

An audience with the pope

■ Santa Monica researcher Daniel Siegel found himself called to the Vatican to meet the pontiff and discuss the blending of science and religion.

DEANNA WELCH

Our Times

When Galileo discovered that the Earth was not the center of the universe, the Catholic Church condemned him as a heretic.

For Santa Monica scientist Daniel Siegel, his recent visit with Pope John Paul II went a little differently.

After Siegel, a Harvard- and UCLA-trained child psychiatrist, wrote a book on the

development of the brain, papal officials called him to the Vatican to laud him for his achievements.

In keeping with 21st-century technology, officials from the Pontifical Council for the Family e-mailed Siegel to ask him to come to the Vatican and discuss his book. Not expecting to find the pope's people on the Internet, Siegel admits it took him a little while to believe the offer was genuine.

But several e-mails later, Siegel, 42, found himself and his wife on a plane bound for Rome in early December.

What interested the Vatican was Siegel's cutting-edge views on the connections between brain biology and subjective, interpersonal experience. His book, published by Guilford Press in 1999, is titled, "The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobi-

SEE POPE PAGE 8

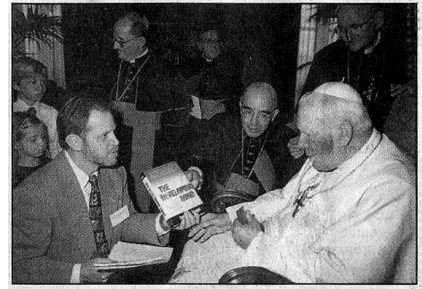


PHOTO COURTESY OF SERVIZIO FOTOGRAFICO DE "L'O.R."
Author Daniel Siegel, left, met with Pope John Paul II to discuss his book, as well as the relationship between science and religion.

POPE

CONTINUED FROM 1

ology of Interpersonal Experience," and examines the effects of various human relationships on the brain.

During his nine-day visit, Siegel gave a talk, translated into several languages, for the pope and about 100 professionals entitled "toward a biology of compassion," which discussed how positive, compassionate relationships at home and in the community actually help the brain function in a more healthy and positive way.

"Just seeing the potential blending of science and reli-

gion was incredibly exciting," Siegel said. "I feel very grateful that I was part of something that was useful to the pope."

As for his contact with the pope himself, Siegel said the pontiff's ailing health limited their meetings; but, Siegel said, the pope told him that he wants to continue to work toward blending faith with science.

Siegel also said he hopes to apply his research to a more local arena. He recently founded the Center for Human Development, an educational organization that provides workshops on his theories in Brentwood. He spoke recently at an event in Santa Monica organized by Louise Jaffe, for-

mer PTA president and founder of an evolving program aimed at fostering education at all ages called Lifelong Learning.

"He's very interested in Santa Monica, as to what we can do to increase community contact to build a web of support for children in the area," said Harvey Karp, a doctor and assistant professor of pediatrics at UCLA who also practices medicine at the city's 10th Street Pediatrics. Karp meets with Siegel and other doctors for a monthly study group to compare research notes.

"He's not an ivory-tower scientist wanting to enjoy knowledge for knowledge's sake," Karp said. "Rather, he

asks how we can use research to do our jobs better. He's a very smart, good doctor and big-hearted person, so he's really your renaissance doctor."

For Siegel, an associate professor of psychiatry at UCLA and the former director of the university's training program on child psychiatry, his work is in its infancy. He has another book in the works, and plans to continue bringing together research that has traditionally not been linked.

"I hope to bring people into collaboration," he said. "This trip to Rome showed the possibility of bringing religion, science and healing into alignment."