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Hopes high for Obama meeting with Pope Francis at Vatican

By Meredith Somers - The Washington Times - Tuesday, March 25, 2014

Gay marriage. Abortion. Stem cell research.

There's plenty for President Obama and Pope Francis to discuss when they meet Thursday at the Vatican.

But beyond their doctrinal differences lies a mutual desire for social justice that likely will tamp down any friction in their first meeting, analysts say.

Same-sex marriage and abortion might be points of contention, but the hope is that Mr. Obama and Francis can find a "point of convergence" on other topics, said Paul Manuel, director of the Institute for Leadership.

"We're looking at two global superpowers that have competing visions of justice," said Mr. Manuel, a political science professor at Mount St. Mary's University. "I'm sure the White House would like to have convergence with the Vatican. One area that might help them is the pope's initiative on human trafficking. I think that's something the president would be happy to discuss."

Francis this month announced his support of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops' Brotherhood Campaign, which aims to stem human slavery in Brazil

Mr. Manuel suggested that the persecution of Christians in the Middle East as another likely topic. He said the issue could be linked to religious freedom, which "is not a far stretch to link to President Obama's health care plan."

Some Catholic institutions in the U.S. have voiced opposition to the president's signature initiative — The Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare — because it requires them to provide birth control for employees, contrary to Catholic doctrine.

"That could be an interesting, robust conversation," Mr. Manuel said.

Francis also has advocated immigration reform "and made it a priority to get countries off the brink of war," he said. "Maybe there will be a discussion about peace in the Holy Land, along with Ukraine and South Sudan."

Those priorities do not stray far from Mr. Obama's objectives, Mr. Manuel said. "It might be a point of convergence, global inequality, and that might resonate with President Obama."

The pontiff also likely will bring up abortion and traditional marriage. "I don't think he'd miss the opportunity," he said.

The Obama administration has supported same-sex marriage, stem cell research and abortion rights, issues that contrast with Catholic Church doctrines.

"In trying to find some common ground, it's not going to be doctrinal issues," said Jo-Renee Formicola, a political science professor at Seton Hall University. "It will be broader issues, like the notion of trying to help the poorest of the poor."

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In announcing the president's meeting at the Vatican, the White House noted that the two leaders will discuss "growing inequality."

Francis has made helping the poor and afflicted a priority since his election a year ago, while Mr. Obama has pushed for an increase in the federal minimum wage.

"If you look at the president's agenda, it's gone from growing the middle class from the center to an emphasis on the poor and raising the minimum wage," said Ms. Formicola, a researcher in church-state relations.

This will be the second visit to the Vatican for Mr. Obama and his first meeting with Francis. It is one of several stops on the president's agenda during his trip through Europe.

Mr. Obama was at the Vatican in July 2009 for a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI, who stepped down last year.

Francis, a 77-year-old Argentine native, has garnered applause and criticism for his "Who am I to judge" response to a question about homosexuality. He reluctantly has "rock star" status around the world, thanks to his unconventional life stories.

Time magazine in December dubbed Francis as its Person of the Year, and Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett this week pitched the idea of a papal visit to Philadelphia for a large celebration of family.

"The pope has become very popular in the United States," said Daniel Levine, a political science professor at the University of Michigan. "He's really confounded expectations. He's very controversial in American politics. It's important for him to make contact with President Obama. Whether he likes him or not, he's the president of the United States."

Francis has held audiences with a variety of world leaders and celebrities. Last year, he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Argentine President Cristina Fernandez. He is scheduled to visit the Holy Land in May.

"The pope's meeting with all kinds of officials," Mr. Levine said. "So I think it's important for him to make contact [with Mr. Obama]."

The past year hasn't been easy for the Catholic Church, especially in America.

Ms. Formicola pointed out that the church has taken a number of hits from the fallout of the child sex abuse scandal and experienced a drop in membership.

A Pew Research Center poll in 2012 found that the number of American Catholics who considered themselves "strong" members of the church was at its lowest ever, and was only beginning to reverse course.

"As for President Obama, he gets to be seen with the pope," Mr. Levine said. "Francis' whole public image is one of welcoming, embracing a variety of positions, embracing people."

Although it might sound like expectations for a first date, Mr. Manuel said, it's important that Mr. Obama and Francis be more than cordial and find a "point of convergence" on which they can build.

"Will they have chemistry?" he said. "If there is, it could turn into something special."