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THE DIPLOMACY OF THE HOLY SEE AND ITS TRANSFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED NATIONS

By Marián Sekerák  and Karol Lovaš 

The Holy See can be viewed as a “hybrid actor” (McLarren and Stahl 2020) in international relations, or, as Bátora and Hynek (2014, 87–111) put it, a “fringe player of the Westphalian diplomatic environment.” At the same time, it has long been considered to be “an awkward remnant of medieval, pre-international times” (Diez 2017, 32). The former can be said due to its specific nature, where the religious and political dimensions are intertwined. This is evidenced by the special attention paid to the Holy See in recent scholarly expertise. Let us think, first, about its position within international law, which is fairly specific and has been under long-lasting academic scrutiny (Ciprotti 1970; Arangio-Ruiz 1996; Ryngaert 2011; Araujo 2011; Schouppe 2018). The same also applies to its diplomacy (Matlary 2001; Joubert 2017) and activities in the field of international relations and world politics, where the Holy See operates with a specific type of soft power (Chong 2010; Troy 2010; Albert 2017; Byrnes 2017).

Within this wide range of activities, the Holy See’s relationship with the UN is quite peculiar

and appears to be of utmost importance. This is quite evident from the attention paid to this institution by the popes, starting with St. Paul VI. However, this has not always been the case. Arguably a change of attitude took place, of course especially in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. This ecclesial event can be considered a kind of turning point in the diplomatic activity of the Holy See, whilst the current Pope Francis has somewhat shifted

Abstract: The Holy See has formal diplomatic relations with almost all states of the world and with international organizations including the United Nations (UN), where it holds Permanent Observer status. Its diplomacy considers the UN as one of the most important agents in international affairs. In the article, we clarify the Holy See’s role as a Permanent Observer and its views on international cooperation before the Second Vatican Council. We then shed light on the leading principles and aims of its diplomacy at the UN as verbalized through the papal addresses to the General Assembly, letters to UN secretaries general, and various messages. Finally, we describe the Holy See’s position in the long-lasting debate over UN reform.

Keywords: Holy See, diplomacy, United Nations, UN reform, Catholic Church

the emphasis, as will be shown later. Therefore, the paper aspires to answer the question of how the Holy See's relationship with the UN has changed over the decades, what the political emphases and goals in its (recent) diplomatic activities are, what types of ad hoc international partnerships it has concluded for these purposes, and how the Vatican's global position has changed during the recent pontificates.

In this article, we analyze the Holy See's diplomatic activities within the UN by building on previous research in the field (Lucal 1970; Gratsch 1997; García Martín 1998; Salvador and Sánchez Patrón 2005; Chong and Troy 2011; Zambrana Tévar 2013). In the first part, the Holy See's position towards international cooperation in the pre-conciliar era will be sketched. Next, its role as a Permanent Observer at the UN will be introduced, followed by a brief analysis of the leading principles and aims of the Holy See's diplomacy. These have been manifested through the papal encyclicals, letters to the UN secretaries general, and various messages and addresses to the UN General Assembly, which was labelled by St. Paul (1965b) as "an Assembly of Peace, the objective of which is to promote and defend among the peoples (...) concord in peace, security, and mutual collaboration." All these texts have shaped global public opinion and defended the Holy See's diplomatic priorities as firmly grounded in natural law. In the conclusion, the Holy See's position in the long-lasting debate over UN reform will be described.

The Holy See and International Cooperation in the Pre-Conciliar Era

Significant changes in the Holy See's attitude to international cooperation occurred in the 20th century, mainly due to the Second Vatican Council, which can be viewed as "a postcolonial, transnational assembly" (Barbato 2017, 1163) of bishops from all parts the world. It should be noted that the Holy See maintained a considerable distance from, and was skeptical of, the then League of Nations. Immediately after the First World War, there was the possibility of the Holy See's entering the League of Nations, as Benedict XV was at the birth of this idea. The

question of its membership was raised in the 1920s, but the United Kingdom and France opposed it. Even in the United States, concerns about the pope's "control of the world through the League" have occasionally appeared in some political circles (Pollard 1999, 146).

