

# The Diplomacy of the Holy See in the Modern Era

Written by Francis Rooney

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FRANCIS ROONEY, SEP 9 2013

In the increasingly secular environment of the developed western world, driven by rapid information exchange and an unprecedented degree of inter-personal connectivity, one might consider the role the Holy See plays in the affairs of states and international relations as a quaint anachronism or a vestige of the distant past, and thus seek to consign the Holy See to obscurity. However, to do so would ignore the ageless foundation upon which Holy See diplomacy is based, and the fact that it remains as relevant to humanity in the 21st century as it has been in the past. It would also fail to account for the unique role the Holy See plays now, lacking a territorial agenda, in the cultural and religion-inspired conflicts around the world today.

In fact, many leaders at Vatican II urged elimination of the diplomatic role of the Holy See, arguing that the Church should exclusively devote itself to theological and pastoral issues. However, in *Sollicitudo Omnium Ecclesiarum*, a papal letter from 24 June 1969, Pope Paul VI articulated the rationale for continued diplomatic engagement as a means of helping the community of nations “achieve the implementation of great human hopes, peace between nations, the domestic tranquility and progress of each country.”[1] These words call to mind the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution and the U.S.’s lofty foreign policy goals of protecting human rights and dignity and spreading essential freedoms around the world.

A leading Vatican diplomat, Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran, describes the diplomatic force of the Holy See more tangibly as a “moral authority” able to “contest systems or ideas that corrode the dignity of the person and thus threaten world peace.”[2]

### The United States and the Holy See: Natural Partners

As the only nation founded from its beginnings on the principle that man is endowed with inalienable rights, emanating from his being and not by the grant of some government, and as the creators of the 1st Amendment’s protection of the freedom of religion often called it “the first freedom” from which others derive, the United States is a natural partner for the Holy See and can leverage its own goals and policy objectives by continued alignment with it.

The Holy See is most effective when using its platform to denounce actions which undermine human dignity, inhibit freedom and oppress people. It has influence by moral persuasion, often called “soft power,” which can accomplish results hegemonic authorities often cannot achieve on their own. It is also effective in working quietly and bilaterally on certain types of issues which relate to its orientation towards human rights, and in using the power of its global network of clergy and Catholic organizations to advance its agenda. In countries of high Catholic populations, there is even more potential to have an impact.

The successful alignment of President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II’s efforts to undermine communism in the 1980’s is well known. As Premier Gorbachev said, “Everything that happened in Eastern Europe would have been impossible without the pope.”[3] In fact, the Russian KGB had identified the future pope as a strong anticommunist in 1971. Then, in an effort to inhibit the pope’s diplomatic agenda after his election, the Communist Party of Poland called him “our enemy” against whom “all means are allowed.”[4]

### Papal Diplomacy from World War II to the Present

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There are many less obvious examples of important work on the part of the Holy See on conflict resolution and the stimulation of dialogue. Pope John XXII played a critical role in creating a window for conciliation during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, via a subtle, clandestine exchange of communications among the pope, President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev, using the editor of the *Saturday Review*, Norman Cousins, as an intermediary. This effort culminated on 25 October 1962 when Vatican Radio broadcast a well-known papal message, which was published on the front page of *Pravda* the next day. At a time of peak tension during the Cold war, these covert messages were in themselves a significant development, but the fact that the Russians published them so prominently was taken as a definitive sign of an incipient thaw or a possible interest in dialogue.[5]

The work of Myron Taylor at the Holy See during World War II, as President Roosevelt's personal representative, is also well documented. In addition to the use of Vatican neutrality to maintain his routine visits to Pope Pius XII and to allow his assistant, Harold Tittmann, to remain in country throughout the war, the Holy See's diplomatic pouch was used to send messages to the U.S. through Switzerland, all of which served to maintain a robust and valuable channel of information exchange throughout the war. The role the Holy See played soon thereafter in nudging the new Argentine president, Juan Peron, to meet with former U.S. President Herbert Hoover in June 1949 is not so well known. Peron had been elected despite strong U.S. opposition, and was not disposed to engage the U.S. as a result. The goal of Hoover's mission was to obtain a commitment to increase food exports to Europe to alleviate the acute post-war famine there, but Peron likely would not have done so absent the link to the Holy See.[6]

Recently, while I was serving as ambassador, the U.S. engaged the Holy See in an effort to unify the Christian block in Lebanon prior to the 2006 war, so as to fortify the power sharing coalition of Druze, Hezbollah and Christian which had brought relative stability to the country for several years. The U.S. also brought the Holy See's influence to bear in Latin America, as several leaders including Hugo Chavez, Rafael Correa and Evo Morales in particular, became increasingly hostile to U.S. interests. It was also during my time in Rome that Pope Benedict intervened to help a group of sailors from Britain who had strayed in to Iranian waters, at the request of Prime Minister Tony Blair. As a hostile power, lacking diplomatic access to the government of Iran, the UK was limited in its options as to how to negotiate for the release of its sailors and approached the Holy See. As in so many border disputes and other diplomatic interventions by the Holy See in the past, its unique position as global moral authority and lack of hegemonic agenda enabled a successful mediation. Pope Benedict XVI wrote the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, asking for release as a humanitarian gesture at Easter, which the Iranians accepted. The words President Ahmadinejad used in explaining the release were in large part the same ones the pope had used in his diplomatic note.

