Dear Priests, Deacons, and Parish Life Coordinators:

Attached please find my Autumn Refection, dated THANKSGIVING DAY. I hope you will read it with interest. I would like you to use appropriate ways of sharing it with your parishioners. You can do this by making copies for your parish and school leadership, by printing sections in your bulletin, by making copies for the back of your church, by placing it on your parish website, by calling attention to its presence on the Diocesan website (diobelle.org), and by mentioning it from your pulpit.

This reflection is quite different from a traditional pastoral letter. It is more personal and it does not address formally specific Catholic doctrines or diocesan policies and practices. Instead, it is an attempt to offer you a partial view of the interior dialogue in the mind and heart of your Bishop.

The reflection explores three significant autumn events.

I. The first is personal. This autumn is the season of my recuperation from major emergency abdominal surgery which has lead to meditation on suffering, death, and the hope of eternal life.
II. The second is national. This autumn marks the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States and the first and only Roman Catholic to be elected to that office.
III. The third is global. This autumn is the first autumn of the Pontificate of His Holiness, Pope Francis as the Supreme Pontiff of the world-wide Catholic Church.

It is my hope that you and your parishioners will find herein ideas that might be fruitful for your conversations, thoughts, and reflections on Thanksgiving Day and in the days ahead as we enter the season of Advent praying “O come, O come Emmanuel!”

I thank you for your continued prayers during my recovery and I wish you and those who are dear to you a blessed and happy Thanksgiving!

Appreciatively yours in Christ,

Bishop of Belleville
Diocese of Belleville
The Bishop’s Residence

An Autumn Reflection

by

The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Bishop of Belleville
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The reflections that follow are quite different from a traditional pastoral letter. They are somewhat more personal and they do not address formally specific Catholic doctrines or diocesan policies and practices. Instead, they are an attempt to offer you a partial view of the interior dialogue in my mind and heart during this season of the year. It is my hope that you will find herein ideas that might be fruitful for your own thoughts and reflections on Thanksgiving Day and in the days ahead as we enter the season of Advent praying “O come, O come Emmanuel!”

**Autumn Wonderment**

Autumn is a unique and beautiful season. We enjoy bright, sunny, blue-sky days with cool breezes and a nip in the air offering a hint of the bite of winter yet to come. We delight in the magnificent colors of the trees with leaves turning from green, to yellow, to gold, to red, and to brown. We look with admiration on the sight of the farmers bringing in cornucopias of their harvests. We cherish the last bloom of garden roses before the first frost wilts and darkens them into a wintery, death-like sleep. It is in autumn that our evenings grow dark earlier as we fall back an hour in time. The whole fleeting season has an air of anticipation and mystery about it that can turn our minds and hearts to God.

Many poets and artists have reflected with a degree of melancholy on autumn as the season that naturally turns our thoughts to transitions and transformations in our human journey. This is due, in part, to the fact that it is preceded by the hot full bloom of summer and followed by the frigid deathlike cold of winter. Christian spirituality can be enriched by the introspective nature of this autumn poetry. During the past three months, I have come to a keener appreciation of the heart-piercing insights of the poet’s words.

In “Spring and Fall” Jesuit Father Gerard Manley Hopkins was compelled to coin new words to express his autumn wonderment. He wrote of “grieving over goldengrove unleaving”
and “worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie.”

William Shakespeare, who many scholars believe was a Catholic, saw a foreshadowing of his own mortality in autumn’s inexorable change. Even though a number of his plays assume the Christian hope for eternal life, he urged his readers to cherish the brief seasons of earthly life. In Sonnet 73, he wrote:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

The season of autumn is a particularly rich one for the Church’s Year of Grace. We honored St. Francis of Assisi, our Holy Father’s patron, on October 4. We celebrated All Saints’ Day on November 1 (preceded by All Hallows’ Eve, sadly corrupted into Halloween). On All Souls’ Day, November 2 we prayed intensely for the dearest of the dear in our lives who have died and for all of the faithful departed. On November 24, we marked the end of the liturgical year with the great Solemnity of Christ the King, concluding Pope Benedict XVI’s Year of Faith. Today, November 28, is the civic celebration of Thanksgiving Day, on which many people offer all praise and all thanksgiving to God. On December 1, we will begin the new Church Year with the First Sunday of Advent, and on December 9, we will honor Mary, the Mother of the Lord, for her unique role in salvation history, celebrating the Immaculate Conception. Just four days after autumn’s end and the winter solstice on December 21, we will celebrate the coming of the Son, the great mystery of the Incarnation, the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our hope of eternal life. His life, teachings, death, and resurrection transform all seasons into seasons of grace and thanksgiving.

