

Vatican media laud Obama's overture to Muslims

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — U.S. President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo, Egypt, was welcomed by Vatican media as a step toward peace and a new beginning in American relations with Muslims.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said the June 4 speech was important not only for relations between the United States and Muslim countries but also for international peace. It brought "an element of hope" to the world horizon, he said in a commentary on Vatican Radio June 6.

"The undeniable political weight of the United States is being employed with clarity toward objectives that are certainly crucial for peace in the world," the spokesman said.

He cited several concerns touched upon in the speech by the U.S. president, including an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, nuclear disarmament, religious freedom, democratic values, development and women's rights.

"These are openings toward directions in which very many people of good will want to cooperate in order to find the right way for humanity, and which we hope can be a meeting ground



U.S. PRESIDENT DELIVERS SPEECH IN CAIRO, EGYPT — U.S. President Barack Obama speaks in the Grand Hall of Cairo University in Egypt June 4. Obama told the world's Muslims that violent extremists had exploited tensions between Muslims and the West. (CNS photo by Larry Downing, Reuters)

for believers in God, creator and lover of peace," Father Lombardi said.

The Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, ran a front-page story June 4 on Obama's speech earlier that day. The newspaper called it an effort to open "a new beginning in relations between the United States and the

Arab world."

It said the president "went beyond political formulas, evoking concrete common interests in the name of a common humanity," including peace, security, education, work, family life and religious values.

On the question of Iraq, the newspaper said, Obama

"marked a break with the past" by citing the need for the United States to use diplomacy and international consensus to solve problems.

Vatican Radio also reported on the speech, saying that it "went beyond expectations" as a reconciliation effort with Muslim countries.

"The words pronounced at the University of Cairo are much more than an extended hand, but the foundation of a real common platform for launching what (Obama) defines as a new beginning in relations between the United States and the Middle East," it said.

In an interview with Vatican Radio, Mario Scialoja, an official of the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy, said Obama's speech signaled a change from the approach of the administration of former President George W. Bush. He said it was especially important that Obama recognized Muslims as a part of American society and called Islam a religion of peace, citing verses from the Quran.

"It seems to me that Obama has touched the right chords in the hearts of Muslims and the entire world and that he has opened an era of more receptive and more frank dialogue between the United States and the Islamic world," Scialoja said.

Several Christian leaders

in the Middle East said they were generally impressed with Obama's speech but wanted action to follow the president's words.

"It's a speech that has been needed for a long time, and the U.S. president had the courage to make it," Chaldean Bishop Youssef Sarraf of Cairo told the Italian Catholic agency SIR. He expressed the hope that "Islam and the Arab world will know how to receive this extended hand."

"It's the beginning of a new process, a new era. Obama really wants to change things, and the image of the United States will benefit from it," Bishop Sarraf said.

Archbishop Paul Dahdah, apostolic vicar of Beirut, Lebanon, said he hoped the speech would spur real initiatives aimed at resolving the "root of all problems in the region," the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "If that does not happen, the extended hand will not lead to any result," he said.

Franciscan Father Pierbatista Pizzaballa, head of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, said Obama was sincere, determined and very balanced in his speech, confirming the U.S. relationship with Israel but signaling a change in strategy with the Arab world.

"This should give an impetus to the search for a solution to the main problem, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," he said.

He said it was important that Obama had recognized the potential role of the militant group Hamas in a future peace settlement, asking at the same time that Hamas recognize Israel.

Vatican newspaper reaffirms support of U.S. bishops

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican newspaper has again emphasized that when it comes to the Obama administration and pro-life issues, the Vatican and the U.S. bishops are in full agreement and that no compromise is possible on the right to life.

The newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, said it was a mistake to view its press coverage of Obama — which has been positive on many issues — as evidence that the Vatican is following a "different strategy" than the U.S. bishops in dealing with the new administration.

The comments came in the newspaper's June 5 edition, in an article criticizing the Obama administration's restoration of federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research.

The newspaper appeared to be defending itself against accusations by some U.S. Catholic commentators that its editorial line was too soft on Obama.

In one of the latest critiques, Michael Novak, director of social and political studies at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote in *National Review Online* May 26 that *L'Osservatore* had "published glowing, star-struck, teenage praise of President Barack Obama" and "seems not to grasp the fundamental realities of abortion politics in America."

The Vatican newspaper said it wanted to underline that "in reporting on recent statements and initiatives of the president of the United States, *L'Osservatore Romano*

has certainly not intended to express appreciation for his positions on questions of ethical importance."

"Obviously the Holy See and *L'Osservatore Romano* have been, are and will be fully at the side of the U.S. bishops in their commitment in favor of the inviolability of human life in whatever stage of its existence," it said.

The commentary said it would be wrong to interpret the newspaper's articles as a sign that it viewed the U.S. bishops' anti-abortion campaign as an exercise in partisan politics. Nor was the Vatican following a "different strategy" than that used by U.S. bishops when it came to the inherent evil of abortion, it said.

The newspaper said Obama has shown himself to be open to dialogue and that U.S. bishops have welcomed this possibility in a positive manner. However, in doing so, it said, "they have reaffirmed, and quite rightly, that in dialogue no compromise is ever possible on the fundamental question of the right to life."

In May, a similar statement came from *L'Osservatore* editor Giovanni Maria Vian, who said: "It should be understood that *L'Osservatore* shares the same position as the American bishops who consider abortion a disaster. It is always a necessary and decisive task, in fact, to promote a culture of life at every level."

At the same time, Vian has said that, despite obvious differences with the new administration on pro-life issues, he does not consider Obama

a "pro-abortion president," and his newspaper has emphasized Obama's declared commitment to reducing the number of abortions.

The latest statement from *L'Osservatore* came at the end of an article that ran on an

inside page. The same day, the newspaper published a front-page article giving good marks to Obama's speech to the Arab world in Cairo.

Pope Benedict XVI and the president and expected to meet in July.

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