

Sending off new Vatican ambassador; Missed opportunity for Africa

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

Miguel Díaz has not yet presented his credentials to Pope Benedict XVI, so formally speaking he's not quite in the saddle as Barack Obama's envoy to the Vatican. Monday evening, however, Díaz got a rousing send-off at a reception held in his honor at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, D.C.

Díaz was sworn in as Ambassador to the Holy See on August 21, following his confirmation by the U.S. Senate on August 4. Díaz and his wife Marian, along with their four young children, arrived in Rome on Thursday.

Once Díaz arrives, I predict he'll be a hit with the locals, if for no other reason than that I was able to verify Monday evening that his Italian is terrific. Romans aren't really accustomed to American VIPs able to converse comfortably in their own tongue, so that alone is usually enough to make someone a celebrity. Díaz also has considerable personal charm, and the four kids don't hurt either. Italians still harbor deeply romantic feelings about children, even if -- or, perhaps, precisely because -- demographers tell us they're not producing many of their own these days.

A wide cross-section of Washington's Catholic power structure turned out Monday night to see Díaz off, including the papal nuncio to the United States, Italian Archbishop Pietro Sambi; the Archbishop of Washington, Donald Wuerl; and his predecessor, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, still remarkably active at 79. Their presence was a sign of the importance that church leaders attach to U.S.-Vatican relations, whatever the flashpoints may be with any given administration. (Certainly under Obama it's not tough to identify those flashpoints, beginning and ending with debates over abortion.)

Díaz becomes the ninth American ambassador to the Holy See, and a couple of his predecessors were on hand Monday night. I was able to listen in as former Ambassador Lindy Boggs, who served under President Bill Clinton and who's now a spry 93, and her daughter, NPR's Cokie Roberts, advised Díaz and his wife Marian about how to utilize the space in the Villa Richardson, the ambassador's residence, to accommodate four growing children.

Díaz, 46, represents change in many respects. Not only is he the first Hispanic to hold the ambassador's job -- he was born in Cuba and immigrated to the United States with his family -- he's also the first professional theologian. In fact, one could argue that by tapping Díaz, Obama actually got a twofer. His wife, Marian, also holds a Ph.D. in theology; the two met during doctoral studies at Notre Dame. The crowd Monday night was swelled by a significant contingent from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, where both husband and wife are on faculty. (Díaz has been granted an indefinite sabbatical while on assignment in Rome.)

Díaz made just a few brief remarks, mostly expressing gratitude for his nomination and excitement about taking up the job. Because he's not yet presented his credentials to the pope, he can't really begin acting like the ambassador -- to make substantive comments beforehand would be considered a diplomatic faux pas.

As a result, in many ways Monday night actually belonged to Díaz's hosts, former Ambassador to the Holy See Thomas P. Melady, who served under the first President George Bush, and his wife Margaret. Tom Melady is

now Senior Diplomat in Residence at the Institute for World Politics, an independent graduate school of national security and international affairs nestled in the historic Marlatt Mansion in downtown Washington.

If the Catholic church had one of those annual lists of "power couples," as they do in Hollywood, the Meladys would have to figure somewhere near the top. Both have wide contacts in multiple circles of life, including the academy, international diplomacy, and American politics, to say nothing of the ecclesiastical scene. Tom, for example, hasn't been the Vatican ambassador since 1993, yet he works hard to keep his contacts at the Holy See green. Whenever I see him, he's always anxious to share the latest insight about what the current crop of Vatican diplomats is up to.

Margaret also has an impressive résumé, having served for six years as president of the American University in Rome and in a variety of other academic posts. She's got several books to her credit, including a 1999 study of the late Pope John Paul II's international travels, touting those trips as a "new vocabulary of the sacred."

Though Tom is now 82, the Meladys show no signs of slowing down. They've long been concerned with the fate of emerging nations in Eastern Europe, and Margaret has recently agreed to serve as provost of Dubrovnik International University, the first private university established in Croatia. Tom, naturally, is dean of its School of Diplomacy. Both will spend a good chunk of this fall in Dubrovnik, and then shuttle back and forth thereafter.

When I bumped into Margaret Monday evening, I laughingly asked, "So, what corner of the world are you saving this week?" Truth to be told, however, their global commitment is no joke.

