

Signals from Rome: engagement and confrontation

Thomas P. Melady | Oct. 6, 2009



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In a two-month period, Rome sent American Catholics two clear signals. One was on engagement -- the historic meeting of President Barack Obama with Pope Benedict XVI on July 10. The other signal was on the resignation of Scranton, Pa., Bishop Joseph F. Martino on Aug. 31.

For the past decade there has been considerable discussion centered around two words: *engagement* and *confrontation*.

These two words are at the heart of the question of how American Catholics respond in a pluralistic democracy to policies that run counter to Catholic teachings.

Engagement emphasizes the use of strategy to convince the other side about the validity of a position and being civil about it. Confrontation on the other hand represents firm opposition to any civil discussion of the issue on the basis that the issue is non-negotiable.

The actual matter energizing these discussions is abortion. While there are other issues, they do not ignite the passion as abortion does.

Engagement

A significant signal came from Rome in regard to the July 10 meeting of President Obama with Pope Benedict. The pope was prepared extensively for the meeting. What were the overriding goals and ideals of the 44th President of the United States? They were carefully researched and the Holy See was well prepared for this historic meeting.

The initial contacts were all well planned. In an unprecedented first step, Pope Benedict in a warm message congratulated President Obama on his election and did not wait until it was official several weeks later when the Electoral College met. One friendly gesture was followed by another and the then President-elect Obama telephoned the Holy Father in late November last year.

In the weeks and months following the election, there was a mini surge of attacks on the newly elected president by a few Catholic clerical and lay leaders on his position concerning abortion. It was soon noted at the time that Vatican connected media at the same time refrained from such criticism.

The July 10 Obama-Benedict meeting occurred several days after the Vatican released to the public the new encyclical "Charity in Truth" which in so many ways converged with ideas of the new U.S. president.

The meeting itself could be classified as a model for two leaders discussing the world issues in a civil way. One was the question on how to develop a dialogue with the world Islamic community. This has been a number one challenge for the United States and also for the worldwide Christian community.

While convergence characterized most aspects of the Obama-Benedict conversation, one subject was discussed where there was disagreement. It was the question of the legality or the right of a woman for an abortion. The Catholic teaching was clearly stated by Pope Benedict, and President Obama set forth why he believed in the right of a woman to select abortion.

Engagement is the one word to describe the Benedict-Obama meeting of July 10th.

Confrontation

Less than two months after the Obama-Benedict meeting, another event occurred that also was a signal from Rome. On Aug. 31, after seven years as the bishop of Scranton, Pa., Joseph F. Martino, announced his resignation. At 63, a relatively young age for a bishop, he stepped down for reasons of "health." There is no new assignment as the head of a diocese or other church structure for him.

Bishop Martino gave the appearance of being the advocate of confrontation. In the quiet area of Scranton, located in the northeastern corner of Pennsylvania, Scranton was from the standpoint of culture a very Catholic city of around 75,000 inhabitants. A majority were the children or grandchildren of Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants who came mostly as workers in the complex of coal and steel mines, factories and related small business operations.

The beauty of the American dream was soon realized. Scranton is the home of both the University of Scranton and Marywood University, both Catholic institutions.

Catholic social teachings were part of the culture. The labor movement had strong local support and many Catholics from neighboring areas visited the Basilica of the National Shrine of St. Ann for prayer and spiritual direction.

Within a year after his installation as bishop in 2002, the atmosphere began to change. The bishop gave the appearance of being ready to speak publicly in regard to the political leadership of the state and the country.

Whereas the appearance of the overwhelming number of U.S. bishops was pastoral, the statements from Bishop Martino seemed focused on President Obama, Vice President Biden, and Senator Robert P. Casey Jr., D-Pa. Media seems to give more headlines to negative statements than to positive ones. A good number of such negative statements came from the then bishop of Scranton.

In the past few years Washington Archbishop Donald Wuerl, Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, Philadelphia Cardinal Justin Rigali, and New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan have been clear and unambiguous about Catholic teachings on all major issues. Their image was and remains pastoral. But Bishop Martino was in the news on political issues more than the four archbishops!

In my opinion, a signal was sent from Rome. After seven years of a confrontational style of governance, the resignation of Bishop Martino was accepted by the Holy See. Cardinal Rigali of the neighboring Philadelphia archdiocese will administer the diocese until a successor is selected by Pope Benedict. The new bishop will

have the best wishes of many faithful Catholics in this northeast corner of Pennsylvania who understand that there needs to be plenty of healing in this historic Catholic corner of their state.

In my recent visit to Rome, it was easy to see the impact of Pope Benedict's engagement style. It is also apparent that there are some differences with some aspects of the style and rhetoric present in the U.S. Catholic circles. While many in Rome view the Catholic health network in the United States as being a symbol of Catholic inspired caring for the sick, one prelate in Rome said he could not understand some of the recent criticism in American Catholic circles of the Catholic network. Even more strongly was the surprise that some Catholics in the United States criticized Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley for presiding at the funeral of the late Senator Edward Kennedy.

Engagement or confrontation? These are sometimes a mixture of styles. Modern communication makes it possible to learn and observe one from the other. In 2009, the signals from Rome are clear. Will it make a difference in 2010?

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