

# The Catholic Church

## *An Underestimated and Necessary Actor in International Affairs*

Jodok Troy

In an attempt to unite faith and reason, among other things, through a quotation of an ancient emperor, Pope Benedict XVI's lecture on 12 September 2006 in Regensburg, Germany, reverberated around the world in widespread, sometimes violent reactions, notably in the Muslim world. Later, the Pope stated that he had simply wished to illustrate the connection between faith and reason. The strong reactions to his speech illustrate what great impact a diplomatic faux pas, especially one from a major religious leader, can have in world politics.<sup>1</sup>

Realists and neorealists, though they tend to disregard the Holy See and the Pope himself as a major political actor in world politics, would argue that such a speech and its reactions have no considerable impact on foreign affairs, at least not on a systemic level. Nonetheless, as this article shows, Papal policy and diplomacy have always had and will continue to have great influence on the world's political stage.

Papal foreign policy can be described, next to its idealistic approach—for example, concerning normative issues such as the consideration of justice—as also truly realistic. This is one of the major reasons why the Catholic Church, hereafter “the Church,” is an important global actor capable of serving as a peacemaker. Therefore, it is worth analyzing the “Catholic international relations theory.”<sup>2</sup>

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Considering that the Church, with regard to its "clientele"—the believers—played an important role in the collapse of communism during the Cold War and during democratic transitions elsewhere in the world, it is important to realize its capability as a peacemaker and "ethical reservoir." This is of particular interest to many who, especially in the public arena, believe that the world is in an age of a "clash of civilizations," where the West faces a fundamentalist Islamic threat.

The first part of this article examines the structures and capabilities of Papal foreign policy and diplomacy and deals with its normative values. It demonstrates that Catholic social teaching can have a significant impact on world politics. The second part analyzes possibilities for the Church as a liberation force from political and social oppression as well as its capabilities as a peacemaker. The last part identifies the necessity of the foreign policy of the Holy See, and studies it in terms of theoretical approaches to international relations, especially that of the English School.

### **The Bishop of Rome and the Holy See in World Politics.**

Although it was well established that the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI would become a rather conservative one, it actually began in an undisruptive manner. In fact, the inaugural encyclical of Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, was, to some degree, surprising. Many parts of that first encyclical stand in accordance with the Catholic social tradition. The Pope emphasized a demand for justice, which is a political responsibility. The Pope stated the Church's limitations, but at the same time took up the Catholic claim of an "ethical reservoir." He also highlight-

ed the entanglement of reason and faith concerning the question of justice:

"From God's standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. ...Its [the Catholic social doctrine's] aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just."<sup>3</sup>

Catholic social doctrine has a grave impact on world politics. Nevertheless, religious issues tend to be particularly marginalized in social studies, especially in the field of political science, mainly due to the secular influence of Western science since the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> The secular approach is inclined to rely heavily upon the individual as an object of science while religion tends to stress the importance of community. It is due to the general neglect of religious study and religious issues in world politics that the foreign policy of the Holy See tends to be overlooked in international relation studies.<sup>5</sup>

Before examining Papal foreign policy, some general observations must be made. First, it is difficult to separate the Papal court as a political body from the government of the Church as a religious organization. Consequently, it is impossible to articulate a specific foreign policy of the papacy because "all its activities are directed toward the religious good and faithful." The Pope, therefore, enters diplomatic dealings as the "supreme pastor of the Church," and not as head of state.<sup>6</sup> In that role, he has respectable capabilities, culminating in the recognition of Vatican foreign policy as Papal foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> This is certainly the case because Papal foreign policy and

its diplomatic activities can be characterized as highly personalized due to the nature of the hierarchical structure of the Church that gives the Pope the highest

The Vatican is, in fact, a sovereign state; it is the smallest in the world and thus not widely recognized as a state. The Church, on the other hand, is very well recognized

