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Controversy clouds Obama visit to Vatican

by Thomas Reese

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I have been predicting smooth sailing for the visit of President Barack Obama to the Vatican, but a story from Vatican Radio makes me more cautious.

The story, which ran Wednesday, is a typical pre-visit piece talking about visits to the Vatican by Obama and earlier presidents. But the last paragraph should cause heartburn in the White House.

Rather than talking about the international issues that might be discussed by the pope and the president, it totally focuses on the conflict between the president and the U.S. bishops over abortion, gay marriage, and the contraceptive mandate. No mention is made of foreign policy questions (Ukraine, Syria, the Middle East, Africa), let alone the common concern of the president and the pope for the poor.

The text reads:

President Obama's first meeting with a Pope occurred in he visited Rome in 2009. His upcoming audience with Pope Francis will take place in the context of a complex phase of the administration's relations with the Church of the United States, marked, in particular, by controversy on the implementation of health care reform (the "Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act," commonly known as "Obamacare") having to do with rules on mandatory health care coverage of sterilization, contraception, and abortion; and on other issues at the centre of public debate in the United States, such as the legalization of homosexual marriages.

If this were from any other news source, it would not matter. But Vatican Radio is under the direction of Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the head of the Holy See Press Office, and the story was sent out to the press by Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, his English language assistant.

If this is part of a coordinated media strategy coming out of the Vatican Secretariat of State, then this is bad news for the administration. On the other hand, sometimes a story is just a story and has no more authority than the individual author. We will have to wait and see.

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