

Archbishop Sambì, papal nuncio, dies July 27 at age 73

UPDATE, July 28: Catholic News Service reports that Archbishop Pietro Sambì passed away July 27, apparently from complications from lung surgery three weeks ago.

Archbishop Pietro Sambì, the papal nuncio to the United States, has been placed on assisted ventilation after “delicate lung surgery” according to Catholic News Service. The Baltimore Sun reported today that the nuncio, who is essentially the Holy See’s ambassador, was being treated at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien passed along a request from the apostolic nunciature in Washington for prayers for Archbishop Sambì, and asked that parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore include an intention for the nuncio in the prayers of the faithful. I’ve met Archbishop Sambì on several occasions, at meetings of the U.S. bishops’ conference and at various dinner functions. He has always been gracious and humble. The most recent occasion was a chance encounter, at Washington’s National Airport, as my wife’s family was dropping off her brother to return to Arizona after the funeral of a family member. My wife and I – both Catholic journalists – recognized Archbishop Sambì, reintroduced ourselves, and asked him for his prayers and a blessing for the family. He agreed, and as he headed off for his own flight, asked us to pray for him as well. We did, of course, and will continue to do so. The Vatican diplomatic corps plays a unique role around the world. The church is “in the world,” but not “of the world.” One goal, certainly, of church diplomacy is to uphold the dignity of people and to ensure religious freedom, and to make sure that people have the rights to which they are entitled by God and natural law.



Archbishop Pietro Sambì, apostolic nuncio to the United States, speaks at the opening session of the Catholic Cultural Diversity Convocation at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana May 6, 2010. (CNS photo/Matt Cashore, courtesy University of Notre Dame)

Over the years, I've had occasion to visit the Vatican nunciatures in Malaysia and Haiti, countries with unique needs for diplomacy. Haiti, a predominantly Catholic nation, had overwhelming humanitarian needs, in which Catholic non-governmental organizations and the church played a huge role. My 2004 visit there was just after a tropical storm had ravaged the country, but its poverty was ongoing, even before a 2010 earthquake caused even more devastation. In Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim country, the nuncio served several southeast Asian countries, and dealt with issues that had to do with religious freedom and other topics unique to the culture. The Vatican diplomat plays a delicate role in balancing the concerns of the Holy See and the pope, and it was a role that Archbishop Sambhi has filled in many places; the United States assignment followed responsibilities in Israel, Cypress and Palestine. Keep Archbishop Sambhi, and all Vatican diplomats in your prayers. Their task is never an easy one.