

Policy changes, interaction with faith leaders mark Obama's first year

WASHINGTON - President Barack Obama's first year in office was packed with major news of interest to the world, but there was much to report about his interactions with faith leaders and on other topics of religious interest.

The changes Obama brought to domestic and foreign policy, his ambitious work to pass a health care reform bill, his appointments to the Cabinet, the Supreme Court and ambassadorships, relations between the White House and the Vatican, and his commencement address at the University of Notre Dame were all significant religious news stories.

One issue that concerned the Catholic bishops and other church leaders was how Obama dealt with abortion, including in health care legislation and in government policy for international family planning funds.

Within days of his inauguration, he reversed the so-called Mexico City policy barring use of U.S. funds by international family planning programs, and in March he issued an executive order easing the Bush administration's limits on stem-cell research involving the destruction of human embryos.

Whether there would be a final health care bill and whether it would ban use of federal funds to cover abortion remained unresolved by mid-December.

Like President George W. Bush's first year, Obama's also included a visit to the pope, a focus on government collaboration with faith-based organizations, and even a speech at Notre Dame, though the Catholic university was criticized for having Obama, a supporter of keeping abortion legal, as a speaker.

Obama revamped what is now called the Office for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, creating an advisory council with members representing interfaith religious institutions, community development and social service programs.

The advisory council has so far taken on consideration of what roles faith-based and community groups should have in working with the government on economic recovery; support for fatherhood and healthy families; interreligious cooperation; environment and climate change, global poverty and development. The topics represent a dramatic expansion of the purview of the faith-based office created by Bush in 2001.

In his first year, Obama met privately with Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and hosted a round table of reporters, most from the Catholic press, shortly before his July visit with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican.

Spokesmen for the pope and the president reported that the two discussed biomedical ethics, dialogue between cultures and religions, the global economic crisis and its ethical implications, food security and development aid, as well as political situations in Cuba and Honduras and outreach to Muslim communities.

L'Osservatore Romano, the official Vatican newspaper, extolled Obama's foreign policy actions, including his efforts toward Middle East peace, disarmament, diplomacy and multilateralism.

His appointment of several Catholics to prominent positions in his administration prompted some public debate over whether they would - or should - bring the influences of Catholic teaching to their positions.

Catholic appointees included Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and Surgeon General Regina Benjamin.

Obama also appointed two Catholic campaign supporters as ambassadors: theologian Miguel Diaz, from St. John's University and the College of St. Benedict in Minnesota, to represent the U.S. at the Vatican, and Pepperdine law professor Douglas Kmiec to represent the U.S. in Malta.

Policy watchers in the USCCB and other Catholic organizations applauded Obama's signing of a bill that reauthorized and expanded the State Children's Health

Insurance Program, his overtures toward settling disputes in the Middle East, his commitment to work toward nuclear disarmament and movement on closing the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Church groups also supported several types of tax credits and deductions for low-income families in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which Obama signed in February.

The USCCB and the Vatican welcomed Obama's orders relaxing travel to Cuba for Cuban-Americans, easing restrictions on family financial support and reopening discussions with the Cuban government on immigration. But as recently as Dec. 10 Pope Benedict pressed the U.S. government to end the 47-year economic embargo against Cuba, saying it particularly hurts the poor.

Catholic organizations were critical of the administration's decision to phase out a school voucher program for the District of Columbia, Obama's plan to add 30,000 troops to the war effort in Afghanistan and a Dec. 2 announcement that 13 more embryonic stem-cell lines were eligible for federal research funding.

But even before he was sworn in Jan. 20, Catholic and other faith groups had rallied to head off what they feared would be the quick reversal of some anti-abortion policies of the Bush administration and the anticipated introduction of the Freedom of Choice Act, which would wipe out many existing state laws and impede states' ability to regulate abortion.

A postcard campaign last January sponsored by the U.S. bishops' pro-life office and the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment asked members of Congress to oppose the proposed Freedom of Choice Act "or any similar measure, and retain laws against federal funding and promotion of abortion."

To date it has not been introduced, and Obama has stated it is not a high legislative priority for him.

One of Obama's major initiatives has been health care reform, but as reform bills progressed the prospect of that reform including federal funds for abortion became a major sticking point.

He pledged in a September address to Congress to continue the restrictions on the use of federal funds for abortion and to maintain conscience protections for health care workers in any health reform legislation.

USCCB and Catholic health care representatives urged House and Senate leaders to ban abortion coverage in health reform. An amendment to the House bill to do that passed, leading to passage of the bill itself Nov. 7. A similar amendment to the Senate bill was tabled Dec. 8.

How exactly the abortion funding ban would be worded in a final bill, if there is one, may have to be worked out in a House-Senate conference committee.

The president said repeatedly that comprehensive immigration reform would be the next big issue on his administration's domestic agenda.

As another January drew near, an interfaith postcard campaign was being planned to push Congress to take up immigration reform as its next major priority. Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez, D-Ill., was expected to introduce his bill Dec. 15.