

Pope Francis and the challenges of inter-civilization diplomacy

O Papa Francisco e os desafios de uma diplomacia inter-civilizacional

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201500204>

BORIS VUKIĆEVIĆ*

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int. 58 (2): 65-79 [2015]

Introduction

The Holy See, as the governing body of the Roman Catholic Church, has been a major player in international politics for many centuries. It has survived many attacks and persecutions, and has remained recognized as the subject of international law and international relations in the contemporary world, which makes it unique among religious organizations.

Throughout its long history, the Holy See has survived turmoil. First, in its very beginning, the Roman Empire persecuted Christianity, forcing the early Church to be a clandestine organization whose first leaders were either executed or incarcerated. Then, after the Church was recognized, its status significantly improved. In 754 the Donation of Pepin founded the Papal State, making the Bishop of Rome - now known as the pope - the ruler of the independent state. Still, the papacy faced a new set of troubles. Long lasting conflict with the Holy Roman emperors and a power struggle with the kings of France forced the Holy See to temporarily move its seat to Avignon. During its time in Avignon, the Church did not have dominance in European affairs as it did during much of the rest of the medieval period.

The Age of Enlightenment brought even tougher times for the Catholic Church, and Pope Pius VII was even arrested and humiliated by Napoleon at the pinnacle of Napoleon's military might. Finally, in 1870 the pope lost his eleven centuries long power over the Papal State, which became part of a united Italy. The 20th century brought even more persecutions for the Church. On the one

* University of Montenegro, Faculty of Political Science, Podgorica, Montenegro (obala@t-com.me), ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-7946-462X.

hand, the rise of totalitarian regimes — particularly communist rule in countries with long Catholic traditions, like Poland, Hungary and Lithuania — and, on the other hand, the triumph of secularism in western democracies made the Church more vulnerable than ever. The timely *aggiornamento* made by John XXIII and his successor Paul VI was the Church's answer to the latter, while the election of the charismatic Polish Pope Karol Wojtyła was its answer to the former. After communism collapsed and the Cold War ended, the so-called idea of “the end of history” for a moment appeared to open doors for a more stable and tranquil role of the Holy See in the new world order, but many events of the late-1990s and the turn of the century proved that there would be even more challenges and obstacles for the Holy See in its international dealings, and that some kind of new *aggiornamento*, better sooner than later, would be needed.

Given the dual nature of the Holy See's role in international relations, its diplomats (nuncios) have two functions. First, nuncios deal with the local governments of the states they serve, working like any other diplomat on a variety of topics that characterize usual diplomatic work. Second, they deal with the local Catholic Church within the states they serve, being a kind of go-between connecting the Vatican and local churches, but also working on theological dialogue with local non-Catholic communities. This dual nature remains a sign of the unique position of the Holy See - at the same time a foreign actor and an internal player in a variety of countries. For centuries, the Holy See was dominated by Europeans, mostly Italians, but in the second half of the 20th century it started to become more and more of a global player, which was also reflected in its internal organization composed of increasingly diverse cardinals.

The 21st century brought, instead of long desired stability, a whole new set of challenges to the Church. We can discuss at least three types of challenges the Holy See faced at the beginning of the new millennium. One group of challenges includes problems that came from inside the Church itself — scandals like the discovery of pedophile priests and money laundering in the Vatican bank. The second group of challenges came not from the Church itself, but from societies that were mainly Catholic, so they were still more or less *internal* problems. Secularization opened the path for a host of issues, many of which were not exactly supported by the official doctrine of the Catholic Church. Still, the involvement of the Church in societies made certain topics — like the legalization of euthanasia, abortion, same-sex marriages, marijuana, and contraception issues, celibacy of priests, etc. — major subjects of the Holy See's affairs in many countries. Finally, the group of challenges that was most strictly related to diplomacy was the question of the position of the Holy See in international relations of the post-Cold War era.

The Holy See, as we saw throughout its history, usually succeeded in getting along with major powers on the world scene. This is something it needs to do again, especially given the rapidly changing world. Of growing importance for the Holy See are its relations with major non-Catholic entities. As mentioned, its

relations with major Western countries and the part it takes in their societies may be considered *internal* dialogue in which the Holy See takes part. Then, the *outer* dialogue, the one with China, with predominantly Orthodox countries — Russia above all — with the Islamic world, and also with Israel became increasingly important as those countries and religious groups became substantial factors in world politics. The Holy See succeeded in finally establishing fairly close and stable relations with major Western countries — USA, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy — only during the second half of the 20th century, but the importance of non-Western countries grew, and it faced many new diplomatic negotiations.

