Speaking Truth to POTUS:
Presidents, Politics, and the Pope
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Since the pontificate of St. John Paul II, the Pope has been a leader of world significance, which brings the Holy Father into contact with the President of the United States (POTUS). John Paul II dealt with five chief executives. The recent history of presidential-papal interactions suggests five roles into which Presidents cast the Pope and three lessons about the relationship between POTUS and Peter.

In December 2014, President Barack Obama announced that the United States and Cuba would work to normalize relations after decades of hostility. In his announcement, the President cited the intervention of Pope Francis in helping to move the two nations toward reconciliation. Mr. Obama later told the National Prayer Breakfast that “I’ve been touched by [Pope Francis’s] call to relieve suffering, and to show justice and mercy and compassion to the most vulnerable.” These warm tributes stand in contrast to other actions of the Obama Administration, including efforts to force EWTN, the Little Sisters of the Poor, and other Catholic organizations to provide contraceptive coverage for their employees.

How could President Obama praise the Holy Father’s moral witness one day, but on another take Catholic faithful to court in an attempt to force them to violate their consciences? The answer is that a convoluted relationship between this President and the Pope is not unique. It is not the first time that the Holy Father has spoken truth to POTUS (President Of The United States), only to have the President listen selectively.

For much of American history, presidential relations with the papacy were distant and formal. All of this changed, however, when Pope St. John Paul II became a “pilgrim Pope” who travelled the world to visit his flock. The travels of John Paul II made him an international figure. Not surprisingly, the Holy Father’s international role as a teacher and messenger of the Gospel brought him into closer contact with America’s President.

The President of the United States is a world leader backed by enormous economic and military resources. In contrast, the papacy has few of the traditional sources of international political influence. His status as spiritual leader of the world’s Catholics gives him an enormous flock, but not necessarily influence on the world stage. It is the Holy Father’s role as
teacher—indeed, as prophet—that enables him to be a world leader. Popes St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis—through extensive travels, unwavering pronouncement of the Gospel, personal warmth, and shrewd judgment—have commanded international respect.

The Pontiff with the most experience of American Presidents was St. John Paul II. Over his long pontificate, St. John Paul met with five Presidents, from Jimmy Carter through George W. Bush. Presidential-papal interactions during his pontificate sketch the range of that relationship and outline its realities.

**Jimmy Carter:** Jimmy Carter seemed to regard the Pope as one of many world figures, admirable but of limited importance. Carter corresponded with the Holy Father and welcomed him when John Paul visited the United States in 1979, a meeting he recounted as “one of the most moving moments of his presidency.” But in his memoirs, Carter mentions John Paul only twice, and those references are minimal and unenthusiastic. What Carter does not mention is that he found the Pope politically useful. His 1980 reelection campaign ran a television commercial that featured footage from the Pope’s 1979 visit to the United States, with narration explicitly comparing Carter to John Paul as two leaders seeking peace.

**Ronald Reagan:** Ronald Reagan regarded John Paul II as an important world leader and ally in proclaiming the superiority of freedom over communism. Early in Reagan’s tenure, several members of the administration worked with Cardinal Pio Laghi (the papal nuncio in Washington) to generate diplomatic pressure against a possible invasion of Poland by Moscow. Moreover, General Vernon Walters told the BBC in 1997 that he made regular visits to the Pope during the 1980s, taking with him satellite photos of Soviet troop movements in eastern Europe. Reagan also developed a personal relationship with the Pope. He visited the Pope in Rome in 1982 and met John Paul on other occasions as well. They had a brief meeting in Alaska in May 1984, which White House officials acknowledged that they hoped might help Reagan in his bid for reelection.

**George H. W. Bush:** George H. W. Bush believed that foreign policy was business for leaders of major states and their professional diplomats. Bush showed great respect for John Paul but regarded the Holy Father as only one of several prominent religious leaders who offered him advice and counsel. In the book he co-wrote about foreign policy during his presidency, Bush mentions John Paul only twice. The first time is in the context of a brief discussion of democratization in Poland. The second is to mention the Pope as one of several religious leaders who contacted him on the eve of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Bush’s Secretary of State, James Baker, makes no mention of John Paul in his book on the Bush years.
which John Paul’s biographer George Weigel interprets as a sign that Baker regarded the Vatican as largely irrelevant to international diplomacy.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Bill Clinton:} The Clinton presidency marked a decidedly different era in relations between the White House and the Vatican. Clinton’s approach was always to enthusiastically praise John Paul, then leave it to his surrogates to take on the Catholic Church over abortion and birth control. He was also careful to protect his standing with American Catholic voters, many of whom supported him in 1992 and 1996. Clinton praised the Holy Father’s “moral leadership” when John Paul arrived in Denver for World Youth Day in 1993.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, the Clinton Administration consistently sought to widen the availability of abortion on demand everywhere and supported population control efforts in developing nations. These efforts included funding for birth control in nations receiving American aid, as well as clashes between US diplomats and Vatican delegations at the 1994 World Population Conference in Cairo and the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.

