

Visit proves source of delight

Last week I wrote about the first part of our *ad limina* visit to the Holy See. This week I conclude that report with the following notes:

Tuesday, Feb. 24: Today brought relief from the heavy rains of yesterday. Last night Eric Phillips came to my rescue giving me some shoe polish so I could restore my water-stained shoes, and some thread and a needle to repair a cuff that came loose on my trousers and dragged through the water.

We visited the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith this morning. Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect, and Archbishop Bertoni, the secretary, were our hosts for a conversation, which ranged over several subjects including: Christology, ministry in ecclesiology, biblical translations, stability in marriage, the use of inclusive language in the church's liturgy and documents, and the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist in Catholic life.

A second visit brought us to the Secretariat of State, where we were hosted by Archbishop Tauran. The visit of Pope John Paul to Cuba, the tension in Iraq, Church-State-relations, issues and problems in the United States were matters we discussed.

Half of our number were enjoying their personal meeting with the Holy Father and so were not at the visit to the Secretary of State. Those bishops also had lunch with the pope today. As of this writing, the rest of us have not been notified of the date of our appointment.

Susan Koeppen and Todd Rogenthien of WHEC-TV Channel 10 in Rochester came to the North American College for an interview after lunch. We went up on the roof and so were able to enjoy a magnificent vista of the city as we did our work.

As they were leaving it began to rain again. The deteriorating weather reminded me that I had not yet visited the new weight and exercise room they have developed here. So I went down and ran on an excellent treadmill.

Ash Wednesday, Feb. 25: The NAC Community celebrated the Eucharistic Liturgy this morning at Santa Sabina, the Lenten station church for today. Archbishop Ed O'Brien, formerly the Rector of NAC and now the head of the Military Archdiocese, presided and preached. He did a beautiful job. So did all who in any way contributed to the celebration.

Many other people from Rome, most of them English-speaking, participated. Among them was Sister Breda Shelley, RSHM, whom I came to know well when I helped out at Marymount International back in the '70s. Through those years I celebrated Eucharist with the school community on alternate weekends. The custom here has it that students walk to the Lenten church of the day whenever possible. I decided to join them. We assembled at 6 a.m. and started for Santa Sabina. The walk took 40 minutes at a vigorous pace. When offered a ride on the way back you can believe that I readily accepted the kindness.

Our visits today were to the Congregation for Education and the Apostolic Signatura. At the earlier meeting we spoke of vocations, seminarians, Catholic schools at all levels, relationships with Catholic colleges and universities, and the pastoral care of all Catholic college and university students.

The Apostolic Signatura is, for all practical purposes, the court of last resort in the church. Its chief responsibility is not so much to rule on the substance of particular cases but to ensure that all steps necessary for a just process have been honored.

We had no activities scheduled for late in the day. I think that was a welcome nod to Ash Wednesday. Whatever the reason, I welcomed the stretch of quiet it provided.

Supper with the staff of the College and other visitors here was a pleasant interlude. No one had to break off for activities and we had a most enjoyable conversation.

No word as yet about further activities with our Holy Father.

Thursday, Feb. 26: The Congregation for Bishops was first on our agenda today. Cardinal Bernard Gantin and some of his staff welcomed us in warm fashion. The cardinal stressed the word "for" in the title of the Congregation, indicating that he and his colleagues were there to assist and support bishops in the conduct of their pastoral office.

along the way

BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK



A second major piece of their responsibility is to conduct the process by which priests are identified as suitable candidates for the office of bishop. The pope appoints all bishops, but understandably, depends for support and appropriate recommendations from the congregation. You may be interested in knowing that the congregation relates to the needs of 1,677 world dioceses or their equivalents.

There were some questions about the appointments of auxiliary bishops, especially when the diocesan bishop requesting such assistance is close to retirement age.

In the afternoon we celebrated the Eucharistic Liturgy at St. Paul outside the Walls, thus concluding our visit "*ad limina apostolorum*." Cardinal O'Connor, who normally would preside, had another commitment and was not able to join us. In his absence, Bishop John McGann did the honors. I am a great admirer of John, but even if I were not, I would have enjoyed his homily. He touched on a range of the responsibilities of a bishop in a realistic and most encouraging way. I really drew strength from him.

On the way home from St. Paul's we went to the Villa Stritch, which is a residence for priests from U.S. dioceses who work in the Vatican. As is their custom with *ad limina* groups, they hosted us at a very pleasant reception. As is true with the present seminary staff, there are several priests now living at the Villa who were seminarians when I was on staff at the American College. It was good to see them again. On the bus home I sat immediately behind the driver. His negotiation of that huge bus through such narrow and winding streets raised in me great waves of awe and fear. It was more thrilling than a roller coaster!

Howard Hubbard and I reviewed the day over bowls of penne arrabbiata and insalata mista. Great friend. Great food. Who could beat that.

