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'We've been uprooted into a life of service'

by John L. Allen Jr.



Miguel Diaz, the new U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, accompanied by his wife Marian, right, arrives for the canonization Mass of five new saints in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 11. (CNS)

Though neither of us realized it at the time, new U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Miguel Diaz and I met on a propitious day for Diaz's boss, President Barack Obama. A little over two hours after our interview ended, news broke that Obama had been awarded the Noble Peace Prize. One of the first global institutions to issue its congratulations was the Vatican, which expressed "appreciation" for the choice and encouraged what it described as Obama's commitment to "peace in the international arena," especially nuclear disarmament.

All in all, not a bad day for Obama's man at the Vatican.

Diaz is the first Hispanic to serve as ambassador to the Holy See, as well as the first professional theologian. (He's currently on extended sabbatical as a professor of theology at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in Minnesota.) 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. Diaz and his wife Marian have four school-aged children.

Despite today's developments, in many ways Diaz has his work cut out for him. Not only does he have to learn the argot and customs of international diplomacy on the fly, but he represents a president who can seem an ambivalent figure seen through the Vatican's prism: congenial on many matters of foreign policy, but problematic on abortion, contraception, and other life issues. Of course, Diaz also knows that Obama is an even more controversial figure in some circles of Catholic opinion in the States.

The following is a transcript of our interview, which took place in Diaz's office at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, located in Rome near the Circus Maximus.

NCR: Thanks for agreeing to this interview.

Ambassador DiazI wanted to do it ... I know that when the announcement [of Diaz's nomination] was made, it captured the imagination of many communities. Your own piece talked about me as 'a new face of Catholicism,' and various other pieces followed, plus reactions from friends and colleagues in the academy. Clearly there was a lot of joy, and a certain sense of pride from the academic community that a professor was chosen for this role. There's a lot of honesty and humility required to be thankful for that, on behalf of myself and others who share this profession.

You're conscious, then, that in some ways you're regarded as a symbol for a number of different groups -- for Hispanic Catholics, for theologians, and perhaps also for what we might call 'progressive Catholics' in the States.

You know, on that point ... what I would say is that I have never been, nor would I ever want to be, boxed into categories. I find troublesome the boxing of 'progressive' and 'conservative.' ... The first words out of my mouth [after the nomination], and really the only words I've been able to say until now, were that I want to be a bridge-builder.

From my academic perspective, a good scholar listens to a variety of perspectives and resists the temptation to be pinned down. Clearly, we all have our points of view, and people have read my work. I'm sure you've seen that different people have said, 'Oh, he's this' or 'he's that.' In fact, my work just doesn't lend itself to this thinking. If I were to self-identify based on my background, I'm a systematic theologian who's done a lot of work in the areas of theological anthropology and Trinity. Those have been my passions. Within those areas, there's a wide range of scholars.

I do have a Rahnerian background, I'm not going to deny that, and I do have the U.S. Hispanics piece, and I'm not going to deny that either. That's part of my past. Yet even in my attempts to engage someone like Karl Rahner with the thought of U.S. Hispanic theologians, or black Catholic theologians, or Asian-American theologians, I think that points to my attempts to be a bridge-builder.

I promised that I wouldn't drag you into theology, but since you bring up Rahner ... You know that the intellectual climate under Benedict XVI tends to be shaped more by von Balthasar. Is that also a bridge you think you can build?

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In fact, one of the last theses I directed, by one of my students, was on Hans Urs von Balthasar. There's a tremendous aesthetic dimension that von Balthasar [brings] that can't be denied. It's been welcomed, in fact, by the Benedictine tradition that I come from ... aesthetics is a big piece of it. A couple of years ago,

I gave the Landregan Lecture at the University of Dallas, which was titled "Seer of the Word." I talked about the St. John's Bible, drawing on the theology of Rahner but also von Balthasar, on the subject of the sacramental imagination.

So, I would say that even on the scholarly level ... if someone thinks they're going to pigeonhole me and draw me into a specific intellectual category, they're going to have to do a lot of work to pull it off.

Have you had a chance to talk directly with President Obama about your role here?

I have, and the president has given me his full support for my mission here. He's expressed to me that he has no doubt I will succeed in this assignment. In fact, part of what the president finds very exciting is the fact that both Marian and myself have a background, and a passion, for religious studies.

So he sees you two as a package deal?

