

Obama Hopes to Use Pope's 'Moral Authority' to Advance His Own Agenda

When Pope Francis arrives in Washington next week, the White House hopes he will bring attention to the need to curb climate change and fight inequality – areas of common ground for the popular pontiff and President Barack Obama.

But after months of work on the agenda for their meeting, White House officials said on Thursday that they expect Pope Francis may also address issues such as gay marriage or government funding for abortion – policies on which the Catholic Church and White House fundamentally disagree.

“This pope is a very independent figure and we know from his previous travels that we don’t know what he’s going to say until he says it,” said Charlie Kupchan, senior director for European affairs at the White House National Security Council.

Obama and Pope Francis share concerns on “big ticket items” like climate and poverty, said Kupchan, who told reporters that the White House has worked on new “initiatives” to roll out during the visit.

“We are hoping that his moral authority helps us advance many of the items that we take to be high on our policy agenda,” he said.

Obama and Pope Francis met last March at the Vatican, where they spoke for about an hour.

The pontiff played a key role in helping the Obama administration end a 50-year detente between the United States and Cuba, the island nation where the pope will visit en route to the United States.

Obama and Vice President Joe Biden will greet Pope Francis when he lands at a U.S. military base just outside the city on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, more than 14,000 invited guests from around the country will gather on the South Lawn of the White House for a welcome ceremony, before Obama and the pope meet in the Oval office one-on-one.

The next day, the pope will address a joint meeting of the Senate and House of Representatives. Lawmakers eager to have television cameras capture their encounter with the pontiff have been warned against trying to grab a handshake as he makes his way in.

Pope Francis arrives in Washington as the race heats up to replace Obama in the November 2016 presidential election.

Vice President Biden, who is considering whether to compete for the Democratic nomination, will attend many of the pope's events, and will lead a farewell ceremony in Philadelphia on Sept. 27, the White House said. {eo}

(Reporting by Jeff Mason and Roberta Rampton; Editing by Lisa Shumaker)

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