

World issues dominate Vatican hopes for Obama

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican has struck a positive tone as it opens relations with the administration of President Barack Obama, emphasizing hopes for cooperation on issues of peace and social justice, and – for now – downplaying differences on moral questions like abortion.

Pope Benedict XVI sent an Inauguration Day telegram congratulating the new president and supporting President Obama's resolve to "promote understanding, cooperation and peace among the nations."

The Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, compared the swearing-in of the first African-American president to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and said it ushered in a new era of expectation and participation.

But beyond these optimistic public declarations, what are the Vatican's top concerns at the start of the Obama term? What are its highest hopes and its deepest worries?

In interviews over recent weeks, Vatican officials said their expectations were highest on international questions of war and peace – most specifically, the Israeli-Palestinian war, which a Vatican official once termed "the mother of all conflicts."

What is expected of the Obama administration, they said, is a decisive initiative to restart the peace process and move it toward a definitive solution, not a one-shot attempt but a "consistent commitment" to lead Israelis and Palestinians to the realization that a settlement is in their own best interests.

Vatican diplomats were disappointed at the Bush administration's peace-promoting efforts in the Holy Land. They said those efforts came late and that the most promising initiative – the peace conference in Annapolis, in late 2007 – was not followed up with diplomatic pressure.

While no one expects President Obama to alter the United States' fundamental support for Israel, Vatican officials said the new president begins his term with a

certain amount of trust and sympathy among Arabs. That could be important, they said, because Arabs need to feel they have a world leader who takes their situation to heart.

All this could help change the dynamic of tension and mistrust throughout the Middle East, they said. Already, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent statement that the new administration would move quickly to diplomatically engage Syria and Iran was seen as a wise move by the Vatican.

The Vatican always was uncomfortable with the Bush administration's self-proclaimed "war on terrorism," even though officials gave qualified support to U.S. military action against terrorist enclaves in Afghanistan in 2001. Vatican sources said the hope is that the anti-terrorism effort under President Obama will be carried out with two principles in mind: first, respect for legal rights, i.e., a rejection of torture; and, second, attention to the underlying causes of terrorism, including injustice and political frustration.

On economic issues, Vatican officials cited potential areas of agreement with President Obama, including his concern for those on the margins of society. The hope, they said, is that the president's stated concern for the poor in the United States will translate into a serious U.S. commitment to help alleviate global poverty. This was an important area of cooperation with the Bush administration, and the Vatican wants it to continue under President Obama.

Asked about pro-life issues, on which President Obama and the Catholic Church have clear differences, Vatican officials took a wait-and-see attitude. They said they shared the immediate concern of U.S. church leaders that President Obama may restore federal funding for nongovernmental family planning programs that offer abortion outside the United States and lift the Bush administration's limit on the funding of embryonic stem-cell research.

But on Inauguration Day, there was a strong hope at the Vatican that President Obama, who is seen as an intelligent politician, would not pick unnecessary fights with the church. As a sign of just how closely the Vatican was watching the president's words and deeds and how willing it was to accentuate the positive, one official who follows pro-life questions said he was encouraged that in his

inauguration address Obama didn't mention anything about these hot-button issues.

"He did mention parents who nurture their child. Now that's a very pro-life statement," he said.