

Obama and Benedict: A partnership delayed, but not yet denied

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 9, 2010 All Things Catholic

Tomorrow marks the one-year anniversary of the first, and, to date, only meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and U.S. President Barack Obama. Fireworks probably won't mark the occasion on either side of the Atlantic, given that hopes for a "grand partnership" between the two leaders so far have fizzled.

A partnership delayed, however, does not have to mean a partnership denied.

Not so long ago, the stars seemed aligned for an "odd couple" coalition between Benedict and Obama, despite obvious contrasts in both substance and style. The Vatican reacted warmly to Obama's ascent, with the pope departing from custom to send a personal telegram congratulating Obama on his "historic" election. When Benedict XVI traveled to the Holy Land in May 2009 and Obama delivered a major address around the same time in Cairo, there seemed a striking convergence in their visions of détente between the West and the Islamic world. As fate would have it, their meeting last year came on the heels of the Benedict's long-awaited social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, and ethical reform of the global economic system seemed another area of intersection.

Those points seemed to provide raw material for collaboration between the world's most important "hard power" and its most unusual "soft power" -- the only religion with its own diplomatic corps. If the hip new progressive leader of the United States and the consummate man of tradition atop the Catholic church could join forces in areas where they agreed, optimists argued, mountains could move. (For a precedent, think about Bono and John Paul II standing shoulder-to-shoulder in favor of debt relief during the Jubilee Year of 2000).

Over the last twelve months, little of that promise has been realized.

Globally, it's hard to detect any transformative impact on either the relationship with Islam, or a new ethical vision of the economy, as a result of joint efforts by Obama and Benedict. In Rome, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Miguel Diaz draws positive reviews on a personal level, but observers say the embassy during his tenure has so far kept a low profile -- in part, some speculate, because of the broader uncertainties surrounding the relationship.

Those uncertainties can be expressed in four points.

First, both Obama and the pope have been distracted over the past twelve months. For most of the past year, the White House was focused on passing a domestic health care reform bill, and today Obama is struggling to contain the political fallout from the oil spill in the Gulf. Meanwhile, Benedict XVI has watched the sexual abuse crisis reignite in Europe, generating hard questions about both the Vatican's response and his own personal history. It's not clear whether either administration at the moment has the focus, or the political capital, to sustain a daring new global initiative.

Second, the Vatican is obviously influenced in its approach to the White House by the U.S. bishops. When various voices in the Holy See expressed enthusiasm about Obama in 2008, they felt blow-back from several

senior U.S. prelates, who charged that the Vatican's embrace was undercutting their efforts to press the new administration on abortion and other life issues. Those memories are still fresh, and partly as a result, Rome was careful not to do anything over the past year that might have weakened the efforts of the American bishops to hold the line on abortion in the health care debate.

Third, while Obama seems to have a genuine interest in the Vatican, it's not always clear his enthusiasm is shared by the apparatchiks who rule the roost in the U.S. State Department or in the Democratic establishment. (For an illustration of the point, read Raymond Flynn's memoirs about his years as the Ambassador to the Holy See during the Clinton administration. It once took him an entire week to persuade Clinton aides that the president should take a phone call from John Paul II).

Fourth, the Vatican appears to be going through a period of retrenchment in its diplomatic relationships. Diplomats in Rome, and hardly just the Americans, complain that it's become more difficult to get meetings with senior Vatican officials or to reach them on the phone, and it's even harder to get information when you do finally get through. The perception is that Vatican diplomacy has become reactive rather than taking the initiative, becoming tightly focused on core institutional priorities, such as protection of Christian populations in Islamic nations, rather than broader humanitarian concerns. To what extent this is the result of a conscious policy choice, or whether it's simply an index of drift in the Secretariat of State under Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, is a debated point, but the result is the same: Diplomats say the Vatican is engaging them less, making it difficult to launch new projects.

Those impediments, however, do not have to be eternal.

Obama seems anxious to move the ball on other elements of his agenda, at least some of which (such as immigration reform) create the possibility of common cause, not conflict, with the bishops. The White House has an eye on both the 2010 and 2012 elections, when the 67 million Catholics in America will once again be in play. Senior Vatican officials, meanwhile, are anxious to show that the papacy has not been paralyzed by the sexual abuse crisis. (Gian Maria Vian, the editor of *L'Osservatore Romano*, told me this week in Rome that one reason the paper has not devoted a tremendous amount of space to the subject is because they don't want to seem obsessed with it.)

Here and there, the two sides have sent reassuring signals. The Vatican appreciated a recent brief from the Obama administration before the U.S. Supreme Court arguing that sovereign immunity ought to insulate the Vatican in a sex abuse lawsuit in Oregon, even if the Supreme Court ultimately chose to let the case proceed.

In November there will also be a change in leadership within the U.S. bishops' conference. Though the transition from Cardinal Francis George to Bishop Gerald Kicanas won't change much in terms of the bishops' official priorities, a new moment could create momentum for new possibilities.

Ultimately, however, the case for partnership between Obama and Benedict shouldn't be about short-term gains for either man. The core argument concerns proper institutional roles, beyond the vicissitudes facing whoever happens to be president or pope at a given moment. In the end, it's simply good for the world if its hard and soft powers work well together -- even if, at some points and on some issues, they will also be at odds.

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This week marks not just the anniversary of the meeting between Benedict and Obama, but also the release of *Caritas in Veritate*. (The encyclical was presented in a Vatican news conference on July 7, 2009, although formally it carried the date of June 29, the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul.)

