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A Light to the Nations: Vatican Diplomacy and Global Politics

Introduction

WITH A HISTORY STRETCHING BEYOND THE BIRTH of many of today's nation states, Vatican diplomacy has always taken an active interest in multilateral relations. Since 1945, those relations, and global politics in general, have had their principal forum in the United Nations Organization. This lecture intends to explore something of the shape of the United Nations and how the Holy See views its importance in the preservation of peace and the future of humanity.

By no means perfect, the United Nations often receives negative press for a mixture of reasons which are not always entirely true or fair. In America, the United Nations is sometimes criticized as too expensive or excessively out of step with U.S. foreign policy. It is portrayed as corrupt, as a bureaucratic monster that is out of control. In contrast to that, I would like to suggest that, in spite of its flaws, the United Nations remains an essential component of the peace and security of the entire concert of nations.

I would contend that the importance of the United Nations is further demonstrated by the fact that in today's world it would be extremely difficult to invent anything like it. To replace it with a coalition of willing countries, as some commentators occasionally suggest, would likely end in failure.

Firstly, a coalition of such countries would not resolve the world's pressing human rights problems in undemocratic countries which otherwise remain in the United Nations where

they can be named and shamed. Secondly, such a club could risk finishing in irrelevance like the League of Nations.

One of the most important lessons of the first half of the twentieth century must surely be that the world needs the United States, and the United States needs the world. With 192 members in this democratic institution, no one country can always expect to get its way in the United Nations, but the United States undoubtedly belongs at the heart of the United Nations, rather than outside looking in.

Global Politics since 1945: The United Nations

Ever since it took place, the Second World War has defined global politics. The Alliance which opposed the Axis powers effectively shaped the outcome of the War. That alliance was already being dubbed “The United Nations” from the very first days of 1942, just after the entry into the war by the United States. In his history of the Second World War, Churchill makes it clear that he was always confident that, once the United States had entered the war, the conflict would be a foregone conclusion in favor of the Allies. So confident of this was he that he and Roosevelt spent almost as much time planning the peace as prosecuting the war. Those plans included the transformation of the wartime alliance of the United Nations into an international body that would improve radically on the League of Nations, born of the First World War’s settlement but crucially lacking major players, including the United States.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans returned to embrace the idea that engagement, not isolation, was the only foreign policy option open to them. This meant that before the War was even finished, Truman could say: “The responsibility of great states is to serve and not dominate the peoples of the world.”¹ Nowadays, there are plenty who prefer to forget such sentiments. However, I believe that Truman’s insight is an extremely valuable one: this is not a naïve ideal but a key to understanding why the

¹ HARRY S. TRUMAN, Address before a joint session of the Congress (Washington DC, 16 April 1945): see the Truman Presidential Museum and Library at: <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/ww2/stofunio.htm>.

United States helped shape the United Nations in the way it did and why the United Nations and the United States remain essential to each other today. The U.S. presence at the heart of its institutions is also one of the key reasons for the successes that the United Nations has enjoyed in its 61 years of existence.

To grasp the United Nations' basic shape is to see in broad strokes today's multilateral landscape. Thus, in order to understand it better, I will use here the three main fields of concern outlined in a 2005 report on reform commissioned by the Secretary-General, entitled *In Larger Freedom*.² It examines the United Nations' future in terms that correspond nearly perfectly to its original functions as conceived by the opening words of the United Nations Charter.³ The United Nations was founded to promote these crucial, interlinked areas: freedom from fear, freedom to live in dignity, and freedom from want. Simply put, these are peace, human rights and development. These are the interlocking areas which give structure to this discussion.

Churchill often made it clear that he believed that peace in Europe was crucial to the security of the world⁴ and that 50 years of peace needed to be secured if the Second World War was not to have been fought in vain. Achieving peace in Europe, he argued, would more or less guarantee a peace of sorts throughout the world. Certainly, if that is what he and his contemporaries set out to do, then they more or less succeeded. There has been no truly global war since, and we have had more than 60 years of peace in Europe, even if partly due to the Cold War standoff between East and West.

