

Two Americans receive new assignments as Vatican diplomats

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Jan. 18, 2013
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Pope Benedict XVI gave new assignments in mid-January to two U.S. archbishops serving as Vatican ambassadors.

Archbishop Joseph Marino, a native of Birmingham, Ala., who will be 60 on Jan. 23, was named the Vatican's first nuncio to Malaysia, as well as nuncio to East Timor and apostolic delegate in Brunei.

Archbishop Charles Balvo, a 61-year-old native of Brooklyn, was named nuncio to Kenya, as well as observer at the U.N. Environment Program and its Agency for Human Settlements, both based in Nairobi.

Marino moves from Bangladesh, where he has been nuncio since 2008, to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital. The Vatican and Malaysia announced the establishment of full diplomatic relations in mid-2011.

Almost 60 percent of Malaysia's 29 million residents are Muslim, while Catholics account for just over 3 percent of the population. In neighboring Brunei, which has a population of about 408,000 people, about 67 percent are Muslim and almost 5 percent are Catholic. By contrast, close to 98 percent of the 1.1 million people of East Timor are Catholic.

Balvo moves to Kenya from New Zealand, where he has served as nuncio since 2005. In addition to representing the Vatican in Wellington, he simultaneously served as Vatican ambassador to 10 Pacific island countries: Fiji, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Vanuatu, Tonga, Kiribati, Palau, Cook Islands, Samoa and Nauru.

In an interview Friday with the Vatican newspaper, the head of the academy that trains Vatican diplomats underlined the importance of studying political, economic and cultural realities around the world, but said the top quality of a Vatican diplomat must be "a solid priestly identity."

Archbishop Beniamino Stella, president of the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, said Vatican diplomats must be men of prayer who exhibit prudence, balance, discernment and a strong "sense of adherence to the church of Christ and to the pope, whom they are called to serve."

In the interview with *L'Osservatore Romano*, he said the priests studying at the academy come from every continent and mirror the universality of the church.

"The vocations crisis has provoked a drastic decrease in the number of priests and, consequently, it is more difficult to find young men with the proper characteristics" to serve as Vatican diplomats, he said, although bishops still are generous in letting the Vatican know of "young priests distinguished for their qualities and pastoral zeal."

Each year, he said, between 30 and 35 young priests are chosen by the Secretariat of State to begin their studies at the diplomatic academy. They all earn graduate degrees in canon law, study languages, and attend courses on

the history and practice of Vatican diplomacy, international law, papal documents and current affairs. After years of study in Rome, he said, 10 to 12 priests complete the course and enter the Vatican diplomatic service each year.

In other news regarding Vatican diplomacy, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi's office announced Friday that the next Egyptian ambassador to the Holy See will be Mahmoud Mekki, who served briefly as Morsi's vice president and is serving as chairman of a national dialogue forum of political parties attempting to resolve differences over the country's future.

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