Vatican



Pope Francis meets with bishops from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Alaska during their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican Feb. 3, 2020. The bishops were making their "ad limina" visits to report on the status of their dioceses. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by Catholic News Service

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Vatican City — February 3, 2020

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Bishops from the northwestern United States spent more than two and half hours with Pope Francis and came away talking about his small gestures and, especially, his understanding and encouragement.

Sixteen bishops — including auxiliaries and retired bishops — from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Alaska met Francis Feb. 3 at the beginning of their weeklong "ad limina" visit to the Vatican.

Three spoke to Catholic News Service afterward but declined to give specifics about the topics covered out of respect for the pope, they said.

Archbishop Alexander K. Sample of Portland told CNS that even though he had heard from other bishops about Francis' unique style for the "ad limina" visits and his desire for a free, open discussion, "I never imagined it, just the fraternity that was in the room. It was remarkable."

The pope started things off, he said, by telling them "to not hold anything back" because they, as brother bishops, needed "to be able to talk to each other like this" and have "a very open and honest exchange with one another."

The atmosphere and conversation were so friendly and comfortable, he said, that "after a while, I almost had to stop and remind myself, we're talking to the pope."

The pope spoke "from the heart," saying things that he obviously had reflected on deeply and had come "from a place of deep prayer," Sample said. "It will be truly something I will remember forever."

The archbishop said he felt the way the pope led their conversation mirrored the way the pope would like bishops to be with their priests.

Asked what issue was important for him to talk about with the pope, Sample said the Pacific Northwest is "very, very secular," many people are not raised in any religious tradition and "God and religious values are not highly respected, quite honestly."

"It's sort of a hotbed, if you will, of relativism, where there's no sense of any kind of objective realities of truth or objective moral norms," he said. While that presents a challenge, he said, it also indicates "a tremendous opportunity" in that people may lack any preconceived notions, prejudices or "baggage" and are more open to

receiving the Gospel.

While not detailing what the pope said, the archbishop indicated the pope's approach to them at the meeting provided important guidance by showing them what "that beautiful imagery of accompaniment, engagement and encounter" looked and felt like.

Francis set a "good example for pastoral leadership" with their morning meeting, he said.

Sample said he also felt there was a teaching moment when the pope reached over for a glass of water. The archbishop thought the pope was thirsty, but instead he handed to water to his translator.

"Even in the midst of this very intense and engaged conversation, the Holy Father had time to notice someone's thirst," the archbishop said. "It was a small gesture. I don't know if anybody even else noticed it, but it touched me in some way."

The only other time Archbishop Paul D. Etienne of Seattle made an "ad limina" visit to the Vatican was in 2012. Pope Benedict XVI was pope and the archbishop was bishop of Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Now "I feel like I'm carrying a lot more weight of office," the archbishop told Catholic News Service. Then, he had been a bishop barely two years and his diocese was much smaller.

But more than anything, he said, the church in the United States is "in a different place than we were 10 years ago, eight years ago."

"I think ecclesiologically, there's a greater division in the church today," he said. "And I pray regularly for unity. I pray regularly for the discernment of the Spirit to know how to be a bishop today, how to truly listen to the people and their needs, their perspective."

While not getting into specifics, he said, Francis "acknowledged the strain that the bishops in the United States are under today."

"But he encouraged us to carry that and to not lose hope. And to be courageous, be faithful, and to remain very close to the Lord and to support one another," Etienne

said.

"We can have very different opinions about things. Brothers sometimes fight, but they always, in the end, forgive each other. They still love each other," the archbishop said. One of the challenges in the church today is to remind all Catholics, "Folks, it's OK to disagree, to have different opinions about things, but in the end, we're still family. In the end, we still love each other. In the end, unity and charity are priorities. And we can do all that and be faithful to the teachings of the church at the same time."

Preparing for the "ad limina" visit, Etienne said he spent a lot of time thinking about the different needs and different perspectives of the people in his archdiocese. "And I realized that it's in the midst of that that I'm called to be a shepherd, that I'm called to be an instrument of unity in the church and an expression of God's love for all of his people."

Bishop Andrew E. Bellisario of Juneau, Alaska, who also serves as apostolic administrator of the Archdiocese of Anchorage, told CNS he felt "very heartened and supported by the Holy Father."

"It really is amazing the understanding he has of places like Anchorage and Juneau that are very, very far away from Rome," Bellisario said.

He also said he was struck by the pope's "directness and forthrightness when he talks," as well as "his vast knowledge of what is happening in the church and certainly for us in the United States."

"I didn't feel like we were talking to somebody who we had to bring up-to-date on a lot of information," he said.

Among the challenges facing Catholics living in Juneau and Anchorage is the lack of priests, especially in remote areas in his diocese where parishes are only accessible by plane or ferry.

The clerical sexual abuse crisis is also a big issue and concern. In January, the Archdiocese of Anchorage released a report by an independent commission which found credible evidence of abuse committed by 13 priests and a lay volunteer since 1966, when the archdiocese was established. The report was commissioned by Archbishop Etienne when he was head of the archdiocese.

Bellisario told CNS that confronting sexual abuse by members of the clergy is "something that very much needs to be done," and while "it's very painful," the "whole purpose is to allow people to come forth for healing."

The pope, he said, "is very supportive of any way that we can offer healing to people who have been hurt and who have been harmed."

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