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An open letter to President-elect Barack Obama

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 7, 2008 All Things Catholic

For the record, nobody from the Obama transition team has solicited my advice about relations with the Vatican, and I would frankly be surprised if the question were yet on their radar screen. Others, however, are already speculating about how things might shake out; on Wednesday, for example, Reuters moved a story predicting a ?tricky? relationship between Rome and the Obama White House because of the abortion issue. As a thought exercise, I decided to pen an open letter to the president-elect about U.S.-Vatican ties over the next four years.

Mr. President-elect:

This letter is a plea to make U.S.-Vatican relations under your administration a priority, because of the enormous good in the world that could be accomplished by exploiting natural areas of common concern.

I?m aware that the stars may not seem especially well-aligned for such collaboration. A small number of Catholic bishops in the United States made statements during the campaign that favored your opponent, which may have left a bitter aftertaste among some of your supporters and advisors. It?s also clear to everyone that, barring a dramatic change of heart on your part, the White House and the Vatican will have deep differences during your term over ?life issues? such as abortion and embryonic stem cell research.

I would urge you, however, not to allow those points to obscure four basic political realities.

First, the Vatican and the United States need each other, whatever their differences may be in a given historical moment. What the United States is in the realm of ?hard power,? meaning coercive military and economic might, the Vatican is in terms of ?soft power,? meaning the capacity to stir action on the basis of ideas. Religion is a powerful motivating force in human affairs, and the pope has the biggest bully pulpit of any religious leader. It?s simply bad for everyone if these two forces are not on good speaking terms.

Second, it?s smart politics for you not to neglect the Vatican. As you know better than anyone, in some ways your reelection campaign in 2012 has already begun. You won the Catholic vote overall this time, but narrowly lost white Catholics; working cooperatively and respectfully with the Vatican could help you and your party with that group.

Third, the Vatican has a centuries-old diplomatic tradition of dealing with governments that, in one way or another, don?t follow the church?s line on certain matters. Despite those disagreements, Vatican diplomacy typically strives to keep lines of communication open and to seek common ground. In other words, they?ll want to do business with you where they can.

Fourth, the Vatican is eager for good relations with the United States in particular, regardless of which party

happens to be in power. The Vatican deeply admires the robust religiosity of America, in contrast with the pervasive secularism of much of Europe. The Vatican also believes that the United States is its most natural ally in promoting religious freedom and human dignity around the world.

The potential for collaboration is very real, because there are numerous areas where your policy positions dovetail with the social teaching of the Catholic church and the diplomatic interests of the Vatican. Among the most obvious examples are immigration, economic justice, peace, and environmental protection. In a statement this week congratulating you, Vatican spokesperson Fr. Federico Lombardi also expressed the Vatican?s desire to work together on Iraq, the Holy Land, Christian minorities in the Middle East and Asia, and the fight against poverty and social inequality.

In each area, you will find a clear track record of teaching from recent popes and a strong determination on the part of the Vatican?s diplomatic apparatus to move the ball. In fact, many of these topics represent areas in which the Vatican was at odds with the Bush administration and has longed for new American leadership.

Pope Benedict XVI himself has clearly opened the door to a positive working relationship.

The pope sent a telegram on Wednesday calling your election ?a historic occasion,? and offering his prayer that God will ?support you and the American people, so that through the good will of all, a world of peace, solidarity and justice can be built.? Lombardi likewise expressed hope that you ?will be able to match the expectations and the hopes directed towards the new president, effectively serving justice and rights, finding the best ways to promote peace in the world, favoring the growth and dignity of persons with respect for essential human and spiritual values.?

You?ll notice that neither the pope nor his spokesperson explicitly mentioned abortion or other areas of disagreement, and certainly their tone suggests that concern for the ?life issues? will not exclude cooperation in other areas. On the contrary, the Vatican seems to be doing everything it can to invite it.

May I suggest one more possibility for U.S.-Vatican partnership? I believe there is a historic opportunity for your administration and the Holy See to work together to move the international community, at long last, toward serious engagement on behalf of peace and development in Africa.

You are a hero to much of Africa, giving you a degree of political capital on the continent that no other Western leader could rival. At the same time, 2009 is shaping up as a ?Year of Africa? in global Catholicism. Over the next 12 months, Pope Benedict XVI will visit Cameroon and Angola; the African bishops will hold their plenary assembly in Rome; and bishops from all over the world will converge on Rome for a ?Synod for Africa.? All this suggests the possibility of synergy between the world?s most important political and spiritual leaders -- i.e., you and the pope -- to promote peace and development for Africa, where the world?s most impoverished and abandoned people are today found.

If you?re interested in forging such a partnership, the first important choice to make is who to send to the Vatican as your ambassador. Ideally, you will turn to someone known to have your ear, who will have real political influence in your administration, and who also knows the Catholic world. What you?re looking for, in other words, is a Democratic equivalent of James Nicholson, President Bush?s first Vatican ambassador. Nicholson had served as the chair of the Republican National Committee, and helped to steer the party?s outreach to Catholic voters. Bush sent a clear signal with that nomination that he was interested in the Vatican, and this is one case where it would behoove you to follow his lead.

Finally, one last piece of unsolicited advice: Mr. President-Elect, whatever else you do, please try to avoid repeating the mistakes of the last Democratic administration with regard to the Vatican.

In his memoirs, former Vatican Ambassador Raymond Flynn tells a depressing story from 1994 illustrating what I mean. During the lead-up to the U.N. conference on population in Cairo in 1994, Pope John Paul II called Flynn to the Vatican on a Saturday morning to personally request a telephone conversation with President Clinton. Flynn relayed the request urgently to the White House that afternoon, and got no response. He called again on Sunday and on Monday, both times with no results. Frustrated, Flynn then got on a plane to Washington on Tuesday. He cooled his heels outside the president?s office that night and most of Wednesday. Finally, he was admitted to the White House?s pre-Cairo war room, where he was told by Assistant Secretary of State Timothy Wirth that ?nobody is getting a chance to lobby the president on this one.? Dumbfounded, Flynn explained that the Bishop of Rome is not a lobbyist, and that it would be seen as a profound act of disrespect if the president wouldn?t even get on the phone. After almost a week, Clinton finally agreed to take the pope?s call.

The episode was symptomatic of a basic disinterest within the Clinton team about the Vatican, which at times shaded off into hostility. The result was that the U.S.-Vatican relationship during the Clinton years was more often defined by predictable differences than by imaginative areas of common purpose.

For what it?s worth, Mr. President-Elect, my advice is to get on the phone if the pope calls. Better yet, initiate the conversation yourself. You might be surprised about where it goes.

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Editor?s Note: The U.S. bishops will be meeting in Baltimore Nov. 10-13 for their annual fall assembly, and John Allen will be covering the event. Look for daily posting of his stories at **johnallen.ncrcafe.org** [1] and on **NCRonline.org** [2].

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