The Holy See never became a member of the League and subsequently took a very critical attitude towards it. One of the most emblematic statements on this topic can be found in Pius XI's encyclical *Ubi arcano* of 1922, where the Catholic Church is postulated as an ideal of cooperation of the whole human family instead of any earthly international organization. Although he does not criticize states for their efforts to cooperate, Pius considers such efforts to be ineffective when some of the cooperating states do not formulate their efforts sincerely, but only engage in power play. He writes as follows:

No merely human institution of today can be as successful in devising a set of international laws which will be in harmony with world conditions as the Middle Ages were in the possession of that true League of Nations, Christianity. It cannot be denied that in the Middle Ages this law was often violated; still it always existed as an ideal, according to which one might judge the acts of nations, and a beacon light calling those who had lost their way back to the safe road. There exists an institution able to safeguard the sanctity of the law of nations. This institution is a part of every nation; at the same time, it is *above all nations*. She enjoys, too, *the highest authority*, the fullness of the teaching power of the Apostles. Such an institution *is the Church of Christ*. She alone is adapted to do this great work, for *she is not only divinely commissioned to lead mankind*, but moreover, because of her very make-up and the constitution which she possesses, by reason of her age-old traditions and her great prestige, which has not been lessened but has been greatly increased since the close of the War, cannot but succeed in such a venture where others assuredly will

fail. (Pius 1922, paras. 45–46; italics added).

Such words echo the universalism of the Middle Ages, when the popes were powerful and influential agents in international affairs (Araujo and Lucal 2005). Similar claims were presented by the pope even during the Council years. At his meeting with the then UN Secretary General U Thant of Burma on July 11, 1963 in Rome, St. Paul VI praised the UN's program of eliminating the threat of war, helping newly emerging independent countries in the period of decolonization, and protecting the rights and dignity of human beings. However, he stressed that the universality of the Catholic Church reflected spirituality in a way contrasting to the temporary era of the UN. According to him, the various ideologies behind the UN member states' efforts to prevent the evil of war and promote the "good things of peace" corresponded to the concept of humanity, which was part of the Catholic Church's "spiritual mission" (Paul 1963).

Pius XII, too, was critical of international organizations such as the League of Nations and the UN. Although the pontiff considered the involvement of Christians in international organizations to be a form of their "missionary duty" (Lucien-Brun 1964, 538), he did not show much sympathy for and confidence in an institution in which the former allies of the Second World War, including dictatorial regimes, sat together at the same table. It did not come close enough to his notions of a society in which "all nations recognize the common spiritual and moral purpose of mankind" (Pius 1953), as he emphasized in one of his traditional Christmas radio messages pronounced in the midst of the Cold War.

In his statements on various occasions, he "spoke out repeatedly against the emerging post-war order. He showed its very premises were misconceived, that security and stability would not be achieved at the cost of suppressed rights and stifled aspirations. But he was unable to back this up with popular pressure. Instead, he persisted in seeing himself as a player at the diplomatic chessboard at a time when the world's

great powers were controlling the game and inventing new rules" (Luxmoore and Babiuch 2000, xii). Pius XII appreciated the fact that political wisdom, the goodwill of nations, and organizational authority had merged into a secure international system, but the Soviet Union's right of veto in the UN Security Council raised in him serious doubts about the organization's peace-building capacity. He favored a true supranational global authority, not just a post-war alliance of nations, whereas the Security Council veto "violated the principle of equality of states and added to the danger that big powers would dominate the organization" (Lucal 1970, 317). Interestingly enough, the Holy See did not favor the abolition of the right of veto in the UN Security Council until several decades later in discussions on UN reform (Vatican Favors Reform ... 2004, 6).

Pius XII's distrust of the UN stemmed from the fact that this organization led the states of the world to respect human rights in an institutional form, without accentuating that these rights grew out of the natural order. According to him, the UN was only an organization which was able to defend merely a kind of arms peace and to do so only temporarily and at the cost of political compromises. Furthermore, Pius XII's skeptical reception of the concept of human rights and democracy took a peculiar, pre-conciliar form (Łuków 2018, 318). It is, then, clear that under his pontificate the Holy See's cooperation with the UN was almost unthinkable; it could develop only after his death, at the time of the aforementioned Second Vatican Council.

Permanent Observer Status: An Overview

Although the Holy See is not a UN member, it has had the status of a permanent "Observer State" (United Nations 2003, 2) since April 6, 1964. The status was confirmed by the UN General Assembly through Resolution no. 58/314 of July 16, 2004, which was adopted on the 40th anniversary of the acquisition of this status. A few years earlier, it had been agreed between the Holy See and the United Nations that it would be the Holy See and not the Vatican City State that would be affiliated with this

international organization. The deployment of a permanent observer was announced in a note from the then Secretary of State of the Holy See, Cardinal Amleto G. Cicognani, which was sent to UN Secretary General U Thant on 21 March 1964, who responded to it positively on April 6 that year (Salvador and Sánchez Patrón 2005, 458).

