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Not all bishops on 'ad limina' visits will meet with pope

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Oct. 21, 2011

Pope Benedict XVI meets with a group of Australian bishops at the apostolic palace Oct. 20 during their "ad limina" visits. (CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano)

VATICAN CITY -- In a quiet modification of a traditional format, the Vatican has dropped most of the individual private meetings between Pope Benedict XVI and bishops making their "ad limina" visits to Rome.

The unannounced change was instituted earlier this year, apparently in an effort to reduce the scheduling burden on the 84-year-old pope and to help cut through the backlog of "ad limina" visits, which are supposed to be made every five years by heads of dioceses.

In place of one-on-one meetings, the pope now usually holds more freewheeling sessions with groups of 7-10 bishops at a time, lasting about an hour. That is expected to be the format for U.S. bishops when they begin their "ad limina" visits in early November.

Several bishops who have recently come through Rome on "ad limina" visits had good things to say about the new practice.

"The Holy Father welcomed us, he sat down and made us comfortable, at home and he chatted with us. He said, 'Now tell me,' and he listened very attentively and made a comment here or there. At the end, he summed up beautifully what was said," said Archbishop Felix Machado of Vasai, India, who met the pope with a group of eight others in early September.

"It was very spontaneous, a heart-to-heart talk. And that's what it should be. It was a real sharing between him and us," the archbishop said.

Australians making their "ad limina" visits in October were also pleased with the format, saying it means the pope does not have to cover the same ground with each bishop.

"The response of the bishops has been universally positive. As a matter of fact, they've come back from those meetings really excited by the nature of it and by what's happened. They think it's a terrific initiative. And everyone would agree it's a very good use of the Holy Father's time," said Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide.

Archbishop Wilson, as president of the Australian bishops' conference, did have a one-on-one encounter with Pope Benedict. Some cardinals and archbishops in "ad limina" groups have also met individually with the pope. The new policy has not been spelled out, and officials at the Congregation for Bishops declined comment.

One official involved in setting up papal appointments put it this way: "When the possibility exists, the personal audience is maintained. When instead there are a great number of bishops, they are grouped together in such a way that the pope can see them all."

Traditionally, the bishop's private meeting with the pope has been a key moment of the "ad limina" visit. The Vatican's directory for the pastoral ministry of bishops, for example, emphasizes that while bishops may come to Rome as a group, it is "always the individual bishop" who makes the visit on behalf of his diocese.

"It is the individual bishop who meets the successor of Peter personally and retains the right and the duty to communicate directly with him and the heads of dicasteries (Roman Curia agencies) on all questions concerning his diocesan ministry," the directory states.

Blessed John Paul II intensified interaction with the bishops during the "ad limina" visits. In addition to the group meeting and individual audiences lasting about 15 minutes each, the late pope celebrated Mass with the bishops in his private chapel and hosted them for lunch, a dozen at a time. Toward the end of his pontificate, the ailing pope had to cut back on those activities and the pace of the visits slowed.

Pope Benedict did not continue the practice of working lunches and private Masses with the visiting bishops, but during the first five years of his pontificate he met personally with individual bishops.

Meanwhile, the backlog of "ad limina" appointments kept growing. One reason is that the number of bishops in the world has doubled over the last 50 years; the pope would have to meet about 600 bishops each year to put "ad limina" visits back on a five-year track, and Vatican officials have said that's not going to happen.

As a result, most "ad limina" visits are now made every seven or eight years. U.S. bishops, who will make theirs in 2011-2012, last came in 2004, for example.

This year's visits have featured countries with large episcopates, including the Philippines and India. So far in 2011, Pope Benedict has met with nearly 300 bishops making "ad limina" visits, either individually or in groups.

The name of the visits comes from the Latin phrase "ad limina apostolorum" (to the thresholds of the Apostles), a reference to the pilgrimage to the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul that the bishops are required to make.

Cindy Wooden in Rome contributed to this story.

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