

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES**  
**WORLD LEADERS FORUM LECTURE: "ASPECTS OF VATICAN DIPLOMACY"**  
**SETON HALL UNIVERSITY, NEW JERSEY**  
**FEBRUARY 1<sup>ST</sup>, 2023**

I thank very warmly Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Archbishop of Newark, for his kind words of welcome and introduction; thank you for your presence here today, Your Eminence;

I greet and thank Dr Joseph Nyre, President of Seton Hall, for his kind invitation to offer these remarks today in the context of the World Leaders Forum;

I greet members of the administration and of the teaching faculty of the University;

I welcome above all the students of this educational institution who have come to hear something about this rather interesting topic of "Vatican Diplomacy"; it's a pleasure to have the opportunity to meet you and to have this chance for an exchange, which I hope will be beneficial for each of us.

When asked to indicate a topic for this afternoon's address, I proposed "Aspects of Vatican Diplomacy" But, I must begin with a confession: there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as *Vatican Diplomacy*! There is, however, the diplomacy of the Holy See; there is the diplomatic activity of the Holy Father and of his principal collaborators. There is the diplomatic service of the Holy See, of which I am a member as Apostolic Nuncio to the United States. But, technically, the term Vatican Diplomacy is really only a shorthand, a phrase that renders immediately comprehensible a rather more complicated reality. So, we talk analogously about "Vatican diplomacy" and "Vatican diplomat" and sometimes even, "Vatican embassy". In fact, we meant something else.

*The Holy See & the Apostolic Nuncio*

First of all then, we should clarify precisely what is meant by the "Holy See" and also, who I am as the "Apostolic Nuncio". I have observed that what we are really exploring today is the diplomacy of the "Holy See". But, what is the "Holy See"? What does it mean?

In the strict sense, the Holy See refers to the See (in other words, the Diocese) of Peter and thus it refers to the Pope, as Peter's successor in that See. In its broader canonical sense, it encompasses the Pope and the Roman Curia, as the central organ of governance of the Catholic Church (cfr. Can. 361). However, at the level of international law, "Holy See" is the proper name given to that sovereign entity that has an entirely peculiar place in the world of diplomatic relations, since it is a sovereign entity **related to a person and not to a territory**. The Holy See is synonymous with the Pope, who is thus recognised as a subject of International Law.

As I said, it's true that we often use the more readily recognizable phrase "Vatican Diplomacy", but this is a misnomer as such. Even if one of the finest books on the history and meaning of the Holy See's diplomatic activity bears precisely that title: "Vatican Diplomacy" was written by Robert Graham S.J. and published in 1959. It remains, to my knowledge, one of the best English-language treatments of the Holy See's diplomacy. And how is the Holy See related too – or mistaken for – the Vatican? Well, the Vatican City State, that small, sovereign territory on and around the Vatican Hill in Rome, is where the Pope lives and where the Roman Curia operates.

But the Vatican City State itself does not send and receive ambassadors and does not ordinarily engage in diplomatic activity. It is, rather, the **Holy See** that sends and receives ambassadors, that is a member

– indeed, in some cases, a founding member – of many international and multilateral organisations, that negotiates agreements and treaties and that acts on the international stage. And the Holy See, as we have seen, is synonymous with a person: the Pope.

We might say then that the international activity of the Holy See – at the diplomatic and non-diplomatic level – is nothing other than the activity of the Pope in these spheres. The Pope is the principal diplomatic actor of the Holy See. This fact has been very clear in recent pontificates. We need only think of the personal action of Pope St John Paul II, particularly in questions concerning Eastern Europe. Again, in this present pontificate, we can see the impact that Pope Francis has on the international stage. For the diplomatic identity of the Holy See is anchored *in a person, not in a territory*.

This is the first of many conceptual peculiarities of what we call *Vatican Diplomacy*. That sovereignty and diplomatic identity can be anchored in a person, and not in a particular territory, which is usually what determines sovereignty.

As a sovereign subject of international law then, the Pope exchanges ambassadors with most countries in the world. Ambassadors are accredited to the Holy See and the Pope, in his turn, sends his own diplomatic representatives, who are called Apostolic Nuncios, to most of the world's nations. A *nuntius*, from the Latin, means "one who is sent". And thus, the Apostolic Nuncio is the stable representative of the Pope, vested with diplomatic status. In those few countries with whom the Holy See does not have full diplomatic relations (and they are very few) the Pope sends an Apostolic Delegate, as indeed he did to the United States for some 80 years, before diplomatic relations were formally established in 1984.