In view of the fact that the Holy See is not defined as a state, it “is conspicuous that the UN General Assembly does not characterize the Holy See as a non-State actor, but as an observer State” (Ryngaert 2011, 841). This may mean that the UN is not able to adequately approach atypical entities such as the Holy See, although several intergovernmental organizations and other entities, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, or the Sovereign Military Hospital of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes, and Malta, also have permanent observer status. It is therefore possible to distinguish four types of permanent observers: non-member countries, intergovernmental organizations, national liberation movements, and NGOs (García Martín 1998, 191). The State of Palestine also has the status of a permanent observer as a non-member state of the United Nations, on the basis of Resolution no. 67/19 of 22 November 2012.

There is no legal basis for this status in the UN Charter or in the 1947 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the Specialized Agencies; it has merely practical in nature. Although the absence of written rules may indicate some ambiguity in the process of obtaining the status, in practice it has become established that it will be granted by the UN General Assembly through a resolution based on a previous vote. The practice of granting this status has evolved on the basis of long-term practice, courtesy, privileges, and precedents (Mower 1966, 267).

Since the acquisition of this status, several serious obstacles to the possible full membership of the Holy See in the UN have emerged. It is clear that without the existence of the Catholic Church, with which it is inherently connected, the Holy See would never have existed. Even today, it is sometimes considered “a hybrid of

state and religion” (Campbell 2009, 348). In the case of full membership, this hybridity would probably deepen and it would be difficult for the Holy See to speak out against a particular state, as the discussions in the UN General Assembly and its committees presuppose; its position could be automatically identified with religion and the Catholic Church. The Holy See would also have to take an active part in setting the security agenda and cooperating in the transfer of powers within the UN, including the adoption of sanctions. On many issues, the Holy See would probably be forced to abstain, but certainly not for tactical reasons. Furthermore, under Article 24 of the Lateran Treaties, to the signing of which led a relatively long road of difficult negotiations (Votavová and Šmíd 2018), the Holy See would not be able to intervene directly in conflicts between states and could no longer accept any sanctions imposed on any state by the UN Security Council.

The Holy See declared that it “desires to take, and shall take, no part in any temporal rivalries between other States” (Treaty ... 1929, art. 24). In the case of cooperating international organizations, a Member State is not obliged to behave in any way on the basis of a decision of other than intra-organizational without that state’s consent, and the standards developed by such an organization are only a recommendation to the Member State. UN Security Council resolutions are already legally binding and a Member State is required to follow them, as stated in Article 25 of the UN Charter. Given the high degree of internal decision-making freedom, the ethical principles inherent in its diplomacy, as well as its neutrality, it is almost impossible to imagine the Holy See as a UN Member State agreeing to a UN Security Council resolution, especially one concerning some form of sanction against a state.

The functions of the permanent observer mission to the UN are formally defined by the Convention on the Representation of States in Their Relations with International Organizations of a Universal Character (1975, art. 7). For many years, the scope of the Holy See’s rights at the UN rested on unwritten rules. For example, the rule was that the Holy See had to obtain the

consent of all five regional groups before speaking at the UN General Assembly. It could also not circulate documents and proposals among Member States and had no right of reply in the case of interventions concerning it. Since 2004, the set of Holy See rights has been clearly expressed in the above-mentioned resolution, which confirmed that the participation of the Holy See in the UN is not ideological, but legal in nature.

Nowadays, the Holy See can influence the course of international conferences held under the auspices of the UN, the formation of opinions during them, and the adoption of final decisions. Given its right to distribute its proposals among conference participants, it has the opportunity to influence the Member States' views and persuade them to support its own positions. That was the case of the International Conference on Population and Development of 1994 (Cahill 2020). At the conference, many states, including Islamic ones, joined the Holy See on the topic of abortions and the use of contraceptives. However, from the perspective of the Holy See, such alliances are a "strategy for projecting Catholic social teachings at the international level" (Chong and Troy 2011, 339). A similar scenario cannot be ruled out in the future, when the issue of same-sex marriage, on which the Holy See has long presented a negative stance, will reach the global level.

