

Interview with Ambassador Mary Ann Glendon

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Mary Ann Glendon is the eighth Ambassador of the United States to the Holy See, and by most measures she's probably the nominee least in need of on-the-job training. Glendon is a veteran Vatican insider, having represented the Holy See at the 1995 Beijing conference of the United Nations on women, and having served as president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences – the first woman to head a pontifical academy. A professor at the Harvard Law School, she's also an expert on international legal theory.

Though her ambassadorship is likely to be short, expiring with the end of the Bush administration, it's already been eventful. Just two months into her term, Glendon found herself a key figure in Pope Benedict XVI's April 15-20 trip to the United States, especially his April 16 meeting with U.S. President George Bush.

I sat down with Glendon at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See April 30 to talk about the relationship between the Vatican and America – its strengths as well as some enduring differences, including contrasting analyses of the war in Iraq and the role of the United Nations.

The United States and the Holy See have had formal diplomatic relations for 25 years, and to some extent it's always been a good relationship. Nevertheless, it seems that the stock of the United States, and of the American Catholic Church, has never been quite so high as it is right now in the wake of what is seen here as a remarkably successful trip to the United States. Do you agree?

I would, and I would say that the reason for that partly has to do with long-time preoccupations of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI. Even in his early writings, he was fascinated by the United States as a place where many different religions could not only coexist peacefully with one another, but where they could all flourish. That's linked to another old preoccupation of his, which is the significance of different branches of the Enlightenment. The French Enlightenment had such hostility to religion, and that was absorbed into European culture. The English and Scottish Enlightenments were compatible with religion, and when they went to the United States, they formed the background of the culture.

I see many parallels between Benedict and de Tocqueville ... the European who is fascinated with the United States, who does not regard the United States as a model to be copied, but rather as an example that proves that something is possible. If it's possible there, it would be possible in another form over here. To come back to your question, part of the reason the relationship is so good is because we have a pope who for a long time has had a special interest in the United States. When he came, his affection for the United States was so palpable.

It wasn't just his affection for Americans ... Americans also showed a surprising degree of affection for him, didn't they?

Yes, and I thought all of that suddenly became clear in the ceremony on the White House lawn. To me that was incredibly moving, to have the President 'speaking Catholic.' In his own way, he was speaking Catholic. It's a language with which he feels very comfortable. He's the only president in our history who is so comfortable with Catholic terms and concepts, and he uses them regularly. Then you have the pope on that day ... it was like a duet, with each one singing an unaccustomed role, or at least the role you wouldn't think they would take. The president was poetic, and the pope was the one who sounded like the patriotic American. I think we all felt that. He was reminding us of things in our tradition that we take for granted, and telling us to be proud of that. Sometimes it takes somebody from far away to notice those things.

After the pope gave his speech, the president went up to him and said, 'Awesome speech!' It was so great, so American. Both of them were absolutely what they were. That's who George Bush is, and that's who the pope is.

It struck me that the pope's presence gave us a chance to demonstrate the best of ourselves to the world. For once, all those founding ideals that are so often used as political sound bites, like freedom and justice, didn't sound phony in that context.

I think that's right. Actually, I think that if there was a theme to his talks, it was a methodological theme. It was exactly what you said. Everywhere he went, he addressed what that tradition should feel good about ... the U.N., Catholic colleges and universities, the United States, the bishops. His method was to validate and remind them of the highest and best in their tradition.

And then to challenge?

Exactly.

You've spoken about this pope and this president, but I'm wondering if there are also deeper historical forces at work. When I started covering the Vatican ten years ago, there was a fair bit of ambivalence about the United States, as a cowboy culture, a society shaped by Calvinism, with an inflated messianic sense of its role in the world and a tendency to think in a sharply dualistic fashion. While those stereotypes endure, today the outlook tends to be much more positive, which I suspect has to do with events in Europe in the meantime. For example, in the last ten years we've seen the Vatican's failure to persuade the EU to mention God in the preamble to its new constitution, the election of a strongly anti-clerical regime in Spain, and so on. To come back to April 16, on the very day that the White House was throwing the world's biggest birthday bash for the pope, the Council of Europe passed a resolution for the first time recognizing an international "right" to an abortion. Does all of that suggest that the growing closeness between the U.S. and the Vatican is likely to endure regardless of who occupies the White House?

