



## **Bush and Benedict: First Meeting**

Posted GMT 6-12-2007 14:55:32

George W. Bush is used to taking center stage, regularly passing from meeting to meeting at a hectic pace to carry out an ambitious agenda.

But after a flurry of intense meetings last week with the leaders of the world's most powerful nations at the G8 meeting in Germany, which Bush hailed as a success, he found himself slowed to a snail's pace, Saturday, June 9, during a solemn procession to meet the greatest spiritual leader on earth.

Led by two rows of finely-dressed noblemen who assist at papal events, Bush followed in the footsteps of countless other political leaders who, over nearly two millennia, have experienced the gravitas and grandeur of the Holy See on the approach through the Vatican to meet the successor of St. Peter.

In centuries past, monarchs would ride up to the papal palace in their carriages between Bernini's immense colonnades, feeling the muscular squeeze of the Pope's temporal and spiritual authority upon them.

President Bush did not have to face a fearsome Borgia or Medici at the end of his slow march, but he must have still felt some trepidation on his first encounter with the soft-spoken yet formidable Benedict XVI, known for his blunt criticism of the possibility of war with Iraq as Cardinal Ratzinger and equally blunt statements delivered as recently as Easter that "nothing good comes from Iraq, torn apart by continual slaughter as the civil population flees."

Yet despite the increasingly dramatic situation in Iraq and the protests around Rome against Bush's visit that closed down most of the city, the Pope and the President first had other, slightly less antagonistic, items to discuss on their agenda.

### **A Half Hour in the Pope's Library**

The presidential entourage arrived at 11:03 in the courtyard of San Damaso at the heart of Vatican City.

The Prefect of the Papal Household, American Archbishop James Harvey, welcomed Bush and his wife Laura, and accompanied them to the library of the Apostolic Palace. After greeting Bush, the Holy Father, while reporters were still in the room, asked him about the G-8 summit, and specifically the sharp disagreement with President Putin over a missile defense system in Eastern Europe. Bush said that the meeting had been a success, then, glancing toward the journalists, added: "Umm... I'll tell you in a minute," after which both men laughed.

Before their closed-door discussion, Bush also told Benedict about his request to Congress to double U.S. aid to Africa.

The Holy Father then spoke alone with Bush for more than half an hour.

After their private talk, there was the traditional exchange of gifts: the Pope gave Bush a print depicting St. Peter's Basilica in the 17th century. The president gave the pontiff a white walking stick with the Ten Commandments cut in it in different colors, the work of a former homeless man from Dallas.

(Rocco Palma reports the following gift, too, though I haven't seen it reported elsewhere and didn't notice it while watching the coverage: "Benedict's gift to the commander-in-chief was even more precious, and message-packed: a rare first edition of the autobiography of John Carroll of Baltimore, the founding bishop of American Catholicism.")

What did Bush and Benedict say to one another during those 35 minutes of privacy following the journalists' departure from the Pope's library?

No detailed report has been made. But we know that a number of delicate topics of common concern were on the agenda of Bush's meeting with the Pope, and then of his meeting with the Vatican's Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, and with Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States (the equivalent of "Foreign Minister" in a secular government).

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Showing that few issues do not fall within the Holy See's range of study and activities, Cardinal Bertone told the Italian bishops' newspaper *Avvenire* before the Bush-Benedict meeting that topics of discussion with the president would include Iraq, Latin America, the Middle East, life issues, and, speaking generally, "the great ethical and social questions that regard the peoples of the world."

President Bush's talking points were even more ambitious, according to recent interviews with the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, Francis Rooney. Under the umbrella of "issues that relate to freedom and the promotion of human dignity in the world," Rooney listed the environment, immigration, terrorism, fundamentalism, the fight against AIDS, Lebanon, and aid to Africa.

It is unlikely every topic was covered in the course of the one and a half hours President Bush spent at the Vatican -- from 11 am to 12:30 pm, first with the Pope, then with the other top Vatican officials -- but the press statement issued by the Holy See Press Office says discussions concerning a surprising number of subjects occurred:

- the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- Lebanon
- Iraq and the Christian community there
- Africa and the Darfur crisis
- Latin America
- human rights and religious freedom
- the defense and promotion of life
- marriage and the family
- the education of the young
- sustainable development.

