

Ireland to close embassy to Holy See, but diplomatic relations continue

DUBLIN - Ireland will close its Embassy to the Holy See in what has been described by officials as a cost-saving measure.

Foreign Minister Eamon Gilmore said the move is not a result of a recent dispute between Ireland and the Vatican, which led Italian Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza, papal nuncio to Ireland, to be temporarily called back to the Vatican in late July and later reassigned to the Czech Republic.

The Vatican had recalled Archbishop Leanza citing “certain extreme reactions” from politicians after the Vatican was criticized in a report into the mishandling of clerical abuse in the Irish Diocese of Cloyne.

In a statement issued late Nov. 3, the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, downplayed the Irish government’s decision.

“The Holy See takes note of the decision of Ireland to close its embassy in Rome,” Father Lombardi said. “Naturally, every state that has diplomatic relations with the Holy See is free to decide ... whether to have an ambassador to the Holy See who is resident in Rome or resident in another country. What is important is diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the states, and this is not in question with Ireland.”

Gilmore said it was with “the greatest regret and reluctance” that he had decided to close the Vatican embassy as well as Ireland’s diplomatic missions in Iran and East Timor.

He said the decision “follows a review of overseas missions carried out by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which gave particular attention to the economic return from bilateral missions.”

He noted that while the Embassy to the Holy See is one of Ireland's oldest diplomatic missions, it yields no economic return.

"The government believes that Ireland's interests with the Holy See can be sufficiently represented by a nonresident ambassador," he said.

"The government will be seeking the agreement of the Holy See to the appointment of a senior diplomat to this position," Gilmore said.

He insisted that tensions over clerical sexual abuse had "no bearing" on the decision and that "Vatican relations will continue and be valued."

Cardinal Sean Brady, president of the Irish bishops' conference, said the decision "seems to show little regard for the important role played by the Holy See in international relations and of the historic ties between the Irish people and the Holy See over many centuries."

Cardinal Brady expressed his hope "that despite this regrettable step, the close and mutually beneficial cooperation between Ireland and the Holy See in the world of diplomacy can continue, based on shared commitment to justice, peace, international development and concern for the common good."

The Vatican was among the first states with which the newly independent Irish Free State established full diplomatic relations in the 1920s. The post of papal nuncio to Ireland is currently vacant after Archbishop Leanza's reassignment, but church sources in Dublin expect a new nuncio will be appointed before the end of 2011.

Several countries maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See without having a resident ambassador in Rome, choosing instead to have an ambassador accredited to a neighboring country conduct business with the Holy See. Under the terms of the 1929 Lateran Pacts between the Vatican and Italy, ambassadors to the Italian state are not permitted to serve as ambassadors to the Holy See.