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Vatican embassy move draws fire from former US envoys

by John L. Allen Jr.

Plans to move the U.S. embassy to the Vatican onto the grounds of the larger American embassy to Italy, though in a separate building and with a distinct entrance, are drawing fire from five former American envoys despite the tacit consent of the Vatican itself.

Justified primarily on the grounds of enhanced security, the move is described by former U.S. Ambassador James Nicholson, who's also a former Secretary of Veterans Affairs in the Bush administration and a former chair of the Republican National Committee, as a "massive downgrade" in U.S./Vatican ties.

"It's turning this embassy into a stepchild of the embassy to Italy," Nicholson said.

"The Holy See is a pivot point for international affairs and a major listening post for the United States," he said, "and to shoehorn [the U.S. delegation] into an office annex inside another embassy is an insult to American Catholics and to the Vatican."

Nicholson, who spoke in an interview Wednesday with *NCR*, joins former Bush envoys Francis Rooney and Mary Ann Glendon as well as Raymond Flynn, the first Clinton ambassador, and Thomas Melady, who served the first President Bush, in objecting.

"In the diplomatic world, if you don't have your own separate space, you're on the road to nowhere," said Rooney, who served as ambassador from 2005 to 2008. He's author of *The Global Vatican*, a new book on U.S./Vatican relations.

While the move has not yet been publicly announced, a contract for renovations to the new facility has

been awarded, and it's tentatively scheduled to open in January 2015. The embassy is presently located in a building near Rome's Circus Maximus, roughly 3 miles away from the other American diplomatic facilities in the city.

Although the Vatican traditionally has insisted that countries maintain embassies in distinct locations as a way of underscoring its autonomy, signals in this case suggest it won't protest the relocation.

On background, a senior Vatican official told *NCR* on Monday that safety is a "real concern," especially in the wake of a lethal September 2012* assault on a U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, that claimed the lives of an American ambassador and three other officials. A U.S. State Department report after that assault recommended consolidating facilities wherever possible.

As long as the embassy remains "completely separate" from other U.S. missions, the Vatican official said, the new site represents a tolerable exception to normal practice.

The current and former Vatican ambassadors of the Obama administration as well as a senior official of the U.S. State Department all told *NCR* the move is primarily about security. They also say the move will bring cost savings and improved facilities and will not be accompanied by cuts in personnel or resources.

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"I see no diminishing in the importance of the relationship at all," said current U.S. Ambassador Ken Hackett.

In truth, Hackett said, "the relationship between the Vatican and the U.S. government hasn't been better than it is right now in quite a while," especially under Pope Francis.

That view was echoed by the State Department official.

"Having the embassy close to the other missions gives it greater stature," the official said, who was authorized to speak to *NCR* on background. "It makes it central to everything the U.S. is doing in Italy and the region rather than being out of sight and out of mind."

Especially given the global interest in Francis, the official said, "If anything, we anticipate intensifying our relationship."

Hackett and others note that a few other countries, such as Israel, have always had their embassies in Rome at the same location while others, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, have recently combined them.

Those assurances, however, haven't mollified the critics. Nicholson rejected the security argument, calling it a "smokescreen."

"That's like saying people get killed on highways because they drive cars on them," he said. "We're not a pauper nation ... if we want to secure an embassy, we certainly can." He said protection at the current location is "state of the art."

Flynn described the move as part of broader secular hostility to religious groups, the Catholic church in particular.

"It's not just those who bomb churches and kill Catholics in the Middle East who are our antagonists, but it's also those who restrict our religious freedoms and want to close down our embassy to the Holy See," Flynn told *NCR*.

Flynn said he can't see any "diplomatic or political benefit to the United States" from the relocation and called it "shortsighted."

Melady told *NCR* that no matter how the move is justified, it will be perceived in diplomatic circles as scaling back.

"Whether that's the official reason doesn't really matter, because that's how people will see it," Melady said.

Hackett called those perceptions off-base. Among other points, he said, the new facilities include better office space and the ability to host small conferences involving 30 to 40 participants.

All told, Hackett said, the new site will give visitors the impression that the United States is "serious" about engaging the Vatican.

The idea of moving the embassy has been around for at least a decade. Under former Ambassador to Italy Mel Sembler, who represented President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2005, the U.S. acquired a large building and other property adjacent to the embassy to Italy, located on Rome's upscale Via Veneto.

The third U.S. embassy in Rome, a mission to the Food and Agriculture Organization and other U.N. agencies, moved into that compound in early 2012.

Both Nicholson and Rooney said moving the Vatican embassy to the same location was floated during their tenures, and both resisted it on the grounds that the delegation to the Vatican needs its own identity, including a separate physical location.

After the Benghazi attack, momentum for moving the embassy gathered steam. Those conversations took place toward the end of the term of former Ambassador Miguel Diaz, who represented Obama from 2009 to 2012.

"There are really serious issues in terms of protecting U.S. diplomatic personnel," Diaz said. He said the move is "absolutely not a downgrade."

Diaz said it will promote collaboration among the three American embassies in Rome, creating "more possibilities to do what we want to do."

Hackett said the Vatican embassy no longer will have to pay the annual lease on its present location, which he estimated at between \$600,000 and \$1 million. Officials say once it's operational, the new facility will have separate signage and a separate entrance on Rome's Via Salustiana, marking it as a distinct diplomatic operation.

Glendon disputed the notion that the United States ought to cite what other countries have done as precedent, saying the importance of the relationship merits its own location and profile.

"Both [the U.S. and the Vatican] are global actors," she said. "The Holy See's sphere of concern, like that of the United States, is worldwide."

Diaz suggested that since much of the blowback is coming from representatives of Republican presidents, it may have a partisan edge.

"We need to look at the evidence and the facts rather than politicizing this move," Diaz said.

Nicholson disputed that charge, noting that his initial objections were lodged under the Bush administration while a fellow Republican was the ambassador to Italy.

"There's no partisan motivation on my part," Nicholson said. "I've served there, I know the importance of this post, and I know the damage that will be done."

Although the State Department official described the decision as a fait accompli, Nicholson said he still hopes it can be reversed.

"They like to use the term 'reset' in talking about diplomacy, and I think this is something that can be 'reset,' " he said, saying he's had conversations with political leaders "on both sides of the aisle" in an effort to roll it back.

The U.S. Embassy to the Holy See also maintains an official residence for the ambassador, a picturesque 19th-century building known as the Villa Richardson rented from the American Academy on Rome's Janiculum Hill, which is often used for receptions and other events. Officials say there's no plan to change that residence.

Former Ambassador Frank Shakespeare, the only other living former U.S. envoy to the Vatican, did not respond to a request for comment on this article.

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated when the attack occurred.*

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