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The Diplomacy of the Holy See and Its Role in the Resolution of Global Conflicts

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Introduction

According to José Casanova, the Pope is the 'first citizen of the emerging global civil society'. This position did not arise suddenly; it was preceded by a long struggle within the international arena. After the loss of the Papal States at the end of the 19th century, and the Pope's confinement within the walls of the Vatican, his political struggle shifted to the realm of norms. However, it was precisely this position that generated a remarkable opportunity for the Pope to become a citizen of a world that is increasingly global, much like the Church he leads.

Since the rise of 'global Catholicism' in the 20th century, the world has been marked by devastating wars, and the Pope's central message has therefore focused on war and its destructive consequences for humanity. The Pope can exert influence on global conflicts by *(de)legitimizing* particular political options based on moral authority and/or through *diplomatic activity* in the service of peace. In practice, it has been shown that popes have used both methods of influence. However, for their influence to be possible at all, three preconditions must be met. According to José Casanova, these are: that the Pope's voice be present worldwide, that he

makes use of transnational resources and local churches, and that his voice amplifies already existing voices that contribute to changes in attitudes and policies.

This paper will demonstrate how the papacy has historically (de)legitimized particular political options and thereby influenced wars, as well as how its diplomatic activities have contributed to the cessation of conflicts. Finally, through the example of the war in Ukraine, it will show how the Holy See fulfills the basic preconditions for global action, while also explaining why it is still not chosen as a mediator in peace negotiations.

(De)legitimization

Jonathan Fox wrote that ‘legitimacy is a central aspect of politics’, while ‘religion is one of the few things that can legitimate nearly anything’. In the intersection of religion and legitimacy, significant social and political outcomes can be achieved. Having religious legitimacy as one of the main sources of global influence, the papacy was able to promote something as ‘just’, whether in the context of war or peace.

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One of the greatest historical burdens in the history of the Catholic Church is the notion of ‘just wars against unbelievers’, namely the Crusades. These wars, however, were considered defensive and therefore just from the perspective of the Catholic Church, as they were preceded by Turkish conquests of Christian territories in Asia Minor and the obstruction of Christian pilgrims seeking to enter Jerusalem. These wars evolved into religious conflicts, and although they initially began with the intention of a unified Christian offensive against Muslims, they ultimately led to internal conflicts between Catholics and Orthodox Christians. In a broader sense, the early modern religious wars in Europe, which were fought against Protestants, can also be considered part of the Crusades.

Another major historical burden of the Catholic Church is World War II. The first half of the 20th century was marked by an ideological struggle against modernism – Pope Pius X even required the clergy in 1910 to take an oath against the ‘errors’ of modernity – as well as against atheistic materialism, which from the 1917 took on a state form in the Soviet Union. The First World War represented a final reckoning with the old order, and Pope Benedict XV certainly did not wish to see the loss of a major Catholic state in Europe such as Austria-Hungary. However, his successors, Pius XI and Pius XII, perceived secularization in formerly Catholic states and the rise of socialism as a greater threat. Pre-war support for certain ideological positions associated with fascism and National Socialism is often interpreted in this light. Nevertheless, the ‘policy of silence’ during the Second World War – when these ideologies gave rise to crimes against humanity and genocide – remains a burden that the papacy carries to this day.

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The early period of the Cold War coincided with the Second Vatican Council, which introduced changes both in internal matters and in the global functioning of the Catholic Church. Above all, the Church became actively involved, in its own distinctive way, in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The roles of local bishops and local churches were strengthened, and certain ideological positions were liberalized. In the era of mass media, the papacy acquired a new image as a promoter of peace. Ultimately, all of this contributed to the perception that the defeat of socialism in Europe during the Cold War could, among other factors, be attributed to the significant charismatic figure of Pope John Paul II. Therefore, the subsequent wave of democratization in the world, which Huntington refers to as the 'third wave of democratization', was even labeled the 'Catholic wave'.

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The beginning of the 21st century was marked by the attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001. This event triggered the so-called Global War on Terror led by the United

States. However, whereas in earlier times one might have expected the Catholic pontiff to align with those fighting militant Islam, Pope John Paul II condemned every military offensive that followed from this war, particularly the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In his Address to the Diplomatic Corps on January 13, 2003, he declared: 'No to war! War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity'. His successors, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, have consistently called for peace and ceasefires in the Middle East and in conflict zones around the world. In particular, Pope Francis has emerged as a figure of dialogue, and his role in the global climate movement has further strengthened the position of the papacy as a norm entrepreneur.

Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have consistently called for peace and ceasefires in the Middle East.

