

Vatican ambassadors: Potpourri of people

VATICAN CITY – Many countries' embassies to the Vatican have a priest on staff to help advise their ambassador on pontifical protocol and all things Catholic.

But most of them could learn a few things from Mary Ann Glendon, the Harvard law professor President George W. Bush nominated as U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

In 2004, Pope John Paul II named her president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, an advisory body chock full of experts in law, economics, sociology and other fields. She led the Vatican's delegation to the 1995 U.N. Conference on Women in Beijing and to a follow-up meeting on the status of women in 2005.

At first glance, it would seem that if the U.S. Senate confirms her nomination Glendon's Vatican connections would make her a unique member of the diplomatic corps.

But Poland's ambassador to the Vatican, Hanna Suchocka, also is a member of the social sciences academy and, like Glendon, she is one of the original members appointed by Pope John Paul when he established the academy in 1994.

Suchocka, again like Glendon, has a background in law. But the Polish ambassador also was deeply involved in partisan politics, elected to Poland's legislature before serving as Poland's prime minister, 1992-93.

The Polish ambassador currently is one of 17 women in the 175-member group of diplomats accredited to the Vatican.

While Glendon can be described as a Vatican "insider," she has never been a salaried Vatican employee, like two other members of the diplomatic corps serving at the Vatican.

Montenegro's Ambassador Antun Sbutega is a former economics professor who spent almost 13 years working at the Society of St. Peter Apostle, one of four

pontifical missionary societies under the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Slovenia's Ambassador Ivan Rebernik earned a doctorate in philosophy from Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, then entered the library sciences program at The Catholic University of America in Washington. He returned to Rome, where he worked in the Gregorian library, 1964-88, then spent the next 16 years as the director of the prints catalogue at the Vatican Library.

Many of the nations that have diplomatic relations with the Vatican always send a Catholic as ambassador, believing it gives their representatives a jump on the learning curve.

But other countries believe that sending a non-Catholic ensures the objectivity and impartiality of their ambassadors, who are sent to the Vatican to represent their nation's interests and not simply to explain Vatican policy to their foreign affairs departments.

Francis Campbell, named Great Britain's ambassador to the Vatican in 2005, was the first Catholic to hold the post since the Reformation. The government of Germany continues to have a policy of alternating a Catholic ambassador and a Protestant ambassador.

Sbutega told Catholic News Service that he was named ambassador to the Vatican "because I know the Vatican better than any other citizen of Montenegro. If the Vatican is a mystery to most Romans, imagine how confusing it is to someone from Montenegro."

"In a technical sense, one can learn quickly how things work in the Vatican, but there is an underlying culture formed by faith that is more difficult to learn," he said.

Raymond Flynn, a Catholic who served as U.S. ambassador to the Vatican from 1993 to 1997 under President Bill Clinton, told CNS he thought Glendon would be "a great asset" to the United States in her new role.

"She is so clever, so smart," he said, that she should not have any problem explaining the Vatican's views to the U.S. government and the government's views

to the Vatican.

“Sometimes I was too outspoken, and I paid the price for it. I was reprimanded by the State Department,” said the former Boston mayor. “I was a politician, and that’s what you do: You talk.”

But Glendon, he said, is a scholar and legal expert; “she isn’t looking for votes. ... She only deals with the facts.”

While Flynn believes there still is “an undercurrent of anti-Catholicism” in Washington that needs to be handled with tact, he said, “You do your country a greater service by expressing your point of view.”

And, he said, a coherently Catholic ambassador “gains credibility with the Vatican because they know you are not just another politician willing to sacrifice your core values for votes.”