

# Bishop Clark sees time with pope as highlight

By Lee Strong  
Associate editor

As Pope John Paul II's recent visit to Cuba showed, for many people, just witnessing a papal Mass can be the thrill of a lifetime.

Meeting the pope is beyond most Catholics' greatest dreams.

But Bishop Matthew H. Clark has actually met the pope on a number of occasions — beginning with his days as spiritual adviser at the North American College in Rome in 1978-79 and his own ordination as a bishop by the pope in St. Peter's Basilica May 27, 1979.

Bishop Clark will once again meet with the pope when he visits the Vatican Feb. 19 to March 1 for his fourth "ad limina," a term that means "to the threshold." (See related article).

During the trip — which is required of diocesan bishops every five years — Bishop Clark is likely to enjoy a meal with the pope and the other bishops of New York, who will also be traveling at the same time to Rome for their "ad liminas." As a group, they will celebrate Mass with the pope, and each bishop will have a short, private talk with the pontiff.

Even though they have met on a number of occasions before, the bishop noted, he views the meeting with the pope as a "highlight" of each "ad limina."

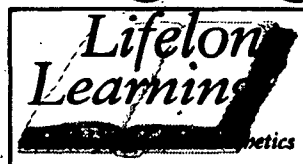
"To me, the most attractive part of the 'ad limina' — in addition to the visit to the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul — is contact with the Holy Father," Bishop Clark said in a brief Jan. 28 interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

The visits with the pope are generally "informal and familial" in tone, Bishop Clark said. "Every time I've met him, he recalls that he ordained me a bishop."

The pope "usually takes the lead in asking questions about pastoral life," Bishop Clark said. The pontiff frequently addresses such areas as religious life in the diocese, vocations to the priesthood and educational development programs for clergy.

In addition, the bishop said, "He's always interested in the youth of our diocese."

As for this visit, Bishop Clark is not cer-



tain how much time he will be able to spend with the pope.

"He has been extraordinarily generous with his time in past visits," Bishop Clark said. But this year, he explained, there may be limitations due to the pontiff's ongoing health problems.

The bulk of the time during the "ad limina" will actually be spent at various Vatican congregations, Bishop Clark observed. Each diocese scheduled for this "ad limina" submitted quinquennial reports detailing life and new initiatives in the diocese over the past five years. Portions of those reports have been sent to the various congregations the bishops will be visiting.

Those congregational visits, Bishop Clark noted, are made as a group, thus there is little time for the congregation staff to make individual comments. Generally, any such comments are sent to the respective diocese months after the actual visit.

Bishop Clark said the visits to the congregations are usually "informal."

"We're quite free to raise questions and concerns" during the congregational visits, Bishop Clark said. One topic he said he might raise is "the recent instruction on ordained ministry and lay ministry."

In that document, released Nov. 13, 1997, the Vatican spelled out clear distinctions between the ordained ministry of priests and the ministry of lay people collaborating with them. Bishop Clark has appointed a group to study the document and its potential implications for lay ministry in the diocese.

In his experience, Bishop Clark said, "ad liminas" have generally been positive events, and not times to raise criticisms of individual bishops or to touch on controversies in individual dioceses.

"It's never happened before. I don't anticipate it happening," he said.

As for those individuals who anticipate that such criticisms will take place, Bishop Clark simply said, "I don't think they understand the office of bishop."

hood and religious life.

• The importance of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and reconciliation. The pope probably will discuss continuing efforts to revise the translations of prayers and readings used at Mass.

In almost every speech, the pope will emphasize the role of bishops as teachers, promoters and guardians of the faith.

In turn, the pope listens to what the bishops have to say about their dioceses, and about his own actions and those of the Vatican. Thus the "ad limina" visit is a chance for the pope and the bishops to raise issues of concern.

"This is, in fact, a dialogue because, as Vatican II says, the individual bishop is clearly responsible for his own diocese, but must also have solicitude for all the dioceses," Father Hart observed.

Vatican officials said they did not think the pope had any big, surprise issues on his agenda for the U.S. bishops this time.

