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Obama charm offensive ahead of pope meeting seems to be working

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tIf the White House strategy behind arranging a session for President Barack Obama with religious journalists on the eve of his visit to Pope Benedict XVI was to set a positive tone for that meeting, early returns in Rome suggest it?s working to perfection.

tThat session last Thursday, in which Joe Feuerherd of the *National Catholic Reporter* took part, has received extensive and largely positive coverage in the Italian press, including the official outlets of both the Italian bishops and the Vatican ? both of which generally reflect important currents in official Vatican thinking.

tObama is set to meet Pope Benedict XVI in the afternoon of Friday, July 10, just after the conclusion of a G8 summit in Italy and just head of the president's visit to Ghana.

tIn Saturday?s *Corriere della Sera*, Dino Boff, editor of *L?Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops, praised Obama?s ?great honesty? and ?great intelligence,? saying it was clear that Obama ?is not playing the game of trying to divide the Holy See from the American bishops.?

tBoff is a widely respected figure in Vatican circles, and his point about appearances of a split between the Vatican and the U.S. bishops is one that has been of growing concern both in Rome and in Catholic circles in America. If Obama was indeed successful in blunting that perception, it could prove important in shaping whatever public statement the Vatican makes after the July 10 session.

t?Obama tends to emphasize the points of contact? between his positions and the church, Boff said, ?and circumscribes those areas where there isn?t contact, though without ever denying them. When there isn?t agreement, he?s careful to speak in the least annoying fashion for the church.?

tBoff noted that while Obama?s respectful style doesn?t resolve all matters of substance, ?style is very important for being able to reach agreement.?

tIn its own Saturday edition, *L?Avvenire* carried a front-page essay by editorialist Andrea Lavazza arguing that Obama has demonstrated ?an attitude of listening and dialogue that deserves not to be under-estimated.?

tLike Boff, Lavazza was particularly struck by the respectful stance Obama took vis-à-vis the American bishops.

t?In a country that has established a sharp separation between church and state, and in which Catholics were for a very long time a politically ostracized minority ? that?s a position that can?t be taken for granted,? Lavazza wrote, adding that it can?t be taken for granted ?even in Italy, given the recurrent accusations of interference directed at the church.?

tNoting that Obama has expressed a desire to work with the Vatican on the Middle East, anti-poverty efforts,

climate change and immigration, Lavazza called those issues ?the great challenges of our epoch.?

tLavazza also noted approvingly that Obama has said his concern for the vulnerable comes in part from his experience of Catholic sensibilities, that Obama attends Sunday services, and that he receives a small devotional reflection every morning via e-mail.

t*L?Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, carried a small piece about the Obama interview on Saturday, leading off with his words of appreciation for the pope?s leadership role. *L?Osservatore* emphasized Obama?s insistence that he will always respectfully consider whatever criticisms the American bishops advance.

tOn abortion, *L?Osservatore* emphasized Obama?s pledges to help young people avoid unwanted pregnancies, to promote adoption, and to protect the right of health care workers to conscientious objection so they?re not compelled to provide abortion services.

tThe Vatican paper also touched upon Obama?s repeated pledges to help impoverished nations, a theme that should be much in the air when he meets Pope Benedict. The G8 summit which opens on Wednesday will consider global anti-poverty efforts, which are also expected to figure prominently in the pontiff?s new encyclical letter on the economy, *Caritas in Veritate*, to be released on Tuesday, July 7.

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