

# US-Vatican Relations: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and a New President

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United States-Vatican diplomatic relations have matured to a high point of cordiality since inaugurated 25 years ago. The visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States in April 2008 was in many ways a stunning success. President Bush made an unprecedented trip to the airport to welcome him upon arrival. The following day over 10,000 Americans crowded the White House grounds and greeted the Pope enthusiastically.

Within months of the Papal visit the American presidential elections took place. Senator Barack Obama, an African-American, made history when he became the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, succeeding George W. Bush. The past 25 years have witnessed the development of excellent relations between the two powers. Will that situation continue with the new President?

Before attempting to answer that question, an overview of US relations with the Vatican is in order. According to the Department of State's *Background Note* on the Holy See, the United States "maintained consular relations with the Papal States from 1797 to 1870 and diplomatic relations with the Pope, in his capacity as head of the Papal States, from 1848 to 1868, though not at the ambassadorial level. These relations lapsed with the loss of all papal territories in 1870." The long interregnum of no official contact lasted from 1870 until 1939, when President Roosevelt appointed his special envoy to the Vatican in the person of Myron C. Taylor.

However, when President Harry Truman tried to appoint a successor in 1951, he met with a storm of protest, and the post went vacant for nearly 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Thirty years

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<sup>1</sup> John Thavis in his article, "Once Controversial, US-Vatican Relations Mark Silver Anniversary," published on January 16, 2009, by Catholic News Service writes that the "traditional argument against US-Vatican relations was that the Vatican—technically the 'Holy See'—was first and foremost a church, not a state, and should not be privileged by a diplomatic presence....[However,] it wasn't long before most of the criticism faded. One big reason was that under Pope John Paul II, who was a strong critic of East European communism, United States and Vatican interests were seen to coincide."

later, President Reagan entered into concrete discussions for full diplomatic relations with the Holy See, and on January 10, 1984, these discussions culminated in the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Vatican.

In this article, we will review the sweep of events that have occurred in these 25 years, including a direct conversation between Ambassador Melady and Pope John Paul II regarding the attempted assassination of the Pope, and offer some thoughts on the future of the relationship.

#### United States-Vatican Relations: 1776-1867

The opportunities for the United States and the Holy See to cooperate in the promotion of human rights, religious freedom, and political pluralism are steadily increasing due to the full diplomatic relations now existing between the two powers. This cooperative framework did not always exist, however, as it took America over two centuries before it entered into formalized relations with the oldest international personality in the community of nations.

This is not to say that there had been no contact between these two powers until recently, but rather the contact was very unsteady. In 1848, President James K. Polk appointed Jacob I. Martin as *chargé d'affaires* (a diplomatic envoy below the ambassadorial level) to the Papal States, thereby extending to the Pope the formal *de jure* recognition of the United States.

Mr. Martin presented his credentials to Pope Pius IX on August 19, 1848. Five representatives succeeded him, the last being Rufus King who retired from his post in 1867. Mr. King's departure would signal the beginning of a 74 year interregnum during which there was no American diplomatic representation to the Pope.

The first interregnum coincided with a period of heightening anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States. During this period, America saw a drastic increase in the number of immigrants who were flooding into the "melting pot." The majority of these were from Ireland, France, Italy and Spain, all Catholic nations.

#### United States-Vatican Relations: 1939-1984

The dearth of communication would last until 1939, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt originated the idea of appointing a "personal representative of the President." On December 24 of that year, Roosevelt announced that he would be sending a personal envoy to the Pope. Myron Taylor was to be the first in a long line of presidentially appointed personal envoys to the Holy See. Over his ten years serving in this position, Taylor enjoyed easy access to the Pope and was the principal source of valuable information made available to the United States. It was remarkable that while the United States was formally at war with Italy, there was an American diplomatic mission in the heart of Rome.

