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U.S. AND VATICAN RESTORE FULL TIES AFTER 117 YEARS

By Steven R. Weisman and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

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The United States and the Vatican established full diplomatic relations today for the first time in 117 years.

The step, announced here and at the Vatican this morning, was described by spokesmen for the Reagan Administration as intended to improve communications at a time when Pope John Paul II has become increasingly involved in international affairs.

But it touched off strong criticism among Protestant groups, as well as some Jewish and civil liberties groups, who criticized the move as a violation of the separation of church and state. Roman Catholic reaction was restrained and cautious. (Page A4.)

Californian Picked to Be Envoy

President Reagan announced that he would nominate William A. Wilson, a California industrialist and real estate developer, to serve as the United States Ambassador to the Holy See. Mr. Wilson, a longtime friend of the President, has been serving as the President's personal representative to the Vatican since 1981.

The Vatican's representative in Washington, Archbishop Pio Laghi, serves as an apostolic delegate, the envoy of the Pope in foreign countries with which the Vatican has no diplomatic relations. Under the action taken today, he or his successor would serve as a papal nuncio.

Establishment of full diplomatic ties with the Vatican was made possible by a move by Congress last year lifting a prohibition on diplomatic relations enacted in 1867. The original, a product of widespread anti-Roman Catholic sentiment and concern about the struggle for Italian unification, led to the withdrawal of the American minister to the Vatican, Rufus King.

No Debate and Little Attention

Since the time of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, some Presidents have sent personal representatives to the Holy See, but attempts to upgrade the diplomatic contact have been opposed. In November, however, when Congress repealed the 1867 ban, there was no debate in either the House or the Senate, and therefore there was little public attention.

A spokesman for Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., Republican of Tennessee, the Senate majority leader, said it was too early to tell whether there would be any strong opposition to the

Administration's move today. Such opposition could take shape either in the appropriations process or in the confirmation proceedings for Mr. Wilson.

Senator Ernest F. Hollings, Democrat of South Carolina and a candidate for his party's Presidential nomination, said he would oppose elevating the special representative to the rank of ambassador. "It's in violation of the First Amendment and sets a bad precedent," he said.

White House Is Not Worried

White House officials, however, said they foresaw little difficulty in sustaining today's action or winning Senate confirmation for Mr. Wilson. This was also the view of the office of Senator Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Indiana, who led the effort to permit the establishment of diplomatic relations.

In defending the action today, Administration officials noted that 106 other countries have full diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Two years ago, Britain established diplomatic ties on the eve of the first visit by a Pope to Britain since King Henry VIII broke with the church in the 16th century.

Both Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, and John Hughes, the State Department spokesman, said there was no violation of the separation of church and state because the United States was recognizing the Holy See, rather than the Roman Catholic Church itself. Pope Held 'in High Esteem'

"The United States holds Pope John Paul II in high esteem," Mr. Speakes said. "We respect the great moral and political influence which he and the Vatican exercise throughout the world. We admire the courageous stands he takes in defense of Western values."

Mr. Reagan, who is a member of the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ, issued no public comment on today's action.

For all its historical importance, the announcement today was made in a somewhat low-key manner. It came after several weeks of discussion between the Vatican and American representatives and came at Mr. Hughes's regular daily briefing, at which he read a statement:

"The United States of America and the Holy See, in the desire to further promote the existing mutual friendly relations, have decided by common agreement to establish diplomatic relations between them at the level of embassy on the part of the United States of America, and nunciature on the part of the Holy See, as of today, Jan. 10, 1984."

A nearly identical announcement was issued at the Vatican this morning:

"The Holy See and the United States of America, desiring to develop the mutual friendly relations already existing, have decided by common accord to establish diplomatic relations at the level of apostolic nunciature on the side of the Holy See and of embassy on the side of the United States beginning today, Jan. 10, 1984." May Help Win Catholic Support

Several White House and Republican political strategists said today that they thought the move by Mr. Reagan would help win support among Roman Catholic voters, although they emphasized their view that this was not Mr. Reagan's motive.

Some questioned, however, whether this support would be undermined by defections among Protestant or Jewish groups opposed to the action today.

"There was no real hue and cry up here for this," a Republican aide in the Senate said. "I think you're going to hear some grumbling and grouching, rekindling some of the religious bigotry that's still within this country."

But a key White House official said public reaction to Mr. Reagan's move was likely to be favorable.

"I would say it's a positive," said the official, Faith Ryan Whittlesey, assistant to the President for public liaison. "The rank-and-file Roman Catholics are pleased that this has taken place. Everybody knows that the Holy See is an international focal point of diplomatic contact. I think the level of opposition will be muted."