

The Role, Function and Duties as Apostolic Nuncio and Delegate

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The practice of sending representatives to other communities or to civil authorities has its roots in the earliest traditions of the Church. A scriptural example can be found in the eleventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles when the apostle Barnabas is sent to the Christians of Antioch as the representative of the Church in Jerusalem.

The Bishop of Rome, already in the first century, when the Church was not yet officially established, sent letters to other churches to represent him. In later centuries priests and deacons were sent to other churches on specific missions. In most of the early ecumenical councils the Pope did not take part personally but rather he sent legates and as a result his right to be represented in this manner was publicly recognized.

The principal reason for the practice was to maintain and strengthen the bonds of communion that existed between the local churches. Letters of communion were frequently sent in order to deal with questions of doctrine and discipline and to exhort and encourage each other in the practice of the faith, especially in situations of persecution.

Some of the other the Patriarchal churches – which included Constantinople (now Istanbul), Antioch (in Syria), Alexandria (in Egypt) – developed the practice of sending representatives to each other, to keep open the channels of information and communication within the Catholic communion. At the end of the fifth century, when the Bishop of Rome had taken on responsibility for the civil as well as the religious life of the city, due to the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the Pope sent permanent representatives to the Imperial Court in Constantinople, where the Roman Empire in the East continued to exist. In a certain sense, this practice can be considered a precursor of the later and current figure of the apostolic nuncio, as a representative of the Holy See not only to the local churches but also to civil governments.

In later centuries, the practice continued of sending papal legates, many of whom were cardinals, to deal with specific questions and problems. In certain cases some of these representatives gradually took on a more stable function in the places to which they were sent and therefore remained for a time.

The first permanent nunciature, in the modern sense, was established between the Holy See and the Republic of Venice in 1500. Similarly, papal legates were sent on a permanent basis to what were known as the “crowned” heads of Europe: Spain, the Holy Roman Empire (modern Germany), France and Portugal.

In the late 16th century, Pope Gregory XIII reorganized the system of legates, and nunciatures were established in other city states in Italy and Germany, as well as in Switzerland, Flanders and Poland. At the time, the principal task of the papal representatives was to implement the reforms of the Council of Trent.

Within the European context, in which these nunciatures existed and functioned, the system gained further recognition at the Congress of Vienna held in 1815, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. In virtue of the spiritual mission of the Holy See, papal nuncios were accorded special privileges, including precedence over other ambassadors, a function which is now exercised by the dean of the diplomatic corps. The Vienna Convention of 1961, which is the fundamental document that governs diplomatic relations throughout the world, continues to recognize the right of the Holy See to send and receive representatives, under international law. The Convention also allows governments to grant precedence to the papal nuncio, as dean of the diplomatic corps, in recognition of the spiritual authority of the Holy See.

Appointment

The Pope, in the exercise of his responsibilities as the visible head and the principal spiritual leader of the Catholic Church, makes use of representatives to act as liaisons both to local churches and to states and public authorities throughout the world.

This practice reflects primarily the theological reality that, as the successor of Peter, the Pope is “a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and fellowship” and has the mission to confirm his brothers and sisters in the faith, as members in communion of the Church. The bishops, as pastors of the local churches spread throughout the world, exercise their office collegially, in communion with and under the authority of the Pope. In this context, the papal representatives are recognized as an effective, though certainly not exclusive, means of maintaining the bonds which link the Holy Father with the bishops of the world, as well as with all the members of the Christian faithful.

The papal representatives are sent, first of all, to the local churches, as an expression and extension of the mission of the Holy Father, hence, their role is primarily a service to the Church.

At the same time, representatives of the Pope are sent also to states and public authorities. Particularly since the Second Vatican Council the Church addresses itself increasingly to every aspect of human life in exercising its mission to proclaim the gospel to all peoples, to communicate to society Christian values, and to safeguard the rights of the Christian faithful as well as the transcendent quality and the fundamental rights of all human persons. Therefore the Church attempts to engage in constructive dialogue with political authorities and with the international community of nations and supranational organizations. In this secular aspect of their mission, the representatives of the Pope exercise a role which is rooted fundamentally in their service to the Church. For their part, states and public authorities, in recognizing the particular mission of the Church, send representatives, or ambassadors, to the Holy See.

The Holy Father sends his representatives in virtue of his spiritual and moral authority, rather than as the supreme temporal ruler of the State of Vatican City. To illustrate this point, for nearly sixty years, from 1870, when Italy became a united country and the Papal States ceased to exist, until 1929, the Pope did not possess a territory. Yet the international community continued to recognize his right to send representatives and receive ambassadors. In fact, during that period, the number of diplomatic missions accredited to the Holy See actually increased. The State of Vatican City as it is today came into existence on 11 February 1929, with the Lateran Pacts, in order to guarantee the Holy See territorial independence. The status of the Holy See as a subject of international law, which chiefly developed in the context of western civilization, has always been recognized. The Holy See, as it is defined in the law of the Church, comprises the person of the Pope, the Secretariat of State and the other institutions of the Roman Curia, namely, the congregations, tribunals, pontifical councils and other offices.

