

In the Heartland

Ad Limina Apostolorum

From March 6th to March 14th Bishop Joseph Charron and I were due to be in Rome with the other Bishops of Region IX – Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska and Kansas – of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, participating in the custom of “ad limina apostolorum” which means at the “threshold of the tombs of the Apostles.”

This practice is undertaken periodically by all of the world’s bishops so that we bishops can once again visibly remind ourselves of our commitment to carry out the mission entrusted to us as successors of the Apostles. Jesus gave this mission to his Apostles with the expectation that it be fulfilled with unwavering fidelity – to make disciples of all nations by making his name known and loved.

This mission is fulfilled within the context of the three-fold responsibility of the bishop. He is ordained to teach, govern, and sanctify the community under his care. At the threshold of the Apostles’ tombs we pray – first reflecting on how well we have fulfilled these responsibilities and then to recommit ourselves in an ever more fervent way. In the Roman environment, we seek once again to be in touch with the vivifying Spirit of the early Church.

The spiritual nature of the pilgrimage is further experienced by celebrating Eucharist together at the four major Roman basilicas – St. John Lateran, St. Mary Major, St. Paul’s Outside the Walls and St. Peter’s. We gather also at the tomb of Blessed John Paul II who so courageously led the Church in Peter’s shoes for twenty-six years, planting and strengthening the faith throughout the world in our times.

Equally important in the visit to Rome is the opportunity to be with the Successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI. Extending the role entrusted by Jesus to Peter – Pope Benedict serves as the rock on which Jesus builds his Church. In that capacity he is the source of unity for believers and exercises his role of “strengthening his brothers” as they serve the local churches throughout the world. For these reasons it is always inspiring to spend time with the Holy Father and to benefit from his encouragement.

Associated with meeting the Pope is submitting to him the “Quinquennial Report” or the five year report. This documents activity in the diocesan church over five years under twenty-two categories.

In my commentary which was a part of the report, I expressed great gratitude to God for the blessings the Church of Des Moines has experienced in these years. The total numbers of Catholics in the diocese have increased substantially over the past decade in large part because of the significant influx of Hispanic sisters and brothers who have so richly enhanced our community.

One statistic that caught my attention is the percentage of registered diocesan Catholics who attend Mass weekly. It has remained steady at 40 to 41%. Because of our Eucharistic identity our goal obviously is 100%. In the face of increased numbers of the unchurched and diminished weekly participation of Catholics elsewhere as well as other denominations, our stable participation signals hope and reflects the basic values of the heartland.

The diocesan core ministries also reflect sustained commitment to the faith. Catholic school enrollments have increased by 300-400 pupils. Catholic Charities is expanding its ministries communicating compassion and the face of Christ in tough economic times. Our Catholic hospitals extend healing of bodies and souls to millions in our diocesan borders every year. All of these ministries embed the Gospel values at the core of our identity.

The number of active priests has remained essentially stable with the well-founded hope of increasing the priesthood corps based on our growing vocation program. Additional permanent deacons have been an enriched blessing along with the growing groups of lay ministers who serve our community of faith with such dedication.

The report to the Pope also points out three significant events that have occurred recently.

- The changeover of bishops from Bishop Charron to Bishop Pates
- Celebration of the 30th anniversary of the 1979 historic visit of Pope John Paul II to Des Moines. The then Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, underlined the Pope's message of the centrality of agriculture in God's plan of creation and as experienced in our 23 counties of Southwest Iowa.
- In 2011 we commemorated our diocesan centennial. With the focus on Evangelization, the spotlight included appreciation for the brave forbears of our diocesan community especially the religious women and priests; recognition of the vital spirit of our own day; commitment to embrace the future always realizing the mission entrusted to the Church of all ages – making Jesus Christ known and loved by living out the Gospel at every moment.

The final section of the report was to identify priorities of the Church as we embrace the future. The priorities are those of the recent past which retain great relevance and need to be firmly implanted. They are:

- An overall conscious commitment to evangelization both within the interior life of the Church as well as serving as a leaven in our secular society;
- Continuing emphasis on building a culture of religious vocations and recruitment of priests, sisters, brothers and permanent deacons;
- Christian marriage – continuing to enrich and emphasize marriage preparation as well as supporting current marriages and family life.

- Welcoming and providing service and assistance to our recently arrived Hispanic sisters and brothers and integrating them into our diocesan and parish life.
- Establishing ministries that address the needs of our youth and young adults especially through evangelization, catechesis and opportunities for service as well as promoting social gatherings.

Given the blessings of the recent past and the enthusiastic life of faith in our diocesan community it is with well-founded optimism that we communicate to the Pope that we enter into the future confident of God's ever generous Providence.