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The symbolism of a pope and a president

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The world's eyes turned toward Vatican City as President Barack Obama and Pope Francis met for the first time Thursday. Questions have swirled for months in anticipation of the visit: What would they talk about, would it be controversial or cordial, and would there be some sort of broad-reaching policy consensus?

Certainly, the president and the Holy Father would talk about the issues where they find common ground: poverty, immigration and health care. They might have also discussed the finer points of areas where they disagree: same-sex marriage, contraceptive use and pro-life issues. Some have even suggested that the president could use the opportunity to gain a certain level of popularity from a visit with the world's most popular figure.

I would argue that these two men have a great deal in common, but beyond their policy alignments, their greatest asset is that they understand the importance of symbols -- and the symbolism of this meeting should not be lost.

When Barack Obama took to the stage at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, he gave a speech that was uniquely American, brimming with language that was not only symbolic to the Democratic party, but to a nation. He thanked the convention on behalf of the "land of Lincoln" and expressed that his presence on that stage was "unlikely." He talked about his father hailing from a village in Kenya and how his grandfather had dreams that would allow his father to study in "a magical place" called America. At that moment, Barack Obama was not just a candidate for Senate; he was the symbolic essence of everything we believe the American spirit to be. He made the moment not about himself, but about the progress of an entire nation.

Similarly, when Pope Francis stepped out onto the balcony at St. Peter's on March 13, 2013, he made a

symbolic gesture about the church he was about to shepherd. He stepped out in a simple white cassock and iron cross, starkly in contrast to the traditionally elaborate mozzetta and gold pectoral cross used by his predecessor. The teachings of the church would not change, but the way they were presented to the world would. He understood the important message his simple dress would send to an institution that preaches preferential option for the poor. At that moment, he was not solely the new pontiff; he was the symbolic essence of Christ's teaching.

Clearly, the Catholic community's relationship with the Obama administration has been tense. The American church has had to balance a laity that has been largely receptive to the president's social justice agenda, and a hierarchy that has had to manage legitimate concerns with the Affordable Care Act implementation.

However, the meeting Thursday presented an opportunity for both world leaders to come together on the issues at the heart of both of their agendas. This meeting should not be misconstrued as an opportunity for some of the "Francis effect" to rub off on Obama, but rather as a symbolic opportunity to raise up the plights of those on society's margins. The symbolism of this meeting has allowed the president and the pope to teach the world (and, perhaps most importantly, Washington) an important lesson: Even though you disagree on some policies, you can still find common ground.

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