This reflection explores three significant autumn events.

I. The first is personal. This autumn is the season of my recuperation from major emergency abdominal surgery, which has lead to meditation on suffering, death, and the hope of eternal life.

II. The second is national. This autumn marks the 50th anniversary of the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States and the first and only Roman Catholic to be elected to that office.

III. The third is global. This autumn is the first autumn of the Pontificate of His Holiness, Pope Francis as the Supreme Pontiff of the worldwide Catholic Church.
On Friday September 13, 2013, I underwent emergency major abdominal surgery to remove a non-malignant intestinal obstruction. I was very moved when the Catholic surgeon who performed the operation knelt down and asked for my blessing before the surgery. The operation was a totally new experience for me since I have never been seriously ill in my life. I have never spent a night in a hospital as a patient. After the operation, I learned that this “scar tissue” like obstruction may have been congenital and that had this surgery not been performed, the condition could have become life threatening. I am deeply grateful to my surgeon, and the administrators, doctors, nurses, and staff members of St. Elizabeth Catholic Hospital in Belleville for their excellent care. I am equally grateful to all those who sent thoughtful expressions of prayerful support and encouragement during my two-week hospitalization and during my ongoing time of recovery.

In spite of the outstanding care of the dedicated hospital staff, the post-operative weeks in the hospital were marked by excruciating physical and psychological pain due to the nature of the procedure and the impact of certain pain medications. I not only had terrible nightmares but also frightful “day mares” as well. I have long been acutely aware of the brevity and fragileness of human life. I have frequently contemplated what the Czech-French writer, Milan Kundera, rightly calls “the unbearable lightness of being.” This awareness was certainly reinforced by this profound experience of illness. My many sleepless nights in the hospital became a unique opportunity to ponder and search for the elusive presence of God who dwells in unapproachable light, even in the midst of suffering.

Though we hear of death every day, none of us has a personal experiential knowledge of dying or of death. We have no direct knowledge of dying and being dead, because we are alive. It often seems as if dying is something that only happens to other people. But, we all know that death will happen to us even if we prefer not to think about it. Serious illness forces us to think about it. We are all part of the “goldengrove unleaving.” And we know when we die the world will go on without us, whether we are pope, president, priest, or pauper. The sun will rise and set and the seasons will change. Government shutdowns, stock market gains and losses, the World Series, international upheavals, natural disasters, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year will take place whether or not we are in this world to experience them. And, as time passes, all but a few of those who mourned our “passing away” will think about us and speak about us less and less. This may be at the heart of the somewhat disheartening expressions: “Life is for the living” and “Life goes on.” Psalm 103 starkly states, “A man’s days are like grass, they flourish like a flower that blooms in the field. The wind blows over him and he is gone; and his place remembers him no more.” Nevertheless, as Christians, as people of faith, we know that our Creator will never forget us, even if others do. God cherishes each of us and calls us by name.

Members of the Church sometimes respond to the inevitable end of our lives in seemingly contradictory ways. Our faith teaches us that in death, life is not ended but merely changed. Yet our everyday language almost suggests the opposite. We learn that someone’s mother has died and we ask, “What WAS your mother’s name?” The reply is usually, “Her name WAS Evelyn.” As if her name is not still Evelyn—as if she no longer IS. Our faith teaches us to pray for the dead. The funeral rite is a prayer for the dead, designated by the Church as the “Liturgy of Christian Burial.” Yet, a growing number of parishes regularly disregard this and print programs for funerals announcing, “The Mass of the Resurrection: A Celebration of Life,” even though the person has obviously not yet been raised from the dead. Furthermore, being raised from the dead does not guarantee eternal life with God. Scripture teaches that all of the dead shall be raised. However, only the just are destined for the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, homilists regularly
assert that the person whose gentle remains lie before the Paschal Candle is “already in heaven with the angels and saints.” If they are, why are we praying for them?

