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Ireland plans to reopen Embassy to Holy See, but no date set

Michael Kelly Catholic News Service | Jan. 22, 2014
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Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin welcomed an Irish government decision to reopen a Vatican Embassy just over three years after closing it.

Foreign Affairs Minister Eamon Gilmore announced Tuesday that Ireland was preparing to open a scaled-back embassy but gave no date for the reopening.

Gilmore came under sharp criticism in November 2011 when he announced that the embassy would close and a diplomat based in Dublin would represent Ireland at the Vatican.

At the time, the government said the closure was a cost-saving move, a claim rejected by opposition politicians who accused Gilmore of wanting to downgrade relations with the Vatican amid tensions about the church's handling of allegations of sexual abuse against priests.

The Vatican had no immediate response to the announcement.

Martin said reopening the embassy, although on a smaller scale, was "a very constructive exercise."

The archbishop, who previously served as a Vatican diplomat, said Pope Francis, from the outset of his pontificate, "has dedicated himself to being a strong voice for fighting poverty."

The Vatican remains an important place of interchange on questions of global development, Martin said, adding that a resident Irish ambassador will enhance relations between the Vatican and Ireland.

The Department of Foreign Affairs said the new mission would be "a scaled-back, one-person embassy with a focus on international development."

Gilmore said the embassy will "enable Ireland to engage directly with the leadership of Pope Francis on the issues of poverty eradication, hunger and human rights."

Brendan Smith, spokesman for the opposition Fianna Fail party on foreign affairs, welcomed the move. "The reasons given for closing the embassy in the first instance were completely bogus and it was a mistake," he said.

"At the time, we pointed out the diplomatic value of having representation at the Holy See and the networking influence it gave us," he said. "But the Labor Party knew best and pressed ahead with their populist agenda."

Questions remain about where the diplomatic offices will be housed because the former embassy on Rome's Janiculum Hill now serves as Ireland's Italian Embassy.

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