I think it does. I didn't know about the Council of Europe, but that's a very telling contrast. There was an article in *Panorama* yesterday that's very much in the mood of what you just said. [Note: A leading Italian news magazine.] The headline was something like, 'In the wake of the pope's visit, we see that the Catholic church is becoming more American and

therefore a little less European.’ It pointed out that the closeness between the Holy See and the United States intensified in a certain way during the Cold War, with the concern about Communism, but now these cultural issues are bringing the United States and the Holy See closer together.

I think this closeness will endure regardless of changes of American administration. There’s also another factor we haven’t mentioned. I picked it up when I started making what they call the ‘courtesy calls.’ The first courtesy call I made, as it happened, was to Monsignor [Gabriele] Caccia [the number three official in the Secretariat of State], and the first thing he said, which is something I hear everywhere, is that the Americans are such a generous people. He also talked about his admiration for the American system of separation of church and state, and how it’s conducive to the flourishing of religion. I think this theme of generosity endures between administrations. The United States doesn’t get enough credit for this, but it is the most generous donor of humanitarian aid in the world, by any measure. We all know the kinds of things people say when they want to criticize us, that we don’t give up to what we promised and so on.

Like the Millennium Goals?

Yes. But not only are we the most generous donor of humanitarian aid, but a large proportion of that comes from private sources. That’s a big difference between the United States and Europe, and this private generosity of Americans is truly impressive to the Holy See.

Looking at the other side of the coin, the Holy See oversees that vast network of hands-on providers of humanitarian aid, the people who see that it gets to the persons it’s supposed to help. We also have a common interest in Africa. I think all these things will endure.

Having said all that, you’ve experienced a period of time when things were not so harmonious between the Holy See and the White House. You represented the Holy See during the titanic battles in the 1990s over abortion and reproductive rights during the U.N. conference on women in Beijing, when the Clinton administration was on the other side. To what extent is the quality of the relationship dependent upon a particular administration, versus dynamics that continue in and out of season?

I think that you put it well. It’s not really dependent, at least exclusively, on a relationship between two administrative entities. There is a large sympathy between the Holy See and certain very prominent currents in American culture, and those currents obtain whether the administration is Republican or Democratic. One can predict, of course, that with a Democratic administration, or even perhaps with a different kind of Republican, that there will be, to use the church terminology, some ‘neuralgic points.’ But it’s a conversation that has an entirely different tone and quality from the conversation that goes on in Europe. In the United States, we’re a big, diverse, rambunctious country, and these kinds of conversations go on. At our best, we give reasons for our positions. We have the kind of conversations that in Europe aren’t being had, for the most part.

You mean about the public role of religion?

Faith in public life, sure. I think we have much more of a conversation about the broad range of social issues.

If you can put yourself back in the atmosphere surrounding the Beijing conference in 1995, would you have said the same things about the underlying vitality of the relationship between the United States and the Holy See at that time?

It's a good question. What it reminds me of is that the principal antagonists of the Holy See's delegation at Beijing were the representatives of the European Union. I remember being asked the question about whether there was an 'unholy alliance' between us and the Muslim countries, and I said, 'no.' Look, we vote with them on some issues, but we also align ourselves with the United States on many issues that have to do with poverty in the Third World and assistance to the neediest people in the world. We don't have alliances, holy or unholy, with particular groups. We have alliances on particular issues.

But you're saying that even then, it was clear that from the Vatican's point of view, the problem was Europe?

Yes, Europe. At that time, Spain was in the presidency. The European Union delegation was voting in a bloc.

