

U.S./Vatican ties; Francis as Deng Xiaoping; and witchcraft

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 22, 2013 All Things Catholic

In diplomatic circles, relatively small matters of substance sometimes can blow up into major questions of symbolism. Such a case may be unfolding in U.S./Vatican relations over where the American embassy to the Holy See is physically located.

[I reported on the controversy](#) [1] on Wednesday for the *NCR* website. In a nutshell, plans call to move the embassy from its present location near Rome's Circus Maximus into a building on the grounds of the American embassy to Italy, though with a separate entrance and separate signage marking it as a distinct operation.

A contract to remodel the facility already has been awarded, and the move-in is tentatively scheduled for January 2015. At this stage, it seems a foregone conclusion, though that's not stopping critics from pushing back.

The relocation is justified primarily on the grounds of enhanced security, especially in light of the tragic June 2012 attack on a U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. In the wake of that assault, a State Department assessment recommended consolidating facilities where possible. The move also should save the taxpayers some money, given that the current location is leased whereas the new building is owned. If anything, officials say the new digs are actually an upgrade, providing more space and improved work capacity.

Sounds like a no-brainer, right?

Not so fast, say five former American ambassadors to the Vatican, charging that moving into this space sends a signal that the Vatican embassy is a second-class operation -- sort of an adjunct to the embassy to Italy rather than a critically important mission in its own right worthy of a separate identity.

Former Ambassador James Nicholson, who was the first envoy of President George W. Bush, calls the move a "massive downgrade."

"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."

Strikingly, the Vatican itself is sitting out the fight. A senior official speaking on background said this week that security is a "real concern," and while combining locations is "not ideal" in terms of respecting the Vatican's autonomy, as long as the two operations remain completely separate the Vatican won't object.

That tacit consent, however, hasn't stopped Nicholson, Francis Rooney, Raymond Flynn, Mary Ann Glendon and Thomas Melady from sounding an alarm. Melady represented the first Bush administration; Flynn was Clinton's first envoy; and Rooney and Glendon followed Nicholson in representing the second Bush.

Without getting into the details, two points are worth making.

First, given recent history, some observers in Rome probably will be tempted to see the relocation as a rollback,

no matter how it's sold. [Ireland closed its Vatican embassy in 2011](#) [2], now relying on a nonresident ambassador, and several other Western nations have flirted with something similar.

In 2011, veteran Italian journalist Massimo Franco published a book called *Once Upon a Time There was a Vatican* about what he saw as the Vatican's declining international relevance. Its opening chapter was titled "The Last Ambassador," in which he quoted a Western diplomat working at an embassy to the Vatican who compared his situation to that of the final envoys to the soon-to-disappear Republic of Venice in 1797. Franco described another diplomat at a Vatican reception looking around at his colleagues and openly wondering, "How many of us will still be here in 10 years?"

To be sure, that was the mood in the late Benedict years; things have changed considerably with the renewed political capital and international prestige enjoyed by Pope Francis. Still, given the water under the bridge, some may look at the American move and wonder if it's a sign of decline.

That's certainly not the line from senior U.S. diplomats. Ambassador Ken Hackett told me this week the move implies no "diminishing" of the relationship with the Vatican, which he insisted "hasn't been better than it is right now in quite a while." On background, a top official in the U.S. State Department said if anything, the U.S. government expects to "intensify" its Vatican ties in the Francis era.

Assuming the relocation goes ahead, American diplomats may need to demonstrate that's not just rhetoric. They might be well advised to have a major, visible initiative ready to roll out once the new facilities are operational as a way of proclaiming that this is about ramping up rather than winding down.

Second, there's a risk that debate over the move on this side of the water could split along partisan lines. It's hard to miss the point that both the former and current ambassadors of the Obama administration support it while four out of the five critics served Republican presidents. The one Democrat in the mix, Flynn, has a recent history of allying himself with conservative causes. Nicholson is the former chair of the Republican National Committee.

Perhaps there's nothing to be done about that, but it's still notable given the long-standing spirit of solidarity among the small club of current and former Vatican ambassadors. There have only been 10 since the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1984, two of whom -- William Wilson, the very first envoy under Ronald Reagan, and Lindy Boggs, the second Clinton pick -- have since passed away.

