

Vatican approach to Obama in contrast to conservative U.S. Catholics

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 22, 2009 All Things Catholic

A year into Benedict XVI's papacy, the early line was that the people most disappointed were the same ones most jazzed by his election. The late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus had voiced "palpable uneasiness," pointing to what some saw as a lack of disciplinary muscle and a few ill-advised appointments. Over time, that uneasiness receded as Benedict took several steps more reassuring to the right, such as his lecture in Regensburg challenging Islamic radicalism and his revival of the Latin Mass.

Today, a new winter of discontent may be stirring, based on the Vatican's strikingly upbeat approach to U.S. President Barack Obama.

The tone from Rome stands in obvious contrast to the ferment in some Catholic circles in the States, with the juxtaposition in Washington this week of the inauguration on Tuesday and the annual March for Life on Thursday offering a powerful illustration. (As one example, a contingent from the Ave Maria School of Law carried signs tweaking Obama's campaign theme: "Yes we can" terminate abortion!)

Benedict has now had three bites at the apple in terms of sending a message to the new president, with nary a mention of abortion or other "life issues" in the mix. So far, no prominent American Catholic has publicly objected, but that may be more an index of the void left by Neuhaus' death than what's actually on people's minds. Anxiety is certainly out there; I recently had dinner with one American bishop identified with the pro-life cause, who wondered aloud: "What is it that Rome doesn't get?"

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The pope's three communications with Obama so far have been:

- A Nov. 5 telegram of congratulations, itself a notable tip of the cap since Vatican protocol dictates that popes are not supposed to address heads of state until they take office;
- A Nov. 11 telephone call, as part of a round of calls from Obama to major world leaders;
- Another telegram on Jan. 20 marking the inauguration.

The first two messages were private, but a Vatican spokesperson passed on the gist. The pope called Obama's election an "historic occasion," and expressed desire that church and state collaborate to "build a world of peace, solidarity and justice." The text of the Jan. 20 telegram was released, the heart of which was a fervorino to combat "poverty, hunger and violence," and to promote "understanding, cooperation and peace among the nations." (The full text appears below.)

All this reinforces the basically positive vibe about Obama that has been emanating from other quarters in Rome. The day after the election, *L'Osservatore Romano* carried a front-page essay hailing Obama as "a choice that unites." The missionary news agency "Asia News" ran a piece asserting that Obama would be good for America's image around the world, and also helpful for race relations in Europe. Vatican diplomats have repeatedly expressed optimism about what Obama's presidency is likely to mean for the church's foreign policy interests, especially in the Middle East and Africa. Whatever one makes of it, it's a fact that the only people in the Vatican willing to take on Obama, at least so far, have been Americans.

Already, the American bishops have come under fire for allegedly talking a good game on abortion, but not walking the walk. When the bishops met in Baltimore shortly after the election, the big news in the secular world was their shot across the bow regarding the Freedom of Choice Act; pro-lifers, however, were dismayed that a warning to pro-choice Catholics not to take Communion was cut from their final document. Yet in comparison to the Vatican's early tone, the bishops come off as positively made of steel.

To be sure, no one can dispute Benedict XVI's pro-life credentials. While he was still running the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger essentially compelled the German church to shut down pregnancy counseling centers rather than risk complicity in abortion. As pope, he's blasted abortion as "the opposite of human rights" and "aggression against society itself." During his 2007 trip to Brazil, he backed Mexican bishops who had warned pro-choice politicians that they risked automatic excommunication under canon law.

So, what gives?

One might suspect that the three papal overtures so far have been *pro forma*, and that the tough love will come now that Obama has actually started to govern. Or, one could posit that the Vatican and the U.S. bishops have unwittingly adopted a "good cop/bad cop" routine, with the Vatican dangling the carrot of cooperation and the bishops wielding the stick of cultural war.

Inevitably, however, the situation also highlights a basic contrast in Catholic culture on the two sides of the Atlantic. Catholics in Europe, even the most ferociously conservative, generally do not have a single-issue focus on abortion. They're no less pro-life, but perhaps because there's no prospect of rolling back abortion rights in most European nations, it's not their signature crusade. In the States, abortion is the elephant in the room during any conversation about Catholics and politics, but not so across the water, and not so for the pope.

Pressure has already begun to build in the States for Benedict to be more forceful. Columnist Jeffrey Kuhner recently wrote in *The Washington Times*, "The Vatican is the last line of defense against the new Dark Age. It is time for the Holy Father to personally speak out against [the Freedom of Choice Act] and to warn pro-choice Catholics in the Obama administration they will not only be refused communion at Mass but face excommunication."

So far, of course, that interdict has not come.

After Neuhaus sounded his alarm three years ago, I spoke to another prominent American conservative who offered a memorable sound-bite: "We thought we had elected Ronald Reagan," he said, "but we ended up with Jimmy Carter."

In the wake of Regensburg, that judgment seemed fairly silly. If the pope continues on his present course, however, it's only a matter of time until it makes a comeback.

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Here's the full text of the pope's Jan. 20 telegram, released by the Vatican this week:

On the occasion of your inauguration as the forty-fourth President of the United States of America, I offer cordial good wishes, together with the assurance of my prayers that almighty God will grant you unfailing wisdom and strength in the exercise of your high responsibilities. Under your leadership, may the American people continue to find in their impressive religious and political heritage the spiritual values and ethical principles needed to cooperate in the building of a truly just and free society, marked by respect for the dignity, equality and rights of each of its members, especially the poor, the outcast and those who have no voice. At a time when so many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world yearn for liberation from the scourge of poverty, hunger and violence, I pray that you will be confirmed in your resolve to promote understanding, cooperation and peace among the nations, so that all may share in the banquet of life which God wills to set for the whole human family (cf. Isaiah 25:6-7). Upon you and your family, and upon all the American people, I willingly invoke the lord's blessings of joy and peace.

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