

The 5 year ad limina visits of the bishops to Rome according to Rocco Palma of Whispers in the Loggia

Whispers in the Loggia

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With US' Vatican "Checkup" On Tap, The Reports Come Due



Even more than usual, the last 11 months have seen no shortage of notable stories come up, only to get washed out within hours by the latest curveball on the crisis front.

Among other instances, this happened last July when – at the start of what should've been a quiet summer weekend – a Friday night saw the first report of plans for the all-important *ad limina* visit of the US bishops: American Catholicism's first Roman "exam" in the age of Francis...

...yet before dawn the next morning, the announcement of Theodore McCarrick's forced resignation from the College of Cardinals – the first ouster of its kind in nearly a century – didn't just rightly take over the news-cycle, but turbo-charged it.

While the Stateside resurgence of the scandals had already been brewing for five weeks to that point – beginning from the first revelation of a credible abuse report against McCarrick involving a minor and the then-cardinal's initial suspension from ministry on June 20th – in hindsight, the extraordinary step of yanking the red hat from the now-former cleric was the moment the dam really broke, and the ferocity of the oncoming current has only increased since.

In that light, as the *ad limina* piece was reported with little inkling to the "perfect storm" that would quickly erupt – all the more once August's release of the Pennsylvania grand-jury report dropped a gas tank on the already-fraught situation – the ongoing inferno has served to recast the frame of the four-month visit, which begins in early November, and whose key preliminary element, the mammoth "Quinquennial Report" to the Holy See on each of the nation's 197 dioceses, is only now beginning to come due.



Always sent in thick binders – which allow for easy division of the contents among the Curial offices upon their arrival in Rome – the Quinquennials are to be received at the Washington Nunciature six months before the scheduled visits by the 15 USCCB regions. Given that timeline, the first incoming batch over these weeks will deal with American Catholicism's hardest-hit turf in this fresh round of crisis: the Northeast, stretching from

Maine to the Mason-Dixon Line.

Beyond the brutal fallout of the Pennsylvania report within the state, the attorneys general of New Jersey and New York each announced statewide probes of their respective dioceses within a month of the grand-jury's release. Just as critically, meanwhile, both will soon be awash in lawsuits as "window" laws take effect, suspending the civil statute of limitations on bringing abuse claims – a tide likely to amount to hundreds of cases, to say nothing of settlements and legal costs totaling in the hundreds of millions of dollars. And beyond the legal hurdles, the first three conference regions likewise contain some of the most destabilized and inflamed local scenes in the wake of new revelations.

All told, 16 statewide investigations have been launched from coast to coast since the Pennsylvania report, and last October's inception of a Federal probe based in Philadelphia, though initially limited to the Keystone State, is quietly shaping up to be the most sweeping of all. Still, as the figures and assessments in the Quinquennials are intended to provide a snapshot of a local reality only through the end of 2018, odds are that many, if not most of the diocesan reports will simply be unable to account for sizable challenges and shifts on the ground occurring just before a region's visit takes place, or even while it happens.

By way of example, recent days have brought another set of developments likely to impact their respective locales into the mid-term future:

- In California – where a first "window" law in 2003 drew over \$1 billion in settlements, a figure topped by Los Angeles' \$660 million deal with over 500 survivors – the specter of a second halt of the civil statute has seen most of the US' largest province (five of the six Southland dioceses led by LA) adopt the out-of-court mediation program for new claims already taken up by most of the dioceses of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. For a sense of scale, even before

its one-year "window" takes effect in August, the "independent reconciliation and compensation" push by the dioceses of New York State has already seen payments approaching \$250 million;

- Likewise in the nation's largest state, Attorney General Xavier Becerra has laid the groundwork for a long-expected review of the personnel files across California's 12 dioceses with last week's issuance of "hold letters" calling for each to preserve all relevant records. At least so far, the documents have solely been requested, not yet rising to the level of subpoenas or search warrants;
- As Georgia became the latest entry among the statewide probes, Michigan's top prosecutor hinted at criminal charges stemming from her investigation in short order, likewise revealing that she's received death threats for engaging in it;
- Just yesterday, the Chancery of the 1.4 million-member Dallas diocese became the second headquarters of a major Texas fold to be raided by local police over recent months – for unspecified reasons, the daylong operation included the presence of FBI agents;
- And, of course, in the wake of last week's release of *Vos estis lux mundi* – Francis' global accountability norms for prelates accused of abuse and/or cover-up – with the new provisions set to take effect in little more than two weeks, the US church's implementation will have an early compliance-check during the *ad limina* itself, as well as a review of diocesan policies and procedures already in place.

