

Interview with Ambassador Glendon; A possible papabile

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 2, 2008 All Things Catholic

Mary Ann Glendon is the eighth Ambassador of the United States to the Holy See, and by most measures she's probably the nominee least in need of on-the-job training. Glendon is a veteran Vatican insider, having represented the Holy See at the 1995 Beijing conference of the United Nations on women, and having served as president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences -- the first woman to head a pontifical academy. A professor at the Harvard Law School, she's also an expert on international legal theory.

Though her ambassadorship is likely to be short, expiring with the end of the Bush administration, it's already been eventful. Just two months into her term, Glendon found herself a key figure in Pope Benedict XVI's April 15-20 trip to the United States, especially his April 16 meeting with U.S. President George Bush.

I sat down with Glendon at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See on Wednesday to talk about the relationship between the Vatican and America -- its strengths as well as some enduring differences, including contrasting analyses of the war in Iraq and the role of the United Nations.

The full text of our interview appears here: [Glendon interview](#) [1]. The following are excerpts.

NCR: It seems that the stock of the United States, and of the American Catholic church, has never been quite as high in the Vatican as it is right now in the wake of what is seen as a remarkably successful trip to the United States. Would you agree?

Glendon: I would, and I would say that the reason partly has to do with long-time preoccupations of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI. Even in his early writings, he was fascinated by the United States as a place where many different religions could not only coexist peacefully, but flourish. That's linked to another old preoccupation of his, which is the significance of different branches of the Enlightenment. The French Enlightenment had such hostility to religion, and that was absorbed into European culture. The English and Scottish Enlightenments were compatible with religion, and when they went to the United States, they formed the background of the culture.

I see many parallels between Benedict and de Tocqueville ? the European who is fascinated with the United States, who does not regard the United States as a model to be copied, but rather as an example that proves that something is possible. If it's possible there, it would be possible in another form over here. ? When he came, his affection for the United States was palpable.

You've experienced a time when things were not so harmonious between the Holy See and the White House. You represented the Holy See during the U.N. conference on women in Beijing, when the Clinton administration was on the other side. To what extent is the quality of the U.S./Vatican relationship dependent upon a particular administration, versus dynamics that continue in and out of season?

It's not really dependent, at least exclusively, on a relationship between two administrative entities. There is a large sympathy between the Holy See and certain very prominent currents in American culture, and those currents obtain whether the administration is Republican or Democratic. One can predict, of course, that with a Democratic administration, or even perhaps with a different kind of Republican, that there will be, to use the church's terminology, some 'neuralgic points.' But it's a conversation that has an entirely different tone and quality from the conversation that goes on in Europe. ? We have the kind of conversations that in Europe aren't being had, for the most part ? for example, about faith in public life.

If you can put yourself back in the atmosphere surrounding the Beijing conference, would you have said the same things about the vitality of the relationship between the United States and the Holy See at that time?

It's a good question. What it reminds me of is that the principal antagonists of the Holy See's delegation at Beijing were the representatives of the European Union. I remember being asked the question about whether there was an 'unholy alliance' between us and the Muslim countries, and I said, 'no.' Look, we vote with them on some issues, but we also align ourselves with the United States on many issues that have to do with poverty in the Third World and assistance to the neediest people in the world. We don't have alliances, holy or unholy, with particular groups. We have alliances on particular issues.

But you're saying that even then, it was clear that from the Vatican's point of view, the problem was Europe?

Yes, Europe. At that time, Spain was in the presidency. The European Union delegation was voting in a bloc.

Five years ago, there was a deep division of opinion between the Holy See and the Bush administration about the wisdom of going to war in Iraq. Are we now in a position where, if something like Iraq were to flare up again, we wouldn't see the same differences, or is this a conversation that still needs to take place?

Definitely a conversation that still needs to take place. With the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, of which I'm still allowed to be a member, even though I've stepped down from the presidency, in 2009 the subject of the academy's meeting will deal with these issues ? in fact, probably 2009 and 2010.

