

The Diplomatic Activity of the Holy See

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I thank Archbishop Denis Hart for the kind invitation he issued to me on behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to visit Australia for the centenary of the Apostolic Delegation and to address you on the occasion of your plenary meeting. It is a great joy to meet you all here in Sydney, having had the opportunity on other occasions to meet many of you either as a group or individually in the Vatican. I also bring you warm greetings from the Holy Father.

As this is the first visit of a Secretary for Relations with States to Australia, and given that the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, whom you all know well, has been appointed to succeed me, I thought it might be helpful to talk to you about the Holy See's diplomatic activity and to speak also about the current situation of Christians in the Middle East, an issue which I know is of concern to you all.

As you know, the Secretary for Relations with States has particular responsibility for the Holy See's diplomatic activities. The Secretariat of State has two sections: the Section for General Affairs and the Section for Relations with States. The latter is recognised in international protocol as the Holy See's Foreign Ministry and the Secretary for Relations with States is equivalent to the Foreign Minister. The apostolic constitution *Pastor Bonus*, promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1988, which regulates the organisation of the Roman Curia, describes the various responsibilities of the Section for Relations with States in articles 45–47. The section handles all matters involving civil governments. It promotes diplomatic relations with states and other subjects of international law and deals with matters of mutual interest for the promotion of the good of the

* His Excellency Archbishop Dominique Mamberti is Prefect of the Apostolic Signatura. This article is the text of an address given to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in Sydney on 25 November 2014 to mark the centenary of papal representation in Australia. At the time he was invited to speak, he was Secretary for Relations with States, Secretariat of State. In January 2015 he was among the new cardinals named by Pope Francis.

Church and civil society, sometimes by means of concordats and similar conventions. It represents the Holy See at international organisations and meetings and, in some cases, particularly where there are agreements with civil governments, it is involved in matters relating to the erection and mutation of dioceses and episcopal appointments.

1. A Terminological Clarification

As it may seem strange to many people that the Catholic Church should engage in diplomacy, given that diplomatic activity is the prerogative of states, deriving directly from their being constituted as sovereign entities with respect to other states, I thought it appropriate to say something about this aspect of the Church's mission and the aims of papal diplomacy in general.

To begin with, I would like to clarify some issues of terminology. Many commentators often speak of 'Vatican diplomacy' and some question the value of accrediting diplomatic representatives to the Vatican, which is the smallest independent state in the world. In reality, Vatican City State, as such, does not maintain diplomatic relations with any state, although technically it could. Vatican City State exists merely to guarantee the autonomy of the Holy See, which, for centuries, because of its spiritual sovereignty, has been recognised as a subject of international law. This was true even when the Holy See did not have any territory, namely, in the years between 1870, following the loss of the Papal States, and 1929, which saw the creation of Vatican City State as a result of the signing of the Lateran Treaty between the Holy See and Italy. Even when he had no territory of his own, the Pope continued to send and receive diplomatic representatives, and the Holy See was called to mediate or lend its good offices in no less than thirteen international disputes, such as that of 1885 between Germany and Spain over the Caroline Islands.

What is the 'Holy See'? In the narrow sense, the term 'Holy See', or 'Apostolic See', refers to the office of the Roman Pontiff. In the broad sense, which is the one more usually employed, the 'Holy See' includes the offices and other institutions of the Roman Curia, which assist the Pope in the government of the universal Church. It is therefore to be distinguished from 'Vatican City State', a territorial enclave within the city of Rome which functions like other states and exists solely to ensure the autonomy of the Holy See.

2. The Situation Today

Today, as a result of the increased role of the Holy See on the international stage, no less than 180 states have full diplomatic relations with it. To these should be added the European Union, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, and a mission with special character, namely that of the State of Palestine. The Holy See is also represented at various international and regional organisations, of which it is either a member or an observer, such as the United Nations, the

Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the African Union, ASEAN, and UNESCO.

Many countries, including Australia, maintain a resident mission to the Holy See in Rome. Including those of the European Union and the Order of Malta, there are at present eighty-two such missions. In addition, the mission of the State of Palestine and the offices of the League of Arab States, the International Organisation for Migration, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees maintain regular contacts with the Holy See through their chanceries in Rome.

Australia took the decision to have a resident ambassador in Rome six years ago and there is no doubt that this has enhanced our bilateral relations and led to increased contact and interchange on a wide range of international issues of mutual interest.