To be sure, that's merely a cursory glimpse of another week in the storm, but as one senior prelate – clearly frazzled after months of onslaught – recently mused to *Whispers*, "You go into the office every morning and just wonder to yourself: '*What on earth will happen today?*'"

Even if they tend to make for tedious reading, the Quinquennials – comprised of 22 sections, roughly corresponding to each office of the Roman Curia – provide a fascinating glimpse into the trenches

of the nation's largest religious body: at least, as local leadership sees it. And though the reports are closely held as a matter of cultural habit, there is no prohibition on their public release – ergo, while there's never exactly been an outcry for them to be shared, amid the tenor of the ecclesial moment and its premium on transparency and accountability, it'd seem optimal for the dioceses to publish them in some form... still, odds are the ones most open to doing that would be the least in need of the scrutiny.

In that light, it bears noting that – aside from concerns raised by the Holy See during the visit itself (usually compiled from any complaint-mail that reaches Rome) – there is no mechanism for auditing the content of the reports. Accordingly, if any howlers pop up over the course of the next months' reading, we'll be sure to let you know.

All that said, much as the wider discourse remains oblivious about the impending pilgrimage, it won't be long before it's all you're hearing about. With that in mind – especially for those who missed it the first time – below is the initial 27 July report laying out the shape of the visit and the issues at hand, even as the crisis has come to loom ever larger over the process.

In one significant update to the original, however, it's since become understood that – as the first round of the *ad limina* coincides with mid-November's election of a new USCCB president and vice-president – those regions absent from the Baltimore meeting will take part in the votes in real-time at the North American College.

While that unprecedented move will insulate the voters in Rome from being ahead of or behind the curve on the progress of the ballots, considering the outsize importance of the on-site conversations among the bench over the weekend leading up to the meeting, the absence of a critical mass of the electorate from the pre-vote talks will nonetheless have some bearing on the result.



27 July 2018 – Amid the specter of a fresh round of sex-abuse crises and a roiled summer for the American Catholic leadership, the US church is indeed set to come under the Vatican's microscope – but not due to the recent

scandals.

One of the last major benches to make its *ad limina* visit to Benedict XVI, the USCCB will have its first Roman "checkup" under Francis beginning in November 2019 – eight years to the month since the last "quinquennial" got underway.

The summons was delivered in a late June letter from the Nuncio to Washington, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, which was circulated to the bench in mid-July.

Whispers has obtained the documents, which included a schedule that sees the bishops of Region I (New England) being received by the Pope on 7 November 2019. As has become standard, the conference's 15 regions – 14 geographic clusters of neighboring states, and one comprising the nation's Eastern-church hierarchs, spanning 197 (arch)dioceses and eparchies in all – will be making their visits in numerical order, essentially running up and down the country from the Northeast to the Northwest and Alaska, before ending with the Southeast and the eparchs.

While the pilgrimages of all the world's bishops are supposed to take place on a five-year schedule, the sheer logistics of what's now

a global episcopate in excess of 5,000 members has seen the gap considerably lengthened over the last decade and a half; before the late 2011-early 2012 visit – which took six months – the 250-man US bench's prior trek "to the threshold of the apostles" had stretched over eight months of 2004. (In a notable coincidence, both visits came at the tail-end of the respective pontificates of St John Paul II and B16.)



A duty required of every bishop, the *ad limina* has three major facets: the prelates' prayer at the tombs of Peter and Paul (usually in the form of a Mass at each), a meeting with the pontiff, and morning or afternoon-long sessions with all of the

congregations, tribunals and councils of the Roman Curia, one by one.

Over recent cycles, the latter two elements have changed considerably – where John Paul would meet individually for 15 minutes with each diocesan bishop (together with his auxiliaries) and give a speech to every group, toward the end of Benedict's reign, Papa Ratzinger began receiving the prelates in groups for an extended dialogue, and on the last US visit, the number of addresses was cut back to five: respectively, the speeches covered the topics of the new evangelization, religious freedom, sexuality and family life, education, and immigration and the unity of the church – all of them addressed to the entire conference and the nation's church at large.

