

To the Threshold of the Apostles

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Bishop Victor Galeone Recounts His Visit With The Holy Father

Every five years, all Catholic bishops are expected to meet with the Holy Father in a visit that is identified from its Latin title, *Ad Limina Apostolorum* - "To the Threshold of the Apostles (Peter and Paul). It should be noted that months before the actual visit to Rome, every bishop is expected to supply a detailed report, outlining the status of his diocese since the previous visit. For example, how many Catholics are there in the total population? How many baptisms were there, both of infants and adults? Are vocations increasing? Have any new parishes been established? In addition, every diocesan entity has to give a detailed report of its ministry. I am most grateful to our Chancellor, Father Keith Brennan, for having coordinated the compilation of our diocesan report.

The dioceses of the United States are divided into 14 regions. The first region to be scheduled for this round of visits was Region XIV, comprised of the states of Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas. We bishops from that region gathered in Rome the week of March 28th.

We began our *Ad Limina* on Monday by concelebrating Mass at the tomb of the apostle Peter in the crypt of St. Peter's Basilica. What fond memories that Mass evoked for me from my seminary days spent in Rome! While praying quietly after Communion, I recalled the promise that Jesus had made to Simon Peter at Caesarea Philippi: "You are Peter - the Rock - "and on this rock I will build my Church, and the power of death will never overcome it..." (Mt. 16:18) According to the early Church Fathers, Peter was the first one to bring the faith to Rome. And it was there that he was crucified head-down in the circus of Nero, located at the foot of the Vatican hill. In a word, he was the first bishop of Rome - "the first pope. And here we were, almost 2,000 years later, visiting the present bishop of Rome - "the 264th successor of Simon the fisherman.

Wednesday was a rainy day in Rome. But the rain could not dampen our spirits as we made our way late that afternoon to the Basilica of St. Paul's on the Ostian Way. There, we concelebrated Mass at the tomb of St. Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, whose name is always associated with that of St. Peter in the founding of the Church in Rome.

The second segment of our *Ad Limina* visit consisted of a series of meetings between the bishops and members of the Roman Curia. During the course of the week, we met with the Cardinal director or his secretary of the following congregations: Clergy, Bishops, Doctrine of the Faith, Catholic Education, Divine Worship, and the Secretary of State. For the most part, we had candid discussions with the directors of the congregations about matters that were both timely and of concern.

The third and final segment of our *Ad Limina* visit was our meeting with the Holy Father. Throughout the week, the bishops met individually with him for about ten minutes. During my visit with him, the Holy Father asked about the status of vocations in our diocese, both to the priesthood and to the religious life. We also discussed issues dealing with family life and the challenges posed by the large number of Mexican immigrants and how to minister to them properly.

I would like to underscore two points of my visit with the Holy Father. First, for the most part, he kept his eyes fixed on me the entire time, making me feel like the most important person in the world. And second, even though his Parkinson's condition had slurred his speech, he was still very alert and most interested in what I had to say.

On Friday, all the bishops of Region XIV concluded our *Ad Limina* at a special audience with the Holy Father. First he read a portion from a prepared text. Then he bid us farewell individually, giving each of us a pectoral cross as a parting gift.

I would like to conclude with an anecdote. Most of the bishops of our group were lodged inside Vatican City at the residence of Casa Santa Marta. Whenever leaving on foot to attend one of the Curia meetings, we had to walk past the Swiss guards standing at attention at the entrance of the Vatican next to the Basilica of St. Peter's. As the guards noted our episcopal robes or pectoral crosses, they would click their heels, and give us a military salute. There would often be tourists watching and snapping pictures of this rather impressive display. After several days of this, I thought, "This is heady stuff. If a man's not careful, he could mistakenly develop a sense of self-importance, which would be tragic." Obviously, the guards were honoring not us - "the individual bishops - " but rather the office we held. So we must never lose sight of what Jesus had to bring to the apostles' attention in Mark 10:42-44. Those who wish to lead in his kingdom must serve the rest; and whoever wishes to be the first, must become the servant of all. Please pray that we bishops never forget that most important lesson of servant-leadership.

I'm writing this report on my return flight to the States. It's the ideal way to relive the highlights of my first *Ad Limina*, especially the beautiful experience of meeting with Simon Peter in the person of John Paul II, who is still fulfilling the command that the Lord gave Peter to "strengthen the brethren." (Lk. 22:32)

Excerpts from The Holy Father's Report to the American Bishops

The following are excerpts from the Holy Father in his report to the Bishops of Region XIV, including those from dioceses in Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas, who made their *Ad Limina* visits to Rome the week of March 28, 2004.

"Our meetings are taking place at a difficult time in the history of the Church in the United States. Many of you have already spoken to me of the pain caused by the sexual abuse scandal of the past two years and the urgent need for rebuilding confidence and promoting healing between Bishops, priests and the laity in your country. I am confident that the willingness which you have shown in acknowledging and addressing past mistakes and failures, while at the same time seeking to learn from them, will contribute greatly to this work of reconciliation and renewal."

"The history of the Church demonstrates that there can be no effective reform without interior renewal. This is true not only of individuals, but also of every group and institution of the Church...The renewal of the Church is thus closely linked to the renewal of the episcopal office. Since the Bishop is called in a unique way to be an alter Christ us (another Christ), a vicar of Christ in and for his local Church, he must be the first to conform his life to Christ in holiness and constant conversion."

"I wish to reaffirm my confidence in the Church in America, my appreciation of the deep faith of America's Catholics and my gratitude for their many contributions to American society and to the life of the Church throughout the world. Viewed with the eyes of faith, the present moment of difficulty is also a moment of hope, that hope which does not disappoint (Rom 5:5), because it is rooted in the Holy Spirit, who constantly raises up new energies, callings and missions within the Body of Christ."

"...The exercise of this prophetic witness (the episcopal office) in contemporary American society has, as many of you have pointed out, been made increasingly difficult by the aftermath of the recent scandal and the outspoken hostility to the Gospel in certain sectors of public opinion, yet it cannot be evaded or delegated to others. Precisely because American society is confronted by a disturbing loss of the sense of the transcendent and the affirmation of a culture of the material and the ephemeral, it desperately needs such a witness of hope. It is in hope that we have been saved (cf. Rom 8:24); the Gospel of hope enables us to discern the consoling presence of God's Kingdom in the midst of this world and offers confidence, serenity and direction in place of that hopelessness which inevitably spawns fear, hostility and violence in the hearts of individuals and in society as a whole."

"In the coming months, I would like to engage you and your Brother Bishops in a series of reflections on

the exercise of the episcopal office in the light of the threefold munus (function) by which the Bishop, through sacramental ordination, is conformed to Jesus Christ, priest, prophet and king. It is my hope that a consistent reflection on the gift and mystery entrusted to us will contribute to the fulfillment of your ministry as heralds of the Gospel and to the renewal of the Church in the United States.”