

Obama's Vatican Pick: Boosting Hispanic Catholics

Sunday, May. 31, 2009

By Amy Sullivan

Barack Obama has an uncanny ability to disarm critics, especially those itching for a fight, and it was on full display this past week. His choice of [federal judge Sonia Sotomayor](#) as a Supreme Court nominee, of course, got all the attention. But another key appointment of a Hispanic with top-notch credentials and a compelling personal story also showed just how good the President is at keeping his opponents off balance. In fact, in selecting Catholic scholar Miguel Diaz to be the new ambassador to the Holy See, Obama not only neutralized potential controversy, but also highlighted a potential weakness of the U.S. Catholic Church these days. (See [TIME's photo-essay "Sonia Sotomayor: The Making of a Judge."](#))

If confirmed, the Cuban-American Diaz would be the first theologian to hold the diplomatic post, and he would become one of the country's most influential Hispanic Catholics. The choice is a shrewd one for a White House that has been under fire from leading conservative Catholics in the first few months of the Administration. What could have been an ugly confirmation battle may well proceed with all the rancor of a first-communion party. (See [pictures of Pope Benedict XVI.](#))

While the relationship between the U.S. and the Vatican has become an important one, the two have enjoyed full diplomatic relations only since 1984. Over the past 25 years, ambassadors to the Holy See have either been Catholic politicians or close personal friends of the President who appointed them. Ronald Reagan chose California businessman William Wilson; Bill Clinton selected former Boston mayor Ray Flynn and former Congresswoman Lindy Boggs; and George W. Bush's first ambassador was former RNC chair Jim Nicholson.

Nominating a Catholic pol to the position would have been a risk for Obama. His selection of Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius to lead the Department of Health and Human Services generated protests from conservatives who questioned whether a politician who supported abortion rights could be a real Catholic. A Catholic politician — even one with pro-life views — would probably have been subjected to a thorough review of her record and asked to explain any votes against abortion restrictions.

Instead, Diaz is a Catholic theologian and professor at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in Minnesota. He is a board member of the Catholic Theological Society of America and a scholar of the German theologian Karl Rahner, one of Pope Benedict's mentors. Diaz, who happens to be pro-life, served on the Obama campaign's Catholic advisory group during the 2008 campaign. Like Sotomayor, he is the child of immigrants and was the first person in his family to attend college.

If Diaz's background as a theologian insulates him from inquiries about an abortion voting record, his Hispanic identity puts potential critics in a bind as well. The U.S. Catholic church may be the one institution more worried than the GOP about losing Hispanics. One-third of U.S. Catholics are Hispanic, and among younger Catholics, the percentages are even larger. A full 60% of American Catholics under age 30 are Hispanic. Father Thomas Reese of the Woodstock Theological Center recently noted on the *Washington Post's* OnFaith site that studies show 1 out of 3 Catholics has left the church over the course of their lives. "The only reason Catholics continue to be a stable percentage of the U.S. population," he wrote, "is that Hispanics are making up for the white Catholics who are leaving."

Even so, the U.S. Catholic Church has been slow to respond to this new reality. Only 9% of active Catholic bishops in this country are Hispanic, and just one of the 31 archbishops is a Latino. *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* reported last year that only 6% of Catholic clergy even speak Spanish. There are exceptions — the new Archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan, delivered part of his inaugural sermon there in Spanish, and Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahoney has been a strong national voice in favor of immigration reform.

But as in Central and South America, the Catholic Church is steadily losing Hispanic congregants to Evangelical denominations. A 2007 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey found that half of Hispanic Catholics prefer charismatic worship styles and practices. In some cases, they are able to find that in Catholic parishes. But where they can't, they are turning to Pentecostal and other Evangelical traditions instead. Although 68% of Hispanics in the U.S. are still Catholics, that percentage has dropped from 78% in the early 1970s.

The job of ambassador to the Holy See is unusual — there are no visa issues to deal with, no military actions to observe and report. At a conference on May 28 at Catholic University to discuss the past 25 years of U.S.-Vatican relations, former ambassador Nicholson said that one of his duties in the post was preparing a quarterly memo to the State Department outlining his best guess of who would be elected as a successor if the Pope died. Pope Benedict would probably prefer to debate Rahner's theological arguments with Diaz than to speculate about his own demise. But he will find in Diaz a representative of the U.S. Catholic Church's future — and an indication that the new Administration not only intends to take its relationship with the Vatican seriously, but that it won't make it easy for conservative Catholics to attack it.

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