NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Religion and diplomacy: Why Jerusalem and Athens need each other

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 15, 2011 NCR Today

When President Barack Obama named a relatively unknown theology professor from St. John?s University in Collegeville, Minnesota, as his Ambassador to the Holy See in 2009, it raised some eyebrows among observers who wondered if Miguel Diaz?s lack of diplomatic experience might prove a drawback.

The flip side of that concern, however, is that Diaz is fluent in the argot of Catholicism, enabling him to engage the intellectual traditions of the church in a way that somebody without his theological training likely couldn?t ? an especially valuable calling card, perhaps, during the reign of a theologian-pope.

tCase in point: How many foreign service types could have tossed out a reference to the ?Chalcedonian grammar? of Catholicism, meaning its emphasis on distinguishing but not separating, faith from reason and nature from grace, as Diaz did yesterday in a lecture in Washington, D.C.?

tDiaz delivered the Dean Hoge Memorial Lecture at the Catholic University of America, before a mixed audience of church and political leaders, trying to bring the two worlds he now inhabits, professional diplomacy and the Catholic church, together.

tThe thrust of Diaz?s argument was that religion and diplomacy need each other.

tIn a time of a ?worldwide religious resurgence,? Diaz said, diplomats need to establish connections with religious leaders in order to advance the common good. Religious leaders, meanwhile, need diplomats for their real-world expertise and their art of compromise, to avoid falling into sectarianism and extremism.

tThough Diaz did not explicitly make the point, he delivered that argument in a moment in which many diplomatic observers believe the Vatican is going through a period of retrenchment ? becoming more reluctant about taking on new initiatives, and more difficult to mobilize even in areas of longstanding concern.

tMoreover, the prospects for partnerships between the United States and the Holy See ? what Italian journalist Massimo Franco calls the ?parallel empires? of the West, meaning the world?s most important hard and soft powers ? have been complicated not only by differences over abortion and other pro-life concerns, but also because both the United States and the Vatican have been preoccupied by internal crises.

tIn that context, Diaz?s speech Monday evening amounted to a plea to movers and shakers on both sides of the U.S./Vatican relationship not to throw in the towel.

tTo diplomats, Diaz argued that pursuing their humanitarian and foreign policy concerns in the 21st century requires engaging religious communities.
t
tDiaz argued that we live in a time of ?the globalization of God? and a ?worldwide religious resurgence.? In that context, he said, ?the presence of religious agents and organizations, and their networks of relationships, are essential to meet the challenges that confront us.?

tDiaz quoted the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain to the effect that the ?common good? must include the religious and moral sentiments of the members of a society. (Maritain, by the way, also served as the French Ambassador to the Holy See from 1945-48, making him sort of a patron saint for the scholar-diplomat.)

tOn a more practical note, Diaz argued that the Holy See is a valuable listening post, ranking among the top five states in the world in terms of the number of countries with which it has diplomatic relations. At present, the Holy See has relations with 178 states as well as member or observer status in virtually every international organization in the world, including the United Nations.

tThe Vatican, Dias suggested, is also a point of entry to the ?vast network of humanitarian, educational and health care institutions? affiliated with the Catholic church around the world.

tTo church leaders in a time of growing concern about Catholic identity ? which sometimes translates into skepticism about partnerships with secular actors ? Diaz argued that diplomacy brings something valuable to religion too.

tOpening with a citation from ?Gaudium et Spes,? the document of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on the church and the modern world, Diaz contended that religions don?t just teach the world, they also learn from it.

t?Religion needs diplomacy to stay in touch with the socio-political and cultural realities of the world,? he said, arguing that contact with the complex realities of diplomacy can ?prevent religious institutions from falling into sectarianism? as well as ?fundamentalism and extremism,? while also ?improving their likelihood of success with respect to actions on behalf of the common good.?

tDiaz provided his own theological sound-bite: ?Jerusalem needs Athens to become a more persuasive voice and agent of change in the world.?

tDiaz closed by noting that the mutual relationship between faith and reason, between the City of God and the earthly city, is not only an ancient trope in Catholicism, but a core concern of Pope Benedict XVI.

tThe next opportunity to test the capacity of the ?parallel empires? to work together should come in May, when Diaz and the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, along with St. Thomas University in Miami, host an international conference on the prevention of human trafficking. The idea is to strengthen public and private partnerships and to ?expand the network of religious agents engaged in this important mission.?

Source URL (retrieved on *09/01/2015 - 18:58*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/religion-and-diplomacy-why-jerusalem-and-athens-need-each-other