n last month’s issue of People of God, I wrote about the then upcoming ad limina visit of the bishops of Region XIII to Rome. In this month’s column, I would like to share with you our journey and some of its highlights.

I felt very blessed to be traveling to Rome with about 40 of the faithful from the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. We began our pilgrimage with prayer, a prayer that intensified due to the persistent turbulence caused by a storm that was brewing over the Atlantic and headed for Europe. On the bright side, the plane reached sustained speeds of 724 miles per hour and we arrived one hour and 10 minutes early at Fiumicino Airport.

Despite the turbulence, we arrived safely at our destination. After going through immigration and customs, we claimed our luggage and headed to the hotel. We were all exhausted from the journey, but we managed to make it to the hotel and celebrate Sunday Mass together at the Divine Mercy Shrine near the Vatican.

The following day we gathered with the bishops of Region XIII for Mass at the Tomb of St. Peter. It is very moving to be at the spot where St. Peter is buried and where the early Christians gathered to celebrate the same Eucharist we were celebrating over 2,000 years later. After Mass, our pilgrims had an opportunity to visit the many historic sites of Rome while I joined my brother bishops for our visit with Pope Francis. We engaged the pope in a conversation that lasted about two-and-a-half hours, talking about a variety of matters, including lay ecclesial ministry, our splendid priests, ecumenism, the role of women in the Church, evangelization, the V Encuentro, immigration, and much more. Pope Francis was very relaxed and most cordial. It was extraordinary that he would give us so much time. He clearly enjoyed being with us and getting to know us better.

On Wednesday, our group attended the papal audience in the morning and explored the many interesting sites of Rome in the afternoon. While they were touring, I went with my brother bishops to visit the Congregation for Bishops and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Then, in the afternoon, we all met for Mass at St. Paul Outside the Walls. The Roman Emperor Constantine I founded this major basilica over St. Paul’s burial place. Pope Sylvester consecrated it in 324. It has had many renovations, being almost completely rebuilt after a fire in 1823. It was a special treat for me to see 72 pilgrims at the Mass from the Diocese of Salt Lake City, accompanying Bishop Oscar Solis, a bishop of Region XIII.

The next day, Thursday, our pilgrims departed for a two-day trip to Assisi and Florence. As much as I would have liked to join them, I spent the day with the bishops, celebrating Mass once again at St. Mary Major. We then
went for our visits to the following Congregations: Laity, Family and Life; the Promoting Integral Human Development; Catholic Education; Consecrated Life; Divine Worship; and Causes of Saints. We had to split up for some of these given the pressure of time. It was an intensive day and as you can see, I really would have liked to be with our pilgrims! Seriously, however, I did enjoy our visits with these important departments in the papal curia.

On Friday, we bishops celebrated Mass at the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran, also known as the Cathedral of the Most Holy Savior and of Saints John the Baptist and the Evangelist in the Lateran. This is the oldest and most important of the four major basilicas in Rome and has the distinction of being the oldest public church in Rome and the oldest basilica in the Western world. This is the Bishop of Rome’s cathedral and so after Mass we gathered around the cathedra, or chair, to pray. On February 22 of each year, we celebrate the Feast of the Chair of Peter, which is a symbol of the unity of the Church under the pope, the Bishop of Rome. After Mass, we visited the Congregation for Clergy and then the Secretary of State, Cardinal Parolin. The cardinal secretary performs all the political and diplomatic functions of the Holy See and the Vatican City. He is an amiable and perceptive man who serves as one of the pope’s closest advisors.

So there you have it! It was a full and grace-filled week during which we were able to communicate our concerns to the pope and the major heads of his curia. In turn, we were able to learn much about the current affairs of the Holy See and the Church universal. It was wonderful to be with my brother bishops and in particular, with my brothers and sisters from our archdiocese.

When our pilgrimage group returned Friday night, I was pleased to hear about their time in Assisi and Florence but we were all tired and had to pack for the long flight home the next day. Without the tail winds of the week before the flight took a lot longer but that gave us more time to ponder the wonderful memories of our trip and to savor our enriching experiences that will last a lifetime. We are grateful to God for safe passage and the gift of the Church, given to us by Christ Himself. I pray for the Bishop of Rome every day and I also thank God every day for the grace and privilege of being bishop of this graced and spirit-filled Church of Santa Fe. It is good to be home!

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord,

Most Rev. John C. Wester,
Archbishop of Santa Fe