3. The Aims of Papal Diplomacy

What are the aims of papal diplomacy? The Holy See, while exercising its diplomatic activity in accordance with international law and established practice, differs from states in that it does not have particular commercial, military or political aims to defend or pursue. Rather, its diplomatic activity serves the universal mission of the Pope, which is essentially a spiritual mission at the service of the Gospel. In this sense, the Holy See is often said to exercise 'soft power' diplomacy, namely a diplomacy which does not depend on military, political or economic strength but on the ability to persuade. The Holy See, one could say, acts as a voice of conscience, at the service of the common good, by drawing attention to the anthropological, ethical and religious aspects of the various questions affecting the lives of peoples, nations and the international community as a whole.

At the heart of this mission is a certain conception of the human person, who is seen as having an innate dignity, which must always be respected, ultimately because he or she is created in the image and likeness of God, and is endowed with reason, will and freedom. This vision of the human person is fundamental to the Church's social teaching, which is a body of teaching developed over the centuries, particularly over the past two hundred years, concerning the organisation of society and various issues which affect the human person in his or her social dimension, such as the family, economics, culture, politics, justice, human rights, peace and the environment. In its diplomatic activity, the Holy See continually refers to this teaching, which, to a large extent, is not dependent on one's particular religious beliefs, as a basis for peaceful social coexistence and a contribution to the common good.

The Holy See's diplomacy has various particular aims which flow from its primarily spiritual mission. These include the defence of the Church's rights and freedom, and of religious liberty in general; the promotion of an ethical vision in the various questions which affect human life, society and development; the

defence of human dignity and human rights; the promotion of reconciliation and peace; the promotion of integral human development and humanitarian interests; the protection of the environment; and, when requested, the mediation of disputes.

The Pope makes use of the diplomatic system and possibilities available to him, not because it is intrinsically linked to the Petrine ministry in the sense of not being able to function without it, but because it is a useful and valuable instrument for exercising his ministry in the world. Papal diplomacy enables the Pope to exercise his prophetic mission in the international forum and contributes to the defence of the Church's freedom, human rights and religious liberty in different countries throughout the world.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the attentiveness of the international community to what the Holy See might have to say about a particular issue. It is not that the Holy See seeks to impose a particular religious view; such an attempt would in any case be rejected by the other players on the international stage. Rather, the Holy See, using the instruments of diplomacy available to it and arguing from rational principles, brings to the table a particular contribution, based on ethical and religious considerations, which serves to enrich the debate and bring to the attention of other participants insights which might otherwise go unobserved or be ignored.

4. The Situation of Christians in the Middle East

At this point, I would like to speak about the Holy See's concern for the situation of Christians in the Middle East. For obvious reasons, the Holy See has long had an interest in this region, where Christianity first emerged and which is home to the most ancient Christian communities. We are very much concerned about the gradual disappearance of these communities, which is caused by various factors, including restrictions on religious liberty, the lack of social and economic opportunity, discrimination and, more recently, persecution of a most violent nature.

For these reasons, as part of the Holy See's intense diplomatic activity and as an indication of its concern, two high-level meetings devoted to the Middle East were held in the Vatican last month. From 2 to 4 October, in accordance with the Holy Father's wishes, the apostolic nuncios to the various countries in the region, the permanent observers to the United Nations in New York and Geneva, and the Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union met with the Secretary of State and other superiors and officials of the relevant dicasteries of the Roman Curia. This meeting enabled the participants to obtain first-hand knowledge as well as an overall view of the situation of Christians in the various countries of the Middle East. Subsequently, on 20 October, the Pope called a meeting of the College of Cardinals and the Patriarchs to discuss the situation and to explain the Holy See's approach to the various complex problems of the region. The various interventions made at the meeting focused on the need for peace and

reconciliation in the Middle East, the defence of religious freedom, support for local communities, the importance of education for forming new generations capable of engaging in dialogue, and the role of the international community. I know that the Church in Australia has a keen interest in the Holy Land and I thank you for your generous support of Christian communities there.

With regard to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Holy See’s longstanding position is that the two parties should arrive at a negotiated settlement. The Holy See is concerned about access to the holy places, which should be guaranteed to the followers of the three principal religions present in the Holy Land. In addition, to clarify the legal and financial situation of Catholic communities and institutions, the Holy See continues to negotiate various agreements with both Israeli and Palestinian authorities, and maintains regular high-level bilateral contact with both, in order to deal in an effective way with issues of mutual concern.

In recent months, we have seen the worsening of the situation in Syria and in northern Iraq. Large swathes of territory have fallen into the hands of terrorist groups, the so-called ‘Islamic State’. Descending to levels of barbarism of scarcely imaginable atrociousness, these terrorists have driven Christian and other minorities from their homes; despoiled them of their possessions; sold women into slavery; recruited minors as child soldiers; ruthlessly eliminated those who oppose them, resorting even to crucifixion and decapitation; and committed mass murder.

The sufferings of these communities led Pope Francis to write to the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr Ban Ki-moon, at the beginning of August, making an appeal to the international community and the United Nations to take urgent action to end the humanitarian tragedy. Allow me to quote from his letter:

The violent attacks that are sweeping across Northern Iraq cannot but awaken the consciences of all men and women of goodwill to concrete acts of solidarity by protecting those affected or threatened by violence and assuring the necessary and urgent assistance for the many displaced people as well as their safe return to their cities and their homes. The tragic experiences of the Twentieth Century, and the most basic understanding of human dignity, compels the international community, particularly through the norms and mechanisms of international law, to do all that it can to stop and to prevent further systematic violence against ethnic and religious minorities.¹

The same appeal was reiterated only last month by Archbishop Benardito Auza, the Holy See’s permanent observer to the United Nations in New York, at

1. See w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140809_lettera-ban-ki-moon-iraq.html, pp. 1–2.

the Security Council open debate on ‘The Situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian Question’. In particular, he appealed to the United Nations to strengthen the international juridical framework of a multilateral application of the responsibility to protect people from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity and humanitarian law, while emphasising the need for dialogue, including interreligious and intercultural dialogue, in order to find a peaceful and lasting settlement.

Given all of this, you may ask: Does the Holy See favour military intervention to resolve the crisis created by ‘Islamic State’? On the one hand, because of its religious nature, the Holy See has always emphasised the primacy of peace and the necessity of finding peaceful solutions through dialogue to resolve crises. Only recently did Pope Francis declare ‘war is madness’. Hence, in so far as it is possible, every effort should be made to avoid war. On the other hand, provided certain conditions are met, the Holy See does not exclude the use of force to restrain the unjust aggressor and protect persecuted communities. We recall what the Holy Father said last August in reply to a journalist’s question on the return flight from Korea:

It is licit to stop the unjust aggressor. I emphasize the word: ‘stop’. I’m not saying drop bombs, make war, but stop the aggressor. The means used to stop him would have to be evaluated. Stopping an unjust aggressor is licit. But we also need to remember! How many times, with this excuse of stopping an unjust aggressor, the powers have taken over peoples and carried on an actual war of conquest! One nation alone cannot determine how to stop an unjust aggressor.²

It is therefore licit to restrain the unjust aggressor, provided this is done in a proportionate way and in accordance with international law, not in a unilateral fashion. For this reason, the United Nations and the entire international community, in particular the various states of the Middle East region, must be involved. This is the best way to guarantee that the actions of the international community have an adequate objective legal base and to ensure that the common good prevails over one-sided interests. That said, the present situation in Syria and Iraq is an emergency one which requires a rapid response. In this case, the involvement of Muslim-majority states in whatever action is taken is important in order to avoid creating the impression that the present intervention is a thinly veiled form of Western aggression or, worse still, a war of religion—an impression that would simply play into the hands of fundamentalists.

However, it is obvious that the problem posed by terrorism will not be solved by a military response alone. Apart from urgently needed humanitarian

2. See w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/august/documents/papa-francesco_20140818_corea-conferenza-stampa.html, p. 3.

aid, it is essential to tackle the root causes which allowed 'Islamic State' and other terrorist groups to emerge. There must also be a clear political will to combat terrorism by preventing illegal financing and illegal trade in arms, technology and other supplies, which enable terrorists to continue fighting. Religious leaders, both Christian and Muslim, must play their part and cooperate in promoting dialogue, education and mutual understanding, as well as in condemning the exploitation of religion to justify violence.

As you can see, the Holy See is very concerned about the tragic situation currently unfolding in the Middle East. It does not propose technical solutions but it is tirelessly involved in raising international awareness and in appealing to the international community to intervene as a matter of urgency in order to stop the aggressor, provide humanitarian aid and address the root causes of the present crisis.

5. Conclusion

I thank you for this opportunity to give you some insight into the workings of papal diplomacy. The Holy See engages in diplomatic activity as part of its primarily spiritual mission and as a contribution to the good of humanity as a whole. In doing so, the Holy See can count not only on the support and advice of Catholic Church personnel throughout the world—I think in particular of local episcopates, like your own, and academic institutions—but also on the valuable assistance of many people of good will outside the Church, with whom it is in constant dialogue on a wide range of issues to help resolve the numerous problems that affect the world today. For all of this, the Holy See is most grateful.

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