

“The mission of the Church is to carry forward the mission that Jesus gave to the apostles, to go and ‘make disciples of all nations.’ Our own commission from the Lord is just as real as the commission he gave to Peter and Paul, and he gives us the grace we need to carry it out.” – Bishop John Folda

To the threshold of the apostles

The law of the Church requires that bishops pay a visit to Rome every five years or so. This is called the visit *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, which means “to the threshold of the apostles.” In the long history of the Church, bishops have made this pilgrimage to the tombs of the great apostles, Peter and Paul, to strengthen our bonds of communion with the universal Church and to meet personally with the Pope, who is the successor of St. Peter. From Jan. 10–18, I joined the other bishops of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota for this visit, which constitutes a sort of pilgrimage and extended consultation with the Holy Father and his collaborators at the Vatican.

On the opening day of our visit, we celebrated Mass at the tomb of St. Peter in St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. It’s an amazing paradox to see the massive and glorious basilica built over the tomb of a simple fisherman, who was called *Petros*, or “the rock,” by the Lord Jesus. As we celebrated Mass together, I thought of the early days of the Church, when Peter first came to Rome and began his preaching of the Gospel. Christianity was a new reality in pagan Rome, and while it attracted great interest among the people, it also aroused the ire and hatred of Rome’s rulers. Because of his faithful service to Jesus as the leader of the apostles and the first bishop of Rome, Peter was crucified and then buried at a place marked directly below the high altar of the basilica. In that crypt chapel, one remembers the apostolic foundation of the Church, which was established by Christ himself on a humble fisherman from Galilee: “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

Later that same day, the bishops of our region were invited to an audience with Pope Francis, the current successor of St. Peter and Bishop of Rome. The Holy Father welcomed us warmly and greeted the pilgrims who joined us. I was accompanied on this visit by Monsignor Joseph Goering, the Vicar General of our diocese, and also by Deacon Riley Durkin, who was in Rome with his class from St. Paul Seminary for their winter term. Our group of bishops then spent over two hours with the Pope in a wide-ranging conversation about the Church and the issues we face. Pope Francis was very interested in hearing about our dioceses, and he is very well-informed about the challenges that confront the Church in the United States and in our particular region. He specifically encouraged us to pray for our people and for ourselves, so we might grow in our communion with Jesus and in our zeal for the faith. The Holy Father was very open in discussing the problems of our times, and he shared his own challenges with us as well. But he also gave us great encouragement and reminded us that Christ is our Savior, the One who is with us always and who sustains us in our daily lives.

As part of our pilgrimage, we also traveled to the southern part of Rome to visit the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. There we celebrated Mass at the tomb of St. Paul, who also came to Rome in the early decades of the Church and preached the Gospel of Christ. Paul too died as a martyr, and his recently excavated tomb is located at the foot of the high altar in this huge basilica. Once again, as we prayed at the apostle’s tomb, I was reminded of the apostolic identity of the Church. Paul was called by our Lord and sent as a missionary (which has the same meaning as “apostle”) to the nations. He traveled throughout the Mediterranean region and courageously proclaimed Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of the world. The fervent witness of St. Paul drew countless souls to Christ and planted the seeds of Christianity that would spread throughout the world. We hear his words nearly every Sunday at Mass, but to approach the place of his burial and celebrate the Eucharist there was a moving moment of grace. Paul reminds us that we are all called to be missionaries, disciples of Jesus Christ who are ready to go into the world and share the Gospel by the witness of our lives. This is a point that Pope Francis emphasized as well: the power of Christian witness by the faithful. Our Catholic faith isn’t only taught by the words we speak, but by the way we live our lives fully in union with Christ.

I had the opportunity to live in Rome for two years as a young priest, and have visited there several times since. Every time I come to Rome, I am reminded of the universality and apostolic character of our Church. People of every nation and language travel to Rome and visit the holy sites of our faith, especially the tombs of the apostles. They come to see and hear the Holy Father, and they come to pray. (They also come to take pictures and eat delicious gelato!) It is always remarkable to experience the catholicity, or universality, of the Church gathered around Peter's successor. We discover once again that Jesus came to this earth to save all peoples, and he continues to reach out to every soul with the love and mercy of his Father. The mission of the Church is to carry forward the mission that Jesus gave to the apostles, to go and "make disciples of all nations." Our own commission from the Lord is just as real as the commission he gave to Peter and Paul, and he gives us the grace we need to carry it out. During my time in Rome, I prayed in a special way for the clergy, the religious, the seminarians, and all the faithful laity of the Diocese of Fargo. May our Lord Jesus Christ continue to guide us and fill us with the grace of his divine love during our pilgrimage here on earth.