

Review - The Global Vatican

Written by A. Alexander Stummvoll

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The Global Vatican: An Inside Look at the Catholic Church, World Politics, and the Extraordinary Relationship Between the United States and the Holy See

By: Francis Rooney

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013

Being foreign ambassador to the Holy See is considered to be a great honor and privilege. Usually this post is offered to senior career diplomats as acknowledgment for long and distinguished service. In some countries, like the United States, the head of state often reserves the post for political appointees as a reward for personal friendship or financial support. The latter case applies to Ambassador Francis Rooney, a successful businessman who helped to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004 and the ensuing festivities of his second inauguration.

The reason that an ambassadorship to the Holy See is so attractive lies in the unique nature and the soft power of the Vatican, which has a unique status under international law. On the one hand, it is a sovereign entity which currently engages in diplomatic relations with 179 states and is a permanent observer at the United Nations. On the other hand, in the person of the pope, it is the spiritual and organizational head of the Catholic Church, representing the single largest religious denomination in the world consisting of approximately 1.2 billion Catholic Christians.

Foreign ambassadors to the Holy See – with the exception of the Italian ambassador – neither have to worry about economic nor about consular relations. Instead, they pursue big and broad diplomatic issues: monitoring the development of the Vatican's position on emerging global crises, its stance on thematic issues such as human rights or terrorism, and its other multilateral and bilateral relationships, always with a view to representing each country's national viewpoints, to downplay tensions, and, if possible, nudge the Vatican closer to their national interests.

Francis Rooney served as US Ambassador to the Holy See from 2005 to 2008; a time when US-Holy See relations had hit a low in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which John Paul II publicly opposed. While some circles initially harbored concern that Rooney was simply a “big-money pal” who lacked the necessary diplomatic experience, his newly published account reveals that he actually arrived with a great fascination of all things Catholic as well as a strong and positive commitment to restore US-Holy See relations towards a more co-operative direction.

The Global Vatican is very well written and easy to read. Thanks to a well-designed structure, it accomplishes the rare feat of appealing to both a general audience as well as to experts. The first part of the book offers a well-researched history of US-Vatican relations since the 17th century. The second part of the book contains Rooney's personal reflections about the key themes, issues, and events of his ambassadorial stint, including his initial difficulties of deciphering the Vatican's unique culture and its complex institutional structure.

US-Holy See Relations

Rooney convincingly explains the history of US-Holy See relations as a long process of overcoming mutual suspicions and prejudices towards recognizing what is best in each other. Until independence, religious toleration decrees in America frequently applied to everyone except to Catholics who fought hard to celebrate mass publicly or

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to get voted into a political office. At a time when the newly founded US celebrated its commitment to human rights, democracy, and republicanism, the Catholic Church was scared by the traumatic and bloody experience of anti-clerical persecution which instilled a lasting aversion towards all things modern and democratic in the papacy.

In 1789, the starting year of the French Revolution, John Carroll was approved as the first Catholic bishop of the US and the religious freedom for Catholics increased. The 19th century brought subsequent waves of Irish and later Italian Catholic immigrants. These new communities would eventually make Catholicism the single largest religious denomination in the country. The influx increased prejudice and hostility on the part of native-born, working-class Protestants who perceived Catholicism to be an alien religion and who were under economic pressure by the influx of new and cheap labor into the US job market.

Following the defeat of Napoleon, the Papal States, a large territory located on the Italian peninsula ruled by the papacy since the 8th century, were restored. Freelance US consuls had been based there since the late 18th century to represent American trade interests relating to cotton, sugar, and tobacco. From 1848 onwards, the US government was represented by a *chargé d'affaires* to expand these economic relations. Yet diplomatic relations broke down in 1867. A (mis-) perceived Vatican sympathy for the Confederate States and an (unfounded) rumor that the Vatican had forbidden Protestant American worship in Rome led the US Congress to end the financial appropriations for the US mission to the Holy See.

In 1870, the unification of Italy led to the loss of the Papal States and the invasion of Rome. The papacy was now confined to the tiny Vatican territory inside Rome and had to find a new role in international relations, replacing its traditional territorial and financial power resources with a new emphasis on its moral authority.

During World War I, Pope Benedict XVI vehemently pushed for peace and led sustained humanitarian efforts for war refugees, prisoners of war, and battlefield casualties. According to Rooney it was “one of history’s great misfortunes” (p. 76) that Benedict’s Vatican and Wilson’s America did not join forces for peace by “adding depth and strength to the other’s moral authority” (p. 79). President Wilson reacted negatively to Benedict’s August 1917 Peace Note and, following the US declaration of war in April 1917, pushed for an Allied victory instead of a restoration of the *status quo ante*.

During World War II, US-Holy See relations were much closer even though the Vatican maintained a neutral posture. President Roosevelt recognized the added-value of sending a personal representative, Myron Taylor, to Pope Pius XII with a view to coordinate humanitarian efforts, to soften anti-Soviet rhetoric by the Vatican, and to establish a useful listening post in war-torn Europe.

In the Cold War era, shared antipathy to communism was the glue that kept the US and the Holy See together, as evidenced by shared efforts to prevent a communist victory in the 1948 Italian elections, intense strategic conversations during the Vietnam War, and a convergence of interests between President Reagan and Pope John Paul II to support the Polish workers’ movement Solidarity in the 1980s. While President Truman’s 1951 attempt to normalize diplomatic relations with the Holy See was still doomed to fail due to anti-Catholic sentiment, President Reagan succeeded in appointing an ambassador to the Holy See in 1984.