The Church rightly celebrates All Saints’ Day on November 1, before the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed on November 2. In this way, we are reminded that through Baptism we are all called to live in such a way as to be numbered among the Communion of Saints. This is our destiny. However, All Hallows’ Day has been obscured by the ghosts and ghouls of All Hallows’ Eve (Halloween). Regrettably, in most communities, the children of Catholic families join with others in the children’s celebration of Halloween and “trick or treat.” “Haunted house” images of the dead may eclipse a true Christian spirituality of death. As a result, children may be given little or no catechesis about the meaning of All Saints’ Day. When All Saints’ Day is diminished, the true meaning of All Souls’ Day is obscured and we lose sight of our Christian hope that Christ’s faithful disciples are to be numbered among the saints. When I became Bishop of this Diocese, I began the tradition of celebrating a special Mass in the Cathedral of St. Peter on All Souls’ Day for all of the Deacons, Priests and Bishops of the Diocese who have died. On November 2, we prayed, by name, for the priests of our Diocese who have died during the past liturgical year: Father Wilbert J. Iffert, Dec. 7, 2012; Father Richard L. Daly, May 8; Father Henry J. Fischer, June 3; and Father Jerome E. Wirth, Sept. 30. I ask you to join me in continuing to pray for them.

In the United States, we no longer live under what sociologist of religion Peter Berger called “the sacred canopy.” Instead, we live in what philosopher Charles Taylor calls “a secular age,” marked by doubt and skepticism concerning religious beliefs. Many people reject the existence of an immortal soul and the Christian hope for eternal life. We must concede that we cannot provide scientific evidence and empirical proof of these realities but, with confident faith anchored in the testimony of the Word of God, we continue to believe what St. Paul believed when he wrote to the Christians living in Corinth. He told them that when our perishable nature has put on imperishability death will be swallowed up in victory. We see now through a glass, darkly, but then, face to face!

II. John Fitzgerald Kennedy: Fifty Autumns Later

This year, Thanksgiving Day comes just days after the anniversary of the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy on November 22, 1963, fifty autumns ago. On that terrible day a half century ago, the world was shaken by a cruel and shocking act. The Chaplain of the Senate prayed, “Our Father, Thou knowest that this sudden almost unbelievable news has stunned our minds and hearts. We gaze at the vacant place against the sky, as the President of the Republic goes down like a giant cedar, green with boughs.” I hope the late president was remembered in the prayers of many on All Souls’ Day.

When he was elected in 1960, many Americans were surprised that a Catholic could be elected in a country where there was a considerable anti-Catholic bias, including an unfounded fear that a Catholic president’s judgments and policies might be somehow controlled by the Holy See. Catholics were generally proud that a member of the Church had been chosen to lead the country at a critical juncture.

It is significant that no Catholic has been elected president since then. When we examine the many difficult issues our country has faced this autumn and consider the extreme divisions that exist not only among our elected representatives in Washington but also among the citizens themselves, we may now wonder if a Catholic, with a well-formed conscience who is faithful to
the teachings of the Church, could mount a successful campaign for the presidency. Religious beliefs have been all but banished from the public square into the realm of personal opinions and private convictions. As a result, discourse by elected officials and the media about fundamental issues concerning the dignity of every human life and the intrinsic meaning of marriage and family life are never spoken of as “moral issues,” even though that is what they are. Instead, they are almost exclusively termed “social issues.” This makes it possible to sidestep the question of objective truth and ways of evaluating human activities that are based on more than statistics and opinion polls. In the secular age, it is argued that there are no objective moral norms, only subjective points of view. When you consider the complex process of garnering votes in certain parts of key states in order to win a majority of votes from the Electoral College, the question must be asked: Could a Catholic accomplish this in the age of pluralism and remain faithful to his faith? As we appreciate the potential, the achievements, and the limitations of President Kennedy’s brief tenure, in retrospect it may seem unlikely that we will soon see an autumn with another Catholic in the White House.

President Kennedy’s admirers and critics generally acknowledge that one of his gifts was the ability to put words right. Five decades after that awful autumn day in Dallas, it is instructive to recall his eloquent words, or to consider them for the first time.

On November 5, 1963, the president issued a proclamation designating November 28 as Thanksgiving Day, never dreaming that he would not live to see that day. In his proclamation, he wrote:

> Yet, as our power has grown, so has our peril. Today we give our thanks, most of all, for the ideals of honor and faith we inherit from our forefathers—for the decency of purpose, steadfastness of resolve and strength of will, for the courage and the humility, which they possessed and which

we must seek every day to emulate. As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them.