The last decade of the 20th century brought huge changes to international relations, and the Holy See found itself confronting new conditions. Although the collapse of real socialism made the Church a more important player in many countries and on the world scene, many other issues were still present and new ones arose. The big question at the beginning of the new millennium was whether the Church would be able to answer the challenges posed to it, and how it would resolve both the problems we called internal and those that can be considered external. The aging Pope John Paul II, a charismatic and influential man who became somewhat of a pop star unlike any religious figure before him, had an important role in overthrowing communism, particularly in his native Poland. Still, being old and ill, and obviously belonging to a more conservative part of the leadership of the Church, he could not (and probably would not) even consider possible reforms.

The pontificate that followed John Paul's was its natural continuation. In the modern era, perhaps only the conclaves of 1939 and 1963 chose popes who were more expected and seen as more obvious choices than the conclave of 2005, which signed the beginning of the pontificate of Benedict XVI. Pope Benedict, previously Cardinal Ratzinger, was an obvious choice: He was a close friend of John Paul II, had for a long period of time held the powerful position of Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and was also already 78, which meant his pontificate would probably not last for too long. After John Paul II's pontificate that lasted for almost 27 years, it was understandable that the cardinals did not want a very long pontificate again so soon. But more than its pontificate's length, the cardinals were worried about the possibility of a reformatory pope — thus, they overwhelmingly voted for a sure choice, a pope who would be one of continuation and preservation and not of discontinuity and reform. Such was indeed the pontificate of the German pope.

Lacking the charisma of John Paul II and facing many more problems (the heritage of various problems from previous pontificates continuously added to one another, but became public only during his papacy), Benedict did not have the strength and, arguably, the will to make bold moves. That said, it is ironic that Benedict would, for a majority of the public, probably be most remembered for doing one very untraditional thing. Often political and historical figures are most

remembered for one thing that does not have much to do with their actual policies and achievements. Thus, Kim Campbell or Edith Cresson are remembered as first female prime ministers of their countries, and detractors of Barak Obama diminish his importance by emphasizing, as Donald Trump recently did, that Obama will stay in people's memories only as the first African-American president. Of course, Joseph Ratzinger was pope for almost eight years, which is longer than many other popes, even if he was one of the oldest popes at the time of his election. Still, he is remembered more than anything else as the first pope in many centuries to voluntarily resign¹.

It would be unjust to say that the Church did not respond at all to the changes in the world around it. Benedict XVI was the second pope to visit both a mosque and a synagogue. He spoke openly about the good sides of Marx's teachings, thus criticizing the injustices of capitalism. After his resignation, it was proved that he had taken some actions against bishops who had concealed the criminal acts of pedophile priests. Still, given all that, paradoxically his strongest message, the one that was more revolutionary than anything he did during his pontificate, was the way he left the Throne of Saint Peter.

His act sent at least two very strong messages to the Church and to the world. First, he was aware that the pope is the face of the Holy See and if the pope is frail and weak, it hurts the reputation of the Church itself in front of the whole world. John Paul II was charismatic and energetic, fairly young when elected, but his late years brought many painful images to his followers. The world witnessed his sharp mind struggling with his frail body to move and, in his final days, even his struggle to speak. In a world that changes at a very fast pace, having a frail pope is not a good way for the Church to show strength, effectiveness, and preparedness in the face of modernity.

Benedict probably wanted to avoid this happening again less than a decade later and to let the Church find a better face to represent it in front of the world, one that would symbolize its strength and perhaps a newly found sense of modernity. In becoming the first pope to voluntarily leave the position since the Middle Ages, Benedict XVI also showed that doing what has not been done for a long time and thinking outside the box could be done even at the top of the Holy See, thus making it easier for his successors to make other bold decisions on a variety of issues (including making it much easier for them to leave the office once they believed they should do so). In a way, Pope Benedict XVI, seen as a conservative and traditionalist, still paved the way, not only literally, for reforms that Pope Francis would start to make from the very beginning of his own pontificate.

