

Pope Francis hosts President Obama for 'cordial' talks

by [Eric J. Lyman](#)

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis met with President Obama for the first time on Thursday (March 27) in a meeting heavy in symbolism that reportedly touched on some hot-button disputes between the White House and the U.S. Catholic bishops.

The highly touted 52-minute meeting was friendly and cordial, with polite niceties exchanged—Obama told Francis he was “a great admirer” of his papacy—before the formal session got underway. According to White House press reports, the overall mood before the meeting was lighthearted, with Obama injecting some humor before the two men began their private discussions.

“His Holiness is probably the only person in the world who has to put up with more protocol,” the president said.

According to an official statement from the Vatican about the “cordial” talks, “views were exchanged on some current international themes and it was hoped that, in areas of conflict, there would be respect for humanitarian and international law and a negotiated solution between the parties involved,” as well as combating human trafficking.

The statement also said the two men discussed immigration reform and “the exercise of the rights to religious freedom, life and conscientious objection” among American Catholics—a veiled reference to Obama’s support of abortion rights and his strained relations with the American hierarchy over the administration’s contraception mandate under the Affordable Care Act, which went to the Supreme Court on Tuesday.

The leaders exchanged gifts, with Obama offering the pontiff a collection of seeds in a box made of wood reclaimed from the oldest Catholic cathedral in the U.S., in Baltimore. The seeds came from the White House garden, and Obama suggested

that Francis could see the real thing in a visit to Washington.

“Why not?” the pope responded in Spanish.

The pope, in turn, presented Obama with a plaque and a copy of his first apostolic exhortation on “The Joy of the Gospel.” The president said he would “treasure” it and “read this in the Oval Office when I’m deeply frustrated. I’m sure it will give me strength and calm me down,” prompting a smile and chuckle from the pope.

Obama used the seeds as an informal invitation to visit the United States. “If you have a chance to come to the White House, we can show you our garden as well,” he said. Philadelphia officials are lobbying hard for a papal visit in 2015 in conjunction with a Vatican meeting on the family.

Vatican officials cautioned, however, that the exchange did not necessarily constitute a formal acceptance of the invitation.

Observers said each leader appeared genuinely pleased to meet the other. “There was a sincerity in the air,” said the Rev. Alistair Sear, a retired church historian. “It was clear this was much more than a photo opportunity.”

It is Obama’s second visit to Italy and second meeting with a pontiff; the president met retired Pope Benedict XVI in 2009.