Types of Papal Representatives

The majority of the papal representatives hold the rank of apostolic nuncio, who exercises the dual function of representing the Holy Father to local churches and to states and public authorities. The word nuncio translates the Latin “nuntius”, which means “messenger” and can be understood also from the English word “announce” that is derived from the same root.

At present, the Holy See maintains diplomatic relations with 178 countries, as well as with the European Union and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, and has a special relationship with the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Arab League. The total number of nuncios is just over 100, since several are accredited at the same time to more than one country. In my case, I am Apostolic Nuncio to eleven countries: New Zealand, the Cook Islands, the Fiji Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.

The papal representatives who represent the Pope only to the local churches are given the title apostolic delegate. Since most countries of the world now have diplomatic relations with the Holy See there are very few apostolic delegates. The Pacific region, in this sense, is somewhat exceptional, due to the fact that a number of territories are under the political control of other nations. Hence, I am Apostolic Delegate for nine territories: New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna, which are part of French Oceania; the Northern Mariana Islands (Saipan), Guam and American Samoa, which are territories of the United States; and Niue, Tokelau and Tuvalu.

An apostolic nuncio or delegate holds the rank of titular archbishop, that is, he is named to a historical diocese which no longer exists. Mine is Castello, which is one of the islands that makes up the city of Venice and since the fifteenth century was incorporated into that diocese. Most of the apostolic nuncios and delegates, as in my case, have already been in the diplomatic service of the Holy See. I entered the service in 1987 and I had the following assignments: Ghana, with Togo and Benin, from 1987 to 1990; Ecuador, from 1990 to 1993; Chile, from 1993 to 1996; the Czech Republic, from 1996 to 1999; Jordan, from 1999 to 2002; and Lithuania, with Latvia and Estonia, from 2002 to 2005. I was then appointed as apostolic nuncio by Pope John Paul II, on 1 April 2005. A few of the nuncios have served in other institutions of the Church and have been appointed to some countries in mission territories and especially in the Middle East.

The Holy See is also represented to numerous regional, continental and worldwide international organizations, both governmental and non-governmental.

A number of these institutions, such as the United Nations Organization, are of such importance that permanent missions have been established, such as in New York, Geneva and Vienna, while for others representatives are designated ad hoc.

Concrete examples of recent major international meetings that have drawn worldwide attention, particularly to the role played by the Holy See

delegations, were the United Nations Conferences on Population, in Cairo (1994), and on Women, in Beijing (1995). These delegations included not only permanent pontifical legates but also members chosen from among the clergy, religious, and the laity, both men and women.

Institutions and conferences of this kind have become an important forum for the Holy See. Through papal representatives the Holy See has the possibility to speak out in order to manifest the Church's concern for the principal moral and social issues of the day, which affect the lives not only of the Christian faithful but also of all the people of the world. In recent years, the Popes have increasingly addressed themselves to these organizations and to events organized by them, in order to draw the world's attention to many serious problems affecting the dignity of the human person. Pope Paul VI went to New York in 1965, Pope John Paul II went twice, in 1979 and in 1995, and Pope Benedict XVI went in 2008, to speak to the General Assembly of the United Nations, which demonstrated the high regard in which that institution is held, despite its imperfections.

The Holy Father also sends legates, usually one of the cardinals, as his representatives for special ecclesial events, such as a national Eucharistic congress or an important anniversary. As an example, in the month of May 2004, while I was in Lithuania, my previous assignment, Cardinal Achille Silvestrini was sent as the Pope's representative for the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the designation of Saint Casimir as national patron. You may recall that before both the first and second war in Iraq, in 1991 and 2003, Pope John Paul II sent a personal legate to Iraq and the United States in the hope of averting war.

Ecclesial responsibilities

The principal obligations of the papal representative are directly related to and draw their fundamental reason for being from the Pope's ministry as a visible sign of unity for the whole Church, such that he acts as a liaison between the Holy See and local church.

First, the papal representative is to keep the Holy See informed regarding the conditions of the Church and of the Christian faithful in the territory to which he is sent. The most effective means of carrying out this mission is by means of personal visits to dioceses, seminaries, religious houses, parishes and other institutions and communities, such as I am doing today. In this way he can acquire first hand knowledge regarding the life and activity of the Church as well as the material and civil circumstances which affect the life of the people. So far, since I arrived here in New Zealand at the end of July 2005, I have

participated in church events in all six dioceses of the country. I have also been able to make a visit to all but one of the island countries and territories to which I am accredited. The only one left yet for me to visit is Niue.