I would also submit that the United Nations has been an important part of the solution, not the problem, for much of its existence. As well as 60 years of peace in Europe, we should also mention decolonization. This was an important part of the United Nations' original role, although it is commonly overlooked nowadays. It too was carried out fairly successfully, in spite of the Cold War and the conflicts visited upon the citizens of some

² *In Larger Freedom*, United Nations document A/59/2005 (21 March 2005).

³ Cf. Charter of the United Nations (San Francisco, 24 October 1945), article 1 §§1-3.

⁴ WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, *Sinews of Peace*, Speech to Westminster College (Fulton MO, 5 March 1946): see the Churchill Centre at: <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=429>.

newly sovereign countries. Nevertheless, in principle, decolonization was necessary, even if its timing or circumstances could have been happier.

Other successes we can attribute to the United Nations include the lack of nuclear proliferation and the concept of modern peacekeeping. After the Second World War, commentators feared the emergence of about 30 nuclear powers by 1970, but today we still have less than 10 nuclear-armed powers in the world. The tensions between India and Pakistan, Israel and Iran, and North Korea and Japan are all causes for ongoing concern. However, the nuclear non-proliferation situation is still much healthier in 2007 than people thought it would be when they peered into an uncertain future in 1945.

Although we often take it for granted, peacekeeping is another United Nations success. Today, there are more peacekeeping missions than ever before (18 of them, as of the end of 2006) with more soldiers, police and other personnel than ever before (some 100,000 men and women). Peace remains as fragile as ever, but something is being done about it in a way unknown in history prior to 1945. This is a notable success that we all take for granted, but it is new and comes with the birth of the United Nations.

On the other hand, we see that nuclear disarmament is beginning to lose its impetus because the disarmament *quid pro quo* at the heart of non-proliferation is not being honored by the major nuclear powers—which are, in principle, supposed to start to disarm in return for the world's other nations *not* to arm themselves with nuclear weapons. A definitive and just resolution of the Palestinian question still eludes the world. Negotiations on small arms and light weapons—the ones that do most of the killing in today's world—get bogged down because arms-producing countries have a tendency to drag their feet. Finally, Africa remains in notable difficulty, partly due to incompetence and corruption, but also partly because it is still recovering from its role as a theater for proxy Cold War conflicts between East and West. It has now exchanged that role for one as a theater in the global struggle for access to and control of resources, especially minerals and fossil fuels.

The improvement of human rights globally is another historic breakthrough which can be attributed to the United Nations; although, there is no doubt that much remains to be done here too. In the plus column, we find the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the promotion—by means of the stated aims of the United Nations Charter—of democracy and the rule of law. The official endorsement of democracy and the rule of law at the international level is a major step forward, and both have been spread to a degree hitherto unknown in history. Partly as a direct reaction to the horrors of the Nazi death camps and that regime's contempt for the human person, the United Nations was founded with human rights machinery integrated into it, and little by little, human rights are indeed taking root. The world's peoples also have a greater sensitivity now to these questions. They are more aware than ever of their own rights and those of others, in rich countries and poor, in liberal democracies and in closed dictatorships alike. A greater popular awareness of this whole question is due in great part to the United Nations, in spite of its famously flawed human rights bodies.

As for the theme of development, although it is still treated by some as a Cinderella subject, it is in fact every bit as important as human rights in establishing global peace and security. If the United Nations were a three-legged stool, it would need peace and development and human rights to stand up straight. Part of the genius of the way in which Churchill, Truman and others conceived the United Nations as successor to the League of Nations was to understand and correct the flaws of the League. So the United Nations was not conceived simply to punish the vanquished; instead, it was set up to promote long-term peace through accompanying policies that actually removed the pretexts for war. That is what human rights and development are meant to do; they disarm aggression before it can even take place. This is because war is often provoked by either poverty or injustice. Injustice can only be eliminated by respect for human rights, including democracy and the rule of law. Poverty can only be eradicated by a constant and substantial commitment to social and sustainable development.

So development forms a natural—even essential—element of the peace equation, and in the United Nations, it is approached from various points of view, using ideas like the

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or the commitment of some rich countries to set aside 0.7% GDP as official development assistance (ODA) to poorer ones. It is also useful to see this question from the side of the poor.

