PETER AND CAESAR: Is Pope Francis Shifting the Vatican’s Worldview?
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Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43556199
Accessed: 08-02-2020 01:05 UTC

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Prior to Pope Francis’s visit to the Holy Land, his ambassadors sought to temper expectations by reminding officials in Washington and other capitals that the pontiff himself had called it “strictly a religious trip.” Its main purpose, they said, was to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the meeting in Jerusalem between Pope Paul VI and the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras—the first such encounter after a thousand years of antagonism between the two churches, Roman Catholic and Orthodox. But in a region where religion and politics are an explosive mix, every word he spoke, every step he took was going to be scrutinized for any hint of support for one side to the disadvantage of the other, and no one knew it better than Francis. But the Argentine-born pope already had a reputation for not avoiding controversial issues—and a gift for making unexpected symbolic gestures to make his point.

His program upset Israelis even before his departure: unlike the two previous popes to come to the Holy Land, Francis crossed from Jordan to the West Bank before visiting Israel, and the Vatican announced that he would meet “the president of the state of Palestine”—an entity endorsed by the Holy See, but not recognized by Israel, or for that matter, the Unit-
ed States. But by and large, as was widely reported, his visit showed a fine sense of balance. Residual animosity was negligible. For example, later, when he landed at Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion Airport, he called for recognition of “the right of the state of Israel to exist and to flourish in peace and security within internationally recognized boundaries.”

His impromptu stop by the twenty-six-foot-high Israeli security wall that cuts through the West Bank, where he rested his forehead against the concrete and prayed silently while a child holding a Palestinian flag looked on, was a powerful image that angered some Israelis, but the fact that he made no statement defused the incident—and opened the way for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to take him to Israel’s Victims of Terrorism monument, which was not on the schedule either. The prompt acceptance by both Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas of his equally spontaneous invitation to come to Rome to pray together for a peaceful settlement of what he called the “unacceptable” Israeli-Palestinian dispute reflected the atmosphere of goodwill generated by his personality. He celebrated Mass on three occasions on the trip, and he addressed words of peace, reconciliation, and hope to Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike.

By choosing the minefield of the Holy Land for his first foreign visit (his earlier trip to Brazil had been planned for his predecessor), Francis has given notice that he sees himself as a major player on the international stage—but it is hardly the first sign.

Last September, Francis wrote to President Vladimir Putin before the scheduled Group of 20 summit in St. Petersburg, urging him to persuade the participants “each and every one, to help find ways to overcome the conflicting positions [in Syria] and lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution.” At the time, the Obama administration was fitfully seeking allied support for military action in the Syrian conflict, in response to the Damascus government’s use of chemical weapons, and the pope and Putin found themselves—for different reasons—on the same side, trying to prevent it.

That the new pope’s first personal foray into international politics should be to contact the Russian president was seen as a departure from the established channels of Vatican diplomacy, which had long tended to be linked with the West. Two months later, after Putin had a particularly cordial meeting with the pope at the Vatican, presenting the pontiff with a rare icon of the Virgin Mary while at the same time (as was reported later) expressing his own deep devotion to the mother of Jesus Christ, experts
Roland Flamini

began talking of a warming of relations between Rome and the Kremlin. The encounter signaled what the Italian journalist Massimo Franco, author of the new book Il Vaticano secondo Francesco (The Vatican according to Francis), described in a lecture at Chatham House, the London think tank, as the end of Moscow’s long-standing perception of the pope as “a kind of religious corollary of the North Atlantic Alliance.” For his part, Pope Francis, Franco said, “views Putin as a sort of Christian czar, defender of Christian minorities in the Middle East.”

On the personal level, Putin’s socially conservative agenda, his emphasis on the traditional family, and opposition to the gay community created no fundamental divergences with Francis. In fact, there was a convergence of concern between the two leaders over the plight of Christians in the Middle East as a result of the US invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring, and, most urgently, the Syrian civil war. In Putin’s discussions with the pope, according to the Vatican communiqué after the visit, “special attention was paid to...the urgency of the need to bring an end to the violence and to ensure necessary humanitarian assistance to the population.” Thereafter, relief organizations from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican increased their cooperation in helping thousands of Syria’s Christian refugees, some of whom were in communion with Rome, and others belonging to the Orthodox Church.

