

More from CUA anniversary event

Michael Sean Winters | May. 28, 2009 NCR Today

In the late morning session at CUA's symposium, two questions caught everyone's attention. A panel of three former U.S. ambassadors — Mary Ann Glendon, Jim Nicholson, and Thomas Malady — and former State Department official Nicholas Burns were asked what they thought of President Obama's appointment of Miguel Diaz as the new ambassador. Malady took the question.

Diaz has "a very impressive academic record," the Bush 41 ambassador offered. "He will fit into the mold of his eight predecessors." Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the Vatican Nuncio also said, I would like to express my congratulations and best wishes to Mr. Diaz. In an interview published in Italy, Sambi had called the appointment "excellent." ("E' un'eccellente scelta di un rappresentante che conosce bene gli Stati Uniti e conosce bene la Chiesa cattolica", ha detto monsignor Sambi all'ANSA.)

Another questioner asked how the Vatican could even deal with the Obama administration given the President's position on abortion. The entire panel essentially ducked and Malady said that such disagreement could not be allowed to infringe on the need for good bi-lateral relations.

In the afternoon session, Princeton Professor Robert George lectured on why abortion is different from other issues, such as marginal tax rates. He allowed that tax policy is fraught with moral content, but that such issues are best left to the laity because different Catholics can reach different conclusions in the matter. But, he insisted that abortion is a fundamental issue on which there can be no real discussion.

This misses the point. It is not clear that the Republicans, while mouthing pro-life rhetoric, actually achieved much to limit the abortion rate. President Obama has pledged to do so. Maybe his policies will work, maybe they won't. But, the calculation for the serious Catholic is whether to be content with GOP lip-service or whether they can, in good conscience, embrace the policies that might actually make a difference. I recall a Gospel parable about a man whose first son says he will do his father's will, but doesn't, and a second son who says he will not do his father's will, but then actually does it.

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