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

What Pope Francis can teach President Obama this week

Mary Ann Walsh Religion News Service | Mar. 26, 2014
Commentary Washington

Thirty years ago, when the United States established full diplomatic relations with the Holy See, critics of the move fell into two camps.

One group worried that the Vatican would try to unduly influence the U.S., where anti-Catholicism lay barely beneath the skin. Indeed, Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. once called anti-Catholicism "the deepest bias of the American people." Poet Peter Viereck of Mount Holyoke College called anti-Catholicism "the anti-Semitism of the intellectuals."

Those in the other camp worried that the U.S. would try to unduly influence the Vatican. They complained, for example, that the U.S. would lobby the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Sciences to make it refrain from criticizing the now barely remembered Star Wars program, which the U.S. was promoting in the 1980s as part of our national defense system.

The issues come to mind now as Pope Francis and President Barack Obama will meet Thursday at the Vatican, just as popes and presidents did before them, even before formal diplomatic ties existed. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, met with Pope John XXIII, and President John F. Kennedy met with Pope Paul VI.

What can come of the top superpower and top spiritual power coming together?

The Vatican brings moral suasion to the table. It raises concern for the human needs of people around the globe -- people starving for lack of food, fighting dysentery for lack of clean water; people lacking for a homeland as war and forced migration drive them from their roots into nations ill-equipped or unwilling to shelter them.

The Vatican also holds honest-broker status. With a diplomatic corps that's more concerned for human development than trade agreements and military buildup, the Holy See becomes the peacemaker that builds bridges between America and the nations with which Washington barely speaks.

The Vatican also offers a beacon of hope. It cannot promise legions of Swiss Guards as military advisers to bolster a nation's armed forces, but it can urge nations -- including the United States -- to tap into its well-known generosity, to defend the weak and to promote human dignity.

The United States, for its part, brings material power to the table -- a lot of it. The United States is generous, but to a point. Right now our foreign aid budget is small -- less than 1 percent of the federal budget. A mere 1 percent increase could mean provision of basic sustenance, such as food and water, for many more people.

Two smiling, confident and charismatic leaders will meet at the Vatican this week. Francis will have the opportunity to touch the heart of Obama. Obama will have the opportunity to advise the leading churchman of what the Land of the Free can do to improve life for many more of humankind.

Both pope and president have high hopes for the meeting, and given the will that exists, something good can come from it. It's worth a prayer.

[Sr. Mary Ann Walsh is director of media relations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.]

Donate today Webathon 2016 one family [1]

DONATE NOW [1]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/06/2016 - 05:25*): http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/what-pope-francis-can-teach-president-obama-week

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end