The same applies to the adoption of some General Assembly resolutions, which may also be decided by a coalition in which the Holy See will not play a leading role but to whose creation it may contribute. A similar case happened in December 2008 during discussions on a UN declaration condemning discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, one initiated at the UN General Assembly by the United States, France, the Netherlands, Colombia, and Slovenia. The Holy See spoke out against the declaration, stressing that while it rejected violence against any human person, regardless of her sexual orientation, the categories of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" were not enshrined in international law. According to the Holy See, the adoption of a declaration using these terms would lead to legal

uncertainty and, ultimately, to forming a new and flexible form of discrimination against those states that do not recognize civil unions or same-sex marriages and which, as a result of the declaration, could be directly or indirectly compelled to do so by such legislation (Statement . . . 2008). It joined the majority of Muslim states which had signed an opposition to the declaration. These attitudes indicate the aims and guiding principles of the Holy See's diplomacy at the international level. They correspond to the values of the Catholic Church and relate to issues such as peace, poverty, gender issues, women's rights, and human rights in general (Heger Boyle, Golden, and Liao 2017).

Principles and Goals of Holy See Diplomacy

As it has been mentioned, the Holy See focuses primarily on ethics and morals in international relations, emphasizing the need to uphold international law, anti-militarism, and the importance of international institutions as platforms for cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution (pacifism). As a result, its "hybrid-by-nature" diplomacy resembles the English School of international relations theory (Barbato 2013; Troy 2018). Key issues in its diplomacy also include tackling poverty and global terrorism, supporting education, universal disarmament, and regional armed conflict resolution. These topics have been emphasized as part of the "papal geopolitics" in statements and encounters with the UN Secretaries General (Troy 2017), during pastoral visits abroad (Barbato 2020), as well as in speeches before the yearly blessings of *Urbi et Orbi*, where popes draw global attention to ongoing military conflicts (Kratochvíl and Hovorková 2017). The UN's role in this field was pointed out quite critically by St. John Paul II in his social encyclical *Centesimus annus*, where he wrote that this international organization "has not yet succeeded in establishing, as alternatives to war, effective means for the resolution of international conflicts. This seems to be the most urgent problem which the international community has yet to resolve" (John Paul II 1991, para. 21).

Furthermore, the Holy See ardently defends fundamental human rights as recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, in particular the right to life of every individual and the right to religious freedom. The Declaration, as well as the importance of the UN as such, was appreciated by St. John XXIII in his famous social encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of 1963. He also made explicit his wish.

that the United Nations Organization may be able progressively to adapt its structure and methods of operation to the magnitude and nobility of its tasks. May the day be not long delayed when every human being can find in this organization an effective safeguard of his personal rights; those rights, that is, which derive directly from his dignity as a human person, and which are therefore universal, inviolable, and inalienable. (John XXIII 1963, para. 145).

In his first address to the UN General Assembly, St. John Paul II enumerated the list of human rights that the Holy See considered to be the most important on the basis of the Declaration (John Paul II 1979, para. 13). In this catalogue the rights ensuring the protection of human life came first. Pro-life attitudes were actively defended by the Holy See at the above-mentioned conference in Cairo in 1994, at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, and at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Such activities in the field of protecting human life “from birth to natural death” and marriage as rooted in natural law are the main organizational principles of its public diplomacy, which can be defined as “a set of activities of state and non-state agents that influence public opinion abroad in purposeful accordance with the foreign policy interests of the state” (Pajtinka 2011, 540). This type of diplomacy also includes agenda setting and nation branding (Novotný 2011, 70).

From the viewpoint of the Holy See, the understanding of the human rights catalogue is limited to frameworks that do not allow for its extension to a new generation of rights, which

would undoubtedly include the rights of sexual minorities or the so-called reproductive rights. The universality, indivisibility, and independence of human rights from the Holy See’s point of view lies in the fact that they “are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations. Removing human rights from this context would mean restricting their range and yielding to a relativistic conception, according to which the meaning and interpretation of rights could vary and their universality would be denied in the name of different cultural, political, social, and even religious outlooks,” as Benedict (2008) put it in his address to the UN General Assembly. The same was emphasized by his predecessor, St. John Paul II, in his address to the same forum in 1995 where he said that “there are indeed universal human rights, rooted in the nature of the person, rights which reflect the objective and inviolable demands of a *universal moral law*” (John Paul II 1995, para. 3; italics in the original).

