Church in our diocese has been in the position of Parish Life Coordinator. They care for the day-to-day administration and pastoral care of these faith communities. When a Parish Life Coordinator is appointed, a threefold ministry often emerges; the “canonical pastor,” a “sacramental minister”. Sometimes the “canonical pastor” and the “sacramental minister” are the same priest. This triadic structure sometimes presents pastoral and organizational challenges because three distinct persons are doing the work usually done by a single pastor. I am in the midst of an initial consultation regarding these concerns in the hope of refining these pastoral arrangements for the benefit of all.

Financial Resources and Stewardship: The efforts of everyone involved in the work of the Church are sustained by the faith, prayers, and generous spirit of the entire ecclesial family. The considerable material resources needed for the life of the Church to go forward would not be available were it not for the contribution of time, talent, and treasure by so many. Not only are our parishes, schools, and other Catholic outreach activities sustained by this support but also the work of the diocese itself is sustained in the same way. I am most appreciative of this generosity.

Each year the Annual Bishop’s Appeal raises nearly \$2,000,000 to fund the essential ministries of our Diocese by which we proclaim and live our faith.

Because of the decline of Common Meaning, it is almost inevitable that some developments in the Church will be a cause for concern. It sometimes happens that individuals who disagree with events in the Church conclude that the best way to express their unhappiness is to withdraw their financial support from their parish or diocese. They want the Vatican, the bishop, or the pastor to know that they are displeased with some aspect of the life of the Church. It is good to remain mindful that your contributions do not go to the Vatican, the pastor, or the bishop. They go to the support of those pastoral activities for which they were designated. Withdrawing support only hurts those who might be most in need of the Church's ministry. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are Christ's witnesses. Let us go forward with confidence.

### **Part III.**

#### **Look to Christ: In Search of Common Meaning**

Our Spirit-filled mission as the Church in Southern Illinois makes us witnesses to Jesus Christ. He alone is the full expression of God's love for each one of us. In this Pastoral Letter I have shared with you the ramifications of an obvious phenomenon, which I have termed the "decline of Common Meaning." Though the words may have been unfamiliar, I hope you have recognized the reality in the various examples that I have given and in your own experience. It would be much easier for us to do the work of the Church if the fragmentation caused by the decline of Common Meaning could be countered by at least the gradual restoration of Common Meaning.

But this is not a simple matter. Common Meaning in the life of the Church developed over centuries; its decline came about over decades. There is no prepackaged six-week renewal program that can automatically revive what has declined. If we wish to know what we might do to contribute to a greater sense of Common Meaning, we must look to Christ, the source of Common Meaning. We need to look into our own interior world. We need to examine the radical core of our spirituality.

One way of doing this is to ask ourselves some rather simple but revealing questions in the Spiritual Inventory contained in the full text of the Pastoral Letter. Our responses to the questions reveal the inner world of conversion: our openness to the mystery of God, to Christ Himself, to His Body the Church, to living by the moral teachings of Christ and the Church, and to developing intellectual maturity in order to have a coherent life of faith. The honest sharing and discussion of our responses to questions such as these in small groups or "wisdom communities" can significantly help us appreciate the obvious, but easily overlooked fact that no two Catholics are in the same place on their spiritual journey.

A Dialogue of the Soul: Members of parish staffs, priests, deacons, religious, and parishioners are often so busy with the practical day-to-day matters of parish life that they feel they do not have the luxury to spend time on questions such as these. But when these questions are explored in a prayerful, non-threatening environment, a kind of "dialogue of the soul" may occur. In an atmosphere of trust and authenticity it becomes possible to share some of the "major truths". This can allow us to uncover or restore some elements

of shared **experiences**, **understandings**, **judgments**, and **commitments**. When this happens the path to Common Meaning sometimes becomes visible. This truth makes it possible for us to be open to loving fellow Christians with whom we have significant differences.

The ability to perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love and concern, as well as the desire to express love and concern, is necessary for anyone who wishes to contribute positively to the renewal of Common Meaning. This perspective makes it possible for Catholics of profoundly different points of view to greet each other with the “Kiss of Peace” and mean what they are doing because they know it is not their imperfect human peace that is being extended but the Peace of Christ. Those who differ are able to share their interior worlds in a genuinely caring and trusting fashion. They are not enemies. They are fellow Christians. When a generous spirit of openness and reconciliation is manifest, people will be slow to judge and quick to forgive.

Often different pastoral approaches, different understandings of Church disciplines, and different theological perspectives are not as contradictory and incompatible as they first seemed. Within the careful sharing and honest listening of a “wisdom community” these differences may be appreciated as complementary from a higher viewpoint. Concerns such as these can likely be resolved, at least to some degree.