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authority. Furthermore, spiritual intentions such as the circulation of the Christian origins of Papal foreign policy have to be recognized: "Vatican diplomacy, by its very nature, is basically spiritual and sacerdotal. It does not aim at political power, material advantage, or the defense of the interests of any particular group."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the main political function of the Vatican—as a territorial state and therefore host of multiple domestic institutions—is to be the diplomatic center of the Church and to promote its spiritual interests as a religious institution: "The Vatican, as a religious power, employs the Catholic Church as a religious institution to assist the attainment of its goals on the global level."<sup>9</sup>

Four main elements characterize global actors: external recognition, legal authority, autonomy, and a minimum of cohesion among collaborating units. The problem concerning the analysis of the Church as a global actor is that those characteristics are mainly appointed by nation-states, primarily the United States, or international organizations with a tendency toward state-like units, primarily the EU.<sup>10</sup> Those characteristics can only apply to the Church if they are seen in interaction and in interdependency with the Vatican as a sovereign state and the Church as a religious institution.

as a religious power. In legal terms, especially due to its diplomatic activities which are also institutionalized through nunciatures, the Church is recognized globally. The characteristics of legal authority as well as autonomy are given because of the domestic, hierarchical structure of the Vatican and the Church. This feature of minimum cohesion among collaborating units is due to the strict hierarchical structure of the Church, which provides the necessary unity within its institutional framework.

There are several motivations for analyzing the Church in world politics, especially compared to the standards of other actors on the world stage. First, the Vatican is the smallest country in the world, but has diplomatic missions in nearly all other states of the world; as a result, it has its own distinct foreign policy department, which is disproportionately large for a state of this size. Second, unlike other actors, the Vatican and the Holy See have a universal claim—the Christian faith—in a world still separated by nation-states. Third, the position of the Pope is unique: He serves as a bridge builder between the secular and faith-based environments. Furthermore, it must be noted that the Catholic Church is the oldest religious and political actor on a global level; the Pope, as the head of millions of believers worldwide, possess-

es extraordinary leverage through his authority, which appears by means of his access to political leaders and his power to appoint bishops across the world who in turn have a great political impact in many countries.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth analyzing the Church in international affairs because of its vision of peace, which consists of four main elements: human rights, development, solidarity, and world order.<sup>12</sup> The development of the Church after the Second Vatican Council also shows the Church's commitment to human rights.

### **The Church in World Politics: a Considerable Liberation Force.**

Although the Holy See and the Pope have no real power in terms of "hard power" or military capabilities, their power can be described as symbolic and subtle in terms of "soft power," or more descriptively as "expressive." Consequently, it is reasonable to distinguish between power in terms of influence and in terms of capabilities. Evidently, the Holy See holds "soft power," mainly in terms of influence, to persuade with nonmilitary means. In light of its lack of "hard power," globalization, including the growth of the information age, is a rather fortunate development for the Church and even more so for its personalized political constitution. No other Pope besides John Paul II was more aware of this symbolic power and how to wield it, particularly with regard to the media.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the Holy See's conception of power is realistic, its application is not precisely because it recognizes the need to harmonize ideals with national interests and imperatives. The Church seeks to empower a world society by using cooperation rather than a balance of power in international relations. It is

apparent that Pope John Paul II opposed the second Gulf War led by the United States, whose intention can be seen as the preservation of a balance of power. The concept of a law-based international society is an old and well-documented one in Catholic teaching. It can be found in the thoughts of St. Augustine and in the teachings of Francisco de Vitoria, Francisco Suarez, as well as in the newer documents. For example, the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* notes:

"Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship; instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice. Peace results from that order structured into human society by its divine Founder, and actualized by men as they thirst after ever greater justice. ... [P]eace is never attained once and for all, but must be built up ceaselessly. Moreover, since the human will is unsteady and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant mastering of passions and the vigilance of lawful authority."<sup>14</sup>

