

# How Meeting the Pope Hurts Obama's Income Inequality Campaign

✘ Earlier this week, President Obama met with Pope Francis for the first time at the Vatican. The historical meeting garnished a lot of press, with many of the news headlines describing a *kinship* between the two men, specifically in the area of one of the president's favorite campaign topics: *Income inequality*.

ABC's Jonathan Karl reported that, "they have clearly formed a bond..., especially in seeing fighting poverty as a moral responsibility."

*Good Morning America* host, Robin Roberts, said that the president "feels a special bond with the Pontiff."

NBC's Chuck Todd spoke of an "ideological comfort level between the two," while CBS's Major Garrett told of their "genuine connection."

While the two men undeniably hold polar opposite positions on issues like abortion and religious freedom, it is indeed true that they have both spoken of the wide wealth discrepancy between *the rich* and *the poor* being a form of moral injustice.

The general consensus in the media seems to be that the photo op was good, politically, for President Obama. The feeling is that it helped substantiate the president's *call to action* against income inequality by placing it in moral alignment with the words and hopes of the wildly popular and highly admired Pope Francis.

I would argue, however, that their meeting actually draws a deeper contrast between the two. I would argue that it further

calls into question the president's commitment to the cause, and his sincerity in believing that income inequality is actually even a problem.

Pope Francis is as popular as he is, in large part, because his devotion to the plight of the poor is unquestioned. He's long lived well below his means, choosing a no-frills, simple lifestyle in order to be closer to the people he serves and advocates for. He chose to live in a small suite instead of the papal palace. He rejected the fancy red cape that popes typically wear. He views himself as a bishop and not a king. He named himself in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi, who was especially concerned with the well-being of the poor.

"He brought to Christianity an idea of poverty against the luxury, pride, vanity of the civil and ecclesiastical powers of the time," the pope once said of Saint Francis. "He changed history."

When Pope Francis speaks about the immorality of luxuries and excess in a world with so many in poverty, people believe him because he practices what he preaches.

President Obama is much different.


Let's set aside for a minute that under President Obama's leadership, the wealth gap between the rich and non-rich in America has widened significantly (four times faster than under his predecessor). Let's set aside that under Obama, the percentage of Americans working is at its lowest point in 35 years. Let's forget that the U.S. poverty level under Obama has broken a 50-year record. Let's not mention that 47 million Americans (20% of U.S. households) are on food stamps. And let's certainly not bother to point out that the numbers listed above would seem to put him at direct odds with Pope Francis' stance on income inequality.

Let's forget about all of those things for the time being, and just look at the optics of how President Obama has chosen to

spend his time in office. He's elected to live the same lavish lifestyle as his predecessors did during significantly better economic times, burning through millions and millions of dollars on exotic family vacations, White House parties, and fancy state dinners.

Personally, I couldn't care less about this. I've never criticized President Obama for such things. I think it would be petty to do so, especially considering that he's simply doing as the administrations before him have done. As far as I'm concerned, he can body-surf, play hundreds of rounds of golf, escort his wife along a red carpet as she's wearing a \$12,000 dress, etc. I honestly don't care.

However, it seems to me that if President Obama wishes to align himself with a man of Pope Francis' stature, and use that relationship as a way of highlighting the immorality of luxuries and excess, he should be willing to trim at least some of those luxuries and some of that excess from his own lifestyle. Otherwise, why should anyone take him seriously? Why should anyone believe that he stands on some moral high-ground from which to speak on the topic? If it's a slap in the face of poor people for rich people to flaunt their wealth and live like kings, what on earth has our president being doing?

By no means am I suggesting that President Obama emulate Pope Francis' lifestyle. That would be completely unrealistic given the position he holds. But if he honestly believes, as the pope does, that income inequality is a moral issue (not purely an economic one), shouldn't he at least be willing to work on the optics? 

Of course, the other conclusion that can be drawn from how our president conducts himself is that his campaign against income inequality is purely a political tool, and that he simply doesn't believe in it. If he truly believed in it, after all, wouldn't he open up his eyes to his own record, recognize that liberal policies are making the problem much worse, and

actually do something to fix the problem?

Does anyone think that will ever happen? Me neither. Sometimes a photo op is just a photo op.