## The Holy See and Iraq

The only hint the Vatican statement provided regarding the views the Pope and his aides expressed on those many issues was contained in the following sentence: "On the part of the Holy See, hope was once again expressed in a 'regional' and 'negotiated' solution to the conflicts and crises afflicting the region" of the Middle East.

This seems clearly a diplomatic way for the Holy See to express its view that Middle Eastern conflicts should be solved, not by foreign (i.e., American) intervention, and not through a unilateral, militarily-imposed solution, but through a multilateral, negotiated settlement.

This is a view that has been expressed in more direct language in the past by Cardinal Ratzinger, before he had the spotlight of the papacy upon him. "It is necessary that the community of nations makes the decision, not a particular power," the then-cardinal told *Avvenire* newspaper in 2002. He went on to state his personal conclusion that "the damage would be greater than the values one hopes to save."

He also disagreed with the concept of preventative war, pointing out that it does not exist in the Catholic Catechism. Speaking in his capacity as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then-Cardinal Ratzinger explained that while "it is true that the Catechism has developed a doctrine that, on the one hand, does not exclude the fact that there are values and peoples that must be defended in some circumstances; on the other hand, it offers a very precise doctrine on the limits of these possibilities."

Cardinal Ratzinger was always careful to temper these points by consistently acknowledging that political questions were not in his competence, that it was not heretical to disagree with the Pope on matters of war, and that the appropriate authority for making the final decision to engage in war are public officials, not the Church.

He did, however, clearly state that the authority to make such decisions should lie solely within the power of the United Nations (even if "the U.N. can be criticized" for a number of inadequacies) as "it is the instrument created after the war [World War II] for the coordination - including moral -- of politics."

The Vatican's nuanced support for the United Nations is a complex topic for another article, but it is worthwhile to point out that despite U.N. approval and international cooperation for the first Gulf War in 1991, John Paul II still condemned the war as unjustified, as did much of the Iraqi Chaldean hierarchy.

One of the central reasons -- prior to both the first Gulf War and the current crisis -- for their objection to attacking Iraq was stated in an *Inside the Vatican* interview with the late Iraqi priest Fr. Ragheed Ganni just a few months before the invasion: "If there is a war, the first victims will be Christian; on a local level, the people will turn against the Christians."

## The End of the Church in Iraq?

Tragic events affecting the safety and sustainability of Christians in Iraq over the last few weeks only seem to reinforce Benedict's

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prediction that the damage to Iraq caused by war might be greater than the values saved, at least from the perspective of the Iraqi Christian community. The June 3 murder of Fr. Ragheed Ganni and three deacons following a Mass at the Church of the Holy Spirit in Mosul-- a parish which has suffered numerous attacks over the last four years -- was followed by the kidnapping of another Chaldean priest, Fr. Hani Abdel Ahad and five boys on their way to visit a minor seminary in Baghdad (the boys were later released but Fr. Ahad is still being held). Both terrorist actions hint at a systematic campaign to eliminate the future leaders of the Chaldean Church.

And these are only the latest in a series of increasing sectarian attacks on Christians that have led the Chaldean hierarchy to fear that Christianity will soon be extinct in Iraq after a 2,000 year history. Along with Muslim Iraqis, Christian Iraqi civilians have been flooding out of Iraq, decreasing the population from more than half a million in 2003 to a little less than 20,000, according to figures cited by an Apcom article written June 9 by Serena Sartini and Iacopo Scaramuzzi.

The figures show a rapid decline in the Iraqi Christian population in recent months. An October 2006 letter sent from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice numbered the Christian population at 600,000. In that letter, the US bishops asked the State Department urgently to find ways to improve the security of Christians, even to consider establishing an "administrative region" in the Nineveh Plain Area for them. Christians make up 40 percent of the refugees fleeing Iraq, though they are just three or four percent of the total population.

Benedict XVI, drawing upon the reports and opinions he receives from the Chaldean hierarchy, the Apostolic Nuncio in Iraq, and the Congregation for Oriental Churches, has made the situation of Christians in Iraq a priority.

