

G8 Summit. The Obamas Visit Italy (and the Vatican)

Maria Rita Latto (July 17, 2009)



In occasion of the G8 Summit in L'Aquila, the First Family enjoys Italy's beauties and goodies. A chronicle of their visit...with a few curiosities...

Images from the last G-8 summit are burned into the memories of those who have been following the event all over the world. How can one forget the expression on Michelle Obama's face as she toured L'Aquila's center looking at the destruction from the earthquake? The First Lady shook her head in disbelief as she stood in front of damaged centuries-old churches and other treasures reduced to rubble by the earthquake that claimed more than 300 lives. Michelle Obama walked along piles of debris through L'Aquila's main square and in front of a destroyed government palace. The First Lady was concerned about the homeless children living in tents and she appeared moved



by the many sad stories from the earthquake.

Another image includes the residents of L'Aquila who toyed with President Obama's campaign slogan, waving "Yes, we camp" signs as the U.S. leader visited the historic town square destroyed during the April earthquake.

After her return to Rome from L'Aquila, Michelle Obama, joined by her daughters, took a private, 30-minute tour of the Pantheon, the well-preserved ancient monument with a massive concrete dome in the heart of the city. Isabella Rauti, the wife of Rome's mayor, told the Italian news agency ANSA that the First Lady had spoken to her about her daughters, Malia and

Sasha, saying: "I want to teach them that Italy isn't just pizza." It may be true, but besides Rome's ancient monuments there's also...ice cream! Malia and Sasha Obama were given the opportunity to make a tasty discovery, and the photos that appeared all over the world show another aspect of the U.S. President's visit to Italy.

Malia, 11, wearing sunglasses and a T-shirt with a peace sign, 8-year-old Sasha, dressed in green shorts, went with their grandmother to Giolitti, the capital's best-known ice cream shop. The girls were given aprons and cloths and learned how to make ice cream, choosing blackberry and banana flavors, said proprietor Nazareno Giolitti. "Right after they made gelato, they tasted it straight from the machine, and the youngest said, 'It really tastes like blackberries,'" he reported. Giolitti also said the two girls left with about 3 kilograms (6.6 pounds) each of the ice cream they made as a special present for their mother. Giolitti showed Italian national TV a tub of some of the blackberry flavor the girls made, and said that after the Obama sisters left the leftover ice cream was quickly snapped up by customers. At sunset, Malia and Sasha joined their mother for a private tour of the Coliseum.

After about 40 minutes, the trio left the ancient Roman arena, with Malia clutching a guide book. Sasha had changed from her shorts to a floral-print dress for the guided tour. The Roman holiday continued in the alleys around the Pantheon, where the paparazzi could not believe their luck as they met Michelle Obama and her daughters taking a walk in the heart of the city, looking for a restaurant.

It was the image of a first lady demonstrating sincere simplicity, living her life as normally as possible. And, like all the American tourists who want to taste authentic "macaroni," she decided to spend a special evening with her daughters in a real Roman trattoria eating pasta, "only pasta". The chef, faced with the experience of a lifetime, outdid himself, preparing "un trionfo" of lasagnette al ragù, carbonara, amatriciana, fettuccine burro e parmigiano, and fettuccine al tartufo. It was unforgettable!

The photo album of President Obama's trip includes the image of a historical moment: the first-ever meeting between Obama and Pope Benedict XVI that took place in the Vatican on Friday, July 10. It was scheduled after Obama returned from the last session of the G-8 summit held in the central Italian city of L'Aquila. The meeting between Obama, a Protestant, and the spiritual leader of the world's 1.1 billion Roman Catholics was seen as an important moment because the two figures share similar views on helping the downtrodden and pushing for peace in the Middle East, but disagree on abortion and stem cell research.

Obama first had a short meeting with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, followed by a private talk with Benedict XVI. His wife and their two children joined Obama at the end of the private talk with the Pontiff. Obama arrived at the Vatican under tight security, with much of the area around the Vatican blocked off; cell phone access was jammed as his motorcade passed. Obama was driven up to the San Damaso courtyard at the base of the apostolic palace where he was greeted by the Swiss Guard in full regalia.

As pictures were taken at the beginning of the meeting, the Pope asked Obama about the summit and he replied: "It was very productive, particularly today."



The U.S. President and the Pontiff talked about Middle East peace, immigration reform, and sensitive bioethics matters. "The Pontiff told me that President Obama affirmed his personal commitment to try to reduce the number of abortions in the United States," said Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman.

This meeting took place after signs from both sides indicated that were ready to begin a dialogue. The Pope had repeatedly expressed his eagerness to work with the American president. In an unusual move, the Vatican sent Obama a congratulatory message directly after his election; typically the Pope waits until the inauguration to congratulate a new president. He sent another telegram after Obama was sworn in, following with a telephone call.

