

## Nation's bishops share ecumenical insights

I write this week from Washington, D.C., where I am attending the November General Assembly of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

It is good to be here with bishops from every state of the union. These days are a time when we can consider the pastoral plans and opportunities of our time. Our gathering also allows a privileged few days during which we can come to know one another better, share our pastoral experiences and enjoy the wonderful communion of prayer.

On Sunday we enjoyed a stimulating morning, the central theme of which was "The Ecumenical Ministry of the Bishops." Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, delivered the keynote address. Cardinal Cassidy highlighted significant passages from the documents of the Second Vatican Council, then walked us through the principal moments in the ecumenical life of our church since then.

In addition to Cardinal Cassidy's excellent speech, we enjoyed talks by three bishops of our conference who reflected on their own experience of ecumenical dialogue with representatives of other churches in the Christian family. Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland spoke about what he has learned from his conversations with representatives of Orthodox churches. Bishop John Snyder of St. Augustine, Florida, highlighted all of the

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important common beliefs and agreements we share with our Episcopalian sisters and brothers, and named the areas that cause pain for all because we are not yet where Christ would want us to be. Finally, Auxiliary Bishop Richard Sklba of Milwaukee drew out some of the implications of our recent agreement with the Lutheran church on the matter of justification.

One of the fruits of the morning is the ongoing stimulus it has been to think about our involvement in the ecumenical enterprise. How are we living out our call to unity at this moment in our history? Are there initiatives we should take or responses we should make that would advance this essential mission in our life? How can we support one another as we try to make our own the deep desire of Christ "that all might be one"?

I mentioned above what a pleasure it is to be in the company of the other bishops — for the renewal of long-standing friend-

ships; for the development of new ones; for the kind of understanding, support and encouragement we can enjoy with people whose daily experience is much like our own.

This kind of interchange occurs during the formal portions of our meeting. One can learn much from and have the opportunity to contribute to the public interchange around our agenda items. I am consistently impressed by the way in which the bishops can fold often notably diverse pastoral approaches into pastoral plans that enjoy the support of all.

The work of the conference and the conversations that work generates open avenues of friendship and understanding among the bishops. But no less do the opportunities we have for relaxed conversation and informal association strengthen us in mind and heart.

For example, this evening I'll be having dinner with 10 or 12 bishops who try to get together in this fashion sometime during every general assembly. We have no formal agenda. The understanding is that each will have an opportunity, if he wishes, to share with the others whatever might be on his mind.

In my experience with this group, I have been impressed both by the honesty of the bishops as they share what's on their minds and the supportive respect with which each is heard by all.

Peace to all.

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