

Ad Limina visit in Rome

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The Catholic Bishops of Indiana, Wisconsin and Illinois are organized as Region VII among U.S. dioceses. Last year we were called to Rome for December 8-13 meetings. The formal event is called the visit ad limina apostolorum, to the doorsteps of the apostles, particularly to the tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul. My group stayed at the Pontifical North American College, the American seminary in Rome since 1859.

Originally these visits were every five years, but 2012 was our last formal visit. Our chancery office sent ahead two diocesan status reports that are shared by various Vatican offices. The first is called a quinquennial report. The second was a detailed calendar and outline of work describing the Uniting in Heart 2030 Pastoral Plan. The Catholic Moment continues to detail the latter.

This was a working visit. It was physically and spiritually demanding. I have taken to calling it a retreat within a pilgrimage. Prayers, Masses and meetings were very focused on the religious mission of bishops as Christ would have it among his apostles. At each daily Mass, I prayed for our people, priests, deacons and religious.

My group met for over two hours with Pope Francis in a free-flowing conversation. Bishops generally do not report on the encounter except in general terms. The Holy Father acutely feels limitations imposed by commercial media which tend to portray his every action or word as “taking sides.” They do this by reporting only threads of his overall teaching. This makes it difficult for him to fulfill his role as a bridge builder (pontifex) among people.

Among my other meetings was a visit to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Children. Two of the seventeen international board members were present: Theresa Kettlekamp, a former colonel with the Illinois State Police, and Neville Owen, a retired judge from Australia. Concern was expressed here as elsewhere for the survivors of sexual abuse, and for creating safeguards for minors and adults.

We also participated in meetings with the Congregation for the Clergy, the Congregation for Bishops, and the Congregation for the Defense of the Faith, sometimes called the Holy Office.

We were with the bishops from Michigan and Ohio (Region VI) for our session at the Secretariat of State. We Americans were reminded that the topic of human ecology in Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si* is a respect-life document. How would the Vatican offices know about local ecology? Remember that there are papal representatives around the globe, and each of the 2,886 dioceses in the world also send quinquennial reports about local challenges. We did ask when the McCarrick report would be issued. It appears that you will know when I know.

I concelebrated the Pope’s Mass at St. Peter’s on December 12, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It was a wonderful experience. Spanish was the language for the liturgy, except that a nearby priest MC gave instructions to us in Latin to stand, sit, put on/off our mitres. The pope personally greeted each bishop at the end of Mass. It was the evening before his 50th anniversary as a priest, and the week before his 83rd birthday. He does not lack energy!

After that Mass, Cardinal Blase Cupich gathered us bishops at the confessional, an area over the tomb of St. Peter. We together recited an Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be, followed by the Apostles Creed, affirming-confessing our Catholic faith and apostolic mission. It is significant that St. Peter had been martyred nearby, a fact not lost on any of us.