The President also took steps to reach out to the Vatican, such as inviting editors and reporters from various Roman Catholic publications to the White House before embarking on his trip to the G-8 conference. President Obama "is eager to find common ground on these issues and will work aggressively to do that," said Denis McDonough, Deputy U.S. National Security Advisor. He added, however, that there may be areas where the two leaders will not reach an agreement.

Despite the best intentions of finding as much common ground as possible, problems between the Pope and Obama quickly surfaced. Less than two months after his inauguration, Obama lifted restrictions on federal funding for human embryonic stem cell research, which the Vatican opposes because it destroys fetuses. U.S. Catholic bishops criticized Obama for lifting the ban and later many of the bishops denounced Notre Dame University, a leading American Catholic institution, for giving Obama an honorary degree.

Though the Vatican says that it still wants to continue to have a constructive dialogue with Obama on a host of issues, including peace, the Middle East, the environment, and the Muslim world.

On a personal note, Obama handed the Pope a letter from Senator Edward Kennedy and asked the Pontiff to pray for the senator who is suffering from an incurable brain tumor. Obama telephoned Senator Kennedy just before leaving Rome for Ghana, said Robert Gibbs, a White House spokesman, who emphasized that no one but Senator Kennedy knew the contents of the letter.

Michelle Obama, the couple's daughters, as well as Obama's mother-in-law and the girls' godmother also spent time with the Pope, said Gibbs. Before her arrival at the Vatican, Michelle Obama and Malia and Sasha were given a private tour of St. Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel.

According to press reports, the Pope gave Obama a little green book that was not the social encyclical published on July 7, *Veritas in Caritate*, which was the planned gift announced in a press office bulletin. The Pope also gave him the encyclical, as planned, in a special white leather edition. The green book, apparently added at the last minute since it wasn't mentioned in the pre-visit press release, was an Instruction entitled *Dignitas Personae* (Dignity of the Person) published on December 12, 2008 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It is a Vatican document which makes the philosophical and theological argument that human beings have a profound, inalienable dignity and lays out the basis for a just society, beginning with the defense of the most innocent of human beings, the unborn.

There was a traditional exchange of gifts: Pope Benedict gave Obama a mosaic with St. Peter's Basilica and Square, an autographed copy of the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in

Truth), the little green book, and a medal marking the fifth year of his pontificate. The President told the Pope that the mosaic, which was made in the Vatican's mosaic studio, "was very beautiful" and would have "a place of honor" in the White House. Obama gave the Pope a liturgical stole that had been on the remains of St. John Neumann, the first U.S. male citizen to be canonized. Pope Benedict then told the President: "A blessing on all your work and also for you." The president responded, "Thank you very much. We look forward to a very strong relationship."

After the meeting, Obama left the Vatican to fly to Ghana where he was expected at a state dinner in the evening. He had been at the Vatican for a little more than an hour.



Father Lombardi, speaking to the press about an hour after Obama had left, said the meeting and the atmosphere were “very cordial and calm.” He said that “the president is clearly charismatic, and this was noted by the people around the Pope from the Prefecture of the papal household to the Gentlemen of His Holiness. He has a great capacity for treating people well.” Father Lombardi said the Pope told him afterwards that he was “extremely satisfied, content, and serene” with how the talk went.

The Pope noted that the President spoke of his commitment to reduce the number of abortions and was sensitive to the Church’s position on moral issues, Lombardi said.

The Pope also noted that Obama was an attentive participant and a patient listener, Lombardi said. In terms of international politics, Lombardi referred to the situation in the Middle East, saying that “there is a convergence of views,” especially over whether Palestine and Israel should be two independent states, whether settlements should be stopped, and that all sides – Israel, Arab states and Palestine – should be willing to talk, end violence, and agree to peace. He said both men underscored the role of education in the commitment to peace, especially to create a new mentality of peace.

The Pope spoke of the Church’s role in education and President Obama recalled his early education in a Catholic school, Lombardi said.

Father Lombardi stressed the importance of the meeting between the two leaders, saying that when two people meet personally and get to know each other, it is always a big step forward. He said that Pope Benedict and President Obama addressed each other in English, although two other people were present, Monsignor Peter Wells from the Vatican and an interpreter from Obama’s staff.

When asked about the Pope’s gift of Dignitas Personae to Obama, Father Lombardi said that it “was not planned, but its meaning is clear.” Repeating himself, Lombardi said the Pope did not wish to stress differences, but rather to put topics and points of view on the table with “clarity and objectivity.” He again defined the meeting as cordial, serene, and very productive.

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