

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners:

Last week I was in Rome for a reunion held by the seminary I attended there, the Pontifical North American College. The reunion completed a year of celebrations observing the 150th anniversary of the founding of the College. The Pontifical North American College was founded by Pope Pius IX and the bishops of the United States in 1859. By way of clarification, in Europe a “college” is often just a residence for students. Their instruction is received at a “university” and this is how it is in Rome. At the time of its establishment the “NAC” joined the ranks of a number of “national” seminaries in Rome.

The idea behind these institutions is that it is a good thing that at least some of the seminarians of a particular nation receive their training in Rome. By doing so, they will experience the truly universal nature of the Catholic Church by studying for the priesthood with seminarians from other nations. This was certainly my experience as in the classes I took there we had seminarians, as well as religious sisters and lay people, from all over the world. By studying alongside people from other places we learned that the various cultures all have something to contribute to the life of the Church. We also learned that what we often think of as being big “issues”, for example, the all male priesthood, are not issues at all among Catholics from other lands.

In addition to experiencing the truly universal character of the Catholic Church, it is hoped that by studying in Rome future priests will be instilled with a strong loyalty to the Pope. The popes, as the Vicars of Christ and successors to St. Peter, are responsible for maintaining the unity of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I like to think that my four years of study in Rome were successful in helping me to develop a strong loyalty to our popes. Indeed, during my years of study there, 1985-89, I was able to attend many Masses and audiences presided over by Pope John Paul the Great. He was such an amazing gift to the Church, that it was very easy to develop a respectful attachment to him.

About 140 priests attended the reunion. Some were ordained more than fifty years ago others were of recent vintage. The main events of the reunion were some special Masses that were offered at St. Peter's Basilica, two other historic churches in Rome and at the College itself. We also had a number of social events. Undoubtedly, the highlight of our reunion was our private audience with Pope Benedict on Saturday, January 9th. The seminarians currently studying at the North American College joined us and so our group numbered close to 400 people. The Pope was a bit late in arriving but he certainly didn't disappoint us. On the way into the meeting hall and then again on his way out, Pope Benedict shook every hand that was extended to him. Although he is not as outgoing as John Paul was, Benedict certainly seemed to enjoy the opportunity to greet each of us. The meeting actually wasn't very long but it was very inspiring. I have a photograph from the event that will help me to remember the joyful experience when my memory of it begins to fade.

In addition to the reunion events I was also blessed with the opportunity to make a holy hour each day in St. Peter's basilica. Since St. Peter's is only a ten minute walk from the College it became quite familiar to me when I was a seminarian. It was sort of like our parish church. Of course, St. Peter's is a bit different than the typical parish church. For one thing, thousands of pilgrims and tourists file through it each day. Fortunately, there is a side chapel there that is cordoned off specifically for prayer. In this chapel, which is almost as big as our church, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed in a monstrance for prayer and adoration. During the hours I spent in the chapel there was a constant stream of lay people, nuns and priests from all different races and cultures who came into pray. It made me happy to see them all and to rejoice that I have been blessed to be a member of the Lord's Catholic Church.

So, all in all, my seminary reunion was great and a wonderful way to begin the new year. Still, it's good to be back home and to have the privilege of celebrating our Faith with you.

With my prayers,

Fr. Conley