For example, who among us would think like Nelson Mandela to include *salt* in the bare necessities of development? Who among us would think of providing the HIV-infected poor with food and clean water, which Peter Piot of UNAIDS says is demanded first by the poor themselves, before administering expensive drugs? Very few of us, I suspect, would even start where Tony Blair does in his arguments when he talks about defeating terrorism through the promotion of development—but all three are right.

All would agree that poverty eradication is not an optional extra in the global peace equation. Rather, it is a *sine qua non* in order to uproot the need for war, disarm terrorism, and ensure the world's sustainable survival. Development for the poor is also the enlightened self-interest of the rich, and it would serve richer countries and their citizens well to give it greater consideration. For Christians, of course, it is also a question of being faithful to the Gospel, but enlightened self-interest would already be a useful starting point as a motive towards sustainable development.

Since 1945, the United Nations has come a long way from a meetings facility to a true world forum. It has had some success in averting war and building peace. It has had a slowly growing success in the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. And it has been the godmother of an unprecedented global approach to the promotion of development. On the other hand, its machinery undoubtedly needs to be updated before the 1945 consensus that created it unravels.

The Holy See and Global Politics

It comes as a surprise to some to discover how active the Vatican is politically. Although this activity is by its nature discreet, who Vatican diplomats are and what we do is there

in public for all to see. For those directly involved in global politics, the name “Holy See” is as familiar as the name of any other country among the 193 nations that currently make up the world’s sovereign states. At the United Nations in New York, no one refers to the Holy See delegation as “the Vatican” in the offhand way that some writers choose to do. It is known by its correct title and its voice is raised on a whole host of issues of the greatest international importance today—from nuclear non-proliferation to the struggle to save the planet from environmental degradation; from the promotion of human rights to that of social and economic development; from migrants and indigenous peoples to the peaceful use of outer space.

Occasionally, though, we do catch a glimpse of what the Holy See is, beyond the feeling that its presence on the world stage is just unfinished business from another age. An example of this was in 2005 at the funeral of the late Pope John Paul II. The event was attended by 200 heads of state and government. Now, at least at the official level, they attended because he was a head of state with whom most of them had cordial relations, both diplomatic and personal. But what kind of head of state can the pope be if the state in question—Vatican City—is one-eighth the size of an American film star’s ranch? How can such a place have an impact in today’s world? Does the Catholic Church even need an appendage such as a mini-state in order to maintain the pope’s independence of action in today’s world?

First of all, perhaps we should examine our presumptions about what constitutes a country. For a sovereign nation state, you usually need three ingredients: people, land and a set of laws. Without one or other of these elements, or without the recognition of them by neighboring powers, such a “nation” is likely to become akin to today’s indigenous minorities who find themselves, willingly or not, citizens of a more dominant society. So, given our general premise that people, land and laws are needed to make you sovereign, the Vatican just about makes it: it is 108.7 acres in size, it has about 1,000 passport-carrying citizens and it has its own laws.

In other ways, however, it struggles to be counted as a “real” state. Since 1870, the Vatican City State has had almost no real territory to defend. It has no economic or industrial interests in the usual sense of the term. It has almost no population compared to most countries. It has the Swiss Guard but no strategic defense force to speak of.

However, having no major strategic, political or economic interests to defend, the Holy See is in fact freer than other states to act on matters of global concern. It is a sovereign actor but without the same burden of national interests as other states, so it is able to promote what is best, not so much for states, but for the world’s peoples. Most states and governments naturally look first to their own survival. The Holy See, on the other hand, often has the freedom to stand above the fray and propose what might actually turn out to be best for the *peoples* of the world, and because it is sovereign, it can do so in the world’s global political fora. People-centered policies can be quite different from national self-interest, and these are often at the core of the interventions made by the Holy See at the United Nations.

It is not widely known that the popes have been promoting the idea of an international body to resolve disputes between nations since the First World War. Pope Benedict XV (d.1922) tried in vain to call a peace conference to stop the First World War. Some of his ideas for an international machinery to prevent further conflicts are said to have been adopted by Woodrow Wilson in his proposals for the League of Nations. Be that as it may, the principle that there should be some kind of permanent multilateral mechanism to resolve international disputes before they led to war was promoted vigorously by Pope Benedict XV.

