

White House official says Obama gave pope letter from Kennedy

VATICAN CITY - U.S. President Barack Obama, meeting with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican July 10, gave the pope a personal letter from Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., who was diagnosed more than a year ago with brain cancer.

Denis McDonough, deputy national security adviser for strategic communications and a member of Obama's entourage, told reporters after the papal-presidential meeting that Obama also asked the pope to pray for Kennedy.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said Obama spoke with Kennedy by phone after the meeting.

"The president, just as we lifted off, spoke with Sen. Kennedy for about 10 minutes, telling him that he had delivered the letter on his behalf to the pope today," Gibbs told reporters on Obama's plane en route to Ghana.

"The contents of the letter were not known to anybody that I know of except Sen. Kennedy," he added.

Kennedy, a Catholic, was elected in 1962 to the seat once held by his brother, John F. Kennedy, who became president in 1960. He is the second most senior member of the U.S. Senate, after Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va.

Kennedy has worked with Catholic bishops and Catholic Charities officials on a variety of issues, such as immigration, the federal minimum wage and health coverage. He also has been criticized by Catholic leaders for his support for legalized abortion and embryonic stem-cell research.

He is currently chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee.