

As envoy to Vatican, Hispanic theologian will stress collaboration: Miguel H. Diaz

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The new U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, who was nominated to the post in late May and was easily approved by the Senate, met the press recently in Rome for the first time—and showed some diplomatic skill.

Miguel H. Diaz received a group of ten American and Italian reporters at the official ambassador's residence on Rome's Janiculum Hill on October 5, three days after presenting his credentials to Pope Benedict XVI.

Emphasizing the priorities that he said the Obama administration has in common with the Vatican, Diaz sketched out an agenda of collaboration against terrorism, religiously inspired violence, HIV/AIDS and human trafficking and in favor of interracial, intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

"The points where we have coordination today between this president and the Holy See are more than just one," he said, speaking in Italian as he did for much of the meeting. "We have the possibility of collaboration on so many points."

As might be expected, Diaz downplayed differences over abortion and other biomedical issues which, as one reporter mentioned, the pope himself raised with President Obama when they met at the Vatican in July.

"In any international relationship between two states, it's normal to have differences," he said, quoting Obama's statement that it is possible to "disagree without being disagreeable."

The ambassador voiced his ambition to be a "bridge builder" between the Vatican and the White House, a job that he acknowledged would include explaining Catholic teaching on controversial issues to the Obama administration.

“But I think it’s important that one understands, too, that I’m not representing the church,” said Diaz, who is Catholic, making a point he repeated several times. “I’m representing the United States and my president.”

Diaz is the first theologian and the first Hispanic to serve as U.S. envoy to the Vatican since Washington established formal diplomatic ties with the Holy See in 1984. The Cuban-born professor has taught theology at the College of Saint Benedict and St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota, since 2004.

At confirmation hearings in July, Diaz told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that his socially conscious scholarly work gives him common ground with Benedict, a fellow theologian, enabling him to further U.S. policies and interests in such areas as the Middle East peace process, dialogue with the Muslim world, bioethics and abortion.

“What I hope is that the philosophical and theological background that I have can be useful in the service of bringing people together,” Diaz told journalists. Yet he drew a distinction between his professional background and his current role, discouraging a reporter’s suggestion that he and Benedict might sit down privately to discuss their academic interests.

“As ambassador of the United States, I’m not here primarily to be having theological conversations with the Holy Father,” he said. “I’m here to represent my president, my people, my country in the effort to build diplomacy.” -*Francis X. Rocca, Religion News Service*