



Canadian journalist Joyce Napier hosts "Power Play with Joyce Napier" on CTV News in May 2023. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/CTV News)

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In a rare ambassadorial appointment, the Canadian government will send a veteran journalist to the Holy See to serve as Canada's top diplomat at the Vatican.

On May 8, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly [announced](#) that 66-year-old, Montreal-born Joyce Napier — the only journalist to ever serve as bureau chief, at different times, for both an English-language and a French-language Canadian news network over a four-decade-long career — will become Canada's senior envoy in Vatican City.

"Canadians can count on Joyce's experience, stature and tenacity representing Canada to the Holy See," said Joly in a statement. "Critically, Joyce will work at the Vatican to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, including confronting the painful legacy of the residential school system."

Until she formally presents her credentials to Pope Francis at a ceremony "in the coming weeks," Napier is not doing any extensive interviews about her new assignment, according to Global Affairs spokesperson Charlotte MacLeod.

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However, Napier is no stranger to the Vatican, where she will work, or to Rome, where she will reside.

She told the National Catholic Reporter that she moved with her family to the Eternal City in 1960 when her Egyptian-born father, an executive with Encyclopedia Britannica, was transferred there for work.

Napier spent a total of 15 years in the Italian capital.

From 1966 to 1977, Napier attended what was then called the Institut Saint-Dominique, an all-girls, French-language Catholic school run by the Dominican order, now known as the [Institut International Saint-Dominique de Rome](#), which is open to all students.

"We had uniforms — I studied Latin and religion, among other subjects," she said. "We had morning prayer and Mass once a week on Wednesdays."

"I am most definitely a Catholic," added Napier, who graduated from the institute with a French baccalaureate, the equivalent of a high school diploma.

She began her career in print journalism in Montreal in 1981, but became best known for her work in broadcast journalism, which began in 1989 when she was

hired as a television reporter for the [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation](#) (CBC), the country's public broadcaster.

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— Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly

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Three years later, she joined [Radio-Canada](#), the CBC's French language counterpart and became the network's Jerusalem-based Middle East correspondent in 1998, working alongside her journalist husband of 34 years, [Neil Macdonald](#), now 67, who was assigned to the same role for the CBC.

In 2003, Napier moved to the U.S. and became Radio-Canada's bureau chief in Washington, D.C., where Macdonald also served as senior correspondent for CBC News.

Napier left CBC to join Canada's largest private broadcaster, [CTV](#), in 2016 and remained there until last year, when she was among 1,300 employees of Bell Media, which owns CTV, who were laid off by job cuts.

[Former Canadian diplomat Roy Norton](#), a friend to Napier and Macdonald, said that her vast news reporting experience, along with having lived in Rome and her Italian fluency, makes her "well-suited" to serve as Canadian ambassador to the Holy See.

"She is going to fit in instantly," said Norton, who as chief of protocol for Canada met Francis at the Vatican in 2017, and as the protocol head for the province of Ontario, helped organize Pope St. John Paul II's final visit to Canada in 2002.

"In stepping outside the box and naming someone like her we're importing someone into the system who is vastly more experienced and more worldly than any diplomat we would normally send to the Vatican," Norton said.

[Tom Clark](#), another former longtime broadcast journalist who was appointed Canada's consul general in New York City last year, said that "to be a great ambassador, you've got to understand your own country — and Joyce really does,

sometimes looking at Canada from afar and seeing how it fits in the world."



CTV's Tom Clark moderates a plenary session at the 2012 Halifax International Security Forum. (Wikimedia Commons/Halifax International Security Forum)

He said that Napier's journalistic reflex is exactly what she will need as ambassador.

"A good journalist is relentlessly curious, asks a lot of questions, digs deep and keeps going to find more and more threads, and that's exactly what a great diplomat does," explained Clark, a former Washington bureau chief for CTV, who expects part of Napier's tasks will be to "discover and help Canada play better in the global Catholic world."