We've spoken about areas where there is a natural sympathy between the United States and the Holy See. I'd like to talk about a couple of areas that seem to be enduring differences. First of all, was it a surprise to you that there wasn't more conversation about Iraq during the pope's visit?

Yes.

You mean from the pope's side?

No, I didn't think that the pope was going to raise it. I know it's easy to say after the fact, but I would have guessed that the pope would do exactly what he did. After all, he came under the sign of hope, and his method, like John Paul II before him, is to discern and build upon what is good that he sees in the cultural manifold. I couldn't imagine that he would dwell on it.

So where did you expect it to come from?

After having read the Michael Sean Winters article ["How Pope Benedict has disappointed the right," in *Slate*], I expected that the press would scrutinize every statement the pope made for an excuse to turn into a criticism of the United States. But, it didn't happen.

Why do you think it didn't happen?

From the moment the pope stepped off the airplane, and the president of the United States for the first time in his presidency went out to meet a foreign leader, there was just something else in the air. I'll tell you what the president said to us at Andrews Air Force Base, when he

came into the room and were standing around. He said, 'You know, a lot of people have asked me why I'm coming out to do this for the first time. It's obvious. This is the greatest religious leader in the whole world.' He repeated that when the pope came and he sat down with the pope, he said it again. There's just something so uplifting about the president's admiration for the pope, and then on the White House lawn the next day the pope's appreciation for all that is best in America's traditions ... molecules started to move. There was just something about the mood that got us all thinking about living up to what is highest and best.

Five years ago, there was a deep division of opinion between the Holy See and the Bush administration about the wisdom of going to war in Iraq. At the time, there was much discussion in Catholic circles in the United States about the need for deeper reflection on the just war tradition. Are we now in a position where, if something like Iraq were to flare up again, we wouldn't see the same differences, or is this a conversation that still needs to take place?

Definitely a conversation that still needs to take place. If I may refer to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, of which I'm still allowed to be a member, even though I've stepped down from the presidency, in 2009, a year from now, the subject of the academy's meeting will deal with these issues ... in fact, probably 2009 and 2010.

Why is the conversation not over? Because neither we in the Catholic just war tradition, nor the international law community, has really sorted out how we are to think about this whole question of humanitarian intervention. We have not sorted out the whole question of why we would recognize the right of say, Kosovo, to declare its independence from Serbia, but not, say, the right of Puerto Rico to declare its independence from the United States. All these issues really are still much debated, much discussed. What needs to be particularly rethought is the question of what do you do when there is a threat from non-state actors, this whole question of terrorism.

Of course, that wasn't the precise issue in Iraq.

It was not. But you're asking about whether the just war arguments still need to be developed, and I think with the just war tradition, like every other element of Catholic social teaching, the principles remain the same, but their application has to be considered in light of the changing cultural manifold. New problems do arise, and the implications of those principles for new situations have to be thought out. We are at a moment where that discussion is going to go on for quite a long time.

Let's assume that two months from now, the U.S. administration were to make a decision that some kind of intervention in Iran was unavoidable. Would we see the same sharp divisions with the Holy See that we saw five years ago, or has something changed in the meantime?

I think the discussion is still very much in progress. I think we would see a vigorous discussion. Within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, there is a discussion going on. Within the international legal studies community, to which I belong, there is a discussion going

on. Within my own law faculty, there is a discussion going on. I think honest people are genuinely perplexed about how we apply principles, upon which all of us can agree, to these situations, particularly the situation of non-state actors.

Which are sometimes harbored by states?

Exactly.

Another traditional area of tension between the Holy See and the United States has been the role and powers of the United Nations. Many people heard in Pope Benedict's reference to "multilateralism" in his address to the U.N. a sort of gentle chiding of the foreign policy of the Bush administration. Did you hear it that way?

No. I was not only there listening, but I have re-read that speech two or three times since then, because it will be the basis of a forum that we will have here at the embassy on Oct. 16, and it will be the basis for the 2009 meeting of the pontifical academy. So, I have a special interest in that speech.

