

United States-Vatican Diplomatic Relations and the Recognition of the State of Israel

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Disclaimer: The opinions and characterizations in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the United States government.

In the last several decades much has been written about the Holy See's diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel. However, there is a story yet to be told—the key role that the United States, and in particular the office of the President, played in making those events happen. As an inside witness to those events, I believe the time is right to share what I saw from my perspective as the US Ambassador to the Holy See to help us all understand how the Vatican recognition came to be.

There were many challenging events during my four years as Ambassador to the Holy See from 1989 to 1993. Nevertheless, the assignment, given to me personally by President George H.W. Bush, was a major focus for me during that time. At a private meeting between my wife Margaret, myself and the President and Mrs. Bush, President Bush pulled me aside and we discussed several matters concerning previous US Ambassadors stationed in Rome. He knew I would enjoy my Roman assignment and he informed me that I would have a special task: to work for diplomatic recognition by the Vatican of the State of Israel. This assignment was unusual for several reasons. One was that it was outside the bilateral relationship, which emphasizes the interactions between the two states. While there were bilateral issues between the Holy See and the United States, I was told that a top priority was for me to concentrate on the Holy See's relationship with a third party, Israel.

Several significant issues occurred after my arrival in 1989. I was negotiating with Holy See officials about the presence of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in the Vatican mission to Panama. There were also questions involving Sudan, Somalia, Mozambique, Zaire, South Africa, Indonesia and the Middle East. Nevertheless, the major

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issue, in my opinion, was the assignment given to me directly by President Bush when he discussed my appointment as the Ambassador to the Holy See.

During my visit to the Vatican Affairs Office of the Department of State, I asked to see the Israeli file. Many states in the world had already recognized Israel, but in 1989, the Vatican and Israel did not have diplomatic relations. The Embassy of Israel to the Republic of Italy in Rome had an office which took care of Israeli contacts with Holy See officials.

I asked myself, “Why the lack of official recognition?” As soon as my nomination by the President was announced, I had, for the first time, the experience of being asked this question in public. Newspapers, radio stations and television networks would frequently include this question in a general interview with me. As an ambassador-designate, I had to minimize public remarks on my assignment until I appeared before the US Senate for confirmation hearings. After several such experiences, I avoided public appearances.

The confirmation process moved slowly and several controversial appointments held up the process. This gave me sufficient time to call on the most senior Department of State officials. In a meeting I had with Secretary of State James A. Baker III, he continually repeated the same theme to me about the Vatican recognition of Israel. This instruction came directly from the Executive branch of the government. During my US Senate hearing, I found that the desire for papal recognition of Israel was also reflected in the sentiment of the Senate. During July 1989, seven other ambassadorial nominees were being reviewed, but I was informed that there were to be no problems concerning my appointment.

Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware presided at the meeting of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee where I was to be interrogated. My two Democratic Senators from Connecticut, Chris Dodd and Joe Lieberman, had endorsed my nomination before the hearing with enthusiasm. A Roman Catholic, Senator Biden, delicately raised the issue of the perception of an anti-Semitic bias on the part of the Vatican for not recognizing Israel. He strongly urged me to influence the Holy See to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. Concerned about how the media would report this exchange, I nonetheless responded that I agreed with the sentiment that Israel should be recognized.

Little did I realize in 1989 that the history of the Holy See’s relationship with the Holy Land of Israel and neighboring states had complicating nuances. It took me the four years in Rome as the US Ambassador to help lay the groundwork for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations. But within several months, I had a clear plan. My first decision was to bring into my confidence a Jewish and a Catholic friend. In June 1989, I met with Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum in New York City. He was, in many ways, a hero to those interested in improving Christian-Jewish relations. He always was able to find a path for positive conversation even in difficult circumstances. We met several years earlier when the civil rights movement was gaining speed. Rabbi Tanenbaum was delighted to learn about my assignment and pledged total secrecy. He observed that the central goal should be to convince the Pope himself that this should be done. Marc was in failing health

and never was able to visit me in Rome, but I never forgot his advice. He passed away in 1992 before the goal of recognition was accomplished.

