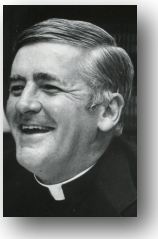
Reflections

by the

Most Reverend Thomas J. Murphy



The Memories Are Still Fresh

A year goes by far too quickly. This reality hit home for me as I thought of this time a year ago when I was preparing to go to Rome for my first experience of what is called an "ad limina" visit with the Holy Father. Every five years, a bishop is invited to Rome to share with the Pope the conditions and status of his diocese. For over 100 American bishops, this visit last year was combined with a month-long theological consultation.

The memory of last year came back to me for two reasons. At the end of June, I was asked to accompany the President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop James Malone, to Rome and to share some thoughts with the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. While in Rome for a week, I attended the Wednesday morning General Audience with the Holy Father in St. Peter's Square.

Bishops have the privilege on such occasions of sitting in the front row, and, at the end of the Audience, to join the Holy Father in extending a blessing to all present. Afterwards, the Holy Father greets each of the Bishops present and speaks with them for a few minutes. Since there were only ten bishops at the Audience, the Holy Father seemed to take more time. He asked each of us who we were, and with a remarkable ability to recall the past, the Holy Father would share some personal words. He mentioned to me that he remembered the "ad limina" visit of last year and asked me to extend his blessing to the people of Eastern Montana.

Being present at a General Audience in St. Peter’s Square is an unforgettable experience. Thousands of people are present from throughout the world. The Holy Father speaks a message in five major languages and when various groups are introduced, he relates a personal message to them. At the heart of each General Audience is an address where the Holy Father shares his insights and teaching with those present and the whole Church. In the June 27th Audience, the Holy Father stressed the dignity of Christian marriage and the challenge offered to people today to live out the Gospel demands of family life.

Yet, the powerful message offered at such Audiences with the Holy Father is the greater awareness of the universal mission and nature of the Church. As I say so often, no parish or diocese has the luxury of isolating itself from its relationship to the Church universal with its teaching, laws and guidelines. As bishop or priests, we cannot think only in terms of “my” diocese or “my” parish. Neither can parishioners think of the priests and religious who serve them only in terms of their own parish.

The memories of last year’s “ad limina” visit were also recalled when I received a booklet this past week containing the nine addresses which Pope John Paul II shared with the Bishops from the United States. Before going to Rome, the Bishops had been asked by the Pope to suggest topics for reflection. With clarity and vigor, the Holy Father spoke on priesthood and the Eucharist, marriage and family life, the charism and ministry of religious, the value of Catholic education, and the ministry of Bishops, as well as religious formation and liturgy. This compilation of addresses is well worth reading and discussion. (Available from USCC, 1312 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005).

Continued on next page

The Memories Are Still Fresh

In reviewing again what the Holy Father shared with the Bishops of the United States, I realized again how well Pope John Paul II fulfills his ministry as proclaimer of the Word. He challenges all members of the Church to be faithful to the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. We cannot afford to be congregational in our understanding of the Church, nor are we allowed to take a "pot-luck" approach to the Church of choosing what we like or what is convenient.

A visit to Rome is always a great experience. It brings back memories, and it always offers new challenges.