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Three options for pope's meeting with Obama: Pelosi, Blair, Zapatero

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Despite the intense anticipation surrounding Pope Benedict XVI's July 10 meeting with President Barack Obama, the reality is that encounters between popes and politicians are generally all pictures and no sound, meaning that they're often photo ops without much substance.

Obama will probably sit down with Benedict for 10-15 minutes, and maybe twice that with the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, and other Vatican diplomats.

Those sessions will all take place off-camera, so aside from body language and vague impressions about the mood in the room before doors are closed, the key to shaping public impressions is whatever both sides say afterwards. Since the White House can be counted upon to apply the best possible spin no matter what, the only real "x factor" is whatever the Vatican will say.

The drama comes down to this: Will the Vatican accent the differences between the church and the White House over abortion and other life issues, creating the impression of a tense encounter? Will it play down those differences, suggesting the two men hit it off? Or, will the Vatican try to strike a delicate balance?

One can sketch the possibilities in terms of three options: the Pelosi Option, the Blair Option, and the Zapatero Option.

The Pelosi Option

When Nancy Pelosi met the pope last February, it was presented in advance as something of a breakthrough for the Democratic Speaker of the House, a pro-choice legislator who had recently been embroiled in a controversy with the U.S. bishops after publicly suggesting that Catholic teaching on when life begins was unsettled and unclear.

As things turned out, however, there was little joy in the meeting for Pelosi.

The Vatican did not permit any video or photos of the meeting, and the speaker hadn't even left the Apostolic Palace before the Vatican released a tough statement saying the pope had reminded Pelosi of the requirements of the natural moral law and the Church's consistent teaching on the dignity of human life from conception until natural death, which enjoin all Catholics, and especially legislators, jurists to work [toward] a just system of laws capable of protecting human life at all stages of development.

As one blogger put it, the impression was that Benedict had "schooled" Pelosi.

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Most observers, however, regard it as deeply unlikely that a similar treatment will be reserved for Obama. For one thing, Pelosi is Catholic and Obama is not, which means that to some extent her political views become a matter of internal ecclesiastical discipline. For another, Obama has never suggested that Catholic teaching on abortion is in flux, which effectively amounts to a challenge to the teaching authority of the bishops and the pope.

Given the fact that Pelosi's meeting with Benedict came hard on the heels of her public spat with the U.S. bishops, there was real concern that the encounter might be manipulated in the States to suggest a kind of Vatican seal of approval for Pelosi's position. Obama, meanwhile, recently vowed to always take seriously any criticism that comes from the American bishops, however passionate their tone.

Finally, the Speaker of the House simply isn't the President of the United States, and Vatican diplomats would generally be loathe to burn bridges quite so emphatically with a new head of state.

The Blair Option

In June 2007, Tony Blair paid what amounted to a farewell call on Pope Benedict XVI, as he was then wrapping up his ten-year run as the British Prime Minister. As it was well known that Blair was on the brink of converting to Catholicism, the meeting with the pope marked not only his political exit but also his religious arrival, and most observers expected a largely amicable encounter.

Afterwards, however, the Vatican issued an unusual declaration, which read: "Some significant contributions of Prime Minister Blair, during his ten years of Government, were reviewed. There followed a frank exchange on the present international situation." Finally, after an exchange of opinions on some laws recently approved by the Parliament of the United Kingdom, best wishes were conveyed to the Hon Anthony Blair ...?

While that may seem fairly tame, in diplomatic circles the phrase "frank exchange" is widely understood to be code for a bare-knuckles brawl. The British press played it up, suggesting there had been a "blazing row" between the pope and Blair—an impression, by the way, that the Vatican did not exactly go out of its way to correct.

†The language about “some laws recently approved” in Britain was, among other things, understood to refer to a set of regulations the Blair government issued in January 2007, six months before the meeting with the pope, which prevent Catholic adoption agencies from refusing to serve gay couples. The phrase “international situation,” meanwhile, was seen in part as a coded reference to differences between Blair and the Vatican over the war in Iraq.

†The bottom line is that what was supposed to be a feel-good session turned into a diplomatic incident.

†Though a “Blair option” for the Obama meeting strikes most observers as more within the realm of possibility, it still comes off as unlikely for two reasons. One, Blair was on the verge of entering the Catholic church at the time, and hence his positions on matters such as abortion and embryonic stem cell research raise some of the same internal concerns as Pelosi; two, his government had just adopted a measure which was perceived not only as contrary to Catholic teaching, but directly discriminatory against the church’s charitable activity.

The Zapatero Option

†Probably no political leader on the global stage today is more of a *bête noire* for the Vatican than Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, a socialist whose full-court press in favor of gay marriage, embryonic stem cell research, divorce, and a wide variety of other issues has created church/state tensions not seen since the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, the shorthand way around the Vatican of referring to their worst-case scenario about Obama is that he could turn into a *Zapatero globale*, meaning a force for a radical social agenda all over the world.

†When Benedict XVI met Zapatero for the first time in Valencia, Spain, in July 2006, many observers expected a diplomatic version of the Ali/Frazier prizefight.

That showdown never materialized, however, as the Vatican said essentially nothing afterwards, leaving the field clear for government spokespersons to assert that it had been a “highly cordial” meeting devoted to immigration, international conflicts, and the situation in Africa.

†The pope met not only with Zapatero but also with his top deputy, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, and Spanish sources told NCR that after his chat with Fernández de la Vega, the pope told her that he felt church/state relations in Spain are “in good hands.”

†To be sure, Benedict found other occasions during his trip to Valencia to accent the church’s positions on hot-button matters such as abortion and gay marriage, especially since he was in town for a World Meeting of Families. Yet the Vatican worked hard to keep the whiff of conflict away from the encounter with Zapatero himself.

†Upon his return to Rome, Benedict was asked by journalists about his remarkably positive tone in Spain, and he delivered a memorable reply: “Christianity, Catholicism, isn’t a collection of prohibitions? We’ve heard so much about what is not allowed that now it’s time to say: we have a positive idea to offer? [Everything] is clearer if you say it first in a positive way.”

†The apparent calculation in Spain was that in an already tense situation, it was better for the pope to dial down the rhetoric and to stress potential zones of collaboration, rather than to let slip the dogs of cultural war.

Meeting in the Middle?

tWhich option might one expect for the meeting between Obama and Benedict on Friday, July 10?

tCertainly the tone from the Vatican since Obama's election last November has been basically positive, accenting potential areas of cooperation such as anti-poverty efforts, disarmament, multilateralism in foreign affairs, and outreach to the Islamic world. Vatican officials were particularly struck by the seemingly broad areas of coincidence between Benedict's messages to Muslims during his mid-May trip to the Middle East and Obama's speech in Cairo on June 4.

tOn the other hand, Vatican officials are sensitive to impressions of a split between Rome and the American bishops vis-à-vis Obama, given that several bishops in the States have struck a more confrontational posture over the "life issues." In that regard, Obama's respectful language about the American bishops during a recent Q&A session with religion writers in Washington was especially well received here.

tMost senior diplomats and church-watchers in Rome expect there will be a reference in the Vatican's public statements to the church's concern for human dignity "from conception to natural death," the usual way of flagging issues such as abortion and embryonic stem cell research.

tNonetheless, the sense here remains that both sides want the meeting to create the basis for a constructive working relationship. For that reason, most bets right now are running against any public reference to a "frank exchange" on Friday afternoon.

tIf not quite the Zapatero option, in other words, most sources here don't expect a Pelosi or a Blair.

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