

Laghi, Law in New Positions

Vatican Ambassador: U.S. Church 'Vibrant'

Washington (NC) — The U.S. Catholic Church is "a very strong, vibrant church" that needs no pushing from the Vatican to meet the challenges it faces, says Archbishop Pio Laghi, the new papal ambassador to the United States.

U.S. bishops are both "pastoral" and "prophetic," and U.S. Catholics as a whole are more committed to and knowledgeable about their faith than Catholics in most parts of the world, the archbishop said.

Archbishop Laghi, 63, was interviewed jointly by NC News Service and the national newspaper USA Today March 27, the day after Pope John Paul II appointed him apostolic pro-nuncio, or ambassador of the Holy See, to the United States.

The first person to hold that post since the United States cut off diplomatic relations with the Papal States in 1867, Archbishop Laghi said his duties "might increase, but they will not change" because of his new official diplomatic status with the government.

As apostolic delegate in the United States for the past three years, he, like his predecessors in that post, functioned unofficially as diplomatic liaison with the government, he said.

Although he has full rank of ambassador, Archbishop Laghi is called a pro-nuncio because the title "nuncio" is reserved to an ambassador of the Holy See who is head of the diplomatic corps.

Some countries follow an international protocol under which the Holy See's representative is automatically head of the diplomatic corps. The United States, the most conspicuous, follows the protocol under which the apostolic ambassador is the diplomatic corps head.

"The difference is a formal one. For practical purposes, we have no difference," he said.

But he added that diplomatic role secondarily means that "the first and most important task" of either pro-nuncio or apostolic delegate is to be "a converging point, a connecting point between the center of the church (in Rome) and the local church."

During the interview Archbishop Laghi also:

• Rejected the idea that the U.S. government might be able to use its diplomatic relations with the Holy See to pressure the U.S. bishops to back off from positions critical of government policy.

• Described Vatican diplomacy as fundamentally different from the diplomacy of states, saying that the Holy See's activity

is aimed at helping solve common human problems, not protecting its own interests.

• Strongly reaffirmed the church's position on controversial issues such as artificial birth control, clerical celibacy and ordination of women, and said that it would be "very difficult" for a priest who disagreed with church teaching on such issues to become a bishop.

• Rejected the image abroad of the United States as a consumerist, materialist society, saying that he sees a strong spirit of generosity and "deep spirituality" in American society.

• Said that if there is a weakness in American Catholicism, it is a selective understanding of the Second Vatican Council.

Asked about a concern raised by some American Catholics that formalized diplomatic relations could provide a means for the U.S. government to get the Vatican to put pressure on the U.S. bishops when they criticize government policies, Archbishop Laghi said that the suggestion "implies a bit of misunderstanding of what is, has been or will be my task."

The primary role of a Vatican diplomat, he said, is to convey the position of the Holy See on an issue or situation when a government asks to know that position. In doing so, he added, the diplomat also seeks to present that position in a way that is "in harmony with" positions adopted by the local bishops.

"If the government of the United States should give instructions related to the internal government of the Catholic Church," he said, his response would be that "the government is out of line, that you are touching a matter of the First Amendment (to the U.S. Constitution)."

He also said that he is "committed" to informing the leadership of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops regarding any information about the Holy See's positions on various issues that he might convey to the U.S. government.



ARCHBISHOP LAGHI

Boston Archbishop: Abortion Is 'Darkness'

Boston (NC) — Newly installed Archbishop Bernard F. Law of Boston declared March 23 that abortion is the "primordial darkness" clouding society's ability to deal effectively with such major problems as hunger, injustice and the threat of nuclear war.

Archbishop Law, former head of the Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Mo., Diocese, faced the homily at his installation with references to lightness and darkness.

"To be the light shining in the darkness, we must name the darkness," he said. "The darkness must be named whether it be the clouds which shroud the individual conscience, in the paralysis of materialism, in the excess of sensuality, or in the consequence of sinful decisions, in hunger, poverty, discrimination, war, abortion."

Discussing abortion, he added, "This, I believe, is the primordial darkness of our time. This is the cloud that shrouds the conscience of our world."

"Having made our peace with the death of the most innocent among us," he continued, "it is small wonder that we are so ineffective in dealing with hunger, in dealing with injustice, in dealing with the threat of nuclear war."

In confronting abortion, "we must speak the truth in love," he added. "Like Jesus, our purpose is not to condemn but rather to persuade, to call to conversion."

Attending the installation ceremony in Holy Cross Cathedral were some 2,300 persons, including Archbishop Pio Laghi, apostolic delegate in the United States, seven cardinals, 130 bishops and archbishops, and about 300 priests and deacons.

Archbishop Laghi three days later was named apostolic pro-nuncio, or ambassador, to the United States.

