

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 | MADISON, WI 53701 | (608) 256-8900 | FFRF.ORG

September 22, 2015

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Papal website and promotion on WhiteHouse.gov

Dear Mr. President:

We write on behalf of the 23,000 nonreligious members of the national Freedom From Religion Foundation, which serves as a state/church watchdog, to object to the White House's gratuitous webpage promoting the pope's private religious worship events.

The White House has launched this website, "Pope Francis Is Coming to Washington: Here's What You Need to Know," with PR photos and information about Pope Francis's visit.¹ The website notes, "President Obama and the First Lady will welcome His Holiness Pope Francis to the White House on Wednesday, September 23 during his first trip to the United States." The White House webpage further invites citizens to enter their names and emails to receive notifications about the pope's progress. "Over the course of the Pope's visit, we'll send special messages covering his activities and providing you with ways to engage. Sign up to stay up to date."

The site also touts the White House's and the pope's "shared values and commitments on a wide range of issues." In effect, the White House is advertising and promoting religious worship. This is inappropriate and in violation of the spirit of the precious American constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It's one matter to meet with the pope, but quite another for the federal government, Presidency and White House to serve as publicist for a religious figure. The United States of America does not have a pope, or a monarch or any so-called anointed leader. Three-quarters of U.S. citizens are not Roman Catholic.² Nearly one-quarter of adult citizens and a third of young people today identify as nonreligious.³ Many Americans refuse to call another human being "His Holiness," or pretend there is a special class of "spiritual" clergy elevated above the rest of us.

The White House website advertises private religious events that have no bearing on diplomatic relations. Their sole purpose is to promote Roman Catholicism. None of the following events are anything but religious, yet the White House advertises them all:

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/campaign/pope-visit>

² *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

³ Ibid.

9/23

11:30 AM: Midday Prayer with U.S. bishops at Saint Matthew's Cathedral in D.C.

4:15 PM: Junipero Serra Canonization Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

9/24

11:15 AM: Visit to St. Patrick's Catholic Church in D.C. and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington.

6:45 PM: Evening prayer at St. Patrick's Cathedral (New York)

9/25

11:30 AM: Multi-religious service at 9/11 Memorial and Museum at the World Trade Center

4:00 PM: Visit to Our Lady Queen of Angels School in East Harlem

6:00 PM: Madison Square Garden Mass

9/26

10:30 AM: Mass at Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul

7:30 PM: Visit to Festival of Families at Benjamin Franklin Parkway and Prayer Vigil with World Meeting of Families.

9/27

9:15 AM: Papal meeting with Bishops at St. Martin's Chapel, St. Charles Borromeo Seminary.

4:00 PM: Papal Mass for World Meeting of Families

The White House ought not to be hawking an evening prayer at St. Patrick's or other religious events. The Executive branch, the branch of government charged by the Constitution with enforcing that document, is instead flouting one of its core tenets, the separation of state and church. What message does it send to city councils and school superintendents when the president has so little regard for that founding principle? It tells them that when it comes to the law, religion gets a pass.

Finally, the promotion of the pope by the White House offends many citizens who on principle vigorously oppose Roman Catholic teachings, and the Vatican's attempt to impose its dogma on the world's citizens via secular law.

Many Native Americans are deeply offended that the pope is turning the "father of the missionary system" into a "saint," since Serra virtually enslaved and decimated tribal populations in the name of Roman Catholicism.

Feminists oppose the church's attempt to ban contraception, abortion and sterilization — openly seeking to criminalize abortion globally even to save a woman's life and to overturn the contraceptive mandate you have vigorously defended in the Affordable Care Act.

LGBTQ Americans are insulted by being branded “an intrinsic moral evil,” and by the Church’s attempt to interfere with civil rights and marriage equality.

Scientists are shocked by the Church’s attempt to halt stem-cell research, threatening scientific work to fight disease and ease suffering.

Those who support a right to death with dignity are aggrieved by the Church’s open lobbying against state reform and its imposition of dogma via hospital mergers.

Parents and taxpayers who support public education are displeased with the Church’s work to force taxpayers to support religiously segregated schools.

Many Catholic women are harmed by the church’s denial of religious equality to them, citing demeaning biblical teachings.

Tens upon thousands of victims of pedophiles are outraged by the Church’s actions to protect itself and coddle predators in its ranks.

And worldwide civil libertarians are upset by the Church’s work to derail enforcement of CEDAW, the United Nation’s Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Regardless of what the pope chooses to focus on in his inappropriate joint address to Congress, the unprecedented invitation sends a message of Congressional deference and endorsement of one religion over others, and religion over nonreligion. Even if he talks about global warming, we have a “global warning”: that religion and government are a dangerous mix.

Government “sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to... nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’ ” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 530 U.S. 290, 309 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

We urge you to immediately remove the website entirely, or at minimum to remove the exclusively religious events and the invitation to sign up “to stay up to date.”

Sincerely,



Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-Presidents