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'Remarkable congruence' between pope and president on Islam

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

If anyone is still puzzled about why the Vatican sat out the fuss over President Barack Obama's appearance at Notre Dame -- and more generally, why the Vatican has refused to allow its relationship with Obama to be defined by obvious differences over abortion -- the president's speech to the Muslim world yesterday in Cairo should go a long way toward clearing things up.

Seen through Catholic eyes, perhaps the most striking thing about Obama's speech is what Fr. James Massa, the U.S. bishops' top official for inter-faith dialogue, called its "remarkable congruence" with Benedict's own message to Muslims during his May 8-15 trip to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

The coincidence of Benedict and Obama both visiting the Middle East at roughly the same time, and both delivering much the same pitch, hints at a beguiling geopolitical prospect: That just as John Paul II and Ronald Reagan joined forces a quarter-century ago to vanquish Communism, so a pope and president might stand shoulder-to-shoulder once again, this time to engineer a historic rapprochement between Islam and the West.

Despite differences in frame of reference and rhetorical style (and despite the fact that Obama erroneously situated the Inquisition during the period of Muslim rule in Spain, a mistake Benedict presumably would not make), Benedict's message to the Islamic world three weeks ago and Obama's speech yesterday nonetheless intersect on several important points:

- Urging dialogue with Islam, calling for a new start after the divisions of the past;
- Proposing the Holy Land as a place of peaceful co-existence among Jews, Muslims and Christians;

- Seeing violence and extremism as a perversion of Islam;
- Backing the two-state solution to the Israeli/Palestinian problem;
- Calling for the protection of religious freedom and other human rights in Islamic societies, including greater scope for democracy and empowering women;
- Acknowledging that some corrosive features of Western modernity have given Muslims legitimate reason to be suspicious;
- Opposing militarism and the use of force to resolve disputes.

What difference can such a tone from the world's most important spiritual and political leaders make? Thursday night, I tracked down Bishop Thomas of the El-Qussia and Mair diocese of the Coptic Church in Upper Egypt, who had been in the audience for Obama's speech at the University of Cairo, to ask what the impact has been in his part of the world. Referring to the combined effect of the pope's trip and Obama's speech, he was succinct: "It's made the atmosphere much lighter."

Bishop Thomas, by the way, is no naïf about Islamic extremism. Last year he delivered a speech pointing out that there was a Coptic culture in Egypt long before Islam and the Arab language arrived, unleashing ferocious criticism that the bishop had attacked the Arab and Islamic identity of Egypt. One news service demanded that he be tried for sedition.

While Obama's outreach to Islam flows both from his biography and from his politics, Benedict XVI's approach has been progressively refined since his controversial speech in Regensburg three years ago, which cited a Byzantine emperor linking Muhammad and violence. Although the pope has not backed away from his challenge to Muslims on terrorism and religious freedom -- in theoretical terms, the need to integrate reason and faith -- he's far more adept at expressing a positive vision of an "alliance of civilizations" with Islam, which has become his top inter-faith priority and the leading example of his shift from "inter-religious" to "inter-cultural" dialogue. Benedict's emphasis on Islam was palpable during his Middle East trip, which featured repeated expressions of "deep respect" for Muslims and the pope's second visit to a mosque in four years.

The intersection between pope and president helps explain rave Vatican reviews for the Obama speech.

The president hadn't even left the building in Cairo before the Vatican spokesperson, Fr. Federico Lombardi, expressed "great appreciation" for the speech back in Rome. Lombardi called it "very important," not just for relations between the United States and Islam, but for international peace. Meanwhile, *L'Osservatore Romano* called the speech "a new beginning in relations between the United States and the Arab world," and Vatican Radio enthused that the speech "exceeded expectations" and created "the foundation of a real common platform."

Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, Georgia, who heads the U.S. bishops' committee for inter-religious affairs, was equally upbeat, highlighting similarities between Obama and Benedict.

"The president's address touches on many important points that were made by Pope Benedict XVI during his recent visit to the Holy Land," Gregory said in a written statement to *NCR*. "Both the pope and president concur that a dialogue of civilizations must supplant the specter of a clash of civilizations ... All Catholic Americans who hope for a more secure world, and peace among the religions, can feel grateful that the president underscored the indispensable role of religion in advancing educational, economic, and scientific goals."

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Several experts sense something important afoot.

"This clearly seems to be a turning point," said John Esposito, director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. "You've got the head of the largest Christian church in the world, and the most powerful nation in the world, both offsetting the strong sense among Muslims that they're not respected as equal partners."

