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Unexpected sanity in Europe; Miguel Diaz; and Syria's Christians

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

In the spirit of Thanksgiving, here's something to be grateful for: Against all odds, the European Parliament on Wednesday managed to avoid opening a new front in the long-standing, and lamentable, "clash of civilizations" between secularism and religion.

Despite a well-organized and fairly nasty campaign to block the nomination of Maltese Foreign Minister Tonio Borg, a devout Catholic, as Europe's new Commissioner of Health and Consumer Protection, the parliament voted to confirm him, thereby declining to embrace the view that traditional Christian beliefs are simply incompatible with "enlightened" 21st century European values.

In the run-up to the vote, Borg's critics accused him of being "outrageously misogynistic," "homophobic" and a "fanatic," someone committed to "medieval views" on abortion and homosexuality, for his staunch adherence to orthodox Catholic teaching. Those accusations seemed to lose some steam, however, after Borg's Nov. 13 confirmation hearing, when he came off as competent, rational and basically pragmatic.

Had things gone the other way, forces on both sides were eager to let slip the dogs of war. Defenders of the Maltese pol even had a new bit of vocabulary ready to roll: "Borged," coined with reference to the failed 1987 U.S. Supreme Court nomination of Robert Bork, which gave Americans the term "Borked."

In effect, it shaped up as round two of the fracas that broke out in 2004, when Italian politician Rocco Buttiglione, a philosopher and friend of Pope John Paul II, was rejected as a European commissioner on the basis of his personal opposition to abortion and homosexuality.

Back then, many people felt Europe had a new hiring policy: "No Catholics need apply!"

Yet this time around, over opposition from Liberals, Greens, Socialists, and a cross-section of secular NGOs such as the European Humanist Federation, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and the International Lesbian and Gay Association, Borg's nomination was upheld by a vote of 386 to 281.

To be clear, the opponents had their reasons. The 55-year-old Borg aggressively campaigned in favor of writing Malta's ban on abortion into the country's constitution, and he's opposed legal recognition of both same-sex couples and divorce. If you're in favor of those things, obviously this isn't your guy.

Borg is also among the architects of Malta's hardline policies on illegal immigration. In 2001, he oversaw the deportation of 200 Eritreans back to their country, where some were allegedly tortured and killed. That background might legitimately give someone pause.

All this would be more relevant had he been up for a job in which he could dictate policy. As commissioner, however, his role is primarily to enforce policies others adopt, and in a Nov. 17 letter to parliament, Borg pledged his willingness to do precisely that.

As Borg put it during his hearing, he was coming to Brussels neither to impose his values nor to abandon them.

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What was at issue, therefore, wasn't whether Europe would embrace Borg's Catholic views on abortion, divorce and homosexuality -- there's zero serious possibility of that, given the political climate of the Old Continent. The question was instead whether simply holding those views disqualifies someone from any public role at all.

Had Borg been voted down, there's little doubt a cultural row would have ensued. Here's how Maltese Fr. Joe Borg, a popular blogger and columnist, put things in a Nov. 4 piece for the *Times of Malta*:

"Will the anti-Christian lobby prove once more that it is made up of intolerant bigots with a flair for fundamentalism? Its members do not put on burkas and are not strapped with ammo-laden belts, but fundamentalists they are just the same. Their extremism is as despicable as the extremism on the far right."

In slightly less incendiary fashion, new Maltese Auxiliary Bishop Charles Scicluna, the Vatican's former top prosecutor on sex abuse cases, warned that rejecting Borg would have been a "disaster" and an "affront" to Catholics.

By confirming Borg, the parliament has given us a breather from that sort of protest.

Wednesday's vote was closely watched in the Vatican, and it will likely be taken in tandem with last year's ruling by the European Court of Human Rights upholding Italy's right to display crucifixes in its schoolrooms as a further hint that perhaps the wheels are turning toward greater tolerance of religious belief.

Bottom line: On the evolving cultural landscape of the West, there may just be some rational secularists and people of faith willing to meet one another halfway, figuring out how they can live and work

together, rather than forever trying to freeze one another out.