The United Nations, the effective successor to the League of Nations, has always been similarly supported by the Holy See. Since 1964, following U Thant’s invitation, the Holy See has been a State Observer at the United Nations along with Switzerland. In 2002, Switzerland finally applied for membership, leaving the Holy See as the lone State Observer there. This gave us the opportunity to consider our options with a view to clarifying our status or applying for membership. One of the first tasks given to Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the current Nuncio and Permanent Observer in New

York, was to explore with national delegations and other experts the pros and cons of membership weighed against the alternative of an official clarification of our status as Observer.

After reflection, it was decided to choose the latter path, and Resolution 58/314 of July 1, 2004, was adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly. This resolution outlines the Holy See delegation's status and possibilities for action in the work of the United Nations. For example, we cannot vote on resolutions or decisions, but we can still help shape them along with member states. We also have access to most of the meetings that member states do, and that is usually enough to participate to the extent we wish on matters of our concern.

However, since the Holy See is not quite like any other country, it finds its unusual size and nature occasionally held against it, especially when it is the target of opposition. Until recently, those who wanted to sideline the Holy See attempted to have its status reduced to something like that of a non-state actor. Opponents still point to the size of Vatican City or say that the Holy See unfairly represents only one religion's point of view.

Such arguments forget that the Catholic Church is today more than one-sixth of the world's population; that 25 percent of the world's known AIDS patients are cared for in 12,000 Catholic hospitals and clinics throughout the world; that the Church runs 196,000 schools; that there are one million religious (mostly women) in the world, many of whom are active in charity work; and that the Church is active in most of the world's countries among those abandoned, ignored or marginalized by their own society. Furthermore, a cursory glance at our interventions shows clearly that the Holy See uses its position to promote freedom of religion for all peoples, irrespective of the actual creed in question. The Holy See and the Catholic Church have a great potential for good internationally, and not to have the Holy See at the United Nations would surely be a great loss to everyone.

The Church's social teaching is naturally at the heart of the Holy See's perception of policies at the United Nations. It in turn is inspired by the person of Jesus Christ and by our faith in him as the Redeemer of the world. Our respect for humanity, regardless of race, creed, sex or any other accidents, and our respect for the whole of creation are obviously based upon a Christian world view. However, witnessing to our faith there does not necessarily require us to mention that faith by name in every speech we make. Our Christian faith is the bedrock of all we do in the United Nations, but the principles upon which we base our arguments there are drawn essentially from natural law. So our common humanity, the stuff that makes us all the same, is the ground we prefer to fight on in most of our United Nations battles. This is also the turf on which popes from Leo XIII to Benedict XVI have chosen to address the world's nations. The love of Christ is always our motivation, but our political arguments often rest upon natural law.

Religion is rarely mentioned in the United Nations, but when we look at its shape—its basic approach to the three pillars of peace, human rights and development—Christians can detect with approval a familiar ethic running through the shape of the organization. I like to fancy that this is perhaps because many of the United Nations' founders were still broadly influenced by traditional European, Judeo-Christian ethical principles. This is one reason I believe that, as long as the United Nations remains faithful to the vision of those founders, it will serve humanity well because such ethics have the true welfare of all peoples at heart, without reference to accidentals. We should add that the original vision of the United Nations was influenced by people like Churchill and Eleanor Roosevelt, Harry Truman and René Cassin, who found that to respond to the nihilism of the Nazis they had to do so with exactly the same tools that the Church uses: moral arguments drawn from an understanding of the common dignity and worth of all humanity without exception.

In his recent encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI states: “As Augustine once said, a State which is not governed according to justice would be just a bunch of thieves: “*Remota itaque iustitia quid sunt regna nisi magna latrocinia?*”⁵ This reflects an important

⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus caritas est* (Vatican City, 25 December 2005) n.28 (a).

concern of the Holy See's about global politics in general. It attempts to remind the world's leaders that politics must be about justice; it cannot be about winning at any price. As we have seen already, the Holy See's policies are people-centered, so the Holy See tries to speak for those who have no voice such as the unborn child, irregular migrants and their families, unwanted refugees, religious and ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, trafficked women, abused girls, and many more. These are concerns which resonate perfectly with a Christian approach to the United Nations.

