

# On Obama, Rome is more gentle than U.S. bishops: Vatican conspicuously silent

News in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

Ever since the University of Notre Dame announced that President Obama would receive an honorary degree and speak at its May 17 commencement ceremony, debate among American Catholics has grown increasingly heated.

At least 55 U.S. Catholic bishops (about 20 percent of the total) have criticized Notre Dame for honoring Obama, who supports legalized abortion and embryonic stem cell research. Mary Ann Glendon, a former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, declined Notre Dame's prestigious Laetare Medal to protest the Obama invitation.

Yet amid all the furor, one voice has remained conspicuously silent: that of the Vatican.

The official Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, which normally highlights news about the U.S., as of May 6 had not published a single word on the Notre Dame controversy. That omission is consistent with a record of friendly, even enthusiastic, treatment of Obama since his election last November.

Known as the "pope's newspaper," *L'Osservatore* is under the direct authority of the Vatican's Secretariat of State, which reportedly vets articles on sensitive topics before publication, particularly when they touch on relations with foreign governments.

The paper's coverage—or rather, lack of it—offers the most extensive evidence so far that the Holy See has opted for a milder approach to Obama than have some important elements of the U.S. church hierarchy.

Observers say the difference in emphasis and tone may be a deliberate decision that allows the Vatican to remain above the domestic American fray in its diplomacy with Washington. It could also reflect divergent assessments of the potential to work with

Obama in the future.

Both the U.S. bishops and the Vatican have indicated that they would work with the White House in areas where their aims and policies converge, such as poverty reduction and expansion of health care.

That has not kept prominent members of the church's American leadership from underscoring their disagreements with Obama, however.

Chicago's Cardinal Francis George, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has called the Notre Dame invitation an "extreme embarrassment." He recently had what he described as a polite yet confrontational Oval Office meeting with the president, in which he stressed their differences on abortion.

"I think on the life issue he's on the wrong side of history," George told a priests' convention in Louisiana in April. "I think he has his political debts to pay, and so he's paying them."

Commentary from the Vatican, meanwhile, has tended to accentuate the positive. It started with a papal telegram to celebrate Obama's "historic" election.

*L'Osservatore* hailed the election on its front page as a "choice that unites," proving that America is "able to overcome fractures and divisions that until only recently could seem incurable."

When the paper reported Obama's nomination of Kathleen Sebelius, a Catholic, as secretary of Health and Human Services, it failed to mention that her archbishop had forbidden her to receive communion because of her support for legalized abortion.

The next day, *L'Osservatore* praised the president's budget for its shift in spending priorities, stating: "After a decade of exaltation of individual enrichment, today the USA, struck by the economic crisis, is witnessing instead the pressing resurgence of the values of solidarity."

The good press has culminated, so far, in a front-page story on April 29 that characterized as exaggerated the "forceful concerns" of Catholic bishops over Obama's policies on abortion and embryonic stem cell research, which, the article said, have turned out to be less than "radical."

According to Massimo Franco, author of *Parallel Empires*, a history of U.S.-Vatican relations, such statements reflect genuine relief at the highest levels of the church.

During last year's presidential campaign, Franco says, many in the Holy See feared that Obama would turn out to be a global version of Spain's José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the Socialist prime minister who has defied church opposition by legalizing same-sex marriage and pressing for liberalized abortion laws.

Instead, Franco says, Vatican diplomats have discovered Obama to be not an "anticlerical ideologue" but a "pragmatist."

The Spanish bishops' experience in fighting a center-left government in Europe has taught the Vatican to be more cautious with Obama, Franco says. "It can boomerang if you are too confrontational." -Francis X. Rocca, *Religion News Service*