Here's what I would say about it. The key word in that part of the speech, I think, is 'subsidiarity.' There's a couple paragraphs where the pope expresses his appreciation of the fact that there are a growing number of areas where what needs to be done can't be done expect at the higher level. Even though the doctrine of subsidiarity would push as many questions as possible down to the lowest level that can deal with them well, you need an organization like the United Nations for a whole range of questions, which he enumerates. When he talks about what the United Nations should be doing, and when he talks about sovereignty, he says two times in the speech, 'within the limits imposed by international law and by the charter of the United Nations.' The charter itself, actually, is ambiguous about exactly where the line is between what one nation can, and out of duty to its own citizens, must do unilaterally, and what has to be done at the multilateral level. What I heard was the pope very carefully raising the issues that are still very much under discussion. Where do draw those lines?

There are some who believe that the Vatican has an overly romantic notion of the United Nations. Would you agree?

No. I'm getting to know the Second Section [of the Secretariat of State, the Vatican's main diplomatic corps.] You know that my previous work with the Vatican has been with councils. There I do not see romanticism about the United Nations. I see a good understanding of subsidiarity. As the former president of a pontifical academy, I was asked by Monsignor [Giovanni] Lajolo [former top Vatican diplomat] to look into some of these questions of unilateralism, multilateralism, and just war theory. I see a very well informed core of people who are seriously grappling with difficult questions in the modern world.

Wouldn't it be fair to say that the Holy See is a bit more deferential to the United Nations than the United States would be, for example on the decision to intervene in Iraq?

Yes, the way you put it I think is correct. The Holy See itself is like the U.N. It is an entity with a worldwide scope of interests, and worldwide preoccupations. The United States is a nation-state ... with worldwide interests, but it's a nation-state. To use your term, I would say that it's natural that one entity similar to the United Nations in worldwide scope and concerns would be more deferential, and more sympathetic. Also, you have to keep in mind that a nation-state, a sovereign state like the United States, has responsibilities to its citizens, to protect its citizens, that are different from the responsibilities that these two multinational entities have.

Let me ask you about some traditional diplomatic concerns of the Holy See. What do you hear these days about the Israeli/Palestinian problem?

Here again, there's a large correspondence between the concerns of the United States and the Holy See. You know as well as I do that the Holy See has particular concerns about Christians in the Middle East, about Jerusalem, about the status of church property.

There was a lot of interest here in the Annapolis process. What do you pick up about that?

I think it's important to know that the president of the United States is very, very much hoping to see a Palestinian state by the time he leaves office. If we should get anywhere close to that, Jerusalem will be an area where there are many difficult questions, and that will be an area where the Holy See's interests will be most involved.

Broadly speaking, you sense support here for the president's initiative?

I think there's hope that the Annapolis process will move forward.

What do you hear on China?

Not much.

Is that a surprise to you?

I've only been here two and a half months, and the main focus has been on the pope's visit. I expect that there will be other things that come to the fore.

At least in your initial round of visits, would you say that the number one diplomatic concern is with the Middle East?

I can't say on the basis of what came up in courtesy calls that this is the number one concern of the Holy See. I would expect in my next round of calls that the conversations will be more issue-oriented.

Another thing you have to know is that when I got here, Cardinal [Tarcisio] Bertone [the Secretary of State] had just returned from Cuba. So we talked about Cuba a whole lot, but that doesn't mean that Cuba is the number one concern in the Holy See. It's just what was on their mind at the moment.

What came out of that conversation?

I think that the Holy See, or at least Cardinal Bertone, was very impressed by what he saw in Cuba. He's very hopeful about what he saw in Cuba. The way he would put it is that he thinks there will be significant changes, in a positive direction. I would say that the United States is waiting to see those changes.

Is it the position of the American government that Bertone's trip was ill-advised or unfortunate?

No, certainly not the trip.

Finally, a couple of personal questions. How did your nomination as ambassador come about?

