

Diplomats learn Vatican's unique, complex global role

VATICAN CITY – In early May, the Vatican opened its doors to 18 diplomats from Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries with significant Muslim populations.

The young diplomats were attending a May 7-27 introductory course on the Vatican, Vatican diplomacy and the Vatican's approach to Catholic-Muslim and intercultural dialogue.

"We saw beautiful rooms in the Vatican that even my ambassador has not seen, and they allowed us to ask so many questions," said Deniz Kilicer, a career diplomat currently serving at the Turkish Embassy to the Holy See.

The diplomats spent a morning in the Vatican Secretariat of State, meeting top officials in the conference room and touring the frescoed offices and halls of the Apostolic Palace.

They also received a flow chart reflecting the two distinct, but related parts of the course title, "The Catholic Church and the International Policy of the Holy See."

The unique identity of the Vatican and its interactions with the world were illustrated in black and white: The general affairs section of the Secretariat of State handles internal church matters, and the section for relations with states serves as the Vatican's foreign ministry.

The flow chart was one piece of paper the diplomats were certain they would keep.

Ms. Kilicer said she hoped the course would become an annual event because "in some countries, the Vatican is completely unknown."

Diplomats assigned anywhere need to study up on their host country's culture, history, economic situation and general political approach, but the Vatican's function as the unifying center of the Catholic Church complicates matters.

Naji Abi Assi, Lebanon's ambassador to the Holy See, told the young diplomats that

preparation was especially important before arriving at the Vatican.

“If you do not take initiatives to learn before you arrive, you will sit in your office and miss everything,” he said.

Mr. Abi Assi also said he thinks ambassadors to the Vatican err when they try to distill political messages from papal and Vatican statements, ignoring their moral and religious content.

“We are accredited to an entity with a highly spiritual dimension – the Holy See – and not to Vatican City State; and we cannot conceal our professional and moral obligation to play a role as intermediaries between the political community and the religious community in the framework in which we move, nor can we remain neutral concerning the promotion of spiritual and moral values,” he said.

Over and over again, the diplomats heard Vatican officials declare that the Vatican does not engage in politics.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, a former Vatican foreign minister, told the students confusion is understandable: “Religion and politics ought to remain separate, yet we find the Catholic Church always involved in political debates.”

The key to understanding, he said, is to know that the pope feels an obligation to use his “moral authority” for the good of all men and women and will do so especially to defend human life and dignity, the family, religious freedom, peace and democracy.

When political debates touch on moral issues, he said, the Vatican proposes principles to protect individuals and the common good, not to engage in a partisan battle.

Mohammad Hossain Chalaksaraei, an official of the Iranian foreign affairs ministry who monitors Vatican affairs, said it was important for him to come from Teheran for the course “because relations between the Vatican and Islamic countries must improve.”

But, he said, he does not think the Vatican’s claim of not engaging in politics is completely accurate.

"I believe the Vatican is a high-level political center because it can influence many things in the world. The head of the Vatican, yes, is a religious man, but the organization is political," he said.

"The pope can mobilize the Catholic people," he said, pointing to a recent rally in Rome in defense of the traditional family. The rally was organized by Catholic organizations, not the Vatican, but it reflected church teaching on the family.

Hosting the diplomats May 15 at the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, the Vatican's residence and school for future diplomats, Archbishop Justo Mullor Garcia said the 305-year-old academy "prepares students to become representatives of the world's premiere moral authority."

The pope's loss of temporal power in the late 1800s was "a huge favor" for the church, because "it freed the pope to focus on his mission of spiritual authority," said the archbishop, president of the academy.

"The less the Holy See has had to deal with material matters, the stronger its voice has been," the archbishop said.