

Obama taps former CRS head as new Vatican envoy

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 17, 2013 NCR Today

By naming a veteran leader in Catholic charities as his new envoy to the Holy See, observers say President Barack Obama has managed both to elevate the prospects for American/Vatican collaboration and, perhaps equally importantly, to avoid opening a new front in tensions between the administration and the American Catholic bishops.

Assuming he's confirmed by the U.S. Senate, Ken Hackett, who served as president of Catholic Relief Services, the official overseas relief agency of the U.S. bishops, from 1993 until his retirement in December 2011, will replace former Ambassador Miguel H. Díaz. The first Hispanic to hold the job, Díaz served from 2009 to 2012 and now holds a chair in Faith and Culture at the University of Dayton.

Hackett's selection was announced Friday in a brief White House news release. Reached today by phone, he told NCR he can't comment on the appointment until it's officially presented to the Senate.

Hackett, 66, had previously been appointed by Obama in February 2012 as part of an official U.S. delegation to a Vatican consistory for the creation of new cardinals. He had been seen as a leading candidate for the ambassador's post since Diaz stepped down in November, for two primary reasons.

First, although he's never served as a diplomat, Hackett brings four decades of experience at CRS dealing with governments, non-governmental organizations, church organizations, and international bodies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. He's also familiar with the various Vatican departments involved in foreign policy and charitable work.

As a result, observers say Hackett won't need much "on the job training" to grasp areas where the Vatican and the U.S. government can collaborate, both in direct relief efforts and in pursuit of broader social, political and humanitarian aims.

Second, Hackett is also well known and trusted in most Catholic circles, including a strong relationship with the leadership of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In that sense, his nomination likely avoids yet another source of tension in the sometimes strained relationship between the Obama administration and the bishops.

Although CRS has drawn fire from time to time from pro-life groups, which have charged among other things that some CRS partner groups around the world promote birth control or abortion, Hackett himself has never been a controversial figure. Some observers expect him to become a voice inside the Obama administration for a more conciliatory relationship with both the Vatican and the American bishops.

Sources told NCR that Hackett has already received the Vatican's *agrément*, meaning the formal diplomatic approval, for the ambassador's position. (Under international law, a host nation has the right to accept or reject potential ambassadorial nominees.)

Not only is Hackett a veteran church employee, but his daughter currently works as a fundraiser for the Baltimore archdiocese. Reaction to the appointment in church circles has been positive.

Bishop Denis J. Madden, auxiliary bishop of Baltimore and a former Catholic Relief Services board member, called it "great news."

Hackett "has so many skills applicable to this job," Madden told the *Baltimore Sun*. "He has traveled all over the world and worked with [Vatican representatives], bishops and general consuls in all those places, and he has dealt successfully with plenty of sticky situations."

Although the USCCB does not issue statements about government appointments, a spokesperson for the bishops nevertheless praised Hackett in response to an NCR inquiry.

"Ken Hackett knows the needs of the poor and has deep experience dealing with poverty through Catholic Relief Services, especially in Africa and Asia and at the CRS helm," said Sr. Mary Ann Walsh.

"He should be able to speak well in diplomatic circles for what Scripture calls 'the least of these,'" Walsh said.

Observers say that if the Senate follows its normal pace, Hackett could be confirmed and ready to take up his position in Rome by September. The Ambassador to the Holy See generally serves for one presidential term, meaning that Hackett is likely to hold the position until sometime in 2017.

A native of West Roxbury, Mass., Hackett graduated from Boston College in 1968 and joined the Peace Corps.

He joined CRS in 1972, starting his career in Sierra Leone, where he managed both a nationwide leprosy control and a maternal and child health program. He has since served in CRS posts throughout Africa and Asia, as well as in administrative positions at the CRS Baltimore headquarters. As the CRS regional director for Africa, he managed the agency's response to the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85. He also supervised CRS operations in East Africa during the 1990s crisis in Somalia.

Appointed president in 1993, Hackett held the job for 18 years. He was succeeded by Carolyn Woo, former dean of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business.

During Hackett's tenure, CRS established a division to reach out to dioceses, parishes, Catholic organizations, colleges and universities, and for the first time added lay people to its board of directors. Now generally viewed as among the world's most effective and efficient relief and development agencies, CRS operates in more than 100 countries, with a global staff of nearly 5,000.

Hackett has also served as North America president of Caritas Internationalis, the confederation of humanitarian agencies of the Catholic Church. He's still on the board of the Vatican Pontifical Commission *Cor Unum* and acts as an adviser to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Hackett has received honorary degrees from Boston College, Cabrini College, University of Great Falls, College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Mount St. Mary's University, New York Medical College, Siena College, University of San Diego, Santa Clara University, Villanova University and Walsh University.

In 2012, Hackett received the Laetare Medal from the University of Notre Dame, considered the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics.

?Ken Hackett has responded to a Gospel imperative with his entire career,? said Notre Dame?s president, Rev. John I. Jenkins, in presenting the award.

?His direction of the Catholic Church?s outreach to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and unsheltered of the world has blended administrative acumen with genuine compassion in a unique and exemplary way,? Jenkins said.

Hackett underwent surgery to install a new heart valve in late January, but is said to have made a strong recovery. Most observers expect a fairly easy confirmation process in the Senate.

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