

Sanders makes a pilgrimage to Rome

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The overnight visit to Rome by Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders to address a Vatican conference and meet for five minutes with Pope Francis was the occasion for a mixture of mockery and head-scratching in the American media.

The visit certainly invited ridicule: Sanders' conduct was both undignified and demeaning. He left New York barely an hour after his Thursday night debate with Hillary Clinton and flew for seven hours to Rome, arriving less than an hour before his 15-minute speaking slot at a conference reportedly focused on economic inequality and hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

After his remarks, along with those of two Latin American presidents, Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Evo Morales of Bolivia, a message arrived that the Pope would not be attending the event. The Vatican announced that there would be no meeting between Sanders and Francis.

Sanders adjourned to his apartment in a papal guest house, where he dined with several bishops and waited hopefully for a sign from God's purported representative on earth. This duly arrived: if he was outside the pope's apartment the next morning at 6 am, the pontiff would deign to greet him on his way out the door.

The brief encounter took place. Senator and pope shook hands and exchanged a few words, then each rushed off to his respective chartered jet. Sanders flew west to New York City to rejoin his campaign, Francis flew east to Greece for a photo op at a refugee detention camp on the island of Lesbos.

There was a serious and politically illuminating aspect to this entire episode. Sanders and Pope Francis are engaged in parallel missions in which each sees association with the other as providing mutual benefit.

The pope is seeking to give a "left" and "compassionate" face to the Roman Catholic Church, one of the most important bulwarks of ideological reaction on a world scale. Sanders is doing something similar for the Democratic Party, adding a "socialist" gloss to what has been described as the world's "second-most-enthusiastic capitalist party" (trailing only the Republicans).

Since he assumed the papacy in 2013, the former

Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio has proven to be a cunning political tactician, striking a posture of public humility and sympathy for the poor while playing a significant role in global affairs, most notably in brokering the recent deal between the Obama administration and Cuban President Raul Castro.

Earlier this year, Pope Francis made headlines by seeming to rebuke Donald Trump for his bigoted attacks on Mexican immigrants. Now he makes more headlines by cultivating the most "left" of the major-party candidates for the US presidency.

At the same time, the pope has upheld all the traditional medieval dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, including prejudices against women and gays and adamant opposition to both abortion and contraception. And the Church, one of the world's largest property owners, remains immovably aligned with the interests of the possessing classes, both capitalists and landowners, in every country.

Sanders' journey to the Vatican allows him to capitalize on both sides of the new papacy. His much-publicized admiration for the first Latin American pope is no doubt aimed at boosting his credibility with Catholic voters, particularly Hispanics. More importantly, his attendance on the leader of an institution that has long been a bastion of anti-communism and political reaction sends a definite political signal to the US ruling elite.

The Vermont senator is underscoring the fact that his "socialism" is little more than the type of moral sympathy for the poor professed for millennia by the Catholic Church, even as it upheld a social order that placed all wealth in the hands of kings, nobles, landowners, capitalists—and the high clergy. It has nothing to do with any mobilization from below of social forces that could threaten the wealth and property of the financial aristocracy. It opposes the class struggle and the independent mobilization of the working class.

It is noticeable that since his return from Rome, Sanders has made repeated reference in his speeches to the need for a "moral" economy, with denunciations of corporations like General Electric for "destroying the moral fabric" of America.

In justifying his adulation of Pope Francis, Sanders has praised the pontiff's supposedly progressive views on economic and social inequality. The conference Sanders attended, however, was not, as reported by much of the media, devoted to inequality. Rather, the occasion was a celebration to mark the 25th anniversary of the papal encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, issued by the arch anti-communist Pope John Paul II.

An extremely conscious defender of capitalism, John Paul wrote the encyclical as a warning to the international bourgeoisie not to take the collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to mean an end to the danger of socialist revolution. He cautioned against too extreme an assault on the jobs and living standards of the working class in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, on the grounds that this might push workers back onto the revolutionary road.

The Latin title of John Paul's encyclical refers to the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the famous anti-socialist encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, which gave papal sanction to the establishment of Catholic trade unions and Christian Democratic parties to fight the domination of the European workers' movement by Marxism.

It may seem doubtful that Senator Sanders, a secular Jew, was familiar with the theological subtext to the Vatican conference. But his 15-minute speech to the conference consisted largely of favorable references and direct quotations from a series of papal encyclicals, some issued by Francis, but going back to *Rerum Novarum* itself.

The obsequious tone of Sanders' remarks deserves note. He hailed Pope John Paul II, the apologist for right-wing military dictatorships and imperialist gangsters like Reagan and Thatcher, for giving "a clarion call for human freedom in its truest sense."

The Democratic candidate presented the Roman Catholic Church as a powerful advocate of workers and the poor and a trenchant critic of capitalism, declaring, "There are few places in modern thought that rival the depth and insight of the Church's moral teachings on the market economy."

He gushed of the current pontiff: "Pope Francis himself is surely the world's greatest demonstration against such a surrender to despair and cynicism. He has opened the eyes of the world once again to the claims of mercy, justice and the possibilities of a better world."

Sanders is a self-described "democratic socialist." But his approach to the Roman Catholic Church is diametrically opposed to that of genuine socialists, who have long recognized organized religion as one of the main ideological fetters from which the working class must free itself.

It is not a matter of making provocative threats against religious institutions, let alone attacking workers who retain

religious illusions to one degree or another. Religion is not simply a mistake in thought, but has an objective source in the historical development of class society. As Trotsky wrote in "Culture and Socialism" (1927), "The main element in the culture of the old society was religion. It was the most important form of human knowledge and unity; but in this form was expressed most of all the weakness of man before nature and his powerlessness within society."

The building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class, the decisive task in preparing the transition from capitalism to socialism, requires an intransigent struggle against illusions and false consciousness of all kinds, particularly those fostered by the various organized religions.

The Catholic Church has been an especially conscious and implacable opponent of socialism. Here is what Leo XIII wrote in *Rerum Novarum*, a politically sophisticated manifesto for the mobilization of all the reactionary forces of Europe to defeat the threat represented by the socialist proletariat, rapidly growing (in the late 19th century) both organizationally and politically.

"Private ownership," the pope wrote, "is the natural right of man, and to exercise that right, especially as members of society, is not only lawful, but absolutely necessary."

He explicitly rejected the Marxist doctrine of the class struggle: "The great mistake made in regard to the matter now under consideration is to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict."

After a lengthy exposition of the many evils that capitalists inflict upon the workers, the pope then explained, "To remedy these wrongs the socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies."

The goal of social equality, Leo XIII maintained, was itself intrinsically wrong: "It must be first of all recognized that the condition of things inherent in human affairs must be borne with, for it is impossible to reduce civil society to one dead level. Socialists may in that intent do their utmost, but all striving against nature is in vain."



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