For his part, Francis has almost entirely ditched the formal addresses – unless, that is, there's a critical message he'd like to make public – and his group sessions, which begin with each bishop speaking briefly about his diocese before heading into a free-form conversation, usually reach or exceed the two-hour mark. On the Curia front, meanwhile, where prelates of the past can easily recall being read the riot act by dicastery chiefs – or, alternatively, a prefect or two who dozed through the sessions – continuing a shift started under Benedict, the rounds at the offices are notably more collegial, interactive and service-oriented, with the staffs eager to offer their assistance on the visitors' concerns and advice on the relevant challenges they face at home. Of course, in light of Francis' consolidation of several pontifical councils into two super-dicasteries (Laity, Family and Life; and Human Development), the number of stops are considerably less numerous than they've been on prior visits. Still in all, the entire process normally takes a week to ten days.

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As for the schedule, while the US' previous *ad liminae* would, as noted above, extend for the better part of a year, the 2019 edition is occurring on something of a lightning-round timeframe – by November's end, no less than the first seven regions are slated to be blown through, with Francis receiving the different groups every three or four days. As the Vatican doesn't accommodate national holidays outside Italy, the visits will not be suspended over Thanksgiving – on Turkey Day itself, the Pope is slated to meet with the bishops of Region VII (Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin), while others will likewise be in Rome continuing their dicastery rounds.

However, an even bigger scheduling hitch comes earlier – as the November plans conflict with the USCCB Fall Meeting in Baltimore, the timeline as given would put three East Coast regions (five provinces in all, stretching from New York to the Carolinas) in a particular bind: while a conference plenary can

normally go missed by prelates without much impact, with the 2019 Fall Classic headlined by the election of the bench's next president and vice-president, it would be exceedingly difficult to hold the vote with a sizable chunk of the electorate missing. (In addition, the meeting would normally bring the bishops' final sign-off for the updated *Faithful Citizenship* materials on Catholics' political responsibilities with an eye to the next year's Federal elections.)

While the plenary can't be moved due to hotel contracts set years in advance, according to an op apprised of the situation, other potential remedies are already under consideration, including the possibility of swapping *ad limina* dates with another country's bishops – almost certainly bringing an earlier start for the impacted US groups – or an arrangement that would see the overseas USCCB members cast their votes by electronic ballot (presumably at the traveling prelates' base at the North American College) at the same time as the election takes place in the Premier See. That said, as the weekend-long private conversations around the Marriott leading up to the vote are always a decisive factor behind the making of the vice-president – the incumbent #2 traditionally being elevated to the top post – the absence of a significant number of prelates from the Harborfront would inevitably alter the dynamic ahead of the ballot, and accordingly its result.

For Francis, meanwhile, the visit will provide his most significant immersion experience to date in a national church that he arguably knows less about than any of his predecessors over the last half-century or more. Having only visited the States for the first time on his September 2015 trek to Washington, New York and Philadelphia, though Papa Bergoglio is surrounded by a formidable cadre of US advisers and confidants, Popes ranging from Pius XII and Paul VI to John Paul and Benedict had extensive firsthand experience of the country and its ecclesial profile before coming to Peter's chair, whether as diplomats, from

extensive US travel – or, in Benedict's case, that and 25 years of dealing with no shortage of American figures and issues at the helm of the CDF.

As with the last few visits, however, the church Francis will hear of in depth is really a tale of two Stateside Catholicisms – a reality of constricting structures and declining, aging populations in most of the Northeast and upper Midwest, countered by the extraordinary growth and vitality of the Catholic outposts of the South and West, which now claim the bulk of the nation's 75 million faithful. Yet what's more, given the pontiff's lack of facility in English, it wouldn't be surprising if at least some of the meetings with the later regions are conducted entirely in Spanish, in which the overwhelming majority of "Sun Belt" prelates are fluent or at least conversant. Should it happen, that in itself would be a first.



In any case, while Francis has met a sizable chunk of the US episcopate either in the reception lines at his Wednesday audiences or the annual crop of rookies (his own new appointees) attending each September's "Baby

Bishop School," aside from a moment of brief pleasantries with each, for all but a few prelates, the visit will make for their most extensive personal time by far with the Pope – and with the bench's constant cycle of vacancies and appointments, there's inevitably a degree of "auditioning" prospects for higher office on the pontiff's part. (On this front, by November 2019 it especially bears noting that two key Eastern archdioceses will be freshly pending new leaders, as both Cardinal Seán O'Malley of Boston

and Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia will have reached the retirement age of 75 over the preceding months.)

