

Welcome, Holy Father!

The Knights of Columbus will be at the forefront in greeting Pope Benedict XVI to the United States

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As regular readers of this column know, we are in the midst of a systematic presentation of the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. But like a television announcer who intones, "We interrupt our regular broadcasts for an important message," I find myself interrupting the flow of my columns so that I can add my voice to yours in welcoming our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, to the United States.

Just before Christmas, I accompanied our supreme knight on a visit to the Vatican, where we had the privilege of meeting with Pope Benedict. The Holy Father greeted us warmly, spoke English fluently, and with natural ease demonstrated his great familiarity with the spirit, character and work of the Knights of Columbus throughout the world. He thanked us for what he called "the great army" of loyal Knights.

The supreme knight and I also had the privilege of discussing with the Holy Father his upcoming visit to the United States. We expected to spend only a few minutes with him but ended up visiting for almost 20 minutes. He was genuinely interested in what we had to say. Here is a man of great brilliance who listens with the love of a gentle shepherd.

A BLESSING FOR THE CHURCH

People are generally aware that Pope Benedict has spent much of his life studying and teaching the faith of the Church. He has written more than 50 books and numerous articles, and he has delivered countless addresses. His writings are learned, thorough and sometimes lighthearted, but also accessible to most readers. Above all, they speak of someone who knows Jesus Christ not only in a scholarly way but also in the depths of his soul. Once again, the Holy Spirit has blessed the Church with an extraordinary pontiff.

From April 15-20, the United States will welcome an individual who, by every measure, is enormously accomplished and who possesses an abundance of admirable human traits and virtues, including the personal courage to be a commanding voice of faith and reason in the world today. But we are welcoming more than a great man. We are welcoming the vicar of Christ and should therefore spend some time reflecting on the office that has been entrusted to him by the Holy Spirit.

We might begin by asking from where the pope's mission and responsibilities are derived. The short answer is "Christ." At the beginning of his public life, Christ chose apostles. He instructed them and sent them into the world to carry forward his mission. Scripture makes it clear that St. Peter was chief among the Twelve Apostles, a precedence that was recognized by the other 11 both during Christ's life on earth and after his death and resurrection.

Over the centuries, the Church's understanding of the pope's role developed. Faithful to tradition, both Vatican I (1869-70) and Vatican II (1963-65) teach that "[t]he pope, the bishop of Rome and successor of St. Peter, is the perpetual, visible source and foundation of the unity of the Church. He is the vicar of Christ, the head of the college of bishops, and pastor of the universal Church over which he has by divine institution full, supreme, immediate and universal power" (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 182). That is quite a job description! A few words of explanation might be helpful.

THE POPE'S JOB

First, the pope is bishop of Rome. Revered as the place where both Peter and Paul gave their lives for Jesus Christ, Rome emerged as the Church's

preeminent see (diocese). Today, through a vicar general (Cardinal Camillo Ruini), Pope Benedict looks after the pastoral needs of this city and surrounding area, at once ancient and modern. As frequently as he can, he visits parishes in Rome and occasionally meets with the clergy of Rome. As successor to St. Peter, the pope continues the mandate that Christ gave to Peter, a mandate that extends to the end of time — namely, to be the "visible source and foundation of the unity of the Church."

Jesus made Peter the recognizable head of the apostles and commanded him "to confirm the faith of his brothers" (see Lk 22:32). Until the end of the world, the Lord will continue to provide a universal shepherd for his Church. He will empower this shepherd to foster the Church's unity — "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5). To fulfill this mission, the Lord has given the pope "full, supreme, immediate and universal power." As Vatican II teaches, "...our Lord made Simon Peter alone the rock and key-bearer of the Church (Mt 16:18-19) and appointed him shepherd of the whole flock (Jn 21:15)" (*Lumen Gentium*, 22).

This means that the pope can intervene in dioceses throughout the world and reserve various matters to himself for the common good of the whole Church. Let it be emphasized that he fulfills this mission primarily by teaching the faith — sometimes in extraordinary ways (ecumenical councils, solemn definitions), but most often in encyclical letters, exhortations or his Wednesday audiences. It is by proclaiming and teaching the faith that people are led to pray and to share in the sacramental life of the Church. It is on the basis of the Church's faith that she is governed.

