

Along The Way

With Bishop Matthew H. Clark



Before you get into all of this, let me explain a little about it.

This is the story of a visit I made to Rome last week with 21 other bishops from New York State and the Military Ordinariate.

It is called an "ad limina" visit (to the doorway) to signify that it is a visit to the home of the Holy Father to strengthen the bonds of charity and mutual support which should unite the bishops and all of the local Churches in our faith communion.

What follows here is not a travelogue or a systematic, chronological accounting of the accounts of the week.

Rather, it is part journal, part reflection, part report, finally organized and written on the flight home from notes jotted down as time allowed during an extremely busy week.

But it is an attempt to communicate to you in some way what happened and what the days meant to me.

You are the reason I went; I am happy to offer you these words as I return.

THE CITY

It always happens.

In Rome, I am never more conscious of the mystery of the Church. I mean the earthiness of it as well as the holiness.

There is something musical about the streets of Rome. Even when people shout, the language seems soft and easy. And most often — even when a little harried — the people are friendly, ready to meet you.

Wisdom is all around even when it is not manifest in efficiency or order. The Romans have many skills but there seem always to be more artists and philosophers than mechanics here!

This morning, I walked to some of my favorite places — Piazza Navone, Campo dei Fiori for the public market, Piazza Farnese, the Pantheon and the Trevi Fountain.

It was clear and bright and there was a freshness in the air. The street sweepers had finished and many of the fountains were newly cleaned and filled.

In the clarity of the morning, colors leapt from flower beds newly placed along sidewalks and in the main piazzas. Life shone all around.

All of the piazzas were alive with people. Life lit black, yellow, white and olive skin and the music of nations filled the air.

Caricaturists were active, attracting as spectators the merely curious and those trying to work up enough courage to have their own caricatures done.

Con games abounded. Sales were made for prices less than the sellers had hoped and for more than buyers wanted to pay. But both thought they had gotten the better of it.

Children, filled with the excitement of the hunt, chased pigeons but always slowed on the critical moment lest they catch one. When you're four, how do you know for sure how a cornered pigeon will react?

On ancient streets that ever wind into new surprises, I saw people from all parts of the earth. In this wedding of time and place is a meditation on the ancient but always living tradition of which we are a part.

One cannot be in the middle of it all without wondering at a God who chooses us to be vessels of His life, who entrusts to us the vocation to make Him known by our words, our touch, our loving.

The humanity of the Church and therefore her frailty, sin and misdirection are all represented here. But so is her holiness in the witness of the saints who have walked her streets.

The saints and scoundrels who populate our history all come back in this place in the person of Peter who was both. His suffering which began before the sanhedrin in Jerusalem was brought to completion here when he was asked for everything. Through the transforming power of the Spirit, Simon finally became Peter and hallowed the streets of Rome with his blood.

I find his faithful witness to the resurrection today in John Paul II and am reminded by the two of them of the hosts of women and men through the ages who in this city and around the world have walked with the Risen One.

That kind of melting together of all who have gone before

with those who are part of today's communion of faith is a great consolation and, itself, a call to faith.

Frailty and sin are part of our life and they will be until Jesus comes again.

But since he came and died and rose we can smile at the frailty because it is a reminder of grace. And we can be less afraid of our sin because it can remind us of His ready welcome when we turn our hearts back to Him.

Rome always reminds me of the fidelity of God and of the astounding humanity of our faith communion.

Rome is the center of that communion. Because we're human, that fact will always create a certain amount of tension. There have always been complaints about this city, her bishop, her place in our Church, historical and present-day life. There always will be.

But we've missed something in the end if we don't love this place.

Peter is here and he, finally, in this wondrous gathering called together in the power of the Spirit, is the one who reminds us of who we are in Christ and who we are called to be for one another.

Sometimes, he calls us scoundrels and invites us to better things. But he always reminds us that we are saints — and no one has a more important ministry than that.

THE VISITS

We visited eight of the Roman congregations or dicasteries during our stay in the city; those concerned with the Doctrine of the Faith, Education, Sacraments and Liturgy, Clergy, Bishops, Religious, Justice and Peace and Family.

These, with a few other congregations, form the administrative arm of the Holy See. Their function is twofold: to serve the Holy Father in the administration of the matters entrusted to their care and to serve the local churches by sharing with them the pastoral insights and experience of the whole Church.