Let's return to the three categories we have been using to examine the United Nations. Firstly, the Church's interest in peace is as traditional as it is evident. Peace is probably the most important gift after life itself and remains the primary concern of the Holy See at the United Nations. We have always understood that peace can be more strongly rooted when there is justice and solidarity to support it. This is encapsulated succinctly in a quotation from Pope Paul VI, where he says, "Development is the other name for peace."⁶ This phrase has gained a currency of its own and was even quoted in 2004 by the President of the 59th General Assembly in his opening speech before the entire Assembly. Pope Paul VI, on the first visit of a pontiff to the General Assembly in 1965, stated unequivocally: "No more war! War never again! It is peace which must guide the destinies of people and of all mankind."⁷ The present Holy Father recently stated that "peace between individuals and peoples [is] the ability to live together and to build relationships of justice and solidarity."⁸ The late John Paul II made two visits to the United Nations, the second on its 50th anniversary in 1995, and made a powerful plea for "freedom, peace and solidarity."⁹ These references are of course just a taste of the popes' very many interventions indicating their concern for peace in today's world.

Secondly, the United Nations today is the world's premier forum for the promotion of human rights, in a way hitherto unknown in history. Human rights are now being

⁶ PAUL VI, Encyclical letter *Populorum progressio* (Vatican City, 27 March 1967) n.74.

⁷ *Idem*, Address to the 20th General Assembly of the United Nations (New York, 4 October 1965) n.5.

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace (Vatican City, 1 January 2007) n.3.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Address to the 50th General Assembly of the United Nations (New York, 5 October 1995) n.4.

brought constantly to the world's attention, originally as a reaction to the horrors of the Second World War, although "man's inhumanity to man" has not ceased. In spite of what it might do at home, no government nowadays dares criticize the promotion of human rights, and this is already for the good. Recent popes have also made their position clear regarding human rights and the need to place their consideration squarely at the center of global politics. Pope John Paul II, again in 1995, stated that universal rights "reflect the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law."¹⁰ Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI recently said that the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights is based on "man's very nature and his inalienable dignity as a person created by God."¹¹ When we know of the Holy See's constant concern for human rights at the international level, it comes as little surprise to see even the most recent statements of the Holy Father addressing these questions directly.

Thirdly, as we've seen already, the Church understands that peace can only be achieved by underpinning it with development. Nevertheless, it often comes as a surprise even to well educated Catholics how many rights the Church attributes to the world's poorest and weakest peoples. We have all heard of the right to life—but the right to development, housing and security, a fair wage, fresh drinking water, citizenship...? Yet these have all been proposed by the Church's social teaching over the last century.¹² In a free, wealthy country like the United States where such goods are there for the taking, calling them "rights" is sometimes viewed as unhelpful at best. Yet if we look at the broader world context and the disgraceful levels of poverty that even middle income countries' governments tolerate in their own backyard, the need for basic standards that will foster a concrete sense of every human being's equal dignity becomes clearer. We should also add that using ODA and private flows are two of the surest ways to promote the sustainable and efficient use of the world's resources, to the benefit of rich and poor countries alike. Similarly, not long ago, the United Nations started to promote

¹⁰ Ibid., n.3.

¹¹ BENEDICT XVI, Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace (Vatican City, 1 January 2007) n.13.

¹² See for example *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington 2005) n.155 & passim; see also JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical letter *Centesimus annus* (Vatican City, 1 May 1991) n.47; Address to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations (New York, 2 October 1979) n.13.

microcredit and microfinance as important means of development, especially for women; but, as with many other social activities—just think of health or education—the Catholic Church was there long before governments, in this case giving small loans to poor people. This is why we can happily lend support to such initiatives at the international level and measures that will improve peoples' living standards in all these fields.