#### *The Bilateral aspect*

I mentioned that the Pope sends and receives ambassadors. Let's put a little flesh on that statement. It is a result, of course, of the diplomatic relations maintained between the Holy See and individual States. On January 9<sup>th</sup> last, Pope Francis met with the Ambassadors accredited to the Holy See. At that time the Secretariat of State gave an updated picture of the Holy See's diplomatic relations. The Holy See has full diplomatic relations with 183 states, as well as with the Order of Malta and the European Union. In addition, it has fixed, though not diplomatic, relations – through an Apostolic Delegate – with several other States.

On the part of the Holy See, diplomatic relations are maintained by a network of Apostolic Nunciatures, which are the Holy See's embassies. And given what we have said about the identity of the Holy See, they are rightly considered representations of the Pope. In this country, as you know, we often speak about the "Papal Nuncio", which nicely underscores the point. The Nuncio has the rank of Ambassador and, by an ancient courtesy, reaffirmed most recently in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, can also be the Dean *de iure* of the Diplomatic Corps. That practice is followed, at present, in around 40 countries.

The Holy See has over 100 physical representations, with a resident Head of Mission, either a Nuncio or a Chargé d'Affaires. Thus, some of the Holy See's missions follow more than one State. I undertake that role to this country.

For their part, the States in question accredit an Ambassador to the Holy See, either resident in Rome or in another city. 91 states have full-time Ambassadors to the Holy See, resident in Rome, including the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, His Excellency Joseph Donnelly.

The network of Nunciatures and of Embassies to the Holy See assures a stable relationship with the vast majority of States in our world today. It allows collaboration on questions of mutual interest; it permits

the Holy See to have an official channel of communication with government authorities; it favours initiatives in support of peace and religious freedom. From the ecclesiastical point of view, it affords the Holy See an opportunity to be present to the Church in individual nations.

Indeed, in practical terms, this is the daily work of the Apostolic Nuncio. He is the representative of the Holy See to the State, of course; but he is also the Pope's representative to the local Church, reinforcing the bonds of communion between the See of Peter and the dioceses of the world. There are, in fact, some 3,000 territorial circumscriptions (that is to say dioceses, eparchies, apostolic vicariates, prefectures and so on) in the world, headed by a Bishop or his equivalent. It is rather difficult to find a piece of the map not covered by one of these circumscriptions. And each of these territories has contact with a Nuncio, who represents the Pope to that diocese and makes the concerns and the realities of that local Church known to the Pope and the Roman Curia.

The Holy See's very large network of Nunciatures then is a significant commitment to dialogue, to communion, to partnership at the bilateral level. It is truly global, with Nunciatures in every continent and in virtually every corner of the world. It means too that the Holy See is a genuine interlocutor with most of the world's governments and peoples.

#### *The Multilateral aspect*

The second aspect of the Holy See's diplomatic engagement I want to touch upon, is the multilateral sphere. The devastating wake of the Second World War gave birth to several instruments of international cooperation, which have grown enormously in range and complexity and now constitute a central aspect of the global landscape. The Holy See has been deeply engaged with these organisations from the beginning. Since the Holy See's mission is itself global in essence, it is entirely natural that the voice of the Pope should also be heard in these international *fora*.

The Holy See currently has 8 Permanent Representations exclusively dedicated to multilateral relations. These include, of course, a Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and in Geneva. You will recall that Pope Francis addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations a few years ago when he remarked on the "importance which the Catholic Church attaches to this Institution and the hope which she places in its activities."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, it can be said that the Holy See's engagement with the many and varied international institutions is based on this very insight: the *importance* for a just global order that such instruments of multilateral cooperation represent and the *hope* that engagement with them can forward certain of the spiritual aims of the Holy See: that is to say, peace, fraternity, harmony, justice and the other spiritual values. I have put peace as the first of these values, and I shall return to speak of it more in the final part of these remarks.

The engagement of the Holy See at the multilateral level is, in fact, considerable. As I mentioned, the Holy See maintains permanent representatives at the United Nations in New York and Geneva. But also at the United Nations and other Specialised Institutions in Vienna; at the World Food Programme and other Institutions in Rome; at the United Nations Offices in Nairobi; as well as those in Paris, including UNESCO. In addition, the Holy See has representatives to the Council of Europe and other European Institutions at Strasburg, as well as to the African Union at Addis Ababa, to name but the most important.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations*, New York, 25 September 2015.

And thus, representatives of the Holy See engage with the very wide range of issues that fall under the remit of these multilateral institutions. At New York, the Holy See's Permanent Representative regularly intervenes at the Ordinary Session of the General Assembly, and follows the work of many of the commissions and regional groups that are constantly active there.

In Geneva the activity of the Holy See's mission is equally intense, given that many of the agencies of the UN are located there. The Holy See follows in particular, and contributes to the work of: the Global Forum on Migration & Development; the Committee against Torture; the International Labour Organisation; the World Health Organisation; the UN Programme for Development and that for the Environment; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; UNICEF and so on.

In Paris, the work of UNESCO in particular is followed; in Vienna that of the International Atomic Energy Agency (of which the Holy See is a founding member); the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe; and the UN Organisation against Crime and Drugs. In Strasbourg, a representative of the Holy See takes part in the work of the Council of Europe. Closer to home, in Washington D.C., there is a Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the Organisation of American States. In Asia an Apostolic Nuncio is accredited to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and in Nairobi the work of UN-Habitat and of the UN Programme for the Environment are followed.

As I noted earlier, the Holy See invests time and energy in the multilateral sphere in the hope that it will bear fruit, in cooperation between nations, for the good of the human family. During his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015, Pope Francis recalled the earlier visits of his predecessors, Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. They all went with a similar purpose, that of engagement with the world, that of a call to collaboration in facing challenges, that of extending an invitation to solidarity within the family of nations and that of building bridges towards peace.

Pope Francis made this point during his address in 2015: "The praiseworthy international juridical framework of the United Nations Organisations and of all its activities, like any other human endeavour, can be improved, yet it remains necessary; at the same time, it can be the pledge of a secure and happy future for coming generations. And so it will be, if the representatives of the States can set aside partisan ideological interests and sincerely strive to serve the common good."<sup>2</sup>

The common good, in fact, is a fundamental principle in the Holy See's bilateral and multilateral engagement. Often, there is a need to invite partners in dialogue from a vision that may be too partial, towards solutions that promote the good of all. Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, offers a synthesis of this principle:

In her dialogue with the State and with society, the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue. Together with the various sectors of society, she supports those programmes which best respond to the dignity of each person and the common good. In doing this, she proposes in a clear way the fundamental values of human life and convictions which can then find expression in political activity.<sup>3</sup>

Among these fundamental values that the Holy See proposes are religious freedom, respect for international law, and in cases of conflict, humanitarian law. There can be no value more fundamental than religious freedom, which is a freedom not only to worship, but which also implies the liberty of religious communities to organise themselves, to act in the society and in the culture, to form their

---

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations*, New York, 25 September 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, n. 241.

members and to establish whatever institutions are necessary to give concrete expression to their common life.

Both in its bilateral and in its multilateral activity, the Holy See acts not only to promote conditions that allow the Church to live in peace, but to ensure that religious freedom is upheld as a fundamental principle, for the benefit of all. In his address to diplomats on January 9<sup>th</sup> last, Pope Francis remarked:

Religious freedom, which cannot be reduced simply to freedom of worship, is one of the minimum requisites for a dignified way of life. Governments have the duty to protect this right and to ensure that each person, in a way compatible with the common good, enjoys the opportunity to act in accordance with his or her conscience, also in the public sphere and in the exercise of their profession.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Dialogue and the search for Peace*

We have looked briefly at the bilateral and multilateral engagement of the Holy See, and I hope you have found interesting this overview of the scale of that involvement.

But what about its purpose, its end? Why is the Holy See so engaged? We hinted at this earlier when we spoke of the spiritual values the Holy See promotes and when we spoke of religious freedom. Of course, the Holy See enters into relations with the States of the world in part to assure the Church's freedom to act and to carry out her mission in each country. The same human subject, after all, is both a member of the Church and a citizen of a particular state. It makes sense that both Church and States act together, whenever possible, for the good of the same subjects.

Apart from promoting those conditions that allow the Church to flourish in each land, the Holy See also has a specific set of values and principles that she wishes to offer to the world, as a response to the many dilemmas that daily confront us. Among what we might call these *universal values*, none is more dear to the Holy See than the promotion of peace. This is the driving force of the Holy See's engagement internationally. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Pope's Secretary of State, summed it up in these words:

The Holy See, in essence, works on the international stage ... in order to sustain the idea of a peace that is the fruit of just relations, of respect for international norms, of the protection of fundamental human rights, beginning with those of the least, the most vulnerable.<sup>5</sup>

Pope Francis recalled the centrality of peace in the activity of the Holy See during his address to the Diplomatic Corps in 2016:

On the diplomatic level, the Holy See will never cease to promote efforts to enable the message of peace to be heard to the ends of the earth ... the greatest challenge we face is that of overcoming indifference and working together for peace, which remains a good that must constantly be sought.<sup>6</sup>

The Holy Father returned to this theme in that address he gave to diplomats just a few weeks ago, to mark the beginning of the New Year. He recalled the publication of Pope John XXIII's Encyclical Letter

---

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, Vatican City, 9 January 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness, *Lectio Magistralis* 'The diplomatic activity of the Holy See at the service of peace', Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, 11 March 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings*, Vatican City, 11 January 2016.