Evidence for the low-key rapprochement between the two leaders can be seen in the Vatican’s muted reaction to Putin’s Crimean landgrab. Other than calling on all parties to reach a negotiated settlement early in the crisis, Francis has said little. Spheres of influence overlap in Ukraine. The Catholic Church is strong in western Ukraine, which is outside the current Russian threat. The eastern part of the country, including Crimea, is predominantly Russian Orthodox, and Putin has won the public support of the church hierarchy in Moscow by portraying his Ukrainian action as a mission to ensure freedom of worship for Orthodox believers.

The Vatican has also gone easy on Putin over Ukraine because the desire of Ukrainians for association with, and ultimately membership in, the European Union—the fuse that lit the conflict—earns them little sympathy in Rome. The Holy See is not a member of the European Union, and the consistent refusal of the drafters of the European Constitution to include a reference to Europe’s Christian roots in its preamble has always rankled the Vatican. Furthermore, Putin’s contempt for European values (or, in his view, lack of them) and way of life find a sympathetic ear in an
institution that heard its previous leader, Pope Benedict XVI, express concern over Europe’s shrinking faith and increasing secularization.

Francis has so far made no pronouncement on Europe, as a recent interviewer from the Milan newspaper Corriere della Sera, pointed out to him. True, replied the pope, sidestepping the obvious invitation; he would make his views known at the right time, and on the right occasion. But Francis’s frequent criticism of the excesses of capitalism, and what he calls the “throwaway culture” that not only wastes food on a daily basis, but also discards human beings as unnecessary, exposing them to child slavery and human trafficking, is surely a clue.

The tenor of Francis’s dealings with Putin is one sign that the non-European pope is shaping his own foreign policy course. Unlike the two pontiffs he canonized in April, he does not come from a world where the Vatican was strategically aligned with the West in the struggle against communism—a communism that Pope John XXIII (1958–63) tried to deal with, and Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) helped destroy.

Of the two, Pope John provided a sort of model for Francis, introducing his own version of détente with Moscow to ease the pressure on Catholics in Eastern Europe—the so-called Church of Silence. He lowered the tone of the church’s anti-Soviet and anti-communist rhetoric, and during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis addressed a letter to President John Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev appealing to both leaders to pull back from the brink and resolve the crisis through negotiation. The Soviet party paper Pravda reported Pope John’s appeal on its front page, noting his reference to the wisdom of negotiation. Commentators said it gave Khrushchev “cover” from the Soviet hard-liners seeking a confrontation with the United States when he backed down and averted war.

Afterward, Khrushchev agreed to a Vatican request to release Josef Slipyi, the Catholic archbishop of Lviv, Ukraine, who had been imprisoned in Siberia for nearly twenty years. And on March 7, 1963—to the consternation of Cold War Washington—John gave a private audience to the chief editor of Izvestia, Alexei Adjubei, who happened to be Khrushchev’s son-in-law. The discussion touched on the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the Soviet Union, and a possible Khrushchev meeting with the pope. Neither happened, but the lines of
communication opened by this audience made it possible for clerics from behind the Iron Curtain to travel to Rome for the historic Vatican Council.

Then, shortly before his death, John published his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, in which he drew a distinction between “a false philosophy on the nature, origin, and purpose of men and the world,” and its social, cultural, and political program—“even when such a program draws its origin and inspiration from that philosophy.” Thus, he argued, cooperation with atheists was possible in the quest for peace and social progress, while at the same time rejecting atheism.

Pope John Paul II, who came from the combative Polish hierarchy that had openly opposed the communist regime, rejected conciliation with the Soviets in favor of confrontation. Admittedly, this was no longer the powerful Soviet Union of the 1960s but an empire showing distinct signs of internal political corrosion and economic decay. The pope joined forces with President Ronald Reagan to destroy what the latter famously called “the evil empire.” John Paul openly supported his country’s illegal trade union, Solidarity, and suppressed the pro-communist left in his own church, clamping down on liberation theology in Latin America. According to former Reagan administration officials, the Vatican and Washington exchanged information about developments in Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. Vernon Walters, then a senior CIA official, regularly briefed the pope; and as tension increased between Solidarity and the Polish government of General Wojciech Jaruzelski, Walters came armed with the latest satellite images of Soviet troops massing near the Polish border.