"That's a pretty impressive one-two combination," Esposito said.

To be sure, Benedict and Barack are not entirely singing from the same hymnal. For Benedict, one primary objective of an "alliance of civilizations" is for Muslims and Christians to join forces against Western secularism. In part, that means joint opposition to some of the liberal social policies Obama embodies -- on abortion and contraception, on gay rights, and so on. Any partnership between pope and president, therefore, may have a limited shelf life.

On the other hand, the fact that Benedict and Obama represent such different faces of the West -- Obama the ultra-chic progressive, Benedict the voice of traditional religious and moral conviction -- may offer the best possible proof that their opening to Islam is not a fad, or a partisan wedge issue, but rather a deep movement of the historical plates.

Jesuit Fr. Daniel Madigan, an Australian and longtime veteran of Catholic-Muslim dialogue, says there are intriguing signals that mainstream Muslim leaders are willing to meet the pope and president halfway. He pointed to the "Common Word" initiative spearheaded by Jordan, in which a cross-section of Muslim scholars and clerics responded positively to Benedict XVI's controversial lecture in Regensburg, and to a recent inter-faith summit in Madrid organized by the Saudi-based Muslim World League, which brought together Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs.

Putting it all together, Massa suggested the parallel with John Paul and Reagan.

"The last time a pope and a president were allies in one of these titanic shifts going on in the world, it was Reagan and John Paul II vis-à-vis communism," Massa said. "That alliance proved to be very, very effective."

Imam Yahya Hendi, a native Palestinian who serves as the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown, agreed.

The outreach from Benedict and Obama "may not change the minds of the terrorists," Hendi said, "but it will influence young Muslims who aren't sure what to think," and it "gives the moderates in the Islamic world some ground to stand on."

Hendi said that he paid careful attention to Arab discussion following both the pope's trip and the president's speech, and in both cases he found that even hard-line Muslim clerics, traditionally skeptical of both the Catholic church and the United States, praised what they called a "tone of reconciliation."

Of course, whether Benedict and Obama will actually trigger a "velvet revolution" in Islam remains to be seen. Already, some observers have warned that momentum will be wasted if it isn't matched by progress on the ground, especially on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That was the gist of a June 4 letter to Obama signed by a cross-section of American Christian leaders, including five Catholic bishops and the heads of the major umbrella groups for men's and women's religious orders in the country.

"The window is rapidly closing" for a peaceful resolution, the letter warned, asserting that among other things, prolonged conflict threatens the viability of Christianity in the Holy Land.

At a minimum, however, the tantalizing prospect of a partnership between the pope and the president on Islam helps explain why the Vatican isn't ready to join the most ardently pro-life Catholics in America on the anti-Obama barricades. When a President of the United States travels to the heart of the Muslim world and essentially echoes the pope, or so the thinking seems to go, he can't be all bad.

* * *

On Tuesday, I spoke to a day-long gathering of priests in the Chicago archdiocese. The event was held in a big dining hall, and I was feeling fairly good about the turnout until someone showed me a letter of invitation the priests had received from their boss, Cardinal Francis George.

"Your presence and participation are very important," George had written, "and I expect that you will make every effort to attend."

Alas, the crowd size thus probably had more to do with George's not-too-subtle exhortation than my meager star power.

For the record, the priests couldn't have been more gracious, whatever they may have thought privately about giving up a morning to listen to me pontificate. While the bulk of my presentation was devoted to a review of major trends shaping the Catholic future, I began with a note I always try to strike when speaking to priests, and which I'll repeat here.

It's no secret that these are not the easiest of times to be a Roman Catholic priest. Clergy shortages mean priests are pulled in a thousand different directions, the sexual abuse crisis has given the priesthood a black eye, and on and on. Despite all that, what I pick up repeatedly as I move around the Catholic world is a deep sense of gratitude for the service and sacrifice that so many good priests provide. People know that despite all the challenges, the vast majority of priests still get out of bed every morning and try to do God's work, and they're more grateful than they sometimes are able to articulate.

George's remarks at the end of the day were off the record, but I don't think I'm betraying any confidences by relaying one point he made: Most activism in the church, including all the ways that Catholics contribute to building a better world, begins with a good foundation in the parish. The parish priest may not always be the star of the show, but without good pastors none of the rest of it is possible.

Pope Benedict has announced a Year of Priests to begin on June 17, the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. To mark the occasion, I'd like to offer a simple two-word message to all the priests out there, two words I suspect most of them don't hear often enough: "Thank you."

It may not be especially profound, but at least it has the virtue of sincerity.

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