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Pope presses Obama on pledge to reduce abortions

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When President Barack Obama came calling on Pope Benedict XVI today, the two men enjoyed a ?truly cordial? encounter, according to a Vatican spokesperson, but at the same time there was no diplomatic silence from the pontiff about their differences over abortion and other ?life issues.?

Not only did Benedict press his pro-life case with his words to the president, but he even found a way to make the point with his gift, offering the president a copy of a recent Vatican document on bioethics. According to a Vatican spokesperson, the pope drew a repetition from Obama of his vow to bring down the actual abortion rate.

Beyond the life issues, the Vatican?s statement indicated that Benedict and Obama also found ?general agreement? on the Middle East peace process and other regional situations. The two leaders also touched food security, development aid especially for Africa and Latin America, immigration and drug trafficking, according to the statement.

Coming away from the meeting, however, it was hard to escape the impression that Benedict wanted to use it to deliver a clear pro-life message.

While Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said after the meeting that it would be wrong to interpret the pope?s message as a ?polemic,? he added that the life issues are ?important for the American church? and ?it would be ambiguous to try to hide these differences, or to put them in second place.?

According to a written statement from the Vatican, the first issues discussed during a 35-minute private meeting this afternoon in the Apostolic Palace were ?questions which ? constitute a great challenge for the future of every nation and for the true progress of peoples, such as the defense and promotion of human life and the right to abide by one?s conscience.?

The latter phrase was understood as a reference to the current debate in America over protections for health care workers who assert a conscientious objection to participating in abortions or other procedures. During a session with Catholic journalists last week, Obama promised a ?robust conscience clause? which would not weaken protections in vigor during the Bush administration.

In a briefing for reporters in Rome, Lombardi said that Benedict XVI said afterwards that Obama had seemed ?attentive? to the church?s concerns, and that Obama had reiterated his commitment to adopting policies that will bring down the actual number of abortions.

Lombardi said that Benedict XVI seemed ?very satisfied and content? with how the meeting went. Obama left the meeting saying to the pope that he wants to forge ?a very strong relationship? with the Vatican.

The face-to-face session between Obama and Benedict XVI, accompanied by two interpreters, was scheduled to last around 15 minutes, but in the end the two men were behind closed doors for more than 35 minutes. Afterwards Obama introduced his family to the pope, along with key members of his administration, and the two men exchanged gifts.

Typically that gift exchange is pro-forma, but this afternoon Benedict

XVI used it to underscore his message on the life issues. In addition to a signed copy of his recent encyclical on the economy, *Caritas in Veritate*, which has become the pope?s standard offering to heads of state this week, Benedict also gave Obama a copy of *Dignitas Personae*, an instruction from the Vatican?s doctrinal agency on bioethics released last December.

Dignitas Personae lays out the church?s position in defense of human life ?from conception to natural death,? and also treats a wide range of new bioethical questions such as embryonic stem cell research, cloning, preimplantation diagnosis and genetic engineering.

As reporters waited outside during the private session, a top papal aide approached them to explain that the pope was presenting Obama with a copy of *Dignitas Personae*. He said, ?The reading [of this document] could help the president better understand the church?s position.?

Later, as Benedict pointed the document out to him, Obama said it looked like he had ?some reading to do on the plane.?

Prior to his session with Benedict XVI, Obama sat down with the Vatican?s Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, for roughly 15 minutes.

Well before Obama even strolled into the Apostolic Palace, both sides had made clear they were committed to making this meeting happen.

Obama called on the pope in the middle of what is arguably among the busiest days of his presidency to date. This morning he wrapped up a G8 summit in the Abruzzo region of Italy, meeting with the heads of state of African nations and then conducting a bilateral meeting with President Jacob Zuma of South Africa. Obama then made his way to Rome to see the pope, en route to the airport for a state visit to Ghana, where he?s due to arrive tonight.

On the Vatican side, two small but telling concessions reflect their eagerness to receive Obama. For one thing, it?s long been diplomatic protocol here that the pope receives heads of state in the late morning, with the afternoon often reserved for meetings with curial officials. For another, the normal procedure is for a head of state to meet first with the pope, in his library on the top floor of the Apostolic Palace, and then to descend to the first floor for a session with the Cardinal Secretary of State in his office. In this case, Bertone came upstairs to meet Obama in the *sala d?angolo*, or ?corner room,? just a few doors down the hall from the papal apartment. In an inversion of the normal sequence, Obama met first with Bertone and then with Benedict XVI.

All these gestures were designed to accommodate Obama?s tight schedule, and although the concessions may seem small, in the carefully orchestrated world of Vatican diplomacy ? where nothing is too insignificant to escape notice ? they amounted to unmistakable signals that the Vatican wanted the chance to put some matters on Obama?s radar screen.

Despite the weighty nature of the issues at stake, some of the rock-star-like excitment that Obama often induces was evident even in and around the Vatican this afternoon. In the Press Office of the Holy See, for example, a French correspondent displayed a banner above his work space, playing off the famous ?Yes We Can!? mantra of the Obama campaign.

The banner read: ?Yes We Vatican!?

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