For Pope Francis, the Cold War is yesterday’s news. To him, the enemy is first and foremost indifference to the plight of the global poor, based on his formative experience in the urban sprawl of his native Buenos Aires, and second, the Islamic fundamentalism that appears determined to drive Christianity out of its Middle Eastern birthplace. In doing battle against both, the pope has signaled his determination to pick his allies without regard for the church’s past alignments.

And he has the instrument in place to help him do it. By an ancient and often controversial quirk of international politics, the Roman Catholic Church, alone among faiths, is a diplomatic player. At last count, the Vatican—or more exactly, the Holy See—had full diplomatic relations
with one hundred and seventy-five states, including the United States and
the Russian Federation, and countries with different religions from its
own, including India, Indonesia, and South Africa. Many have resident
ambassadors in Rome, and the pope has his own extensive network of
envoys, or apostolic nuncios, assigned to national capitals around the
world, most of them experienced diplomats trained at the Pontifical
Ecclesiastical Academy, in Rome.

The justification for a papal diplomatic service, which has been in con-
tinued existence since the sixteenth century, is the pope’s dual status as
spiritual leader of the world’s billion Roman Catholics and temporal leader
of a sovereign state. Nuncios reflect that duality by maintaining relations
with both the host government and the local church. In the latter function,
one of their main tasks is spotting ecclesiastical talent to fill vacancies for
local bishops, and sending their recommendations to the pope.

The Holy See is also a member of sixteen international bodies, includ-
ing the United Nations, where it chooses to remain a permanent observ-
er rather than a voting member but maintains a vantage point to advan-
cate its core policies: improving the economic situation in poor nations;
support and extension of international law; nonviolence; support for
marriage and the “sanctity of life”; and banning the use of contraceptives,
abortion, and euthanasia.

In early January, the traditional New Year’s reception for the ambassa-
dors accredited to the Holy See gave Francis the opportunity to deliver a
comprehensive review the world’s problems, as he saw them. In his charac-
teristically simple language, he welcomed the Syrian conference launched
in Geneva on January 22nd, saying he hoped it would “mark the begin-
ing of the desired peace process,” and praised Jordan and Lebanon for
receiving Syrian refugees. He welcomed progress in the West’s talks with
Iran on halting Tehran’s alleged nuclear weapons program.

He said he was concerned about “ongoing political problems in Leb-
anon,” about Egypt, which “needs to regain harmony,” and Iraq, “which
struggles to attain peace and stability for which it hopes.” But he was
encouraged by “the resumption of peace talks between Israelis and Palestin-
ians,” adding, “I express my hope that both parties will resolve, with the sup-
port of the international community, to take courageous decisions aimed
at finding a just and lasting solution to a conflict which urgently needs to
end.” Regarding Africa, he expressed his sadness that “in vast areas of Nige-
ria violence persists, and much innocent blood continues to be spilt. I think
above all of the Central African Republic, where much suffering has been caused as a result of the country's tensions.” Francis also referred to “political instability…many deaths and a humanitarian crisis” in South Sudan, but welcomed the “restoration of promising democratic structures” in Mali.

It was noted that in this panoramic view of the state of the world, he made no direct reference to China, except that in mentioning Asia he said the Holy See “looks with lively hope to the signs of openness coming from countries of great religious and cultural traditions, with whom it wishes to cooperate in the pursuit of the common good.”

In his address, the pope did not refer to the United States except in the context of illegal immigrants, who he said undertake “perilous journeys” in “the hope of a better life.”

The close cooperation between Reagan and John Paul II on the project of tossing the USSR onto the ash heap of history has obscured the often ambivalent relationship between the United States and the Holy See. President Kennedy, who had an almost pathological fear that his Catholic faith would damage him politically, kept the affable Pope John XXIII at arm’s length and minimized his dealings with Rome. In 1963, the US president was actually in Italy on his European trip when the newly elected Pope Paul VI was crowned in St. Peter’s Square, but the president felt that he would be criticized at home if he was seen at the pope’s coronation so he sat out the occasion in a hotel in Lake Como, pleading tiredness from his travels.