Two small postscripts to this discussion: firstly, diplomacy is not advocacy. Diplomacy is of its nature deliberately “discreet,” while advocacy is deliberately “indiscreet.” The work of the Holy See falls very much into the first category. We use our access to diplomatic circles to persuade and encourage friend and foe in ways that are discreet and behind closed doors. Depending on circumstances, this can sometimes be very effective. The popes, the Holy See and the Church are sometimes criticized for not being more outspoken or more radical in their public pronouncements on international questions, but in a sense that is the job of NGOs, pressure groups and campaigners. Diplomatic goals require diplomatic tools.

The second postscript concerns the people with whom diplomats associate in their work. Diplomatic activity means privileged access to governments and leaders. That also draws criticism occasionally. For example, the Holy See was criticized during World War Two for keeping open a Nunciature in Berlin until the end of the war, yet this was consistent with its actions in other difficult circumstances. During the Second World War, the secretary of the Nunciature in Hungary—Msgr. Gennaro Verolino, faced with a Nazi-backed regime—saved as many as 25,000 Jews by issuing them with papers;¹³ and Archbishop Andrea Cassulo, the Nuncio in Romania at the same time, is credited with having saved many more than that.¹⁴ Even Archbishop Cesare Orsenigo, the Nuncio in Germany, remained at his post with all its difficulties until February 1945, doing what little he could to assist the civilian population.

¹³ See for example the interview with Archbishop Verolino in the February 2005 edition of *30 Days* at: <http://www.30giorni.it/us/articolo.asp?id=7890>.

¹⁴ On this delicate subject, it is interesting to note for example the opinion of Dr Joseph L. Lichten, expressed while International Affairs Department for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith at: http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=1339.

The point, of course, is that the worse the situation is in a country, the more reason the Nunciature has to be there. Even in the last decade or so, Vatican diplomats have found themselves in very difficult circumstances in Haiti, Rwanda, the Central African Republic, Iraq and elsewhere. In Burundi, where the recent civil war left only nine embassies open, the Nunciature never closed but continued to bring substantial help from the Catholic world outside to the local population. Successive nuncios talked to all sides in the hope of encouraging a more rapid conclusion to the war. Archbishop Michael Courtney, Nuncio in Burundi from 2001 until his assassination there in 2003, risked his life to bring the government and the rebels together with a view to the early resolution of the conflict. This kind of activity does not stop diplomats from being targets; on the contrary, Archbishop Courtney and others were targeted because they attempted to create what extremists were so carefully trying to destroy—common ground that would lead to peace.

The Holy See believes strongly that nothing is lost by talking in this way.¹⁵ The intention is to keep the interest of ordinary people at heart, no matter who you have to talk to or be photographed with.

Conclusion

Since 1945, the United Nations has been at the center of global politics. If the United Nations did not exist, we would have to invent it or something very similar to it. It may be old, it may have flaws, it may sometimes move at the speed of its slowest member, and it is certainly in need of reform, but all the world's nations need it and benefit from its continued existence.

The Holy See has been on the world stage for hundreds of years as a sovereign actor. Global politics has grown in importance for the Holy See since 1945, and notably during the late Pope John Paul II's pontificate, as he successfully expanded diplomatic relations

¹⁵ Pius XII's appeal of 24 August 1939 has been often revisited in the Holy See's speeches: "Nothing is lost with peace. Everything can be lost with war": *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Pio XII*, Ed. Poliglotta Vaticana, vol. I, p. 306.

with states from 93 to 175 countries.¹⁶ The Holy See's global policies are inspired by the Gospel, are people-centered and based upon the natural law written in every human being. Our diplomatic service uses its access to government circles to remind the world's leaders that politics is about justice, not winning, and that the world still needs peace, human rights and development informed by natural law. The way to achieve those goals at the global level today is best achieved through the United Nations—an imperfect instrument, to be sure, but still the best one at hand to promote the good of all humanity now and for future generations.

¹⁶ As of March 2007, the Holy See has full diplomatic relations with 175 of the world's 192 other states (including the Sovereign Order of Malta and the latest state, Montenegro); it has relations of a special nature with the Russian Federation; and relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization.