

Addressing the Future

The Holy See's Presence in International Affairs

by Angelo Cardinal Sodano

Angelo Cardinal Sodano was born in Isola d'Asti, Italy, in 1927. In 1988, Pope John Paul II named him Secretary of the Section for Relations with States of the Secretariat of State, the equivalent of Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Holy See. After his appointment to the College of Cardinals in 1991, he became the Vatican's Secretary of State, a position equivalent to Prime Minister of the Holy See. As such, he oversees the Vatican's relations with states and international organizations. He also directs the activities of the various offices of the Roman Curia, the body that assists the Pope in the pastoral care of the church. We are pleased to present the following excerpt from Cardinal Sodano's address to the Seton Hall University community on September 5, 2000.

The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 marks a significant date for the world as a whole. We commemorate the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the dawn of a new era of human history. At the beginning of the third millennium, Christians feel impelled to bear clearer witness to their faith in the Lord and the Church, which has continued his work in the world for two thousand years.

The great event of the incarnation of the Son of God divides the history of mankind into two parts: before and after Christ. In these past twenty centuries, humanity has embarked upon a great journey, and the light of Christ's Gospel has guided its not always sure steps. It is appropriate, then, that this extraordinary event should be commemorated by the United Nations. In the days to come, I will join heads of state and government from throughout the world in celebrating the dawn of the third millennium. To all present, I will bring the greetings of Pope John Paul II, together with his appeal to world leaders to respect the primacy of spiritual values in the lives of individuals and peoples. I will also assure those present of the Catholic Church's desire to cooperate in the transformation and ennobling of humanity in the light of the saving message of Christ.

On the occasion of my visit to the United States and to Seton Hall University, I have chosen to offer some thoughts on a topic of current concern that is close to my heart: the rationale for the Holy See's presence in the international community. I will limit myself to a few aspects of the Church's involvement in international life. I will not speak of the outstanding work done by individual members of the Church—clergy, religious, and laity. Rather my reflections will be restricted to the work of evangelization carried out by the Holy See in the international community.

THE MANDATE FROM CHRIST

“Go and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19). *Docete omnes gentes*, as the sharp Latin text of Saint Matthew’s Gospel puts it.

This command expresses the universal missionary mandate that Christ entrusted to his Apostles at the conclusion of his earthly mission. It is a command which the Church cannot shirk: “Go and teach!” The Apostles and their successors are charged with this duty with regard not only to individuals but also to the world’s peoples.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE HOLY SEE

Let me first make it clear that when I speak of “the Holy See” and “the Apostolic See,” I am referring to the See of Rome, where according to God’s plan St. Peter established his “chair” as a teacher of truth. Every Episcopal See is holy, because it is sanctified by the grace of Christ and is constantly engaged in raising up holy men and women. Similarly, every Episcopal See is apostolic, since every bishop is linked to the Apostolic College, to the Twelve Apostles sent by Christ to preach the Gospel to the whole world. But the See of Rome has always been called “the Holy See” or “the Apostolic See” *par excellence*, because of the primacy that Christ conferred upon St. Peter and his successors.

Having made this point, it can now be said that throughout history, the Holy See has always been at the forefront of the church’s efforts to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. All Christians are reminded of the call to work and pray for the spread of the Gospel when they recite the Lord’s Prayer, imploring our heavenly Father: “Thy kingdom come! *Adveniat regnum tuum!*” In my position as secretary of state, I can assure you that this is also the whole purpose of our work in Rome. All the offices of the Roman Curia, all the papal nuncios in the different countries of the world, all the agencies working for the See of Peter, share this one goal: *to bring Christ’s Gospel to the lives of individuals and nations.*

TODAY’S CHALLENGES

Recently, Belgian theologian Michel Schooyans wrote a book with the significant title *L’Evangile face au desordre mondial—The Gospel in a Disordered World*.¹ In a world faced with the “disorder” created by ideologies old and new, Christians must constantly proclaim the Gospel of Christ. In a particular way, this is the thrust of the work carried out by the pope, the pastor of the universal Church: the papal ministry is one of service to Christ’s Gospel, which still needs to be proclaimed to the furthest ends of the earth.

Service to the Gospel is also the context for understanding the activity of the Roman Curia, the complex of agencies which assist the Pope in his pastoral ministry. The present Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, made this point very clearly in the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*,² by which he reorganized the Roman Curia.

The Activity of the Roman Curia. Article 15 of *Pastor Bonus* states that the various departments of the Roman Curia are to approach all issues “with pastoral criteria and with concern for the salvation of souls.” Pope Paul VI once described the Roman Curia as “a permanent Upper Room” of apostles totally dedicated to the spread of the Kingdom of God.³ As one who has spent forty years in the service of the Holy See, I can testify that this is the spirit with which we work, at all levels, and in our efforts to make the Christian message heard in today’s world.

