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Pope Francis, the Kentucky Clerk and Culture Wars Revisited

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN and JIM YARDLEY SEPT. 30, 2015

After a busy morning addressing a joint meeting of Congress and mingling with the homeless at an outdoor lunch, Pope Francis decamped to the heavily barricaded Vatican Embassy in Washington last Thursday for what Vatican officials billed as a brief afternoon siesta before his flight to New York, the second leg of his American trip.

But the 78-year-old pope did more than nap that afternoon. He made time for a private meeting in the embassy with Kim Davis, the Kentucky county clerk who has been claimed as a hero by religious conservatives for choosing to go to jail rather than issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Francis gave Ms. Davis and her husband, Joe, two rosaries, embraced her and told her to “stay strong” — according to her lawyer, Mathew D. Staver.

Not a word about Francis’ rendezvous with Ms. Davis, the current standard-bearer of the movement to resist same-sex marriage, leaked out, even when the pope was asked by an American television reporter during a news conference on the flight home to Rome about government officials who refuse

to perform their duties because of religious objections to same-sex marriage. The question was clearly a reference to Ms. Davis, but neither the reporter nor the pope mentioned her name.

“Conscientious objection is a right that is a part of every human right,” Francis responded, while demurring that he could not speak about specific cases.

Six days after Ms. Davis was furtively hustled into the embassy, a Vatican spokesman issued a terse confirmation on Wednesday that the meeting had occurred but offered no details. The episode added a new dimension to an American tour in which the pope drew rapturous throngs and surprised admiration from liberal Americans thrilled to hear a pope stake out left-leaning positions on poverty, the environment and immigration.

Suddenly, on Wednesday, religious conservatives were cheering. They had spent a week watching with some chagrin the pope’s reluctance to engage directly in their culture-war battles over same-sex marriage, abortion rights and religious liberty. Francis had urged American bishops to avoid “harsh and divisive language.”

But now, the conservatives were taking heart, putting the Davis visit together with the pope’s subtle speech on religious freedom on Saturday and his unscheduled stop in Washington to see the Little Sisters of the Poor, an order of nuns that is suing the federal government over the Affordable Care Act’s contraception mandate.

“The news is consistent with what the pope said, consistently, in his various addresses and appearances,” said Richard W. Garnett, an associate dean and a professor at Notre Dame Law School. “Some have seemed to want to frame the pope’s visit as a pushback” against the bishops’ campaign supporting the rights of those who resist same-sex marriage and the contraception mandate on religious grounds.

He said the pope's friendly meeting with Ms. Davis suggested "that this frame does not fit."

Liberal Catholic commentators were left asking whether the pope had been trying to make a statement about religious liberty or same-sex marriage by meeting with Ms. Davis, and if so, why the meeting had been kept secret. Some called it a mistake.

"The news that Pope Francis met privately in Washington, D.C., with Kim Davis throws a wet blanket on the good will that the pontiff had garnered during his U.S. visit last week," said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, an advocacy group for gay Catholics.

The pope's meeting with Ms. Davis appears to have been carefully planned. Her lawyer, Mr. Staver, said the idea was first discussed with representatives of the pope on Sept. 14, more than a week before Francis' arrival in the United States. Mr. Staver declined to say who had proposed it, but said that Vatican officials had been aware of Ms. Davis's jailing and that the meeting had been arranged through them — not through American bishops or the bishops' conference in the United States.

"I would not have imagined that this would be a possibility, that the pope, in his incredibly busy schedule here in the States, would have time to meet with Kim Davis," Mr. Staver said.

Ms. Davis and her husband were scheduled to be in Washington on Friday to pick up an award from the conservative Family Research Council, but flew in a day earlier to meet with Francis, Mr. Staver said. He said he drove the couple to a rendezvous spot in or near the Vatican Embassy, which was surrounded by security and crowds of people hoping for a glimpse of Francis. Sneaking her inside was no mean feat, Mr. Staver said, because Ms. Davis is now nationally recognized.

While waiting in the embassy, the Davises took cellphone pictures of

themselves with a portrait of Francis. But, Mr. Staver said, “out of deference and respect, they didn’t want to pull out a cellphone with the pope.”

Mr. Staver said the meeting lasted 15 minutes, and the only people present were Ms. Davis and her husband, papal staff and security, and at least one Vatican photographer. He said that he, the Davises and Vatican officials had agreed not to publicize the meeting until after the pope had left the United States because, Mr. Staver said, “we didn’t want the pope’s visit to be focused on Kim Davis.”

Ms. Davis belongs to an Apostolic Christian church associated with Pentecostalism. But her parents are Catholic, and it was an emotional encounter for her.

“I put my hand out and he reached and he grabbed it, and I hugged him and he hugged me,” Ms. Davis said Wednesday in an interview with ABC News. “And he said, ‘Thank you for your courage.’ ”

“I had tears coming out of my eyes,” she said. “I’m just a nobody, so it was really humbling to think he would want to meet or know me.”

For the most part, Francis has avoided incendiary talk about same-sex marriage, and early in his papacy, he signaled a tolerant attitude about gay people with his well-known comment, “Who am I to judge?”

However, Francis opposes same-sex marriage and has often defined marriage as between a man and a woman. In his Mass in Philadelphia, hours before his departure, Francis said that God was revealed through the “covenant of man and woman.”

Some analysts argued that Francis’ meeting with Ms. Davis was less about same-sex marriage and more about his uncompromising support for conscientious objection — a stance he emphasized in the news conference on his flight home.

Francis began with what, in hindsight, seems like a curious disclaimer: “I can’t have in mind all cases that can exist about conscientious objection.”

He added: “Conscientious objection must enter into every juridical structure because it is a right, a human right. Otherwise, we would end up in a situation where we select what is a right, saying, ‘This right, that has merit; this one does not.’ ”

News of his meeting with Ms. Davis broke late Tuesday night, when Mr. Staver’s group, Liberty Counsel, sent out a news release timed to coincide with a post on the website of Inside the Vatican, a conservative publication edited by an American who has covered the Vatican for years.

For nearly eight hours, Vatican officials refused to confirm or deny that the meeting had occurred, before finally confirming it on Wednesday afternoon.

Asked why the Vatican had announced the visit with the Little Sisters of the Poor but not the meeting with Ms. Davis, a Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, drew a distinction.

“That meeting with the pope and the Little Sisters was a specific event,” he said Wednesday, noting that he had informed the news media about it because the pontiff had diverted from his public schedule. “The pope went specifically to a precise place.”

John Gehring, Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, a liberal advocacy group, posited that Francis’ intent on his trip was not to escalate America’s culture wars but to illustrate the contradictions within them.

“Part of the Francis effect is making the left and the right a little bit uncomfortable, and mission accomplished,” Mr. Gehring said. “I think Pope Francis affirms religious liberty, and he rejects the culture wars. That’s something we need to grapple with.”

Laurie Goodstein reported from New York, and Jim Yardley from Rome.
Elisabetta Povoledo contributed reporting from Rome.

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