

Mixed Reaction

Vatican Ties Hailed But Also Criticized

By Jerry Filteau
NC News Service

While Catholic officials hailed the U.S. decision to form diplomatic ties with the Vatican Jan. 10, a leading Baptist spokesman called the move "a ludicrous leap of logic" that imperils American Christian missionaries in the Third World.

A church-state separation group announced plans to file suit against the move on constitutional grounds.

Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia said President Reagan's decision gives the United States "the standing it deserves" at the Holy See.

He called the century-old U.S. ban on diplomatic relations with the Vatican, which was recently lifted by Congress, a "remnant of the unfortunate nativism and religious prejudice which once so sadly influenced our national policy."

Archbishop James Hickey of Washington issued a similar statement, saying, "I rejoice that the passing of religious bigotry has made this development possible."

He rejected the view that the new ties would violate the principle of church-state separation. "The exchange of ambassadors will not advance nor is it intended to advance the cause of Catholicism in this country," he said.

A sharply divergent reaction, however, came from James M. Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, an agency representing some 27 million U.S. Baptists on questions of U.S. public policy.

Calling Reagan's move "one more evidence of massive misunderstanding on the part of this administration of the appropriate relationship of church and state," Dunn said the action was "a clear violation of the principle of church-state separation."

Dunn also called it "a dangerous and divisive precedent of government meddling in church affairs, and the occasion for practical problems for all those engaged in the far-flung missionary venture in developing countries." In campaigning against the establishment of ties beforehand, Dunn had argued that widespread anti-Americanism in Third World countries would be linked with and would strengthen anti-Christian feeling in those parts of the world if the U.S. diplomatic link to the Vatican took place.

"For the administration to pretend that the naming of an ambassador to the church had nothing to do with religion is a ludicrous leap of logic smacking of Orwell's '1984,'" he commented.

The Seventh Day Adventists had also waged a strong campaign against U.S.-Vatican diplomatic ties, as did the

now-secular but Protestant-originated Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "We are going to sue, there is no question about that," said AUSCS spokesman Joseph Conn.

The Rev. Jerry Falwell, a fundamentalist preacher and leader of the Moral Majority movement, who supported Reagan in the 1980 election campaign, also opposed the move, saying it set "a precedent which we will regret later." He asked how long it would be before Mecca, the chief holy city of Islam, makes a similar request for diplomatic recognition.

The Rev. Dean Kelley, church-state specialist for the National Council of Churches, reiterated the NCC's official policy since 1951, which he said "maintains it is improper for the United States government to send an ambassador to any church." The NCC is an umbrella organization for U.S. Protestant and Orthodox churches with a combined membership of 40 million.

Not all non-Catholic reaction was negative, however. While a number of American Jewish organizations are on record opposing Vatican-U.S. ties on grounds of church-state separation, their response to the move was described as generally "muted" by Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, director of Christian-Jewish relations of the American Jewish Committee.

One reason for this, he suggested, was the shared concern of American and world Jewry over the Soviet threat and recognition that the Holy See is an important force against that threat.

While noting the church-state concern of Jews, he also cited an argument that in terms of Vatican diplomacy, the Holy See can legitimately be considered "a 'secular' arm of the church, conceived as a sovereign state."

One thing remains, Rabbi Tanenbaum added, and that is for the Vatican to establish diplomatic relations with the state of Israel.

Manhattan-based Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the interfaith Appeal of Conscience Foundation, welcomed the new diplomatic link as "a positive step."

It "carries with it the potential for more effective cooperation on issues of deep concern to American people and all humankind -- issues of poverty, hunger, interfaith harmony, religious freedom and world peace," the rabbi said. Catholic bishops who commented expressed similar hopes.



William Wilson with President Reagan.

Wilson a Catholic Convert

By NC News Service

William A. Wilson, the 69-year-old California businessman whom President Reagan nominated as the new ambassador to the Vatican, converted to Catholicism almost 40 years ago.

Since February 1981 Wilson has served as Reagan's personal representative to the Holy See, a non-paid position which carried no official ambassadorial rank. He succeeded former New York Mayor Robert Wagner, who was appointed President Carter's personal envoy in 1978.

Wilson said Jan. 10 that "converting to Catholicism as an adult assured me that I knew in my own mind that I knew what I was doing." He converted five years after his marriage; his wife is Catholic.

Marcia Hobbs, one of his two daughters, told The New York Times, "I don't know if you'd say that we are a strongly religious family. I think you'd say my father follows his religion quietly."

Born Nov. 3, 1914, in Los Angeles, Wilson graduated from Stanford University with a degree in mechanical engineering

and served in the U.S. Army Ordnance Corps during World War II.

A millionaire, Wilson was president of Web Wilson Oil Tools Inc. until 1960, is active in real estate development and has cattle interests in the United States and Mexico.

Wilson has been a personal friend and political adviser to Reagan for more than 20 years. He served on the Presidential Personnel Advisory Committee, which sought out Reagan loyalists for administration positions after Reagan's election in 1980.

Wilson's first visit to Rome as the personal envoy was in March of 1981. In an interview with a Rome daily newspaper he said, "John Paul II is a fantastic man and in my judgment one of the greatest statesmen of our times."

At that time Wilson praised the Vatican's role in international relations, saying that the Vatican "can interpret international events in a key way that is without politicization."

Now It's Official

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one else named ambassador to the Holy See, he added, because he already has full access to Pope John Paul II and ranking Vatican prelates.

But where there was only one channel of communication between Washington and the Vatican, now there will be two, he said. This will not only give Washington official access to the Vatican as a worldwide listening post through its diplomatic corps but also benefit the search for peace and help Washington and the church in many areas of mutual concern, such as refugee resettlement or the fight against hunger, he said.

Wilson rejected the idea that U.S. recognition of the Vatican implies an endorsement of the Catholic Church or of one religion over another. The proposal to end the ban on diplomatic relations cleared both houses of Congress, neither of which has a Catholic majority, and was signed by a non-Catholic president, he said.

"What we are doing is recognizing diplomatically a sovereign state," he said.

"The fact that the U.S. government has decided to

recognize the Vatican diplomatically, and vice versa, says a great deal about our President Reagan and about our Pope John Paul II," said Wilson. "Both of them have fought hard and worked hard and have prayed hard for peace in the world and human freedom."

Both the United States and the Vatican share the same goals of working toward the common good of humanity, and these are "human values, not religious values," said Wilson, rejecting the notion that the United States would be opening itself to "sectarian entanglement" by recognizing the Vatican.

Nor would diplomatic recognition of the Vatican result in church entanglement in U.S. foreign policy, he said. "Our foreign policy is developed in the White House and implemented by the State Department."

He also commented, "The Vatican is not like every other state. Its influence throughout the world is tremendous. From that point of view it is essential to the United States."

Wilson said he expects the post of U.S. ambassador to the Vatican to be full time, as with any other ambassadorial position, but without a physical embassy as such. His office, once close to the U.S. embassy in Rome but now directly across from the Vatican, should be sufficient for some time to come, even with a larger staff.

Being a Catholic helps to understand the church and its ceremony, but is not essential to being an ambassador to the Holy See, said Wilson, who converted to Catholicism "five years after I married a wonderful Catholic girl" some 40 years ago.

"Converting to Catholicism as an adult assured me that I knew in my own mind that I knew what I was doing," said Wilson.

Asked why diplomatic relations between the United States and the Holy See are possible now when only 20 years ago a Roman Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, was opposed to such a move, Wilson simply observed, "Times have changed."

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