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An Expression of the Apostolate. Likewise, the activity of papal nuncios accredited to states and international organizations also must be seen as a form of apostolate. If not, we will fail to perceive clearly the higher goals of the Holy See’s involvement in the international community. The Church is not only a *community* of salvation; she is also an *institution* of salvation. The Church is a people redeemed, but also a people which redeems. The Second Vatican Council pointed to the close link between the notion of communion (*koinonia*) and the notion of service (*diakonia*), understood as the active face of communion. This is emphasized especially in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, which states that the Church’s specific service to the human family is “to introduce the light which comes from the Gospel and to make available to men and women the saving power which the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder.”⁴

Institutional Means. If the Church is both a community of those who have been saved and an institution through which salvation is offered to others, it is obvious that she needs to employ certain institutional means to achieve her goal. These means include papal representation. In the course of centuries, the Roman pontiffs gradually began to send out personal legates in order to maintain contact with the particular Churches in different parts of the world and to engage in continuous dialogue with the civil authorities responsible for the destiny of nations.

During the early centuries of the Church, it was in relation to councils and synods that papal representation first appeared. It eventually came to be seen as an expression of ecclesial communion and as a means for promoting the Christian life.

In this regard, we might recall the example of Pope Gregory the Great, who, before his election to the See of Peter in 590, had served for several years as the papal envoy to the emperor of Constantinople. A Benedictine monk living in Rome, he had formerly been prefect of the City of Rome and thus had a vast knowledge of people and human affairs. For this reason Pope Benedict I sent him to the East in order to improve relations with the Church of Constantinople and to maintain dialogue with the emperor.

Gregory did not refuse this mission. Accompanied by some of his Benedictine brothers, he set out for the Bosphorus, knowing that this activity too was a means of serving the Church and of encouraging missionary fervor in those distant lands.

Diplomatic Missions. With the rise of modern states in the fifteenth century, international relations took on certain set forms, including the establishment of permanent diplomatic missions. The popes too began to use these missions as a means of ensuring permanent contact with heads of the various nations. Thus the first Apostolic Nunciatures sprang up—in Spain, France, the Republic of Venice, and the various states that are now Germany and Austria.

Today the Holy See continues to maintain nunciatures for its diplomatic relations with states, precisely so that it can maintain contact with the local Churches and facilitate dialogue with the civil authorities, especially regarding freedom of religion and conscience, so as to ensure freedom for the Church to pursue her spiritual and humanitarian mission of service.

At present the Holy See, as the central government of the Catholic Church, has diplomatic relations with the governments of 174 states. The most recent government to establish relations with the Holy See, just a few months ago, was that of Djibouti. Present on every continent, papal nuncios are thus in a position to give Caesar what is Caesar's and to ask that God be given what is God's.

An Example of a Nuncio: Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. One of the great papal representatives of our times was Archbishop Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. Before he was appointed patriarch of Venice and then elected pope in 1958, taking the name of John XXIII, Archbishop Roncalli was for many years a papal nuncio, first in Bulgaria (1925–1934), then in Turkey and Greece (1935–1944), and finally in France (1945–1953).

His diary, published after his death and entitled *Journal of a Soul*, contains entries of great depth, which reflect the profound sense of the supernatural outlook which guided his whole life. In Roncalli's mind, every ministry in the church is meant to have a higher supernatural goal and employ virtue as a method: generosity, patience, sacrifice, and perseverance.

When, in 1953, Pope Pius XII asked him to leave Paris and go to Venice, Archbishop Roncalli wrote in his diary:

Now I find myself engaged in direct ministry to souls. In fact I have always believed that where priests are concerned, what passes for diplomacy must be imbued with a pastoral spirit; otherwise it is of no account and a sacred mission becomes something ridiculous.⁵

As you know, Pope John XXIII was beatified just a few days ago, on September 3, and so he can now serve as a heavenly patron for Apostolic Nuncios.

THE HOLY SEE IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

In recent decades, especially during the papacy of Pope John Paul II, the presence of papal representations in international organizations has become much more evident. The goal is always the same: to bring the leaven of the Gospel to all the complex reality of international relations and to international debates about social problems,

human rights, and the rights of peoples; questions of justice and peace; and issues of cooperation for the development of peoples.

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As a consequence, the work of the Papal Mission to the United Nations in New York has become more demanding, as has that of the Missions to the specialized institutions of the United Nations based in Geneva and Vienna. The same may be said of the Papal Missions to UNESCO in Paris and to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, as well as the Holy See's involvement in European institutions, such as the European Union in Brussels, the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in Vienna.

The speeches delivered in New York before the General Assembly of the United Nations by Pope Paul VI in 1965 and by Pope John Paul II in 1979 and 1995 provide an eloquent illustration of the lofty religious aim that inspires the Holy See's involvement in the international community, namely, that world affairs be imbued with the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the family, the gospel of harmony and peace, and, moreover, the Gospel of truth, justice, and love.



Notes

¹ Paris: Fayard, 1997.

² June 28, 1988.

³ See *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, XI, 1973, p.257.

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 3.

⁵ *Journal of a Soul* (Rome: 1965), p. 336.