¹ It is well known that the last pope to resign voluntarily was Celestine V in 1294. That decision apparently did not bring much respect for Celestine and many believe Dante thought of him when he mentioned *coward who made the great refusal* in his *Divina Commedia*.

Inter-civilization and interfaith dialogues of Pope Francis: Israel, Russia, China and the Islamic world

Among the most important issues that are included in what we called *outer dialogue* are the following: improving relations with Russia and other countries with Orthodox majorities, establishing diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, and the continuation of two very long and rather complex dialogues — with Judaism, including complicated relations with the State of Israel, and with the Islamic world, encompassing some of the major countries like Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia. The Holy See still does not have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, but it is trying to establish them. According to the Holy See, interreligious dialogue presumes that freedom of religion exists, so that the individual is free to compare his or her religion with that of the other and to discuss them in a free atmosphere for mutual enrichment. This is a significant problem in developing relations with countries where religious minorities, including Catholics, are persecuted, as is the case with some Muslim-dominated countries and with the People's Republic of China.

Regarding relations with Israel, formally established only in 1993, it is unavoidable to see the impact of the Church doctrine and its attitude toward Jews on the diplomacy of the Holy See (Perko 1997, 2). A long history of bad relations between Catholics and Jews got better after the *Nostra Aetate* declaration adopted by the Second Vatican Council. Still, for the time being, Pope Paul VI, while he was still Cardinal Montini, said that there was “no Vatican recognition of Israel, otherwise than in exchange for satisfactory guarantees about the international regime for Jerusalem and the Holy Places, and generally about the maintenance of Catholic rights in Palestine” (Perko 1997, 7). John Paul II, having come from Shoah-stricken Poland, brought a personal note to relations with Jews, but still maintained that Jerusalem should be a common heart of all three major religions, despite it being proclaimed the eternal capital of Israel in 1980 (Perko 1997, 14). He confirmed his stance in his apostolic letter *Redemptoris Anno* in 1984.

Relations between the Holy See and Israel were always affected by the situation in the Middle East — when it appeared that peace negotiations were advancing, there was a better chance for continuous improvement of their relations. Thus, after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the opportunity to adopt a legal framework for their cooperation was opened. On December 30, 1993, the Fundamental Agreement between The Holy See and the State of Israel was signed. Formally, it opened a new phase, although a change for the worse in the Middle East after the beginning of the Second Intifada and, later, wars between Israel and Hezbollah and Hamas, again made their relations more difficult. Accusations of deicide long held by the Church were no longer used, but latent animosity toward Jews, combined with support for (partly Christian) Palestinians, was still present.

While Benedict XVI had a particularly difficult position because of his German nationality and his own experience with The Hitler Youth, it appeared that Francis would bring less personal baggage than his predecessors to Jewish-Catholic and Israeli-Holy See dialogue. Francis did come from one of the least multi-confessional continents, South America², but his hometown of Buenos Aires, where he was archbishop for a very long time, has a significant Jewish community. However, it seems that dialogue between Jews and Catholics will still be held hostage by the unsolved Palestinian issue and also by delicate (and more important) Muslim-Catholic (and Muslim-Christian overall) relations. We should mention as well the special interest of the Holy See in Holy Places, the frail intra-confessional peace in neighboring Lebanon, and the lesser but still present problems like the ongoing canonization of the controversial Pope Pius XII. Therefore, there was no significant improvement in Judeo-Catholic and Holy See-Israeli relations after Francis visited the Holy Land, and it does not appear, given the extremely fragile and volatile relations in the Middle East, that the Holy See will move closer to Israel in a situation where it values its dialogue with the Muslim world among the most important. It is hard to expect any major breakthrough by Pope Francis in the complex problems of the Middle East. His charisma and popularity hardly can facilitate matters in a region so close and dear to the Holy See but still so complicated and devoid of a strong Catholic presence, when compared to many other parts of the world.

International relations today are very complex and are arguably more complicated than they have been since at least the start of the *détent* era. The Holy See was well positioned at the beginning of this century because socialist regimes that had been hostile to it collapsed a decade prior. However, many important players in the world are countries where the Holy See's influence is nearly insignificant (Russia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Japan, etc. and, at least for now, China), while there are others with huge Catholic populations and long traditions but where Catholicism is still arguably in decline (USA, France, Germany, Brazil, India, Canada, etc.).