These examples show quite clearly the interconnectedness of the Holy See’s diplomatic goals with the moral and social teaching of the Catholic Church. This teaching “marks significant differences in the degree of seriousness and binding nature of human rights and draws attention to problematic trends and contradictions; for example, freedom of religion is restricted by the absence of the institution of conscientious objection, the right to life overshadowed by reproductive and women’s rights, the right to work to earn a living by an agenda of social demands reflecting the Western consumerist lifestyle” (Míčka 2014, 207). Such a “rich and long-standing body of social teaching” of the Church “has been developed over the centuries” and the Holy See brings it “to the political and diplomatic discussion” because of lacking “the ‘customary’ diplomatic tools employed by most States” (Gallagher 2020). The importance of introducing the Gospel to international relations and discussions on global issues was also emphasized in a lecture given by Archbishop and later Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran (2002) at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, who said that the Holy

See sought to promote the Church's Magisterium in international affairs.

This is nothing more than what St. Paul VI has already stressed in a different way in the historically first speech of the head of the Catholic Church before the UN General Assembly. He referred to the rich historical experience of the Church, on whose behalf he spoke in particular: "Our message is meant to be first of all a solemn moral ratification of this lofty Institution, and it comes from our experience of history. It is as an 'expert on humanity' that we bring this Organization the support and approval of our recent predecessors,

that of the Catholic hierarchy, and our own, convinced as we are that this Organization represents the obligatory path of modern civilization and world peace" (Paul 1965a). According to Joblin (2006, 292), this apostolic visit to the UN General Assembly, as well as the later journey of the

same kind by St. John Paul II, "confirm the fact that the papacy and the Church always appear as essential actors in international life."

Such a religious rootedness of the Holy See's diplomacy was later confirmed by Cardinal Angelo Sodano, according to whom "the lofty religious aim that inspires the Holy See's involvement in the international community, namely, that world affairs be imbued with the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the family, the gospel of harmony and peace, and, moreover, the Gospel of truth, justice, and love" (Sodano 2001, 91). In his address to the 2005 UN General Assembly, he even accentuated that his "voice echoes the sentiments of Catholics throughout the world who look to the United Nations as an institution that is ever more necessary for the peace and progress of the whole of humanity" (Sodano 2005).

The call for peace and its achievement through cooperation of nations at the UN is one of the core principles of Pope Francis' discursive strategy of moral appeals (Troy 2019; Troy

2021) and his "culture of encounter" (Mannion 2017). He perceives peace as "the fruit of a great political project grounded in the mutual responsibility and interdependence of human beings" (Francis 2019). The current Pontiff is often considered a global actor shaping not only the global political environment (Lyon, Gustafson, and Ch. Manuel 2018), but also shifting the Vatican's own worldview (Flamini 2014). Francis has long been involved in resolving international conflicts, such as that in Iraq (Francis 2014), or rapprochement between Cuba and the US (Stafford 2016). However, he

seems to be dissatisfied with the UN's role in the field, as made clear in his 2020 address, where he said that "our strife-ridden world needs the United Nations to become an ever more effective international workshop for peace. This means that the members of the Security Council, especially the Permanent Members, must act with greater unity and

determination" (Francis 2020a). Anyway, as the Archbishop and later Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, the then Secretary for Relations with States of the Secretariat of the State, assured the community of nations a couple of years before, "the UN can always count on the Holy See to be not only an attentive Permanent Observer, but also a travelling companion, ever ready to support its complex and difficult activity" (Lajolo 2004).

Compared to the previous diplomatic position of the Holy See and its stance during the pre-conciliar era, there is an obvious significant rise of its international acceptance and informal political influence, although this may not always be clearly visible within the UN. The growing "medialization" and "celebritization" of the papacy also play an important role in this process. This trend is closely connected especially with the personalities of St. John Paul II and Francis and their respective individual charisma. However, this was neither an immediate and sudden shift nor a return to the previous (medieval) form of the international impact of

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the Holy See. Its readmission “to the international scene was gradual; it was accompanied by a recognition of the effective influence it exerts as an influencer in a world that has become democratic” (Joblin 1999, 306). According to Diez (2017, 34), several factors have emerged that enabled the Holy See and the pope in particular to strengthen their visibility and influence in global politics: (a) an overall shift of international society towards solidarist understanding, (b) greater responsibilities toward individuals beyond a state’s own territory, (c) the increasing relevance of non-state actors, and (d) a gradual change in diplomatic practices.

