

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

On the passing of a diplomat, priest and brother

On July 27, we received the sad news that Archbishop Pietro Sambì, apostolic nuncio to the United States, had died from complications following lung surgery. Although his name might not have been familiar to most Catholics, Archbishop Sambì's ministry in our country for the past six years touched us all. He was a brilliant diplomat and, more importantly, an extraordinary priest and brother to all who knew him.

As an apostolic nuncio, his work comprised a wide variety of activities on behalf of the Holy Father, all of which were an expression of the universality of the church and her mission, the pope's pastoral care for people around the world, and relations between the Vatican and governments everywhere.

Vatican City State encompasses only 109 acres and has a resident population of less than 800, yet it maintains diplomatic relations with approximately 176 countries and other entities such as the European Union, as well as special relations with groups such as the Russian Federation and the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine.

Vatican City State is a recognized national territory under international law, enters into international agreements and receives and sends diplomats to countries around the world. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone has been Secretary of State since 2006 and oversees a large pool of papal legates charged with representing the pope in various nations and regions.

A special role

When the legation is only to the church in a certain country, the papal representative is called the apostolic delegate. When the Vatican has formal diplomatic relations with a country, the papal representative is known as the apostolic nuncio and has the rank of



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ambassador; he also serves as the pope's representative to the local church.

The United States did not have formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See until 1984. In that year, Pope John Paul II appointed Archbishop Pio Laghi as the first apostolic nuncio to the United States (until then

he had served as apostolic delegate). The first U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, William A. Wilson, was appointed by President Reagan, and the current ambassador, Miguel H. Diaz, was appointed by President Obama.

Why does the Holy See have apostolic delegates and nuncios? What purpose does it serve the kingdom of God for the Vatican to have diplomatic relations with 176 countries? Does that not blur the separation of church and state?

Pope Benedict XVI is pastor of more than 1 billion Catholics. Imagine the army of laity, clergy and religious needed to accomplish that task. Nuncios and apostolic delegates play a special role in assuring that ties between the Vatican and local churches remain strong. They keep the pope informed about church and political conditions around the world, which vary dramatically from place to place. They also play an important role in the appointment of bishops and in ecumenical relations.

An extraordinary example

As the church is to proclaim the Gospel in every circumstance, papal representatives also keep the pope apprised of the societal and social state of affairs that determines the shape of the local church's mission, as well as situations which hinder that mission. In some parts of the world that is a delicate, even dangerous, task.

Since nuncios are also ambassadors, they are responsible for promoting relationships between the Holy See and governments. This is important for several reasons. On the one hand, nuncios work to ensure that local churches

have freedom to function as they see fit, freedom to proclaim the Gospel, freedom to live in peace. On the other hand, they also promote human dignity for all people

(especially the most vulnerable) and offer moral guidance, consistent with the truth revealed by God, to world affairs. Proclaiming God's truth to nations and governments is not an optional activity for the church.

Since the Gospel is the truth revealed by God, and since the church is Christ's body sent to proclaim the Gospel, then as those baptized into his body all of us have a similar role in our counties and communities. Not only are we to personally live the truth; we are also to proclaim it and do what is in our power to ensure that society is guided by it.

In maintaining diplomatic relations with 176 countries, the Holy See is fulfilling a critical aspect of the mission of the church. The world and its people, created and redeemed by God, have a right to the Gospel proclaimed for their salvation. They have a right to live in a way that is consistent with their God-given dignity. Baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, we Christians have a responsibility to God and to the world.

Last encounter

Archbishop Sambì was particularly beloved to us bishops, because he gave extraordinary example as to how to be a good priest and bishop. He looked after us as a pastor looks after his flock, and when he had business to transact with us individually, he did so with a shepherd's loving care.

I will never forget the phone calls I received from him in recent years, particularly when he informed me of my appointment as bishop of Joliet and, later, as archbishop of Seattle. As he told me the important news, he also tended to me gently as a brother priest whose life was about to change. He inspired me to accept my mission with courage, hope and joy.

The last time I saw him was June 29, just before the Mass of the Pallium in St. Peter's Basilica. With his usual smile and boundless energy, he came looking for me among the group of new archbishops, making sure that I had arrived safely and that all was well. I will always smile when I think of that last encounter.

May this good servant of God and the church universal, this brother to nations and lover of humanity, this wonderful priest and bishop, rest peacefully in the arms of the Lord.