President Bush himself made mention of the Holy Father's deep concern for Iraqi Christians in a press conference yesterday afternoon. "He was concerned that the society that was evolving (in Iraq) would not tolerate the Christian religion," the president told the press, "and I assured him we were working hard to make sure that people lived up to the (Iraqi) constitution -- that modern constitution voted on by the people from different walks of life and different attitudes."

President Bush's reference to this concern of Benedict's, coming just an hour or two after their meeting, makes clear that this was one of the central points the Pope made to Bush.

While Iraq's modern constitution may protect Christians and other religious minorities from persecution in theory, facts on the ground strongly suggest civil authorities are at best limited in their ability to curb religious persecution and at worst turn a blind eye to it.

In an unprecedented statement in May, the Iraqi Chaldean Patriarch, Emmanuel III Delly, lamented that "Christians are killed, chased out of their homes before the very eyes of those who are supposed to be responsible for their safety." Patriarch Delly went on to say: "Today, Christians are persecuted in a country where everyone is fighting for their own personal interests. They have always lived in Iraq and over the years they have done everything possible to contribute to its development together with their Muslim brothers."

The terrorists responsible for the persecution, kidnappings, attacks, and murders are rarely captured, and blame is often attributed to the Iraqi government for their failure to provide protection and to the U.S.-led coalition for starting a war in their country.

"For a while, the Christian community has been subjected to kidnapping and threats with neither protection from the government nor the coalition forces," the Chaldean representative to the Holy See, Monsignor Philip Najim, said in his homily at a requiem Mass for Fr. Ragheed in Rome last week. "After the embargo, which was both unjust and imposed, and years of American occupation, there is still only a sectarian Iraq where Christians do not receive assistance, no one fights for their cause, and they were abandoned," Najim said. "This is a major historic, political, and human injustice. We need the Holy See to encourage unity in the Iraqi church and among all Christians."

What, if any, solution to the current crisis the Pope prefers has not been discussed by any Vatican official, and it is highly unlikely he would ever choose to articulate an opinion on the matter unless the Iraqi hierarchy were to unite on a position and lobby the Holy See for support. With the debate over troop withdrawal from Iraq already dominating the 2008 presidential campaign, any Vatican statements on Iraq will be scrupulously examined for hints of an opinion on the matter, just as comments by Vatican officials during the lead up to war in Iraq made headlines around the world.

## Collaboration and Conflict

"The United States is a great country and the current president has particularly distinguished himself in regard to some positive initiatives in defense of life from conception," Cardinal Bertone told Avvenire prior to Bush's visit. "There remain, however, some problems, already made manifest by that great prophet who was the Servant of God John Paul II, for example, the Iraq war and the dramatic situation of Iraqi Christians, which is always getting worse."

The Vatican Secretary of State's comments reflect the major themes in the relationship between the Bush administration and the Holy

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See during Bush's six and a half years at the White House and with two different pontiffs. Speaking in general terms, there has been agreement and collaboration to an unprecedented level for a U.S. president and the Pope of Rome, but only on particular issues. On the other hand, the relationship has been marked by persistent tension because of the decision to go to war in Iraq, which the Vatican took many steps to prevent through diplomatic initiatives, as well as on the role and supremacy of international law. On the fight against terrorism in general, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI often lent their support in speeches condemning this "modern scourge," as John Paul described it, but in large terms.

Following on eight years of battle over life issues with the Clinton administration, Bush's pro-life principles and policies were a breath of fresh air at the Vatican. From the withdrawal of funding for overseas abortions to stem cell research limitations to pro-traditional marriage policies and the fight against same-sex marriage, the Vatican had a powerful ally in President Bush. While no measure or law was beyond all criticism from a Catholic perspective, particularly the stem cell research decision, the Vatican would often praise the president's pro-life and pro-family efforts, with Cardinal Lopez Trujillo of the Pontifical Council for the Family as his most vocal supporter.