The Church's emphasis upon justice in international relations demonstrates the extent to which it is bounded by realistic and idealistic concepts. It is aware of the difficulties in achieving peace and makes clear that peace can only be attained by an "enterprise of justice." At the same time, it recognizes the unsteadiness of the human will, which must lead to a "constant mastering of passions." The Holy See seeks to empower global governance, especially through the UN, due to its suspicions against the use of

armed forces.<sup>15</sup>

Catholic encyclicals have always been serious and sensitive instruments in analyzing world politics.<sup>16</sup> The gravity supporting Catholic social teaching, reflected in the encyclicals, is its aim towards more social justice. Once targeted against the “national security state” and the “consumer society,” the very same insights of encyclicals can address developments in an age of terror.<sup>17</sup> This addresses the destructive and inhuman power of religious terrorism just as much

One practiced and successful method in the Church’s peace-building efforts is third party mediation in conflicts where there is no particular religious dimension present. These faith-based initiatives have been successful primarily because they are altruistic or carried out as a matter of charity, as the lay Catholic community of St. Egidio in Mozambique had demonstrated. Another example is the Pope’s visit to Cuba in 1998, which had both religious and political ramifications.<sup>20</sup> In more than one way, the

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as the reactions thereupon, such as growing constraints of political freedom motivated by the war against terrorism.

Although the Vatican as a sovereign state has rarely been characterized as a liberal democracy, the Church has developed itself into a respectable promoter of human rights and freedom as a result of its commitment to the preservation of life. John Paul II particularly stressed the importance of religious freedom as the first freedom, because it is rooted in the divine dignity of human free will.<sup>18</sup>

The twentieth century marks many important shifts in the foreign policies of the Holy See. The Cuban Missile Crisis—when Pope John XXIII played an important role as a back channel—exposed the urgent need for world peace, or, more modestly, defined peaceful coexistence as the primary goal of the Church.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Second Vatican Council, in the same period, marked the Church’s turn from a promoter of the status quo to an active liberation force.

Catholic Church can be justifiably characterized as a promoter of democracy.<sup>21</sup>

Samuel Huntington observed that the “third wave” of democratization was overwhelmingly a Catholic one.<sup>22</sup> This was mainly due to the political changes made during the Second Vatican Council, which incorporated the ideas of human rights, democracy, economic development, and religious freedom into its teachings. Thus, during the 1960s the Church underwent a fundamental transformation into a major force for change.<sup>23</sup> The transformation is especially present in the encyclical *Dignitatis Humanae*, which reflects a new relationship between the Church and the state.

During the Cold War, the Vatican had already shifted from a de facto alliance with the West to a position of nonalignment that it holds to this day.<sup>24</sup> At the end of the Cold War, the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* addressed a new era and tried to define it while remaining or attempting to remain neutral.

Trends within the current political culture around the world, such as transnational structures, subsidiary, or devolution, are not new phenomena from the perspective of the Church. In Catholic history, they have all long been familiar concepts.<sup>25</sup> The strong participation of the Church in international organizations, especially in the UN, and even in lobbying activities, such as within the EU, proves this familiarity.

This article is not about religion itself as a force of change and possible peacemaker; it is about analyzing the institution of the Church as an instrument of nonviolent, sociopolitical change.<sup>26</sup> This is possible through its institutional stability and moral authority, its ability to empower individuals to act, and its general commitment to nonviolence. There are several ways in which the Church can become such a force: it can be proactive, as in the Philippines; passive, by providing a forum for political expression; or it can function as a follower of change, such as the example of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Church in World Politics— In Theory and Practice.**

In light of Holy See's support for the UN and the concept of law-based solidaristic international society, the foreign policy of the Holy See can be situated within the diverse tradition of international theory of the English school. The English School stresses the importance of a law-based international society—the idealistic component—and it is also aware of the realist tradition concerning the reality of power and the "ambiguities inherent of the use of power."<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the diplomacy of the Holy See can be seen from the perspective of the English School, which characterizes diplomacy as

a system "incorporating the virtues of charity and self-restraint constituting an element of civilization which made it easier for people to be good in their relations with those whom they saw as others, outside their own society or community of shared rules, understandings, and outlook."<sup>29</sup> This evokes the Catholic conception of a world order which tries to harmonize different interests in a just and thus civilizing manner, working towards a world society.

