

Interview with the Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the International Organizations in Vienna Msgr. Dominique Rézeau

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ETHICA:

Monsignor, you are the Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the International Organizations in Vienna. Could you tell us something about your role in the diplomatic service of the Holy See, maybe also something about your personal goals?

RÉZEAU:

Well, as a representative of the Holy See I am not supposed to have personal goals, because I represent the Holy See, so first of all I have to be faithful to the goals and the teachings of the Church and the Holy Father. That however, does mean that I do not enjoy at the same time the "basic freedoms" embodied in the charters of our international organizations! I sometimes see that some of my colleagues, the ambassadors, have to consult with their governments before they can say anything, whereas in our case, we are given quite an amount of freedom to take our own initiative. We also have to consult headquarters for important matters, but we still have a lot of latitude in what we do and say. Sometimes, this could also make things more difficult for us, because very often we don't receive precise instructions. I'm not revealing any secrets when I tell you that I was not told what to say in this interview before I came here, nor was I told to present the opinion of the Holy See on various matters, or its position vis-a-vis the five organizations I am assigned to. I am not saying we have unlimited knowledge - nobody has - but we do have a certain amount of insight which does not necessitate constant referral to our superiors, and I appreciate that.

ETHICA:

So there is a lot of confidence in your loyalty and competence?

RÉZEAU:

Yes definitely, there is confidence and I try to live up to it.

ETHICA:

You said you represent the Holy See in five organizations?

Rézeau: Yes, I am permanent representative - which means that the Holy See is a member of these organizations - to the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and the CTBTO (Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization). I am also permanent observer to UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organization), and to the UN Offices in Vienna. I am only an observer in the two latter because the Holy See is not a member of the United Nations. Since we are only observers, we do not participate in all the day-to-day business of the UN, but we do take part in all meetings and general conferences

organized by it. We are however, members of the IAEA, which allows the Holy See to take part in important conferences, such as those on population and women in Beijing and Cairo. Incidentally, Vienna is the only place where the Holy See has a permanent representative. In all, we have seven different missions to the international organizations: in New York, Geneva, Brussels, Rome, Paris and Strasbourg, however, as I mentioned before, only in Vienna, do we have a permanent representative to these three organizations.

ETHICA:

What are the priorities or main objectives of the Holy See's engagement in the diplomatic world?

RÉZEAU:

Vatican diplomats always wear two different hats if you will: one is the "Church" hat, the other is the "diplomatic/political" hat. In the countries where there is a nuncio, they have a responsibility towards the local church, to guide, advise and counsel it and, at the same time, they have a responsibility toward these countries' local governments. This is not exactly like civil diplomacy however, because its main objective is rather to maintain the dialogue between the local Church and the Church in Rome. Sometimes the nuncio and other Vatican diplomats are viewed as only coming in when there are problems, and of course sometimes there are; but their main preoccupation remains that of keeping the constant exchange of information about local situations and cultures, flowing back and forth. At the same time, they must maintain the dialogue with the local politicians and government; without imposing on them particular views or strategies, there are some points however, which we insist on, such as those related to human rights.

We always stress human rights because we consider them to be very important. They are also part of the development process, of course. We cannot have security, like we have in Europe, if there is no cooperation and solidarity among nations, or if there is no sustainable social and economic development. There are also issues that are very important, such as peace, education, and others, which are not directly religious in nature. When we deal with governments, for instance, in Muslim countries, we do not preach our faith to them, that would not be acceptable, but we have exchanges with them about all these issues.

ETHICA:

Where do you see the main concerns of the Holy See's involvement in the UN and the OSCE?

RÉZEAU:

Being accredited to these organizations is quite different from a normal assignment to a particular country. When you are the representative of the Holy See to a given country, you are in a certain position of strength. Maybe not everybody concerned agrees with you, but you are the only representative of the Holy See in that country. When you are accredited to the international organizations however, the situation is no longer one on one. Instead, you are one of nearly two hundred at the UN and one of more than fifty in the OSCE. This requires a different kind of sensibility, a humility I would say, because we have the same rights as the others - no more, no less. Let me give you a small example: yesterday I was at the IAEA because the Holy See ratified a special convention on nuclear weapons. One part of this convention is a protocol of safeguards, which obliges the signatories to comply with the rules of the Agency and to accept control over their installations. Not all the members signed, but the Holy See did, and had

to follow the same procedure as all the others, even though they all know that we “probably” do not have nuclear weapons. So we had to answer a series of very specific questions and had to agree to let their inspectors visit the Vatican and check the veracity of our claims. I’m sure the inspectors will enjoy their stay in the Vatican, and afterwards will publish a report to the UN, detailing exactly which countries complied with the stipulations of the treaty. I think it is important for us to be a part of that. This is only a minor example, but it shows how we participate in these international organizations. People trust us, but we have to follow the rules just like everyone else. It also shows in the meetings, of course people give us due consideration and attention, but no more than they give the others. This is a good thing, a form of purification and also good for the position of the Holy See in the world today. It demonstrates that we no longer dictate, we merely suggest. We know what we want, we know what is good for the human being and for society, but we only make suggestions.

ETHICA:

Is the Holy See generally well accepted in the diplomatic world?

