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Should the Holy See retain its diplomatic presence?

The relationship between politics and religion is one whose history and discourse is mired in centuries of fractious and intense debate, with the issue arguably more contentious now than ever. Whilst some countries, particularly those in the Islamic worldⁱ, increasingly press for an ever tighter union between the state and its chosen religionⁱⁱ, the process of untangling the two has become increasingly popular, such as the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion in the United Statesⁱⁱⁱ. The delicate balance between the two is perhaps nowhere more clear than in the influential, yet often imperceptible, diplomatic workings of the Vatican, whose diplomats (known as *nuncios*) serve the interests of the Catholic Church, and act on behalf of the Vatican whilst retaining legal distance. In this essay, I will be examining the origin, agenda, and nature of the Papal diplomacy, as well as arguing why I believe that, in an increasingly secular world, the presence of a diplomatic force with an overtly religious motivation is an inappropriate power on the global diplomatic stage. However, I will also argue that from a practical standpoint, the presence of the papacy is an often invaluable force for peace and reconciliation, and as such can and does act as an important intermediary in various extremely influential points of diplomatic friction.

The Holy See - whose representation lies not with the sovereign territory of the Vatican, but primarily with the Catholic church - has long been held in a special esteem by the international community with regards to international politics and diplomacy. Historically, the diplomatic place of the Holy See has been curiously expansive, even alongside an ever-more secular global society. While the Holy See has been establishing diplomatic relations since the 15th century,^{iv} the biggest expansions came during the 20th century, most notably in 1914 with Pope Benedict XV's expansion into South America and Eastern Europe^v, and under the papal oversight of Pope John Paul II, during whose tenure the number of permanent diplomatic associations increased from 85 upon his 1978 election, to 174 at the time of his death in 2005^{vi}. Under his tenure, the papacy was able to forge some extremely powerful diplomatic ties, including Margaret Thatcher's Britain, Ronald Reagan's America, and Mikhail Gorbachev's USSR^{vii}.

The Holy See currently has diplomatic relations with 183 sovereign states, 180 of which are permanent diplomatic missions abroad^{viii}. It is also a deliberative participant in 16 multilateral intergovernmental bodies, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Furthermore, the Holy See is the only delegation in the United Nations General Assembly to have voluntarily adopted 'permanent observer' status, a position it has held since 1964, the only other being the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, whose application to the General Assembly failed when Britain and France chose to abstain from voting on their appointment^{ix}. While it does not, therefore, have voting rights in the General Assembly, it regularly is invited to participate in negotiation and ratification of legislation on equal footing with member states. This is done by the UN practice of the *all-states formula*, in which members of UN specialised agencies - such as the IAEA - are invited to participate in legislative action that concerns international law. For example, the Holy See participated actively in the negotiation of the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

One aspect of the papal diplomacy that is crucial to the discussion is that apostolic nuncios are not primarily representatives of the Vatican city state, but representatives of the Catholic Church, and therefore their interests in the UN and beyond are tied primarily to the promotion and promulgation of the interests of the Church. While the Holy See is responsible for enacting diplomatic action on behalf of the Vatican, having ‘full ownership, exclusive dominion, and sovereign authority and jurisdiction’^x over the city state, they are legally distinct; one cannot draw an exact correlation between the Holy See and other overtly religious nations - such as Iran - as national religions do not form the first priority in their diplomatic program, as is the case with the Holy See.

The primary issue that arises when one considers the diplomatic power of the Holy See is the potentially troubling marriage of religion and politics that it espouses. Generally speaking, I would argue that a religious affiliation ought to remain a personal relationship one has with one’s organisation, and as such ought not to play a role in politics or international relations.

Another issue that I would raise in objection to the diplomatic presence of the Holy See, and the subsequent marriage of international politics and religion, concerns itself with the enlightenment liberal ideals of equality of all people regardless of religion, an idea seemingly at odds with the Catholic exceptionalism that is naturally preached by the Holy See. Benjamin Constant was one such liberal thinker who espoused as strict a separation between religious and political action, arguing that societies ought to ‘[take] care that they be contained inside the private sphere of the individual’^{xi}. To Constant, for a government to allow religiously inclined morals to dictate its legislative program would be to allow the private sphere to spill into public life in an inappropriate manner. Similarly with the diplomacy of the Holy See, its vocal opposition to more recently, often secularly, discovered rights from a position of theological objection is a clear violation of the barrier as identified by Constant. Likewise with the ideas of the great enlightenment thinker John Locke, who, in his ‘A Letter concerning Toleration and Other Writings’, likened the church, as a voluntary organisation to a ‘club for claret’^{xii}. This manifests itself in the Holy See’s opposition to abortion, euthanasia and related issues of sanctity of life, justifying its attitude on overtly theological grounds^{xiii}. The contentions of overextension of religious influence came to a realised clash at a 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, in which the Holy See used its political muscle in order to dilute a resolution on reproductive rights, removing the previous mentions of guaranteed access to contraceptives. Representatives of the Holy See even went so far as to meet with and encourage leaders of more radical wings of other faiths, notably from Iran and Libya, to lobby to have all mentions of reproductive rights removed^{xiv}. That the papacy was able to effectively inflict its religious mission on a resolution by a supposedly irreligious group is a clear overextension of the role of religious doctrine according to the boundary set by thinkers such as Constant.

