

Vatican hopes Obama will foster peace, concern for poor, cardinal says

ROME - The Vatican is concerned about President-elect Barack Obama's positions on the family and on the unborn, but it looks forward with hope to his presidency fostering more attention to the poor and easing violence around the globe, said retired Cardinal Pio Laghi.

The cardinal, a former Vatican nuncio to the United States, spoke about the prospects for U.S.-Vatican relations under Obama during a Dec. 22 conference in Rome sponsored by Limes, an Italian political journal.

Although some pundits have said President-elect Obama's support for legalized abortion and embryonic stem-cell research would poison the rapport the United States and the Vatican have developed under President George W. Bush - despite the Vatican's opposition to the war in Iraq - Cardinal Laghi said, "the Vatican does not fear" the end of close cooperation.

"One must wait to see how he acts with regard to the fundamental commitments - which for us are very important - to protect the family and the sacredness of human life from conception to the tomb," the cardinal said.

But another very serious issue is "the defense of Christians, of Catholics, who are threatened in India, in Iraq where there has been an enormous exodus and in the Holy Land," he said.

"This situation has worsened because of the war in Iraq. If the war had been avoided, there would not have been this huge exodus, especially from Iraq, and this sense of persecution, of real persecution," the cardinal said.

In 2003 Pope John Paul II sent Cardinal Laghi to the White House in a last-minute attempt to convince Bush not to invade Iraq.

Ignoring the pope's pleas and conducting a war that was much more complicated than foreseen, Bush's action exacerbated anti-Christian feelings in many parts of the world, Cardinal Laghi said.

Because the United States is considered to be a Christian country, he said, "where American soldiers go, the countries they occupy consider Christians to be their occupiers."

Cardinal Laghi said the Vatican is hopeful that under President-elect Obama's leadership the United States will return to acting primarily as a force for peace, especially with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also expects Obama to act on his promise to assist the middle class and the poor, particularly with health care, he said.

"But very important points, which could lead to contrast and difficulties on the part of the Holy See and of Catholics in the United States, are the family and the defense of life," he said.

"Obama brings with him to the White House the first Catholic vice president, Joe Biden. And I read today that Obama has put him in charge of a task force on the family. This is a good sign, if the family will be defended as it should be," Cardinal Laghi said.

The cardinal also said he hoped President-elect Obama would take his time and seek "good counsel" before acting on the proposed Freedom of Choice Act, which would protect abortion as a fundamental right throughout the United States, regardless of existing state laws to restrict it.

Beyond specific policy issues, President-elect Obama's election was a sign of renewed hope in "a country of hope," Cardinal Laghi said.

President-elect Obama's election, he said, capped the United States' "liberation from the horrendous original sin that for many years marred the face of America: slavery."

"Obama's campaign was inspired and motivated by a spirit of reconciliation," he said, and Pope Benedict XVI, the U.S. bishops' conference and the Vatican

newspaper each welcomed his victory as an opportunity for a new beginning.