Statement from the Bishop on the *ad limina* visit

As many are aware, the U.S. bishops have been going to Rome in groups since last November for our *ad limina* meeting with the Holy Father and the various offices of the Vatican. The *ad limina* experience has a rich history. Typically, it was meant to be every five years but with the numbers of dioceses and bishops increasing it now seems closer to an every seven or eight-year experience. The purpose is for bishops to turn in extensive reports on the status of their dioceses to the Vatican. The goal of the meetings that follow is to have a two-way dialogue: for us to share our local understanding with the Holy See, and for the Vatican’s leadership to share a more universal understanding with us. A second ancient purpose of the visit is that it is to be a pilgrimage of prayer. Bishops are to visit certain holy sites and pray for the peoples of their diocese. Lastly, but of great significance, is the bishops visit with the Holy Father, traditionally the high point of the visit.

Arizona is part of Region 13 (along with New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Utah). There were 15 bishops representing our region and we began on Monday, February 10th. It was not a blessed beginning for me as I seemed to have picked up a stomach virus, probably from flying and travel. I actually missed the scheduled Monday morning meeting of our region with Pope Francis! But 36 hours later I was fully well and invited to participate on Thursday of that week with the bishops of Region 14 (Georgia and Florida) in their meeting with Pope Francis.

The meeting with the Pope was extraordinary. Because of a prior meeting that morning with visiting senior leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, Pope Francis was 30 minutes late for our appointment. He kept apologizing for keeping us waiting! He then proceeded to spend two and a half hours with us in a generous dialogue. He clearly was as interested in what we had to say as we were in hearing from him. Several bishops remarked that after the initial awe of being in his presence wore off, it felt like a humble gathering of brothers joyfully entering into dialogue on our beloved faith and Church. There was a blessed paradox at work within Pope Francis. On the one hand he has a healthy and appropriate understanding of his critical role as Vicar of Christ. But he balances out the gravity of that calling with a wonderfully humble spirit that exuded fraternity to the brother bishops visiting with him in his home. I have known many blessings that have flowed from my ministry, but I suspect few will compare with the grace I felt for those hours. The meeting cut into our scheduled lunch as well as the Holy Father’s, but he clearly was not going to short-change us on our time with him. As the meeting came to a close, he seemed as hesitant to say goodbye to us as we were to take leave of him. What a joyful encounter with the Successor of St. Peter!

Some may be curious to know what we discussed. As our conversations were unplanned on the part of Pope Francis—wanting us to take the lead—the topics jumped around quite a bit. The day prior to our meeting he had just released a document on the *Synod on the Amazon*. He noted that the media was abuzz with the fact that he did not call for the ordination—in rare instances—of elderly, proven married men (*Viri Probati*) so that those of exceptionally remote areas who see a priest currently only once a year might have the Eucharist and other Sacraments with more regularity. My impression was that he seemed sad that this somewhat incidental discussion of married priests in rare instances (which we already have in other circumstances) became the focal point of media coverage and international interest. In addressing the matter briefly with us he noted that during the Synod he seemed to discern with others that the Holy Spirit was not moving in the direction of ordaining these *Viri Probati* and that the topic was not ripe for discussion. Nevertheless, this sole issue seemed to draw attention away from the actual focus and significance of the
Synod which is the fact that millions of the faithful deserve greatly increased pastoral care, and the world’s lungs (The Amazon) are being burned away, risking the well-being of our planet for future generations.

There were a host of other topics as well, some of which included: better evangelization and witness to our young people; the manner in which secularization (a way of life that does not involve any relationship with God) is eroding humanity’s true dignity as well as the inherent dignity of every individual human being; the human crisis of immigration and its causes found in famine, violence, extreme poverty, and climate change; and the frightening rise in nationalism which denies the humanity of those who aren’t a part of our ethnicity, language group, religion or culture. At the end of our discussions one of the bishops asked about the former Cardinal, Theodore McCarrick. The Pope noted that the case continues to be studied carefully and that the report should be published very soon. The matter has caused a deep wound to our Church and I believe that the bishops, along with Pope Francis, are anxious to shine a light on the facts. What may be problematic is the fact that the former cardinal’s life was quite complex: he was bishop in various dioceses, was well known for formal and many informal diplomatic efforts around the world, was involved in national and international ministries and charitable works, and interacted with people in a multitude of environments and situations. It is entirely unrealistic to think there’s a single, simple file sitting in an office somewhere. Tracking down all the avenues of information is incredibly complex, and my hunch is that the Holy See wants to get it comprehensive and correct when it does finally release the report.

While the visit with the Holy Father was a pinnacle of the *ad limina* we also enjoyed the traditional Masses at the four principle basilicas of St. Peter’s, St. Mary Major, St. John Lateran, and St. Paul’s Outside the Walls. It was in these four great centers of faith that bishops prayed together, celebrating Mass, but also paused in private prayer for the people we serve. The remainder of our days was mostly spent in various offices of the Holy See. The meetings were cordial and informative.

As I write these words, I’m preparing to head home. As wonderful as this pilgrimage has been it will indeed be good to be home among you. Nothing humbles me better or brings me more joy than when people look at me and say with great sincerity “Bishop, I’m praying for you.” Permit me to say that I felt the power of those loving prayers and support. I feel wonderfully refreshed—despite a rushed international trip which began with a virus!—and ready to throw myself back into the ministry to which I have been called.

I close this reflection by asking you to join with me in prayer for some of the many causes Pope Francis invited the bishops to pray: for the poor, the sick, and the hungry; for those whose lives are threatened or not valued, especially the unborn, the prisoner, and the dying; for those who have no home, especially the immigrant, the migrant, and the refugee; for the young people of our world who so often are found to be living with a loss of hope, or fear of their future; and for bishops—ordinary, sinful men who are called in every age to be prophets of God’s redeeming love and mercy.

+Edward Weisenburger