

ANNIVERSARY

From Wilson to Burch, 41 years of American ambassadors to the Vatican

WORLD

20_01_2025

John Clarke



On January 10 2025, the Vatican celebrated 41 years since President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II decided to establish formal diplomatic relations. The United States opened its first official embassy to the Holy See on April 9, 1984.

The establishment of official diplomatic relations between the most powerful nation in the world and the spiritual center of the largest global religion might seem surprisingly late. For over a century, anti-Catholic sentiment among Protestant elites in the U.S. cast the Vatican as an “evil force” to be opposed. This prejudice reached its peak with the "Know-Nothings," a nativist political movement formally known as the "American Party," which gained prominence in the 19th century due to its anti-immigration stance, particularly toward Irish Catholics, and its anti-Catholic sentiment.

However, the United States maintained consular relations with the Papal States as early as 1797. Before the formal establishment of diplomatic ties, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Postmaster General, James Farley, normalized relations with the Holy See in 1933. During World War II, Myron Taylor served as an emissary from President Roosevelt to Pope Pius XII, a Pontiff of significant international standing.

From 1951 to 1968, the U.S. had no official representative accredited to the Holy See until President Richard Nixon appointed Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. as a “personal representative” to circumvent old legislation prohibiting the presidency of the United States from using federal money to fund a representation to the Holy See. President Jimmy Carter used a similar strategy by appointing former New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr.

But only the immensely popular Ronald Reagan had the political capital to establish full diplomatic relations with the Holy See, appointing William Wilson as the first U.S. ambassador. Wilson, a devout Catholic, was a decorated war hero and successful California businessman who had developed a close friendship with then Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan and his wife, Nancy, in the 1960s.

Upon assuming office in 1981, Reagan appointed Wilson as his personal envoy to the Holy See—a role upgraded to ambassador in 1984 after Congress repealed the 1867 law prohibiting federal funding for diplomatic missions to the Vatican.

But it was Reagan's second ambassador to the Vatican, Frank Shakespeare, who played a pivotal role in aligning Pope St. John Paul II and the president on critical global issues. Shakespeare, a successful media executive and devout Catholic, developed a deep devotion to Our Lady of Fatima during a previous ambassadorship in Portugal.

Contrary to the popular perception that John Paul II and Reagan shared identical worldviews, there were significant differences. Shakespeare was instrumental in fostering mutual understanding and collaboration between the two leaders, who developed a close friendship. He made it possible for Reagan to meet with the Pope on June 6, 1987, ahead of the G-7 Summit in Venice. Shakespeare, many years later, would reveal [in an interview](#) that the two-hour meeting covered "everything."

While it is not a prerequisite for U.S. ambassadors to the Holy See to be Catholic, all appointees since Reagan have been members of the Roman Catholic Church. Among the notable figures who have represented the U.S. at the Vatican is Raymond Flynn, a devout Catholic and pro-life Democrat who served as ambassador from 1993 to 1997. Flynn, a former mayor of Boston, repeatedly urged President Bill Clinton and the State Department to take calls from Pope John Paul II, who sought to request U.S. neutrality during the 1994 Cairo World Population Summit and the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women. In both events, UN officials and major pro abortion organizations pushed for the establishment of abortion as a world-wide "human right."

Flynn's efforts only found deaf ears in the Clinton administration. Finally, to counterbalance the U.S. delegation, Pope John Paul II appointed Dr. Mary Ann Glendon, a distinguished legal scholar, to represent the Vatican at Beijing. Glendon successfully defended Catholic positions on life and family issues, pushing back against her own country's delegation, headed by none other than First Lady Hillary Clinton. Dr. Glendon ended up having a remarkable academic career, and after serving in several positions at the Vatican, she was appointed U.S. ambassador to the Holy See by President George W. Bush in 2008, during Pope Benedict's papacy.

Another notable figure was Callista Gingrich, who served as ambassador from 2017 to 2021 under President Donald Trump. Initially met with skepticism due to her marriage to Newt Gingrich, a staunch and frequently abrasive conservative politician, she ultimately won over Vatican officials. A Vatican representative described her tenure as "a pleasant surprise," particularly for her dedication to advancing bilateral initiatives against human trafficking and promoting religious freedom worldwide.

If confirmed by the Senate, Brian Burch (*photo above*), the President of [CatholicVote](#)

and father of nine, will be only the second U.S. ambassador to bring children to Villa Richardson, the ambassadorial residence overlooking Vatican City from the Gianicolo hill. The first was Miguel H. Díaz, appointed by President Barack Obama, who served from 2009 to 2012.

Díaz's post-ambassadorship life diverged significantly. After a relatively uneventful term, he faced credible accusations of sexual harassment at the University of Dayton in 2013, separated from his wife in 2015, and later entered a same-sex relationship. In 2020, Díaz joined several pro-LGBT groups in supporting Philadelphia's exclusion of a Catholic adoption agency unwilling to place children with same-sex couples. The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled unanimously in favor of the agency, citing First Amendment protections.

In 2022 Díaz published the book, *Queer God de Amor*, which according to its [official description](#) "outs God from heteronormative closets and restores human sexuality as a resource for theology. This outing of divine queerness -that is, the ineffability of divine life- helps to align reflections on the mystery of God with the faith experiences of queer Catholics. By engaging Juan de la Cruz through queer Latinx eyes, Miguel Díaz continues the objective of this series to disrupt the cartography of theology latinamente."

Jorge Aquino, chair of the Theology and Religious Studies Department at the University of San Francisco, explained to an [LGBT local magazine](#) why Díaz's book was relevant. "Díaz presents a significant theological argument in favor of a more open church teaching on sexuality. And Díaz's own story as a sexual subject — a man who came out as gay later in life, having fathering children in a long-standing heterosexual marriage presents fruitful pathways toward a new thinking in Catholic theology. The fact that Díaz is one of the most prominent public theologians in this country, having served as ambassador to the Holy See during the presidency of Barack Obama, will force more conversation about the need to rethink today's unsustainable anathemas against non-heterosexual love and queer families."

If confirmed by the US Senate, Burch, married for 27 years with his wife Sara and already a grandfather despite his relatively young age, will move into the embassy with four of his nine children.