In 1951, following the retirement of Taylor, President Truman sought to make the relationship official and prepared to nominate General Mark Clark. In 1952, fearing a political defeat, Truman decided not to submit the nomination to the formal confirmation process and withdrew it. The result was a continuation of personal envoys following the formula established by Roosevelt. However, the administrations of Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson did not appoint any special envoys. In 1977, President Carter resumed the practice, and in 1981, it was continued by President Reagan.

### Reagan and the Papacy

John Paul II was elected Pope in 1978, and within a year he was making his presence felt, most directly in his homeland of Poland. In 1979, he traveled to Warsaw where he held a mass for over one million people in Victory Square. In the summer of 1980, the workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk went on strike. Later known as Solidarity, the movement formed by these workers was supported by the Pope, who instructed Polish Primate Wyszyński to do the same. The intercession of the Holy See lent vast moral support to the movement and before long it had swelled to over ten million people. Such was the power of the Pope's influence that within three months the Soviets had orchestrated an attempt on his life.

The Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies were not the only ones to realize the potential power and influence of the Holy See. On June 7, 1982, a historic meeting took place between President Reagan and Pope John Paul II in Vatican City. Pleased and inspired by the Pope's open and unwavering support for the Solidarity movement in Poland and his open defiance of Communist rule, Reagan sought the counsel of the Pontiff regarding the question of freedom in Eastern Europe. From that point on, the United States and the Vatican began to work ever more closely on their shared objective of defeating the Soviet menace. On January 10, 1984, President Ronald Reagan announced the official re-establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See, relations which had not officially existed for over a century. On that day, William A. Wilson was nominated by the President to be the first United States Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Holy See.

### "No, Not Now."

Ambassador Melady remembers these three words of Pope John Paul II and still reflects upon their implication two decades later. After presenting his credentials as the third US Ambassador to the Holy See in October 1989, Ambassador Melady met privately with the Pope in his library. After the discussion of several important issues, he mentioned to the Holy Father, that upon the instructions of President Bush, he wished to offer the services of the United States to aid in the identification of the government or persons who were behind the assassination attempt of May 13, 1981.

It had been quite evident that the plot to kill the Pope was far more than just a simple "one-man operation," but was rather a conspiracy involving several individuals, including one involved with the Bulgarian Embassy. While the assailant, a professional

assassin named Mehmet Ali Ağca, had already been incarcerated, the question as to who actually initiated this attempt remained unanswered. Ambassador Melady remarked to the Pope that people of the world should know. The Pope sat back reflectively gazing at the Ambassador, and after a minute or so of contemplation he answered in a clear and quiet voice, “No, not now.” The audience ended, and Ambassador Melady thanked the Holy Father for the visit. Since then, other reports and investigatory committees have come forward, most famously in 2006, when an Italian parliamentary body, known as the Mitrokhin Commission, concluded “beyond any reasonable doubt” that Soviet Military Intelligence was responsible for the 1981 attack.

Several weeks later, in September of 1989, Ambassador Melady had an important meeting with Agostino Cardinal Casaroli, then Vatican Secretary of State, who informed him about his contacts with the then Soviet head of State, Mikhail Gorbachev. It became clear then that the Holy See felt that changes were taking place in the Soviet Union, and that Pope John Paul II wanted to see those changes occur, believing that they would lead to an end of the Cold War. All references to the assassination while he served as Ambassador, and later as a private citizen in contact with the Holy See, left Ambassador Melady with the impression that the interest of the Vatican was the development of a positive, stable dialogue with the Russian people. Thus, it became clear that making an issue of the attempt on the Pope’s life would be harmful to this goal of promoting discourse, not only with the Soviet Union but with all of the nations which had fallen under the shadow of the Iron Curtain. John Paul II’s strategy was to prove successful in the pursuit of this objective. On December 1, 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev traveled to the Holy See and met with the Roman Pontiff. By December 1990, the Holy See had established diplomatic relations with Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Romania.

