

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 12, 2011 at 8:42am

Obama meets quietly with head of U.S. bishops

by Michael Sean Winters



CNS photo

President Obama met with New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan without fanfare Nov. 8, the White House has confirmed.

Dolan is the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The men discussed a range of issues related to the often complicated and recently fractious relationship between the administration and the U.S. church hierarchy. A spokesperson for the USCCB declined to confirm or deny the meeting.

The meeting came in advance of next week's plenary meeting of the USCCB in Baltimore at which the bishops will discuss their new ad hoc committee on religious liberty. It was sandwiched between two of Obama's foreign trips, to France for the G-20 summit and to Asia.

According to a White House official who spoke with *NCR* on background, the meeting was part of the Obama administration's work with faith leaders from across the spectrum, and was one among many meetings with officials from the Catholic Church and the administration.

The official also noted that the Obama administration has robust partnerships with organizations such as Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities USA to serve individuals and families in need across the country and the world. The official said that the administration looks forward to continuing these critical partnerships in the future.

The meeting between the president and Dolan comes against the backdrop of continued news stories about friction between the administration and the bishops. In today's Washington Post, Jerry Markon reports on congressional Republicans inquiring into the decision by the Department of Health and Human Services not to renew a contract with the USCCB for a program assisting the victims of human trafficking. Another article in the Post, by Religion News Service's David Gibson, highlights that tension between the White House and the USCCB.

On the other hand, in *NCR's* John Allen's just published book, *A People of Hope: Archbishop Timothy Dolan in Conversation with John Allen, Jr.*, based on a series of interviews with Archbishop Dolan, the prelate had kind words for the president. "I've been impressed with Obama's sincerity," Dolan says in the book. "On the day of the vote on health care, which was a tough day for us, I was talking to Patrick Gaspard [Director of the Office of Political Affairs in the White House].

He said that some of the things Congressman Bart Stupak had said about a group of women religious who came out in favor of the legislation were very uncivil. I said, "Patrick, there's been a lack of civility on both sides. Have you read Maureen Dowd this morning? For anybody you can bring up on the pro-life side who's been uncivil, I can match it." He said, "Point well taken." I then remarked, "Having said that, I think the man you work for, the president, has been a model of civility." I do admire that."

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