

An encounter with Pope Francis



The Bishop Speaks

In late June I undertook my first *visit ad limina apostolorum* normally referred to more simply as an *Ad limina* visit, which all Bishops make to Rome to visit the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul and to meet with the Holy Father the Pope. The visit also includes meetings with the leadership and senior staff of the various ‘dicasteries’ which are offices that assist the Pope in governing the Universal Church in their various areas of responsibility.

Bishops traditionally made these visits every five years but in recent decades the visits have become spaced further apart with the last visit by the Bishops of Australia taking place in late 2011, just a few months before I became bishop of Armidale.

The highlight of the visit was the morning we celebrated Mass at the Tomb of Saint Peter in the crypt of the impressive Saint Peter’s Basilica before meeting with the Successor of Saint Peter, Pope Francis. I, with all the other Australian Bishops rose very early that morning for a quick breakfast and time to change into our formal episcopal attire, as protocol still dictates formal attire when meeting with the Pope. We travelled to Saint Peter’s in buses to arrive at 6.30 am for our 7.00 am Mass which we all concelebrated with Archbishop Coleridge our principal celebrant and homilist.

After Mass we gathered in a tight group around Saint Peter’s tomb, known as ‘the confession’ and together made our profession, or confession, of faith by reciting the Apostles Creed together. This was a very poignant moment and even an emotional experience for me.

After Mass there was a little spare time before our audience and meeting with the Pope. A number of us gathered at a small café just outside Saint Peter’s Square for a good Italian coffee. We were served by the friendliest Filipinos who seemed to own and

manage the café. In our colourful robes we attracted quite a bit of attention from the passers’ by!

Seeing and photographing one of the colourful Swiss Guards is a must for every pilgrim and tourist visiting Rome. As we were being ushered through the Vatican Buildings and courtyards to meet the Pope, we were lucky enough to come across a whole troop of Swiss Guards on their way to a changing of the Guard. They may have been less in number than one sees at Buckingham Palace, but I must say they were far more impressive in their uniforms designed by Michelangelo.

Entering the audience room for our meeting we each had the opportunity to meet and greet Pope Francis personally, as we also did at the end of the meeting when he gave each of us a gift – a medallion and some rosary beads. I was able to assure him that the people of Armidale hold him in our prayers.

The word that best describes our more than two-hour meeting with Pope Francis is that it was an ‘encounter’. We encountered him and he encountered us! After some initial words in English he switched to Italian and was aided by a very skilled and relaxed interpreter. The conversation was free-flowing and he was happy to answer any and all of our questions and to discuss whatever issues we might raise.

The things we discussed together included the Church’s work to eliminate child sexual abuse and to accompany survivors; ministry to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; the forthcoming Plenary Council; the Sacrament of Confession; the participation of the lay faithful in the mission and governance of the Church; the importance of the Bishop’s relationship with his priests; and the need to find new ways of witnessing to Jesus Christ in a country deeply influenced by secularism and sometimes even hostility to the Church.

Front Cover: Bishop Kennedy meets Pope Francis in Rome

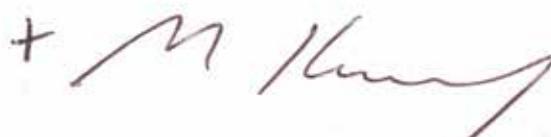


I had the sense that the Pope was well-aware of and understood our situation in Australia and that we are not alone in the difficulties we face. Throughout the conversation - or encounter – which was often serious, we also shared some mutual humour and some laughs. It was an encounter of joy, fraternity, shared responsibility, and encouragement. I left the meeting having had a tangible experience of the Successor of Saint Peter strengthening and encouraging the Bishops as successors of the Apostles.

I felt that the Ad limina visit also helped the Australian Bishops to grow in our communion with each other as individuals and as a group. This was greatly helped by a five-day silent retreat we made at the beginning of the visit. We spent our days together in prayer and reflection, breaking the silence only around the dinner table in the evening. It is a reminder that true and deep communion between people of faith is based on our shared experience of faith and our

relationship with God – not on conversation and chit chat, though these things certainly help too.

As much as I enjoyed my time with Pope Francis and my brother Bishops, I am very glad to be back home among the Priests and the faithful of the Diocese of Armidale.

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Bishop of Armidale