As I bit into my turkey yesterday, that's an unexpected bit of sanity for which I certainly gave thanks.

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Over the years, I've had the pleasure of knowing seven U.S. ambassadors to the Holy See. They worked for different presidents and represent different political persuasions, but in my experience, all tried their best to navigate the cultural gap that separates Main Street USA from the highly idiosyncratic world of the Vatican.

In mid-November, the most recent of these envoys, Miguel Diaz, announced he was stepping down in order to take up a position as professor of faith of culture at the University of Dayton. In addition to being the first Hispanic to serve as ambassador, the Cuban-born Diaz was also the first theologian -- so in a sense, he and his wife, Marian, are now returning to their natural habitat. (Marian, also a theologian, has likewise joined the faculty at Dayton.)

While those who held the job faced their share of headaches, you can make a good case that Diaz, who never held any diplomatic post prior to this assignment, stepped into a "perfect storm" composed of three forces:

- The Vatican's Secretariat of State has been hit by a series of crises and scandals, most recently the Vatileaks mess, leaving it somewhat distracted and slow to embrace new diplomatic initiatives.
- Perhaps especially under Democratic administrations, some elements in the U.S. foreign policy establishment can be ambivalent, if not hostile, about engaging religious groups generally and the Vatican in particular.
- The Obama White House and the U.S. bishops have been embroiled in conflict on a number of fronts, which means that anytime they do anything together, even on a completely uncontroversial matter such as fighting human trafficking, somebody's likely to make a federal case out of it.

Despite all that, Diaz remains upbeat about the potential to build bridges, and he plans to continue to do so from his new position at Dayton. I spoke with him Tuesday.

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Looking back, what will you take away from your years as ambassador?

This was a great honor and privilege, and I take so much with me. It offered me a new perspective, a new angle of vision, on both my country and my church. It also multiplied my relationships at the national and international levels.

Being a diplomat gave me an incredible platform to invite various communities and leaders to the table and to engage them in bridge-building. That's always been part of who I am. Growing up, I bridged the Cuban and American sides of what it means to be an American, to be part of this Hispanic-American reality, at the experiential level. Intellectually, I bridged the worlds of Karl Rahner and Latino theology in my dissertation work at Notre Dame and in various leadership positions I've held in the academy.

As a diplomat, I worked on bridging divides in new ways. In Rome, we organized conferences that brought together Muslims, Christians and Jews to talk about issues such as the economy, conflict resolution, the environment, HIV/AIDS, and so on. The idea was to focus concretely on success stories and strategies, what these groups actually have done together to bring about cooperation and to benefit the

human family.

Did living in Italy have an impact on you?

It's given me a new appreciation for beauty. In Italy, everything is either *bello* or *brutto*, beautiful or ugly, while in English we tend to judge things in terms of right or wrong. I think there's a lot of value to that aesthetic category of beauty. Even when we disagree with one other, we can still seek the beauty of the other and the beauty that's inside us. ... We face tremendous issues and challenges, but if we can prepare the table well and make our arguments more beautiful and attractive, we might be able to increase our success in terms of promoting the common good.

What did you learn about the Vatican that surprised you?

The basic thing is that it's a mistake to look at the Vatican as some monolithic organization. It's clear to me now, after this experience, that the Vatican is a big institution composed of all sorts of different offices, and you can't talk about it in sweeping generalizations.

The way I approached my ambassadorship was to look at the tremendous possibilities this relationship offered to extend not only our ears, but also our reach, in terms of being able to cooperate with different offices inside the walls as well as all those institutions associated with the Vatican, either loosely or in a tighter way. We cast the net wide, engaging not only the Second Section [of the Secretariat of State] and the various councils, but also pontifical institutes, the universities, lay ecclesial communities such as Sant'Egidio, Communion and Liberation, and the Focolare, and groups such as Caritas Internationalis. They're all part of the richness and the diversity of the church.