In addition to life and family issues, there were grounds for agreement on some of Bush's immigration initiatives, praised by the U.S. bishops' council, and on the collaboration between Church and state in charitable activities, which President Bush termed the Faith-Based Initiative. On Saturday, Bush highlighted his accomplishments regarding humanitarian aid through faith based organizations and programs (such as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR) in both his meeting with Benedict and in his meeting with the Community of Sant'Egidio, who run a successful AIDS treatment program in Africa.

However, none of the Bush administration's "compassionate conservatism" programs or policies were endorsed without some reservation, either by the Catholic hierarchy or by all members of his own party, some of whom were alarmed by Bush's "big government" tendencies.

George W. Bush campaigned on a platform of "compassionate conservatism" in 2000, and the Faith-Based Initiative was his proudest accomplishment as governor of Texas, and most publicized policy initiative upon election as president. The September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington transformed Bush into a "war president" overnight, however, and set him on an eventual collision course with the Vatican due to the decisions he and his administration took in response to those attacks.

It is an irony not likely to be lost on Bush, who, as an ecumenically-minded "born again" Christian, sought out and surrounded himself with Catholic strategists like Deal Hudson, Catholic thinkers like Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, and Catholic staff like Jim Towey (former director of the White House Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives). Bush also expressed a level of affection for the Holy Father and the Catholic Church uncommon for a U.S. president in a country with a historic bias against "papists." At his last meeting with John Paul II in 2004, Bush presented the pontiff with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor awarded to a civilian, for his role in the defeat of communism and the spread of freedom internationally.

Since the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the United States in 1984 under the pontificate of John Paul II and the administration of President Ronald Reagan -- as much a symbol of the final acceptance of Catholics in U.S. politics as it was a symbol of a Cold War alliance -- no U.S. president passes through Rome without a visit to the Vatican. President Bush, however, seems to have gone out of his way to pay his respects to the previous Holy Father, with three visits to John Paul II and a personal appearance -- along with his wife and several staff members -- at the papal funeral, where he first met then-Cardinal Ratzinger.

Another Bush family member, Columba Bush, the president's Catholic sister-in-law, led a U.S. delegation to attend the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the election of John Paul II. The U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, made a solo visit to the Vatican in February 2005, and met with then-Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano in the absence of John Paul, who was ailing at that time.

Though this was Bush's first personal visit to Benedict XVI, the president's brother, former governor of Florida and Catholic convert Jeb Bush, attended Benedict's installation Mass on April 24, 2005, and Laura Bush, along with daughter Barbara, had a brief papal audience in February 2006.

Just as he often spoke of his admiration for John Paul II, Bush yesterday described his first meeting with Joseph Ratzinger since his election as Benedict XVI as a "moving experience," saying he felt "awe" to be in the presence of the Holy Father, whom Bush described as a "very smart, loving man."

And just as with John Paul II, Bush managed to maintain a great personal admiration for the Pope even when receiving papal criticism of his policies. At their first greeting, both men seemed pleased, even nervously excited, to be in one another's company.

President Bush wore a more somber expression following their private discussions, however, as he introduced the Pope to his entourage that included Bush's Deputy Chief of Staff and master planner Karl Rove. As the group was ushered from the papal apartments following the final photographs, a woman with a clip board leaned toward Rove as he was passing by and told him reassuringly, "We're doing OK," referring to the minute by minute itinerary she was holding and checking off for the Bush delegation. Pope visit? Check. Next up, Vatican

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Secretariat of State followed by lunch with Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi and coffee with Silvio Berlusconi. The race was back on.

Benedict's Agenda: The Christians of the Middle East

Benedict, proving he is just as much a man on a mission as Bush, left the Vatican in a motorcade shortly after his meeting with the president, while Bush was still in his meeting at the Secretariat of State.

The meeting the Pope went to attend carried on the themes discussed during the meeting he had just held with the president, themes the president was at that moment still discussing with Cardinal Bertone and Archbishop Mamberti.

The Pope went outside the Vatican's walls to the Congregation for Oriental Churches on via della Conciliazione at 12:30 pm to announce the appointment of a lifelong Vatican diplomat, the Argentine Archbishop Leonardi Sandri, 62, as the Congregation's new Prefect, replacing Syrian-born Cardinal Ignace Moussa I Daoud, the former Patriarch of Antioch.