*Pacem in terris*, 60 years ago, in the context of the Cuban missile crisis and the ominous threat of nuclear annihilation. *Pacem in terris* means, of course, “Peace on earth”.

Pope Francis remarked that the text of the encyclical letter “continues to be extremely timely, even though the international context has changed greatly.” He went on: “The paths to peace are paths of solidarity, for no one can be saved alone. We live in a world so interconnected that, in the end, the actions of each have consequences for all.”<sup>7</sup>

We are currently witnessing, in real time, how true is the Pope’s observation, as we live with the world-wide consequences of the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine. Not only are what Pope Francis calls the “martyred Ukrainian people” suffering, but the conflict threatens the food safety of many of the poorest nations, it threatens the energy supply of many non-belligerents, and it has caused a huge migrant crisis for neighboring countries. In this context, the Pope tirelessly urges negotiation and peace.

On October 2<sup>nd</sup> last, Pope Francis issued an urgent appeal for a ceasefire, asking that “serious proposals for peace” be heard. In addition, the Pope made this appeal to the wider world:

I urge all the protagonists of international life and the political leaders of nations to do everything possible to bring an end to the war, without allowing themselves to be drawn into dangerous escalations, and to promote and support initiatives for dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

Commenting on the Pope’s appeal, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State, in a speech on December 13<sup>th</sup> last, laid out the position of the Holy See, not only in relation to the present conflict in Ukraine, but in response to every recourse to violence and war. And I quote:

Let us seek, then, to take new paths of peace, beginning in Europe, excluding nobody. Let us dedicate energy and resources to promoting dialogue and negotiation. Let us invest more in peace at every level, beginning with our school programs. Let us collaborate with and support those leaders who continue to believe in peace, even when everything seems obscure and appears to be devoured by the demon of war. Let Europe return to being the beacon of a civilization founded on peace, on the rule of law and on international justice.<sup>9</sup>

It sounds almost prosaic to say it, but “Vatican Diplomacy”, the Holy See’s diplomacy exists to keep calling the world back to these fundamental truths: dialogue and peace, dialogue towards peace is the highest meaning of diplomacy.

For the Holy See, dialogue is always to be pursued and privileged. It is the royal road to overcoming patterns of conflict and, especially, to averting war. Pope Francis, in that discourse of January 9<sup>th</sup> last made this clear to the diplomats he addressed, when he said:

The task of diplomacy is precisely to resolve conflicts and thus to foster a climate of reciprocal cooperation and trust for the sake of meeting common needs. It can be said that diplomacy is an exercise of humility, since it demands that we sacrifice something of our self-regard in order to build a relationship with others, to understand their thinking

---

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, Vatican City, 9 January 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, *Remarks before the recitation of the Angelus*, Vatican City, 2 October 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Cardinal Pietro Parolin, *Speech at the Conference: L’Europa e la guerra. Dallo spirito di Helsinki alle prospettive di pace*, Palazzo Borromini, Rome, 13 December 2022

and points of view, and thus to oppose the human pride and arrogance that are the cause of every will to wage war.<sup>10</sup>

That image of “diplomacy as an exercise of humility” seems to me something very beautiful and true. The virtue of *humility* does not, perhaps, jump spontaneously to mind when we conjure up the traditional profile of the diplomat. But today, a strong dose of humility would greatly help our international order.

Perhaps that is the real task of the Holy See’s diplomacy today: to call the world to a diplomacy of humility, for the sake of our common home and of future generations.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, my dear friends: I have been able to touch, only briefly, on three aspects of the Holy See’s diplomatic activity – bilateral relations, multilateral relations, the promotion of dialogue and peace. They are by no means the only aspects but merely those that suggest themselves as particularly important in the current context.

We have had the opportunity to look at each one, admittedly in a rather cursory manner. But, in a certain sense, it can be misleading even to enumerate them, as if they were separate matters. They are, of course, all deeply interrelated. What they represent are aspects of the Holy See’s activity in the world. That activity springs from the universal mission of the Pope and it is consequently ordered towards communion, collaboration, cooperation for the promotion of the Gospel and for the promotion of everything that favours human flourishing.

The vision that guides the Holy See’s global engagement makes it a unique contributor to the international conversation and makes it a ready partner of all who wish to promote peace and who strive for the common good.

I am grateful to have had this opportunity to share with you some thoughts on these questions that are of great importance today. I hope this short address has afforded a glimpse of the Holy See’s global profile, which is rooted in the mission and activity of the Pope, both as a Sovereign subject but also, and principally, as the Successor of Peter and the Visible Head of the Catholic Church.

Thank you!

---

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, Vatican City, 9 January 2023.