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Pope, president, likely to challenge each other

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On July 10, President Obama and his Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, will meet for the first time. They will like each other and find much in common. It is reasonable to suppose that their conversation will be framed as much by the Holy Father's recent encyclical writing as by the president?s policy initiatives.

Indeed, *Veritas in Caritate* (?Truth in Charity?) ? the title and substance of Benedict XVI?s much awaited and soon to be released third encyclical will likely provide an ample agenda for the Rome meeting.

In Barack Obama, Pope Benedict will find a leader taking practical steps to fulfill our obligations and opportunities to the world community. While historians will differ, and at this early point promise is surely not yet fulfillment, it can be argued that Obama reflects a fuller understanding of church teaching than any American president in modern time, even as other presidents have captured and pursued portions of this teaching.

As Holy Cross Father John I. Jenkins, president of the University of Notre Dame said in introducing President Obama at the University?s 2009 commencement:

> ?We honor [President Obama] for the qualities and accomplishments the American people admired in him when they elected him. . . . He is a leader who has great respect for the role of faith and religious institutions in public life. He has said: ?Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square.? He is the first African American to be elected president, yet his appeal powerfully transcends race. In a country that has been deeply wounded by racial hatred ? he has been a healer. He has set ambitious goals across a sweeping agenda -- extending health care coverage to millions who don?t have it, improving education especially for those who most need it, promoting renewable energy for the sake of our economy, our security, and our climate. He has declared the goal of a world without nuclear weapons and has begun arms reduction talks with the Russians. He has pledged to accelerate America?s fight against poverty, to reform immigration to make it more humane, and to advance America?s merciful work in fighting disease in the poorest places on earth.?

Of course, President Obama is not at one with the church on the issue of abortion and stem cell research. This, too, was conscientiously observed by Jenkins in his introduction, wherein he stated, ?but President Obama is not someone who stops talking to those who differ with him.?

This quality of the president I am privileged to know firsthand, and while I have not met His Holiness, certainly the public impression is that Benedict XVI is hardly someone reticent to insist upon the truth of the human person. The president has said in the past, too glibly for many Catholics, that on the issue of unborn life, he would ?agree to disagree? with our church. The Holy Father should probingly ask ?why?? -- after all, as Benedict has reflected in his draft: ?if personal and social sensibility toward the welcoming of a new life is lost, even other forms of welcoming (life) useful to social life become fruitless.?

The president thrives on intellectual give and take. Indeed, since the president has admitted that there are some matters of human right and dignity that necessarily do lie beyond majority determination, why isn?t the legal protection of the child in the womb within the ambit of the law? Is it because Obama thinks there is no evenhanded or effective way to apply legal sanction, or is it merely because of political calculation?

If it is because the president believes that it is better to address the tragic causes that would prompt a mother to act against her unborn child, the president should direct his own question to the Holy Father ? how welcoming ? in real, tangible ways ? are individual parishes to unwed mothers and in addressing their needs? The pope might inquire as to the specific steps being taken by the president?s faith office and outreach to reduce, as the Obama administration tends to say, ?the need for abortion.?

For his part, Obama might inquire ?Why isn?t it responsible for a president who governs people of many faiths, who differ on their conception of when personhood attaches, to favor embryonic stem cell research if the stem cells were produced in a petri dish and research of possible great assistance to the cure of chronic and fatal disease, when such cells were never intended for implantation anymore than other research cells containing DNA or RNA??

There are Catholic answers to these questions ? some better than others. It is not impertinent, or unhelpful, for each man to challenge the other. These are men of letters. They read; they study; they propose. Certainly, one can be entirely confident that the Holy Father in putting these queries would follow the pastoral constitution of the church and extend ?Respect and love . . . to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters.?

As *Gaudium et Spes* reflects, notwithstanding the opposition supposition of a small minority of American bishops, it is true that ?the more deeply we come to understand [an opponent?s] ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them.?

Of course, the point of the meeting is to illustrate how much can be done by the U.S. and the Vatican acting in concert ? since, as the pope?s encyclical draft reveals, when the great powers of the earth ? spiritual and temporal ? work as one, the chances of equating ?truth with trust and love? grows ever greater. Building that trust is very much the task of diplomacy.

As the world most assuredly by now grasps from Benedict?s recent travel to the Holy Land and Obama?s visit to Egypt, the world is fortunate to have these two diplomats engaged in the pursuit of peace and prosperity in its fullest and most just sense. Both men understand, as Dorothy Day did, that one never need wait for an institution to do good; you can simply go out and do some yourself.

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