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Obama, eyes on Vatican meeting, cites areas of cooperation

Joe Feuerherd | Jul. 2, 2009

NCR Publisher Joe Feuerherd and Obama (White House photo)

WASHINGTON
Pope Benedict XVI has ?taken extraordinary leadership? on a host of issues that could form the basis for additional U.S.-Vatican cooperation, President Obama told religion writers at the White House earlier today. Obama and the pope are scheduled to meet for the first time at the Vatican July 10, following the president?s participation in the three-day meeting of the Group of Eight industrialized countries.

The areas of additional cooperation between the Holy See and the United States could include, said the president, Middle East peace, worldwide poverty and climate change.

On one level, said Obama, the papal-presidential meeting represents typical diplomatic exchanges that take place ?with any other government.? But, he continued, ?this is more than just that.? Said Obama: ?The Catholic church has such a profound influence worldwide and in our country. The Holy Father is a thought leader and an opinion leader on so many wide-ranging issues and his religious influence is one that extends beyond the Catholic.?

?From a personal perspective,? said the president, ?having a meeting with the Holy Father is a great honor and something I?m very much looking forward to.?

The president responded to eight questions during the 45-minute Roosevelt Room briefing. Among the issues he addressed:

- Federal protections for health workers who choose not to participate in procedures, such as abortion, that violate their religious or ethical beliefs. The Obama administration rescinded ?conscience clause? provisions promulgated by the Bush administration as Bush?s term drew to a close. ?I think that the only reason that my position may appear unclear is because it came in the wake of a last-minute, eleventh-hour change in conscience clause provisions that were pushed forward by the previous administration that we chose to reverse,? said Obama. ?But my underlying position has always been consistent, which is I?m a believer in conscience clauses. I was a supporter of a robust conscience clause in Illinois for Catholic hospitals and health care providers.? He continued, ?I can assure all of your readers that when this review

is complete there will be a robust conscience clause in place. It may not meet the criteria of every possible critic of our approach, but it certainly will not be weaker than what existed before the changes were made.?

- Assistance to countries and individuals especially hard-hit by the world economic crisis. The United States has ?robust plan? to address the food security needs of poorer countries and will be promoting its approach at the G-8 meeting. But programs for the poor, he said, are not just international in focus. ?I think what I?ll also want to talk to the Holy Father about is the need to initiate some core reforms not just oversees, but here in this country, that assure basic security for individuals in this country not only poor, but also middle class, who are extremely vulnerable to bankruptcy if they get sick, to flat wages and incomes, [which] are making it more and more difficult for them to live lives of dignity and security. So everything from our health care reform agenda to our approach to education I think is geared towards providing greater opportunity.?
- Administration efforts to promote areas of agreement among abortion-rights supporters and opponents. The president said he expects to receive recommendations from a working group that includes both pro-choice and pro-life advocates later this summer. Said Obama, ?I can tell you, though, that on the idea of helping young people make smart choices so that they are not engaging in casual sexual activity that can lead to unwanted pregnancies, on the importance of adoption as a option, an alternative to abortion, on caring for pregnant women so that it is easier for them to support children, those are immediately three areas where I would be surprised if we don?t have some pretty significant areas of agreement.? The president said there would undoubtedly be areas ? he specifically mentioned contraceptive services ? of continued disagreement. But, he continued, ?I don?t know any circumstance in which abortion is a happy circumstance or decision, and to the extent that we can help women avoid being confronted with a circumstance in which that?s even a consideration, I think that?s a good thing.?

Obama?s meeting with the pope follows the controversy surrounding his recent commencement address at the University of Notre Dame, which raised the public ire of nearly 90 U.S. bishops who criticized the school for providing an honorary degree and a Catholic platform to a pro-choice president. Obama expressed no rancor toward those church leaders who spoke out against his presence at Notre Dame.

?Number one, one of the strengths of our democracy is that everybody is free to express their political opinions, and I take people?s opinions seriously,? said the president. ?I?m the president of all Americans, not just the Americans who happen to agree with me.? Further, said Obama, ?The American bishops have a profound influence in their communities, in the church, and beyond.?

The president noted, ?Although there have been criticisms leveled at me from some of the bishops, there have been a number of bishops who have been extremely generous and supportive even if they don?t agree with me on every issue. So in that sense the American bishops represent a cross section of opinion just like other groups do.?

Meanwhile, said Obama, at a recent Oval Office meeting with Chicago Cardinal Francis George, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, ?I expressed to him my interest in working in as constructive a manner as possible with the bishops on a range of issues.? Obama said his desire to work with church leaders is inspired by his experiences as a church-funded community organizer.

?You know, part of why establishing a relationship with the bishops is important to me is because I have very fond memories of Cardinal [Joseph] Bernardin, who was in Chicago when I first arrived to be a community organizer ? funded in part by the Campaign for Human Development ? and working with Catholic parishes on the south side of Chicago. And so I know the potential that the bishops have to speak out forcefully on issues of social justice.? Said Obama, ?I think there are going to continue to be areas where we have profound agreements and there are going to be some areas where we disagree. That?s healthy.?

Asked whether he sometimes felt he has been ?dragged into a largely intra-Catholic family fight? on issues that divide liberal and conservative Catholics, Obama again recalled Bernardin?s example, particularly as it relates to the ?seamless garment? of life issues the late cardinal saw as integral to Catholic teaching.

?Cardinal Bernardin was strongly pro-life, never shrank away from talking about that issue, but was very consistent in talking about a seamless garment and a range of issues that were part and parcel of what he considered to be pro-life, that meant that he was concerned about poverty, he was concerned about how children were treated, he was concerned about the death penalty, he was concerned about foreign policy.

?And that part of the Catholic tradition is something that continues to inspire me. And I think that there have been times over the last decade or two where that more holistic tradition feels like it?s gotten buried under the abortion debate.?

The president continued, ?Now, as a non-Catholic, it?s not up to me to try to resolve those tensions. As I said, all I can do is to affirm how that other tradition has made me, a non-Catholic, I think reflect on how I can be a better person and has had a powerful influence on my life. And that tells me that it might be a powerful way to move a broader set of values forward in American life generally.?

The president said that he and First Lady Michelle Obama have yet to decide on what, if any, religious congregation to join in the Washington area. The Obama family attends religious services when they spend the weekend at Camp David, he said, but may, in a concession to the disruption the president?s presence causes other worshipers, ultimately opt to rotate among different churches in Washington. In addition, said Obama, the controversy over his previous pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, ?made us very sensitive to the fact that as president the church we attend can end up being interpreted as speaking for us at all times.?

In addition to *NCR*, the Catholic press represented at the briefing included representatives from *America*, *Catholic Digest*, Catholic News Service, *Commonweal*, the *National Catholic Regis*ter, and Vatican Radio. From the secular media, a reporter from *The Washington Post* was present.

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