

Will Obama's Catholic critics now be as respectful to the president as the pope?

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 11, 2009 NCR Today

One word jumped out at me from the official communique issued by the Holy See after the meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and President Barack Obama: The exchange of views was described as cordial.

My colleague John Allen strikes a similar note in his post here when, after an excellent analysis of the differences between the Vatican's approach to Obama and that of some of his more vocal Catholic critics stateside, he poses the issue thusly: "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.?"

I think the thing that most galled many of us Catholics who support Obama was precisely the lack of generosity evidenced in so many of the statements about him in the run-up to his appearance at Notre Dame.

This lack of generosity was perhaps especially obvious and troublesome to me because I worship occasionally at a mostly black parish here in Washington, St. Augustine's. The pain these loyal Catholics felt at the barrage of criticism, some of it incendiary, was palpable. To them, understandably, it was just another instance of beating up on the black guy. Going forward, I wish Obama's critics would be mindful of how black Catholics view their harsher attacks.

Lord knows, everyone has a right to criticize the President. I have done so when I disagree with him. Indeed, argument and disagreement is the very rockbed of our democracy. But, venom is another matter. So is disrespect. The Holy Father clearly had no qualms about stating with his quintessential clarity the Church's teachings on life issues but he did so with respect and he did so by actually showing up to meet the President. Is that too much to ask of the President's domestic critics?

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