CENTER VALLEY – With the nation’s gaze turned toward the Pennsylvania primary, citizens of our Commonwealth may have a pivotal role in making political history. Our votes next month might well decide whether or not a female for the first time becomes a candidate for president of the United States.

Recently, a different American woman made political history, when Mary Ann Glendon began her work as the eighth ambassador of the United States of America to the Holy See. With the formal presentation of her credentials, she entered a position with political powers deemed “extraordinary and plenipotentiary.” Though the glare of the media remains focused elsewhere, Glendon’s historic appointment nevertheless has significant political potential.

The sovereign entity known as the Holy See has the oldest continuous diplomatic service in the world. Tracing its origins has far back as the year 325, today it maintains embassies (“nunciatures”) with 176 nation-states and is an active member of numerous international organizations. Since 1964 the Holy See has enjoyed permanent observer status in the United Nations, with all the rights of full membership in the general assembly, except voting, accorded to it in 2004. Formal diplomatic relations with the USA were established only in 1984.

To some, this quick perusal of the Church’s geopolitical history raises the question of whether a religious body should be so active in secular affairs. Particularly in our American cultural history, the intermingling of church and state is a political posture to be avoided at all legal costs. Why, then, should the U.S. government expend its resources on an embassy at the Vatican?
The simple answer is part political, part humanitarian. From the former perspective, as Glendon stated, “The U.S. understands that we are part of an increasingly interconnected world that calls on each of us – no matter what our culture or faith – to work for peace, life, and hope.” Promoting peace is what any U.S. embassy does, but this work is a special competency of the embassy to the Holy See. As a former State Department official there once told me, even though it may not be reported as such, this embassy plays a vital role in the development of most treaties or other agreements that foster peace anywhere in the world.

On a more public front, the embassy advances our country’s humanitarian concerns. As Glendon also noted, “the United States is an instrument of hope in the world because its people are compassionate and generous.” As an example, she noted that the USA provides more than half of all the food aid in the world. Aligning itself with the humanitarian work of an international church, the U.S. embassy thus shares a “commitment to this essential human solidarity” that underscores all political efforts at promoting international stability and security.

Beyond the potential for political influence or international aid, a deeper reason for maintaining diplomatic relations between church and state is the recognition that the interplay of faith and culture, based on an understanding of the inviolable dignity of every human person, is essential to world order. In the present reality of our global community, the promotion and defense of human rights is a common concern that characterizes our interdependence. Acknowledging what it means to be a person necessarily incorporates a religious perspective, for being human results not from a governmental decision or political compromise, but from an awareness of something beyond us, something greater than individual citizens or diverse nations. And today, as the pope said in receiving the new ambassador’s credentials, “this task of reconciling unity and diversity, of forging a common vision and summoning the moral energy to accomplish it, has become an urgent priority for the whole human family.”

Mary Ann Glendon stands in a unique position to respond to this priority. As a Harvard professor of constitutional law, she has academic expertise in human rights and international legal theory. As the first woman to lead a Vatican delegation to a major United Nations conference, and as the first woman to direct a pontifical academy, she has unprecedented experience with the geopolitical workings of the Church. In this year, which marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is most fitting that she has become our ambassador to the Holy See. Having written a book entitled “A World Made New,” she can now play a role in making that come true.