

Fostering the universal and unifying mission of Christ

Following his conversion, St. Paul went to Arabia to preach the Gospel and after three years traveled to Jerusalem to visit Peter, where he stayed 15 days (see Gal 1:17–18). Several more meetings with Peter followed in ensuing years.

Biblical accounts make clear that in those early days, unity in faith and mission was prized as indispensable and binding for the church. In an analogous way, “visits to Peter” have continued through the centuries, as bishops from around the world have made regular pilgrimages to Rome as a sign of unity with Peter’s successor, the pope.

The earliest historical record of such visits comes from the fifth century, when Pope Leo I insisted that Sicily send three bishops yearly to Rome for a council. The practice expanded in various forms, so that by the 11th century all archbishops (and soon, all bishops) were required to visit Rome at set intervals.

In 1585, Pope Sixtus V formally developed a process by which every bishop was required to visit Rome to report to the pope on the state of his diocese. The formal name for this tradition is the visit “Ad Limina Apostolorum” (“to the thresholds of the apostles,” Peter and Paul).

An expression of communion

Its primary goal is to strengthen and support the bishops’ communion with the pope and to underscore our responsibility as successors to the apostles. Although the ad limina visit entails numerous liturgies and meetings, its basic purpose is twofold: to venerate the tombs of Peter and Paul, and to meet with the Holy Father.

The practice continues today at an interval of every five years (a “quinquennium”). In fact, as you read this column, I am in Rome with Archbishop Brunett, Bishop Elizondo, Bishop Tyson, Bishop Cupich, and the bishops of Oregon, Alaska, Montana and Idaho (we make up “Region XII”) for our ad limina visit. The visits were set somewhat off schedule after the death of Blessed John Paul II, and so it has actually been eight

years since our last one. Through participation in the ad limina visits, the pope also fulfills an important aspect of his pastoral ministry — learning about the state of the church throughout the world. Directly and through the offices of the Vatican, he receives information about the dioceses and offers comments and suggestions of his own.

In preparation for his visit, each bishop is asked to prepare a “quinquennial report,” detailing the situation in his diocese in the past five years. All bishops make an annual statistical report to the Vatican, but the quinquennial report is different. It includes an even broader range of statistical information about the diocese and the area in which it is located, extensive narrative accounts concern-

ing diocesan pastoral programs, and the bishop’s personal assessment of the state of his diocese.

Ad limina visits are about much more than a report, however. They are an expression of the communion and solidarity of the Catholic Church in faith, prayer and mission. In other words, they express the unity of the local churches with the Holy Father, and thus our unity with one another.

Universal, unifying mission

The experience of the church worldwide is staggeringly varied. In some parts of the world, persecution and martyrdom are present-day realities; in others, church leaders are the only stable factor where countries are in political shambles. In some parts of the world, famine and disease have decimated local populations; in others, food is bountiful and medical care is advanced, but they are not justly distributed. In some areas, vocations to the priesthood and religious life have declined; in many others, they have risen dramatically.

In some places, there is extreme poverty but strong family life; in others, there is wealth but crumbling family life and loss of a moral compass. In some areas, people enjoy full democratic freedoms; in others, democracy is a new experience (or still a dream), and newfound freedom needs careful guidance lest it lead to moral chaos.

The church is present in every place and every situation. Ad limina visits help foster the kind of exchange that keeps the church true to her mission in Christ. “If one part suffers, all the parts

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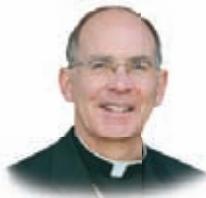
You may send it to him at Archbishop Sartain’s Prayer List, Archdiocese of Seattle, 710 Ninth Ave., Seattle, WA 98104.

suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy. Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it” (1 Cor 12:26–27).

The highlights of our ad limina visit will be Masses celebrated at the tombs of Peter and Paul and personal visits with Pope Benedict XVI. If anyone has a full grasp of the state of the church worldwide, it is he. It is easy to become nearsighted and preoccupied with our own corner of the world, no matter what our calling. It cannot be that way in the church, and the visit “Ad Limina Apostolorum” expresses and fosters the universal and unifying mission of Christ.

“I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph 4:1–6)

All of you are with us in prayer as we make a pilgrimage “to the thresholds of the apostles.”



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