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President Obama and the Vatican

Richard McBrien | Aug. 24, 2009 Essays in Theology

While most of the attention was focused on President Barack Obama's audience with Pope Benedict XVI on July 10, there was an important bit of news in a column published the day before in *Commonweal*'s on-line edition.

The article, written by *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, a Catholic layman who often addresses issues related to religion and politics, was entitled, "Does Obama have a friend in the Vatican?"

Dionne noted that, when President Obama had his audience with Pope Benedict XVI, just three days after the release of the Pope's new social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth"), there were no right-wing Catholic demonstrators upbraiding the Pope, as they did outside and inside the University of Notre Dame's graduation exercises this past May.

Nor, one might add, was there any single-engine, propeller-driven plane flying overhead with an anti-abortion message and picture.

"The disjunction between Vatican attitudes toward Obama and those of the most conservative forces inside the American Catholic Church has been obvious from the moment Obama won election," Dionne wrote.

"The conservative minority among the bishops [which, however, has grown in recent years] as well as political activists on the Catholic right have insisted on judging the president only on the basis of his support for legal abortion and stem cell research.

"But the Vatican clearly views Obama through a broader prism," Dionne continued. And then some extraordinary bit of news: "Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the papal nuncio in Washington, has privately warned American bishops that harsh attacks on Obama threaten to make the church look partisan."

Not giving readers time to catch their breath, Dionne continued: "The Vatican press has been largely sympathetic to Obama, and in a recent article, Cardinal Georges Cottier, who was the theologian of the papal household under Pope John Paul II, praised Obama's 'humble realism' on abortion and went so far as to compare the president's approach to that of St. Thomas Aquinas."

This is not to say that President Obama and Pope Benedict XVI are in full agreement on all moral issues, such as abortion, contraception, or embryonic stem-cell research.

"But the pope and many of his advisers," Dionne observed, "also see Obama as a potential ally on such questions as development in the Third World, their shared approach to a quest for peace in the Middle East, and the opening of a dialogue with Islam."

Dionne noted that the Vatican's more benign attitude toward President Obama and the generally positive reaction to his Notre Dame Commencement address have "at least temporarily quelled the vocal opposition to

the president among more conservative American bishops."

At the same time, other bishops, representing the majority of the U.S. hierarchy, have been working closely with the new Administration on health care reform, immigration, and climate change legislation.

Dionne suggests -- and I am in full agreement with him -- that the Pope's new encyclical shows that President Obama is in accord with most of Catholic social teaching.

Indeed, Barack Obama is more in accord with that teaching and with the substantial message of *Caritas in Veritate* than the many politically conservative Catholics who berated the University of Notre Dame and its president, Holy Cross Father John Jenkins, for inviting Obama to deliver this year's graduation address and receive an honorary degree.

And it is why, Dionne concluded, the Pope "is far more inclined to work with the man in the White House" than American conservatives are.

In an earlier piece in the Jesuit weekly *America* (on-line, 5/25/09), Georgetown church historian John O'Malley, S.J., drew a similar comparison between President Obama and the Second Vatican Council, referring to Obama as "a Vatican II president."

Citing a few of Barack Obama's speeches, but focusing particularly on the address he gave at Notre Dame, O'Malley noted specifically President Obama's call "for civility, for the end of name-calling, and for a willingness to work together to deal with our common problems, including abortion, rather than a stand-off determination to impose one's principles without reckoning what the cost to the common good might be."

Such an approach, O'Malley insisted, is just what Vatican II called for when it changed the way that the Catholic Church does business in its relationships with its own members, with other Christians, with other religions, and with the world community at large.

Although the pope himself seems to be largely open to that style, too many of the bishops and curial officials whom he continues to appoint are not.

Perhaps they need a collective papal audience to help them absorb that new style which Vatican II brought to the Catholic Church more than four decades ago.

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