



## **A Reflection on a Special Time of Retreat and Reflection for U.S. Bishops**

**January 2-8, 2019 Mundelein Seminary Chicago, IL**

While all bishops and priests are very familiar with times of spiritual retreat and reflection, and in fact look forward to such an essential part of our spiritual life every year, I don't think that any of us have ever experienced such a week as we just completed. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of this new year, at the urging of our Holy Father Pope Francis, every Bishop in the United States who was able to do so, made their way to the gorgeous, 600-acre grounds of Mundelein Seminary in the northern suburbs of Chicago. Of course there were plenty of comments about traveling to blustery and windy Chicago in the dead of winter, as well as musings about how many bishops in the southern and western parts of our country (including Hawaii and Guam---yes both of those Bishops were present) had to borrow winter coats and hats before making the trip; yet, we were blessed with an unusually moderate, and somewhat pleasant, week, weather-wise.

Much more important than the weather, of course, was the incredibly rich substance of the week, and the clear evidence that the Holy Spirit was truly at work through the inspiring instructions of the Retreat Director, Father Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M., Cap., as well as the beautiful concelebration of the daily Masses, Eucharistic Holy Hours at the end of each day, and the communal praying of the Divine Office each morning and evening. Even though the Mundelein seminarians were still on their Christmas vacation, many of the seminarians and several seminary priests and staff were present to provide assistance and to be available in any way they could help. There was an army of lay volunteers to offer cheerful guidance, and a small fleet of golf carts with drivers to assist those bishops who had some difficulty in maneuvering the somewhat large distances among the residence halls, the main chapel, and the dining room, all in separate buildings. All these volunteers were amazingly generous and could not have been more gracious.

The schedule remained the same each day: two spiritual conferences at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., as well as the Homily at the 11 a.m. daily Mass, all preached by Father Cantalamessa; Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer before each morning

conference and following the late afternoon conference; Holy Hour in the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament each evening from 7 p.m. until 8 p.m.; and three meals each day, mostly partaken of in silence. The meals were good, but simple; healthy without any desserts or alcoholic beverages served. There was not any coffee available, except in the dining room, so it was definitely an adjustment for those of us used to 8-12 cups a day. Finally our rooms were the typical seminary room: bed, desk and desk chair. No easy chair, no TV, no frills. There were opportunities provided on several of our retreat days to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. The remainder of each day was for personal prayer and reflection.

On the first evening of our retreat, the Apostolic Nuncio (who remained with us throughout the retreat) welcomed all the Bishops in the name of our Holy Father, and provided each bishop with his own personal copy of an eight-page letter Pope Francis had written to us. When he first recommended that we enter into this time of retreat, it was Pope Francis' intention to come to be with us in person, to direct the retreat himself; however, due to security issues, and too many other details to deal with, he realized that would not be possible. That is why he recommended that the Preacher of the Papal Household, Father Cantalamessa, be our retreat director. His letter, which has been released to the public, made it clear what the Holy Father's hopes were for us as we entered into this time of retreat. As he said, he sees this retreat "as a necessary step toward responding in the spirit of the Gospel to the crisis of credibility that you (Bishops) are experiencing as a Church." He went on to write: "At times of great confusion and uncertainty, we need to be attentive and discerning to free our hearts of compromises and false certainties, in order to hear what the Lord asks of us in the mission He has given us." And he concluded his letter by encouraging us: "Entering with trust into Jesus' prayer to the Father (Jn.17:11-12), we want to learn from Him and, with firm resolve, to begin this time of prayer, silence and reflection, of dialogue and communion, of listening and discernment. In this way we will allow Him to conform our hearts to His image and help us discover His will."

It was with that direction from the Holy Father in mind that Father Cantalamessa drew the theme for his eleven conferences, six homilies, and one penitential service: "*He appointed the Twelve to be with Him; and then sent them out to preach*". While I knew who Father Cantalamessa was, I had never been privileged to hear him, and certainly never had been in his company. I can say

now, after this week, that it was indeed our privilege to have him be our retreat director, and I could not help but think that we were in the presence of a truly saintly priest. He spoke God's Word with insight, conviction, and with a sense that he indeed had a deep, personal knowledge of and love for Jesus, His Word and His Church. As I mentioned earlier, Father's focus in the first half of his daily conferences was on the first half of his theme: that Jesus appointed the Twelve to be with Him. One of the titles that Bishops are privileged to bear is that we are "successors to the Apostles". Father wanted us to reflect and pray about the fact that as the Apostles' successors, we too have been appointed first of all to "be with Jesus". What does that mean? Father's emphasis on each of those conferences was helping us to think and reflect more deeply on what it means to be "in love with Jesus"---that we "stay with Him" by being one with Him, united in Him, in love with Him. And when we are one with, united in, and in love with Him, that means that we are one with, united in, and in love with Jesus' Church. Those reflections led to a deeper appreciation for the importance of regular and constant prayer, and an openness to the prompting, guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit Who continues to guide the Church. The second half of Father Cantalamessa's conferences focused on the second part of his theme: that we have been sent to preach the Good News of the Gospel to all the world; that we are to speak the Truth in Love; that we are to preach Jesus, and not ourselves.

Father Cantalamessa was inspiring, insightful, and challenging. Each of his conferences lasted the better part of an hour, and he always left me wanting to hear more. As I already stated, I had not read much of Father's writings in the past; having heard him on this retreat, I have ordered six of more than two dozen books Father has written so I can continue to be inspired and challenged by his powerful insights.

These seven days of retreat have been a great spiritual gift to me, and no doubt to every Bishop who participated. I am grateful to our Holy Father for directing us to enter into this time of prayer and reflection. The purpose of this retreat was exclusively focused on the need for each of us as Bishops, Successors to the Apostles, and Disciples of Jesus our Lord and Savior to grow in our love for Jesus and our commitment to follow Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; it was not intended to be a working session for the Bishops to develop plans, nor was it a time for the Bishops to discuss solutions to the serious concerns that our beloved Church is currently experiencing. However, it is my conviction as we begin this new year that the fruits of this special retreat have

better prepared me, and all of our Bishops, to respond to the Holy Spirit's guidance to help change our hearts, guide our thoughts, and inform our decisions so that we are more spiritually prepared to find the solutions and develop plans in the near future that will help us resolve the crisis of trust that our people have in their Bishops, to root out the evil of sexual abuse of minors or vulnerable adults, and to continue to help all abuse survivors to heal and to find peace. With God's grace, we can enter into what our Holy Father calls "a new ecclesial season" in which we bishops can discern God's will, and collaborate with others in that same discernment process so that, again as Pope Francis put it, we can "combat the 'culture of abuse' and deal with the crisis of credibility."

Thank you to the members of the clergy and lay faithful of the Diocese of Kalamazoo for your prayers for me and for all the Bishops during these days of retreat. I ask that we all continue to pray for, and with, one another, asking the Holy Spirit to bring healing within the Church and encourage us all to a new spirit of unity, trust and collaboration in following God's Holy Will.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Bishop Paul J. Bradley