NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Insiders see Benedict, Obama meeting as a major success

Thomas P. Melady | Jul. 13, 2009

Thomas Patrick Melady

Days after the meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and President Obama at the Vatican, Washington insiders are pretty much in agreement: It was a significant success.

Looking back, it's clear the Holy See wanted the meeting. It had been known for some time that the president would be in Italy for the G-8 meeting and the Vatican wanted to take the opportunity to meet with the president.

Benedict had reached out early to Obama. In an unprecedented early move he congratulated the newly elected president shortly after his election rather than waiting for the more usual congratulatory message on the day of the formal inauguration in January. This was soon followed by another unprecedented contact. The president telephoned the pope.

The Holy See currently has a highly respected veteran Vatican diplomat heading its mission to the United States. Archbishop Pietro Sambi was one of the first diplomatic appointments by the pope. He had an excellent relationship with President George W. Bush and the Bush senior White house staff. Sambi is given credit for having managed the successful 2008 visit of the pope to the United States.

Sambi's fine diplomatic hand has been evident on how he orchestrated the different relationships with the bishops of the United States while at that same time representing the Holy See to the U.S. There are over 300 bishops and only 6 are constantly critical of Obama on various issues.

These attacks make headlines and tend to present a picture of partisan interests in the U.S. political situation. Sambi, however, has been able to maintain a balanced overview of the U.S. hierarchy. Furthermore, since the election of Obama last November, the Holy See has attempted to avoid any appearance of partisan favor on the U.S. political scene.

Obama's outreach to Muslim communities around the world, clearly set forth in his address in Cairo, was very well received by the Holy See. The administration is fully in agreement with the outreach of the Vatican on these Middle East issues.

Equally well received by the U.S. political establishment was Benedict's new encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*.

The encyclical, released just days before the July 10 visit, reiterated the church's commitment to finding

solutions for the world's economic ills, ills aggravated by globalization. This public renewal by the church emphasizes its resolve to find ways to end the unholy trinity of poverty, illiteracy and disease.

All these factors enhanced the atmosphere leading up to the meeting between pope and president, a meeting, in my opinion, that both established a most cordial relationship between the two leaders and also is being seen to have produced positive results.

Thomas Patrick Melady is former U.S. Ambassador to Burundi, Uganda and the Holy See. He is president emeritus of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Conn.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/11/2013 - 19:54*): http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/insiders-see-benedict-obama-meeting-major-success