

Pope welcomes new US ambassador, prods on right to life issues

VATICAN CITY - Welcoming the new U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI outlined wide areas of potential cooperation with the administration of President Barack Obama, but drew a sharp line on the issues of abortion and the rights of conscience.

The pope called for “a clear discernment with regard to issues touching the protection of human dignity and respect for the inalienable right to life from the moment of conception to natural death, as well as the protection of the right to conscientious objection on the part of health care workers, and indeed all citizens.”

He made the remarks at a ceremony Oct. 2 to accept the credentials of Miguel Diaz, named in May by Obama as the ninth U.S. ambassador to the Holy See. After the encounter at the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo south of Rome, Diaz held talks at the Vatican with the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.

The pope’s comments on the right to life touched on a current debate in the United States over provisions of health care reform and how they would affect abortion policies.

Leading U.S. bishops have insisted that any final health reform bill exclude mandated coverage of abortion and protect conscience rights. Obama has said that under his plan “no federal dollars will be used to fund abortions, and federal conscience laws will remain in place,” but the bishops say none of the proposals under congressional consideration have met that challenge.

The pope smiled and greeted Diaz warmly at the papal villa, chatting with the ambassador before greeting members of the U.S. embassy staff and Diaz’s family. Diaz also prepared a speech, but the pope and the ambassador handed each other their texts instead of reading them.

In his text, the pope said he recalled “with pleasure” his encounter last July with Obama, and expressed his confidence that U.S.-Vatican relations would continue to be marked by fruitful dialogue and cooperation in favor of human rights and human dignity.

The pope praised the founding U.S. ideals of freedom, dignity and pluralism and, in a reference to Obama’s short time in office, said that “in recent months the reaffirmation of this dialectic of tradition and originality, unity and diversity has recaptured the imagination of the world.”

In his own speech, Diaz spoke of the need for the United States to act cooperatively to resolve international problems, saying that “more than ever the United States realizes that we cannot act alone.”

The pope strongly endorsed that orientation toward “a greater spirit of solidarity and multilateral engagement,” saying today’s crises cannot be resolved on individualistic or even national terms. As a prime example, he pointed to the global economic crisis, and said it calls for a revision of financial structures in the light of ethics.

The pope said multilateralism should also be applied to “the whole spectrum of issues linked to the future of humanity,” including basic health care, immigration policies, climate control and secure access to food and water.

He expressed his particular satisfaction for the results of a recent U.N. summit on nuclear disarmament, chaired by Obama, which unanimously approved a resolution on nuclear disarmament and set the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

The second half of the pope’s address examined the necessary connection between genuine progress and “fidelity to the truth.” The pope defended the right and responsibility of church leaders in the United States to weigh in on ethical and social questions by “proposing respectful and reasonable arguments grounded in the natural law and confirmed by the perspective of faith.”

The pope repeated a point he made during his visit to the United States in 2008: that freedom is also a continual summons to personal responsibility. He said that

requires discernment and reasoned dialogue, and the church has a rightful voice in this process.

In explaining why the church insists on the unbreakable link between an “ethics of life” and every other aspect of social ethics, he quoted Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, “The Gospel of Life,” which said a society lacks solid foundations when it asserts values like human dignity but then “radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued or violated.”

Diaz began his speech by saying Obama had been “deeply touched” to meet with and listen to the pope last July.

The ambassador, citing the pope’s recent encyclical on economic justice, listed several areas of mutual U.S.-Vatican concern, including interreligious dialogue, environmental protection, the financial crisis, global poverty and the migration of peoples.

“Your urgent priorities coincide with those set forth by President Obama, and as ambassador of the United States I look forward to working with the Holy See to advance our common interests,” he said.

He said the United States deeply respects the Vatican as “a sovereign entity, as a humanitarian actor and as a unique moral voice in the world.” He noted past U.S.-Vatican partnerships in favor of religious freedom and human rights, and pledged to continue along that path.

The new ambassador closed his remarks by promising to be a “bridge-builder” between the United States and the Vatican, and strengthening their “indispensable relationship.”

Diaz, 46, who taught at St. John’s University and the College of St. Benedict in Minnesota, is the first Hispanic and the first theologian to represent the United States at the Vatican. Born in Havana, he came to the United States from Cuba as a child with his parents.