

Senator: Pope Francis 'Spoke to Our Humanity'

For about an hour, the deeply divided lawmakers of the U.S. Congress closed ranks Thursday behind Pope Francis, the powerful and popular leader of the world's Catholics.

Once the first papal speech before Congress was over, however, they retreated to their respective partisan corners, and offered up different interpretations of the pontiff's message.

If Democrats and Republicans could agree on one point, it was that they were moved by his compassion, manifested in his calls to help the most vulnerable and the poor.

"He spoke to our sense of humanity," said Democratic Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, the longest serving Catholic in Congress. "It wasn't a Catholic or non-Catholic speech. It was a 'remember who you are as people, act like that.' So I liked it."

The Republican Speaker of the House, John Boehner, a devout Catholic, cried at several junctures as he flanked Francis.

Tom Rooney, a Republican representative from Florida, said the pope's message had extra meaning for him as a Catholic. "It was a very special day," he said. "Boehner was tearing up before he even started speaking, so it was like, 'OK, here we go.'"

But there was some public grumbling in Republican ranks.

Representative Bill Flores, chairman of the Republican Study Committee, the largest conservative grouping in the House of Representatives, balked at Francis' wading into politics, such as his call for better treatment of immigrants.

"He said do unto others the way others would do to you," Flores said. "And I don't think other countries would like it if we crashed their borders and invaded their countries."

Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz, a 2016 White House hopeful, took a swipe not at the pope, but at Democrats, when it came to the papal defense of Catholic teachings on family and abortion.

"It was striking and heartbreaking to see so many congressional Democrats sitting, stone-faced, arms crossed, when the pope urged us all to defend human life," Cruz said.

'PRINCIPLES, NOT SPECIFIC POLICIES'

On his first visit to the United States, Francis was expected to express views that would be more favorable to Democrats than Republicans.

On Wednesday, he publicly praised President Barack Obama at the White House for his initiatives to reduce air pollution as part of the pope's push to fight climate change, which the pontiff says disproportionately affects the poor.

Republicans have rejected broad legislation to reduce carbon emissions and a few did so again on Thursday after the speech.

"We can shut down carbon, you go back to the Stone Age, all live in poverty and the world is far worse," said Republican Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana.

But several Republicans, like Representative Paul Ryan, chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee in the House and a Catholic, said Francis was "talking principles, not specific policies" on immigration and climate.

"He wasn't trying to settle a debate. He was trying to open up a dialogue," Ryan told Reuters. "And that's what pastors do, and I thought he did it very appropriately."

Karen Bass, a Democratic representative from California, said the message behind the issues he raised—immigration, poverty and the environment—was that “it’s our responsibility.”

Several lawmakers held out hope that the pope could teach Congress to work better, especially as it faced a government shutdown if it cannot agree on legislation to fund the government by next week.

“Can we put aside some of the nonsense that often goes on here and try to solve the country’s problems and get things done?” asked said Representative Martha McSally, a freshman Republican from Arizona.

Rooney of Florida was skeptical, but mused “Hey, hope springs eternal.”

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