However, the role of the Holy See to promote the interests of those of the Catholic faith has been of diminishing influence in recent years. The election of Pope Francis arguably marked a new era in Papal diplomacy, as he attempted to introduce a new, more liberal attitude to the Church’s presence in global diplomacy. Most notably, Pope Francis has been a vocal influence on the rights and protection of refugees, regardless of their religious affiliation. In a statement he gave to commemorate the 104th Day for Refugees and Migrants, he said:

‘Throughout the first years of my pontificate, I have repeatedly expressed my particular concern for the lamentable situation of many migrants and refugees fleeing from war, persecution, natural disasters and poverty... [I wish] to express the Church’s concern for migrants, displaced people, refugees and victims of human trafficking.’ Pope Francis, *Message of His Holiness*, 14th January 2018^{xv}

The more liberally palatable attitudes of the modern papacy is indicative of the newfound willingness to transcend cultural and religious boundaries to strive for a common diplomatic good. While Pope Francis himself prefers to take a decentralised attitude to diplomacy^{xvi}, prioritising the judgement of local nuncios, he has been outspoken in his criticism of European nations not accepting refugees^{xvii}, even in such cases as when their resettlement programs prioritise Catholics. Such a situation arose in Poland - the most homogenous nation in Europe, at 90% Catholic and 99% native born - in which the state flew in 50 Catholic Syrian refugee families, in the same month that they rejected their EU migrant resettlement quota of 5,024, roughly 0.013% of the population^{xviii}. In response to this, the Polish nunciature asked the local Episcopate to relax its stance on non-Catholic refugees, to which the Episcopate responded that immigration remained the authority of the secular state, not commenting on whether the nunciature’s recommendations would be accepted^{xix}. Nonetheless, that the diplomatic representative was able to comment on the situation in such a way that diminished the influence of Catholic exceptionalism is demonstrative of Pope Francis’ more universalist diplomatic program, even perhaps at the expense of Catholic self-interest.

Furthermore, from a practical standpoint, it is clear that the diplomatic power of the papacy is extremely influential when it comes to issues of peace and reconciliation, especially when acting as a neutral intermediary force. The fact that its diplomatic mission is primarily an extension of its religious authority, can in some cases, rather than raise critical points of intermingling powers, actually lend its diplomatic mission more authority than it would carry as a regular power. The pattern of Catholic brokering of peace deals has been played out many times globally, notably in Burundi, in which Archbishop Michael Courtney helped formulate a peace deal that ultimately ended the 12-year long civil war^{xx}. Arguably the most high-profile of these cases arises from the exceptionally fragile rebuilding of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States during the Obama administration. In 2014, the United States and Cuba were attempting a prisoner swap as part of repairing relations between the countries, but some of the finer details were proving an insurmountable challenge, as the United States was arguing that an American aid worker Alan Gross - who had been detained in Cuba for almost 20 years - had been wrongfully imprisoned and as such could not be used as a bargaining tool. The New York Times reports that

‘A personal appeal from Pope Francis, American officials said, was critical in persuading Cuba’s president, Raúl Castro, to agree to a prisoner swap and the freeing of the American aid worker Alan P. Gross. The pope, officials said, acted as a “guarantor” that both sides would live up to the terms of a deal reached in secret.’ Mark Landler, *Journey to Reconciliation Visited Worlds of Presidents, Popes and Spies*, 17th December 2014^{xxi}

It is clear that, in this case, the reestablishment of relations between the United States and Cuba would have been extremely unlikely without papal intervention, introducing crucial practical nuance to the more theoretical arguments as proposed by Constant.

