

Meetings engender appreciation of the church

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. I had a fresh reminder of that old dictum's truth this week when I returned home from meetings of groups related to the work of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB). One meeting was of the conference's Administrative Committee, which meets before our NCCB General Assemblies to prepare the agenda for those events.

Prior to that meeting I met with the National Advisory Council (NAC), a group of laity, religious and priests from all regions of the country who review and make comments about agenda materials being proposed to the Administrative Committee.

I find such meetings to be rewarding. For one thing, they force me to become better acquainted than I might otherwise be with the work of the conference. For another, they provide an opportunity to hear the points of view brought to any given topic by a wide variety of people.

I may or may not agree with a given point of view. Even if I do agree with an idea, it might not apply to our local situation. But I always find it enriching to be in circumstances in which faithful, committed people share their ideas about how best to live our faith in this day and age of the church.

I suppose that is because such experiences remind me of how diverse and rich is Catholic life in the United States. It may also be because groups like NAC embody the truth that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are

along the way

By BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK



abundantly present and alive all through the church in our nation.

It will probably not surprise you to know that such current issues as Archbishop John Quinn's address at Oxford and Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's Common Ground initiative — while not part of our formal agendas — were very much a part of the informal discussions during both meetings.

Nor will you be astounded to learn that different points of view were expressed about both of those items. The range of those points of view were not notably different from those already reported in the *Catholic Courier* and commented on by me in "Along the Way." But it was an interesting experience to hear first-hand the diversity of points of view good people hold about the same issues.

Difficult as such questions can sometimes be, I do believe that to ask them — and to respond to them — is crucial to the continued health and well-being of the church in our country. These are not contrived questions. They are not the ques-

tions of a radical fringe. They are not questions that are antagonistic to the church.

They are questions rising in the hearts of faithful people who love their church and want it to be as strong and lively as it can be. It seems to me that we honor the living nature of our tradition when we allow such questions to engage our spirits.

The fondness I felt for you returning from those meetings is not a negative comment about those sessions or anyone present at them. To the contrary, they were good meetings and the people were really great.

The fondness was more related to the realization such absences renew in me of your great goodness and your consistent willingness to commit yourself to making our church a better place to be. Such a reminder is always most welcome.

A closing comment on the trip to Washington: I had an opportunity to attend the lecture on the Consistent Life Ethic given by Cardinal Bernardin at Georgetown University last Monday. It was an excellent speech about an issue of great importance in our nation.

I was delighted at how strongly its content supported and strengthened our diocesan commitment to the same theme. I came away happy with what I heard and much in admiration of the cardinal who, although fighting serious illness, found the inner reserves to give such a splendid address.

Peace to all.

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