Well, I think that from the beginning we have seen ourselves as a family. This again comes from my background ... we have a very relational understanding of reality, and a very relational understanding of how things should be done. We're not perfect, and it doesn't mean that we always carry that forth into practice. But I like to think that in the kind of leadership I have, and in the kind of leadership I want to embrace as part of this great team [at the embassy], I want to continue that vision.

Did the president give you any substantive indication of what he hopes you will accomplish?

Nothing specific, but he is aware of the kinds of issues I want to pursue. They're issues very much in line with his Cairo speech, and he as well as others within his administration have given me support on those issues.

If I can take a step back, there's been a lot of conversation as to what was it in President Obama, and what was it in Professor Diaz, that brought the two together? I think that's worth exploring, and there are several things I'd like to say about it. There's no question that I made what I would call a prudential judgment in supporting this president. That judgment was based on a number of issues, but two main things. First, his life story; and second, the question of content, meaning concretely his ideas.

In terms of his life story, he's the child of an immigrant. He comes from humble beginnings. His parents sacrificed a lot so he could receive the privileges he now enjoys. Also, of course, he was a university professor. Last but not least, I found that he has been shaped by a social consciousness. A lot has been said about his years in Chicago, the legacy of Cardinal Bernardin, and so on. So, those four things -- an immigrant family, humble beginnings, the fact that he was a university professor, and his social consciousness -- very much resonated with my own personal story.

Now, on content ... without saying too much, I also draw on my background. His message that "we" could do things, accords with my own familial, communal, cultural as well as intellectual background. It's his 'communal anthropology,' if we're going to use the technical term ... his emphasis on this "we," and inviting us as a nation to embrace a new era of responsibility. It's not so much what I can do, but that we all have a role to play in this community and in this world. That was very attractive to me. I also found attractive his reasoned analysis of issues, of the challenges that face us as a nation and a world. He's a nuanced person, he likes to look at issues ... that's going to resonate with persons who want to avoid extremes.

Then, of course, and this struck me especially when I read *The Audacity of Hope* and its chapter on religion, is the way that he has consistently embraced people of faith, and the way he has welcomed

religion. He's stated that within a democratic and pluralistic society, there's a role to be exercised by people of faith like myself. The challenge for us is to translate those principles persuasively so as to build common ground.

Had you known Obama personally prior to your nomination?

No.

Was your first conversation when he called to offer you the job?

The president himself didn't call personally to offer me the job. It was a White House person.

When you eventually did speak to him about it, was that your first conversation?

Yes. I think this is also for me, at least, part of the surprise, the beauty, and the challenge that came with [the job]. In some ways, maybe others would say 'how interesting,' that I wasn't one of his friends. In the end, however, the fact is that he did choose me, and he has given me his trust.

For the record, you and your wife were not major financial contributors to Obama's campaign?

No. But, I should say that in the last four or five months, we have become friends with a number of those who were big contributors to the campaign, and they themselves have expressed to us how exciting it is that the president chose someone who wasn't a big contributor. The University of Notre Dame's alumni magazine a few months ago had a piece connecting President Obama with President Kennedy, how both plucked professors or intellectuals to put into positions.

In some ways, you would think, why shouldn't we be doing this? Together with the persons who have worked in the Foreign Service and been so much a part of this, why not also increase the pool of gifts?

One point about the Bush administration that virtually everyone would acknowledge is that it took the relationship with the Holy See very seriously. President Bush visited John Paul II three times during his first term, the only American president ever to visit a pope that often. A concern in some quarters is whether there will be the same level of engagement with a Democrat. What can you point to as evidence that this White House is indeed taking its relationship with the Holy See seriously?

I don't want to draw attention to myself, because that's not my purpose here, but I would say that the appointment itself is indicative that the president is serious about this relationship. In terms of the credentials speech by Pope Benedict, he said, 'I also take this occasion to express my confidence that diplomatic relations between the United States and the Holy See, formally initiated twenty-five years ago, will continue to be marked by dialogue, cooperation, promotion of human dignity, respect for human rights, and the service of justice, solidarity and peace for the whole human family.' I have no indication since my arrival here that this commitment has been weakened or will be weakened.

That's from the pope's side. Can you point to something concrete from the side of the administration as evidence of interest or commitment?

Just this week, we had the Deputy Secretary [Spencer] Boyer from the State Department, who's going throughout Europe and visiting different missions. He made a point of coming, and we had extensive conversation. I communicated with him on a number of issues that we want to [work on]. I also communicated that because of the presence of the Holy See worldwide, we are an incredible listening

post.