In most cases, our meetings lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. The Cardinal Prefect or the Archbishop Secretary of the Congregation presided. In that capacity, he welcomed us, spoke of the basic work and pastoral concerns of the congregation and then invited us to dialogue with him about common concerns, questions, problems and hopes.

Because of our numbers, the tight schedule and other factors, the conversations were of uneven quality. But they certainly ranged over many topics of interest to all of us.

It was a joy to speak of the Diocese of Rochester and of the faith of the people of our twelve counties. And it was equally a pleasure to hear the other bishops of our region speak in similar terms about the local churches which they serve.

Each church has its own particular history and character. What is successful in one is not always so in another; a great need in this diocese is a slight problem in that one. Some are blessed in one area; others in some different way.

But there is also a great commonality among the dioceses which make up our Region II. Let me illustrate that by giving some concrete examples of the matters to be discussed.

I'll begin on the darker side and mention some of the pastoral problems we face and or a few of those areas in which we wish we had by now made greater progress:

— the problem of the departure of many of our people, especially our Hispanic brothers and sisters, to fundamentalist and pentecostal sects.

— the high rate of the breakup of marriages which cause such heartbreak for so many and have such serious impact on our young people.

— a dwindling number of priests for the next few years.

— the ongoing, slow work of being as faithful as we can be to the gospel and conciliar call to reject racism, sexism and any other form of discrimination.

— our coping with those pressures of society which weaken family life and undermine basic moral values relative to such matters as sexuality, the use of drugs and alcohol, the protection of unborn life.

— the care of the poor through direct human service and advocacy for a change of those structures which are oppressive to the weakest in our society.

— concern for the future of some of our religious

congregations whose numbers are decreasing and whose average age is rising.

The brighter side? Here are some of the common and encouraging elements of life spoken of at our meetings:

— above all, the faith and commitment of the whole people of God.

— encouraging signs in vocations to the priesthood. We seem now to be finding ways more effectively to reach out to men in college and in post-college years.

— the beautiful blossoming of the Catechuminate in so many of our parish communities. It has been a powerful source of renewal and indications are that it will become even more a sign of life among us.

— a perception that the continued search of once alienated Catholics for spiritual values is leading many back to active participation in the life of our parish communities.

— an awareness among an increasing number of the faithful that they proclaim the Risen Lord in all areas of human endeavor, to people of every description.

— an enriched understanding on the part of many of God's Word and the sacramental life of Church as well as a growing appreciation that growing faith must constantly change the way we live.

— an encouraging number of renewal programs being held in parish communities.

The list is not exhaustive but it represents the expansive life we share and offers considerable hope for the future.

Thank you for being in God's good providence, the source of this renewed hope.

THE HOLY FATHER

This is the hardest part to put together.

The best I can do is to tell you what happened and then share some of the memories which stay with me now.

All but four of us had private meetings with the Holy Father on Thursday.

On that afternoon Bishops Stan Brzana of Ogdensburg, Frank Harrison of Syracuse, Howie Hubbard of Albany and I received invitations to meet with Pope John Paul II on Friday. We were to begin at 11:15 a.m. and see him in 15-minute intervals in the order listed above.

We were slightly behind schedule and I was admitted to the hall in which the Holy Father was receiving us at about 12:10 p.m.

He smiled in greeting as I was introduced, held my arm and said that he remembered ordaining me a bishop. He asked me if that had been two or three years ago and I told him that it was close to four. It may be taking liberties but the gesture he used in response as saying, "Doesn't time pass quickly when you're having fun?!"

We sat together at a desk at which was opened a map of New York State divided into the eight dioceses. The name of the See city in each case was in bold face type and other principal communities were in less prominent type. I remember seeing Elmira, Corning and Ithaca but I cannot be sure they were the only ones so indicated.

The Holy Father was obviously more interested in listening than in speaking so our time together was filled by my responses to his questions.

Were we more rural or urban? I explained to him that of our twelve counties all but Monroe are considered rural counties.

Could you tell me about your young people? They are richly blessed by the Lord and we are very proud of the witness to faith that so many give to us. We are working to help them appreciate our faith community as one in which they can grow to a Christ like maturity.

It was fun here to tell him about the State Catholic Youth Convention I had attended at Camp Casa Owasco on Owasco Lake just the day before I left for Rome. Exciting, vital, beautiful kids. And it was a great treat to pass on the only specific, personal message from home I have him that day.

It came from one of the young women at the meeting who wanted me to tell the Pope that she loved him for his work for peace and for his encouragement of the young. No need to interpret the smile on his face just then! Just great pleasure.

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