While the *ad limina's* theological import is as a moment of communion with the Roman Pontiff and for the bishops to recall their own role as successors of the apostles whose tombs give the moment its name, in practical terms the visit is the Vatican's preeminent exercise of accountability – a topic given fresh prominence in the wake of the now-multiple abuse and misconduct allegations raised against Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. Along those lines, the centerpiece of the process' managerial aspect is the preparation of the Quinquennial Report – an extensive, heavily detailed snapshot of the life of every diocese, which easily extends past 100 pages for most.

Split into 22 general sections, the Quinquennial's areas of focus roughly overlap with the topic-areas of the Curial offices – aspects like worship, ecumenism, Catholic education, the life of the clergy, religious and laity, and the care of migrants, capped by the bishop's assessment of his own ministry and the context in which he works. (Notably, among special appendices required of the US is a section on the diocese's response to abuse and its safe environment procedures.) Along these lines, as the reports generally need to be submitted to the Vatican six months ahead of the visit – and its parts are divided up among the relevant dicasteries upon receipt – it isn't unheard-of for concerns expressed to the offices by letter-writers at home to be raised during the meetings, or even, in especially grave situations, by the Pope himself.

With Francis' baseline for the bench already articulated in full detail in his 2015 address to the bishops in Washington's St Matthew's Cathedral (above), the following is a general list of major issues – among no shortage of others – likely to come up during the visit (in no particular order):



- immigration in general, and specifically the local churches' efforts on behalf of migrants and refugees;
- the worsening polarization of American Catholic life and the broader state and quality of the church's witness in the wider culture and the public square;
- marriage and family

life, especially their evolution in light of *Amoris Laetitia* and Francis' 2015 annulment reboot – on a related front, the coming visit will be the US bench's first since same-sex marriage was legalized nationwide in the Supreme Court's 2015 Obergefell ruling;

- youth ministry and outreach to the “nones,” following on the heels of this October's Synod on young people (and the Pope's major closing text for the gathering, likely to be released by the time of the visit);
- the integration of Stateside Catholicism's rising Hispanic majority into the mainstream and leadership of the national church, and the way forward from this September's 5th Encuentro in Texas – a keen focus for Francis himself, the US fold's most significant event of 2018;
- the US church's environmental efforts and integration of Francis' concept of "human ecology" in *Laudato Si'*;
- changing structures – whether consolidations of parishes and schools and how the institutional void is filled, or the church's effectiveness at engagement in a context of burgeoning "mega-parishes";
- the core concepts of Francis' papacy – missionary discipleship, the “field hospital,” a Synodal church, "a poor

church for the poor," "pastoral conversion," etc. – and how they're being applied at the local level;

- the state of priestly vocations and formation, especially given the new *Ratio Fundamentalis* governing seminaries (its US adaptation still being worked out);
- sex abuse and misconduct, as well as broader questions of accountability and transparency – including on finances;
- clericalism and the development of lay leadership/co-responsibility at every possible level of ecclesial life;
- priestly morale and the relationship between bishops and their priests – an especially fraught issue in some places in the post-Dallas Charter age;
- the ongoing reception of the new Roman Missal, as well as the enhanced oversight of episcopal conferences on liturgical translations as granted by Francis in *Magnum principium*.

On one final note, while an op familiar with the process relays that there are no major changes to the format of the Quinquennial Report from Benedict to Francis, contrary to the headline above, the preparation of the sprawling text will need to wait a little while longer – according to the usual protocols, the data period for the figures and impressions conveyed to the Holy See normally ends on December 31st of the year prior to the visit.

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Rocco Palmo at 11:14

About Me



Rocco Palmo

One of global Catholicism's most prominent chroniclers, Rocco Palmo has held court as the "Church Whisperer" since 2004, when the pages you're reading were launched with an audience of three, grown since by nothing but word of mouth, and kept alive throughout solely by means of reader support.

A former US correspondent for the London-based international Catholic weekly The Tablet, he's been a church analyst for The New York Times, Associated Press, Washington Post, Reuters, Los Angeles Times, BBC, NBC, CNN and NPR among other mainstream print and broadcast outlets worldwide.

A native of Philadelphia, Rocco Palmo attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. In 2010, he received a Doctorate of Humane Letters honoris causa from Aquinas Institute of Theology in St Louis.

In 2011, Palmo co-chaired the first Vatican conference on social media, convened by the Pontifical Councils for Culture and Social Communications. By appointment of Archbishop Charles Chaput OFM Cap., he's likewise served on the first-ever Pastoral Council of the Archdiocese, whose Church remains his home.
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2 Cor 12:14. "for I want not what is yours, but you [for Jesus]"