

With Diaz nomination, Obama passes major Catholic test

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 28, 2009 All Things Catholic

By extending an olive branch to pro-lifers during his commencement address at Notre Dame, President Barack Obama seemed to pass his first major Catholic test. This week, by naming an envoy to the Vatican who doesn't have a public track record of challenging the bishops on abortion, he's in effect passed his second.

For extra credit, he demonstrated a good grasp of the changing demographics of American Catholicism by appointing a Hispanic. Measured against what one might have expected from a pro-choice Democrat and a non-Catholic, Obama's Catholic report card so far appears to look pretty good.

On Wednesday, the White House announced the appointment of Miguel Diaz, 45, a professor of theology at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University, as the ambassador of the United States to the Holy See. Born in Cuba, Diaz and his family left when he was eight, eventually settling in Miami. He has working-class roots; his father was a waiter and his mother a seamstress. Assuming Diaz is confirmed by the Senate, his first major task ought to be arranging a meeting between Obama and Pope Benedict XVI around the time of the G-8 meeting in Italy this July.

Early Vatican reaction seems positive. Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the pope's ambassador to the United States, called the Diaz appointment "an excellent choice of a representative who knows both the United States and the Catholic Church very well," in an interview on Thursday with Italy's ANSA news service.

Sambi added that as a Cuban-America immigrant, Diaz also "is a good representative of Spanish-speaking Catholics" in America.

That's not to say, of course, that the choice is utterly uncontroversial. Diaz served on a Catholic advisory board for Obama during the 2008 campaign, and recently signed a letter in support of the nomination of Kathleen Sebelius as Health and Human Services Secretary despite her record of favoring abortion rights. One conservative Catholic media outlet thus styled the Diaz appointment "the first payback of the Obama administration to Catholics who have been unconditionally supporting his policies and appointments." The fact that the usual Catholic suspects in the pro-Obama camp immediately hailed the appointment has also stoked concern in more conservative circles.

Yet Diaz is described by colleagues as broadly pro-life, and in any event he has never been among the most prominent Catholic apologists for a "soft" position on abortion. In that sense, no one in the Vatican is likely to style the appointment as provocative. (Rome may have other concerns, chief among them the extent to which a fairly obscure theology professor from Minnesota is likely to carry serious political weight inside the Obama administration. That remains to be seen.)

Some Catholics may also be alarmed by Diaz's fondness for Latin American liberation theology, which became a *bête noir* of the Catholic right during the 1970s and '80s due to its affinities with Marxism and class struggle. References to figures such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Ignacio Ellacur'a run through Diaz's writings, and one news outlet referred to Diaz as a "Cuban liberation theologian" in its headline. For the record, that's not really

accurate. In his writings, Diaz distinguishes between the "preferential option for the poor" in Latin America and the "preferential option for culture" in Hispanic theology in the United States, focused on the survival of Latino/a identity.

Anyway, Diaz is nobody's idea of a radical. He's never defended armed revolution, or celebrated a "church from below" in opposition to the hierarchy. His accent has been largely on the importance of community, especially in light of the struggles of immigrant families. In one paper he coined the phrase, "outside the survival of community there is no salvation," a play on the traditional theological maxim *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church there is no salvation").

Looking down the line, the key question is how Diaz's term in Rome might shape up. In that light, the distinctive thing about being the Ambassador to the Holy See is that it's very much an "ideas" job, which means that it's better suited for an academic than many other diplomatic assignments one could imagine. The ambassador doesn't have to worry about trade relationships, security questions, visa policies, and so on -- the nuts-and-bolts matters that loom large in most diplomatic postings. The embassy also doesn't have a large staff or internal bureaucracy. As a result, the ambassador has considerable scope to think outside the box, at least by the normal standards of overseas diplomacy.

The Diaz appointment would seem to open the door to partnerships with the Vatican in at least four areas.

Immigration: In part because of his own background, Diaz has made immigration a key theme of his theological work. In one essay, for example, he develops a theology of community against the backdrop of what he termed a "fear and rejection of others," as exemplified in "legislation proposed before the House of Representatives to make English the official language of the United States, the rise of the Minutemen in Arizona, ongoing government raids on immigrant communities throughout the U.S., and various acts of prejudice against resident "aliens" such as Muslims living in this country." The first statement of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the United States in support of "just and comprehensive immigration reform" was issued during Diaz's term as president. Immigration reform is also a top priority of the U.S. bishops and the Vatican -- in part for reasons of social justice, in part because a disproportionate share of new immigrants in the States is Catholic. Immigration is thus an issue where, in broad strokes, the positions of the Obama White House and the Vatican coincide. It doesn't take a great leap of imagination to envision this as a focal point during the term of the first-ever Hispanic-American ambassador to the Holy See.

Cuba: According to friends and colleagues, Diaz has an interesting profile among Cuban-Americans. He's never been part of the ferociously anti-Castro émigré community centered in Miami, but neither does he reflect the outlook of second generation Cuban-Americans who sometimes struggle to understand what the fuss is about. He arrives in Rome at a time when both the Obama administration and the Vatican are taking a keen interest in Cuba. Pope John Paul II made promoting a gradual opening in Cuba a top diplomatic priority, including a revival of the Cuban Catholic church. There are tentative signs that the government is reciprocating. Last December, Raul Castro attended a beatification Mass in Havana for a 19th century Cuban friar known as the "father of the poor." The state-controlled media, which typically ignores religious news, gave the event wide coverage. The Holy See is keenly interested in where all this might lead, especially given Cuba's influence across Latin America. No doubt, Vatican diplomats will be anxious to hear what Diaz might have to say.

North-South Solidarity: When John Paul II convened a series of regional synods leading up to the Great Jubilee Year in 2000, he referred to the gathering for North, Central and South America and the Caribbean as the "Synod for America," deliberately using the singular. The idea was to promote a unified and integrated continent, from the Yukon to Tierra del Fuego. Benedict XVI made a similar pitch for continental unity when he visited Brazil in 2007 for the assembly of CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal Council, at Aparecida. Diaz's biography and his theological interests could make him an interesting interlocutor for the Vatican on

North/South solidarity, in both the ecclesiastical and also the socio-political arenas. In particular, because of Diaz's Cuban roots and his fluency in Spanish, he should be able to develop good working relationships with the large bloc of Latin American ambassadors to the Vatican.

Changing Demographics: By itself, the imagery of a Hispanic representing an African-American president delivers a message to Rome about the changing face of America. In Catholic terms, Diaz embodies the most important demographic trend in the church today, both globally and in the United States. Worldwide, two-thirds of all Catholics now live in the global South, with more than forty percent in Latin America alone. By mid-century, the figure will be three-fourths. In the United States, most estimates peg the Hispanic share of the Catholic population today at around one-third, and growing fast. Data from the Pew Forum suggest that by 2020, white Catholics for the first time will no longer be a majority of the U.S. Catholic population. Diaz may be positioned to help the Vatican interpret what these trajectories portend, and to become a bridge between this segment of the American Catholic population and Rome. Outside the church too, the Vatican will be interested in what the changing demographics of America mean in terms of the country's political life, its foreign policy interests, its cultural values and approach to the role of religion in public life, and so on.

Collectively, all this suggests that Diaz and his opposite numbers in the Holy See should have a lot to talk about, well beyond the traditional flash-points over abortion and other life issues. If Diaz proves imaginative in seizing those opportunities, it could be a fascinating story to track.

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