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On abortion and contraception, Vatican puts words in context

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Analysis

Vatican City — On successive days in mid-January, Pope Francis and his top collaborator at the Vatican made public statements that provided a lesson in Franciscan contextualization of highly loaded moral issues.

On Monday, the pope told the Vatican diplomatic corps that he found it "horrifying just to think that there are children, victims of abortion, who will never see the light of day."

That was strong language, especially for a pope who has spoken relatively little about abortion. His words had even more impact given the setting: not before a group of clergy, nuns or Catholic doctors, but in a room full of ambassadors, almost all of them from countries where abortion is legal in at least some cases.

Pope Francis' words were even more significant because of the kind of speech in which they occurred. Popes normally use talks to diplomats to survey crises and conflicts around the globe and urge the pursuit of peace, which is what Pope Francis for the most part did. In such a context, references to anything other than geopolitics are bound to stand out.

More specifically, Pope Francis' mention of abortion came in the middle of a paragraph about threats to human dignity such as hunger and human trafficking -- both issues about which the pope has spoken more often, as consistent with the priority he has set on helping the world's poor. The appearance of abortion in that company suggests the defense of unborn life is at the heart of Pope Francis' agenda.

The next day came a statement no less striking or significant in its implications for Vatican policy, even though it did not come from the pope himself.

Cardinal-designate Pietro Parolin, who as secretary of state is considered the highest Vatican official, met with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Tuesday for a conversation that lasted an hour and 40 minutes.

Peace in the Middle East, and particularly Syria, had been expected to be Topic A. Kerry was stopping in Rome between meetings in Paris and Kuwait devoted to the crisis in Syria. And Pope Francis has made ending the civil war in Syria a major focus, among other ways by leading a prayer vigil last September that drew 100,000 people to St. Peter's Square.

So it was no surprise when the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, reported that the two secretaries of state had discussed common concerns on Syria, as well as Israel and Palestine, and other questions of foreign policy. The attention-grabbing anomaly in his account of the diplomats' talk was a U.S. domestic issue.

Lombardi said the two men "also discussed the United States, especially the themes that have been the object of concern and discussion by the U.S. bishops: the health care reform and its relationship to guarantees of religious freedom."

That was evidently a reference to the contraceptive mandate: the Obama administration's requirement that nearly all health insurance plans, including those offered by most Catholic universities and agencies, cover sterilizations, contraceptives and some abortion-inducing drugs -- all of which are forbidden by the church's moral teaching.

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While legal challenges to the mandate are making their way through the U.S. courts, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., president of the bishops' conference, asked President Barack Obama on Dec. 31 to exempt from fines religious institutions who believe funding contraception and sterilization violate their religious principles.

If there were any doubts about the Vatican's support for the bishops' stand, they were dispelled by Parolin's decision to include the contraception mandate in a discussion of geopolitical priorities with Obama's top diplomat -- and then have the Vatican spokesman tell the press about it.

"We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods," Pope Francis said in a widely quoted interview published last September. "When we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context."

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