During the same visit, I was able to see Cardinal John O'Connor, Archbishop of New York. He delivered the same observation as Rabbi Tanenbaum: that it would be the Pope who would make the decision. He was optimistic, but cautioned me to proceed with care and patience. He was also concerned about media leaks. In view of the number of people who worked on the project, I remain surprised that the secret instructions were never leaked to the press. The Cardinal told me that he had an experience similar to mine in his meetings with Jewish leaders. Many felt that there had been some residual anti-Semitism in the fact of Vatican non-diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel. The Cardinal feared that the Jewish leaders were becoming increasingly impatient.

Actual progress on this assignment during my first two years at the Embassy was minimal. The impetus toward recognition was energized by several events in the late Fall 1991 and in early 1992. In October 1991, following the Madrid Conference on the Middle East, President Bush met with Pope John Paul II. The President indicated to the Pope that, in his opinion, following the Gulf War there should be a process to normalize Israeli-Holy See diplomatic relations.

While the President was meeting with the Pope, I participated in a meeting between Secretary of State Baker, Cardinal Angelo Sodano (head of the Vatican government) and Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran (head of Vatican relations with states). Here, Cardinal Sodano spoke about the "new context" in which the Holy See should consider diplomatic relations with Israel. In the weeks following the meetings, I reported to the Department of State that there was increasing optimism in Vatican circles for resolving the impasse over the establishment of diplomatic relations.

Following the visit of President Bush and Secretary Baker, Cardinal O'Connor visited the Eternal City. I considered this a double-headed push. First, the President of the United States and then the leading US Catholic churchman concentrated on facilitating diplomatic relations. From late December 1991 to early January 1992, the Cardinal visited Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. On January 8, 1992, Cardinal O'Connor met with Pope John Paul II and recommended that steps be taken toward establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. I knew that the recommendation of Cardinal O'Connor would be carefully considered by the Pope because of the Cardinal's influence at the Vatican. At the suggestion of the Cardinal, I arranged a luncheon for him at my residence the day following his meeting with the Pope. In attendance were the two top officials of the Vatican: Archbishop Giovanni Re and Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran. Other mentionable guests included Avi Pazner, the Israeli Ambassador to Italy, and the Ambassadors of Egypt and Lebanon. It was the first time that these Ambassadors had met and shook hands, but more importantly it was the first meeting between Israeli Ambassador Pazner and Archbishop Tauran.

Cardinal O'Connor said the impact of the decline of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Iraq by the US-led coalition created a strong desire in Israel to make progress on

issues like the status of Jerusalem, the situation of the Palestinians, the Christian communities in Israel and Vatican-Israeli relations. Following the luncheon, the Cardinal told me privately that he proposed to the Pope that a bilateral commission be appointed to study the matter of Israeli-Vatican diplomatic relations.

Taking advantage of the momentum created by the Cardinal's visit with the Pope, I met with Israeli Ambassador Pazner in mid-January several days after the departure of Cardinal O'Connor. Pazner told me that Israel would approach relations with the Holy See as it had with Moscow and Beijing. He thought diplomatic relations would be as beneficial for the Vatican as for Israel. Pazner said that Israel recognized the Church's concerns about religious institutions and practices, but these matters would be discussed between both parties once diplomatic relations were established. Some mid-level Vatican officials had the opposite opinion. In their view, the issues that included the status of Jerusalem, the boundaries of Israel with its neighbors, the status of non-Jewish residents in the State of Israel and the property of the Church in Israel should be resolved before diplomatic relations were established. Some thought that it was ironic that Pazner's expression of Israeli concern for the slow pace of change in Israeli-Holy See relations appeared in an interview in the April 1992 edition of *The Catholic World*.

