

To understand the world we must understand religion



The U.S. ambassador to the Holy See presents a U.S. initiative aimed at giving a voice to religions in foreign policy

ALESSANDRO SPECIALE, VATICAN INSIDER, 14 JULY 2012

“When religion is talked about on television or in newspapers, it is usually spoken about in negative terms, after some conflict or tragedy has taken place. But religion should not be seen as a problem but as an inimitable source of creativity and ideas”: when the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Miguel H. Diaz speaks of the role of religion against the global challenges of the 20th century, he is not just reciting his job description.

For a man who, before being called by Barack Obama to lead such a unique diplomatic mission – as ambassador to the world’s smallest state and the spiritual headquarters of approximately one billion and a half Catholics across the world - and who had been a theologian for many years, talking about the transformational power of faith in modern societies is not simply an abstract concept.

It is not by chance that Diaz was the man chosen to guide one of the three workgroups of the initiative launched by the U.S. State Department with the aim of establishing a relationship with leaders and religious communities across the world and giving them a say in the preparation of American foreign policy guidelines. The initiative is called “**Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group**” and it is part of a more general dialogue between the U.S. “foreign affairs ministry” and civil society. Ambassador Diaz was called - along with other scholars – to lead the workgroup’s activities relating to “humanitarian development and assistance.”

“As a government we are adamant that in order to face future challenges we need to make our voice heard even more and increase our audience reach. The more partners we are able to embrace, particularly in terms of religious agencies and partners, the more likely it is that we will be successful in our foreign policy objectives,” he explained to *Vatican Insider* just after the latest workgroup meeting. The location for the meeting was not chosen by chance either: the Catholic Relief Service headquarters in Baltimore. The Catholic Relief Service is the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ agency which provides aid to poor countries.

The main aim of the dialogue initiative launched by the U.S. Department of State, Diaz said, is to expand relations with communities of faith throughout the world. “We cannot wait for a tragedy to occur – we must forge ties so that when there is a crisis, there is a network of relations, of friends whom we can turn to and say: “Let’s work together to deal with and solve this situation.”

Religion is destined to play an increasingly important role in foreign policy. The rebirth of religions will influence relations between states to an ever greater extent, as Scott M. Thomas wrote on the *Foreign Affairs* forum. Already today future diplomats study the faiths of other countries they will be assigned posts in and embassies do not only speak with governments and diplomats but with religious leaders as well.

In the same way the “human family” is ever more diverse and in closer contact, according to Diaz religions have a great deal to teach us on how we can learn to treat “difference” not as something alien but as something we can relate to, “not simply tolerating it but embracing its humanity and diversity for the common good.”

“Every religious tradition needs an element of diplomacy” if it does not want to become closed, adopting a devotional and fundamentalist approach that closes its doors to dialogue with others,” Diaz said. At the same time, however, “diplomats need input from the religions” in order to remember to look at the “great ideals” and “raise the level of their aims” beyond the daily routine.