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John Kerry meets Vatican officials, talks health care reform

Joshua J. McElwee | Jan. 14, 2014 NCR Today

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, a Catholic, made a visit Tuesday morning to the Vatican, meeting with Cardinal-designate Pietro Parolin, who holds the role traditionally seen as the No. 2 position in the Vatican bureaucracy.

Kerry, who had been in Paris for talks on the Syria crisis, spoke with Parolin for over an hour and a half on the situation in the Middle East country and on negotiations between Israel and Palestine, the Vatican said in a statement following the meeting.

The two, the Vatican said, also addressed "matters of special interest to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops such as healthcare reform."

The meeting between the U.S. and Vatican officials comes months after Pope Francis led a push in September to prevent a U.S.-led invasion of Syria, hosting a prayer for peace attended by some 100,000 people in St. Peter's Square and forcefully declaring [1] that "violence and war are never the way to peace."

Although the Vatican's terse statement doesn't give more details of the conversations Tuesday, its mention of health care reform may be a reference to opposition by the U.S. bishops to a federal mandate requiring coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans.

That opposition has at times been strident, with some U.S. bishops claiming the administration was wholeheartedly attacking religious liberty.

Louisville, Ky., Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, the head of the U.S. bishops' conference, reiterated the conference's opposition to the mandate in a Jan. 6 column for Religion News Service, writing [2] ?that the bishops "know that the Constitution and the law protect us from heavy-handed government demands that we violate our consciences or pay crippling fines."

Parolin is the Vatican's secretary of state, but in that role oversees both the internal Vatican bureaucracy and the Vatican's relations with other states. He took the post in October and Francis announced Sunday he would be made a cardinal at a consistory Feb. 22.

Following is the full communique from the Holy See Press Office regarding the meeting:

> This morning in the Vatican Archbishop Pietro Parolin, secretary of State, met with John Kerry, secretary of State of the U.S.A. During the meeting, which focused on themes linked to foreign policy, the Parties discussed the peace process in the Middle East, especially the situation in Syria and the preparations for the Geneva II Middle East Peace Conference, and negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

The meeting, which lasted an hour and forty minutes, was also attended by Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, secretary for Relations with States, and Kenneth F. Hackett, ambassador of the United States to the Holy See. Other issues considered during the meeting were the situation in Africa, especially South Sudan, and matters of special interest to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops such as healthcare reform.

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