Not only through public speeches, but also through symbolic gestures such as prayer, the Pope can legitimize one political option over another. Thus, Pope Pius XII consecrated Russia to the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1942, at a time of intense fighting on the Eastern Front and at the height of Joseph Stalin's regime. A second consecration, although without explicitly naming any countries, was carried out by Pope John Paul II in 1984, on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. Finally, a third consecration of Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary was

performed by Pope Francis in 2022, during the war in Ukraine.

Diplomatic activity

Along with the establishment of Vatican City as a sovereign state and the recognition of the Holy See as a subject of international law, the Lateran Treaty also required it to maintain permanent neutrality (*nullius in partibus*). However, this did not prevent popes from becoming 'involved' in armed conflicts as mediators or facilitators, which represent one of the most prominent forms of diplomatic activity in the resolution of such conflicts. The first significant attempt at a diplomatic resolution of an armed conflict was the effort of Pope Benedict XV to negotiate peace during World War I, which, however, remained unsuccessful. By contrast, some of the most successful examples of papal mediation and facilitation were the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the Beagle Channel conflict (1979–1985).

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was one of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war after Soviet missiles were discovered in Cuba. John F. Kennedy imposed a naval blockade, while Nikita Khrushchev initially resisted removal demands, escalating tensions. In this context, Pope John XXIII issued a global radio message and a letter to Khrushchev on 25 October 1962, urging peace, dialogue, and responsibility among world leaders. 'You can say you are not religious, but religion is not a sum of precepts, but the commitment to actions made of love for mankind', the Pope wrote to Khrushchev. His

appeal emphasized the urgency of preventing nuclear catastrophe and continuing negotiations. The papal intervention contributed to de-escalation and a diplomatic settlement, in which the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw missiles from Cuba and the United States later reduced missile deployments in Turkey. The crisis ended without armed conflict, and Pope John XXIII's appeal remains a key example of the Holy See's diplomatic influence in preventing global war. Finally, Khrushchev sent his Christmas wishes to John XXIII on 15 December 1962, acknowledging his role in the peace settlement.

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A significant example of successful papal peace negotiation is the Beagle Channel conflict (1979–1985). The Beagle Channel marks the territorial boundary between Chile and Argentina in the southern region of Tierra del Fuego. The dispute between Chile and Argentina lasted for decades, despite a treaty signed in 1881. After unsuccessful negotiations and an arbitration ruling in 1977 in favor of Chile, tensions escalated, and by the late 1970s both countries were on the brink of war. Nationalist rhetoric and military regimes further hindered compromise. In this context, a key role was played by Pope John Paul II, who offered the Holy See's mediation. His 1978 appeal for peace had an immediate impact – Argentina suspended a planned military operation, and both sides agreed to enter negotiations. The

Pope's envoy, Cardinal Samoré, initiated a long diplomatic process that lasted six years. The mediation was successful due to the Pope's international prestige and the strong influence of the Catholic Church in both countries. Finally, in 1984, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship was reached, resolving the territorial dispute.

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There were also significant mediation attempts in the Middle East, including in Iraq, Iran, and Syria. For instance, during the Iraq conflict, Iraq asked the Holy See to act as a 'peacemaker' with the United States, and the Vatican agreed. Pope John Paul II emphasized international law and diplomacy, while Iraqi officials appealed for mediation and an end to military action. At the same time, the Catholic Church has played a notable role in addressing numerous conflict zones around the world, such as the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mozambique, as well as during Mexico's Zapatista uprising. However, in these conflicts, Catholic clergy and lay believers were often both participants and victims, making a direct papal role less feasible. Accordingly, the Church's more common role in civil wars has been humanitarian assistance through organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, as well as engagement in post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives.

Case Study: The Ukrainian Conflict and the Holy See

The war in Ukraine, although its roots date back to 2014, officially began on 24 February 2022. This conflict therefore took place during the pontificate of Pope Francis, who consistently called for peace in Ukraine and sought diplomatic solutions to the conflict. He immediately condemned the war, rejecting the Russian justification that framed it as legitimate self-defense of Russian-speaking populations in eastern Ukraine.

Pope Francis designated 2 March 2022, Ash Wednesday, as a day of prayer and fasting for peace in Ukraine.

Throughout his pontificate, the Pope clearly fulfilled the first precondition for effective global influence – that *his voice be present worldwide*. Shortly after the outbreak of the armed conflict, Pope Francis designated 2 March, Ash Wednesday, as a day of prayer and fasting for peace in Ukraine. In his Angelus message on 27 February, he stated: 'Silence all weapons! God is with the peacemakers, not with those who use violence'. On 6 March, he further declared at the Angelus: 'The Holy See is prepared to do everything, to put itself at the service of this peace'. He continued to repeatedly call for peace in Ukraine throughout his pontificate, and he also sent two cardinals on immediate missions: Cardinal Krajewski, the Apostolic Almoner, to deliver aid to those in need, and Cardinal Czerny, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, to support humanitarian

efforts. As previously noted, he also carried out a Solemn Act of Consecration of humanity, especially Russia and Ukraine, to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 'so that she, the Queen of Peace, may bring peace to the world'.

