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Vatican steps back on praise for Obama

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- The official Vatican newspaper emphatically denied that its friendly coverage of President Barack Obama reflects any tolerance of his support for legalized abortion and embryonic stem cell research.

"In reporting on some recent statements and initiatives of the president of the United States, L'Osservatore Romano certainly did not intend to express appreciation for his positions on ethical questions," said an unsigned article in the paper's Friday (June 5) edition.

"Obviously the Holy See and L'Osservatore Romano have been, are, and will be standing side by side with the bishops of the United States in their commitment to the inviolability of human life in whatever stage of its existence."

Known as the "pope's newspaper," L'Osservatore is under the direct authority of the Secretariat of State, which directs the Vatican's diplomatic relations, and reportedly vets articles on sensitive topics before publication.

The paper's coverage of Obama has been consistently friendly, and at times openly enthusiastic, since his election last November.

The paper published no reference to controversy over Obama's appearance at the University of Notre Dame last month until the day after the event, when it called the president's commencement speech there part of his "search for common ground" with opponents of legalized abortion.

That article failed to mention that about one-fifth of America's 350 Catholic bishops had publicly protested the invitation because of Obama's support for legalized abortion.

Friday's article said there was "no basis" to commentary that has "sought to exploit the newspaper's articles to make the teaching of the episcopate of the United States on the inherent evil of abortion appear an exercise in partisan politics, supposedly in contrast with a different strategy of the Holy See."

But according to Massimo Franco, a Rome-based expert on U.S.-Vatican relations and author of the book "Parallel Empires," the newspaper's statement is evidence of tension between the Vatican and American church leaders.

"We see that the division of labor between the Vatican and the U.S. bishops with respect to Obama is not so easy to carry out without conflict," Franco said.

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