

Welcome to the Vatican, Mr. President

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Conservative bishops and the Catholic right have insisted on judging President Obama only on the basis of his support for legal abortion and stem-cell research, writes columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. But the Vatican sees Obama as a potential ally on such questions as development in the Third World, the quest for peace in the Middle East, and the opening of a dialogue with Islam.

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WASHINGTON — When President Obama meets with Pope Benedict XVI on Friday, there will be no right-wing Catholic demonstrators upbraiding the pontiff, as they did at Notre Dame earlier this year, for conferring the church's legitimacy upon this liberal politician.

In fact, whether he is the beneficiary of providence or merely of good luck, Obama will have his audience with Benedict just three days after the release of a papal encyclical on social justice that places the pope well to Obama's left on economics. What a delightful surprise it would be for a pope to tell our president that on some matters, he's just too *conservative*.

The disjunction between Vatican attitudes toward Obama and those of the most conservative forces inside the American Catholic Church has been obvious from the moment Obama won election.

The conservative minority among the bishops as well as political activists on the Catholic right have insisted on judging the president only on the basis of his support for legal abortion and stem cell research.

But the Vatican clearly views Obama through a broader prism. Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the papal nuncio in Washington, has privately warned American bishops that harsh attacks on Obama threaten to make the church look partisan.

The Vatican press has been largely sympathetic to Obama, and in a recent article, Cardinal Georges Cottier, who was the theologian of the papal household under Pope John Paul II, praised Obama's "humble realism" on abortion and went so far as to compare the president's approach to that of St. Thomas Aquinas. (Pray this won't go to Obama's head.)

No one pretends that the Vatican is at peace with Obama's views on the life issues, and Benedict mentioned the church's resistance to abortion at three different points in this week's economic encyclical, "Charity in Truth."

But the pope and many of his advisers also see Obama as a potential ally on such questions as development in the Third World, their shared approach to a quest for peace in the Middle East, and the opening of a dialogue with Islam.

The Vatican's stance and the broadly positive response to Obama's Notre Dame speech have at least temporarily quelled the vocal opposition to the president among more conservative American bishops. Now, parts of the hierarchy are working closely with the administration on health-care reform, immigration and climate-change legislation.

Benedict's encyclical may provide the best perspective for understanding why a pope seen as a conservative views Obama more favorably than do most Catholic conservatives in the United States.

While American conservatives, including most Catholics in their ranks, see capitalism in an almost entirely positive light, Benedict — following a long tradition of church teaching — is more skeptical of a system rooted in materialist values. In that sense, he is to the left of his American flock.

Benedict's letter had some good things to say about the market system, but only if it is tempered by both "distributive justice and social justice." He thus spoke approvingly of "the redistribution of wealth" — not a phrase currently on many American lips — and caused free-market conservatives to blanch with his call for a "world political authority" to oversee the global economy in the name of "the common good."

He condemned "corruption and illegality" in "the conduct of the economic and political class in rich countries." And opposing an idea popular among some conservative development economists, he warned that countries should not seek to become more competitive internationally by "lowering the level of protection accorded to the rights of workers" or "abandoning mechanisms of wealth redistribution."

Yet Benedict is more a left-of-center Christian Democrat than a socialist. His radical critique of capitalism is also a conservative critique of permissive societies, and he emphasized that "rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere license." He made the case for a specifically "Christian humanism," arguing that only "a humanism open to the Absolute" could avoid "exposing us to the risk of becoming ensnared by the fashions of the moment."

No one will accuse Benedict of being fashionable, which is why his views run crosswise to important currents in both American conservatism and American liberalism.

This gives the pope a perspective on Obama that conventional American conservatives lack, and it's why he is far more inclined to work with the man in the White House than they are. But Benedict is also more disposed than American liberals to disagree with the president — and, yes, on some issues, he may prod Obama from the left.

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