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Question the pope's 'Catholic identity'?

by Michael Sean Winters

NCR Today

I was startled this morning to find a blogpost entitled "Obama to visit the Vatican; the triumphant vindication of Michael Sean Winters?"

The article was in response to my post yesterday which essentially speculated, mischievously to be sure, how conservatives would react to the news that Pope Benedict XVI would be receiving President Obama at the Vatican next month.

Now, on the subject of triumphalism, I defer entirely to my conservative friends. But, it is interesting to see how they argue that Obama at the Vatican is different from Obama at Notre Dame.

The post above claims:

"The pope regularly receives heads of state all the time. It is simply one of the many things the Vatican does. To do so, even to exchange personal gifts as a matter of courtesy, does not imply endorsement of any or all of the policies espoused by that particular head of state."

But, Obama was also head of state when he went to Notre Dame. Indeed, inviting the sitting president to give the commencement is "one of the things the university does" and Fr. Jenkins made it quite clear that the conferral of the honorary degree upon the President did "not imply endorsement of any or all of the policies espoused by that particular head of state."

The conservative argument used words like "scandal" and "outrage" to describe the Notre Dame visit. They held that this president's views on life issues were so "radical" that Notre Dame's tradition should be set aside. If President Obama's views are so radical, perhaps the pope should set aside the tradition of receiving the president. After all, the pope could have simply said he was starting his vacation early. But,

conservative Catholics can't really attack the pope for refusing to see Obama, can they? At least they can't question the pope's "Catholic identity" the way they did that of Notre Dame.

Over at InsideCatholic.com, they write that receiving President Obama at the Vatican is no big deal: "It's simply statesmanship and hospitality." But, why should only the pope be permitted to show hospitality to the president? And isn't "statesmanship" the reason Obama was invited to Notre Dame too? Because he is head of state?

Admit it conservatives: You wish the pope had said, "No!" You wish he had refused to meet with Obama. But, he didn't. I do not suggest that the pope's meeting with the president connotes any kind of blessing upon any of his policies. It only tells me that the pope understands that charity and hospitality are important Christian virtues, which is precisely what Notre Dame's critics forgot. It is not an outrage for a Catholic to be seen on the same stage with President Obama. There is no scandal in seeking common ground with him either.

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