In a world where Islam is rising much faster and Christianity remains divided, while secularized societies made the Church a less significant player in *internal dialogue* in the Western world, the Holy See needs to find modes by which to maintain a presence and to preserve its influence. Selection of Cardinal Bergoglio as pope appears to be the right answer. His popularity in public overruled the negative tide that existed in most of the media during the last decade, marked by scandals that severely hit the Vatican and the Church itself. Still, the Catholic

2 Two continents of interreligious dialogue, which are more or less multi-religious, are Africa and Asia, while others are seen as "traditionally Christian" (Arinze 2001, 156). These two continents make up part of the Islamic crescent, thus in a way making the Muslim-Christian dialogue *the* inter-civilization dialogue for the Holy See. Note that Asia contains 58 percent of the world population but has 85 percent of all non-Christians in the world (Arinze 2001, 169).

Church is very old and, as most religious organizations are, very conservative. Its *aggiornamento* moved it into the 20th century and it maintained its unity, although some smaller divides did happen. Now, it needs to move into the 21st century and recognize that the world is much different again. Pope Francis's profile is public-friendly — his popularity, but more than that, his image of modesty, humility, and genuine shyness are comparable only to John XXIII, nicknamed *il Papa buono* (the good pope), to whom Francis is now logically compared, and to the much loved but short reigned Pope John Paul I, whose disarming smile, *il sorriso di Dio* (the smile of God), and mixture of shyness and charm perhaps Francis can remind us of the most.

That being said, while his image may help him (and the Holy See) in social media network-oriented Western societies, it is questionable how big an impact Pope Francis can make on the Christian-Muslim dialogue. As someone coming from a part of the world where Islam has a much smaller presence, he has both advantages and disadvantages. He does not carry a burden of complicated interfaith relations with Muslims from his own nation, which could be the case for many other countries. This gave him the possibility to have a fresh start and to provide an outsider's impetus to dialogue between Christianity and Islam. However, there is always fear that he may not be able to manage relations with Muslims since he does not have extensive knowledge and life experience of coexistence by their side. Francis became a pope in a very complicated moment for interfaith relations. He succeeded two popes who both visited Islamic countries and even entered mosques, for the first time in history. On the other hand, Pope Benedict left him a mixed bag of inheritance regarding Islam. Benedict's Regensburg address was one of the low moments of interfaith dialogue, regardless of the fact that he tried to make it up later when visiting Turkey. Francis obviously wanted to emphasize that he sees dialogue between Muslims and Christians as very important for his pontificate. The way he chooses the countries he travels to can point us to important issues that are high on his agenda. Pope Francis visited Albania and Turkey during the second year of his pontificate. This can be seen as an important sign of his commitment to further develop interfaith relations and to emphasize the examples of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. Yet these two countries seem to be the exceptions, the results of decades-long strong pushes for secularism, unseen in most other Muslim-dominated countries.

Out of 193 United Nations member states, the Holy See has not established official diplomatic relations with only 15 of them. Most of those countries are either insignificant for international politics or, with the exception of China, Vietnam and Burma, have very small Catholic populations. Out of those fifteen, more than half — eight — are Muslim countries: Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Maldives, Comoros, Somalia, Brunei, Oman and Mauritania. This fact is telling in itself: ever since *Nostra Aetate* opened the doors for dialogue and establishment of relations, fast improvements were seen only in the cases of more Western-oriented Muslim

countries, while with others sometimes exhausting negotiations are needed to formally establish relations.

The dialogue of the Holy See with the Islamic world is further complicated by the deterioration of West-Islam relations at the beginning of this century. The Holy See, despite its distance from and sometimes even opposition to some Western governments, is by definition seen as a flag bearer of the Western world. Complex problems that only seem to multiply as time goes on make any significant move by Pope Francis even harder. It is very difficult for the Pope to answer to problems of interfaith relations on different fields and to pursue dialogue at the same time.

The lack of stable relations between the Judeo-Christian majority and the Muslim minority in Western countries, seen by some as the failure of multiculturalism, appears to spread even as far as Australia. It seems that it gets increasingly difficult for the Pope and for priests to walk the line between pursuing peaceful coexistence and defending what is seen as Christian values. It is even more complicated to stand for Christians persecuted recently in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Syria, Libya, and Iraq without igniting a possible new conflict. The will for dialogue and cooperation, as seen in the open letter of 138 Muslim clerics and scholars, “A Common Word Between Us and You”, to Pope Benedict (and other Christian leaders) exists, but wider currents of international relations appear to push the Holy See more to conflict than to rhetoric (some would say empty rhetoric) about one human family under one God only named differently, etc.