The Catholic concept of solidarity, which is characterized as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good," can be seen within the context of the English School theory in its controversial but nevertheless important concept of world society and basis of solidarism with a tendency towards cosmopolitanism in its ethical commitments—"[T]he view that humanity is one, and that the task of diplomacy is to translate this latent or immanent solidarity of interests and values into reality."<sup>30,31,32</sup> As with the English School theory, an early notion about the importance of interdependence and globalization trends, and the emerging outlook towards a more solidarist international society, for example through supporting the UN, can be seen through the actions of the Church.

Despite the fact that it is nearly impossible to speak of a traditional foreign policy of the Holy See as its activities are directed toward the religious good, it is still possible to detect a pluralism of realistic and idealistic tendencies. It is realistic because of its awareness of the necessity of power and the nature of human fallibility, mainly the St. Augustine tradition, which comes close to Reinhold Niebuhr's concept of Christian moral realism. It can also be idealistic because of

its support of a law-based international society based on normative principles, resulting in the support of international organizations.<sup>33</sup>

Concerning the theoretical localization of the Holy See's foreign policy decision-making process, the "oligarchic-bureaucratic model," as described by David Ryall, fits because of the Vatican's mix of curial administration and monarchical government. It is the nature of the Holy See's internal system to be very constant and therefore very unhurried regarding internal changes. As a result, the Catholic challenge to international society is subversive rather than revolutionary; it urges radical changes in world order through consultation. Ultimately, Catholicism is a more integrative and stabilizing force in international relations because it has no revolutionary tendency.<sup>34</sup>

The Popes and the Holy See did not see the Enlightenment as the end of history, but rather a phase that will be followed by a new era the Church believes to be of more importance; it will play a greater role in political as well as in ethical and social life.<sup>35</sup> As we face a global resurgence of religion, the Enlightenment and especially seculariza-

tion have not stressed basic human needs enough. It is now the Holy See's turn to use its institutional and moral capabilities to become once more an "ethical reservoir" in an age of a declared and believed "clash of civilizations."

Pope John Paul II had a sense for geopolitical trends and left well-established and extended diplomatic processes behind.<sup>36</sup> Though it seems Benedict XVI's papacy does not focus much on world politics but on social and ethical issues, it is his role to recognize and address the new political, cultural, and religious trends on the world stage. Acknowledging the fact that we live in a more complex world that is often framed by religious and cultural circumstances and differences, it can be argued that the current Pope's focus on ethical and social issues, rather than on "hard" political ones, is the adequate way to address world politics today. As a result, he has the foundation in the Catholic Church as the oldest religious and political global actor to transcend moral dimensions into international affairs to work for the greater good. More than ever, he holds the power and responsibility to demonstrate on the global level that religion is not necessarily violent.

#### NOTES

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1 The most criticized sentence in the lecture was: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_sp\\_e\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_sp_e_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html). Concerning the Muslim voices criticising the lecture see for example:

<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en> and <http://www.islamicamagazine.com/letter/>. For a concise introduction which is in opposition to the mainstream of the "Pope bashing" concerning the lecture, see: James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2007).

2 Georg Weigel, "World Order: What Catholics Forgot," *First Things* (May 2004): 31-38.

3 *Deus Caritas Est*, 28a.

4 See for example Scott Thomas, "Religious resurgence, postmodernism and world politics," in *Religion and Global Order*, ed. John L. Esposito and Michael Watson (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 38-65.

5 Exceptions are the bilateral relations of the Vatican; David Ryall, "How Many Divisions? The modern development of Catholic international relations", *International Relations* Vol. XIV, No.2 (August 1998): 21.

6 Eric O. Hanson, *The Catholic Church in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 67-68.

7 It is widely assumed that the Vatican represents the foreign policy of the Catholic Church. Actually the Vatican is only the sovereign territorial state (since the Lateran treaties 1929) within Rome and of which the Pope is the head of state. The Holy See (*Santa Sede*) on the other side represents first of all the organizational centre of the Catholic Church with the bishop of Rome—the Pope as its head.

8 Edward L. Heston, C.S.C., "Papal Diplomacy: Its Organization and Way of Acting," in *The Catholic Church in World Affairs*, ed. Waldemar Gurian and M.A. Fitzimons (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1954), 40. Therefore Vatican diplomacy can be described as "diplomacy of conscience." Celestino Migliore, "The Nature and Methods of Vatican Diplomacy," *Origins*, February 23 (2000), 539-541.

9 Avro Manhattan, *The Vatican in World Politics* (New York: Gaer Associates, 1949), 24-25, 28.

10 Concerning the characteristics of a global actor (regarding the European Union) see especially: Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

11 James Kurth, "The Vatican's Foreign Policy," *The National Interest* No. 32 (Summer 1993): 41.

12 Drew Christiansen, *Catholic Peacemaking. From Pacem in terris to Centesimus annus*. A Talk prepared for The United States Institute of Peace (Washington, D.C., 5 February 2001), 3-7; <http://www.restorativejustice.org/resources/docs/christiansen>.

13 Considering the fact that John Paul II was the first Pope who had such opportunities. Michael Walsh, "Catholicism and International Relations: Papal intervention," *Religion and Global Order*, ed. John L. Esposito and Michael Watson (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 100.

14 *Gaudium et Spes*, 78.

15 David Ryall, "How Many Divisions? The Modern Development of Catholic International Relations," *International Relations* Vol. XIV, No. 2 (August 1998), 28-31.

16 For instance *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) addressing the challenges of communism long before George Kennan did or *Mit brennender Sorge* (*Ardenti cura/With burning concern*, 1937) addressing the evil of Nazism still in an era of appeasement.

17 Kurth, "The Vatican's Foreign Policy," 46-48. Concerning the "consumer society" and "national security regimes" see *Centesimus Annus*, 19, 47, 48.

18 Allen Hertzke, "Roman Catholicism and the

faith-based movement for global human rights," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Winter 2005/2006): 22.

19 Concerning the Popes role in the Cuban Missile Crisis see Giancarola Zizola, *The Utopia of Pope John XXIII* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978). The encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, published only a few months after, reflected the experiences of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Hanson, *The Catholic Church in World Politics*, 352.

20 Douglas Johnston and Brian Cox, "Faith-Based Diplomacy and Preventive Engagement," in *Faith-Based Diplomacy. Trumping Realpolitik*, ed. Douglas Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22.

21 Allen Hertzke, "Roman Catholicism and the faith-based movement for global human rights," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Winter 2005/2006): 19-24.

22 Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991) 76-85.

23 Douglas Johnston, "Review of the Findings", in *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, ed. Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 260.

24 Bryan Hehir, "Papal Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy* No. 78 (Spring 1990): 46.

25 David Ryall, "The Catholic Church as a transnational actor," *Non-State Actors in World Politics*, ed. Daphne Josselin and William Wallace (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 46.

26 Regarding the notion of the Catholic Church towards peace in general see especially Ronald G. Musto, *The Catholic Peace Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).

27 Johnston, "Review of the Findings," 260-261.

28 Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 182.

29 Paul Sharp, "Herbert Butterfield, the English School and the Civilizing Virtues of Diplomacy," *International Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (2003): 877.

30 For "A firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good," see: *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 38. Concerning the Catholic concept of solidarity see especially *Populorum progressio*, 43-54 and *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 38-40.

31 For the English School and its concept of world society see: Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8, 61.

32 For "[T]he view that humanity is one, and that the task of diplomacy is to translate this latent or immanent solidarity of interests and values into reality," see: James Mayall, *World Politics: Progress and its Limits* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 14.

33 Ryall, "How Many Divisions?," 32.



34 Ryall, "How Many Divisions?," 24-25.

35 Kurth, "The Vatican's Foreign Policy," 52.

36 Although he tended to ignore that the world of nation states is not one family. Derek S. Jeffreys,

"John Paul II and Participation in International Politics," in *The Political Papacy: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and their influence*, ed. Chester Gillis (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 98.