In the Pope's remarks, Benedict summarized his pressing concern for persecuted Christians that he articulated to President Bush: "From my heart, I invoke peace for the Holy Land, Iraq, Lebanon, and all the territories that are under the jurisdiction of the Congregation for Oriental Churches, and for other regions involved in a spiral of apparently unstoppable violence," the Pope said. "May the Churches and the disciples of the Lord stay where they were placed at birth by Divine Providence, where they deserve to remain because of a presence that dates back to the beginnings of Christianity."

Also, in the few minutes between President Bush's visit and his short ride to the Congregation for Oriental Churches, Benedict found time to deliver another speech, in French, to the regional bishops' conference of North Africa, in Rome on their five-yearly ad limina visit. Here too, Benedict touched upon the issue of Christians in Muslim countries, this time highlighting the positive developments taking place in the relations between Christians and Muslims in their region: "I am happy to know that, because of initiatives of dialogue and places of encounter, such as centers of study and libraries, you are engaged in the development and the deepening of esteemed and respectful relations between Christians and Muslims to promote reconciliation, justice, and peace," Benedict said.

"On the other hand, in the sharing of the daily life, Christians and Muslims can find the essential base for a better and mutual knowledge," he added. "By fraternal participation in each other's joys and pains, especially in the most significant moments of existence, and by multiple collaborations in the domain of health, education, culture, or in the service of the most humble, you manifest an authentic solidarity, which strengthens the ties of trust and friendship among persons, families, and communities."

These encouraging initiatives and collaborative activities that lay the foundation for peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims may do little to counter the rise of terrorism and the persecution of Christians on the global level, but they will certainly be examined by the Vatican as counter-measures to growing religious sectarianism at the local community level, particularly in Iraq. The Pope's "point men" on the issue of how to support the persecuted church in Iraq and throughout the Middle East will certainly include his two new appointments, Archbishop Sandri -- formerly the "Substitute" or Deputy Secretary for General Affairs of the Secretariat of State -- and Sandri's replacement, Bishop Fernando Filoni. Filoni was the Apostolic Nuncio in Jordan and Iraq from 2001 to 2006.

So Benedict left a meeting with Bush to give a speech to North African bishops' focused on working in collaboration with local Muslims, and to introduce two new, key appointments, one for the Congregation which oversees the Churches in the Middle East, the other for the Vatican's top diplomatic post, and the men he introduced were Sandri, an extremely savvy and experienced diplomat, and Filoni, who has just had five years of first-hand experience of the Middle East, and of Iraq in particular. In the delicate language of Vatican juxtaposition, the three meetings on the same day -- Bush, the North African bishops, the Oriental Congregation to introduce Sandri and Filoni -- speak volumes about the Vatican's focus and intentions. The Pope is giving his personal attention to the question of Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East, and choosing the best men available to him to help him forge a policy to protect the remaining Christians of that region of the world.

A U.S. diplomat once described the Vatican as the "best listening post in the world." Prior to his papal audience, President Bush said he would be in "listening mode" when he met Benedict, just as he said he would "be there to listen" commenting on his final visit to John Paul II in 2004.

It is a wise approach, considering the accumulated wisdom of the Church on all matters pertaining to the lives of men, be they political, social, or moral. And given the new "intelligence team" Benedict has at his command, and his access to discovering facts on the ground in Iraq in places where even the powerful U.S. government cannot reach, listening to the Holy See is not only wise, it is essential to the long-term success of the U.S.'s mission.

The Bush administration has continuously and effectively courted the Vatican in the hopes of deepening collaboration and avoiding conflict. It is a policy and an attitude that the Holy See appreciates and welcomes, but Pope Benedict will not be flattered into a political partnership that could compromise the Church's moral judgments and principles.

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By Andrea Kirk Assaf  
www.speroforum.com

*Andrea Kirk Assaf received a Phillips Foundation journalism fellowship in 2003, during the debate over just war and the invasion of Iraq, to research and write on the relationship between the Bush administration and the Vatican. Her articles on this subject have appeared in Inside the Vatican magazine and elsewhere, and she has also been interviewed by television, radio and print media.*

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