Pope Francis recognized the Armenian massacres of 1915 as genocide on various occasions during his practice as Archbishop of Buenos Aires (when he allegedly had close relations with the Armenian community there) but also when he became pope. Notably, he spoke about the first genocide of the 20th century that struck the Armenian people in St Peter’s Basilica, honoring the event in April 2015. While this may have been seen as a logical continuation of his straight to the point, outspoken way of speaking, it does come at a sensitive period of time and will certainly damage relations with Turkey. It should be mentioned here that the issue of crimes against the Armenians during the First World War has been present in the foreign policy of the Holy See for a very long time. Pope Benedict XV wrote to Sultan Mehmet V about the issue, and the official paper of the Holy See, *L’Osservatore Romano*, reported at the time that the number of Armenians killed was one million. (Latour 2005, 39).

To make matters more complicated, the Pope spoke of the Armenian genocide in the context of the persecutions of Christians in Muslim-dominated countries in current times. He is loudly turning the attention of the global public to the suffering of different Christians, not only Roman Catholics. This does show that inter-Christian relations are developing, but it seems that the Holy See cannot have both successful interfaith *and* intra-Christian dialogue. The apparent abandonment of a soft approach to Muslim-Christian relations in some of the Pope’s speeches may make his authority in (still divided) Christianity stronger, but it will at the

same time (at least in the short to medium run) slow down developments in diplomacy with the Islamic world. In this case, it does not matter that the Pope never accuses the entire Islamic world or the Islamic religion, *per se*, (he has said that the proper reading of the Quran is opposed to any form of violence) but the way Muslims, and Muslim leaders in particular, understand him is important.

Pope Francis' formal recognition of Palestine as a state (which had actually been named the State of Palestine by the Holy See on a variety of occasions before) right after his recognition of the Armenian genocide brought a new set of controversies to papal diplomacy. For some, it was seen as a continuation of his honest and brave policies on supporting the oppressed, whoever and wherever they are. Others saw supporting Palestine as his attempt to counterbalance his previous stances that may have displeased the Islamic world (although we must keep in mind that while most Palestinians are Muslims, there is also a Christian minority that is often neglected in Palestine). Some even opined that the Holy See's recognition of Palestine was evidence of Francis being a covert socialist. These examples illustrate how complex and balanced papal diplomacy must be in order to achieve its goals and try to preserve and improve its image around the world.

Relations between the Byzantine Empire and the papacy continued until the end of the Byzantine Empire, despite the split between these two parts of Christianity. These relations were the most efficient channel for transmission to the West of a number of aspects of ancient civilization (Tisserant 1947, 283), which remained a glue that kept these two parts related through centuries of estrangement. Indeed, now, when they try to emphasize their proximity, these two parts of Christianity call attention to the rites and customs from ancient times.

The Holy See's relations with Orthodox churches and countries with Christian Orthodox majorities, despite the steadily improving relations of popes with the patriarchs of Constantinople, are mostly measured by relations with Russia. While during the pontificate of German Pope Benedict XVI there was greater hope for improving relations with Russia and its church (the previous pope, John Paul II, carried the baggage of his Polish ancestry and was unable to establish strong ties with Russia), Benedict did not succeed in fulfilling his wish to visit Russia. Furthermore, despite an improvement of relations with some Orthodox countries and the fact that Orthodox churches seem by far the closest of all churches to the Roman Catholic Church, at least dogma-wise, it is a significant fact that only a few European countries have not received a papal visit, and all of these countries are Orthodox. Among these countries are Russia and Belarus, where the Russian Orthodox Church is dominant, and also Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, where the Serbian Orthodox Church (arguably the closest one to the Russian Church) is influential.