Bishop John B. Coburn of Massachusetts led the official delegation of more than 20 Protestants, Orthodox Christians and Jewish representatives. Secretary of Health and Human Services Margaret Heckler, a former Republican congresswoman from Massachusetts, headed the contingent of federal, state and civic officials.

Turning to his colleagues from other Christian churches, Archbishop Law said that "the welcome presence of brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we share the suffering of Christian division calls forth my pledge to pray, to dialogue and to work in the quest for that deeper communion which is God's will."

He also said he was "heartened by the presence of representatives of the Jewish community. Through the law and prophets ours is a strong bond which seeks ever new expression."



ARCHBISHOP LAW

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"I speak as both greeting and an urgent prayer that hallowed word: shalom," he added.

The white-haired 52-year-old archbishop, who is believed to be the first Harvard graduate to head a U.S. Catholic diocese, took "canonical possession" of his new archdiocese at a vespers service a day earlier for priests, deacons and their wives, and seminarians.

There Archbishop Laghi quipped to Archbishop Law that "after Boston, there is only heaven."

Archbishop Law, who succeeded the late Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, who died last September, disclosed long-range plans for convening an archdiocesan synod, the re-establishment of the priests' synod as a "presbyteral council" and promotion of an archdiocesan pastoral council and parish councils.

In his vespers homily, Archbishop Law told the clergy that "from the national disgrace of abortion to the scandal of world hunger to the specter of nuclear warfare, I expect you to stand with me in giving voice to the church's authentic teaching and legitimate concern."

The homily prompted several ovations at the vespers service. At an informal reception afterward, Archbishop Law thanked the clergy for their reaction and confided, "The anxiety that caused me to wake at 3 o'clock this morning dissipated once I got here."

'A Catholic Agenda for 2001'

De Pere, Wis. (NC) — Three Catholic theologians, speaking about "A Christian Agenda for 2001," said they favored the ordination of women but felt that it would not happen soon.

Blessed Sacrament Father Eugene Laverdiere, Redemptorist Father Bernard Haring and Father Richard McBrien spoke about the future of the church at an all-day theological symposium at St. Norbert College in De Pere in mid-March.

Father McBrien, chairman of the University of Notre Dame's theology department, said the church ought to ordain women — "I make no bones about it." But he said he doubts it will happen during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, although the pope has increasingly spoken out about social justice.

Father Haring, a theologian at the Second Vatican Council and professor at the Redemptorist seminary in Rome, urged supporters of women's ordination to be patient and not push the issue yet, but said women should be incorporated into the decision-making processes.

Father Laverdiere, associate professor at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and editor of Emmanuel magazine, said that all people are called to some kind of ministry in the church.

More than a concern for a particular issue, the priests said that the church should avoid a split or polarization over controversial issues.

Father McBrien said those who seek to reform the church must do so in a Christian way. "Even if you are attacked, you ought not to attack in kind," he said. "Respond with dignity and maintain the highest standards of the Gospel itself."

Earlier in the day, Father Haring described Christ and the church as healers. Because Father Haring recently

Theologians Don't See Women's Ordination Happening That Soon, Ask that Polarization Over Such Controversial Issues Be Avoided

underwent a larynx operation, his talk was read by Norbertine Father Xavier Colavecchio, chairman of the symposium committee.

To say one believes in Christ is an acceptance of him "not first or only as healer and liberator from suffering," Father Haring said, "but as the bearer of salvation and thus also of healing."

"The sick and sinful person opens himself to his savior and healer by grateful faith, or, on the contrary, locks himself up in his own misery, ungratefully refusing faith and missing salvation while longing only for health in the narrowest sense," he said.

The church can help those who suffer by first becoming "healthy" itself, he said. "Whenever those sent by Christ to proclaim the good news and to heal the sick exhibit both the joy of the Gospel and healing love...people are effectively called to faith."

Father McBrien, in his talk, said the tensions Catholics feel between liberals and conservatives, between the hierarchy and grassroots reformers, stem from the imperfect fit of different models of church.

Instinct leads people to try to find the truth in each model of church offered and then try to form a new model, he said. The Second Vatican Council provides the map by which the church guides itself.

In his talk, Father Laverdiere distinguished between the historical Jesus and the risen Christ and its implications for the church.

The historical Jesus belonged to a certain race, a certain sex, spoke a number of certain languages and was from a certain part of the world. But when he rose, all those certainties were set aside, the priest said.

"When he rises, everything is different. He transcends all distinctions. He is the universal human being," Father Laverdiere said.

So to set limitations on the church, a church of the risen Christ not of the historical Jesus, is to set limitations where no limitations ought to exist, he said.

The Gospel, he said, must be understood in light of the Resurrection, not limited to a literal interpretation. The Second Vatican Council was the beginning of the new era in the church, he said, an era of the risen Christ.

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