Traditionally, these folks have had a strong sense of common purpose, which is defending America's commitment to Vatican relations against forces who question it.

Over the years, those challenges have come from both sides of the political fence -- from liberal secularists, for example, as well as from conservative evangelicals. During Nicholson's term, I remember attending a dinner at his residence celebrating a grant to the Community of Sant'Egidio for some good cause when a visiting Baptist leader from the States popped up and, totally unbidden, objected vigorously on the grounds of church/state separation.

An unperturbed Nicholson turned to his startled guests and said something like, "Welcome to America's habit of robust democratic debate!"

The sense of having something fundamental in common generally has allowed the Vatican ambassadors to transcend partisan divides. When Miguel Diaz was tapped by President Barack Obama in 2009 as his first ambassador to the Vatican, Melady hosted a reception honoring him in Washington, and it was one of the few spaces in that partisan town where Republicans and Democrats rubbed shoulders comfortably.

For those who believe the Vatican's role as a voice of conscience is important and that U.S. policymakers need to hear what it's got to say, it's critical to have a fraternity of high-profile individuals with street credibility among all political forces to defend the relationship. That's the role the ambassadors have played, with one recent example being Rooney's engaging new book [*The Global Vatican: An Inside Look at the Catholic Church, World Politics, and the Extraordinary Relationship between the United States and the Holy See*](#) [3].

Whatever happens with the location of the embassy, it will be important to assess whether the debate changes the climate within that small club. Arguably that, and not moving the embassy, would be the biggest threat to U.S./Vatican ties.

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Since we're already talking geopolitics, I'll hazard an analogy from world affairs for grasping the nature of the Francis revolution in Catholicism.

The collapse of communism in the late 20th century illustrates two different ways revolutions can unfold. In Europe, the system came down suddenly and dramatically, driven by massive popular uprisings and the sudden construction of a new political order. In China, the transition has been more subtle and piecemeal, leaving the old apparatus largely intact, but the result is similar. Marxism as the basis of social life is basically dead and buried, replaced by a frenzy of buying and selling.

The contrast comes to mind in light of the popular tendency these days to wonder when Francis' revolution is going to begin -- when the dazzling new tone set by this pope will be matched by equally dramatic changes in structures and policies. (The recent arrival of the new Secretary of State, Italian Archbishop Pietro Parolin, after recovering from a surgery has set off another bout of speculation.) The assumption seems to be that Francis is destined to follow the European model, wiping away the past in a single cataclysm.

What if, however, he's more Deng Xiaoping than Václav Havel, revolutionizing things in pieces rather than one fell swoop?

If so, two such pieces may have fallen into place this week.

On Tuesday, Francis named Mariano Crociata, formerly the secretary of the Italian bishops' conference (CEI), as the new bishop of the diocese of Latina. It raised eyebrows in church circles because the last four secretaries of CEI were all named to major archdioceses that put them in line to become princes of the church and heavy-hitters of the first order -- Cardinals Camillo Ruini, Dionigi Tettamanzi, Ennio Antonelli and Giuseppe Betori. (If you don't know those names, you haven't been paying attention.)

Francis also has made it clear he'd like to change the statutes for CEI to allow the bishops to choose their own president and secretary rather than being the only conference in the world where those jobs are assigned directly by the pope.

Taken together, these are moves away from careerism -- with Crociata, Francis has signaled that serving as secretary of a bishops' conference is no guarantee of a cardinal's red hat -- and toward greater collegiality.

Given that CEI is the largest and arguably most important bishops' conference in the world, rivaling if not surpassing the Germans' and the Americans', these two bits of reform carry some real weight.

Also on Tuesday, the Vatican released a *motu proprio*, or legal document, from Francis regarding the Financial Information Authority (known as "AIF"), a watchdog unit erected by Benedict XVI in 2010, along with a

communiqué from the government of the Vatican City State.

The new AIF law allows its president to be a layperson rather than a cardinal, specifying only that the chief executive should be "chosen among people of proven honor, without conflicts of interest and with recognized competence in the juridical, economic, financial fields."

The *motu proprio* creates two branches within AIF, one for financial information and the other for vigilance and regulation, reflecting an enhanced set of powers for the watchdog unit, enabling it not merely to track transactions but also to approve and monitor anyone wanting to do business with the Vatican.

