

Thoughts on Our Church| Pope's words should inspire us all

By Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien

Canon law requires each Catholic bishop to make a pilgrimage (or ad limina visit) to Rome every five years to report on the state of his diocese and, while there, to “venerate the tombs of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul and to present himself to the Roman Pontiff.”

Joined by Bishops Mitchell Rozanski and Denis Madden, I was pleased to present to Pope Benedict XVI our Quinquennial Report (so named for the expanse of time it covers) and to update him on the overall health and future direction of the Catholic Church in Baltimore. The Holy Father evidenced great interest.

Our report, 200 pages in length, covers just about every aspect of Church life - from evangelization and education to demographics and media. I am most grateful to our chancellor, Dr. Diane Barr, and our whole staff for such excellent work. We received a warm and favorable reception and the Pope's representatives were most complimentary of our responses and of our local Church, as a whole.

A highlight of our visit was the opportunity to spend time with the Holy Father, the bishops of the other dioceses of our Metropolitan See (Arlington, Richmond, Wheeling-Charleston and Wilmington) and our four seminarians studying in Rome.

Though the purpose of the ad limina is primarily to renew our love and devotion to the Church founded on the Apostles, it also provides an opportunity for the Pope to share with each of us his pastoral vision for our Church.

That vision was articulated toward the end of our pilgrimage, last Thursday. The Holy Father's words were bold, encouraging and right “on the mark”! The moment served as the pinnacle of the week's activities.

Recognizing the many threats to the Church's active involvement in American public life and affirming our efforts to promote the cause for full and genuine religious freedom in an increasingly secularized society, the Pope warned against those who:

- ?deny basic ethical principles derived from nature and nature's God;
- ?on the basis of extreme individualism promote notions of freedom detached from moral truth;
- ?in the name of separation of Church and State demand the Church remain silent in our nation's discussion of the values which will shape our future;
- ?would reduce religious freedom to the simple right to worship and deny conscience rights, requiring cooperation in intrinsically evil practices.

Finally, is not a subtle, seductive voice of sinful compromise at work in public officials who fail to offer public witness to their faith, especially with regard to the great moral issues of our time: respect for God's gift of life, the protection of human dignity and the promotion of authentic human rights?

The Pope's statement would prove providential as less than 24 hours later President Obama's administration would issue a draconian decision demanding that sterilization, abortifacients and contraception be included in virtually all healthcare plans (see article on Page A10). Calling the decision unconscionable, Cardinal-designate Timothy Dolan, President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said it will "Force American citizens to choose between violating their consciences and forgoing their healthcare."

As our own state and federal officials convene to consider legislation affecting the sacredness of matrimony and the dignity of all human life we can only hope and pray that the Pope's words will be heard and heeded.

Nor should we be intimidated in speaking out, clearly and forcefully, as the Pope said:

"The Church's witness ... is of its nature public: she seeks to convince by proposing rational arguments in the public square. The legitimate separation of Church and State cannot be taken to mean that the Church must be silent on certain issues, nor that the State may choose not to engage, or be engaged by, the voices of committed believers in determining the values which will shape the future of the nation."