

## BISHOP PAUL'S VISIT TO ROME

I would like to share some news of my recent visit to Rome. In company with the other Australian bishops, I was there for what is called a *Visit Ad Limina Apostolorum*. This is a pilgrimage that bishops from each country make to Rome to visit the tombs of the apostles Peter and Paul and to meet with the Pope and those who assist the Pope in his care for the Church throughout the world.

There were thirty-eight bishops altogether in our group. Most of us stayed at Domus Australia, a small hotel that has been set up particularly for Australian pilgrims to Rome. Those bishops who could not be accommodated at Domus Australia stayed at a hotel nearby.

The *Ad Limina* program began on the morning of Monday, June 24. After an early breakfast, we left Domus Australia in small buses at 6.30 am to travel through the Roman traffic to St Peter's Basilica. There we were guided to an area for vesting before processing down to the crypt to celebrate Mass near the tomb of St Peter, which is directly underneath the main altar of the basilica. Bishops are ordained to be successors of the apostles and I found it a moving experience to concelebrate Mass with the bishops of Australia at the tomb of St Peter, called by Christ from his fishing nets to be a leader among the apostles.



*Australian Bishops with Pope Francis*

After the Mass, we were free to wander around St Peter's Basilica for an hour or so before gathering at the bronze door that leads to the apostolic palace where we were to meet with Pope Francis. We passed by numerous Swiss guards and through a number of formal rooms. At 10.30 we were invited to move into the room where the Pope was waiting to greet us.

Pope Francis welcomed each bishop individually. We then sat in an oval-shaped arrangement of chairs. The Pope said a few words of welcome in English. After that, he spoke in Italian, the Australian bishops spoke in English, with a priest from South Africa translating. I was sitting just a few metres from the Pope. It was an absorbing conversation that lasted two and a half hours.



*Pope Francis greets Bishop Paul*

The first question was about the roles of lay people, priests and bishops in the Church community. Pope Francis has spoken often of the value of all the members of the community walking together, with each one contributing their own gifts. In this regard, we spoke about the Plenary Council that is planned for Australia in 2020 and the meetings we have had already in preparation for this Council. There have been gatherings in parishes all around the country, reflecting on the question, "What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?" Already 220,000 people have shared their views in writing, either individually or as members of groups. Pope Francis encouraged us to continue this sharing of our faith.

I was the second of the bishops to make a comment. I referred to a photo I had seen of Pope Francis from a general audience a few days beforehand. The photo showed Pope Francis reaching out to a child in the crowd and the child reaching out to the Pope. I thanked Pope Francis for the example he has given of reaching out to people, including children. I said that in my diocese of Ballarat, sadly, we have had a bitter history of abuse of children, but we have been doing what we can to care for those who have suffered abuse and also to keep

children safe today. I asked the Pope to pray with us for all those who have suffered – those who have suffered abuse directly, and those who have suffered indirectly – their families and in fact the whole community.

In responding, Pope Francis spoke about his reaching out to the child in the crowd. He said that he tries to reach out particularly to children and the elderly because these two groups are often overlooked. When he spoke about child abuse, Pope Francis seemed very sad. He referred to the meeting that he had called in February of presidents of bishops' conferences from around the world. Through that meeting he wanted to highlight the need to care for children. This is a serious duty in the Church and in every society around the world.

In our long conversation with Pope Francis, we covered many topics.

For example, bishops from the north of Australia raised the issue of the special needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. They spoke of the efforts being made to provide education and health care but they noted that much still needs to be done.

Some of the bishops look after Eastern Rite Catholics in Australia. These have close links with Eastern Rite Catholic communities in the Middle East. These bishops highlighted the fact that many people in the Middle East have been driven from their homes by war or persecution. The bishops said that it was an encouragement to these people when the Pope spoke publicly about their situation and when he urged the international community to help them in their time of suffering.

Some bishops noted the growing number of people in Australia who refer to themselves as having no religion. Pope Francis emphasised the importance of witnessing to the Christian faith by the way we live, as well as by the words we say. He said that if we truly live in a Christian way, this can prompt people to ask about Christ. Then we have an opportunity to speak with them about Christ in response to their questions.

When it does come to sharing our faith in words, Pope Francis emphasised the importance of the homily. He acknowledged that priests can sometimes be very busy. However, he said that it is important that priests (and bishops!) make it a priority to prepare their homilies well. They do this by coming to know the Scriptures and coming to know their people, so that they are able to link the message of the Scriptures with people's lives. He recommended that homilies be brief and that they include a key idea and a vivid image.

These were some of the topics we discussed as we shared with the Pope until nearly 1 pm. At that point, there were some photos of the whole group, before the meeting ended with Pope Francis saying farewell to each bishop.

As far as meetings went, the time with Pope Francis was the highlight of our visit. However, the week also included numerous interesting meetings with members of various Vatican departments. I will mention just a few.

Late on the Monday afternoon, we visited the office of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. This is a Vatican commission with a focus on promoting the protection of children around the world. One of the projects of the commission is to gather information about the steps being taken in various countries to respond to those who have suffered abuse and the steps being taken to keep children safe today. The commission is collecting this information and will share it with people around the world to help people in all countries improve their care for children. The members of the commission acknowledged the steps that have been taken in Australia over many years. They said that what has been done in Australia could give a lead to other countries.



*Pope Francis presents Bishop Paul with mementos at the end of the visit*

One of the departments I visited the next day was the Pontifical Council for Culture. This is a council that seeks to promote links between the message of Christ and the many aspects of human culture, such as art, music, sport, and, today, social media.

Another department has the task of “promoting integral human development”. This includes a wide range of areas – education about principles of social justice, assistance to migrants and refugees, care for the environment, help for people suffering because of war or natural disasters.

The meetings with Vatican departments highlighted for me the breadth of issues that the Church is engaged in around the world.

The other key element of our week was the celebration of Mass in the main Roman churches – at the tomb of St Paul in the basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, in the basilica of Saint Mary Major (built in the fifth century, soon after the Council of Ephesus declared Mary to be “Mother of God”), and the basilica of St John Lateran, which is the Pope’s cathedral.

The week came to a fine conclusion with another visit to St Peter’s on the morning of Saturday, June 29, when we were able to concelebrate with Pope Francis for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul. At that Mass, as on many occasions throughout the week, I offered a prayer for all the people of our diocese of Ballarat.

Now that I am back home, I offer a prayer of thanks for the blessings of my time to Rome. As I travel around the diocese, I hope that I will be able to share something of the encouragement that I found in those days.

*Bishop Paul Bird CSsR*