

Vatican's moderate line on Obama has deep roots

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 4, 2009



President Obama

Analysis

When *L'Osservatore Romano* published an essay this week suggesting that U.S. President Barack Obama's positions on abortion and other life issues "have not confirmed fears of radical changes," it provided the latest confirmation of a glaring difference in tone between the Vatican and the most ardently pro-life circles in the American Catholic church, including a growing number of American bishops.

In general, several voices in the Vatican have taken a moderate and conciliatory line on the Obama administration, while several U.S. bishops, buoyed by a network of pro-life activists, have been more pugnacious.

The essay, by *L'Osservatore's* frequent foreign affairs contributor Giuseppe Fiorentino, appeared in the April 29 edition.

Fiorentino's core argument was that Obama's first 100 days "have not shaken the world," contending that despite the president's popularity and communications skills, his policies in many areas have not amounted to a sharp break with the past. Obama has largely continued the policies of the Bush administration in Afghanistan, Fiorentino wrote, and he compared Obama's reluctance to nationalize banks and other lenders to the *laissez faire* approach of the Reagan administration.

The *L'Osservatore* essay pointed to some concrete foreign policy moves that seemed positive, but still tentative and undeveloped, including cautious openings to Iran, Russia and Cuba.

On the "life issues," Fiorentino argued that Obama's controversial executive order on embryonic stem cell research was actually fairly restrained, because it still prevents the creation of embryos for purposes of research or cloning, and it limits the use of federal funding for research to "surplus" embryos.

Fiorentino also argued that Obama's support for the "Pregnant Women Support Act" represents a "rebalancing" of his abortion policies "in support of maternity."

In general, Fiorentino said, the first 100 days of the Obama presidency are too soon to reach a definitive judgment. "It's better to wait for the next 1,361 days," he wrote, referring to the rest of the president's first term.

One striking feature of the *L'Osservatore* essay was what it did not contain. There was no reference to the controversy among American Catholics over the University of Notre Dame's plan to award Obama an honorary doctorate on the occasion of his commencement address this month.

The *L'Osservatore* essay was the latest in a string of amicable gestures from the Vatican, beginning with an unusual telegram of congratulations sent by Pope Benedict XVI the day after Obama's election. (Typically, popes do not address new heads of state until they take office.)

Fiorentino's piece did not sit well with many pro-life activists in the United States. The web site "LifeSiteNews.com," for example, said the piece "sent shock waves through the pro-life world." It carried an interview with an official of Human Life International comparing the Vatican's line on Obama with the policy of "accommodation" towards Soviet Communism associated with the papacies of John XXIII and Paul VI.

How to explain this contrast between Rome and the American church?

Some analysts have theorized a "good cop/bad cop" dynamic, with the Vatican dangling the carrot of cooperation and the U.S. bishops wielding the stick of cultural war.

Less speculatively, however, there are at least two basic factors at work.

First, abortion has never been the overriding focus for conservative Catholic intellectuals and activists in Europe that it is in the United States. In Europe, the dominant issue tends to be the continent's Christian identity, which is often expressed in anti-EU activism or concern about the social impact of immigration. As a result, it does not come naturally for many European Catholics, including many in the Vatican, to evaluate leaders primarily through the lens of their policies on life issues.

Second, the Holy See is a sovereign state with its own diplomatic corps and a wide range of international interests. On several matters of global concern -- including the reconstruction of Iraq, the Israeli/Palestinian problem, multilateralism in foreign policy, and nuclear disarmament -- Vatican diplomats generally believe the early signals from the Obama administration are encouraging. For that reason, some Vatican officials are reluctant to take a hard anti-Obama line, particularly on the eve of Pope Benedict XVI's much-anticipated trip to the Holy Land, which the Vatican hopes will lend momentum to the peace process.

In general, the Vatican does not like to be in the position of seeming to undercut positions taken by a country's bishops, in part for ecclesiological reasons, in part for fear of creating an impression of disunity. As a result, there will almost certainly be pressure on both sides to avoid public disagreements.

At the same time, the two factors cited above represent long-term historical realities that will not be easy to work around -- suggesting the difference in tone may endure.

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