"She's also a highly experienced interrogator," added Norton, noting that Napier's job as a journalist was "to extract information and make people feel comfortable, and build a relationship with them" and then communicate that information to the public.

Her audience now "isn't the world," said Norton, who between 2006 and 2016 served as Canada's consul general in Detroit and later in Chicago, and previously held senior posts at the Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C.

He explained that Napier could be gathering intelligence from within the Holy See — on such global issues as "the standing of China and Russia in the developing world relative to the United States, Canada and other G7 countries" — and transmitting

that information to a closed circle of senior officials at Global Affairs Canada, including Joly, and possibly Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office.



A Canadian flag flies in front of the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, March 22, 2017. (OSV News/Reuters/Chris Wattie)

As a journalist, Napier reported on historic events at the Vatican.

She was there when John Paul II died on April 2, 2005; was outside St. Peter's Basilica to cover the results of the papal conclave that elected the late Benedict XVI as Supreme Pontiff on April 19, 2005; and returned to the Holy See for the beatification of John Paul II on May 1, 2011.

Norton noted that the announcement of Napier's ambassadorial appointment highlighted a focus on Canadian Indigenous issues.

During a six-day visit to Canada nearly two years ago, Francis said he was ["deeply sorry"](#) for the Catholic Church's "catastrophic" involvement in the "cultural destruction" of Canada's Indigenous peoples through its participation in running the

country's residential schools.

Following the pope's first tour of the country, the Vatican repudiated the [Doctrine of Discovery](#), a collection of 15th century papal teachings used to justify colonization, and last year, Francis opened the door to returning Indigenous artifacts from the Vatican Museums, [which has yet to occur](#).

Norton said that part of her diplomatic duties on the Indigenous file, Napier could "ascertain what obstacles there may be to advancing the agenda. Who is arguing internally against this-or-that position? Who are potential allies for a position that we're advancing?"

"As a journalist with her seniority and experience, Joyce is more likely to be effective than a diplomat in that post to be able to uncover opposition or support," he explained. "You do this by approaching people, establishing a relationship with them, and learning what they think. And I think Joyce is a master relationship builder in several languages." In addition to her fluency in French, English, Italian and Spanish, Napier also speaks some Arabic.



Pope Francis participates in the Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage and Liturgy of the Word in Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta, July 26, 2022. (CNS/Paul Haring)

At the Holy See, she will only have five employees, compared to the 150 Clark said he oversees in New York "on any given day."

Her official residence is located in central Rome, about four miles from the Vatican, which consists of "a public area on the main floor that was designed for receiving guests and hosting official events, and a private area upstairs," Global Affairs' MacLeod told NCR.

Unlike the heads of most other major diplomatic missions, however, Napier won't be caught up in much consular, immigration, trade and investment business, and will therefore have more time for "gathering information and intelligence, building relationships and influencing," explained Norton, who also encourages the new ambassador to reach out to cardinals and other members of the Roman Curia.

"She's a very inquisitive person, so I think it would be her natural inclination to get to know all of the players."

Some of them may already know of Napier and want to meet her, according to Norton.

"They will take note that she is quite well-known in Canada, and will learn that she is interesting, that she is charming," he said. "They are very astute and sophisticated, and they will be keenly aware of the fact that this public personality has been appointed to be Canada's ambassador to the Holy See."

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— Former Canadian diplomat Tom Norton

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Norton said that Napier's journalistic background will also make her a source of Canadian information for Vatican officials, such as on climate change — an issue

close to Francis — and whether there could be a change in Canada's position on climate action should [Official Opposition Leader Pierre Poilievre's Conservatives](#) form the federal government in the next national Canadian election, scheduled for next year.

In Clark's view, Napier should expect a warm welcome at the Holy See.

"I think the Vatican would have been delighted by her appointment because of her background in Rome, her religious background and her facility with the language," he said.

Canada [established](#) diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1969.