The pope teaches authoritatively on matters of faith and morals, not as a private person, but by virtue of his office. He is endowed with the gift of "the sure charism of truth" so that he can guard and promote all that God has revealed. Both Vatican I and Vatican II teach that "when the pope, using his full authority as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, defines or states precisely doctrines on faith and morals, and presents them as teachings that must be held true by the whole Church, then, by the divine assistance promised to St. Peter, he

teaches with that infallibility with which Christ willed his Church to be endowed" (*The Gift of Faith* by Archbishop Donald Wuerl and others, *Our Sunday Visitor*, 2001).

But the pope does not oversee the Church alone. He is the successor of St. Peter just as bishops throughout the world are successors to the apostles. When we think of bishops collectively, we speak of the "college" of bishops. This college is united with the pope in the supreme governance of the Church. As the Second Vatican Council taught, "Just as by the Lord's will, St. Peter and the other apostles constituted one apostolic college, so in a similar way the Roman pontiff as the successor of Peter and the bishops as successors of the apostles are joined together" (*Lumen Gentium*, 22).

Collectively, bishops united with the successor of Peter are entrusted

with the care of the whole Church. The college of bishops, though, does not act alone but as united with the pope, whether assembled together or separated by great distances. In their individual dioceses, bishops exercise full and complete governance in communion with the Holy Father. After all, dioceses (called "particular churches") are not mere "branch offices" of the universal Church but local "incarnations" of it. Peter's successor is always present as a bishop fully exercises his responsibilities to teach, sanctify and govern. The pope's role does not diminish the local bishop's role but rather strengthens and confirms it so that the Church in its diversity can be united in faith, worship and service. Pope Benedict's U.S. visit will greatly encourage and strengthen the bishops of our country, as indeed it will

strengthen priests, deacons, religious and the laity.

AT THE FOREFRONT

Ultimately, the pope and the bishops in communion with him are to be living signs of the presence and care of Christ, the eternal pastor. We welcome the Holy Father as we would Christ (see Mt 10:40). Pope Benedict is blessed with many wonderful gifts that he has placed at the service of the Lord and his Church. We can show our gratitude for Pope Benedict and his office by praying for him, by opening our hearts to his teaching, and by resolving to be witnesses in our world to the truth and love of Jesus Christ.

The pope has recognized our Order as a "great army" of faith and charity. May we be at the forefront of welcoming this extraordinary pope! ❖

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR COUNCIL USE

1. Have you read any of the many works that Pope Benedict XVI has written, either before or since his election as bishop of Rome? What have you learned from him? What impression does his writing give you, with regard to his character and beliefs?

2. What is the origin of the mission and responsibility of the pope? What implication does this have on our faith as

Catholics, and how does it differ from other understandings of the pope's role?

3. What characterizes the Holy Father's mission as supreme pontiff? In what way are his teachings authoritative? What is the role of the college of bishops, and how does it relate to the bishop of Rome?

4. What are some ways that we might show gratitude for our bishops, for Pope Benedict XVI and for our faith?

Anniversary of the Death of the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II (April 2) On the third anniversary of Pope John Paul II's death, the World Apostolic Congress on

Mercy will begin in Rome.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

World Day of Prayer for Vocations (April 12) This is a good day for a

council to organize an evening of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for the intentions of priests and priestly vocations. Following exposition and Benediction, you may also consider watching the award-winning DVD produced by the Knights of Columbus titled *The Vocation to the Priesthood*. Copies may be ordered by calling the Department of Fraternal Services at 203-752-4270.

Pope Benedict XVI's Birthday (April 16)

Anniversary of Election of Pope Benedict XVI (April 19) Pope Benedict will celebrate his birthday and anniversary during his apostolic visit to the United States April 15-20.

Feast of St. Mark (April 25) See the *Book of Blessings* no. 966-985 for the rite of "Blessing of Fields and Flocks."

The Ascension of the Lord (Thursday, May 1) This is also

the memorial of St. Joseph the Worker. See "Blessing of Tools or Other Equipment for Work" in the *Book of Blessings* no. 919-941.

The Ascension of the Lord (Sunday, May 4)

CHRONOLOGY OF THE SERVANT OF GOD FATHER MICHAEL J. MCGIVNEY

April 8, 1885 — Forms a local council of the Knights of Columbus in Thomaston, Conn.

April 9, 1883 — Serves as deacon at the funeral of Sr. Mary Loyola (Josephine T. Downes), daughter of Edward Downes, at Mount Saint Joseph, Hartford, Conn.

April 10, 1892 — The Order expands to Boston, Mass.

April 17, 1883 — Sends delegation to Meriden, Conn., to establish a local council

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