

Thoughts on our Church: Lessons from the consistory

By Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien

Editor's note: Cardinal O'Brien gave the following homily at the consistory pilgrimage farewell Mass at the Pontifical North American College Feb. 20 in Rome.

There are two reasons why I think it is fitting to conclude this Consistory pilgrimage here at the Pontifical North American College.

First, for us Baltimoreans, there has from the very beginning been a close tie between our Premier See and this College.

In 1855, Pope Pius IX communicated to the American bishops, through Archbishop (Francis P.) Kenrick of Baltimore, his desire to found a seminary in Rome for young American men, to deepen their appreciation of the universality of the Church and of the See of Peter. Archbishop Kenrick was very favorable to the idea but had to persuade Archbishop (John J.) Hughes of New York who was originally opposed. Later that year the eight Provincial Council of Baltimore decided to pursue the project and voted to send a delegation to Rome to proceed. (Incidentally, the seven dioceses represented on the Council voted to contribute \$25 to \$50 each to pay for the expedition, led by Archbishop Kenrick!)

The College opened in 1859 in the center of the city and was granted full pontifical status 25 years later. At the Third Council of Baltimore in 1884, Cardinal Gibbons, in the name of all the bishops of our nation, thanked Pope Leo XIII for this official recognition and pledged to send the College "seminarians of good health and superior talents so that when they returned after ordination they might be safely entrusted with major diocesan assignments."

Our Archdiocese has benefitted many dozens of times over from the College's solid priestly formation and we are happily represented by four young men studying here at present.

The second reason why it is fitting for us to conclude our consistorial pilgrimage here at the Seminary which, from its very beginnings has been dedicated to our Lady's Immaculate Conception, is a bit more profound, and might serve as the spiritual centerpiece for all we've seen, heard and done during our very brief time in the Eternal City.

We have seen here the splendor of our Church in all its richness - its architecture, its liturgies, its pomp, with Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulcher and hierarchy at every level and faithful from all over the world united in joy and enthusiasm.

All of these valid and inspiring externals of the Church are meant to impress upon us Christ's gift to us, of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Rome with Benedict XVI its shepherd in the chair of St. Peter.

If I might indulge in some recent theological insight, we have been experiencing, particularly in Benedict's role, the Petrine principle of the Church's identity, summarized in Christ's charge to the first pope: "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not overcome it. And I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

No doubt, the well-founded power and authority entrusted by Christ to Peter and his successors to guide the Church through the ages, is the Petrine principle.

And there is a complimentary principle to the Petrine principle, and that is the Marian principle, emphasizing Mary's special role in and example for the Church in every age.

In his homily to the cardinals in his very first consistory in 2006, Pope Benedict stressed this Marian principle in the Church through the ages. The Petrine principle of the Church which we celebrate in a consistory offers serious insistence and great

reassurance to the College of Cardinals as the eminent Senate of St. Peter.

But, Pope Benedict said, there is a more fundamental, Marian principle, stressing the example for us in Mary's acceptance of the divine world: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me in accordance with your word."

"Everything in the Church," the pope said, "every institution and ministry, including that of Peter and his successors, is included under the Virgin's mantle, within the grace-filled horizon of her 'yes' to God's will."

In the Gospel just heard we see the Apostles, the one-sided Petrine element, as they argue over power – the power to drive out the evil spirit possessing a young boy. They fail, embarrassingly so. And Jesus reminds them: "This kind can only come out through prayer." The Marian principle of prayer trumps the Petrine principle of power.

Our first reading from the Letter of St. James warns the early Church against bitter jealousy and selfish ambition – rarely absent from the Petrine Church – and exhorts them to show good works by a life of humility and wisdom. The Marian principle of humility over ecclesial rank and ambition.

Is this not exactly the Pope's warning to me and all the new cardinals in Saturday's consistory homily? He said: "Dominion and service, egoism and altruism, possession and gift, self-interest and great witnesses: these contrasting approaches confront each other in every age and place. There is no doubt about the faith chosen by Jesus. He does not merely indicate it in words to the disciples of then and of today, but he lives it in his own flesh."

The Pope concludes: "For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for the ransom of many."

That, my dear friends, is what this whole wonderful weekend has been about – things visible – yes heavenly beauty, God-given power, heraldry and hierarchy. All part of God's plan in founding His Church on Peter.

But without deep prayer, prompting loving and self-sacrificing service, humility and obedience to the Word of God, Mary's gift is missing – and to us the radical core of

our faith.

As tomorrow we all go our separate ways, may we do so in gratitude for our Catholic faith built on the rock of Peter and in resolve to deepen our love for Mary, Mother of our Church ever in prayer.

(This column has been corrected due to a transcription error.)