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Former papal theologian praises Obama's 'realism,' even on abortion

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In the run-up to President Barack Obama?s much-anticipated July 10 meeting with Pope Benedict XVI, an influential cardinal and Vatican adviser has praised Obama?s ?humble realism? and compared the president?s approach to abortion to the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas and early Christian tradition about framing laws in a pluralistic society.

Swiss Cardinal George Cottier, 87, former theologian of the papal household under Pope John Paul II, laid out those views in a cover essay in the current issue of *30 Giorni*, perhaps the most widely read journal of Catholic affairs in Italy.

Styled as an analysis of two Obama speeches ? his May 17 commencement address at the University of Notre Dame and his June 4 speech to the Islamic world in Cairo ? Cottier?s essay was overwhelmingly positive, repeatedly arguing that Obama?s ?realism?, as well as his commitment to finding ?common ground?, resonate with Christian tradition and the social teaching of the Catholic church.

Seen through American eyes, perhaps the most striking element was Cottier?s analysis of what Obama had to say at Notre Dame. The university?s decision to invite Obama, and to award him an honorary degree, were widely criticized in Catholic circles in the States, given Obama?s positions on abortion, embryonic stem cell research and other life issues. More than 80 bishops publicly objected to the event.

Cottier, however, compared Obama?s Notre Dame address to Pope Paul VI?s encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, in its accent on dialogue and common ground, and to the document *Dignitatis Humanae* of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on conducting the search for truth in a pluralistic society. Christians, Cottier wrote, ?can be in agreement? with Obama?s ?way of framing the search for solutions.?

Cottier noted that many American bishops have been critical of Obama on abortion, writing that ?on the one hand, those criticisms are justified, because ? non-negotiable values are involved.? Yet, he wrote, Obama offered ?positive indications? in his Notre Dame address of a desire to find common ground on the issue.

Cottier argued that Obama has not defended abortion as an absolute right, that he recognizes the ?tragic gravity? of the problem, that Obama does not defend ?relativism,? and that ?his words move in the direction of reducing the evil? by seeking to make ?the number of abortions as small as possible.?

Cottier invoked early Christian history to suggest that efforts to reduce the actual number of abortions, rather than to seek an outright legal ban, might be justifiable as a temporary expedient.

?I?m reminded of the first Christian legislators, who didn?t quickly abolish the tolerant Roman laws regarding practices which didn?t conform to the natural law, or which were actually contrary to it, such as concubinage

and slavery,? Cottier wrote. ?Change happened along a slow path, often marked by steps backward, as the Christian population increased, and, along with them, the impact of a sense of the dignity of the human person.?

?At the beginning, in order to guarantee the consent of the citizens and to protect social peace, the so-called ?imperfect laws? were kept in force, which avoided persecuting actions and behaviors in contrast with the natural law,? Cottier wrote. ?St. Thomas [Aquinas] himself, who certainly had no doubt that the law must be moral, added that the state must not enact laws which are too severe or ?high,? because they?ll be disrespected by the people, who won?t be able to follow them.?

?Political realism recognizes evil, and calls it by its name,? Cottier wrote. ?Yet it also recognizes that one must be humble and patient, combating evil without the pretense of eradicating it from human history through instruments of legal coercion.?

He said that the Catholic church is aware of the dangers of trying to totally eliminate perceived evils through the use of force, saying that was the problem with Communist regimes.
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tIn that regard, Cottier wrote, the recent murder of an abortion doctor in the United States illustrates that even the highest values can be become ?marching orders at the disposition of an aberrant ideology.?

tAll of that, Cottier wrote, puts the ?humble realism? of Obama in a positive light.

tWith regard to Obama?s Cairo speech to the Islamic world, Cottier praised it as a ?radical reject of the thesis of a clash of civilizations and an antidote to the tendency to apply negative stereotypes to others.? He compared Obama?s approach to international relations to that of John Paul II in the emphasis upon forgiveness and ?purification of memory.?

"The president also reaffirmed that democracy cannot be imposed from the outside, and that in the movement toward democracy every people must find its own path," Cottier wrote. "He underlined that religious liberty is fundamental for peace."

Noting that Obama cited the Sermon on the Mount during his Cairo speech, Cottier wrote that he "seemed to perceive its positive reflection and its inspiration for public life."

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