> [L]et us earnestly and humbly pray that [God] will continue to guide and sustain us in the great unfinished tasks of achieving peace, justice, and understanding among all men and nations and of ending misery and suffering wherever they exist. Let us therefore proclaim our gratitude to Providence for manifold blessings—let us be humbly thankful for inherited ideals— and let us resolve to share those blessings and those ideals with our fellow human beings throughout the world.

Three years earlier in his Inaugural Address on January 20, 1961 he declared:

> The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.
To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world... And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.

It is striking that these words uttered so long ago still resonate today. Indeed, they could be uttered by an elected official today almost word for word, even though the world of the early 1960s was profoundly different from our world today. Perhaps one important difference is the confident optimism, even the hope, in the slain president’s tone. Today’s political leaders and the American people themselves might be somewhat less optimistic about the future.

III. Pope Francis in Autumn: the Church as a Field Hospital

President Kennedy was elected during the pontificate of Blessed John XXIII who, along with Blessed John Paul II, will be canonized on April 27, 2014. The President was murdered during the pontificate of Pope Paul VI. Now, five pontificates later, Pope Francis has infused his ministry and the Church with a new confidence and a new hope, which is revitalizing the Church, and hopefully the world, in his first autumn in the Chair of St. Peter. When asked about his spirit of “optimism,” the Vicar of Christ said he preferred to speak of hope, hope anchored in the paschal mystery of Christ.

As you know, Pope Francis has not begun his Pontifical ministry with a personal encyclical outlining his hopes for the future of the Church. Instead, he has expressed his ideas somewhat informally in a variety of interviews and comments. These papal comments have been the subject of many conversations among Catholics and many others this autumn. Though he has not departed in any way from the clear teachings of the magisterium, the secular media have implied that from his more informal manner he may be considering changes in those teachings. This misunderstanding by the media, and perhaps by some Catholics themselves, may be the result of the Pontiff’s strong pastoral tone in which he reminds the People of God that the first priority of the Catholic Church must be to present the face of Christ to all individuals and groups within and outside of the Church. This means that love and compassion for everyone must be at the foundation of everything we do and say. While affirming Catholic doctrine, the Successor of St. Peter indicates that before speaking words of judgment about those who depart from the Church’s clear teachings on difficult
issues such as divorce and remarriage, abortion, contraception, homosexuality, and same sex marriage, we must manifest our obedience to the words of Jesus, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

One of the Pontiff’s most discussed interviews, “A Big Heart Open to God,” was published in the September 30, 2013 edition of the Jesuit weekly, America magazine. While this interview did not contain the precision and nuance of a papal Encyclical like Lumen Fidei, it has, by its very nature, reached a much larger American readership. The Vatican Communications Office has indicated that the Holy Father is making use of a completely new genre of papal communication. The Pope is clearly attempting to articulate the timeless message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the vast numbers within and outside of the Catholic Church who have turned their ears away from Catholic teachings because they feel these teachings have not always been expressed with love and understanding.

In the America interview, the Holy Father introduced a new image of the Catholic Church. He spoke of the Church as being similar to “a field hospital after a battle.” The Church needs to focus on healing wounds and warming hearts by a ministry of nearness to the faithful. After a battle, the first thing that must be done is to attempt to provide comfort and care for the wounded, without losing time asking them their medical history. The Pontiff said once the wounds have been bandaged, there will be ample time to discuss the details of how the injuries happened.

He made this point in a different way when he cautioned the Church’s ministers not to be locked up in small-minded rules. (Significantly, the America interview does not specify what the Pope means by “small-minded rules.” This has led some commentators to conclude erroneously that he is referring to central tenets of moral theology.) He urged us to stay always focused on the Good News: Jesus Christ has saved us from our sins. This will help us to work in the field hospital as ministers of mercy accompanying the People of God on the journey of faith. He said that ideally, Church leaders should give witness in the manner of a mother, a shepherdess, or the Good Samaritan washing and lifting up the wounded. We must be a Church with open doors welcoming those who have felt excluded.

Pope Francis told the interviewer that if we are to be effective in preaching the Gospel on every street corner, our first words must not be words of condemnation and judgment. It was in this context that the Pontiff made a frequently cited remark. He said that it is not necessary to speak constantly about questions concerning reproduction and sexuality. He stressed that he is a faithful son of the Church but he does not think it is pastorally wise to assert constantly the Church’s clear teaching about homosexuality, same-sex marriage, contraception, and abortion in a judgmental tone to a world that already knows these moral teachings.

