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# Ireland's embassy closure is not a diplomatic rebuke of the Holy See

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Ireland's embassy to the Vatican is pictured in Rome. The Irish government announced Nov. 3 that it will close its embassy in Rome but maintain a nonresident ambassador. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

***Commentary***

Ireland's decision to rely upon a nonresident ambassador to the Holy See rather than to continue the expense of two embassies in Rome, one for Italy and one for the Vatican, makes economic sense.

Ireland is responsibly looking to meet its economic obligations to the EU in a manner that is least disruptive to existing personnel and its national interests. At a time when the world economy is anxiously waiting to see if Greece can meet the fiscal expectations of Eurozone obligations without imposing undue hardship on its citizens, Ireland deserves praise, not scorn or suspicion, for its good sense.

It is, of course, understandable how some uninformed by the context might see this as a diplomatic rebuke to the Holy See. There is no credible evidence to suggest it is. After all, while 179 countries have diplomatic relations with the Vatican, close to half of that number is nonresident, and housed outside Rome. What's more, Ireland hardly singled out the Holy See, announcing the closure of embassies in Iran and East Timor at the same time.

Moreover, when foreign ministries want to signal displeasure with another nation, there are well-established means for doing so, including so-called Notes Verbale, calling one's ambassador home for consultations or breaking relations altogether. Ireland is doing none of those things, and while Cardinal Sean Brady, the head of the Catholic church in Ireland, might regret the loss of on-site representation in Rome, it is fair to suppose that his own relationship in the Vatican is excellent and there are now helpful ways in which he can keep a nonresident ambassador living in Dublin equally well-informed.

What is most important is for both the Vatican and Ireland to separate the present budgetary decision from their ongoing give-and-take on child abuse. This crime is so repugnant and so destructive of both the mission of love of the church and the health and well-being of families that it deserves immunity from diplomatic politics.

In this regard, and in contrast to today's budgetary decision to reduce foreign service expenditure, the Vatican has recently been at odds with Ireland and sought to convey the message by personnel movement. Specifically,

the Holy See in July recalled its ambassador, Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza, the papal nuncio to Ireland, to express its present unhappiness with Ireland.

The contretemps concerns earlier criticism by Ireland's Prime Minister Enda Kenny, alleging that the Vatican had obstructed the investigation of sexual abuse and had concealed abuse cases as recently as 2009. The prime minister is not alone in this concern. Indeed, the Irish parliament was so alarmed by the report on the diocese of Cloyne that it unanimously passed a motion deploring what it also alleged was Vatican obstruction that "undermined the child protection frameworks."

The Vatican denied that it had in any way encouraged the leadership of the church in Ireland to not fully comply with the stated zero-tolerance policy and the prompt reporting of incidents of abuse to civil authority. To diplomatically underscore its side, it brought the nuncio home for consultation.

Now, unlike Ireland's facilities closure for cost savings, recalling an ambassador for consultation in such a public way *is* diplomatically unusual and serious. It would appear the Vatican intended it to be so. The Vatican is well-known for its discrete, nonpublic manner, but contrary to that customary conduct of business, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertoni, the Vatican secretary of state, is said to have directed that the news of Leanza's return to Rome be announced on Vatican Radio. Putting an exclamation point at the end of that sentence, a Vatican spokesman, Father Ciro Benedettini went on record to say:

"The recall of the Nuncio, being a measure rarely adopted by the Holy See, denotes the seriousness of the situation and the Holy See's desire to face it objectively and determinately."

Diplomatic messages, whether delivered in secret or over the airwaves, are pored over for nuance, and it was not a surprise when the word "objectively" in the above statement became an item of focused aggravation back in Dublin. The Irish foreign minister took note of it, and as you might imagine, dissented, but today's action and statement demonstrates that Ireland has not overreacted.

Objectively, if I can borrow the word, this is the appropriate moment for the diplomatic tit-for-tat to slow down. The measured manner in which the Irish foreign ministry announced its budget- cutting closure of what in some respects clearly is diplomatic duplication is worthy of praise.

It would be useful now for diplomats to do what they are supposed to do best -- that is, resolve real disputes in a way that resolves serious underlying problems as opposed to keeping up diplomatic chess moves that relate more to the ego of diplomats or their heads of state than the welfare of the people. God credited Solomon for requesting a listening, understanding heart, not the ability to send out pointed insult.

The Vatican might praise, for example, Ireland's careful use of its public resources as consistent with the recent Vatican statement promoting economic justice. After all, it is hardly just to use monies in the range of €1.25 million for diplomatic expenses that in the overall scheme of fungible resources could be deployed for the hardship needs of the Irish people, for example.

For its part, Ireland might make note that Benedict XVI has hardly been ignoring the ugly abuse issue. To the contrary, Pope Benedict has initiated new procedures for referral to civil authorities. But that is not to say there is no difficulty. There is disagreement over a proposed Irish law that, broadly interpreted, would undermine the seal of the confessional. Thus, shorn of all the diplomatic falderal is religious liberty weighed against the real need to assure the safety of innocent children.

Here is where the Vatican might rightly be concerned that a nonresident ambassador to the Holy See will have lesser capability to be aware of the subtlety of the church's concerns for religious freedom. In short, a nonresident ambassador is out of country and out of mind, and thus has less credibility and accessibility to

preserve the integrity of the investigatory process in Ireland in a manner that also observes the fundamental human liberty associated with sacramental practice.

What now?

Best to take Ireland at its word: the move to a nonresident advisor signals nothing with respect to the abuse disagreement, and is indeed praiseworthy for its financial sagacity.

Ireland at the same time could reassure the Vatican that the transferred staff from the existing Vatican embassy will lose none of its Vatican responsibility or focus when they move over to Ireland's embassy to Italy. The first order of business for the staff once they have put their pencils in the drawer from the move across town would be to evaluate how the pope's new procedures would have helped in the Cloyne diocese.

Meanwhile, on the Vatican's part, as Leanza takes up his new post in the Czech Republic, a good start would be sending a papal nuncio Ireland who should in the usual Vatican practice arrive without fanfare and begin the hard work of assessing whether and how confession can be secured without deepening the dark scare of child abuse with additional victims -- who most assuredly should not be made collateral victims of diplomatic practice.

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