I don't know. You'd have to ask somebody else! As you know, I have a job that I like.

Are you on sabbatical from Harvard?

Technically it's called a leave of absence. Harvard Law School likes and encourages law professors to go into public service. So, I am following a well-trod path of many of my colleagues.

You plan to return to Harvard when this over?

Yes, sure. Harvard is well set-up for this kind of thing, even if usually it involves people going to Washington.

Obviously you don't require a lot of on-the-job training about the Vatican, but can you say something about the preparation the State Department put you through?

They had a little school in Washington that you're required to go to before you come over here. You go up to the Foreign Service Institute, and you've got, for example, diversity training. I've now got a diploma that says I've graduated from diversity school ... as if Harvard University were not already fairly sensitive to those issues! There's also security training, which is a little sobering. You begin to realize that there are a lot of people in the world who don't like us.

You're so used to moving around Rome on your own. Is it frustrating not to be able to do that?

It's the only part of this job that is difficult to get used to. I can't just go out and wonder around. I'm so used to wondering around Rome, but now I sit in an armored car and look out the window at the places I used to walk. It's difficult, it really is. But it has been impressed upon me

that there really is not an alternative. It would not be smart to sneak out the back door and go for a walk. That really is too bad.

At least you can go see your daughter, right?

Except that I have to bring the escorts with me. For example, when we go to Tivoli, we have to go in the armored car and we have two bodyguards with us. To have private family time, I can be in the residence ... that's about it. If I go to her house, I have to bring a motorcade. In our training sessions in Washington, they have ambassadors who are well-seasoned come and give the new ambassadors lectures, about what to expect. The German ambassador said to me, 'Forget about privacy. Buy a good bathrobe.' So I bought three bathrobes!

You've been an important voice in Catholic affairs for a long time. This role is a little different, because you're not representing the Catholic church here and you're not here as an American Catholic. You're representing the government of the United States. Has it been tough to redefine your role?

Less so than you might think, because lawyers are trained to adapt to different roles. In this case, I have no problem with my client ... I'm very enthusiastic this client and this role, and very happy to do it. But you do touch on something that's very different, which is that a professor's life is a life of maximum freedom. That's brought me up short sometimes. When I came over here, I had three speaking engagements that had been arranged a year ago. People were counting on me. But when the State Department saw it they said you can't give those speeches, because no matter how many disclaimers you offer, you will be understood as speaking on behalf of the United States. Of course they were right, even though my speeches were on social science and legal theory, that sort of thing. But if I had given those speeches, they would have been scrutinized for, 'What is she saying as the ambassador?' That's different ... the loss of freedom is not only my freedom to move around the city, but also to speak in my own name. I can't write the kinds of articles that I usually write. And I was halfway through a book!

On what?

The first chapter of it was published in *First Things*, about Plato. I call it *The Forum and the Tower*. It's about people, famous people mostly, who were torn between Aristotle's choice between philosophy and politics – the two most choice-worthy vocations. You know Max Weber's famous pair of essays, "science as a vocation" and "politics as a vocation." I thought that Max Weber and Aristotle posed the pole between the two, and what would be interesting would be to show how it worked in the lives of people who actually experienced it. I did six of them, and I have six more. But then the telephone call came ... I comfort myself with the thought that maybe I'll get some insight since I've been yanked out of the academy and into the political realm.

Is it your expectation that you will finish your term at the end of the Bush presidency?

Yes.

If McCain were to win and ask you to stay on, would you be open to that?

I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, but I came to this job with the thought that it's going to be a short ambassadorship. The main thing I had clear in my mind was that I have to have some definite project that I could complete in a year. The 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights seemed perfect. The pope has now mentioned that so many times, so I said in my interviews in the State Department and in my confirmation hearings, when I was asked what I plan to do, that I'm going to commemorate the 25 years of our diplomatic relationship by honoring the document that contains most of the principles to which the United States and the Holy See are both dedicated. We'll have four conferences, culminating in January 2009 on the actual anniversary of the document.