

Obama meets with Pope Francis for the first time at the Vatican

By Kathleen Hennessey

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VATICAN CITY -- Greeting a man he has called an "inspiration," President Obama paid his first visit to Pope Francis on Thursday, opening a meeting the White House hopes will highlight the leaders' shared views on economic inequality and poverty and perhaps drown out the president's conflicts with the Catholic Church hierarchy at home.

A cordon of members of the Swiss Guard greeted the president in a modest Vatican courtyard behind St. Peter's Basilica as he arrived for his first encounter with a man whose popularity and international fame match few figures, one of those, perhaps, being Obama himself -- five years ago.

"It is a great honor. I'm a great admirer," Obama said to the pontiff as he arrived Thursday morning. "Thank you so much for receiving me."

Obama and the pope met privately for about 50 minutes. The president was joined by Secretary of State John F. Kerry and his national security advisor, Susan Rice, as well as a small group of top aides.

The White House views the meeting as a chance to align the president with Francis and his focus on economic justice.

The pope's emphasis on inclusion and the church's positions on economic issues have impressed him, Obama has said, putting the president in the ranks of many left-leaning Americans who have cheered the new tone coming from the Vatican in the year since Francis became pope.

The president has publicly associated himself with Francis' message several times in recent months. He's referred to the pope in speeches, most notably in an address on income inequality delivered last fall.

Obama explained the choice in a written interview with an Italian newspaper published Thursday.

"Given his great moral authority, when the pope speaks, it carries enormous weight," Obama told *Corriere della Sera*. "He doesn't just proclaim the Gospel, he lives it. We've all been moved by his humility and acts of mercy. His deeds, the simple act of reaching out to the least of these, is a reminder that every one of us has an individual responsibility to live in a righteous way."

This was the first time Obama has met or spoken to the pope. The president met with Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, at the Vatican in 2009, and noted that meeting as he arrived Thursday.

"I bring greetings from my family," the president said. "The last time I came here to meet your predecessor, I was able to bring my wife and children."

During Benedict's tenure, Obama, who is not Catholic, rarely aligned himself with the church. His most public dealings with the church hierarchy involved contentious fights with American archbishops over abortion rights, contraception and religious freedom.

Some U.S. bishops have waged a pitched fight against elements of Obama's signature healthcare law, saying it forces Catholic institutions to pay for contraception for employees in violation of church doctrine.

Even on economics, there are clear limits to Obama's agreement with the pope, a Jesuit who spent most of his career in Latin America. Francis has spoken out against the perils of globalization and a "throw-away" culture. Obama regularly preaches the virtues of capitalism and free trade.

In the interview, Obama acknowledged the differences. "It doesn't mean we agree on every issue, but his voice is one that I think the world needs to hear. He challenges us."

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