Why is the conversation not over? Because neither we in the Catholic just war tradition nor the international law community has really sorted out how we are to think about this whole question of humanitarian intervention. We have not sorted out the whole question of why we would recognize the right of Kosovo, to declare its independence from Serbia, but not, say, the right of Puerto Rico to declare its independence from the United States. All these issues really are still much debated, much discussed. What needs to be particularly rethought is the question of what do you do when there is a threat from non-state actors, this whole question of terrorism.

Let's assume that two months from now, the U.S. administration were to make a decision that some kind of intervention in Iran was unavoidable. Would we see the same sharp divisions with the Holy See that we saw five years ago, or has something changed?

I think we would see a vigorous discussion. Within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, there is a discussion going on. Within the international legal studies community, to which I belong, there is a discussion going on. Within my own law faculty, there is a discussion going on. I think honest people are genuinely perplexed about how we apply principles, upon which all of us can agree, to these situations, particularly the situation of non-state actors ? including when they're being harbored by states.

Another traditional area of tension has been the role and powers of the United Nations. Many people heard in Pope Benedict's reference to "multilateralism" in his address to the U.N. a sort of gentle chiding of the foreign policy of the Bush administration. Did you hear it that way?

No. I was not only there listening, but I have re-read that speech two or three times since then, because it will be the basis of a forum that we will have here at the embassy on Oct. 16, and it will be the basis for the 2009 meeting of the pontifical academy. So, I have a special interest in that speech.

Here's what I would say about it. The key word in that part of the speech, I think, is 'subsidiarity.' There's a couple paragraphs where the pope expresses his appreciation of the fact that there are a growing number of areas where what needs to be done can't be done expect at the higher level. Even though the doctrine of subsidiarity would push as many questions as possible down to the lowest level that can deal with them well, you need an organization like the United Nations for a whole range of questions, which he enumerates. When he talks about what the United Nations should be doing, and when he talks about sovereignty, he says two times in the speech, 'within the limits imposed by international law and by the charter of the United Nations.' The charter itself, actually, is ambiguous about exactly where the line is between what one nation can, and out of duty to its own citizens, must do unilaterally, and what has to be done at the multilateral level. What I heard was the pope very carefully raising the issues that are still very much under discussion.

Wouldn't it be fair to say that the Holy See is a bit more deferential to the United Nations than the United States would be, for example on the decision to intervene in Iraq?

Yes, the way you put it I think is correct. The Holy See itself is like the U.N. It is an entity with a worldwide scope of interests, and worldwide preoccupations. The United States is a nation-state ? with worldwide interests, but it's a nation-state. To use your term, I would say that it's natural that one entity similar to the United Nations in worldwide scope and concerns would be more deferential, and more sympathetic. Also, you have to keep in mind that a nation-state, a sovereign state like the United States, has responsibilities to its citizens, to protect its citizens, which are different from the responsibilities that these two multinational entities have.

Is it your expectation that you will finish your term at the end of the Bush presidency?

Yes.

If McCain were to win and asks you to stay on, would you be open to that?

I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, but I came to this job with the thought that it's going to be a short ambassadorship. The main thing I had clear in my mind was that I have to have some definite project that I could complete in a year. The 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights seemed perfect. The pope has mentioned that so many times, so I said in my interviews in the State Department and in my confirmation hearings, when I was asked what I plan to do, that I'm going to commemorate the 25 years of our diplomatic relationship by honoring the document that contains most of the principles to which the United States and the Holy See are both dedicated. We'll have four conferences, culminating in January 2009 on the actual anniversary of the document.

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Whenever the subject of Pope Benedict XVI's health comes up these days in Rome, comparisons to Leo XIII are very much in the air. Elected in 1878 at 68, Leo served until he was 93, marking the third-longest pontificate in church history. Given Benedict's obvious stamina during his recent trip to the United States, this appears a credible parallel indeed.

