

Amid tense relations, Ireland closes embassy to the Vatican

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) After months of tense relations over the clergy sex abuse scandal, the Irish government announced Thursday (Nov. 3) that it will close its embassy to the Vatican.

"The government believes that Ireland's interests with the Holy See can be sufficiently represented by a non-resident ambassador," said Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs Eamon Gilmore.

Gilmore presented the move as a cost-cutting measure, announcing that Ireland will also close its missions to Iran and the southeast Asian country of Timor-Leste.

The minister said that the decision to close Ireland's embassy to the Vatican was unrelated to controversy this summer over a government-sponsored report on sex abuse in the Irish diocese of Cloyne.

That report characterized the Vatican as "entirely unhelpful" for downplaying the child protection policies that Irish church leaders established in 1996. The report concluded that, in the case of Cloyne, those policies were "not fully or consistently implemented."

In a speech on the floor of the Irish parliament in late July, Prime Minister Enda Kenny said the report exposed the "dysfunction, disconnection, elitism, the narcissism that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day." The Vatican recalled its ambassador to Ireland a few days later.

On Thursday, the Vatican's top spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, downplayed the importance of the embassy closure and said that relations between the Holy See and Ireland "are not in question."

Although many countries conduct their diplomatic relations with the Vatican through ambassadors posted elsewhere, such an arrangement is practically unheard of for a nation with a Catholic majority such as Ireland's.