Even back in Washington, one of the things I stressed, and that was part of my conversation at the State Department, was the whole notion of the three 'I's.' This administration is very serious about listening to others, learning from others, and leading as a result of that listening and learning. What better listening post than right here in the Vatican?

You think they understand that?

Yes, I do. The fact that the president has sent a presidential delegation [to this weekend's canonization ceremony] ... we asked him to send one, and the fact that he's done it says something. These are just signs, but they're not just minor signs. They're clear indications that the White House is very serious. I have been in touch with a number of people, people like Josh DuBois [who heads the president's office on faith-based initiatives]. He knows the important religious role that the Vatican plays. Today, just after you leave, I will receive the new U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, and we'll engage in conversation about the ongoing ways our embassy can contribute to them in terms of various projects, such as food security and the environment. I think there's a tremendous ability for this administration and the present pope's vision for stewardship of the earth [to intersect].

The inter-racial, inter-religious, inter-cultural piece is going to be strong because of my background, as well as the educational engagement of youth. I'm also interested in how that kind of dialogue can intersect on issues of common ground, like the care of the earth, like food security, like peace-building and rejecting the use of religion for violent purposes.

I'm sure you know the story that former Ambassador Raymond Flynn tells, who represented the Clinton administration to the Holy See, of how it once took him a full week to arrange a phone conversation between the president and the pope. Many interpreted that story as a reflection of a lack of interest in the Vatican in the last Democratic administration. Hypothetically, if Pope Benedict XVI wanted to speak to President Obama on the telephone, would you have the same problem?

Here I'm going to take President Obama's road. I'm not going to go back, and I'm not going to speculate. But I think that I have enough persons connected to the president, that if that were to happen, I could get the president [on the phone]. In fact, the president himself told me before leaving the White House, pointing to a number of persons, 'If you ever need to get to me, you contact so-and-so.'

Obviously it's speculation, but I don't think we're going to have an incident like that. I have no doubt that if I had to get to the president, I have the persons to get to him.

Tell me about your Oct. 2 meeting with the pope. Was this the first time you'd met Benedict XVI?

It was. It was a wonderful meeting.

As a theologian yourself, I presume you had read the works of Joseph Ratzinger?

Oh yes, of course.

You have to remember that this is a pope who took the name 'Benedict,' which in part refers to another pope, but also in part to the founder of the order with which Professor Diaz has been associated! Not only in our private conversation, but also in terms of meeting my whole family, he showed tremendous hospitality.

What I wanted to communicate to him, and to other Vatican officials, is that I'm here as a bridge-builder. I'm here with a background that I hope to place at the service of diplomatic relations, and I'm here to strengthen the past twenty-five years of this relationship. He graciously echoed that back. He listened, we had a conversation ... obviously, these aren't long conversations. If it were up to me, I would love to stay and talk and talk and talk, but this isn't possible.

How long was the meeting?

I'd say about fifteen to twenty minutes.

Apart from his formal text, did he say anything to you?

One of the things that we shared is that we both come from humble beginnings, and we both in some ways have been uprooted from the privileges and the gift that we've been given by those who supported us and got us to the university ... we've been uprooted into a life of service. Listen, I'm not going to deny the fact, to you or to anybody, that I have a passion for theology. I love theology. But I also know very clearly that I have to sacrifice that piece. I know that he has to [make that sacrifice] also as pope. I'm sure he would love to be doing more theology, to be engaged in teaching, and so on.

When I received that call from the White House, I had an option [to decline], just as in a sense Benedict had that option in the conclave. These calls, which are 'calls' in much more than a literal sense, are opportunities for service. How can you say no, whether it's to your country, or in the case of the pope, to the church? Yes, you have to give something up, you have to sacrifice the classroom, in order to embrace a new challenge.

At the level of content, can you put your finger on a few priorities in terms of things you want to accomplish here?

First, I would say no one starts from scratch. Good leadership builds upon the good work that preceded that leader. So, I want to build upon the excellent work we've been engaged in for the past twenty-five years. Some of that work, for example, which you've followed over the years, has to do with trafficking of persons.

I have to put in a plug for something. We have a president who's from Hawaii, and [next week] we have a conference on HIV/AIDS. We have the canonization of Fr. Damien, who's associated also with marginalized persons. To the degree that we're able, even when we disagree on x or y, we don't disagree on everything and we can still cooperate, as on HIV/AIDS. That's what I want to do.