Calling for a UN Reform

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Charter, the sitting Secretary General U Thant highlighted the crisis of confidence of the UN, which was allegedly manifested in its lack of ability to take the position of a respected and powerful authority (U Thant 1970, 652–653). The UN still seems to suffer from this “crisis of confidence”, which is why there have been so many reflections on its reform (Blum 2005; Slaughter 2005; Dušek 2008). The reform has long been supported by the Holy See. It should be “intended to make the United Nations more efficient in its working methods, more rapid in responding to peacetime and development emergencies, and more authoritative in its decision-making,” as pointed out by former Permanent Observer to the UN, Archbishop Celestino Migliore (2005, 12).

Benedict XVI, 2009 made this appeal a bit clearer in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* of 2009 where he called “for a reform of the United Nations Organization, and likewise of economic institutions and international finance, so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth” (Benedict XVI 2009, para. 67). A year earlier, in his speech to the UN General Assembly, he remarked that the international community had been facing a paradox whereby multilateral consensus was not reached through agreement of as many states as possible, but instead was “still subordinated to the decisions of a few, whereas the world’s problems call for

interventions in the form of collective action by the international community” (Benedict 2008).

The necessity of a UN reform as the Holy See’s diplomatic shibboleth has been recently repeated by Pope Francis in his latest encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. He emphasized that,

this calls for clear legal limits to avoid power being co-opted only by a few countries and to prevent cultural impositions or a restriction of the basic freedoms of weaker nations on the basis of ideological differences. ... There is need to prevent this Organization from being delegitimized, since its problems and shortcomings are capable of being jointly addressed and resolved. (Francis 2020b, para. 173)

In the document, however, he just reiterated his former call on the UN General Assembly presented five years earlier, where he said that “the experience of the past seventy years has made it clear that reform and adaptation to the times is always necessary in the pursuit of the ultimate goal of granting all countries, without exception, a share in, and a genuine and equitable influence on, decision-making processes” (Francis 2015). In that address, he was much more specific about the bodies that should be subject to this reform: “The need for greater equity is especially true in the case of those bodies with effective executive capability, such as the Security Council, the Financial Agencies and the groups or mechanisms specifically created to deal with economic crises” (Francis 2015).

In any case, Francis’ calls for a UN reform cannot be viewed as isolated claims. Their broader context becomes clearer when we look at the key topics emphasized by Pope Francis as a religious leader on the global stage and during his international visits (Lynch 2019). First and foremost, there is his emphasis on interreligious dialogue, especially his attempt to openly and fraternally communicate with the Muslim world. This seems to be in stark contrast to the efforts undertaken by his immediate predecessor. Some of Benedict XVI’s communications were not well

applied and led to controversies; let us recall his Regensburg Lecture of 2006 (Markham 2012). *The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* of 2019, known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration, is one of the most significant proofs of this changed, Franciscan approach. Climate change and the situation of migrants are among the other significant topics prioritized by Francis. Let us mention, for instance, his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'* of 2015 (Duncan 2020) and his manifold speeches, documents, homilies, and symbolic gestures on migration (Catania 2015; Guzik 2018; Tan 2019).

Conclusion

This article argued that the Holy See has undergone a significant change in its view of international cooperation from the 1920s to present: from a skeptical opinion on the then League of Nations and the universalist, ecclesial-centered claims evident even in the 1950s, to the

current respected global agent operating geopolitically through its moral leadership. As a Permanent Observer at the UN, the Holy See emphasizes several key diplomatic principles, such as preservation of world peace, the fight against poverty, hunger, and oppression, and protection of religious freedom and human life. The Holy See acknowledges that the leading principles of its diplomacy are closely linked to the moral and social teaching of the Catholic Church, which is deeply rooted in natural law. Nevertheless, the Holy See has been successful in facilitating resolution of diplomatic disputes and has been involved in the long-lasting debate on the reform of the UN and its Security Council. This reform has been supported by both Benedict XVI and Francis, while the latter's increased emphasis on refugee issues, environmental protection, and a peaceful interreligious dialogue is evident in his vivid presence on the level of international relations, as well as in his intra-Church communication. ❖

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Marián Sekerák studied political science at the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia) and obtained his Ph.D. from the Institute of Political Studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University (Czech Republic). He is a lecturer at AMBIS College, Prague and a researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Studies. He specializes in political theory, the theory of democracy, church-state relations, the diplomatic activities of the Holy See, Catholic Social Thought, and higher education research.

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