

Ambassadors discuss Vatican diplomacy

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 16, 2006 All Things Catholic

Tuesday night, Georgetown University hosted its annual event for alumni and friends at Rome's Minerva Hotel. I was asked to moderate a panel discussion on Vatican diplomacy featuring Ambassadors Francis Rooney, who represents the United States to the Holy See, and Francis Campbell, representing the United Kingdom.

Both are Catholics who do not come out of conventional diplomatic circles. Campbell is a policy wonk who worked for Prime Minister Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street, while Rooney is a successful businessman with construction firms in Oklahoma and Florida.

Rooney said there is a great "symmetry" between the interests of the Holy See and the American government in promoting "human dignity and essential freedoms in the world," which he described as "under attack" in places such as Venezuela, China, Bosnia and Russia. He specifically mentioned the struggle for religious freedom in various parts of the world.

Rooney said the Americans appreciate Benedict XVI's strong language against terrorism, which he said parallels the Bush administration's own "war on terror."

"We fight at a lower level, the Holy Father fights at a higher level," Rooney said.

In Latin America, Rooney praised the work of the Catholic Church in defending civil institutions against what he called the "caudillo style of leadership" in countries such as Venezuela and, to a lesser extent, Bolivia.

Rooney also praised collaboration between the church and Western governments on issues such as human trafficking, the struggle against corruption, and HIV/AIDS. Rooney said he would like to see more of the AIDS fund created by the Bush administration go to church groups rather than the United Nations.

"There would probably be more

transparency, less corruption, and more people would get the drugs," he said.

Campbell reviewed what he called the "colourful" history of the British embassy to the Holy See, pointing out that the first resident British ambassador took up the post in 1479. After the English Reformation, however, it largely lay dormant until it was reactivated at the time of the First World War. Campbell described that decision as part of a British effort to support the peace initiatives of Pope Benedict XV.

After World War II, Campbell said, the basic British logic for relations with the Holy See had to do with the fight against Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. A subsidiary aim, he said, was to enlist Vatican support for an end to Protestant/Catholic sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

With the collapse of Communism in 1989, followed by the Good Friday Peace Accords and the peace process in Northern Ireland, Campbell said a new logic for the British relationship with the Holy See had to be sought.

That logic, he said, pivots largely on two points. First, the Vatican is a privileged listening post. Second, he said, it is one of the "world's largest global opinion-makers."

As an example, Campbell cited Pope John Paul II's support for an initiative aimed at global poverty relief by the British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, which he said generated ripple effects in British public diplomacy all over the world.

Moreover, Campbell argued, 12 percent of the British population has a direct connection to the Catholic church, which means that Vatican statements and actions have important domestic consequences.

Campbell cited climate change, international development, conflict prevention, human rights, and ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue as areas of shared interest between the British government and the Holy See.

I asked both men to comment on one area of great "asymmetry," to use Rooney's term, between their governments and the Vatican -- the war in Iraq.

Rooney said that when he presented his credentials to Benedict XVI last November, he expected to talk about the war. In fact, however, he said the pope joked that "Iraq is old news."

Despite differences over the war, he said, today the United States and the Vatican share a common interest.

"We're partners to build a pluralistic country respecting civil freedom," he said.

Rooney acknowledged that early on, the Vatican expressed reservations about the new Iraqi constitution and its explicit recognition of the Koran as a source of law.

Campbell largely echoed Rooney's analysis.

"What's coming across is that they have moved on from 2003," he said. "They're interested in stabilization, and in Iraq's future. They want the new government to be stable and secure, not to reappportion blame from the past."

Responding to a question about immigration, Campbell said that Britain's experience since it decided in 2004 to open its borders to other EU nations has had a big impact on the Catholic church, especially the arrival of some 270,000 Poles. He said the Catholic church has a capacity to balance strong national identity with universality that offers a "very good recipe" for immigration policy.

Both Rooney and Campbell said they would like to see their governments work more with the Vatican to promote justice and development in Africa.

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