



## A Visit to the Pope

At the dawn of the Church's history even the Apostle to the Gentiles felt the need to render to Peter an account of his labors. In his letter to the Galatians St. Paul says that he "went to Jerusalem to consult with Cephas and remained with him for fourteen days". Fourteen years later, he returned to seek Peter's scrutiny again, to assure himself that the course he had been pursuing "was not in vain." In these ancient apostolic encounters we can see the first traces of bishops' ad limina visits to the Pope.

Since last fall American bishops have been travelling to Rome to do as St. Paul did. Monday, 3 February, will be the turn of the bishops of the Northwest. The last time we went, in 2012, it was to see Pope Benedict. This will be our first meeting with Pope Francis.

There is one name – Peter – and one place – Rome – that call Catholic unity to mind. At every Mass the priest speaks the name of the pope in prayer and then the name of the diocesan bishop; the two always go together. Wherever in the world Catholics gather for the Breaking of the Bread, Peter's successor holds a privileged place at the heart of our worship.

From very early on Christians made pilgrimages to Rome to pray at the "thresholds" of the Apostles (the tombs of Peter and Paul). By the 4th century bishops were adopting the practice more formally for themselves, as did the bishops of Sicily well before 600 with visits to Rome every three years. By 1200 it was understood

that the oath a bishop took at his consecration committed him to making the visit annually. In 1585 Pope Sixtus V regularized the ancient custom with three norms that are still in effect today: every five years bishops come to venerate the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul, visit the pope, and submit a report on the state of their diocese.

The Church Jesus sent His Apostles to build cannot be contained within a particular city, region, or nation; rather, it seeks to extend its reach to the ends of the earth. It is this dimension which St. Paul refers to when he speaks of Christ as "the Head of the Body, the Church," and of himself as one who had "persecuted the Church of God."

But the same Paul can just as easily shift the focus from universality to locality when he writes of "the Churches of Asia," the Churches of Galatia," "the Church of God that is at Corinth," and "the Church that meets in [the] house" of Aquila and Prisca.

Just as Christ is one and not divided, so is His Church. In its "universal" dimension, the Catholic Church is God's sacramental design for all men and women without distinction to the end of time. The "local" Church professes and lives the faith of the universal Church in a particular place under the guidance of a bishop chosen by the successor of Peter.

Bureaucratic and administrative structures cannot adequately express the underlying spiritual bonds formed by two millennia of unbroken apostolic succession. "The Lord has entrusted . . . governance to persons and not to structures," The Vatican Directory for the Ad Limina Visit tells us. "It is not structures that are responsible; only persons are responsible, in whose conscience the voice of God is reflected."

Conscientious person-to-person relationships are the point of the bishops' long journey to Rome. As pope, St. Paul VI took the opportunity of the ad limina visit "to recognize the authority of each bishop, to help him in every possible way," and "to fortify him in his sense of responsibility, so that he watches over the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made him Pastor."

That's an inviting threshold to be invited to cross.