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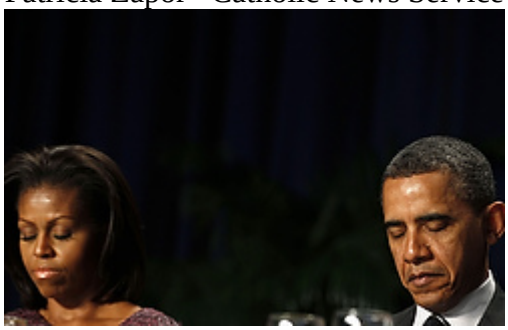
Obama ties call to care for 'least of these' to economic policies

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Feb. 6, 2012



President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama bow their heads during the 60th annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington on Feb. 2. (CNS photo/Larry Downing, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- In remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast Feb. 2, President Barack Obama linked his actions as president to influences of faith, particularly Jesus' call to care for "the least of these."

Obama said at the annual gathering that "when I decide to stand up for foreign aid, or prevent atrocities in places like Uganda, or take on issues like human trafficking, it's not just about strengthening alliances, or promoting democratic values, or projecting American leadership around the world, although it does all those things and it will make us safer and more secure. It's also about the biblical call to care for the least of these -- for the poor; for those at the margins of our society."

The National Prayer Breakfast is a multi-day nondenominational event highlighted by the breakfast itself. It is attended by a global representation of political, diplomatic and religious leaders, but most years the only part open to press coverage is the president's remarks.

Obama's speech came amid harsh criticism of his administration for policies that are being described as hostile to religious freedom, notably a new federal mandate that all health plans, including those at church-run hospitals, colleges and service agencies, cover contraceptives and sterilizations at no cost.

The administration also has put in place a religious exemption to the mandate, but leaders of various Catholic and other faith-based organizations say it is too narrow and they will be forced to provide coverage they oppose. Just a few days before Obama's speech, Catholic churchgoers around the country heard letters from their bishops read from the pulpit decrying the mandate.

Other critics said the president's address at the breakfast avoided recommendations made by his advisory council on faith-based activities for ensuring that faith-based organizations that receive government funding do not use the money in inappropriate ways.

The Rev. C. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance, criticized Obama for praising work done by faith-based groups in providing social services, but remaining "silent about essential safeguards on faith-based funding to ensure that when religious organizations receive government funds, this money is not used for

sectarian purposes or to discriminate in hiring."

Obama himself avoided either topic but focused on the idea of shared responsibility to care for one another as a call that extends across religions.

"When I talk about our financial institutions playing by the same rules as folks on Main Street, when I talk about making sure insurance companies aren't discriminating against those who are already sick, or making sure that unscrupulous lenders aren't taking advantage of the most vulnerable among us, I do so because I genuinely believe it will make the economy stronger for everybody," he said.

"But I also do it because I know that far too many neighbors in our country have been hurt and treated unfairly over the last few years, and I believe in God's command to 'love thy neighbor as thyself.' I know the version of that Golden Rule is found in every major religion and every set of beliefs -- from Hinduism to Islam to Judaism to the writings of Plato."

He said it makes economic sense to expect higher-income people to give up tax breaks so that there is less burden on people who are struggling, but "it also coincides with Jesus' teaching that 'for unto whom much is given, much shall be required.'"

"It mirrors the Islamic belief that those who've been blessed have an obligation to use those blessings to help others, or the Jewish doctrine of moderation and consideration for others," he said.

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