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

The government's hunt for a Vatican envoy to pass muster

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 7, 2013
Analysis Rome

President Barack Obama needs to find a new envoy to the Vatican since Ambassador Miguel Diaz, appointed in 2009, has accepted a position as professor of faith and culture at the University of Dayton in Ohio. Obama's choice for a replacement is being closely watched in Rome, according to one senior Vatican diplomat, because it signals what kind of relationship Obama wants to have during his second term.

Filling the slot tends to be a special headache for Democratic presidents because they have to find somebody who can pass muster both with their party and with the Vatican. The custom that it has to be a Catholic complicates things further, because it's not just a candidate's policy positions that might cause problems, but his or her internal standing in the church.

For those with an appetite for speculation, names making the rounds include two members of the national "Catholics for Obama" team: Stephen Schneck of The Catholic University of America and Nicholas Cafardi of Duquesne University. Both would be acceptable to the White House, but might trip some wires on the Catholic side -- if not with the Vatican, which typically vetoes an appointment only if there are concerns about personal morality (especially marital status), then with the U.S. bishops.

Another hot tip is Ken Hackett, the former longtime president of Catholic Relief Services, who served on Obama's delegation to the consistory in Rome last February when both Timothy Dolan and Edwin O'Brien became cardinals. (For all intents and purposes, Hackett was the delegation, along with Diaz.)

Hackett would be an easy sell on the church side. He has a good relationship with Dolan, who served as chair of the CRS board, and he has a solid working knowledge of the Vatican from his involvement with the Rome-based federation of Catholic charities, Caritas Internationalis. How well he would play with Democrats who have to confirm the appointment is anybody's guess.

One concern with each of these three possibilities is how much juice they would actually have with the White House and the State Department, not to mention the fact they don't have any previous experience as official U.S. diplomats.

Further into the realm of the hypothetical, some observers have suggested that Obama could turn to one of the pro-life Democrats in Congress, such as Dan Lipinski of Illinois' third district. Lipinski is co-chair of the Pro-Life Caucus and a co-sponsor of the "No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act." He's met with Vatican officials in the past, and they have come away impressed. (Solidifying his Catholic credentials, Lipinski also taught briefly at the University of Notre Dame from 2000 to 2001.)

The problem here is that presidents are usually loath to take a member of their own party out of Congress. For instance, Illinois law requires a special election in which Lipinski's seat would be up for grabs. Even though his district has chosen Democrats in 24 of the last 25 elections, it's considered the most socially conservative in the

Chicago area, and theoretically might be open to a moderate Republican.

Given the complications, perhaps it's worth reconsidering an idea that is hardly original to me: Breaking with the traditional bias for a Catholic drawn from the American scene, turning instead to a career diplomat regardless of religious affiliation.

Three considerations support that option.

- First, Vatican diplomats don't really care whether a country's ambassador is a Catholic. Their main concern is that the person is "serious," meaning somebody with real standing in the government they represent who can move the ball on shared concerns. Let's put it this way: If Obama named somebody with the standing of the late Warren Christopher, nobody in the Vatican would squawk about him being a Methodist.
- Second, since career diplomats generally steer clear of taking public positions on domestic politics, such an ambassador wouldn't carry any baggage from the culture wars.
- Third, by naming a non-Catholic, a president wouldn't have to sweat the nominee's relationship with the bishops quite as much. It would also make it less likely that somebody in the Catholic chattering classes would have a personal bone to pick with the nominee.

Granted, there are drawbacks.

People who've been around the block in U.S./Vatican relations say there are advantages to naming somebody who already "speaks Catholic." It's not just that the Vatican is hard to understand without background in the faith, but also because the U.S. bishops are an enormously important silent partner in the relationship. Having somebody who already knows them and their concerns is certainly useful.

Learning how to penetrate foreign languages and cultures, however, is precisely what diplomats do. Envoys who've been posted to Saudi Arabia or China, for instance, certainly know how to deal with a different cultural world, and they didn't have to be Saudi or Chinese to figure it out.

As proof of the point, most Vatican observers will tell you that some of the most astute ambassadors to the Holy See over the years have been the Israelis, none of whom, naturally, have been Catholics. Similarly, the current British ambassador, Nigel Baker, is not a Catholic, but he'd make most people's "top 10" lists for effective diplomacy in Rome.

However, it might be dicey for Obama to be the first president to break the tradition of naming Catholics, given his already ambivalent relationship with the church. If handled badly, it could come off as another provocation or slight.

That brings us back to the seriousness test. Give the Vatican a heavy-hitter, somebody whose background says the White House values this relationship, and Vatican officials will be the first to defend the choice.

Most observers say it'll probably be a while before Obama gets around to filling the job, partly because there are bigger fish to fry on the personnel front.

In the meantime, the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See is being led by its deputy chief of mission, Mario Mesquita, a graduate of the University of California at Davis who's previously served in the Czech Republic, Poland and Colombia, as well as within the State Department. He's held the No. 2 job at the Vatican embassy since August 2011, and most Roman observers say there's been no drop-off in the embassy's activity level since he took over day-to-day management.

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