

WikiLeaks cables show Vatican as horrified by Irish clergy's sex abuse

VATICAN CITY – A spate of U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks portray the Vatican as horrified over clerical sex abuse in Ireland but also deeply concerned that the procedures used by Irish investigators of the scandal were “an affront to Vatican sovereignty.”

The cables, released Dec. 10-12, touched on a wide range of issues, from the Vatican's efforts to deal with leftist governments in Latin America to its recent moves to welcome disaffected Anglicans into the Catholic Church.

One cable offered a highly critical assessment of the Vatican's communications apparatus and said Pope Benedict XVI was surrounded by advisers who make sure dissenting voices are not heard.

Another reviewed the Vatican's efforts to position itself as an intermediary with Iran in case an international crisis erupts and stated that in 2007 the Vatican had helped secure the release of British sailors detained in Iranian waters.

The cables offered a rare glimpse at Vatican diplomacy in action, but through the lens of the U.S. policy experts who authored the reports. Most of the cables regarding the Vatican were written by officials of the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, sometimes after personal meetings with Vatican diplomats.

The Vatican issued a disclaimer Dec. 11, saying the reliability of the cables must be evaluated carefully and with great prudence.

“Naturally these reports reflect the perceptions and opinions of the people who wrote them and cannot be considered as expressions of the Holy See itself, nor as exact quotations of the words of its officials,” it said in a statement.

The Vatican said publication of such secret and confidential material was a matter of “extreme seriousness.”

The U.S. Embassy to the Vatican repeated its condemnation of the release of classified State Department information and refused to comment on the content or authenticity of the information.

The sex abuse scandal in Ireland was treated in a memo dated Feb. 26, 2010, written by Julieta Valls Noyes, the deputy chief of mission at the embassy. She wrote that the Vatican had responded relatively quickly to the revelations of sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Dublin, in part because it had “learned key lessons” from the U.S. sex abuse scandal in 2002.

“Vatican and Irish officials’ first concern was for the victims,” the cable said. But that concern was sometimes overshadowed by the public perception in Ireland that the Vatican was worried about “pettily procedural” matters, it said.

Specifically, the Vatican was upset that the independent Murphy Commission that investigated the scandal had sidestepped diplomatic channels and tried to directly convene the Vatican nuncio, or ambassador, to answer questions and obtain other information from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The Vatican complained to the Irish Embassy, saying such requests must go through diplomatic channels, and in the end the government decided not to press the Vatican to reply, the cable said. It added that contacts at the Vatican and in Ireland expected the sex abuse crisis to continue for several years, as new allegations from other Irish archdioceses come to light.

Another cable written by Valls Noyes was dated April 22, 2009, and titled: “Vatican hopes for better U.S.-Cuba ties, in part to rein in Chavez and his acolytes.” It summarized a conversation with a Vatican Secretariat of State official, Monsignor Angelo Accattino, who was said to have spoken with concern about Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and the deterioration of church-state relations there.

It said Monsignor Accattino raised the possibility of a U.S.-Cuba prisoner swap. It said the Vatican in general believes that improving U.S.-Cuba ties would greatly reduce the appeal of Chavez in the region. According to the cable, Monsignor Accattino said the real risk is that Venezuela is turning into Cuba, while Cuba may be ready to open up.

It also quoted Monsignor Accattino as saying that the worsening situation in Venezuela had led Latin American church leaders to rethink their approach, pulling back from activism and advocacy in the short term in order to protect their pastoral ministry.

The cable on Vatican communications, dated Feb. 20, 2009, reflected what many observers inside and outside the Vatican were saying at the time. The Vatican had just announced the lifting of the excommunication of four traditionalist bishops, including one who, it turned out, had minimized the Holocaust.

"The Holy See's communications operation is suffering from 'muddled messaging' partly as a result of cardinals' technophobia and ignorance about 21st-century communications. Only one key papal adviser has a Blackberry and few have e-mail accounts. It has led to PR blunders on issues as sensitive as the Holocaust," said the cable, also written by Valls Noyes.

It said Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, was overworked and had little influence on major decisions because he was not part of the pope's inner circle. It described Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, as a "yes man" unlikely to bring the pope bad news. It noted that the cardinal did not speak English and added that "not a few voices are calling for Cardinal Bertone's removal from his current position."

According to Italian reporters, Cardinal Bertone responded to the WikiLeaks report by saying he was "very proud to be described as a 'yes man,' since this colorful description accurately reflects my support for the pastoral work of the pope."

A cable of Nov. 30, 2009, written by embassy political officer Rafael Foley, explored the ramifications of the Vatican decision to set up a structure that would welcome groups of Anglicans into the Catholic Church and allow them to retain some elements of Anglican identity. The cable quoted Britain's ambassador to the Vatican, Francis Campbell, as saying Pope Benedict's move had brought Anglican-Catholic relations to their worst crisis in 150 years.

Campbell reportedly said the Vatican had shifted the goal of Catholic-Anglican dialogue from true unity to mere cooperation. He was said to have warned of

repercussions against England's small Catholic minority, including discrimination or even violence.

More than one of the cables monitored the Vatican's position on Turkey's bid to join the European Union. After Pope Benedict's visit to Turkey in 2006, an embassy official expressed the view that the EU entry process was an opportunity to hold Turkey to international standards on respect for religious freedom.