In Spring 1992, I strongly felt that I needed to give another push to accomplish my assignment. The Israelis were growing impatient and I feared that there was a danger that opportunities were being missed because too much time was being given to "the details" but the "big picture" of diplomatic relations was being overlooked. After discussing the matter with my staff, I decided to request the permission of the US Department of State to visit Israel.

The Department gave me permission to visit Israel on a "private visit." My wife and I were able to arrange to be included in an Italian pilgrimage group that left for Israel in early April. We visited Nazareth, Galilee, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Visiting "privately" had all kinds of advantages, because I was able to avoid the complicated aspects of an official visit. I wanted to assess the situation first hand, meet with Arab-Christian leaders and observe the access to the Holy places. While there, I met with Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, and appreciated his concern for all Arab Christians within the borders of Israel, especially within the occupied territories. The Patriarch and other Arab Catholic leaders felt like a lonely minority in a society where they had little or no influence. My departing message to these Catholic Church leaders and to Archbishop Andrea di Montezemolo, Apostolic Delegate to Jerusalem, was that the establishment of diplomatic relations would create a better framework for the resolution of issues between the two powers.

Soon after my return to Rome, I met with Archbishop Tauran and reported on my observations. I also pointed out to him that three active leaders were opposed to diplomatic exchange with the Jewish state: Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Bashir al-Assad of Syria. I pointed out that this was not a pleasant trio. By Summer 1992, influence at the top from Cardinal O'Connor and President Bush began to have results. The announcement that a bilateral commission was being established occurred in July 1992 and

was followed on October 23 by a visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to Pope John Paul II. I was told by Israeli officials that the meeting was “warm and friendly.” President Bush, at my suggestion, sent the Pope a letter that was drafted by my office. It was delivered to the Pope in the last few weeks of the Bush administration. The key sentence in the letter was “I applaud your decision to create a bilateral commission with the State of Israel and to work toward establishing diplomatic relations.” In 1993, my tour of duty was ending. I had the months of January and February to prepare for the transition to my successor. We arranged a huge reception at the Chancery on Inauguration Day, January 20, 1993. Immediately after President Clinton took the oath of office, I offered a toast in his honor.

When I returned to Washington in April 1993, I knew that the Vatican was sensitive and did not wish to appear to have “caved in” to outside pressure on the Israeli matter. The Bush-O’Connor pressure was strong and fortunately it never became a matter of public knowledge. Later in the summer of 1993, a senior Vatican official told me, “Tom, you will have good news by the end of the year; diplomatic relations will be established.” On December 30, a phone call to Vilnius, Lithuania, where I was visiting with my wife, informed me that diplomatic relations had been established. We celebrated with a glass of Lithuanian champagne.

The experience of the Vatican-Israeli project emphasized several lessons for me. First, policymakers who understood the overall major issues were the ones that overcame the opposition that normally came from minor and mid-level officials. In this regard, I give special credit to the late Pope John Paul II who saw the implications of Holy See non-recognition of Israel and responded favorably to the efforts to change it. Second, recognition was achieved in a rapid but orderly manner, especially with the creation of the bilateral commission in 1992 between the Holy See and the State of Israel to develop diplomatic relations. Third, President Bush and Secretary of State Baker clearly articulated their concerns about the lack of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, which is why they made it my top assignment.

A total of nine ambassadors have served in the position of United States Ambassador to the Holy See since US-Vatican diplomatic relations were established in 1984. Each one can recall one action during their tour of duty that stands out. For me, it was the instruction which I received directly from President Bush to influence the Holy See to diplomatically recognize the State of Israel. This was a primary focus during all four of my years as US Ambassador. As both a former American official and a Catholic, I am especially pleased that by working with others I was able to play a role in moving ahead on the improvement of Vatican-Israeli relations. I also am pleased in eliminating the accusation by a few that the absence of diplomatic recognition of Israel by the Holy See was rooted in anti-Semitism. The Holy See, beginning in 1993, diplomatically recognized the State of Israel. Now, two decades later, cordial and correct diplomatic relations exist between the two sovereign states.