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How will Obama's visit with Pope Francis go?

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

The leaders of two of the world's superpowers, one political and the other spiritual, will meet in Rome on Thursday. As with any important international meeting, the media will focus on areas of conflict, and liberals and conservatives will try to spin the results to support their causes.

Conservatives will predict that President Barack Obama will get a tongue-lashing from Pope Francis on abortion and on the contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act. Liberals will have Obama and Francis singing a duet.

What is likely to happen when Obama visits Pope Francis? Two earlier visits give us a good indication.

Obama and Pope Benedict XVI

This will not be Obama's first visit to the Vatican. He met with Pope Benedict XVI in July 2009, and the visit went smoothly. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi told reporters after the audience that "great serenity and great cordiality" characterized the meeting. The pope "seemed extremely satisfied with how the meeting went." He said the pope found Obama to be "attentive and ready to listen."

According to the Vatican statement issued after the meeting, the two men discussed issues that represent "a great challenge for the future of every nation and for the true progress of peoples, such as the defense and promotion of life and the right to abide by one's conscience."

Specifically, they discussed world issues addressed at the recently completed G-8 summit as well as immigration, the issue of reuniting families, and the peace process in the Middle East, "on which there was general agreement."

"Dialogue between cultures and religions, the global economic crisis and its ethical implications, food security, development aid -- especially for Africa and Latin America -- and the problem of drug trafficking" were also discussed. Finally, "the importance of educating young people everywhere in the value of tolerance was highlighted," it said.

The pope brought up his concerns about abortion, and Obama promised to fulfill his pledge to do everything he could to reduce the number of abortions. Lombardi called Obama's promise "a personal demonstration of commitment" and a sign of "giving positive attention to the positions of the church."

The pope gave Obama a signed copy of his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth") along with a document on bioethics, *Dignitas Personae* ("The Dignity of a Person"), issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Most saw this as a symbolic expression of the pope's dual commitment to issues of justice and life.

The pope seemed very pleased with the gift he received from Obama: a stole from St. John Neumann of Philadelphia.

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The meeting was supposed to last only 15 minutes, but the two kept talking for 35 minutes, always a good sign.

If things went that smoothly with Benedict, they will probably go at least as smoothly with Francis.

John Kerry's visit to Vatican

More recently, on Jan. 14, Secretary of State John Kerry met with Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, and that visit gives us another foretaste of the president's upcoming visit.

Again, both sides described meeting in positive terms. "This was as comprehensive a conversation as I've had with any secretary of state or foreign minister in the course of my tenure, and I think, happily, we agreed on an enormous amount of things that we can cooperate on," Kerry told reporters.

Lombardi quoted Parolin as saying, "There was a positive atmosphere and it was a fruitful encounter."

Again, the meeting went about twice as long as scheduled -- a good sign.

International issues were the focus of the meeting. The main topics were the Middle East -- in particular, Syria, where the Vatican is very concerned about the plight of civilians and refugees. The Vatican also wanted a briefing on negotiations between Israel and Palestine, something in which Kerry has been intimately involved.

Kerry asked for Vatican help with South Sudan, where the president is a Catholic. (Cardinal Peter Turkson, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, visited South Sudan this week.) Kerry also asked for help in persuading the Cuban government to release Alan Gross, an American citizen who was arrested and charged with espionage.

In addition, according to the Vatican statement issued at the end of the meeting, "The Holy See expressed its concern, shared by the bishops of the United States, regarding rules regulating the health reform

relating to guaranteeing freedom of religion and conscientious objection."

This issue was the focus of much media attention even though it occupied only about five minutes of the hour and 40-minute meeting. The Vatican brought it up at the request of the U.S. bishops, and it will undoubtedly be brought up again with Obama because of the Vatican's policy of supporting local bishops with their governments. But it is hard to see how the Vatican could get very excited about this issue when Catholic institutions in Italy are paying employee taxes to finance a state health care system that does abortions.

Despite the focus on bioethics, the Vatican has other disagreements with the administration. One of the pope's first international initiatives was to call for a day of fasting and prayer for peace just at the time the president was calling for air strikes against Syria. Also, the Vatican has supported a place for Iran at the second round of talks on Syria, something the Americans oppose. The Vatican also opposes arming any sides in the Syrian conflict.

These areas of disagreement do not get much attention in the American press because here, the pope is to the left of Obama and therefore irrelevant to American partisan politics. No Republican is going to cheer on the pope in these disagreements.

Obviously, the Obama administration wants to stress the areas of agreement between the president and the pope.

"The president looks forward to discussing with Pope Francis their shared commitment to fighting poverty and growing inequality," said the White House statement announcing the meeting.

In that case, Obama might mention to the pope that his first job after law school was working for the Catholic church as a community organizer in south Chicago at Holy Rosary Church. They could swap stories about what it was like walking through the slums of their favorite cities and how it affected them.

How will the visit between Obama and Pope Francis go? Based on past experience, I would predict it will go very well. The main topics of discussion will be international issues of peace and development, especially Syria, Israel and Palestine, Africa, and now Ukraine. Granted Francis' origins, it would not be a surprise if immigration and Latin America came up. They will have lots to talk about.

See also: Francis the peacemaker

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