

U.S. ambassador says pope-Bush meeting was proud day for Americans

WASHINGTON - For the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, the meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and President George W. Bush was a proud day for Americans.

"It was wonderful to have this great world religious leader express his appreciation for so many things we take for granted," Mary Ann Glendon told Catholic News Service April 16.

"From the inside, we Americans read the Pew polls and see the glass half-empty," she said.

But the pope, in his speech to the president, reminded people that "we have many different religions that coexist in harmony and flourish in this kind of political arrangement," she said.

That kind of affirmation was special, she said. So was the fact that the pope and the president both seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the occasion.

Ambassador Glendon noted that the speeches of the two leaders overlapped on several key issues, especially where President Bush echoed some of the pope's main themes - on the need for love, hope and respect for life.

"The president, I think, was particularly eloquent today. I think it was one of the best talks he's ever given," she said.

As for their private talks, Ambassador Glendon said the topics listed in a joint statement had some priority items, especially the need to combat terrorism and prevent religion from being used to justify terrorist acts.

The statement also said the two leaders discussed "the need to confront terrorism with appropriate means that respect the human person and his or her rights."

Asked if that represented a challenge to the President Bush administration's policy on treatment of terrorist suspects, Ambassador Glendon noted that it was a joint statement, so both sides must have been comfortable with the language.

"No one would disagree with the principle. Of course, there might be disagreement about what are the appropriate means," she said.

She said it appeared clear that the Middle East was a main topic on the pope-president agenda. The issue is important to President Bush, she said, who wants to see a Palestinian state established before the end of his term.

If the talks move to a phase of concrete negotiations, "I think the United States will hope for some role of the Holy See as a wide mediator," she said.

Despite apprehension by some that the papal visit would become a political issue in the campaign season, she said so far there was "no hint of that."

Ambassador Glendon said one of the beautiful things was seeing the president's genuine enthusiasm for the visit and his respect for the pope.

She said that when President Bush arrived at Andrews Air Force Base April 15, he strode up to a group of cardinals and told them bluntly that some people had questioned why he would make the unusual effort to come and meet the pontiff's plane.

Ambassador Glendon said President Bush told them: "How could I not come out to meet him? He's the greatest spiritual leader in the whole world."

Then, after the pope arrived and the two sipped orange juice in an airport VIP lounge, the president told the pope the same thing.