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Is Ireland just the first Vatican embassy to go?

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 30, 2011

Ireland's embassy to the Vatican is pictured in Rome Nov. 4. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Last year, veteran Italian journalist Massimo Franco published a book about what he sees as the Vatican?s declining international relevance. Its opening chapter was titled ?The Last Ambassador,? and featured a diplomat from a major Western nation who compared his situation, representing his government to the Vatican today, to that of the final ambassadors to the soon-to-disappear Republic of Venice in 1797.

Franco quoted another diplomat at a Vatican reception looking around at his colleagues and openly wondering, ?How many of us will still be here in 10 years??

Whatever the answer, it will be at least one less. In early November, Ireland announced it was closing its embassy to the Vatican, while still maintaining diplomatic relations with the Holy See. (The announcement was made in tandem with closures of two other Irish embassies, in East Timor and Iran.)

Immediately, the move was seen against the backdrop of the massive sexual abuse crisis in Ireland. Some observers, however, wonder if it may turn out to be just the first closure in a broader cycle -- one that leaves formal diplomatic relations with the Vatican intact on paper, but the number of full-time representatives working on the relationship on a daily basis in steady decline.

The physical presence of an ambassador and an embassy, according to most observers, is a measure of how seriously one nation takes its relationship with another. At the moment, the Vatican has full diplomatic relations with 179 countries, of which 80, including the United States, maintain an embassy and ambassador in Rome dedicated to the Vatican.

(Technically, relations are established not with the Vatican but the ?Holy See,? the term for the papacy as the church?s seat of government and as a sovereign entity in global affairs.)

The possibility of more countries choosing to reduce their representation, observers say, is fueled by three forces: the global economic meltdown, which has left many governments scrambling to cut expenditures; a perception that the Vatican is less internationally engaged and less effective under Pope Benedict XVI than Pope John Paul II; and the impact of the sexual abuse crisis, which has marred the Vatican?s reputation as a moral authority and reduced potential political backlash in many nations for closing embassies and withdrawing

ambassadors.

To be sure, it?s not as if the Vatican?s diplomatic standing is in free fall. In December 2009, for instance, Russia upgraded its relationship to full diplomatic recognition -- in part, a tribute to the effectiveness of Benedict?s ecumenical outreach to the Russian Orthodox church, which had heretofore resisted such a move.

Today there are only a handful of nations that don?t have relations with the Vatican, including China, North Korea and Saudi Arabia. The Vatican continues to function as a unique bully pulpit in global affairs, as witnessed both by an Oct. 27 interreligious assembly in Assisi hosted by Benedict, and a headline-making recent document on reform of the international economy released by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (*NCR*, Nov. 11-24).

In regions of the world where Catholicism is growing, including sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, the momentum appears to be in favor of strengthening Vatican ties, not weakening them. For instance, the latest nation to establish relations with the Vatican was majority-Muslim Malaysia last July.

Among the traditional Western powers, however, the mood is somewhat different.

In recent years, Western ambassadors have quietly complained that it has become more difficult to engage the Vatican on international issues, and that Vatican diplomacy appears to be passing through a period of retrenchment.

Vatican diplomats today, they say, are highly focused on issues of religious freedom and anti-Christian persecution, but sometimes less interested in other matters. Some diplomats point to perceptions that the Vatican was not keenly engaged on Libya in the same way it had been on earlier conflicts in the Balkans or Iraq under John Paul, as an example.

Moreover, these diplomats say, the sexual abuse crisis has created a political environment in which critics of funding missions to the Vatican can wield powerful new ammunition.

?Because of the crisis, people in my government who have always questioned why we have an embassy here are much bolder,? a senior Western diplomat told *NCR* in mid-November. ?To be honest, I?m not sure how much longer we can hold out.?

Most observers say that if there are to be additional closures or downsizings, it?s more likely, at least in the short term, to come from Europe rather than the United States. It?s a long shot, they say, that a Democratic president who already faces a rocky relationship with the Catholic church would take such a step -- especially heading into 2012 elections in which the ?Catholic vote? will once again be in play.

In the meantime, Catholic officials in Ireland have expressed hope the government there may reconsider. Cardinal Seán Brady of Armagh said the closure ?seems to show little regard for the important role played by the Holy See in international relations and of the historic ties between the Irish people and the Holy See over many centuries.?

Signs suggest, however, that for now, reconsideration is unlikely. Just days after the embassy closure was announced, Irish Foreign Minister Eamon Gilmore told the Dáil, Ireland?s parliament, that the government has not invited Benedict to the country to take part in a Eucharistic Congress in 2012, nor was such an invitation under consideration. Observers say that makes it all but impossible for Benedict to visit Ireland next year, which some observers had pointed to as a possible turning point in recent tensions.

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