

Joe Donnelly, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, speaks during an interview with Catholic News Service at his residence in Rome March 7, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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The United States established formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See 40 years ago, and the current ambassador in Rome says its mission has been a wonderful success.

"We've tried to hew very closely to the mission that we've been given, and we have a great relationship with the Vatican," said Joe Donnelly, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

A former U.S. senator from Indiana and former member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Donnelly assumed his new and unexpected diplomatic post in Rome in April 2022, presenting his letters of credential to Pope Francis.

"It's very different from a typical embassy," he told Catholic News Service during an early March interview in the ambassador's residence on Rome's Janiculum Hill.

A typical embassy "would have a visa department, do passports, have chambers of commerce around the country that I would travel to to speak at or to try to promote American business or work with the host country on business issues," he said.

Instead, the Holy See is the government of the Catholic Church based in the sovereign, independent territory of Vatican City State and led by the pope. Its unique diplomatic mission is not to be an instrument of a nation-state, but to promote moral and humanitarian values and human rights in line with the position of the Catholic Church.

The Vatican has diplomats called nuncios in the different countries it has formal relations with, and the ambassadors representing those nations to the Holy See work primarily with staff in the Vatican Secretariat of State.

"They are bishops, and they are diplomats, and they also can get to the point in a hurry. And they're incredibly talented, very, very smart. And I have incredible respect for the people who work in the Vatican," even while they may not always agree on everything, Donnelly said.

"They bring their life commitment with them to everything they do," he said, in that their religious faith "goes into every room with them," but at the same time they try to "make sure that the Vatican's voice can be heard around the world."

A lifelong Catholic and "proud member of St. Anthony de Padua Church in South Bend, Indiana," Donnelly said, "I'm not here on a religious basis. I'm here to work on the foreign policy of the United States with the foreign policy of the Vatican." His job does not touch on internal church issues or domestic policy.

"This is much more like a U.N. posting almost in that it is really about relationship building and making sure that the Holy Father and his team understand where America sits on various issues and that in return that we understand where the Vatican sits on various issues," he said.

And it is not just a cordial hearing out of each side, he said; there is a deep level of openness and mutual respect that can and does end up influencing change.

For example, he recalled Francis' remarks in an interview with an Italian newspaper in May 2022, a few months after Russia had attacked Ukraine, saying that the full-scale invasion may have been in part "because NATO is barking at Russia's doors." "I can't say if (Russia's) anger was provoked," the pope had said, "but facilitated, maybe yes."

Donnelly said, "I have incredible respect for the pope, but he was a little off on that one."

"Russia attacked a neighbor living in peace, just trying to feed their people and keep their country strong," the ambassador said.

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"And so all credit due to the Vatican team and to the Holy Father that over time we tried to let them know, well, here's what's actually going on" in the various parts of Ukraine and "here's the plans that Russia actually had to invade Ukraine based on that they just wanted to take Ukraine back," he said.

"When the Holy Father spoke to the diplomats in his January 8th speech to the diplomatic corps, he talked about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was a significantly different way to talk about it," he said.

"That's why we're here," he added, "to try to make sure that where the United States stands, it's understood."

The United States had consular relations with what then was known as the Papal States during the 19th century and diplomatic relations with the pope for a few decades, but that ended in 1867 when a U.S. law was passed prohibiting using public funds to support full representation at the Vatican. A handful of presidents, starting with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1939, would instead appoint their own "personal representative" to visit the Holy See regularly to discuss humanitarian or political issues.

Congress eventually repealed the ban in a measure offered as an amendment by Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar, Donnelly's predecessor in the Senate. The Holy See had formal diplomatic relations with 106 countries before the U.S. resumed formal relations in 1984, and today 184 states have full diplomatic relations with the Holy See of which 89 have missions in Rome.

Asked if he received any formal training or preparation for this unique position, Donnelly said, "Yeah, try to negotiate a bill in Congress."

His approach to the legislative process in the U.S., he said, was to tell representatives from both political parties that getting "70% of something, it's better than 100% of nothing."

"Because if you want 100% your way every time, those folks over here and those folks over here will never agree. And so how do you get something done?" he said. Additionally, "growing up in a large family as the fifth of five, that also teaches you patience," he said.

Forty years and 12 ambassadors later, the U.S. mission to the Holy See is still "very much like another United Nations," he said, trying to work with the Vatican to create "a safe world," to save lives in areas of conflict, to prevent human trafficking and to safeguard the planet.

"It's very much on issues that matter around the entire world and it's not focused on church-related" issues, he said. "That's why I think in part it's been such a big success over the past 40 years because all the ambassadors understood that."