Originally projected for release in 2007 in order to mark the fortieth anniversary of Pope Paul VI's social

encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, the document was delayed for two years in order to allow Benedict to reflect on the implications of the global economic crisis.

At the PR level, *Caritas in Veritate* is among the few clear success stories in recent Vatican experience. Timing its release to coincide with a G8 meeting in Italy and the encounter between the pope and Obama ensured significant global interest, and Benedict's analysis (including his call for a world political authority with "real teeth") generated wide, and often positive, editorial comment around the world.

Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, for example, editorialized that "the letter's strength is in challenging all ordinary agendas, and in denying that business, politics and morality are separate, watertight compartments of human life." Even *The Economist* conceded that "despite some lapses into trendy jargon," *Caritas in Veritate* is "certainly not a banal or trivial document" and will "occupy a prominent place among religious leaders' competing attempts to explain and address the problems of an overheated, overcrowded planet."

To mark the one-year anniversary of the encyclical, *L'Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference, published interviews on July 7 with two leading Catholic commentators: Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, a distinguished economist and since September 2009 the chairman of the Vatican Bank, and Archbishop Giancarlo Maria Bregantini, president of the Italian bishops' Commission for Social Problems, Labor, Justice and Peace.

Taken together, the two interviews seem to make a single point, one with obvious relevance for divided American Catholics: Defending the unborn and defending the poor are a package deal, and ignoring one at the expense of the other is always a mistake. (The attempt to cajole the church's pro-life and peace-and-justice wings into a better working relationship would seem deliberate, since in Italian terms Gotti Tedeschi is seen as a prominent conservative while Bregantini is a liberal favorite.)

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Here are a few highlights from the interview with Gotti Tedeschi, who worked at senior levels for various banks and multi-national companies in addition to teaching economics in Milan and Turin before taking over at the Vatican Bank (technically, the "Institute for the Works of Religion.")

What should world leaders have learned from *Caritas in Veritate*?

Assuming they actually read it, they should have understood three things: Economic development isn't possible where people don't have children, and it can't be founded either on consumption or debt. In sum, economic development is either integral or it doesn't exist.

Can one say that the economic crisis "rewrote" the encyclical?

One might say that in those two years, some points were integrated: think about the first chapter, where *Humanae Vitae* [Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical on birth control] is forcefully confirmed, as a way of clarifying that the reason for the economic crisis is a collapse in fertility. The refusal of life -- induced in the Western world from 1975 to 1985 by neo-Malthusian movements -- is at the origin of the economic decline, and of the various "compensatory maneuvers" attempted over the last 25-30 years.

Everybody has commented on this encyclical. What are the most common errors?

The first is that many go directly to the fifth chapter, which speaks about the redistribution of wealth, the economy as gift, and so on. They read it forgetting about the other four chapters, and ignoring the introduction -- it's like reading the Ten Commandments by skipping the first. Other commentators held that the

pope wanted to give a new shape to capitalism: however, Benedict XVI does not give lessons to the economy, because his call concerns not the means but the ends. The market and capitalism are instruments, and the pope knows that an instrument in itself is neither good nor bad.

At the distance of a year, what does Gotti Tedeschi think of the encyclical?

I'm convinced that nothing is more rational than Catholic morality, and that this is one of the most rational encyclicals -- more than *Rerum Novarum*. All of *Caritas in Veritate* is permeated by a clear thrust: that the means cannot take on a moral autonomy, that they must have a clear end, and that this end is explained by the truth which the human person needs as a point of reference. In that sense, the introduction is almost a mini-encyclical against the dominant nihilism.

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The following are a couple of highlights from the interview with Archbishop Bregantini, well known for his social advocacy. At the moment, Bregantini is asking critical questions about a mini-boom in windmills in his region of Molise, in central Italy. While representing a potential source of clean energy, the wind mills have been constructed, according to critics, in poorly chosen locations without regard for environmental impact. Some critics charge they're more a boon for certain well-connected contractors than for the environment.

What's the fundamental intuition of the encyclical?

I think the heart of it, which seems ever more profound, is that ethics improves the economy. The pope recalls that rules of an ethical nature render economic activity better able to serve the human person and to protect the "little ones" of the earth, who otherwise would be crushed. The pope, following the Christian anthropological vision, asks that respect always be given to the little ones, whether we're talking about unborn life, the family, the relationship with the environment, and in all other areas.

What form does this intuition take?

What's striking in the encyclical is the deep logical coherence, even ontological coherence, between respect for a baby in its mother's womb and respect, for example, for creation, for the migrant laborer, for everything God has created. The pope proposes a coherent ethical vision. For example, while I defend Molise from excessive windmills, I also look to the struggling family expecting another child, the young man who's unemployed, and the elderly person who needs dignified hospice care. This means there's a deep unity to the struggle against everything that kills life.

What does this mean concretely?

For the church, it implies a precise duty to take sides against anyone who threatens the dignity of the earth with the same evangelical zeal with which we condemn those who kill a life in the mother's womb. This needs to happen at various levels in the defense of life.

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As a footnote, the "True Wealth of Nations" research project at the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, an independent body hosted at the University of Southern California, is organizing an event in Rome in tandem with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace Oct. 15-16 titled "*Caritas in Veritate* and the United States."

The symposium brings together a diverse sampling of leading intellectual lights from the American Catholic church, along with officials from the Council for Justice and Peace, to ponder the reception of the encyclical in

the United States and its potential implications. Along with the best and brightest of American Catholic thinkers, organizers have also asked me to sit in -- apparently on the theory that such a high-brow event needs at least one amateur to lower the tone.

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