The communiqué from the City State, one of the Vatican's most significant financial operations, says Ernst and Young has been hired to conduct an assessment of its operations and will provide the results to an eight-member commission erected by Francis to study the Vatican's economic and administrative structures. Notably, only one member of that group is a cleric, and it's led by a lay Maltese economist.

In tandem, the *motu proprio* and communiqué represent concrete moves toward greater reliance on lay expertise and greater financial accountability.

Perhaps it's time to stop wondering when the revolution will get here, in other words, and start watching it unfold.

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If the *NCR* website could be rigged to flash a red alert upon opening a link, I'd probably suggest one for the following segment of this column, because it comes close to naked self-congratulation. To take the edge off, let me note that the prophecy I describe below hasn't come true in quite the way I forecasted, though it's probably close enough for government work.

In [my 2009 book *The Future Church*](#) [4], I included a section on the powerful hold that witchcraft and the occult has on the popular religious imagination across much of the world, and wrote the following lines: "It does not tax the imagination to picture a future pope from the global South issuing an encyclical presenting Jesus Christ as the definitive answer to the 'spirits of this world' ... A document from the Vatican along these lines would arguably stand a better chance of finding an audience at the global Catholic grassroots than virtually any other subject that Western theological elites might desire a future pope to address."

Flash forward to last Sunday, Nov. 17, with the first pope from the developing world delivering his usual Sunday Angelus address.

That day, Francis took the unusual step of handing out a door prize to the crowd in St. Peter's Square -- a small prayer card designed to look like a medical prescription one might pick up at a pharmacy. It carries an image of a heart, evoking the Sacred Heart of Christ, surrounded by thorns under the heading *Misericordina*, or "little mercy." The instructions for the prayer come in Italian, English, Polish and Spanish and are inspired by the Divine Mercy devotion of Polish St. Faustina Kowalska.

In recommending the prayer for wide use, Francis referred to the prayer as a form of spiritual medicine useful for "prevention against the false saviors, the would-be saints, [and] the magicians and the witches of the world."

The effectiveness of the cure, Francis said, is guaranteed by the words of Jesus. He asked the crowd in St. Peter's Square to spread the prayer cards "everywhere," quipping that he recommends the cure even though "the pope is not a pharmacist." (As a biographical point, the young Jorge Mario Bergoglio studied chemistry before opting for the priesthood.)

As a veteran churchman from the developing world, Francis knows that the pull of witchcraft and other occult practices is no laughing matter.

In Nigeria in 2007, an elderly woman was beheaded after being accused of placing a member of another tribe under a curse. Her murder triggered a spate of killing that left 80 dead. In the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico in 2005, a mob severely beat six people, suspecting them of casting spells. In Kokrajhar in India, five members of two families were killed in August 2006, accused of issuing curses that had caused several locals to come down with viral fever and jaundice. One elderly couple was hacked to death with machetes and spears.

In that light, offering the spiritual traditions of the church as an antidote makes perfect pastoral sense, however quaint or puzzling it might seem to a certain Western sensibility.

One of Italy's leading sociologists of religion, Massimo Introvigne, offered this take on the pope's gesture: "Bergoglio does not allow himself to be entrapped by the outdated distinction between progressives and conservatives," he said. "He's promoting the popular religiosity to which he was devoted in Argentina."

Granted, a prayer card isn't quite the encyclical I predicted four years ago. But still, given that I once forecast Joseph Ratzinger would never be elected to the papacy, I finally feel like I got something right.

A footnote: The prayer cards were recommended to Francis by Polish Archbishop Konrad Krajewski, a former official in the Master of Ceremonies office who was recently named the Papal Almoner, responsible for the pontiff's personal charitable initiatives. Francis picked Krajewski in part because of his reputation for strolling the Via della Conciliazione at night after work, making sure the homeless people who take shelter along the broad street leading up to St. Peter's Square were OK.

It's a further reminder that only to a secular Western mind would taking care of the poor and fighting spiritual battles against witchcraft seem an odd combination. For Francis and the kind of people he wants around him, they go together like peaches and cream because they both speak to the real concerns of ordinary people all over the world.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/64601>

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[3] <http://francisrooney.com/about-the-book/>

[4] <http://www.amazon.com/The-Future-Church-Revolutionizing-Catholic/dp/0385520395>

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