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Pope names first diplomatic representative to Vietnam

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- In a first step toward establishing diplomatic relations, Pope Benedict XVI has named a 57-year-old Vatican diplomat to be a "non-resident pontifical representative" for Vietnam.

Italian Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, currently Vatican nuncio to Indonesia, was reassigned Jan. 13 to serve as the pope's representative to Vietnam and simultaneously as nuncio in Singapore and apostolic delegate in Malaysia and Brunei (two countries that do not have diplomatic relations with the Vatican).

Girelli, who has been in the Vatican diplomatic corps since 1987, previously served at nunciatures in Cameroon, in New Zealand and in the United States, as well as in the Vatican Secretariat of State. He was ordained a bishop in 2006 when he was named nuncio to Indonesia.

A joint working group formed by the Vatican and Vietnam's communist government announced in June that the two sides were agreed that a papal representative would be named. A statement from the working group said that unlike a nuncio, the representative would not be residing in Vietnam for the time being.

For years, top Vatican diplomats made annual trips to Vietnam to work out details of the church's life in the country, including discussing every potential bishop's appointment with the government. The Vatican always insisted that needing government permission to name a bishop was not normal, but that it could be tolerated temporarily as Vatican-Vietnamese relations improved.

In a formal address Jan. 10 to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Vatican, Pope Benedict said the agreement to name a representative to Vietnam was one sign of improved religious freedom in the world.

The pope sent Cardinal Ivan Dias, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, to Vietnam in early January for celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Vietnamese hierarchy.

Dias underlined the fact that the pope hoped for improved diplomatic relations and a chance for the Catholic Church to contribute to the good of Vietnam, particularly through education, health care and social work.

Addressing government representatives Jan. 5 at the Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang, the cardinal expressed his hopes that they "would not fail to ensure full religious freedom, create favorable conditions for religious organizations and for all those who publicly profess and practice their faith, whatever their belief."

The cardinal said the church and the government were like a mother and a father in a family, each having a specific role, but needing to work together "for the good of their children," Rome-based AsiaNews reported.

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