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Not just abortion, but also Assad, divides Francis and François

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NCR Today

Rome — In the wake of yesterday's highly anticipated tête-à-tête between Pope Francis and French President François Hollande, most post-mortems have focused on the differences between the Catholic Church and Hollande's Socialist government over "life issues" such as abortion, gay marriage and euthanasia.

The focus is understandable, in part because it was primarily those matters which induced more than 100,000 angry French Catholics to sign an on-line petition before the meeting imploring Francis to express their "profound malaise and growing concern".

In part, too, Hollande's transparent attempt to minimize the clash probably just made it loom larger. The French president's summary of the meeting after the fact made no mention of bioethics, while the Vatican's had it front and center.

However, it would be a serious misreading to conclude that the two men were basically aligned on other topics mentioned in the official communiques, especially the conflict in Syria, because the truth of the matter is that France and the Vatican have strikingly divergent visions there too.

In other words, it's not just abortion that divides Francis and François, it's also Assad.

The French have been among the most aggressive of the Western powers in insisting on bringing down the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, giving its explicit backing to the opposition coalition.

In September, when the U.S. was contemplating using force in Syria, Hollande urged action and even floated the idea of going it alone when the Americans pulled back.

France is so clearly perceived as an enemy in Damascus that Assad recently accused it of acting as a 'proxy' for Qatar and Saudi Arabia, suggesting that French foreign policy has been corrupted by 'petrodollars' from his regional rivals.

France also stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States in insisting that Iran be excluded from the 'Geneva II' conference on Syria unless it accepted the idea of a transitional government, meaning an endgame in which Assad is out of the picture.

The Vatican, however, is clearly more leery about the prospects of regime change.

Back in August, when reports that Assad had used chemical weapons first began to circulate, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican envoy to the United Nations in Geneva, warned against a 'rush to judgment' about the regime's culpability.

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In September, Francis called a global day of prayer fasting for peace, a gesture understood to signal opposition to a Western military intervention. Many analysts suggested the pope's position on Syria was actually closer to Russia and China than to the Western powers, and when Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Francis in November, he claimed afterwards that the two men saw largely eye to eye.

On Jan. 13, the Vatican held a behind-closed-doors summit on Syria in the run-up to Geneva II that involved heavyweights such as American policy expert Jeffrey Sachs and Egyptian statesman Monhammed El Baradei. The meeting occurred at the urging of the pope, and it ended with a pointed call for Iran to be included in the Geneva summit.

Various Vatican officials in recent months also have urged a moratorium on 'outside influences' stoking the Syrian conflict, understood in part as a way of opposing efforts to arm the anti-Assad rebels 'either by the West, or by other regional powers hostile to the Syrian government.

To be clear, it's not that the Vatican is any fan of Assad.

Those with long memories recall the way he embarrassed John Paul II during the late pope's 2001 trip to Syria, shortly after the young Assad had taken over the presidency from his father. During what was supposed to be a polite exchange of greetings at the beginning of the trip, Assad launched into a crude anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rant, blasting those who 'try to kill the principles of all religions with the same mentality in which they betrayed Jesus Christ and the same way they tried to betray and kill the Prophet Muhammad.'

The Vatican took seriously a Saudi report last February that elements within the Syrian military and intelligence services were considering trying to assassinate the papal ambassador in Syria, Italian Archbishop Mario Zenari, after he appeared to support some form of outside intervention. (Zenari had compared the international community to Pontius Pilate, accusing it of 'washing its hands of the Syrian conflict'.)

More broadly, Catholic social teaching upholds both human rights and political freedom, and the Vatican is well aware those values are often honored more in the breach than the observance under Assad.

The Vatican's viewpoint, however, is also heavily conditioned by the local Christian community in Syria, which tends to see Assad as the lesser of two evils vis-à-vis rising Islamic fundamentalism.

One press report recently quoted an Orthodox bishop in Syria as saying, "We should stand by the government, particularly President Assad, in order to prevent *Takfiris* from gaining control over this country," using the Arabic word for a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of apostasy.

That's true not just of the leadership of the churches, but also at the grassroots. A 29-year-old Latin rite Catholic in Damascus named Bashar Khoury, for instance, told NCR in July that if Assad falls he'd leave the country.

"If that happens, the radicals will take over and there won't be any future for me," Khoury said.

Hollande clearly came away from his session with Francis aware of the differences on Syria.

In his post-summit statement at Rome's French cultural center, he politely invited the Vatican to "welcome" the opposition coalition in Syria. He also flashed some sensitivity to the concern about the Christian minority, pledging support for efforts to defend persecuted Christians in the Middle East.

There was no sign, however, that either side had given in on the \$64,000 question: If dialogue means leaving a future role for Assad in Syria on the table, is it still preferable to violence?

That question hovered over yesterday's encounter, and if the calculus in Syria is still much the same two months from now, it also seems likely to figure in the March 27 summit between Pope Francis and U.S. President Barack Obama.

Bottom line: It's a mistake to assume that foreign policy is where Western leaders these days can take a break from their differences with the pope on other matters. Especially given the political capital Francis now enjoys, they're going to have to face a challenge from him on that front too, beginning in Syria.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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