Relations with Russia throughout most of the 20th century were relations with a Soviet Union that pursued a Marxist ideology, thus conflicting with the Catholic Church and thwarting any kind of official relations. Only in the Soviet

Union's twilight years, during the rule of Mikhail Gorbachev, did the Holy See and the Soviet Union establish relations, and they did so without officially naming an ambassador and a nuncio to one another. The reason for this was the hostile attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was regaining influence at the time and felt threatened by what it saw as the proselytism of the Catholic Church becoming present again in the former USSR. Full relations were established only two decades later, in 2009, and were followed by the official naming of a nuncio to Russia and a Russian ambassador to the Holy See. While John Paul II was Polish — which, because of a rather complex history of Russo-Polish relations, was a big obstacle to closer cooperation — Benedict, as a German, belonged to a nation that historically may have been the most capable of understanding and making a connection with Russia. Still, despite the two entities establishing “full” relations, which was more symbolic than expected to make a big step forward in their relations, there were no major improvements during Benedict's pontificate.

Pope Francis, coming from a completely different part of the world with scarce contact with Russia in comparison to his predecessors, may indeed bring a fresh start to a new chapter of Russia-Holy See relations. His meetings with the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, were important because the two men found common ground on many issues. During their meeting in Istanbul in November 2014, they called for unification of the Catholic and Orthodox churches after almost a millennium of separation after the Great Schism of 1054. Although this idea seems more realistic now than half a century ago, there is still a long way to go for it to become a reality. The Patriarch of Constantinople is only *primus inter pares* with symbolic, but much less real, importance in the Orthodox world. Good relations with some Orthodox countries, like Romania, are significant, but still the key to inter-Christian dialogue and to a real breakthrough with dominantly Orthodox countries is Russia. The Holy See during the Benedict era, and continuing through the current pontificate, appeared to carefully avoid any major confrontation with Russia and its allies, like Serbia. For example, the Holy See, which was among the first subjects who rushed to recognize Slovenia and Croatia back in 1991 during the Yugoslav Wars, has yet to recognize Kosovo, which Serbia, Russia and some other countries still consider part of Serbia. The Holy See maintains religious contacts through a pontifical legate, but it still does not have diplomatic relations with Kosovo. Its attitude toward the crises in Ukraine, and particularly the annexation of Crimea, was also fairly mild. It is still questionable how far the progress of inter-Christian dialogue may go, but inter-Christian dialogue looks to be the one to watch as an opportunity for real breakthrough in the Holy See's outer dialogue.

Relations with China are even more complicated than those with major Muslim or Orthodox countries. The Holy See had relations with the Republic of China, and a nuncio fled with the Chiang Kai-shek government to Taiwan in 1949. From then on, there were no relations between the People's Republic

of China (PRC) and the Holy See, despite many efforts, particularly in the last two decades to have these relations established. Pope John Paul II was not even allowed to fly over China when he visited some East Asian countries. Benedict XVI was not particularly interested in the region and never traveled there during his pontificate. Pope Francis emphasized his increased interest in the Far East when he decided to visit South Korea and, later, the Philippines during his first two years on the papal throne. Visiting countries in China's vicinity was additional proof of the Vatican's will to get closer to China. Pope Francis, unlike John Paul II, had a small breakthrough regarding that country when Chinese authorities allowed his plane to fly over China, which was the first time this happened, and he sent them a telegram with blessings — a small but important step in the possible development of relations. However, there are still some major issues that may delay the establishment of Holy See-China relations in the near future.

The Holy See still maintains relations with Taiwan — Republic of China, although it had Taiwan's ambassador demoted to a *charge d'affaires* in order to appease the government in Beijing. This is of course a problem for any subject who wants to establish relations with PRC, since any form of official relations with both Chinese countries is unacceptable. It appears, however, that the Holy See would readily switch its nunciature from Taipei to Beijing in order to establish relations with PRC. Other problems are more complicated and cannot be solved by such a simple decision. The Catholic Church plays a role of major authority for its followers.

The Chinese government closely followed the happenings in Eastern Europe in the late-1980s where, in certain cases, Pope John Paul II and the Holy See played a pivotal role in overthrowing communist authoritarian regimes. Although Pope John Paul II himself said "The tree was rotten; I merely gave it a good shake." (Cornwell 2008, 366), many people, like Margaret Thatcher in her memoirs, gave credit to his role in the fall of real socialism (Thatcher 1995, 345). China also followed regional dynamics when the rise of the influence of the Roman Catholic Church helped in South Korea's transition to democracy in the late 1980s/early 1990s, and the Church (led by Cardinal Jaime Sin) also strongly supported Corazon Aquino in her eventually successful efforts to topple the Marcos regime.

