

THE 'QUINQUENNIAL REPORT'

Keeping the Vatican in the loop

In a tradition that reaches back as far as the fourth century, Catholic dioceses around the world submit a report to the Vatican once every five to seven years. The Diocese of Erie sent its latest report to Rome this past summer.

The document, known as the "Quinquennial Report," addresses 17 different aspects of diocesan life, from Catholic education and evangelization to pastoral care of the family and Christian charity.

Chapters of the report are sent to various offices in Rome before each bishop's mandatory *ad limina* visit, which, for Erie Bishop Lawrence Persico, will be in November.

It is an opportunity for local concerns or issues to be explored at the international level.

"It's been helpful to create this report, to step back and look at what is essentially a snapshot of the Diocese of Erie," Bishop Persico says. "We've seen significant change across the board, so it will be interesting to see how in-depth we will be able to go with it in Rome."

With just seven more years left in his tenure, Bishop Persico thinks this fall's visit will likely be his last required trip to the Holy See.

Since he became bishop in 2012, the Diocese of Erie has addressed some of the most complex, difficult issues a bishop could face: a sex abuse crisis, declining numbers of priests and significant pastoral planning that has resulted in parish and school mergers and closings.

Several chapters of this year's "Quinquennial Report" deal with diocesan planning that began in 2014. That effort has resulted in school and parish restructuring, a renewed emphasis on vocations, a new approach to faith formation and considerable restructuring within administrative offices. Two other major events include the transition of leadership from Bishop Donald Trautman to Bishop Persico, and the diocese's involvement in the Pennsylvania grand jury investigation

By Anne-Marie Welsh

into sex abuse by clergy.

Yet, even during this period of transition and upheaval, the report provides a number of insights that offer hope.

"The liturgical life of the diocese is strong," the report states.

Diocesan administrative offices, as well as parishes in every corner of the 10,000-square-mile diocese, are involved in a wide variety of ministries and outreach activities.

According to the bishop: "The faith is being lived out at the parish level. People are committed to their faith and to their baptismal call as part of the Body of Christ. It hasn't always been easy for them, but the church is very much alive in northwest Pennsylvania."

The report also indicates that the diocese remains financially sound.

"We will see what the future brings, but at this moment, parish offertory and Catholic Services Appeal donations are showing only slight declines," Bishop Persico says, noting that as the population declines, donors have stepped up their generosity to help make up the difference.

In looking over the report, Bishop Persico pauses at the chapter dedicated to institutes of consecrated life.

"The religious communities in our diocese have a long tradition of planning and preparing for the future," he says. "Even though we have fewer sisters, and even though they are aging, we are fortunate that they are still involved with education, with health care and with service to the poor."

It will take the better part of a year for the American bishops to make their *ad limina* visits. The Diocese of Erie is part of Region III, comprising all the dioceses of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The Region III *ad limina* visit occurs during Thanksgiving week. In fact, Bishop Persico is scheduled to meet with Pope Francis on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 28. †

Demographic information in the 'Quinquennial Report' reveals that since 2011:

■ THE CATHOLIC POPULATION IN OUR REGION HAS DECREASED BY 10 PERCENT

■ THE OVERALL POPULATION HAS DECREASED BY 4 PERCENT

■ THE NUMBER OF PRIESTS IN OUR DIOCESE HAS DECREASED BY 27

■ THE NUMBER OF PARISHES IN THE DIOCESE HAS DECREASED FROM 117 TO 97

Celebrating the 'unbroken line' to Peter

I'm going on a pilgrimage to Rome in November, but I'm bringing you — the people of the Diocese of Erie — with me.

I realize everyone can't make such a trip, so I'm taking my prayers for you to Pope Francis and to the tombs of the apostles Peter and Paul, the pillars of the Roman Catholic Church.

For a bishop, there is nothing more profoundly unifying with the universal, historic Catholic Church than participating in this upcoming visit, formally called "*ad limina apostolorum*," which means "to the thresholds of the apostles."

Since as early as the fourth century, bishops throughout the world have traveled periodically to Rome to meet personally with the pope and pray at the tombs of Peter and Paul, both of whom were martyred in the Eternal City.

For U.S. bishops, *ad limina* occurs every five to seven years. It's a practice that extends as far back as the mid-300s, when the Synod of Sardic addressed a letter to Pope Julius explaining that it was fitting for him to be informed of the religious situation in different parts or provinces of the Roman Empire.

Popes over subsequent centuries welcomed bishops from all corners of the earth, despite the impediment of travel. It wasn't until the late 1500s that Pope Sixtus V made *ad limina* visits mandatory.

This practice and the spacing of visits have changed over the years, yet it remains a strong tradition today. The whole concept is to go on pilgrimage to Rome out of devotion to Saints Peter and Paul, and then visit the bishop of Rome, who is the pope. It's an opportunity for bishops to show their unity with the pope and apprise him of the state of their individual dioceses.



The Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico
Bishop of Erie
@BishopPersico

I already have dispatched to the Vatican our "Quinquennial Report," which you can read about on page 6. It's an overview of what has occurred in the diocese in the past seven years.

I'm looking forward to my first *ad limina* as bishop of Erie. Although I have met the pope once before, this trip will be combined with visits to the different dicasteries, or offices, of the Vatican. It's an opportunity to share local concerns on the international level.

I'll be joining the bishops of Pennsylvania and New Jersey over Thanksgiving week, with an audience with Pope Francis on Thanksgiving Day. We'll visit the papal basilicas of Rome: St. Mary Major, St. Peter, St. Paul Outside the Walls and St. John Lateran. A particularly humbling experience will be Mass in the crypt of St. Peter.

This will be an edifying experience for my priesthood, because it shows the collegiality and the unity with the bishops in communion with the Holy Father. In a sense, it's like visiting Peter.

I think it also teaches us that the Diocese of Erie is a small piece of the universal Catholic Church. It's not just my parish or my diocese, but all of us together.

In other words, my union with Peter bridges his union with the people of Erie. It's an unbroken line.

Humbly, I bring Erie to Peter and — when I return — Peter to Erie.

I would appreciate your prayers. †

Lawrence T. Persico



POPE FRANCIS REGULARLY MEETS WITH BISHOPS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD DURING AD LIMINA VISITS EVERY FIVE TO SEVEN YEARS.