

Benedict, Obama meeting marked by clarity, respect

Nicholas P. Carfardi | Jul. 10, 2009



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The meeting of the Holy Father with President Barack Obama has come and gone, and the Apostolic Palace is still standing. To be sure, the pope and the president were far from being on the same page on every subject. What two heads of state are? The Holy Father teaches that abortion is an intrinsically evil act that should never be permitted. President Obama sees abortion as a tragedy in every instance, which the law should seek to limit but not prohibit.

On this topic and a few others, they evidently agreed to disagree, not in polemical anger, but in a clear understanding that such issues are difficult ones in a pluralistic society, in which well-meaning people, "exercising the right to abide by one's own conscience," in the words of the post-meeting Vatican press release, might have different moral solutions to the same problem.

The remarks of Cardinal Georges Cottier, Dominican theologian emeritus of the papal household, published early last week, in which the Cardinal praised the president's position in seeking a common ground "to reduce the number of women seeking abortion," were an obvious Vatican-planned prelude to this result.

But the sensitivity of these topics was not a bar to the pope and the president's agreement on so many other issues. At the start of the week of their meeting, Pope Benedict issued his third encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*.

This encyclical is a clarion call "to manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the crisis; to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis and the greater imbalances that would result; to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration...." (§ 67)

If he been a credentialed reporter to the G8 sessions in L'Aquila, the pope could not have better described the positions that President Obama took at the G8 meetings. On these vital issues, the two world leaders are very much in sync. If anything, on these issues, the pope may even lean to the left of the president.

What is going on here? The pope welcomes to the Apostolic Palace a political leader whom some of his priests have characterized as an "abortionist" or worse, they talk seriously about this and other issues, they agree that they can work together for the benefit of mankind, they exchange gifts and they part, with the pontiff saying, "I thank you for all your work! I'll pray for you!"

According to the Catholic neo-cons, it was not supposed to happen this way, if it was supposed to happen at all.

Actually, this result was well-telegraphed in advance to anyone paying attention. I have already mentioned Cardinal Cottier's conciliatory remarks, but there were other indications as well. The fact that the audience was scheduled at 4 p.m. to fit the president's schedule is more important than one may realize. Not only are such afternoon audiences against papal protocol, nobody does anything serious in Rome in July after 1 pm. It is too hot. Both sides really wanted this meeting.

And there were the other well-marked indicators before this: the even-handed approach of *L'Osservatore Romano*, with its flattering coverage of the election results and its balanced evaluation of Obama's first 100 days in office; the pope's congratulatory telegram to the president immediately upon his election and not, as is customary, on his swearing-in months later.

And then there is that language in Chapter 9 of *Caritas in Veritate* that the neo-cons and other creators of wedge issues wish was not there: "The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim to interfere in any way in the politics of States." The interior quote is from Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*. These words of the encyclical were singled out by Cardinal Paul Josef Cordes at the press conference on July 7 launching *Caritas in Veritate*.

In explaining the pope's thought, Cardinal Cordes said, "The Church is not a political party, nor is it an actor in the political process. Woe to those who reduce the mission of the Church to a worldly pressure group seeking political results."

The pope, perhaps unlike some other members of the cloth, does not want to play politics. He wants to educate hearts and minds. He wants to bring people, freely and on their own, to faith in the entire Christian message.

He even gave the president some homework to do. He wants him to read *Dignitatis Personae*, the recent Vatican document on bioethics. And I bet that the president will read it, so that the next time that pontiff and president meet, their mutually respectful conversation can continue. We should all go and do likewise.

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