Full US diplomatic relations with the Holy See were renewed in 1984, after a gap of one hundred and fourteen years, when President Reagan saw the potential of gaining John Paul’s support in bringing down the Soviet empire. When John Paul died in 2005, the world was treated to the extraordinary sight of three US presidents—George W. Bush, his father George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton—kneeling before the catafalque of the dead pontiff, along with a somewhat bemused Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. (Jimmy Carter had also wanted to be present, but the White House told him there was no more room on Air Force One.) In 2013, Vice President Joe Biden led the delegation to the installation of Pope Francis.

But despite the two-way diplomatic traffic, many prickly moral and political issues continue to create problems between Washington and the
Vatican. The moral issues tend to be refracted from the disagreements between the American administration and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops—abortion rights, gay marriage, and the current row over mandated contraception coverage under President Obama’s health-care laws. On the political level, there is the Holy See’s recognition of Taiwan as China, and the fact that every pope since Pius XII, John’s predecessor, has endorsed the UN proposal to make Jerusalem an international city, a move the US does not support. In some ways, the Vatican sees the increasingly dangerous plight of Middle Eastern Christians as the result of US and Western mistakes in the region—the Iraq War, which the Vatican vigorously opposed and tried to prevent, and the Arab Spring, which Washington misread.

Add to all this the fact that Francis’s worldview is that of an Argentinean who has no firsthand knowledge of the United States and is not as likely to place as much stock in American influence and American exceptionalism as his European predecessors did. “Francis defies many currents of American thinking,” columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. wrote in the Washington Post recently. “Francis is anti-consumerist and anti-materialist. That’s quite at odds with an American ethos that turns the mall into a religious shrine and shopping into a sacrament. The pope preaches a code of sacrifice that is not widely celebrated in our society outside the realm of military combat. He extols the simple life, a value popular in sections of the environmental movement but not a big seller in a country obsessed with stuff and gadgets.”

In March of this year, President Obama, whose approval ratings have declined, met Pope Francis, who in one year has achieved huge popularity not just with Catholics, but with people of other faiths and even nonbelievers. In advance of the president’s papal audience, the White House understandably skirted the areas of difference and portrayed president and pontiff as soul mates when it comes to poverty and inequality and a commitment to social justice.

Up to a point, says Kishore Jayabalan, who heads the Rome-based Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty. “They have very different starting points,” he says. “The pope can use his office to raise moral concern about the unborn and inequality but there’s not a whole lot he can directly do about it.” It’s the president who has the means and the power to take action but hasn’t, in the view of the Vatican. Also, the pope has been quite outspoken about the global economy and global capitalism.
Roland Flamini

not helping the poor, while Obama “presides over a free-market economy” and “recognizes that the global economy has helped the poor: people in Asia, Africa, and parts of Latin America have benefitted from free trade.”

The meeting took place amid the usual questions from skeptics over what the United States gains from having diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Or, conversely, if the Roman Catholic Church has an ambassador in Washington, why not Islam, or Buddhism? But the answer is clear: What the Holy See has is not power as it is usually perceived in the political context, but enormous influence. One in every six human beings is baptized into the Catholic Church, giving the pope enormous reach as an opinion former. What he says can sway votes—a point not lost on American presidents.

Whether the Vatican’s foreign policy will be as consequential under Francis I as it was under John Paul II is yet to be seen. But it has always been a mistake to underestimate the power of the pope, as Stalin did when in the mid-1930s he derisively asked the French foreign minister Pierre Laval how many divisions the pontiff commanded. (Enough, as it worked out, to help bring down the evil edifice Stalin himself had erected.) Napoleon was closer to the mark when, upon sending François Cacault to Rome, he instructed his personal emissary to “deal with the pope as if he had two hundred thousand men at his command.” In time, Cacault, in recounting the story, used the figure of five hundred thousand men. Confronted with the discrepancy, Cacault replied that the pope’s position had improved in the interim by about three hundred thousand men. And that was two centuries ago.