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Vatican paper mutes bishops' attacks

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VATICAN CITY
In a season of tension between the U.S. Catholic hierarchy and President Barack Obama, the Vatican newspaper has offered some unexpectedly upbeat reviews of the president's first four months in office.

With Pope Benedict XVI expected to meet Obama in early July, it's worth a closer look at what *L'Osservatore Romano* has had to say, and what it finds so promising about the new U.S. administration.

The newspaper enjoys a degree of editorial independence, especially under its new editor, Giovanni Maria Vian, so its opinions cannot be read as formal Vatican policy statements.

But it describes itself as "at the service of the thinking of the pope" and in practice works closely with the Vatican Secretariat of State. If its myriad front-page articles on Obama were going in the wrong direction, one can be sure that the editors would feel a swift tug on the reins.

The abortion issue has been front and center in the U.S. bishops' relationship with Obama, especially after the University of Notre Dame invited the president to speak at its commencement May 17 and gave him an honorary degree. More than 60 bishops were strongly critical of the Indiana university's invitation because of Obama's positions in favor of legal abortion and embryonic stem-cell research.

L'Osservatore did not report on the bishops' criticism in the run-up to the Notre Dame event. In its article on the president's speech, it noted the protests but emphasized Obama's call for "common ground," as well as his commitment to reducing the number of abortions and finding an acceptable "conscience clause" for medical personnel opposed to abortion.

That caused some discomfort among conservative Catholics, but Vian defended the editorial line May 20 in an interview with the Italian daily "Il Riformista." Vian said that the U.S. president's Notre Dame speech was "respectful" and left him convinced that "Obama is not a pro-abortion president."

Twice, the newspaper has opined that Obama seems to have moved away from his 2008 campaign rhetoric on legislation that would enshrine abortion as a fundamental right and remove local limitations on the practice of abortion.

"It should be understood that L'Osservatore shares the same position as the American bishops who consider abortion a disaster. It is always a necessary and decisive task, in fact, to promote a culture of life at every level," Vian said.

In fact, the day it reported on the Notre Dame speech, L'Osservatore also carried a news story on the U.S. bishops' campaign against the Obama administration's policy on federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research. And on May 22, the newspaper ran a short article quoting two U.S. bishops who had criticized Notre Dame's decision to honor Obama.

What's striking about L'Osservatore's coverage of Obama has been its attention to the wider range of issues, especially in foreign policy. The newspaper has found much to its liking:

-- The Israeli-Palestinian situation. Three days after Pope Benedict left Israel with a strong call for a two-state solution based on mutual security, Obama met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with virtually the same message. The Vatican newspaper said the president's position was in "full harmony" with that of the pope, reflecting the Vatican's strong hope that Obama will get serious about pressing Israel on a settlement.

-- Middle East outreach. The Vatican newspaper has said Obama's upcoming speech in Egypt in June represents a "new step by the U.S. administration toward an open dialogue with the Arab world." It has reported favorably on the Obama administration's opening of direct talks with Iran and Syria, and its efforts to encourage greater Syrian involvement in a regional peace settlement.

-- Disarmament. A recent L'Osservatore story headlined "Concrete hopes for disarmament" took Obama at his word when he spoke of the need to rid the planet of nuclear arsenals. This is a sleeper issue, one that makes few headlines in the United States but which is frequently on the minds of Vatican officials, including the pope. Obama's steps toward direct talks with Russia on strategic weapons and his call for strengthening the nonproliferation treaty have convinced the Vatican that he is serious.

-- The Americas. The newspaper has commented favorably on Obama's overtures to several leftist Latin American states, most specifically his lifting of restrictions on Cuba.

-- Multilateralism and human rights. L'Osservatore has applauded Obama's "turn toward multilateralism" in the international arena, especially when it comes to international organizations shunned by previous U.S. administrations. When the administration announced, for example, that the United States would seek a place on the United Nations Human Rights Council, it sent a positive signal of change, the newspaper said. A proposal to close the U.S. detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was described as another human rights step in the right direction.

-- Diplomacy. The newspaper has said Obama is pursuing a foreign policy based on "fewer bullets and more diplomacy," thus reducing the risk of war and bringing the United States into closer alignment with European thinking. It has also credited him with political savvy in identifying Iran and Pakistan as key states vital for the future of world peace.

-- The economy. L'Osservatore has reported in depth on Obama's economic moves, including his "war on superbonuses" and actions to eliminate "fiscal paradises" for multinational companies. Without endorsing his approach, it has defended him against accusations of leading the United States down the path of socialism, saying that the president's actions so far have been fairly cautious.

-- The environment. The newspaper gave favorable coverage of Obama's recent conference on the environment in Washington and his efforts to arrive at a major international meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, next December with a global agreement on climate change.

Up to now, the newspaper seems to agree with the idea that Obama represents a breath of fresh air on many issues, and should be creatively engaged -- an opinion that's widely shared inside the Vatican.

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