### The Future of US-Vatican Relations

The Cold War made clear to the US government the positive advantages of maintaining and strengthening their diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Pope John Paul II and the influence of the Catholic Church played a crucial role in the defeat of Communism, beginning with the Pope’s first visit home in 1979, an event which General Jaruzelski himself referred to as the “detonator,” setting off the explosion of political change in Poland. Mikhail Gorbachev, in an article he wrote for the March 3, 1992, edition of *La Stampa*, also paid a fitting tribute to the role played by John Paul II: “What has happened in Eastern Europe in recent years would not have been possible without the presence of this Pope, without the great role [and also the political role] that he has played on the world scene.”

It is vital that this relationship be continued under the new Obama Administration. When President Obama made known his selection of Hillary Rodham Clinton as the new Secretary of State, he said that his decision was “a sign to friend and foe of the seriousness of my commitment to renew American diplomacy and restore our alliances.”<sup>2</sup> The benefits of an amiable relationship with the Vatican are wide-ranging both domestically and abroad. As John Allen of the National Catholic Reporter observed, this relationship may

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<sup>2</sup> “Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates on Obama National Security Team,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 2008.

also help to restore some of the moral stature that President Obama, among others, feels America has lost. Such a friendly relationship would also help in assisting the vital aid being provided to the poorest of the poor in Africa and around the world. In his annual address to the diplomatic corps, Pope Benedict XVI made clear his concern for the impoverished: “It is toward the poor, the all too many poor people on our planet, that I would like to turn my attention today, taking up my message for the World Day of Peace, devoted this year to the theme: Fighting Poverty to Build Peace.”

It is apparent that on some moral issues President Obama and his administration are in disagreement with the teaching of the Church. These differences should not interfere with the bilateral relationship, which exists between two governments, not a Church and a State. Preliminary reports indicate that initial contacts between then President-elect Obama and the Holy See have been gracious and friendly and should lend themselves to an atmosphere of positive engagement.

Thus far, the new President and Pope Benedict XVI seem to be off to a good start. After the November 4 election, Mr. Obama received a telegram from Pope Benedict which noted the “historic” nature of his victory and offered prayers for the new President that God would “sustain you and the American people in your efforts...to build a world of peace, solidarity and justice.” A week later Obama telephoned the Pope to thank him for his telegram after which they spoke for several minutes. The new President also received a phone call from the Pope on the day of his inauguration. Although they have declined to discuss the actual conversations, it is reported from both sides that they went very well, and that there was a general atmosphere of excitement surrounding their discussions.

American Catholics have been observing the appointments of American clerics to major metropolitan Archdioceses. Pope Benedict XVI has thus far appointed Donald Wuerl to Washington, DC, Edward O’Brien to Baltimore, and Timothy Broglio to the Military Archdiocese. These are all clearly conservative churchmen who have excellent reputations for representing the Church in the public square. The selection of Archbishop Timothy Dolan was enthusiastically recognized as he is a clerical leader who can calmly engage the civic and public leadership of New York City. As head of the archdiocese, Dolan, who is 59 years old, will help to guide the American Church through the complicated waters of the next two decades.

Dolan’s style is quite versatile. He has the ability—to paraphrase Rudyard Kipling—to walk with kings, and yet not lose the common touch. The Archbishop’s appointment displays Pope Benedict’s acute understanding of the appropriate style with which to engage the American people, as does President Obama’s decision to call and congratulate Dolan upon his appointment. The call was quite a surprise to the new archbishop and was received with his characteristic jovial good humor.

While the exact future is always unknown, we can take these initial interactions as a positive sign that the nature of future US relations with the government of the Roman Catholic Church will continue to blossom. Twenty-five years of full diplomatic relations between the United States and the Holy See indicate that the relationship is strong and well

grounded and that the immediate future will offer many opportunities for both powers to work for solutions in a world still beset by civil strife and where the unholy trinity of poverty, illiteracy, and disease affect so many. President Roosevelt was the first to grasp the benefit of a bilateral relationship. President Reagan and Pope John Paul II took it to a new level of cooperation. Pope Benedict and President Obama are destined to continue on the same path of forward movement. In our opinion, the bilateral relationship between the Holy See and the United States will continue to improve for the benefit of the world community.