

Pope Francis and President Obama Focus on Feeding the Poor, Sidestep Pro-Life Debate

U.S. President Barack Obama highlighted growing gaps between rich and poor ahead of his first meeting on Thursday with Pope Francis, an event that was expected to focus on the fight against poverty and skirt moral controversies over abortion and gay rights.

In an interview with Thursday's Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*, Obama said Francis's "great moral authority" had added weight to calls to redress the increasing imbalance between the winners and losers of globalization and economic change.

"In the United States over the last few decades, we've seen a growing gap between the income of those at the very top and the income of the typical family," he said.

"But this isn't just a problem for the United States, it's a problem for countries around the world. And it isn't just an economic issue, it's a moral issue."

As he arrived at the Vatican, Obama and a delegation including Secretary of State John Kerry were greeted by Archbishop Georg Ganswein, Prefect of the Pontifical Household, together with a detachment of the ceremonial Swiss Guard.

Francis has turned his back on much of the traditional formality of the Vatican, preferring to live in a hostel rather than occupy the lavish palatial apartments which are the traditional home of the pope.

But he deployed the full weight of state ceremonial on

Thursday, welcoming the U.S. President outside the Papal Library in the richly frescoed Small Throne Room, where they shook hands warmly before beginning their private meeting.

Since his election a year ago, Pope Francis has several times criticized unbridled capitalism, the excesses laid bare by the global financial crisis, and the growing gap between the rich and poor, even in developed countries.

Obama has repeatedly praised the pope for his compassion and emphasis on helping the poor, and the meeting could help to give impetus to some of his initiatives back home, such as boosting the middle class and helping low-income Americans succeed.

Too Many Left Behind

In the interview, Obama said globalisation and greater trade and commerce had lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in recent decades. "But the pope is correct when he says that not enough people are sharing in that progress, and too many people are being left behind."

In comments audible to reporters, he thanked the pope for receiving him and said he was a great admirer. "I bring you greetings from my family," he said.

He presented Francis with a custom-made seed chest, made from a fragment of one of the oldest Catholic cathedrals in America – the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore, Maryland – and featuring a variety of fruit and vegetable seeds used in the White House Garden.

When Obama met Francis's predecessor, Pope Benedict, in 2009, Benedict raised the matter of abortion, a sensitive issue for many U.S. Catholics as the Church considers abortion a grievous sin. Obama promised to do everything he could to reduce the number of abortions.

Francis, while giving no hint of changes to church doctrine, has used softer language than his predecessor on the rights of women and gays, a stance that has also resonated with Obama, who counted on both groups to help propel him to the presidency in 2008 and 2012.

The centre of Rome was blocked off for Obama's visit, which was to include a meeting with Italian President Giorgio Napolitano and Prime Minister Matteo Renzi later in the day. A small union demonstration protesting against U.S. government policy was planned on the central Via Veneto after the meetings.

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