Does the HIV/AIDS conference have anything to do with the fact that the Synod for Africa is going on?

We've invited the African bishops, and to the degree that they're available, they'll be attending the conference. It's a wonderful opportunity, with an African-American president, and an ambassador whose background embraces the Caribbean ... [to build bridges]. You yourself wrote about my appointment, and I hope it's received in a positive way, that my refusal to be boxed is an expression of my intent to build bridges. If I can bridge not only East and West, but North and South, I'd love to do that.

Again, it's who I am. I married a Minnesotan who's got a background from Croatia! I've lived in the Southeast, I've lived in the Midwest, I've experienced the West Coast, so we are part of the United States. That's why my favorite quote, and you will continue to hear this out of me, in part because of my

Trinitarian background, is E pluribus unum ... out of many, one.

New things I'd like to engage in? [I'm interested in] some of the inter-religious, inter-faith and inter-cultural conversations, for the sake of peace-building. That comes out of the Cairo speech, and also my own background. Also this piece on care of the earth, and the youth piece, to the degree that we can bring that in. We need to engage the youth of the world, and engage with the Vatican on issues that affect youth. If something has an impact on the youth, it has an impact on everybody. Clearly, President Obama has had a tremendous appeal to the younger generation ... he's even been a professor who has taught young people.

By the standards of Rome, you're a young guy yourself.

Well, the present Ambassador of Great Britain to the Holy See was in his thirties [when he was appointed]. Anyway, age is a factor, but it's not the only factor, in terms of [reaching] young people.

Have you had any notable experiences yet, aside from your meeting with the pope?

I prayed at the tomb of Pope John XXIII. What we did was, we made a stop at the tomb of St. Peter on our way to the meeting [with Benedict XVI]. Then we went back the next day to visit the different tombs [in St. Peter's Basilica]. I prayed at the tombs of the different popes, and remembered how each of them had contributed to this history in the Vatican. I prayed for my mission here, that I would have the openness to really execute what the president has entrusted to me.

I don't know if you've been following coverage of the Synod for Africa, but there's been a fair bit of talk about Obama. There seems to be a sense that Obama is a symbol of hope for Africa. Will you try to reach out to the bishops, or to the church in Africa, given their obvious interest in the president?

Remember that my role is to be the ambassador of the United States before the Holy See, and to usurp any other functions. I want to be clear on that. To the degree that the Vatican engages us, and then we engage the various conversational partners associated with the Vatican on a number of issues -- not just Africa but other parts of the world too, as we've done in the past -- I'm always going to be open to developing and enhancing those efforts. As an example, I'll point again to the HIV/AIDS conference. The African bishops have been invited. To the degree that we can, for example through our aid and the church's efforts to distribute that aid, especially in Africa, if we can contribute to each other, of course we'll do that.

It must be a special challenge to realize that you're not just representing a president of the United States, but someone who, whatever one makes of his policies, is undeniably a symbol of hope for much of the world.

I do have a sense of responsibility, a tremendous sense. I've embraced that, and I think about that often. I know that in some ways, the bar has been raised very high for this president. In some cases, it's probably been set too high, because he's only human. I would say that what's important about this presidency is that we not turn the attention to President Obama per se, but what Obama has asked us to do -- it's not about me, it's about what we can do as a world. I think that if we expect for him to solve all the world's issues, this is not what he's about.

Look, I've never been involved in politics at this level. If a college professor decides to get involved, to campaign, to do all that, it's because I felt that I needed to practice what I preached, what I taught. So I heeded the call to also engage in political activity, for the sake of my children, my community, and so on.

I think the challenge I have as an ambassador, if I'm going to properly represent the kind of vision I've been asked to represent, is that I shouldn't ask what I can do, but what we can do to advance this mission. What can we do, and that "we" would include the Vatican. For example, in the case of HIV, what can we do together to advance the health of children and to prevent the spread of AIDS? To the degree that we're able to engage one another, even when there are areas where we may disagree, I think we'll be the better for it.

I return to the experience of raising four children. There are times when they're going to want to shut themselves in their rooms and not talk to their parents, because their parents have given them a time-out or have disciplined them. The challenge is to pull them out and say, no, this is about engagement, it's about building community. We can't destroy the community, we can't destroy the family, even if we disagree with one another. We must engage one another. To quote the president, we must be willing to disagree without being disagreeable to one another. I think that reflects our Catholic ethos, and it reflects an inclusive way of life.

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