It is worth noting that in June 2009, when Manuel Zelaya attempted to return to Honduras to contest the government of Roberto Micheletti after he himself had been removed after provoking a constitutional crisis, Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga played a significant, if not decisive role in keeping Zelaya out of Honduras.[7] Lastly, in the summer of 2010, working through Cuban Cardinal Jaime Ortega and supported by the government of Spain, the Holy See succeeded in accomplishing two significant improvements in the human rights climate of Cuba. First, the Holy See orchestrated the release of the remaining 52 political prisoners who had been rounded up in a politically inspired purge in 2003, and second, it inspired the relaxation of a ban on marches by *Las Damas en Blanco*, a human rights protest organization working in both Miami and Cuba.

## Benedict XVI, Islam, and Secularism

While these examples of tactical diplomatic engagement are interesting, and demonstrate how effective the Holy See can be, the more sustaining and impactful recent expressions of the Holy See's exercise of "soft power" come from Benedict XVI's Regensburg speech and subsequent visits to the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany.

When the pope spoke at Regensburg, Germany, in September 2006 against the misuse of religion to incite violence and advance extremism and intolerance in the Islamic world, he used a poignant and controversial metaphor to make his point, and brought the attention of the entire world to bear on the question of how to temper the religious fervor of some interpretations of Islam with the reason and rationality of the modern world. Subsequent to this speech a group of 38 Muslim scholars has convened and explored avenues toward accomplishing this goal, seeking "a consonance

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between the truths of the Koranic revelation and the demands of human intelligence.” While there is much to achieve in this regard, the position of the Holy See, as both global interlocutor and a major source of leadership for one of the three Abrahamic faiths, has a special role to play.

In a similar vein, the pope and clergy from around the world have discussed the risks to freedom and democracy from degradation of religion in modern society and its replacement with a material secularism. Pope Benedict XVI summarized the Holy See’s position in an address to the German parliament on 22 September 2011, “Politics must be striving for justice, and hence it has to establish the fundamental preconditions for peace...systems of laws have almost always been based on religion: decisions regarding what has to be lawful among men were taken with reference to the divinity.”[8] Whether concerning the internal national politics of a country, or the relations among states, the thesis is that without the “moral compass” and values of human decency and respect for individual rights inspired and taught by religion, it is difficult to have justice and freedom for long. The 20th century examples of totalitarianism, in Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia come to mind.

## Pope Francis and the Future

We will see how the new pope, Pope Francis, takes these principles forward. While Pope Benedict expressed them in a context different from his predecessors, they nonetheless remain the same fundamental principles. Popes have consistently applied these concepts through the years: John Paul II focused on Communism, Benedict XVI on radicalization and secularism, John XXIII on nuclear war and Benedict XV and Pius XII on the evils of the two World Wars which dominated their papacies.

I am hopeful that this “new world” pope, appearing to be more conversational and less formal, will be able to deploy the “soft power” and broaden and deepen the message of the Holy See more effectively than ever to challenge abhorrent and oppressive behaviors in the world. So far, his emphasis on the social mission of the Church squares well with a diplomacy based on the inalienable rights of man and the protection of human dignity for all.

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[1] Paul VI, *Sollicitudo Omnium Ecclesiarum*, 24 June 1969. Text available from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_motu-proprio\\_19690624\\_sollicitudo-omnium-ecclesiarum\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19690624_sollicitudo-omnium-ecclesiarum_it.html).

[2] Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, “On the Theme ‘the Presence of the Holy See in the International Organizations,” Lecture at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan (22 April 2012). Text available from [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/secretariat\\_state/documents/rc\\_seg-st\\_doc\\_20020422\\_tauran\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/documents/rc_seg-st_doc_20020422_tauran_en.html).

[3] “Everything that happened in Eastern Europe”: Rev. John J. Coughlin, O.F.M., “The Practical Impact of the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought,” *St. John’s Law Review*, Vol. 75, Issue 2 (Spring, 2001).

[4] “our enemy”: George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York, New York: Cliff Street Books, 1999 and 2001).

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[5] Renzo Allegri, "An Unusual Alliance," *Messenger of Saint Anthony*, 6 (June 2003); text available from [http://www.messengersaintanthony.com/messaggero/pagina\\_articolo.asp?IDX=193IDRX=60](http://www.messengersaintanthony.com/messaggero/pagina_articolo.asp?IDX=193IDRX=60); also see Renato Cardinal Martino, "The Church and International Order," *Ave Maria Law Review*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (Spring, 2004): 49-64, which discusses the radio address and links it to the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. For a translation of the address, see Pope John XXIII, "A Call for Negotiations, Radio Appeal to All Men and Their Governments (Oct. 25, 1962), *The Pope Speaks* 8 (1963): 227-228. Coverage of the address can also be found in such newspapers as the 25 October 1962 Cumberland Evening Times (front page), and the 25 October 1962 Appleton Post-Crescent (page A2).

[6] The Truman and Hoover Presidential Libraries, *Herbert Hoover and Harry S. Truman: A Documentary History*, edited by Timothy Walch and Dwight M. Miller (Worland, Wyoming: High Plains Publishing, 1992). An online version is available from <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/hoover/book.htm>. See especially, chapter 2, "Feeding the World," available from <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/hoover/world.htm>.

[7] Carlos Salinas, "Óscar Maradiaga, un Papable Progresista Venido a Menos," *El País*, 12 March 2013. Text available from [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/03/12/actualidad/1363096129\\_716306.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/03/12/actualidad/1363096129_716306.html). Also see John Rosenthal, "Honduran Archbishop Blasts Zelaya and Chavez," *The American Spectator*, 16 July 2009; text available from <http://spectator.org/blog/2009/07/16/honduran-archbishop-blasts-zel>; and Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "The Cardinal and the Constitution," *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 November 2009; text available from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703683804574534260986348376.html>.

[8] Benedict XVI, Address to the German Bundestag, Berlin (22 September 2011). Text available from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110922\\_reichstag-berlin\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin_en.html).

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