He encouraged the leaders of the Church to teach in a missionary style with a clear awareness of what is essential to the Gospel:

“The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The Church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards,
Many observers have welcomed the Holy Father’s new style of discourse indicating that his fresh, Ignatian, down-to-earth way of communicating is exactly what the Catholic Church needs if it is to have any hope of reaching those who feel a deep estrangement from the Church, any hope of communicating with a generation of young people who primarily communicate by text messages, Twitter, and Facebook. Others, however, have expressed some concern that some faithful Catholic people might be startled, even confused by the Pope’s direct and uncomplicated way of speaking. As a result, some pastors in the Church may find it necessary to place the brief excerpts of the Pontiff’s comments cited in the media in the proper context of the Church’s teachings. In this way, the Christian faithful will understand that short, informal responses to an interviewer do not have a greater weight than the official teachings of the magisterium. Almost everyone agrees that the first autumn in the pontificate of Pope Francis has been a season of renewed enthusiasm among Catholics. His surprising autumn words and deeds have also gained the attention of many who are not members of the Church.

Conclusion: All Good Gifts

Autumn is a time for taking stock. Summer has departed and winter is fast approaching. Autumn invites us to reflect with gratitude on our participation in the changing seasons of life. This autumn, my emergency surgery and my gradual recovery, with the support of the dedicated hospital staff, have been the occasion for considerable reflection and renewed appreciation for the gift of life. As a Priest and Bishop, I have been at the bedsides of many suffering patients, praying with them and for them, hoping to provide some comfort and support. I hope to continue this ministry with renewed zeal and a deeper insight about the value of every human life, and the impenetrable reality of death illuminated by our Catholic faith in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Tragically, an assassin’s bullet prevented President John F. Kennedy from living out the autumn of his life. His “brief shining moment” left an indelible image of youthful hope in the minds and hearts of many. However, had he lived, he might have continued to offer urgently needed leadership to our country as it faced the unwinnable war in Vietnam and the scourge of the sin and heresy of racism and prejudice in our nation. Was he a flawed leader or a tragic hero, or both? We may never know for sure. The disclosure of personal failings and the myth of Camelot have overshadowed the true measure of the man.

Our new Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, 76, is past the autumn of his life. Yet, Spirit-filled optimism may bring about “a second spring” for the Church. In these early months of his pontificate, he is calling for a broad and welcoming catholicity in the Church, which should not be interpreted as a diminishment of the authentic teachings and practices of Catholicism. Instead, he urges us to be faithful to the foundation of those authentic teachings by having big hearts open to accepting, serving, and loving others as our sisters and brothers in Christ. In this way we will be true companions to our neighbors as they travel over the mountain tops of joy and through the valleys of suffering that are a part of everyone’s journey through the seasons of life.

I am sharing this Autumn Reflection with you, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, on Thanksgiving Day. Every autumn, the President of the United States issues a proclamation declaring that the fourth Thursday of November is to be a day of thanksgiving. He urges all
Americans, in their own way, to offer thanks to God for the blessings that they, as well as the nation, have received during the past year. For many Americans, this autumn day is primarily a day for an enjoyable traditional family meal, a relaxing afternoon watching parades and football games on television, and (for some) getting an early start on Christmas shopping. However, for some of these families and many others, the religious roots of the day are not forgotten. They devote at least a few moments to giving thanks to God who is the source and ground of our existence and of every joy we experience in life.

On this day, many Catholics participate in a special parish Eucharist, the supreme act of thanksgiving, while others join with neighbors of different faiths for an ecumenical or interfaith thanksgiving service. Some families, including my own, have had the custom of spending time before or after dinner during which family members have the opportunity to reflect on the past year’s sorrows and joys and give voice to their gratitude to the Giver of all good gifts. I encourage you to make this custom a part of your Thanksgiving. It is fitting that Thanksgiving Day occurs in autumn, the season that seems to invite wonderment, quiet reflection, and gratitude.

We thank Thee then, O Father, for all things bright and good,  
The seedtime and the harvest, our life, our health, our food,  
No gifts have we to offer for all Thy love imparts  
But that which Thou desirest, our humble thankful hearts!

All good gifts around us  
Are sent from Heaven above.  
So thank the Lord, oh thank the Lord for all His love.  
--From: All Good Gifts

November 28, 2013  
THANKSGIVING DAY