China, like other countries that are not multi-party democracies, is cautious about the possibility of foreign authority having influence on its citizens, hoping to avoid what has happened in other countries. Seated outside its borders, far away from its control in the safety of the Vatican, the Roman Catholic Church cannot be controlled in any way by the Chinese government. That is why China tried to establish a national Catholic Church that would not be obedient to the Vatican. Former socialist countries in Europe played with this same idea (Stehle 1981, 260), but they could never make it possible — being Catholic means being led by the pope as a spiritual leader, and every other possibility would mean leaving the Church. The Catholic Church cannot be organized the way most Orthodox

churches, some Oriental churches, and many Protestant churches are. Its very nature is to have strict unity, hierarchy, and to be monolithic and indisputably guided by the pope. The question of ordaining bishops is certainly one of the most sensitive issues and obstacles in reaching an agreement, if the Chinese government continues to ask the Holy See to accept ordinations of bishops by the government and to remain silent about underground bishops. The massive acts of civil disobedience in Hong Kong in late 2014 probably made the possibility of a papal visit to China or the establishment of diplomatic relations harder. Despite the fact that the Chinese government stabilized things for now, this is still proof of its vulnerability and of letting another player get involved in Chinese matters, which would certainly happen with a nuncio in Beijing and probably now looks to be an even worse idea than before.

Conclusion

Pope Francis indisputably changed the image that the public and the media have had, at least for some time, of the Holy See. He is seen by many as a charismatic and likeable person to whom ordinary people can relate. Unlike Benedict, seen by many as a bookworm detached from everyday life, Francis appears to be respected and even genuinely loved even by non-Catholics, on a level unseen since perhaps the days of John XXIII. This puts Pope Francis in a good position for negotiations in inter-civilization diplomacy that continues to be a major part of the Holy See's affairs since the Second Vatican Council. However, although Pope Francis undoubtedly raised the profile of the papacy, and—even being in his late 70s—revived the papal globetrotting habits and the usage of celebrity status to attract the masses of the John Paul II era, it is hard to foresee any *major* diplomatic breakthroughs regarding relations with non-Catholic actors during his pontificate. Of course, reviving the popularity of the ailing Church in the world is not an insignificant thing. And he had success in mediation between Cuba and the US in late 2014, for which he was lauded and gained greater respect. However, the US-Cuba rapprochement was already on the way for some time, and, while the talks in the Vatican probably sped it up, it would have happened sometime in the near future anyway. Also, the US is a democracy with a large Catholic population, and Cuba (although a one-party system) is heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. We must add of course that Pope Francis himself is Latin American, and this certainly helped his dealings with Cuba.

Inter-civilization dialogue is much more complex, and its major obstacles are much harder to remove. Perhaps higher expectations and hopes follow Pope Francis and make it even more difficult for the outsider to understand how complicated the issues are that confront him.

All popes were interested in the Holy Land, and, at least since Paul VI's visit to that area, tried to help find a solution to the Middle Eastern conflict to no avail.

Pope Francis was able to use his authority to get then-president of Israel Shimon Peres and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas to the Vatican to pray together, but this did not significantly help the dynamics of the region, which were complicated and fragile. It is hard to imagine the Pope playing an important role in the solution to a problem seen by so many as unsolvable any time soon. And, while Francis tried to avoid further damaging the relations of the Church with Judaism (with Pius XII's canonization seen as a big problem) and with Islam (that suffered damage since the beginning of Pope Benedict XVI's pontificate and his Regensburg speech), the dynamics of events not influenced in any way by the Holy See (*e.g.*, the rise of the Islamic State, civil wars in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen, and Israeli conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah) make things more difficult to deal with.

At least since the pontificate of John Paul II, the Holy See has had a papal visit to Russia along with a rapprochement with Orthodox Christianity as one of its major goals. John Paul II, having come from Poland, never had a realistic chance to visit Russia. Although Benedict XVI faced expectations from the beginning of his pontificate to do so, he was unable to move significantly toward closer ties with countries with Orthodox majorities and was unable to visit Russia or Serbia but at least became the first pope to visit Cyprus as a consolation.