Despite that accomplishment, perhaps what's most remarkable about the Meladys is that they come as close to embodying the "Catholic middle" as any prominent political couple possibly could. Certainly Tom's Catholic credentials aren't in any doubt; among other things, he's a longtime member of the Knights of Malta. He's also a moderate Republican who initially endorsed Mitt Romney in 2008, and later served on the national steering committee of Catholics for McCain. Yet he also has deep friendships on the other side of the aisle, and has emerged as a voice of reason urging Catholics to develop a strong working relationship with the Obama administration.

Tom and Margaret thus incarnate the centrist Catholic instinct, striving to see the intersection of faith and politics in "both/and" terms rather than "either/or." As I said to someone Monday evening, the miracle of the Meladys is that had McCain prevailed last November, the Meladys would still be hosting a reception for the new Vatican ambassador, with the same spirit and probably much the same crowd. They're a classic example of politically active people who actually care more about service than politics.

If some of that approach rubs off on Diaz, the embassy to the Holy See ought to be in good hands.

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For some time now, I've been making the argument that 2009 shapes up as the "Year of Africa" in the global Catholic church, pointing to three high-profile events: Pope Benedict XVI's first trip to Africa last March, in which he visited Cameroon and Angola; the plenary assembly of SECAM, the assembly of African bishops' conferences, which was set for Rome in late September; and the Synod for Africa, scheduled to meet in Rome Oct. 4-25.

This "Year of Africa" is obviously timely, given that in many ways Africa represents the future of the global church. The Catholic population in sub-Saharan Africa exploded from 1.9 million in 1900 to 130 million in 2000, a staggering growth rate of 6,708 percent. There's a youthful, confident feel to the faith in Africa that promises to make it a 21st century powerhouse.

As it turns out, however, one leg of the "Year of Africa" stool has now been taken away, as SECAM has been forced to scrub its plenary assembly in Rome due to a lack of funds.

The announcement came in an August 17 letter from Tanzanian Cardinal Polycarp Pengo, the current president of SECAM. (The acronym stands for the "Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar.") In the letter, Pengo lays out the stark financial realities.

Pengo writes that the budget for the event was 260,000 Euro, or roughly U.S. \$370,000, a total which included almost \$100,000 left over after the last SECAM plenary assembly in 2007. That meant the body needed to raise some \$270,000 to make up the difference, and Pengo reports that by mid-August, they had only generated about \$64,000, which obviously represents a significant shortfall.

"This amount is not sufficient to pay for board and accommodation of 250 participants at the rate of 76 Euro per day for seven days, excluding other expenses," Pengo wrote. Given that 76 Euro works out to about \$108 a day, it's clear that the delegates weren't exactly planning to live large during their week in Rome.

Pengo writes that representatives of the African bishops' conferences will meet sometime during the synod to plan their next move, and that the next plenary assembly could perhaps be held in Ghana in mid-2010.

To be sure, one could argue that staging a plenary assembly of SECAM on the cusp of a month-long Synod for Africa was always a bit superfluous. For Africans taking part in both events, it would have meant an even longer stretch of time away from home. In terms of ecclesiology, one could also make the case that the leadership of the African church ought to assemble in Africa.

Nonetheless, holding a SECAM plenary assembly in Rome would have had important symbolic and public relations value. Symbolically, it would help cement 2009 as a year in which the eyes of the global church are on Africa; in terms of PR, it would create another opportunity for African Catholic leaders to engage the global media, particularly the global Catholic media. Among other points, a SECAM plenary is an event the Africans manage themselves, setting their own agenda and following their own protocols; a synod of bishops, on the other hand, is clearly a Vatican production, even if the focus is on Africa.

It can't help but seem tragic that this opportunity will be missed simply because of money, especially considering that in the grand scheme of things, \$206,000, which is what Pengo reported is missing, isn't that vast a sum, even in the present economic climate. One strains to imagine that if, say, the American bishops, or the Germans, wanted to meet in Rome, they couldn't come up with that kind of dough to make it happen.

In that sense, even the absence of the SECAM plenary this fall is an important story. It's a reminder that the inequities of the broader world affect the church too, sometimes meaning that important voices don't get their moment on the global stage.

All of which, of course, makes it critical for Catholics everywhere -- including, most definitely, the American Catholic community -- to tune into the Oct. 4-25 Synod for Africa.

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