

In sign of a stronger bond, Kerry visits Vatican



WASHINGTON — Secretary of State John Kerry, whose political career has at times put him publicly at odds with Catholic Church leadership, traveled on Tuesday to the Vatican in a visit that demonstrated a reinvigorated relationship between the world’s most powerful country and one of its most powerful institutions.

The meeting – which the former altar boy deemed “a thrill” – marks a new, deeper alignment between Washington and the Vatican. The United States and the church are more actively searching for common ground, a development that some observers say is the result of a more inclusive approach by Pope Francis.

It marked the first time in nearly nine years that a US secretary of state had visited the Vatican. The visit was all the more meaningful for Kerry, the first Catholic secretary of state since Edmund Muskie, who traveled to the Vatican in 1980 with President Jimmy Carter. It was also striking that Kerry, who 10 years ago was forbidden by some bishops from taking Communion because of his stance on abortion, found himself in private rooms at the Vatican.

“As an altar boy, as a young kid, I would never have imagined that I would have been crossing the threshold of the Vatican to meet, as secretary of state, with the secretary of state of the Holy See,” Kerry told reporters after his visit Tuesday.

Kerry, 70, did not meet with Pope Francis, because of sensitivities about the pope meeting Kerry without having first met President Obama. Kerry instead met with Archbishop Pietro Parolin, the pope’s chief diplomat and the Vatican’s second-ranking official. The White House announced that Obama would meet with the pope in the “near future.”

‘As an altar boy, as a young kid, I would never have imagined that I would’ pay a visit inside the Vatican.

Quote Icon

The relationship between the Vatican and Washington has typically been strong, although there have been points of friction, particularly with Democratic leaders on issues such as abortion, contraception, and gay marriage. Those divisions remain, but they have diminished since the elevation of Pope Francis, who has focused far more of his attention on issues of social justice that resonate particularly with the Obama administration.

“I think clearly the administration and Secretary Kerry have concluded there’s a really strong window of opportunity at this point,” said Miguel H. Diaz, who was the US ambassador to the Holy See during Obama’s first term. “The stars have aligned in various ways now.”

The delicate and divisive social issues were not on the agenda during Kerry's meeting on Tuesday, and the two parties mostly discussed ways to cooperate in the Middle East, particularly over Syria and in the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, both sides offered after the meeting. The pope is planning to visit the area in May.

"The encounter was extremely fruitful and rich in content," Vatican spokesman the Rev. Federico Lombardi said of the 100-minute meeting. "It was a constructive encounter, an important one, and the length of time it lasted is indicative of its underlying significance."

One reason that the Vatican and Washington are finding more common ground, according to several longtime Catholic observers, is that US foreign policy has put more of an emphasis on diplomacy to solve thorny problems.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – opposed by the Catholic Church – are now fading. In their place, Kerry has promoted diplomacy in places like Syria and Iran.

"Kerry's approach is in tune with Francis's basic approach," said the Rev. James Bretzke, a theology professor at Boston College. "And the fact that he's being received by the Vatican and even going to the Vatican makes that all the more cogent."

"That is something new," he added. "It would not have happened under the previous two pontificates. I wouldn't have seen this under Benedict or Pope John Paul II – this possibility for real dialogue and cooperation. . . . I don't think Pope Francis is setting himself up for the moral admonitor of the heads of state, saying, 'This is what you have to do. I have the moral truth and you have to listen to it and follow it.' I think, rightly or wrongly, that was the way the two previous popes were viewed."

Francis's predecessors also elevated a series of more conservative priests, and fought on issues such as gay marriage and abortion. Francis has said the church needs to "find a new balance" between talking about the church's moral teachings and being more inclusive.

When asked last summer about gay priests, he replied, "Who am I to judge a gay person of good will who seeks the Lord? You can't marginalize these people."

He also recently nominated 19 new cardinals, most of them considered moderates.

Kerry's faith has long been an important, if quiet, part of his identity. He still wears around his neck the same St. Christopher medal — honoring the patron saint of travelers — that his mother gave him when he was going to Vietnam. During the Easter holiday in 2011, he and his wife, Teresa, went on a pilgrimage to Assisi, touring the ruins and churches that mark the birthplace of St. Francis, the humble friar from whom the pope took his name.

Kerry has said that if he could go back to college he would major in religion instead of political science, because religion is more at the center of big foreign policy issues.

But as a public figure Kerry has also clashed with some of the church's teachings. As a senator, he resisted restrictions on abortions. In 1996, he parted with the church when he voted with 14 other senators against the Defense of Marriage Act, which prohibited federal benefits from going to same-sex couples. Kerry also sponsored legislation that would prohibit hiring discrimination based on sexual orientation.

In a 2003 interview with the *Globe*, Kerry said that he and Teresa regularly attended Mass, but added that he still had some policy differences.

“I believe in the separation [of church and state]. I believe in not wearing it on my sleeve,” he said. “I have my obvious, clear differences with respect to some of the liturgy.” He added, “there are other parts that are quite stirring and meaningful.”

In 2004, Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis said he would deny Kerry from taking Communion if the senator attended Mass in his church. In what was seen as a shift toward more moderate leadership, Pope Francis last month did not reappoint Burke to an influential Vatican office that nominates candidates for bishops.

Kerry arrived at Apostolic Palace on Tuesday in a steady rain. When the Vatican officials greeting him

apologized for it, he quipped, “I thought you were supposed to take care of this.”

After his meetings, Kerry was invited on a 15-minute tour of the palace, which expanded into the rest of the Vatican and, eventually, the Sistine Chapel. Kerry mixed in with puzzled tourists, and he asked questions about what happened, and where in the chapel, when new popes are elected.

The trip was Kerry’s fourth to Rome, but it was the first time he went to the Vatican. In fact, during Kerry’s first trip abroad as secretary of state, he was in Rome for meetings on the Syrian conflict. He was there when Pope Benedict formally stepped down.

Kerry acknowledged the history, saying there was not “a more moving and emotional and historic a day than today.” But he also seemed to allude to his sometimes tense relationship with the church.

“So it is a momentous day to be here,” Kerry said, addressing US Embassy staff in Italy. “Somebody teased me with a headline earlier today — say ‘Kerry Arrives; Pope Goes.’ I don’t know. But I’m not going near that one. “

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