Second, the papal representative is expected to develop a close relationship with the local bishops. It should be clearly noted that he neither replaces the rightful role of the local bishops nor exercises a supervisory function over them. I am not “the boss” of the bishops in New Zealand or the Pacific region. The bishops retain their right to deal directly with the Holy See, even if at times, in specific matters, the opinion of the papal representative may also be sought. The relationship between the papal representative and the local bishops is intended to be mutually cooperative since the local church may, at times, face difficult problems and can benefit from the representative’s expertise and advice. He in turn can profit from the experience of the local bishops and seeks their counsel in dealing with certain issues. The papal representative makes present to the local bishops the unifying and strengthening presence of the Pope and likewise keeps the Holy See aware of publications, initiatives and concerns which originate from the local churches.

Third, the papal representative should also maintain a good relationship with the bishops’ conference, respecting and safeguarding its rightful role. He is not a member of the conference but usually he is invited to attend at least a part of the plenary meeting. In this region there are two conferences: the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference and the Episcopal Conference of the Pacific (CEPAC). The papal representative and the bishops are expected to work together to promote the mission of the Church and to deal with specific problems, sometimes with insights or recommendations that come from Rome. The minutes of the sessions of the bishops’ conferences are sent to the Holy See by the papal representative.

Fourth, one of the most important functions of the papal representative is to propose and transmit the names of those priests to be considered as candidates for bishop and to carry out the informative process regarding the individual candidates. With regard to the appointment of an auxiliary bishop, the diocesan bishop proposes the names of the candidates. With regard to the appointment of a coadjutor or diocesan bishop, there is a two step process. In the first step, the papal representative draws up a report on the state of the diocese and the qualities of the person to be considered. At the same time, the names of possible candidates are gathered. The papal representative then submits to the Holy See – the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, for New Zealand and the countries and territories of the Pacific – a ternus, that is, a list of three names for approval. When approval has been given the papal representative then carries out the second step, which is the informative process

on each candidate. Nowadays a fairly wide consultation takes place, involving bishops, priests, religious and lay people, in order to avoid partial views and to have as complete information as possible to send to Rome

Fifth, the papal representative has the responsibility to help promote and consolidate the conferences of major superiors or congregational leaders of religious institutes and to assist where possible and appropriate in coordinating their apostolic activity. Normally he is invited to take part in the opening sessions of the plenary assemblies of these conferences, and he is to receive a copy of the minutes, in order to send them to the Holy See.

The papal representative has other tasks regarding the promotion of the Church's social teaching, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue and the defence of the mission of the Church and the Holy See in society. With regard to purely ecclesiastical matters, the papal representative has other faculties, some of which regard liturgical functions, as well as the granting of permissions and dispensations in particular cases.

Diplomatic responsibilities

As the representative of the Pope to the state and to public authorities, the papal representative has the responsibility to promote and foster relations between them and the Holy See. The exercise of this function reflects as well the specific character of the Church and the Holy See in order to promote the common good and the resolution of conflicts in a peaceful manner. This particular philosophy is reflected in the fact that papal representatives are sent to nations with a great diversity of cultures and political systems, and exercise their functions even when the states to which they are sent are engaged in armed conflict.

If the papal representative is the dean of the diplomatic corps, either as the most senior of the ambassadors or by privilege, he would have additional duties that go with that position, such as representing the whole diplomatic corps to the government and receiving the ambassadors and other heads of diplomatic mission at the beginning and the end of their term of service.

The responsibilities of the pontifical legate in maintaining good relations between the state and the local churches might involve such fields as education, health care and other social programs in which both the local churches and the public authorities are involved. In a number of countries, there are also issues related to church property such as incorporation, registration and taxation. In some of the former Soviet bloc countries, there is also the question of the restitution of goods and properties confiscated by past governments.

The rights of the Church concerning the free exercise of its mission are sometimes guaranteed by a written agreement, such as a concordat or a modus vivendi, between the Holy See and the state. Presently, the Holy See has agreements of these kinds with more than fifty countries as well as with some international organizations. These accords usually deal with issues such as access to places of worship, the establishment of religious schools, the teaching of religion in state or public schools, and the provision of religious services in prisons, hospitals and military bases. The papal representative has particular responsibilities in the negotiations with the state, in drafting the document and signing it on behalf of the Holy See. He exercises this function in cooperation with the bishops of the country, who have first hand knowledge of local conditions, and who may be directly affected by government policies. For the sake of information, there are no countries in Oceania that have an agreement of this type with the Holy See.

Conclusion

The diplomatic activity of the Holy See is a real service and is one of the ways in which the Catholic Church carries out the mission entrusted to her by the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth and in doing so to promote and defend the dignity of every human person, made in the image and likeness of God, who is love.