

Abortion top topic as Obama meets with Pope: "New phase of an alliance based on pragmatism"

News in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

President Obama met Pope Benedict XVI for the first time in a closed-door meeting at the Vatican that focused on the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion but covered other topics as well.

The pope gave Obama a copy of his recent encyclical on the global economy, which calls for a redistribution of wealth, among other things. But Benedict also gave him reading material on Catholic bioethics teaching, which Benedict's personal secretary said would help Obama "better understand" why the church's positions are at odds with the U.S. president's.

Obama's visit to the Vatican July 10 came at the end of the G-8 summit in L'Aquila, 70 miles northeast of Rome. In a departure from papal protocol, the meeting was scheduled for the late afternoon to accommodate the U.S. president's busy schedule.

A Vatican statement released shortly after the half-hour meeting made it clear that while the two men discussed a number of issues, abortion was at the top of the pope's agenda.

"In the course of their cordial exchanges, the conversation turned first of all to questions which are in the interests of all, . . . such as the defense and promotion of life and the right to abide by one's conscience," the Vatican statement said.

The mention of conscience was an apparent reference to the conscience clauses that exempt health-care professionals from participating in the provision of services to which they have moral objections. Obama has moved to scrap the protections, which were approved as former president George W. Bush was leaving office.

Even so, Obama “told the pope of his commitment to reduce the number of abortions and of his attention to and respect for the positions of the Catholic Church,” Vatican spokesperson Federico Lombardi told reporters after the meeting.

“The Vatican wants good relations with the Obama administration,” said Massimo Franco, a Rome-based expert on U.S.-Vatican relations and author of the book *Parallel Empires*. Though disappointed that Obama does not share Bush’s stands on abortion and stem cell research, Franco said, Vatican diplomats welcome many of Obama’s international efforts, such as his overtures to the Muslim world.

The Vatican and Washington “are beginning a new phase of an alliance based on pragmatism,” Franco said, that is “realistic, not ideological.”

Among other topics, the Vatican statement highlighted immigration, “with particular attention to the matter of reuniting families,” and the Middle East peace process, “on which there was general agreement.” Both the Vatican and the White House support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Vatican statement said that the two leaders also discussed the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue; the global economic crisis; food security; the need for development aid, especially for Africa and Latin America; drug trafficking; and the “importance of educating young people everywhere in the value of tolerance.”

Only three days before their meeting, Benedict had released his third encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (“Charity in Truth”), which many Obama supporters have said shows an affinity between the two leaders’ vision for the world.

The papal document, which urges enhanced international cooperation for peace and environmental protection, shows a “convergence of interests between the Holy Father’s social-justice agenda and the announced agenda of the president,” said Nicholas P. Cafardi, who served on Obama’s Catholic advisory committee during the 2008 presidential campaign.

Earlier, during his visit to Moscow, Obama had a cordial seven-minute meeting with Patriarch Kirill I of the Russian Orthodox Church, in which they discussed the importance of interfaith dialogue for U.S.-Russia relations.

Relations between Russia and the U.S. have been tense since Russia battled with Georgia in 2008 and objected to U.S. plans to build missile-defense facilities in Eastern Europe. In July 6 talks between Obama and President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the major point of agreement was that both the U.S. and Russia would reduce their nuclear arsenals, but other political and diplomatic differences remained.

Kirill told Obama July 7 that Russian and American Christians kept channels of communication open between the Soviet Union and the U.S. at the height of the cold war. The U.S. president responded to Kirill's comment that the Russian Orthodox Church has "many American parishioners" by saying, "In Chicago, my hometown, there are a lot of them." -*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*