

Pope and president, partnership and promise

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The United States and the Catholic Church share some intriguing similarities: both are global in reach, exert significant influence over hundreds of millions of people, and (perhaps most interestingly) make serious teleological claims. Such claims have not necessarily clashed, for they appeal to different social and moral aspects of humanity. At their best, they can be complementary empires of promise.

Though in the case of the U.S., the expression of such promise has, at least since the 1890s, been transferred with considerable firepower. And because there has been a large Catholic population in the U.S. since the mid-19th century, the Catholic Church has taken particular interest in how those Catholics have operated in a nation dominated by Protestants and a republican system of government. Over that same period, the U.S. and the Catholic Church have often partnered to address wars and ideological foes. Profound social, cultural, and moral issues have been debated in the relationship between these two institutions—what the [Italian journalist Massimo Franco](#) has called “parallel empires.” We might wonder, then, what it means when the leaders of these two empires meet.

This will reportedly take place March 27 when President Barack Obama visits the Vatican. According to Jay Carney, White House spokesman, the president expects to discuss an issue at the center of the pope’s agenda: material inequality. In his pastoral statement *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis [linked growing inequality](#) around the globe to the violence that consumes the attention of world leaders. He wrote that we “have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. . . . Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.”

Desperation leads to violence, Francis argued, and no measure of security, surveillance, and military power—the trifecta of the American arsenal—can create

adequate answers to such systemic moral problems.

President Obama has also made economic inequality a key issue of the remaining years of his presidency. In his [State of the Union](#) address, he said, “What I believe unites the people of this nation, regardless of race or region or party, young or old, rich or poor, is the simple, profound belief in opportunity for all—the notion that if you work hard and take responsibility, you can get ahead.”

Unlike the pope, the president speaks primarily about upward mobility, the middle class, job creation, a minimum-wage increase, and economic development. While such measures will undoubtedly benefit U.S. Catholics, the president failed to connect such practical means to a more profound end. In other words, Obama did not propose a “big idea.”

In both cases, these leaders seem to be arguing that church and nation respectively need to return home. “Opportunity is who we are,” the president said, pressing U.S. lawmakers to return to an era of hope. “And the defining project of our generation is to restore that promise.” The pope presses his church to re-engage the hardships of the world: “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

In their respective missions, the pope and the president may find each other useful partners. To moderate his empire of might, the president can turn to the pope who has taken the name Francis to demonstrate that he stands for peace. To promote his evangelizing efforts, the pope might turn to the president who reminded his people that “our leadership is defined not just by our defense against threats, but by the enormous opportunities to do good and promote understanding around the globe—to forge greater cooperation, to expand new markets, to free people from fear and want.”

It will make for interesting commentary if the pope and the president debate issues of war, drones, neoliberalism, and abortion. It seems, however, that they have decided to devote their institutions to promise rather than profundity.

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