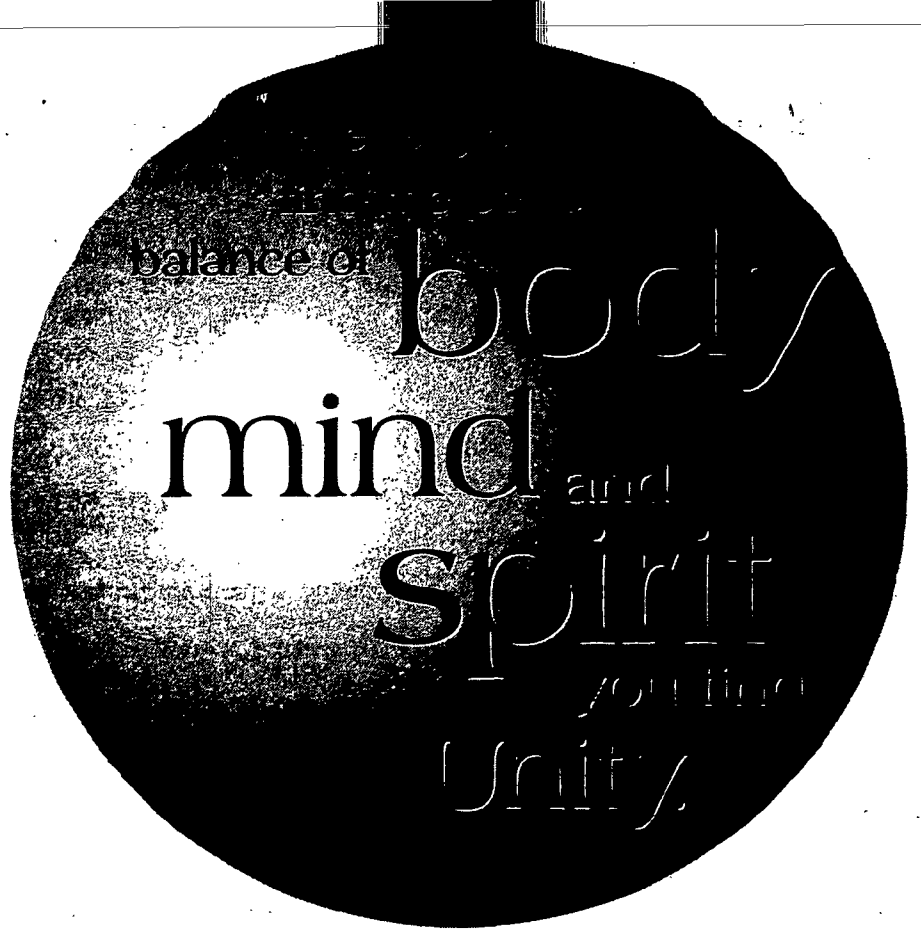
"It's not that the themes will be all that new, but the way they are presented, perhaps with a new twist," one official said.

The visits do not focus on problems, another official said.

"The bishops do not come here to get their wrists slapped. They discuss not only problems, but joys as well," said the official.

"The pope is here to confirm his brothers in the faith," another official said, and with the way Pope John Paul has structured the visits, that's the experience of vast majority of bishops.

Contains additional reporting by Lee Strong.



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## Ad limina

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the trip and the bishops' brotherhood with him in leading the church.

Some aspects of the "ad limina" have changed over the years as Pope John Paul grows older; for example, he now gives each group a copy of his speech rather than read it to them. However, the bishops' personal time with him has been preserved.

Each bishop will have about 15 minutes alone with the pope to discuss the situation of his own diocese. Then, with a few other bishops, he will join Pope John Paul for a meal and informal discussion.

The entire regional group of bishops will concelebrate an early morning Mass with the pope in his private chapel and afterward will receive a copy of a papal speech.

Because the pope will be delivering 13 separate speeches to U.S. bishops, each is likely to focus only on one or two themes.

According to Vatican officials, some of the topics the pope is expected to address include:

- U.S. Catholics' pro-life activities, particularly regarding abortion and euthanasia.
- The role of the laity in society and in the church, particularly in light of a November Vatican instruction on the extent to which lay people can participate in church ministry.
- U.S. young people and the church's ministry to them, as well as a review of efforts to promote vocations to the priest-

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