And...when we returned I received the ticket for my personal interview with Pope John Paul II. Tomorrow will be a banner day: At 7:10, all of the bishops at the Vatican concelebrate with Pope John Paul; at 11:40, my visit with him; at 1:45, the second half of our group will have lunch with our Holy Father. I look forward to it all.

Friday, Feb. 27: The reality was more delightful than our anticipation of it. After vesting in a grand room in the papal palace the group of us were led to the pope's personal chapel where he was already at prayer. He then vested and our Eucharistic Liturgy began. There was no homily preached during the liturgy — celebrated in English — but our Holy Father offered cordial greetings as we began. He spoke of the ministry we share in service of the whole church and expressed the hope that we would grow through what we shared that morning.

Following the celebration we devested and assembled for a group photo with John Paul II. When that shot was taken he invited us, by name and individually, to step forward to receive from him his written message to us. In customary fashion the official photographer caught each moment. I should note that in early *ad limina* visits, Pope John Paul read his message to us. This was the only difference between this visit and earlier ones.

Later in the morning I returned to the Vatican for my 11:40 private interview. I invited Eric to come along because we were given reason to believe that he might have a moment with the Holy Father. I followed the five bishops from Brooklyn and preceded our friend from Syracuse, Bishop Jim Moynihan.

How does one convey a sense of what happened in those 10 minutes and what the experience meant? I offer the following notes:

- It was good to be close to the Pope because he conveys a sense of strength and vitality not so easily perceived from a distance. Yes, he walks with

slow gait and is quite bent at the shoulders. But his color is fine; his eyes are bright; he is sharp and retains his quiet humor.

- He asked about vocations to priesthood and our seminarians, about Bishops Hogan and Hickey, the precise location of our diocese and our size.

- I conveyed to him your love and prayers. I commented about, as so many had requested before I left home, your strong support for his consistent and courageous defense of the dignity of all people, every person.

- At one point in the conversation Pope John Paul II said, "You've been here many times." I told him that this was my fourth *ad limina* visit. I added that they always mean a lot to me because they allow me the opportunity to thank him for ordaining me. I got a kick out of his accurate recollection that the ceremony was very long because he ordained 26 of us. Since that May in 1979, he has switched to January 6 and always ordained a much smaller number.

- We spoke briefly about both the joys and demands of episcopal ministry and agreed that we would both like to be around to meet again in 2003!

- At the end of that 10-minute session — which seemed no longer than 30 seconds — the Holy Father gave a signal at which his aide escorted Eric in for greetings and photographs. That completed, Eric and I went our way to Piazza San Pietro for an interview and some camera work with our reporter friends.

An hour later, 10 of us bishops (five from Brooklyn, three from Rockville Centre, Jim Moynihan and I) were guests for lunch at our Holy Father's table. Our meal together lasted for slightly more than one hour and was a very pleasant experience.

The conversation ranged over a number of issues that I have named earlier in these notes. I do recall the Holy Father looking forward to a retreat he and his household will make together very soon. He spoke of his long service as bishop — he will celebrate his 40th anniversary in September. John Paul expressed much interest in the racial, ethnic and religious diversity of our region, especially of New York City.

At the end of the meal we all went to the pope's chapel for a moment's prayer together. When the time came to depart, the Holy Father stood at the door of the chapel, where he said goodbye to each of us.

That moment of farewell concluded all official activities of the *ad limina* visit. I walked back to the seminary and spent the rest of the afternoon until the evening meal making some notes on the experience and thinking about what the week has meant to me. Some of that I hope I have conveyed in these words. Some of it will become clearer as time goes by.

After dinner on Friday, Howard and I took a walk through the city, and some of our favorite piazzas — Navona, Pantheon, Campo di Fiori, Farnese, Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, Fontana di Trevi, etc. The walk included a stop at Giolitti, a popular place for ice cream in the city. While there we met a wonderful group from Rochester — some from St. Jerome's, another from St. John of Rochester. It was a delightful moment with hugs all around and many photographs.

Saturday, Feb. 28: Our last day. No more meetings or other activities connected to our visit. I took a long walk in the morning, which was bright and warm. Along the way I stopped in a few shops, and once for coffee.

In the afternoon I paid homage to a noble Italian institution, the siesta. Later I got myself organized for packing, watched a student soccer game for a while and then joined Bishops Emil Wcela and John Dunne of Rockville Centre for a celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy.

We celebrated the close of this visit with a Rochester-Albany meal in a restaurant on the Via Appia. There were 10 of us at the table. We told stories of the week and laughed a lot. It was a fitting way to bring our time together to an end.

Sunday, March 1: Howard is sitting next to me on the airplane doing the same thing I am doing. Susan and Todd are across the aisle from us. Both are reading books. I am happy to be heading home. I look forward to the Rite of Election this week and sharing this beautiful season with you. Peace to all.