Like any human reality, the Vatican and the church have both challenges and opportunities. I'm not naïve about the challenges, but what I wanted to do as ambassador, and what I'll continue to do as a professor, is to focus on the opportunities: How can we collaborate to have greater success on behalf of the common good?

What's exciting about the position in Dayton?

The university has offered me the possibility to continue to build bridges, especially on the intersection of faith and culture. There's the possibility of bridge-building across disciplines, both internationally and 'intranationally.' This is the only doctoral program in the country on the U.S. Catholic experience, so it gives me the chance to focus on what it means to be both an American and a Catholic.

It's a bit like being a Cuban-American -- I can't, and don't want to, give up either side. On Thanksgiving, I want both my black beans and my turkey!

One of my theological passions is the doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God exists in a community of persons, that oneness is also diversity. Similarly, one of the foundational principles of our country is *E pluribus unum*. I like to think that our national and cultural identity can be bridged with our Catholic identity and faith principles.

I'm also attracted to the Marian dimension of the university. Mary is an important religious symbol not only for Latinos but for all Catholics, and she's a bridge-builder. She invites us to say yes to God's call for right and just relationships with our neighbors and with all of God's creation. Here's this faithful Jewish woman who's also highly regarded in the Muslim tradition ... with that Marian dimension, I think my passion for bridge-building will come alive and be supported.

Will you be back on the circuit of professional theological meetings, such as the Catholic Theological Society of America?

Yes, of course, and also The Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States. I intend to recommit myself fully to the life of service and scholarship.

How else will you get involved in the States?

All indications from the State Department are that I'll continue my involvement with its religion and foreign policy group. [Note: In 2011, Diaz helped launch the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State's Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society.] The idea is to provide ongoing education for diplomats in religion and society, and to provide insight in terms of how the U.S. government can deepen its existing relationships with communities of faith, and to welcome new ones.

I'll also be involved in other ways, such as giving lectures. I already have two commitments, one at Duquesne and another at USC.

Speaking of religious freedom, that's been a flashpoint in the relationship between the U.S. bishops and the White House. Can you help build bridges on that front?

I'll offer myself and any insights I have both to my church and to my government. I'm ready to stand as a bridge-builder if asked to do so by either of those institutions. I'll answer if the bishops call, and the same goes for the president.

What's your next book?

It's not set in stone, but I'm thinking about a book I'd call *Building Bridges: God, Diplomacy and the Common Good*. It would draw both on my expertise and interest in Trinitarian theology and my recent experience as an ambassador and diplomat. I'd do it in a more scholarly and systematic way, bringing together the theology piece and the diplomatic piece, on how we can do a better job of listening and creating relationships for the sake of the common good.

For me, this isn't just a theory. I was already convinced of it before as a professor, but after this position, I'm much more persuaded that the key question of our time is how we can reconcile ourselves with the increasingly diverse world that surrounds us. To be honest, I think we have a long way to go, as a nation and as a world, in seeking out the better angels that exist within ourselves.

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At the risk of becoming repetitive, let me say it again: There's no place in the world today where Christians face a greater immediate threat to life and limb than Syria, and if Western Catholics can't set aside their ideological differences to do something for them, I'm not sure what hope there is for bringing us together on anything else.

Last Friday, a bomb exploded near a Syriac Orthodox church in Aleppo, leaving between 20 and 80 people dead, and an Armenian Evangelical church was also bombed after being sacked and vandalized by rebel forces. These are simply the latest incidents in what observers describe as a mounting pattern of attacks on Christian targets by fundamentalist elements within the rebel coalition.

For anyone interested in what it's like being a Christian in Syria right now, one terrific resource is the "S.O.S. Christians in Syria" website operated by the Institute of the Incarnate Word. It's a family of

religious women and men who have made the tough choice to stay in Aleppo, one the country's most dangerous battle zones, and to minister to people who otherwise have been left to fend for themselves.

Here's a dispatch from an Incarnate Word sister named María de Guadalupe Rodrigo, titled "The Next One Could Be Me."

The site also contains a way for people to support the Incarnate Word mission in Syria, in both English and Spanish.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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