The second precondition is that he makes use of *transnational resources and local churches*. The Catholic Church itself is a transnational organization, maintaining permanent missions in nearly all countries, as well as numerous non-governmental organizations primarily engaged in humanitarian work. In Ukraine, this role is carried out by Caritas Ukraine (led by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church) and Caritas-Spes (run by the Roman Catholic Church), which provide humanitarian aid (including food, shelter, and medical care) to millions affected by the war. Together, they operate more than 45–50 local centers across the country.

Ukraine has a long Catholic presence. While the majority of Ukrainians are Orthodox Christians, there is a deep division between those belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine. By contrast, around one million believers belong to the Roman Catholic Church, while the second-largest religious group consists of adherents of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, numbering approximately four million. This local church is in full communion with the Holy See. They form the majority in several western regions, particularly in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Ternopil. However, a significant obstacle to using Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church as an instrument of reconciliation lies in the fact that its members are generally not well disposed toward Moscow. In addition to geographic distance from the Russian population, the historical process of union with


Rome remains a subject of sharp contention between Russians and Ukrainians.




Pope Francis criticized restrictions placed on Russian-affiliated church structures in Ukraine.



Finally, it is necessary that *his voice amplify already existing voices* that contribute to changes in attitudes and policies. It must be acknowledged that the voice of Pope Francis has often remained in the minority in world politics. The Western world has overwhelmingly supported Ukraine – both militarily and through strong anti-Russian narratives – sometimes leading to controversial cultural phenomena such as the removal of Fyodor Dostoevsky from school curricula or Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky from philharmonic repertoires. Pope Francis expressed a desire to visit Kyiv, but only after first visiting Vladimir Putin, and he repeatedly reached out to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. He also criticized restrictions placed on Russian-affiliated church structures in Ukraine, particularly the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Consequently, his calls for peace were at times interpreted by Ukrainian officials as calls for capitulation.



U.S. President Donald Trump described Pope Leo XIV as weak and 'terrible for foreign policy'.



These preconditions are necessary for the Pope to act effectively in an increasingly globalized world. Although the idea of mediation by the Holy See was initially accepted by Ukraine, it was not realized, as Pope Francis also sought to ensure that Russia's position would be taken into account. The idea of the Holy See mediation was revived in late 2025; however, neither the new pontiff, Pope Leo XIV, nor the parties to the conflict considered it suitable. As Pope Leo XIV noted: 'I'd make a distinction in terms of the voice of the Holy See in advocating for peace and a role as mediator, which I think is very different and is not as realistic as the first one'. His calls for peace in relation to the current war in Iran have sparked sharp verbal attacks from U.S. President Donald Trump, who described Pope Leo XIV as weak and 'terrible for foreign policy'. While the Pope criticized Trump's claims that the United States could wipe out Iranian civilizations, Trump interpreted these remarks as a direct challenge to U.S. foreign policy – particularly significant given that he is the first Pope born in the United States. Even so, although this episode underscores how unlikely it is for the Pope to play a mediating role in today's major conflicts, it also shows that his public voice carries considerable weight, even among global powers such as the United States.

Conclusion

The Pope may be described as the 'first citizen of the emerging global civil society', but he is not the only actor influencing global affairs. The papacy has undergone a long historical evolution from legitimizing wars, including aggressive ones, to consistently condemning all forms of armed conflict. It has demonstrated

a significant capacity to foster peace between opposing sides, often acting as a mediator in complex interstate disputes and armed conflicts, while respecting the principle established by the Lateran Treaty that it should not intervene unless invited by the parties themselves.

Nevertheless, the absence of clear consent from both parties represents a key limitation for the Holy See in mediating between Russia and Ukraine. Despite historical ties, the presence of local churches, transnational support networks, consistent condemnation of the war, and an established diplomatic presence in Europe, the Holy See has not been regarded as an 'elegant' solution for mediation, as noted by Sergey Lavrov. This raises the question: why such mediation proved effective between the Soviet Union and the United States in 1962? Lavrov further remarked: 'It would be a bit inelegant for *Orthodox countries* to use a Catholic platform to discuss issues on how to remove the root causes (of the war)'. However, given that Orthodox churches themselves are not unified – particularly in their alignment with either the Moscow or the Ecumenical Patriarchate – it follows that the Holy See's resources should not be overlooked in future considerations of peace negotiations.

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