

Obama tells pope he wants to reduce abortions in U.S.

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Reuters Report

By Philip Pulella and Jeff Mason

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - President Barack Obama promised Pope Benedict on Friday that he would do everything possible to reduce the number of abortions in the United States, the Vatican said.

Obama and Benedict held private talks for about 40 minutes in the pope's frescoed study in the Vatican's apostolic palace and the Vatican said bioethics and life issues were a central part of the discussion.

In a surprise move, the pontiff gave Obama a booklet explaining Vatican opposition to practices such as abortion and embryonic stem cell research, which Obama supports.

"Obama told the pope of his commitment to reduce the number of abortions and of his attention and respect for the positions of the Catholic Church," Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi told reporters after he was briefed by the pope.

Obama supports abortion rights and says his policy is to change economic and social conditions so as to put more women in situations where they do not feel they have to have an abortion.

The pope gave Obama, who last March lifted restrictions of federal funding for human embryonic stem cell research, a copy of a recent Vatican document on bio-ethics in which the Holy See explains its opposition to such practices.

"Dignitas Personae" (dignity of a person) condemns artificial fertilization and other techniques used by many couples and also says human cloning, "designer babies" and embryonic stem-cell research are immoral.

The document defends life from conception to natural death and a Vatican statement issued after the meeting said the topics discussed included "the defense and promotion of life and the right to abide by one's conscience."

The pope's private secretary told reporters after the meeting: "This reading can help the president better understand the Church's position on these issues."

"We know that this (abortion) is a crucial theme for the pope. There is no need to hide it. It (giving him the booklet) was an attempt to be clear, it was not polemical," Lombardi said.

The White House said Obama wanted to work together on a range of issues with the Vatican.

"He is eager to find common ground on these issues and to work aggressively to do that," said Denis McDonough, deputy national security adviser, adding that there may be some issues where they cannot come to agreement.

POPE IMPRESSED BY OBAMA

Lombardi said the pope was "very impressed" by Obama and that the pontiff was "extremely satisfied" with the talks.

Obama told the pope during a picture-taking session after the private part of the audience: "We look forward to a very strong relationship between our two countries."

The pope also gave the president a copy of his latest encyclical, "Charity in Truth," which called for a "world political authority" to manage the global economy and for more government regulation of national economies to pull the world out of the current crisis and avoid a repeat.

Obama, who was going to the airport from the Vatican, joked to the pope when he gave him the two documents: "I'll have something to read on the plane."

Unlike his predecessor George Bush, Obama and the pope do not see eye-to-eye on abortion rights and embryonic stem cell research.

The Vatican condemns embryonic stem cell research, which scientists say can lead to cures for diseases such as Alzheimer's, because it involves the destruction of embryos.

Before he arrived at the Vatican, Michelle Obama and their children Malia and Sasha were given a private tour of St Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel. Michelle Obama joined her husband and the pope after the private talks ended.

(Editing by Charles Dick)