It must also be mentioned that during Benedict's pontificate full relations (on an ambassadorial-nuncio level) were established with Russia, but the visit itself eluded him. Pope Francis appears to be very careful regarding Russia and particularly the conflict in Ukraine (as well as continues not to recognize Kosovo) in order to keep the possibility of Russia-Holy See relations alive. However, it is hard to foresee whether he will really be able to become the first pope to visit Russia — the Catholic Church is accused of proselytism, and there are many influential clerics with anti-West sentiments in Russia (and in Serbia, where the situation is the same) who would not support the visit. So, it is hard to tell whether any real breakthrough in the international politics of the Holy See will come to fruition before the current pontificate is over.

The Pope knows and keeps reminding us that his pontificate will not be a long one. That's why he does things faster, trying to accomplish as much as possible in a short time, when sometimes years or even decades are needed. He has already done a lot to repair the image of the Holy See in the eyes of the world and to make it more active and present in international relations. Even if his pontificate finishes soon, he will probably be remembered as a unique pope who brought some much needed fresh air to the Church. At this point, it is hard to believe he could make history as the pope who held a mass in Beijing or Moscow, who established full relations with China, who oversaw a major move toward unity of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, or who helped solve the conflicts in the Holy Land. For those achievements, much more than his will would be necessary. Yet he can pave the way for his successors to continue in the same direction of an active, open-minded, unconventional papacy that tries to genuinely develop

closer ties with the *others* while remaining a visible and authoritative, but at the same time a fatherly and (to paraphrase John Paul I) “motherly” (Hofmann 2002, 193), voice in the Western world.

Only time will tell how deep the reforms started by Francis will go and whether — if we take into account the stances of certain cardinals and bishops — his ascendance will not be the answer to many of the Church’s challenges but rather the challenge itself, if opposition to him continues. That remains the eternal challenge for all reformers — to reform enough to repair things that did not work, but not reform too much in order to avoid new problems derived from the reform itself. Still, as we know that the papacy has been challenged by many empires (Holy Roman, Napoleonic, Soviet, etc.) that do not exist anymore and it is still here, we can pretty safely assume that it will find its way to adapt to a quickly changing and globalized world.

Bibliographic references

Arinze, Francis, A. “The Church and Interreligious Dialogue.” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, Volume 4, Number 1, Winter 2001 (2001): 156-17

Cornwell, John. *Hitler’s Pope*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008.

Hofmann, Paul. *The Vatican’s Women: Female influence on the Holy See*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002.

Latour, Francis. “Les relations entre le Saint-Siege et la Sublime Porte à l’épreuve du génocide des chrétiens d’Orient pendant la Grande Guerre.” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 219 (2005): 31-43

Perko, F. Michael. Toward a “Sound and Lasting Basis”: Relations between the Holy See, The Zionist Movement, and Israel, 1896–1996. *Israel Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, (Spring1997):1-21.

Rocca, Francis X. and Peker, Emre. (2015) *Pope Francis Calls Armenian Deaths ‘First Genocide of 20th Century’*, published on <http://www.wsj.com>, [<http://www.wsj.com/articles/pope-francis-calls-armenian-slaughter-first-genocide-of-20th-century-1428824472>]. Available: 20/04/2015

Stehle, Hansjakob. *Eastern Politics of the Vatican 1917-1979*. Athens, London: Ohio University Press, 1981.

Thatcher, Margaret. *Path to Power*. London: HarperCollins, 1995.

Tisserant, Eugene Cardinal. “The Holy See and the Byzantine Church and Empire.” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1947): 275-283.

Abstract

This article addresses the role of Pope Francis in the interfaith and inter-civilization dialogue of the Holy See. Specifically, it analyses the main aspects of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Russia, China, Islamic countries and Israel, and provides perspectives on the inter-civilization diplomacy of the Holy See during the current pontificate.

Keywords: The Holy See; Pope Francis; Diplomacy; Inter-civilization dialogue.

Resumo

Este artigo aborda o papel do Papa Francisco nos diálogos interreligiões e inter-civilizacionais da Santa Sé. Especificamente, se pretende analisar os principais aspectos das relações diplomáticas entre a Santa Sé e a Rússia, a China, os países islâmicos e Israel, e oferece perspectivas sobre a diplomacia inter-civilizações da Santa Sé no atual pontificado.

Palavras-chaves: Santa Sé; Papa Francisco; Diplomacia; Diálogo Inter-civilizacional.

Received: June 15, 2015

Accepted: October 19, 2015