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Benedict, Obama emerge from meeting, all smiles

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 10, 2009

President Obama, Pope Benedict greet in Vatican (CNS photo)

President Obama met one-on-one with Pope Benedict today at the Vatican where the two men exchanged the greetings as the president was escorted into Benedict's private apartment. The two leaders then went into the Papal Library where Obama sat on one side of wooden desk and Benedict sat on the other.

After photographers were ushered away, the men met for almost 30 minutes before emerging smiling. The pope then received the Obama staff and gave each a small gift.

When leaving Obama could be heard telling the pope: "I look forward to a very strong relationship. Thank you. God bless you."

A Vatican press officer gave the following report:

> The police presence had been tight around the Vatican this week as Heads of State and Government took advantage of the Group of Eight Summit in L?Aquil central Italy to seek audiences with Pope Benedict.
>
> But none was as anticipated as this first encounter between the Pope and the American Leader.
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> The President arrived shortly after 4 pm local time, in motorcade direct from the G8 summit high in the central Apennines, to the Saint Damaso Courtyard below the papal apartments where an honour guard of the Swiss Guard and Papal Household awaited him, led by Msgr. James Harvey.
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> After a brief meeting with Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone he was led to the ornate papal throne room where Pope Benedict was waiting to greet him.
>
> While pictures were being taken at the start of the meeting, the pope immediately asked president Obama about the summit, to which the president replied: "It was very productive, particularly today".
>
> Doors where then closed on the outside world while the Pope and President retired for private discussions lasting over 20 minutes.

Emerging from their talks, the Pope and President Obama posed for photographs, while the President presented the First Lady and members of his Staff.

Gifts were then exchanged. The US President presented the Holy Father a stole originally belonging to Saint John Neumann, while the Pope in turn presented President Obama a copy of his encyclical and a mosaic of St Peter?s Square.

Earlier First Lady Michelle Obama and their children Malia and Sasha had been given a private tour of St Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel. At shortly after five pm the Presidential family took their leave of the Pope and the Apostolic Palace bound for Ghana Africa.

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