(Not everyone, it should be noted, drew this seemingly clear conclusion from the pope's performance in the States: <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1765> [2])

Nonetheless, the fact that the pope is 81 cannot help but stimulate that corner of the Catholic brain given to pondering the future, even if no one seriously believes that a transition is anywhere on the horizon. For those looking around to see who might have the "right stuff" to be a future pope, a Vatican press conference this week regarding next October's Synod of Bishops on the Bible took on a whole new level of significance.

Among the presenters at the press conference was a man who strikes many church-watchers as a rising star: Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

Ravasi is a former collaborator of the emeritus archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, even if Ravasi was sometimes seen as less flexible than Martini on moral and dogmatic questions. A highly cultured soul passionate about art and music, Ravasi revitalized the storied Ambrosian Library in Milan, turning it into an important center of civic life. He also became an important popular writer, penning articles for the major Italian secular paper *Il Sole delle 24 Ore* as well as the Italian bishops' own daily, *L'Avvenire*.

Many Italians believe that when Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi of Milan turns 75 next March, Ravasi will be an odds-on favorite as his successor. Even in his present position, however, Ravasi is in line to become a cardinal whenever Benedict XVI next decides to hold a consistory. When that happens, Ravasi, 65, will almost certainly figure on most short lists of *papabile*, meaning candidates as a future pope.

According to Italian *vaticanista* Sandro Magister, Ravasi was in line to be appointed bishop of Assisi in 2005,

but that nomination was blocked due to concerns about an essay he wrote in 2002 on the subject of Easter titled, "He was not raised; he arose." Some saw Ravasi's thinking as potentially heterodox. Given that background, most insiders saw his appointment at the Council for Culture as a personal decision of Benedict XVI, made outside the normal bureaucratic channels.

(Editor's Note: Ravasi is a subject of a profile in the May 16 issue of *NCR*.)

Monday's press conference offered another bravura Ravasi performance.

He began with a trademark flash of humor. He noted that a recent international poll sponsored by the Catholic Biblical Federation about familiarity with the Bible originally surveyed nine countries, and is now being expanded to include four more. He wryly suggested that perhaps one more country ought to be surveyed, bringing the total to what he called the "Biblical number" of 14: the Vatican City-State.

"There might be a surprise or two" in how much occupants of the Vatican actually know about the Bible, he laughed.

Ravasi then offered a five-point overview of the findings of the new study. He was nothing if not erudite: By my count, he managed to quote Paschal, Erasmus and Umberto Eco once, and Nietzsche twice, in the course of a roughly fifteen-minute presentation.

For example, apropos of apparently strong support in many countries for educating the young about the Bible, Ravasi quoted Eco: "Why should our children be expected to know everything about the heroes of Homer, but nothing about Moses?"

On the cultural level, Ravasi argued, the Bible is a touchstone of Western identity, and if it's lost we lose some essential part of ourselves. He noted that even a virulent critic of Christianity such as Nietzsche once remarked that "between the Psalms and the poetry of Petrarch, we experience the same difference as that between our home and a foreign country."

On the spiritual level, Ravasi observed that for centuries, the Bible, especially the Psalter, was the great prayer book of the church. He called for a new commitment to prayer with scripture, including personal, private prayer. He cited Erasmus to the effect that scripture should be part of the "atmosphere" of Christian life.

Such wit and wisdom clearly recommend Ravasi as future church leader. Of course, that doesn't make him a slam-dunk *papabile*: Some might prefer a pope from outside Europe, at least outside Italy; some might think two scholar-popes in a row would be pushing the envelope; some conservatives may harbor reservations about Ravasi's doctrine or his politics.

What the "papal April" of 2005 should have taught us, however, is that matters such as one's stand on the issues, or one's geographical background, generally fade inside a conclave, while perceptions of personal qualities become much more decisive. At that level, it's not difficult to imagine that Ravasi might get a serious look

whenever the time comes.

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On Wednesday, the sad news reached me in Rome that Tim Unsworth, the legendary author and columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*, had died after a long illness. My brief remembrance of Unsworth can be found here: <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1780> [3] and an obituary is here: <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1776> [4]

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