

Retired Vatican envoy from tiny San Marino helped heal world

VATICAN CITY – Little did this pre-eminent surgeon from the tiny Republic of San Marino know that becoming an ambassador to the even smaller Vatican City State would give him a new platform from which to heal the world.

Dr. Giovanni Galassi, the recently retired dean of the diplomatic corps and San Marino's former ambassador to the Holy See, said, "All my life I've been operating on sick people, and it's always been a one-on-one relationship; me over here and the patient over there."

The cancer and transplant specialist told Catholic News Service April 16 that becoming a diplomat made him realize "one person can also help 100, 1,000, even 10,000 people" by speaking out against and trying to rectify the poverty, hunger and other injustices facing the multitudes.

The world of diplomacy allowed him "to multiply that sense of hope I felt inside me to help others" and expand his ministry of curing people to promoting a social and spiritual healing of society, he said.

Dr. Galassi met with Pope Benedict XVI April 7 to say farewell after serving the Vatican for three decades.

A longtime resident of Rome, Dr. Galassi began his service to the Vatican in 1980, acting as San Marino's representative until being named ambassador when his country and the Vatican established full diplomatic relations in 1986.

In 1988, the Vatican elected him from among the corps' most senior members to also represent the diplomatic corps as dean of the ambassadors accredited to the Vatican.

After 28 years of service with 20 of those years as the highest-ranking member of the corps, Dr. Galassi watched "many a monsignor grow" into an archbishop and cardinal.

His proudest accomplishment, Dr. Galassi said, was being able to rally the entire diplomatic corps into being “a real family of friends.”

On the world’s stage, it is not unheard of for one country’s conflicts with another country to spill over into the diplomatic sphere, resulting in snubs or a lack of cooperation between envoys.

But Dr. Galassi said he went to great lengths to create a haven of peaceful, constructive and even friendly relations among the men and women representing 179 nations and organizations.

“I tried to make everyone understand, the new ambassadors too, that our task at the Vatican was to bring the principles of human dignity, ethics and morality to our nations, not the principles of economics, weaponry or power,” he said.

Dr. Galassi is convinced that “all peoples – even the most, let’s say, aggressive – always have deep down inside of them a tiny piece of humanity” and believe in the most basic principle of respect.

This outlook worked, he said, and his attitude “was grasped by many.”

Dr. Galassi never shied away from confronting ambassadors and airing disagreements between the Vatican’s position and that of individual nations.

Once, during a 2002 Vatican-sponsored conference on ethics and economic globalization, he hotly contested the position presented by Jim Nicholson, who was U.S. ambassador to the Vatican at the time. He said Nicholson “maintained the economic argument and I maintained that what comes before that is the human.”

In March 2003, just a few days before U.S.-led troops invaded Iraq, Dr. Galassi rounded up the diplomatic corps at the Vatican in a last-ditch effort “to convince the United States that it was better to stop plans” for a war.

He said Nicholson came to the gathering, but told the diplomats “that by now things were at a point of no return” and nothing would prevent the U.S.-led invasion.

Even though the diplomats were unable to have an impact, he said, their

participation showed their dedication to the power of dialogue.

Every time Dr. Galassi passed the hat and asked ambassadors to contribute toward the purchase of a goodbye gift for a departing diplomat, everyone pitched in.

“I have to say with pride that when the Cuban ambassador left, the U.S. gave their contribution and when Ambassador Nicholson left, Cuba gave its part; therefore, this just shows the kind of friendly atmosphere we had created,” he said.

Of the dozens of thank-you letters Dr. Galassi received from ambassadors upon his retirement, he said, “one of the most beautiful is a letter from Nicholson.”

The two former diplomats’ disagreements never affected their friendship and esteem for each other, Dr. Galassi said.

“We have remained very close friends, and this is a beautiful thing,” he said.