In conclusion, the role of the papacy in international diplomacy is one that is extraordinarily complex and nuanced, both currently and historically. In an increasingly secular world, and one in which liberal enlightenment ideals of separation of church and state are generally accepted in the Western world, I would argue that the presence of a diplomatic force for the papacy is not compatible with modern standards of liberal democracy. From a philosophical standpoint certainly, the ideals of Constant are most aligned with what I would consider to be proper practice of government and the relationship between religion and the public sphere. However, from the platform of modernisation and liberalisation that Pope Francis seems to be endorsing, it is not clear that the Holy See is in fact violating the barrier that Constant sets up, as it seems to be rejecting the kind of Catholic exceptionalism that one might expect a religious force to proclaim. Furthermore, when one takes into account the sheer scale of peace and reconciliation that the Holy See is instrumental in, most influentially regarding Cuban-American relations, it becomes clear that practical objection to the Holy See is not feasible when it remains such a dominant and trusted moral force globally - politically or otherwise.

ⁱ Islam is the most prominent state religion in the world, with 26 states considering a branch of Islam to be their state religion (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_religion#/media/File:Map_of_state_religions.svg accessed 27/10/18)

ⁱⁱ Consider, for example, Article 2 of the Constitution of Iran: 'The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school [in usul al-Din and fiqh], and this principle will remain eternally immutable' (https://constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en, accessed 27/10/18)

ⁱⁱⁱ See Article 1 of the United States Constitution, 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof' (https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first_amendment, accessed 27/10/18)

^{iv} Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, 'Bilateral Relations of the Holy See' (https://web.archive.org/web/20140709142833/http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/documents/rc_seg-st_20010123_holy-see-relations_en.html accessed 27/10/18)

^v Gagliarducci, 2018, 'How papal diplomacy began a new approach in 1914', Catholic News Agency (<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/how-papal-diplomacy-began-a-new-approach-in-1914-40329> accessed 27/10/18)

^{vi} Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, 'Bilateral Relations of the Holy See' (https://web.archive.org/web/20140709142833/http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/documents/rc_seg-st_20010123_holy-see-relations_en.html accessed 27/10/18)

^{vii} The Economist, 2007, 'God's ambassadors' (<https://www.economist.com/international/2007/07/19/gods-ambassadors>, accessed 27/10/18)

^{viii} Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, 'Bilateral Relations of the Holy See' (https://web.archive.org/web/20140709142833/http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/documents/rc_seg-st_20010123_holy-see-relations_en.html accessed 27/10/18)

^{ix} UN.org, 'Non-Member States' (<https://www.un.org/en/sections/member-states/non-member-states/index.html> accessed 30/10/18)

^x Preamble to the Lateran Treaty, 1929 (<http://www.aloha.net/~mikesch/treaty.htm> accessed 30/10/18)

^{xi} Todorov, 1999, 'A Passion for Democracy - Benjamin Constant', USA: Algora Publishing

^{xii} Locke, 1689, 'A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings', Indianapolis, 2010

^{xiii} Holy See, 'Abortion Policy' (www.un.org/esa/population/publications/abortion/doc/holysee.doc accessed 30/10/18)

^{xiv} Tagliabue, 1994, 'Vatican Seeks Islamic Allies In U.N. Population Dispute', New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/08/18/world/vatican-seeks-islamic-allies-in-un-population-dispute.html> accessed 30/10/18)

^{xv} Pope Francis, 2018, 'Message of His Holiness'

(http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.html accessed 30/10/18)

^{xvi} Gaetan, 2018, 'Pope Francis' Silence on Central Europe's Migration Crackdown', Foreign Affairs

(<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-europe/2018-03-07/pope-francis-silence-central-europes-migration-crackdown> accessed 30/10/18)

^{xvii} Pulella, 2018, 'Pope says countries must unite on migration, as Italy, France clash', Reuters

(<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-italy-pope/pope-says-countries-must-unite-on-migration-as-italy-france-clash-idUSKBN1JA0YJ> accessed 30/10/18)

^{xviii} Wasik and Foy, 2015, 'Poland favours Christian Refugees from Syria', Financial Times

(<https://www.ft.com/content/6edfdd30-472a-11e5-b3b2-1672f710807b> accessed 30/10/18)

^{xix} Ojewski, 2015, 'Why is Catholic Poland so reluctant to help Muslim refugees?', Middle East Eye

(<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/catholic-poland-reluctant-help-muslim-refugees-2091168202> accessed 30/10/18)

^{xx} Nantulya, 2015, 'Burundi: Why The Arusha Accords Are Central', Africa Center

(<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/burundi-why-the-arusha-accords-are-central/> accessed 30/10/18)

^{xxi} Landler and Gordon, 2014, 'Journey to Reconciliation Visited Worlds of Presidents, Popes and Spies', The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/18/world/americas/journey-to-rapprochement-visited-worlds-of-presidents-popes-and-spies.html?module=inline> accessed 30/10/18)

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