

No retreat on abortion, but Vatican gives Obama the benefit of the doubt

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Ever since Pope Benedict XVI set aside Vatican protocol to send a telegram of congratulations to Barack Obama on Nov. 5, ahead of his actually taking office, the Vatican has often seemed warmer to Obama than some voices in the American Catholic church, including some American bishops.

Trying to make sense of this contrast, the key question has seemed whether the Vatican is less bent on emphasizing the "life issues" than the American bishops, preferring to accent areas of agreement such as the Middle East and climate change, or whether they're simply more willing to give Obama the benefit of the doubt despite an equally keen concern with his pro-choice policies.

In that regard, yesterday's 35-minute meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and Obama made two things clear:

First, Benedict XVI yields pride of place to no one in the depth of his pro-life commitment, and there was no mistaking the forceful message the pontiff delivered to Obama on that score;

Second, the Vatican still seems inclined to a more benign reading of Obama's positions than his fiercest American critics.

According to a statement released yesterday by the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the first issue to surface between Obama and the pope was "the defense and promotion of life," as well as "the right to abide by one's conscience," which Lombardi explained as a reference to debates in America over conscience protections for health care workers who object to abortion.

Benedict even used the traditional exchange of gifts with heads of state to reinforce the point. This week, the pontiff has been giving visitors an autographed copy of his encyclical on the economy, *Caritas in Veritate*. With Obama, however, the pope also offered a copy of *Dignitas Personae*, a recent instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on bioethics — the opening sentence of which reads, "The dignity of a person must be recognized in every human being from conception to natural death."

Responding to the pope's concerns, Lombardi said, Obama repeated his pledge to adopt policies aimed at bringing down the abortion rate, by addressing social conditions that sometimes compel women to have abortions. Although Obama has said that before, the fact that he did so in the presence of the pope, in the eyes of many Vatican personnel, lends the pledge extra weight.

To be sure, the two men covered a lot of other ground, from the Middle East peace process, where Lombardi said they found "general agreement," to the recently concluded G8 summit. Nonetheless, Benedict's obvious emphasis was on the life issues.

Both *L'Avvenire*, the official newspaper of the Italian bishops, and *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's leading daily, carried analysis pieces this morning suggesting that part of Benedict XVI's agenda was to support the American bishops in their challenge to the White House over abortion and embryonic stem cell research.

So, the difference between the Vatican and pro-life circles in the States vis-à-vis Obama isn't about content. It seems to have more to do with attitude: many senior personnel in the Vatican appear impressed with what they see as Obama's willingness to consider the church's positions respectfully, and thus they're inclined, at least at this stage, to regard him as a conversation partner rather than an enemy.

While reporters waited outside the pope's library yesterday afternoon during the private meeting with Obama, Monsignor Georg Gänswein, Benedict's private secretary, approached them to explain the pope's gift of *Dignitas Personae*. Gänswein said that "it could help [Obama] to better understand the position of the Catholic church" implying that Obama may be open to reasoned argument, not that he's locked into hard-and-fast ideological opposition.

In pro-life circles in the States, Obama's vow to work to reduce the number of abortions is often seen either as empty rhetoric, or as a way of ducking the real issue — whether all human life merits legal protection. In the Vatican, however, it plays to better reviews.

Lombardi called Obama's promise "a personal demonstration of commitment" and a sign of "giving positive attention to the positions of the church."

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life, and thus effectively its top pro-life official, called Obama's response to the pope "an example of positive secularism, which knows how to listen to the different positions which are present in society."

To some extent, the Vatican's tendency to read Obama in a more sympathetic light than many American Catholics has to do with global context. For example, after yesterday's meeting, a senior Vatican official from Spain told *NCR* that he was "amazed" by Obama's willingness to take seriously what the Catholic church has to say.

In Spain, if the church dares to say anything to Zapatero, it's taken as an insult and an act of grave interference," this official said, referring to Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who has pursued liberal social policies on abortion and gay marriage.

Here you have a secular liberal who wants dialogue with the church," the Vatican official said. "It's astonishing."

In the wake of the encounter between pope and president, therefore, one might sum up where things stand this way: The Vatican's dialogue with Obama over abortion and other life issues is not going to be dialed down for the sake of tactical gains in other areas — but it will be dialogue, not cultural war, among two parties determined to construe the other's motives in broadly positive terms.

Perhaps the truly interesting question now is whether that spirit of generosity will make its way across the Atlantic, and help shape the domestic debate in America too.

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