

For nine days earlier this month, I had the privilege of being in Rome with nearly 150 bishops from around the world who, like me, had been ordained or appointed during the past year. We were there for the Annual Formation Course for New Bishops, or, as it is sometimes playfully called, “Baby Bishops’ School.”

I roll my eyes slightly at the name, but perhaps there is some truth to it. To become a bishop is, in a certain sense, to become a beginner again. There is much to learn... much to receive.

Our days were full. Each day started with Morning Prayer and Eucharist, followed by presentations and small groups work, or what the program designated, “fraternal dialogue.” The subjects ranged widely: the changing cultural world in which the Church finds herself, safeguarding, synodality, priestly formation, Catholic education, canon law and administration, and the Church’s responsibility to defend human dignity and work for peace and the common good.

Yet what remains with me most is not any one lecture.

It is the experience of the Church herself.

At meals, in the chapel, walking through the corridors and the streets of Rome, I found myself with bishops from Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania South and North America. Our dioceses could hardly be more different. Some serve enormous populations; others, like Prince Albert, serve smaller and more scattered communities. Some minister where the Church is growing rapidly; others where Christianity occupies an increasingly marginal place. Some live amid poverty and political instability.

And yet, listening to one another, something deeper than our differences became apparent. We shared many of the same hopes and many of the same worries. We spoke about our priests, about young people and families, about those who have been wounded by the Church, about the challenge of handing on the faith in changing cultures, and about our own sense of inadequacy before what has been entrusted to us. There was something consoling in that.

A bishop is given responsibility for a particular Church, and mine is the Diocese of Prince Albert. My time in Rome did not make that responsibility feel smaller; it brought home to me a profound sense of connectedness. The Church of Prince Albert is one part of a communion stretching across cultures, languages and continents and, indeed, across centuries.

Our days concluded with time at St. Peter’s and an encounter with Pope Leo XIV. One of the messages he impressed upon us was very simple: no bishop walks alone. I remain grateful for that reminder.

A bishop does not walk alone because he walks with his priests and people. He walks with other bishops. He walks within a Church much bigger and older than himself. And, of course, he walks with Christ, who called the first disciples without waiting for them to be completely ready and who continues patiently to form those he calls.

Perhaps that is why “Baby Bishops’ School” is not such a bad name after all. We are all, in one way or another, still learning how to be disciples.

And perhaps one of the graces of being given a new responsibility in the Church is discovering again that the first task is not to have all the answers. It is to remain teachable: to listen, to pray, to receive from others, and to trust that Christ is already at work among the people we have been asked to serve.

In Christ,

+ Ken Thorson, OMI
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