

Mission directors leave Rome feeling efforts are working

VATICAN CITY - A pilgrimage of U.S. mission directors left Rome with a sense that their efforts are making a difference in the universal church, participants said.

Monsignor John E. Kozar, national director of the pontifical missionary societies in the United States, led about 140 diocesan directors to Rome Jan. 29-Feb. 5 for Vatican meetings, workshops on communications, and visits to Assisi and other pilgrim spots.

The goal was twofold: providing the spiritual uplift of a pilgrimage and energizing participants as missionaries by bringing them to the church's international center.

Monsignor Kozar said what struck him during their stay was that people from mission countries are now assuming leadership roles in the universal church. Many are studying in Rome, while others are representing their countries in various roles at the Vatican, he said.

He met with about 80 missionary sisters from Africa and Asia, including China and Vietnam, and said he was "overwhelmed" by the spirit of thankfulness among them.

"These are really tomorrow's leaders in those mission countries, and we're helping to make that possible," he said.

The pontifical missionary societies unite four church agencies involved in mission education and fundraising activities. Their role is to animate and educate people about missionary efforts, ask people to pray for the missions and encourage cooperation, including financial support.

This year, the U.S. societies are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the United States no longer being considered "mission territory." For the last 100 years, Monsignor Kozar said, U.S. Catholics have been giving back to the universal church.

Are U.S. contributions appreciated in Rome?

Yes, Monsignor Kozar said. He got confirmation of that in a brief meeting with Pope Benedict XVI.

“The Holy Father personally expressed to me his very warm thanks and appreciation and love to all of us as his collaborators, and spoke highly of the generosity of the people of the United States,” he said.

Monsignor Kozar said similar appreciation was expressed in meetings with the pontifical missionary societies’ international secretariat in Rome, which operates under the direction of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

In some ways, however, the church in the United States is today on the receiving end from mission countries, Monsignor Kozar said.

“We now have thousands of missionaries in the United States from these same countries that we were able to help in the last 100 years, and are relying more and more on them,” he said.

“So Pentecost continues, that’s the way we say it,” he said.

Father Robert Sharman, a diocesan missionary director in Harrisburg, Pa., said missionary awareness should begin at a young age, but it’s harder to make that happen today.

Young people respond best when there’s a personal connection, but the days when pennies in a milk carton would go to ransom a “pagan baby” are over, Father Sharman said. And with fewer nuns and priests teaching – many of them had personal links to missionaries – there is less emphasis in schools on supporting the missions.

Yet children can be motivated to support the missions, and making it happen depends a lot on local priests, Father Sharman said. He said he had no doubt that preaching about missions can still resonate with youths: Last year, about 210 young people in his parish gave \$1,800 to the mission collection.

“There’s no one with a more generous heart than a kid who knows his sacrifice will help another kid,” Father Sharman said.