

RECENT

comments

- Faxorcist on ['Green Jobs' Adviser Resigns Amid Furor](#)
- Black2Deep on [Cougar Captured in Seattle Park](#)
- myyshop2216 on [Up to 90 Die in Fiery Strike in Afghanistan](#)
- goldypope on [White House Downplays Public Option](#)
- Hestifer on [Charity Transports Shelter Dogs in Style](#)

News Alerts

The latest updates sent straight to your inbox.

[Get AOL News Alerts »](#)

Obama Meets With Pope Benedict

By CHARLES BABINGTON

,

AP

posted: 58 DAYS 5 HOURS AGO

comments: [3506](#)

filed under: [Political News](#), [World News](#)

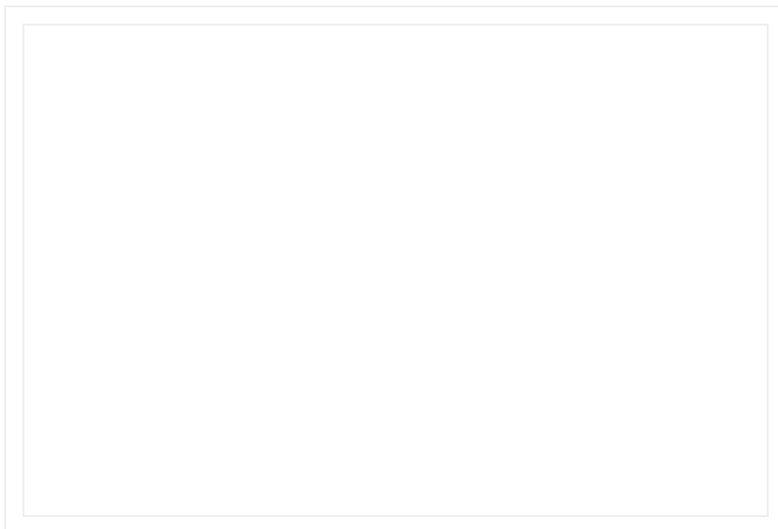
| [E-MAIL MORE](#) [PRINT](#)

Text Size [AA](#)

VATICAN CITY (July 10) - President Barack Obama sat down with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican on Friday for frank but constructive talks between two men who agree on helping the poor but disagree on abortion and stem cell research.

"It's a great honor," Obama said as he greeted the pope, thanking him for this first meeting, which lasted 30 minutes. They sat down at the pontiff's desk and exchanged pleasantries before reporters and photographers were ushered out of the ornate room.

Latest Obama Photos



AFP/Getty Images

500 photos

The Obamas meet with Pope Benedict XVI Friday. The Vatican changed a long-standing tradition of meeting leaders at midday in order to accommodate the president before he left Italy for his first official trip to Africa.

(Note: Please disable your pop-up blocker)

The pope was heard asking about the Group of Eight summit, the meeting of developed nations that concluded before Obama's arrival at Vatican City. Obama said it "was very productive."

After the meeting, the Vatican said the two leaders discussed immigration, the Middle East peace process and aid to developing nations. But the Vatican's statement also underscored the pair's deep disagreements on abortion.

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

Even in his gift to the U.S. leader, the pope sought to communicate his beliefs. Benedict gave Obama with a copy of a Vatican document on bioethics that hardened the church's opposition to using embryos for stem cell research, cloning and in-vitro fertilization.

"Yes, this is what we had talked about," Obama said, telling the pope he would read it on the flight to Ghana.

Earlier, the pope's secretary, the Rev. Georg Ganswein, had told reporters the document would "help the president better understand the position of the Catholic church."

Upon leaving, Obama again thanked the pope. "We look forward to a very strong relationship between our two countries," he said.



With some Catholic activists and American bishops outspoken in their criticism of Obama, even as polls have shown he received a majority of Catholic votes, the audience was much awaited.

Obama is very popular in Italy and several hundred people lining the broad avenue leading to St. Peter's Square cheered his limousine as it went by. Obama waved. Awaiting him at the Vatican was an honor guard of Swiss Guards in their colorful, striped uniforms.

Obama's election presented a challenge for the Vatican after eight years of common ground with President George W. Bush in opposing abortion, an issue that drew them together despite Vatican opposition to the war in Iraq.

But the Vatican has been openly interested in Obama's views and scheduled an unusual afternoon meeting to accommodate him at the end of his Italian stay for a G-8 summit meeting in the earthquake-stricken city of L'Aquila and just before he leaves for Ghana.

In the tradition-conscious Vatican, most such meetings are held at midday. The Vatican also arranged live television coverage of the open session of the meeting after their private talks.

Benedict broke Vatican protocol the day after Obama was elected by sending a personal note of congratulations rather than waiting and sending the usual brief telegram on Inauguration Day.

"I've had a wonderful conversation with the pope over the phone right after the election," Obama told a group of Catholic journalists in Washington before he left for Europe. "And in some ways we see this as a meeting with any other government — the government of the Holy See. There are going to be some areas where we've got deep agreements; there are going to be some areas where we've got some disagreements." But he acknowledged the pope is more than a government head, saying the church "has such profound influence worldwide and in our country."

L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican's daily newspaper, gave Obama a positive review after his first 100 days in office. In a front-page editorial, it said that even on ethical questions Obama hadn't confirmed the "radical" direction he discussed during the campaign.

Tensions grew when Obama was invited to receive an honorary degree at the leading U.S. Catholic university, Notre Dame. Dozens of U.S. bishops denounced the university and the local bishop boycotted the ceremony. Former St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke, who now heads a Vatican tribunal, accused Obama of pursuing anti-life and antifamily agendas. He called it a "scandal" that Notre Dame had invited him to speak.

Yet L'Osservatore concluded that Obama was looking for some common ground with his speech, noting he asked Americans to work together to reduce the number of abortions.

Some conservative American Catholics criticized the Vatican newspaper for its accommodating stance.

This week, Cardinal Justin Rigali, who heads the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, complained that the final guidelines of the National Institutes of Health for human embryonic stem cell research are broader than the draft guidelines.

As a child in Indonesia, Obama's Muslim father enrolled him in Catholic school for a few years. Obama is a Protestant.

White House national security aide Denis McDonough, speaking to reporters Thursday on the influence of Catholic social teaching on Obama, said the president "expresses many things that many Catholics recognize as fundamental to our teaching."

In the interview with Catholic journalists, Obama said he would tell the pope of his concern that the world financial crisis is not "borne disproportionately by the most poor and vulnerable countries."

Just this week, Benedict issued a major document calling for a new world financial order guided by ethics and the search for the common good, denouncing the profit-at-all-cost mentality blamed for bringing about the global financial meltdown.

As Obama has pledged to step-up efforts for Middle East peace through a two-state solution, Benedict made a similar appeal during a trip in May to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories. He issued the Vatican's strongest call yet for a Palestinian state.

Obama met first with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's secretary of state, before meeting Benedict in the pope's study.

Obama's wife, Michelle, joined him at the end of the meeting, and gifts were exchanged. Daughters Malia and Sasha, who accompanied their parents on the weeklong trip, also met Benedict. They were ushered out of the room before the media were allowed back in.

Several senior White House staff members also met the pope, with some either shaking his hand or kissing his ring.



/center>