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New nuncio is no stranger to politics

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Archbishop Carlo Maria ViganÚ, right, with Pope Benedict XVI (L'Osservatore Romano)

Pope Benedict XVI?s choice as his new ambassador to the United States will find a badly polarized society in America, with contentious national elections in 2012 already heating up and no sign that the nasty divisions in Catholic opinion that erupted last time around have been smoothed over.

As strange as it sounds, Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, assuming he gets the job, may just be glad for the break from politics.

The nomination of Viganò, 70, is currently awaiting a ?placet,? or approval, from the U.S. government to become official. A career Vatican diplomat, Viganò would replace Archbishop Pietro Sambi, who died in late July from complications related to lung surgery. Sambi, 73 at the time of death, had held the post since 2005.

Though Washington has long been seen as the capstone of a prestigious career, by most accounts it wasn?t Viganò?s first choice. Instead, it?s a sort of consolation prize for coming out on the wrong end of a bruising Vatican power struggle.

Since 2009, Viganò had served as secretary general, or No. 2 official, of the Governatorate of the Vatican City State, responsible for administration of the 108-acre Vatican territory and its personnel. It?s a key role in Vatican money management, and Viganò carved out a reputation as a strong, but also strong-willed and sometimes polarizing, financial reformer.

Insiders say that Viganò had hoped to take over the top job at the Governatorate when Italian Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, 76, steps down in October.

It wasn?t an unrealistic aim, given Viganò?s reputation for streamlining the city state?s notoriously cumbersome bureaucracy. Observers say he established a centralized procurement procedure to obtain better discounts from suppliers (among other things, negotiating a new deal with Vodafone Italia to provide cell phone services for Vatican personnel), required rational cost estimates for projects, and demanded that each project have a manager accountable for coming in under budget. After 10 months, Viganò saved enough on running the Vatican Gardens alone that he was able to fund an update of the Vatican?s entire heating system.

Overall, Viganò reportedly turned a $9.5 million deficit into a $40 million surplus, which won him Benedict?s thanks during an audience this spring in which Viganò presented the pontiff with the books.

All that seemingly set up Viganò for a key insider role. Benedict has launched what aides informally describe as a comprehensive ?glasnost? of Vatican finances, among other things bringing in a respected lay economist, Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, to reform the Vatican Bank, and creating a new watchdog agency to monitor Vatican compliance with international standards of transparency and efforts against money-laundering.

In fact, however, Viganò?s rising star apparently ran afoul of internal tensions, for reasons both ideological and personal.

Before his job in the Governatorate, Viganò held a key post in the Secretariat of State responsible for assignments to Vatican embassies around the world. That ended in 2009, when a well-known French traditionalist priest, Fr. Claude Barthe, published an essay including Viganò and his nephew, Msgr. Carlo Maria Polvani, who also works in the Vatican, on a list of officials allegedly undercutting Benedict?s efforts to promote a revival of Catholic tradition. (Barthe charged that Polvani is ?an old-style admirer of Che Guevara.?)

In Vatican politics, the circles around the secretary of state are regarded as the moderate, pragmatic camp, which has often bred suspicion among more doctrinally-oriented figures concerned with fidelity to Catholic tradition.

Some observers believe the essay by Barthe, whose liturgical writings have won praise from Benedict, was responsible for Viganò?s transfer to the Governatorate. Once there, Viganò?s efforts to take control of financial management created new controversy -- this time not for doctrinal reasons, but on the basis of complaints from department heads about alleged micromanagement and a lack of collaboration.

Last year, those tensions were widely held responsible for a series of anonymous e-mails, sent to cardinals and to Vatican embassies, accusing Viganò of nepotism in promoting the career of his nephew. The anti-Viganò drumbeat culminated in a piece in the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale*, published under a pseudonym, that accused Viganò of attempting to seize control of the Vatican?s security services. According to the essay, that effort had been turned back by the secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.

If a recent report in the Italian magazine *Panorama* is to be believed, Viganò also has fans willing to play rough. It claims that Bertone recently received a letter containing a veiled death threat, supporting Viganò?s work at the Governatorate and accusing Bertone of ?not knowing how to take decisions and of choosing aides on the basis of personal friendships.?

Vatican sources say that Benedict, who has repeatedly expressed warnings about ecclesiastical careerism, has found this public fray distasteful.

As the carping played out, sources say, insiders floated the idea of sending Viganò to the United States as a face-saving solution. Those sources say Viganò wrote to Benedict to express his desire not to go overseas; the pope apparently replied on Aug. 13, asking him to go to America anyway, stressing the importance of having someone ?of merit? on the scene for the 2012 elections.

In terms of what Americans might expect, sources tell *NCR* that Viganò is a more ?shy and reserved? personality than the exuberant Sambi, and someone more focused on internal ecclesiastical management rather than external political affairs. That could mean the Vatican embassy will have a lower public profile during his tenure.

Viganò is also seen as a centrist diplomat unlikely to bring a strong ideological agenda to the job, including in the nomination of bishops.

Viganò?s profile as a financial reformer, however, could become an important element of his legacy in America. His arrival coincides with a mounting push in church circles for improved money-management practices, the result of at least three forces: the general economic downturn; the sexual abuse crisis; and a desire to avoid new financial scandals, such as a 2007 survey by Pennsylvania?s Villanova University concluding that 85 percent of responding dioceses had suffered embezzlement.

Though Viganò may not be able to bring a financial glasnost to completion in the Vatican, in other words, he may still have the chance to help move the ball in the United States.

Viganò was born in 1941 in the northern Italian city of Varese, near the border with Switzerland, and ordained to the priesthood in 1968. He entered Vatican diplomatic service in 1973, and has served in Iraq, the United Kingdom and the Council of Europe, as well as a stint as the papal ambassador to Nigeria from 1992 to 1998.

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