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Ireland closes Vatican embassy

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NCR Today

In a move that will likely be taken in some quarters as a snub, Ireland has decided to close its embassy to the Holy See. In effect, the move means that Ireland will no longer have full-time diplomatic representation at the Vatican.

Even after the embassy's closure, Ireland will still have full diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Today's move was announced in tandem with the closure of two other Irish diplomatic missions, in Iran and in East Timor.

An Irish official said that the country was obliged to make budget cuts in accord with the terms of an EU/IMF rescue plan, and that while the embassy to the Vatican was one of Ireland's oldest embassies, its work could be performed by a non-resident official.

Though both the Irish government and the Vatican made statements today insisting that the relationship is on a solid footing, the closure nevertheless comes against the backdrop of mounting diplomatic tension between the two parties, primarily fueled by the sexual abuse crisis in the once ultra-Catholic nation.

In July, a government investigation of the Cloyne diocese in Ireland found cases of sexual abuse which were allegedly mishandled as recently as 2009. Many Irish commentators faulted the Vatican for its handling of the crisis, including Prime Minister Enda Kenny, who publicly blasted what he called the "dysfunction, disconnection and elitism, the narcissism, that dominates the culture of the Vatican to this day."

Some Irish politicians floated the idea of extending criminal penalties for failure to report accusations of abuse even to the sacrament of the confessional.

In the wake of the furor touched off by the Cloyne report and Kenny's remarks, the Vatican announced it was recalling its ambassador to Ireland for "consultations."

In September, the Vatican issued an usually detailed 11,000-word response to Kenny's criticism. Among other things, it argued that a 1997 letter from a Vatican official to the Irish bishops, warning them that mandatory reporter policies could conflict with church law, was not intended to prevent the bishops from reporting child abuse to the police. Instead, the Vatican said, the point was to make sure that abusers could not evade ecclesial punishment on a technicality.

In the context of that back-and-forth, some observers may be tempted to see the closure of the Irish embassy as a further rebuke by the government.

Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, by tradition the Primate of Ireland, today expressed "profound disappointment" over the move.

"This decision seems to show little regard for the important role played by the Holy See in international relations and of the historic ties between the Irish people and the Holy See over many centuries," Brady said.

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Apart from the specifics of the Irish situation, some Vatican-watchers might wonder if today's decision could be a harbinger of things to come. Last year, veteran Italian journalist Massimo Franco published a book titled *Once Upon a Time, There was a Vatican*, arguing that the Holy See's international influence is in decline.

Franco described a scene at a diplomatic reception in Rome in which one Western ambassador to the Vatican looked around the room at his colleagues, and openly wondered how many of those governments would still have embassies to the Vatican in ten years' time.

Under Pope John Paul II, the number of nations with which the Vatican has diplomatic relations grew significantly, and today stands at 179. Of those, only 80 have ambassadors living in Rome. Most of the rest assign responsibility for the relationship to a diplomat in another country.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, issued a statement today about the decision. The full text of that statement, in an NCR translation, appears below.

Vatican Statement on Closure of Irish Embassy

The Holy See takes note of the decision of Ireland to close its Embassy to the Holy See in Rome. Naturally, every state that has diplomatic relations with the Holy See is free to decide, on the basis of its possibilities and its interests, whether to have an Ambassador to the Holy See resident in Rome or in another country. What's important are the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the states, and these are not in question with regard to Ireland.

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