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Obama and Francis meet with smiles, leave with intrigue over discussion

by Joshua J. McElwee

President Barack Obama's first visit to Pope Francis at the Vatican on Thursday was filled with much symbolism, with the two exchanging gifts and smiles -- along with a bit of intrigue over differing accounts over what was said between the leaders.

While the Vatican said in a statement following the meeting that discussions had touched upon issues of religious freedom -- an apparent nod to the U.S. bishops' strident opposition to parts of the federal health care reform law -- Obama said later that issue did not come up with Francis, but with the Vatican's secretary of state.

It was the second visit to a pope for the president, who previously visited Pope Benedict XVI in 2009.

In a statement following the meeting Thursday, the Vatican press office said it had been a "cordial" event with a particular focus on "current international themes" and "questions of particular relevance for the Church" in the United States.

Discussion of the latter topics, the press office said, included "the exercise of the rights to religious freedom, life and conscientious objection, as well as the issue of immigration reform."

During a press conference with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi later Thursday, Obama said the U.S. bishops' criticisms of the health care reform law were not brought up with Francis but at a separate meeting with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state.

In apparent contrast to the Vatican statement, Obama said he and the pope spent the "bulk" of their time together focused on issues like income inequality and challenges to global peace.

Social issues like same-sex marriage and contraception "really [were] not a topic of conversation" with the pope, Obama said. However, the president said, Parolin brought up a federal mandate requiring coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans, which the U.S. bishops have staunchly opposed.

Obama said he told Parolin that most religious groups are exempt from the mandate, but he pledged to continue working with the U.S. bishops on the matter.

Arriving at the Vatican with his motorcade at about 10:15 a.m. Rome time, Obama was led by Archbishop Georg Ganswein, prefect of the pontifical household, through the Vatican's frescoed loggia to his meeting with the pope.

"Wonderful meeting you," the president greeted Francis. "Thank you, sir, thank you."

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"It is a great honor. I'm a great admirer," Obama continued. "Thank you so much for receiving me."

The pope and president then sat down together for a private meeting without press, lasting from 10:27 a.m. until 11:19 a.m. Afterward, the two exchanged gifts.

Obama gave Francis a custom-made seed chest featuring fruit and vegetable seeds used in the White House garden. Administration officials said the gift was chosen partially because Francis decided earlier this month to open the gardens of the pope's typical summer residence, Castel Gandolfo, to the public.

The chest holding the seeds was made of American leather and reclaimed wood from Baltimore's Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, one of the first religious buildings constructed in the United States.

The basilica finished a restoration project in 2006. The Baltimore diocese was the first erected in the U.S.

"If you have a chance to come to the White House, we can show you our garden as well," the president told the pope while presenting his gift. Francis may visit the United States in fall 2015 for the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia. The pope replied to Obama in Spanish with "*Cómo no?*", "Why not?"

In return, the pope gifted the president two medallions, one of which symbolized solidarity and peace between the northern and southern hemispheres.

Francis also gave Obama a copy of his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel").

"I actually will probably read this in the Oval Office when I'm deeply frustrated. I'm sure it will give me strength and calm me down," the president said, smiling as he received the gift.

The pope smiled in response after hearing the translation of that remark.

The apostolic exhortation, issued in the fall, at points critiques the global market system, saying it does

not consider the needs of the poorest. "We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market," the pope writes at one point.

Leaving the audience amid the tuxedoed Papal Gentlemen, a corps of volunteers who serve the pope at official functions, the president joked: "His Holiness is probably the only person in the world who has to put up with more protocol than me."

Obama then asked the pope to pray for his family, saying they wanted to be with him at the Vatican.

"They've been very strong," Obama said. "Pray for them. I would appreciate it."

Replied the pope, according to several reports: "I will."

Obama was joined in his visit Thursday by Secretary of State John Kerry, a Catholic, and Ken Hackett, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

Among others joining the president at the meeting were U.S. National Security Advisor Susan Rice; Alyssa Mastromonaco, a deputy chief of staff for Obama; Dan Pfeiffer, Senior Advisor to the President for Strategy and Communications; and Jay Carney, the White House press secretary.

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