RÉZEAU:

Usually yes, especially at the institutional level. I will give you another example: two weeks ago, I headed the delegation of the Holy See to the UNIDO general conference. In our speech, we stressed - as usual - the importance of solidarity as well as social justice and development, instead of the technical aspects of industrialization. All the delegates were listening with particular attention, because our speeches are usually different. In our speeches, we can touch on moral aspects and issues, which are more difficult for the others to address directly. Usually, the president of a conference does not comment on the speeches - he only introduces the speakers. This time, however, the president - who hailed from Sri Lanka - afterwards thanked us expressly for our thought-provoking statement. So you see, we thus succeeded in calling the delegates’ attention to human dignity in industrial development. Likewise the very sensitive issues of women and child labour. This kind of special attention is very unusual; the president of the conference did not say that out of courtesy, but because he felt - as did the others - that we had a special message to deliver. Of course, there are also occasions when our position is not understood or not so well received - usually on the level of individual delegates who do not feel the importance of the issues we want to address. At the OSCE summit in Istanbul, where the security charter was prepared, we insisted on two points: religious freedom and social justice, two issues, which a few of our colleagues from other delegations were clearly not interested in. They did not see why we had to insist on the fact that religious freedom is important as a security issue, and likewise our stand on social justice. Sometimes also, what we say is not well understood.

When we intervene, we try to look at the larger picture, such as the concept that you cannot have security if you don’t respect justice and freedom.

ETHICA:

What is your opinion about the development and achievements of the OSCE as regards European security arrangements, and the opportunities that this organization has to establish peace and security in Europe?

RÉZEAU:

I have been here too short a time to become fully immersed in the activities of the OSCE, but from what I can see, I think that the role of the OSCE is obviously not necessarily to

resolve all problems concerning security and cooperation in Europe, but rather to focus on the respect of human rights and other related matters, such as free elections, freedom of the media or the respect of minorities. That is very positive. Of course, when you talk about problems in Europe, the public eye turns more towards the European Community or the UN peacekeeping forces in places such as Kosovo, but the OSCE itself is not often mentioned in the media. I think its role is more humble than that, it is, in effect, to maintain, through its missions, constant contact with most Central European countries, with the people involved in elections or in human rights organizations or with minorities and so forth, mostly to remind local governments and authorities of the commitments they have made. I think this is a very valuable contribution to security in Europe, and although it does not garner much attention, the fact remains that we cannot attain real security without attending to these issues.

ETHICA:

Is there a concept or a vision of the Holy See for Europe?

RÉZEAU:

There has been some controversy about the views put forth by the Holy Father and the last synod, which contend that the history and culture of Europe are inextricably linked to Christianity. It is a fact that, for centuries, European civilization, artistic expression, education, and other relevant domains, were formed and influenced by Christianity and Christian values, and the Holy See wishes to remind people that we have a common heritage which we cannot and must not, dismiss. Nowadays, of course, civil authorities are fully competent in matters relating to social structure and organization, but this does not mean that the Church, and religious values, should be completely relegated to the past or considered as matters which only concern the individual and not society as a whole. The Holy See states very clearly, that we have to restructure Europe taking our heritage into account, and integrate the religious dimension, with its moral and ethical values, into its society. This is very clear to us, but it is not as clear to certain member countries of the OSCE.

It is a matter of great concern to me that, in some countries, religion has been, or still is, a factor of division. We have to be very careful on this point. In some conflicts today, like in Ireland or Bosnia, it may appear that the religious factor is a source of division. However, it would not be fair to say that these conflicts come as a result of differences between faiths. We know very well that it is not religion itself, which compels people to fight, this is not in the essence of any religion. Religion may be involved, yes, but only in the form of fanaticism and extremism, which is not at all the way for the community of believers to express itself. Religious communities should, and in fact, most often do contribute to peace, justice, and dialogue.

Not everybody in Europe agrees with us about the basis on which we want to build Europe. Some want to build it only on the nebulous concepts of human rights. We agree that human rights are very important, but you also have to know where they come from. Natural law, as stated by Cardinal Sodano in Istanbul, is a law inscribed in our conscience and exists whether we acknowledge it or not. We could publish, without it, as many charters as we want, but they would never be a source and an inspiration of human dignity and respect. The Holy See constantly reminds people of that fact, and sometimes it is understood and sometimes it is not.

ETHICA:

What do you wish for in the years ahead? Which problems would you like solved and which developments would you like to see happen?

RÉZEAU:

It's hard to make plans for specific developments to occur on definite dates, because the world around us is in constant change. I am quite optimistic, however. The media mostly focus on the negative stories: more wars, more extremism, more fanaticism, more local conflicts in Africa, in Indonesia, in Europe. There have always been conflicts - and as the Holy Father pointed out in his recent message for the World Day of Peace, you only need to look at the wars in Europe in this century, to find that many millions were killed although, supposedly, we were then quite civilized and religious. Of course, what is happening in Zaire or Indonesia is terrible, because human life is sacred at any time and anywhere, but because we are informed about everything now, it seems to us as if the world is in constant dissolution. It has always been this way, but I think, at the same time, the international community is now aware that we have to build a new world. Maybe the millennium is also an occasion for people to realize that we cannot continue like this, we have to be able to live together. This is however easy to say at the official, institutional level. The problem is that people have to live together at the local level. We would like for example, the Albanians and the Serbs to live together, but first the people have to accept each other. This is a challenge, but it should be possible to live together. In the countries where I have lived, both Christian and Muslim, and now here in the international context in Vienna, I see that there is a growing awareness by the people responsible in their societies, that it is possible to live together and to find happiness. I really think that all the members of these organizations want to work together. Sometimes we get sidetracked, but I think that most of them really want to build a new world and a new society.