Following the fall of communism, US-Holy See relations declined in the post-Cold War era as the Vatican had misgivings about the use of military action during the Operation Desert Storm campaign against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Moreover, it strongly opposed US-led efforts to liberalize global norms relating to abortion and traditional family values during the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Summit on Women.

Rooney’s Ambassadorship

Francis Rooney was the 7th US Ambassador to the Holy See since the restoration of diplomatic relations in 1984. Despite – or perhaps because of – the tension the Iraq War caused to US-Holy See relations, George W. Bush attached a lot of value to courting the Vatican in order to gain moral legitimacy. He set a presidential record by visiting

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the Vatican a total of six times during his time in office, including for the funeral of Pope John Paul II.

His official instructions asked Rooney to assist America's cause by "waging a relentless global war", "overcoming the faceless enemies of human dignity, including disease, starvation, and poverty", and "assisting American citizens, institutions and businesses as they pursue their charitable and commercial interests" (p. 153).

To operationalize these strategic goals during his work at the Vatican, Ambassador Rooney defended the US position on Iraq, by, for example, pressuring the Dean of the Vatican diplomatic corps, the ambassador of San Marino, to stop talking about Iraq (p. 158). On a more positive note, he tried to reassure Church representatives that the US would protect Iraqi Christians. Instead of focusing too much on divisive issues Rooney opted for the smarter strategy to play up US-Vatican cooperation on issues of shared interest such as the promotion of religious freedom and human rights, the fight against human trafficking, and humanitarian aid for Africa.

Ambassador Rooney also closely monitored – and encouraged – a shifting Vatican position on Islam, listening to Pope Benedict's distinction between the "tolerant" Mohammed of the early Koran and the "aggressive" Mohammed of the later Koran during his credentialing meeting (p. 155) or discussing the radicalizing effects of some Saudi-backed "madrasas" (religious schools) in sub-Saharan Africa during a visit by First Lady Laura Bush to the Vatican. Crucially, Rooney conveyed US support during the fallout created by Pope Benedict's infamous Regensburg speech which included a controversial citation from a 14th century emperor (from which the pope later distanced himself) that Mohammed brought only "evil and inhuman" things.

With regard to other geopolitical areas that are of interest to the US, Rooney closely monitored Vatican-China relations, which are still not official and suffer from China's failure to fully respect religious freedom. Moreover, Rooney pushed for a more outspoken Church position against Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez and raised concern about the public support Cardinal Obando y Bravo expressed for former Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega during the presidential campaign in Nicaragua. "The ability of the United States to affect change" in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia or Ecuador is very limited, Rooney stresses and notes that the Catholic Church is in a better position to exercise a helpful "moderating influence" (p. 233).

Concluding Reflections

The Global Vatican's biggest strength is also its biggest weakness. The book is a political account which colorfully illustrates the perspective of a committed Republican US ambassador to the Holy See. It should not be read as an academic analysis of the Vatican's role in world politics nor a neutral study of US-Holy See relations.

This does not mean that the book is not well-researched. To the contrary, the endnotes and the bibliography contain the most up-to-date overview of literature on US-Holy See relations and thus offer a very useful starting point for further research, especially for postgraduate students. Moreover, the author capitalized on the contacts he made during his ambassadorship in order to interview an impressive range of high-level Vatican officials and Church observers. Even though the author drew upon source material from both the US National Archives and the Vatican Secret Archives he overlooked, however, the wealth of relevant material available from US presidential archives.

Ambassador Rooney unapologetically approaches his topic from a pro-American and pro-Bush position. As any good foreign ambassador would do, he puts the analytical spotlight on areas of cooperation. He acknowledges conflicts as they relate to US-Holy See relations under Democratic presidents, such as the culture wars fought between the Clinton administration and the Vatican during the UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing or, more recently, the tensions between the Obama administration and the Church on the issue of religious exemption for healthcare provision related to contraception.

On the other hand, Rooney brushes over or omits to discuss sources of conflict that arise either due to tensions between the social doctrine of the Church and the position of the Republican Party or America's tendency towards unilateralism and the Vatican's preference for multilateralism. The Bush administration's clamp-down on undocumented migrants which brought suffering to millions of Hispanic families, the impact of unregulated US

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capitalism leading to the 2008 global financial crisis, the ongoing failure to substantially reduce America's nuclear arsenals, the legality of US drone warfare, and the morality of US sanctions on Cuba are not discussed in the book.

Either these discussion points do not come up in US-Holy See relations – which would be surprising – or American ambassadors to the Holy See are doing an amazing job in successfully deflecting these concerns – which is unlikely. Despite the lofty rhetoric about the convergence and complementarity of US and Church values and principles, a key theme that time and again implicitly shines through any study of US-Holy See relations is how the former tries to use the latter as a tool to further its own geopolitical interests. Like other states or international institutions, the US is often more interested in obtaining papal legitimacy rather than receiving policy advice, especially if the Vatican speaks out in a critical, prophetic manner, as it did, for example, during World War I, during the later stages of the Vietnam War, or in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In summary, *The Global Vatican* offers a helpful and well-researched introduction to US-Holy See relations and many interesting and new details regarding the development of that relationship during the ambassadorship of Francis Rooney. Yet the book also serves as an implicit reminder of the reason why the analysis of the Vatican's relationship with international actors should not be left solely to those who actively participate in such relationships.

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