But there may be other Catholics who say, in good faith, they hold beliefs that are completely incompatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church (e.g. abortion is not intrinsically immoral). In the face of such direct rejection of clear teachings, Common Meaning is not advanced by suggesting we must all be open to views that might be more “liberal” or more “conservative” than our own, or to suggest that everyone is entitled to his or her “opinion.”

Catholics who know the teachings of the Church and those who hold beliefs contrary to the *magisterium* are not illuminating the path to Common Meaning if they suggest that we should then embrace the view that there are no objective Catholic teachings. Some hold “more conservative” views, others hold “more liberal” views. This position confronts us with pressing questions: more liberal or more conservative than what? At the center of these extremes lie the often unidentified teachings of the Church. Thus, what is often implied is that the “more liberal” are more liberal than the *magisterium* and the “more conservative” are more conservative than the *magisterium*. At other times it seems to be implied that the authentic teachings of the Catholic Church are simply a set of “more conservative” views.

In order to address this divide, Catholics must really know and understand what the Church actually teaches. Essential reading would include *The New Testament*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the primary documents of the Second Vatican Council, the encyclicals of recent popes, the primary statements of the Bishops of the United States, and important teaching documents of their own bishop.

Common Meaning will not be advanced by taking a harsh, superior, or judgmental attitude toward those who hold beliefs in clear contradiction to the beliefs of the Church. Only prayer, sensitivity, ongoing dialogue, and the grace of God can bring about the conversion that is hoped for in us all.

## **II. Conclusion**

Are you willing? Am I willing? Are we all willing to be His witnesses? Are we willing to be witnesses of Jesus Christ as we work together for the revitalization of Common Meaning in our community of faith? Our celebration of the Chrism Mass and the Sacred Triduum, the Sundays of Easter, the Ascension of the Lord, and Pentecost revitalize our identity as baptized members of Christ's Body sharing in the Priesthood of the Faithful. These celebrations deepen our gratitude for the Ministerial and Sacramental Priesthood exercised by the priests in our parishes who are essential in the formation of our Eucharistic communities. I hope they deepen our appreciation of the ministry of the bishop in our midst as well. These days remind us that in washing the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper Jesus Himself is calling us to be a community of "Foot Washers" relating to one another in all circumstances with patience and graciousness, acting always in good faith with an attitude of service, surrendering ourselves to Christ. He needs our hearts to continue to love!

## Pentecost Sunday

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Peace be with you!

I am pleased to send to you, and to every household in our Diocese, a copy of my Pastoral Letter, “We are His Witnesses: Our Spirit-Filled Mission as the Church in Southern Illinois.” I urge you to read it, study its contents, discuss it with others, pray about it, and to use it as a help to renew the Church in your heart, in your family, in your parish, and in the larger diocese.

It is my hope that this Pastoral Letter will be **read and discussed** by:

All Parishioners in every parish;  
All Families (husbands and wives, parents and children old enough to participate);  
All Priests (perhaps, in their support groups);  
All Deacons and their families;  
All Religious Sisters, Priests, and Brothers;  
All Parish staff, Parish Life Coordinators, Parish Councils, Trustees, Liturgy Committees, and Finance Councils;  
All Diocesan Department Directors, members of their staff and supporting staff (e.g. secretaries);  
All Parish Directors of Religious Education and parish schools of religion;  
All Newman Center ministers;  
All Catholic School Boards;  
All Directors of the Rites of the Christian Initiation of Adults and catechists;  
All those involved in any form of religious formation;  
All faculty members of our Catholic elementary schools and high schools (in the Fall);  
All juniors and seniors in our Catholic high schools (in the Fall);  
All Knights of Columbus and their wives;  
All Knights of Peter Cleaver and their wives;  
All Parish prayer groups and study groups;  
And the members of every other group or organization that does the work of the Church in our diocese.

On June 22, 2006, the Feast of St. Thomas More, I will mark the first anniversary of my installation as Bishop of Belleville. During these months I have often heard the question, “I wonder what the Bishop thinks of this?” This Pastoral Letter contains the answers to many of your questions; it is in three short sections followed by a fourth section of

discussion questions. For those who cannot devote sufficient time to the entire text in one sitting, it is possible to study each section and the appropriate questions in a separate session.

I know how busy everyone is today. I appreciate your generosity in making the prayerful reading and discussion of “We Are His Witnesses” a high priority. Please save it for future reference and rereading. Please share it with others.

Sincerely and appreciatively yours in Christ,

The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton  
Bishop of Belleville