Clinton’s strategy of confronting the Pope through subordinates allowed him to remain above the fray. When John Paul arrived in New York in October 1995, Bill and Hillary Clinton were there for the photo opportunity. After a Mass in Newark’s Sacred Heart Cathedral, “President and Mrs. Clinton strode down the center aisle, working the crowd as if it were a campaign rally.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{George W. Bush:} George W. Bush met three times with St. John Paul, and the Holy Father sent Bush an important message in 2003. They first met in July 2001, as Bush deliberated on research using stem cells extracted from human embryos. The Holy Father asked Bush to “reject practices that devalue and violate human life at any stage.”\textsuperscript{17} Bush thanked John Paul for his principled leadership and defense of human dignity.\textsuperscript{18} But according to Bush himself the “defining moment” in his deliberation was a conversation with medical ethicist Leon Kass, rather than the plea from the Pope.\textsuperscript{19}

Another significant encounter occurred vicariously in 2003, only two weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The Holy Father dispatched Cardinal Pio Laghi as a special envoy to meet with Bush and make a plea for the United States not to invade Iraq. Laghi presented Bush with a letter from John Paul, which the President put aside without opening it.\textsuperscript{20} Bush made a lengthy argument in support of the war, stating that he was “convinced it was God’s will.”\textsuperscript{21} In reply, the cardinal predicted that the United States would find it difficult to end the war.\textsuperscript{22} By the end of the meeting, Cardinal Laghi realized that Bush was determined to proceed with the invasion.
Despite their differences over Iraq, Bush still held the Holy Father in high regard. In a June 2004 meeting at the Vatican, Bush presented John Paul with the Medal of Freedom. He also attended the Pope’s funeral in 2005, accompanied by his father and Bill Clinton.

These experiences demonstrate several realities of the presidential-papal relationship. These realities include the roles in which American Presidents cast the Pope and some lessons about the relationship between POTUS and Peter.

The Roles in Which Presidents Have Cast the Pope: Presidential encounters with Pope St. John Paul II illuminate the various roles in which American chief executives cast the Holy Father. First, all of the Presidents who dealt with him revered the Pope as an international spiritual leader. They may or may not accept the Pontiff’s counsel on specific issues, but Presidents have expressed high regard for the Pope as a world leader. In the age of Barack Obama, the Dalai Lama has been added to this category, making the Pope a rare figure whom Presidents regard as higher than themselves.

Second, in limited cases, the President has found the Pope to be an ally in advancing an important goal. Ronald Reagan saw John Paul II that way in the struggle against communism. Reflecting on that alliance, George W. Bush said, “he’s been a foe of tyranny, a minister of true authority, and a person of great wisdom and kindness and moral courage.” President Obama also found Pope Francis to be ally in his move to normalize relations with Cuba.

Third, Presidents have seen the Pontiff as an advocate for international peace. John Paul II pressed several American Presidents to choose a path of peace. Not surprisingly, Presidents have not always heeded the Pope’s counsel, because they made different calculations of what prudence demands and because they see themselves alone as having ultimate responsibility to decide what is in the national interest.

Fourth, Presidents have occasionally seen the Pope—or the church he leads—as an adversary. The Clinton Administration was in opposition to the Vatican at international conferences. In the Obama Administration, government lawyers have taken on Catholic leaders and organizations over the President’s determination to broaden access to contraception and abortion. Not surprisingly, Presidents have left it to subordinates and surrogates to confront Catholics, allowing the chief executive himself to express nothing but respect for the Holy Father.

Finally, Presidents even cast the Holy Father as a campaign prop. Although Carter did not seem to regard John Paul as a truly significant international actor, he found the Pope’s image politically useful when he
sought reelection in 1980. Reagan met with John Paul in Alaska in 1984, an encounter motivated in part by the presidential election coming that November.

**Lessons from Presidential Encounters with the Pope:** While encounters between the Holy Father and the American President have not yet become routine, they are also not unique events. These encounters suggest several lessons about the relationship between POTUS and Peter both now and into the future.

1) *The contingent nature of the presidential-papal relationship:* Unlike certain well-established and long-standing relationships in American foreign policy, such as between Washington and London or the United States and Israel, there is not a well-worn path between the White House and the Vatican. There is no fixed set of expectations about the relationship between the President and the Pope.

2) *The political connection matters:* No American President wants to be seen as attacking the Pope. Catholic voters constitute a large segment of the population and, even if they often behave in ways at variance with the teachings of the Church, no major American politician wants to risk angering Catholic constituents. No matter what policies the President pursues, POTUS publicly praises the Pope.

3) *The role of personal relations and presidential goals:* John Paul developed a close relationship only with Ronald Reagan. The other Presidents saw the Pope as someone different and less valuable as an ally. Presidential goals may align with the Pope’s message, but that will not always be the case. Since Reagan, only Barack Obama has relied on the Pope to be an ally on a specific issue, and then that alliance was at odds with other differences between Barack Obama and the Catholic Church.

Presidents are political animals; they come to office in pursuit of political and policy goals. Popes, however politically astute they may be, are spiritual leaders. The mission of the Pope is to be the Vicar of Christ and to speak the truth, although Presidents do not always want to hear what the Pope has to say.

**Notes**


4. Quoted in ibid.


9. Clark, quoted in “The Pope and the President.”


13. Ibid., p. 449.


16. Ibid., 776.


19. Ibid.


21. Quoted in ibid.

22. Ibid.
