

## The global influence of the Vatican and its role in world geopolitics

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*The cardinals gather before the start of the conclave in the Sistine Chapel. Photo: Vatican Media Handout/EPA*

### **Abstract**

*Although the smallest sovereign state in the world, the Vatican wields significant geopolitical influence due to its dual nature—spiritual and diplomatic. Through its global network of nunciatures, its presence in international organizations, and the moral positions it takes in global crises, the Holy See remains a distinct actor in the international system. The Vatican's global influence and geopolitical role are complex phenomena, arising from the unique fusion of religious power and diplomatic status. From the political power of the medieval popes to the soft diplomacy of modern pontiffs, the Vatican has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation and perseverance. Through its ubiquitous diplomatic network, the Holy See sits at the table where the world's major issues are discussed; through the prestige and voice of the Pope, it guides the moral debate of the age; through the universal Catholic Church, it permeates culture and society with its values. The Vatican is often called the "cradle of Christianity," but as we have seen, it is also a modern international actor, using classical diplomatic instruments alongside its spiritual influence. In a fragmented world that's often lacking an ethical compass, the Vatican keeps acting as a moral beacon and a balancing point in global relations—small in size, but big in the power of the ideas and beliefs it stands for. In the context of the election of a new Pope, the profile of the ideal pontiff requires a global vision, diplomatic experience, the ability to mediate between tradition and reform, and a commitment to ecology, human rights, and interreligious dialogue. Candidates such as Pietro Parolin and Matteo Zuppi reflect these requirements in different ways: the former through diplomatic competence and doctrinal balance, the latter through pastoral charisma and social openness. The election of the future Pope will shape not only the future of the Catholic Church, but also global relations between spirituality, moral governance, and the changing international order.*

**Key words:** *Vatican, geopolitics, Pope, Holy See, religious diplomacy, soft power, synodality, integral ecology, human rights, nunciatures, Roman Curia, interreligious dialogue, global moral governance, conclave, ecclesial reform.*

### **1. Introduction**

The Vatican - specifically **the Holy See**, the central authority of the Catholic Church - is a unique actor on the international stage. Although the Vatican City State is only 44 hectares and has fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, the Pope leads a spiritual community of more than 1.3 billion

believers spread around the world<sup>1</sup> By this dual nature (spiritual and political), the Vatican exerts a global influence disproportionate to its physical size. For more than two millennia, Roman pontiffs have been involved in global affairs, often called upon as mediators, peace campaigners and **moral opinion leaders**. In the modern era, the Holy See (which represents the Vatican in international relations) maintains diplomatic relations with more than 180 countries, and this extensive diplomacy gives the Vatican a significant voice in global affairs.<sup>2</sup> Its influence is not only religious, but also **ethical and cultural**, with the Church taking a stand on issues such as poverty, human rights and social justice, often on behalf of the marginalised. In what follows we will take a broad look at the historical and current dimensions of the Vatican's influence<sup>3</sup>, from its geopolitical role in history to the instruments of **soft power** and religious symbolism it uses in global politics.

## 2. The historical dimension of the Vatican's geopolitical role

### 2.1. Papal power in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times

In the Middle Ages, the Papacy emerged as a major geopolitical force in Europe. Popes wielded both **spiritual authority** and **temporal power**, often influencing the policies of European monarchs. Kings sought the pontiff's blessing and recognition to legitimise their rule, and medieval pontiffs arbitrated disputes and mediated alliances between states. For example, the coronation of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III (800 AD) symbolised the supremacy of papal authority in the creation of the Christian political order. In the **Renaissance**, papal Rome became a cultural and spiritual epicentre; popes patronised the arts and architecture (e.g. the building of St. Peter's Basilica), using culture as a geopolitical tool to assert prestige<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century diminished the Vatican's influence in northern Europe, causing a confessional split. In response, the **Catholic Counter-Reformation** (e.g. Council of Trent, 1545-1563) revitalised Catholic authority in southern Europe and the newly formed colonies, reinforcing the papal role in the areas that remained loyal to Rome.

### 2.2. Loss of temporal power and diplomatic reassertion (19th-20th centuries)

Until the 19th century, popes directly ruled secular territories (Papal States) in the centre of Italy. These possessions were annexed in 1870 by the new Kingdom of Italy, provoking the "*Vatican Prison*" - a period during which the Pope refused to leave the Vatican, not accepting the loss of the territories. However, even deprived of territorial sovereignty, the Holy See continued to be recognised as a **subject of international law** and to maintain diplomatic relations. Immediately after 1870, 16 states had legations to the Vatican, a number that grew to 27 states by 1929<sup>5</sup>, a sign that the great powers (including Russia, Prussia, Austro-Hungary) still valued the diplomatic role of the papacy. The popes concluded *concordats* (treaties) with various countries to regulate the status of the Catholic Church (29 agreements signed between 1870 and 1929, with countries such as Austria-Hungary, Russia and France). In 1929, the **Lateran Treaties** signed with Italy recognised the independence of the **Vatican State** and the sovereign status of the Holy See, ending the dispute with the Italian state<sup>6</sup>. Paradoxically, the regaining of a tiny territory did not immediately change the Vatican's external influence, which was anyway exercised through its moral prestige and the Church's global network. It was only after the Second World War that the number of countries with which the Vatican had official relations expanded significantly, in line with the papacy's new role in a bipolar world.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Levillain (ed.), *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia\**, Routledge, 2002, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> Pascal Fontaine, *La diplomatie du Vatican\**, Presses de Sciences Po, 2014, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> David Hollenbach, *The Global Face of Public Faith: Politics, Human Rights, and Christian Ethics\**, Georgetown University Press, 2003, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign\\_relations\\_of\\_the\\_Holy\\_See](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_relations_of_the_Holy_See)

<sup>6</sup> <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>

### 2.3. The Vatican in the 20th century and today

After 1945, the Vatican's geopolitical role was redefined by the concept of **soft power** - influential power through diplomacy and moral authority, not military force. Papal diplomacy became firmly oriented towards the promotion of peace, dialogue and humanitarian programmes rather than traditional state interests. Twentieth-century popes have tried to mediate conflicts (e.g. Pope Benedict XV unsuccessfully proposed an armistice in World War I, calling war "a **useless slaughter**"), adopted a position of **active neutrality** in World War II, and during the *Cold War* campaigned for human rights in the communist bloc and for nuclear disarmament. The election of Pope John Paul II (1978) - the first Eastern European pope - marked a key moment: through his visits and messages in his native Poland, he inspired the Solidarity movement and spiritual resistance against the communist regime. Indeed, historians consider John Paul II to have been one of the **three crucial actors** (along with Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev) who precipitated the fall of the Iron Curtain<sup>7</sup>. Gorbachev himself called the Pontiff "*the first citizen of global civil society*", recognising his immense influence beyond the religious sphere. In the 1980s, the Vatican successfully mediated the border conflict between Chile and Argentina, demonstrating the papacy's diplomatic capacity. Thus, from the Middle Ages to today, the Vatican's geopolitical role has evolved from direct political domination to **global moral arbiter**, but it has maintained its relevance. The continuity is evident: the accumulated historical experience allows the Vatican "to navigate contemporary global challenges with depth and understanding"<sup>8</sup>, blending its spiritual mission with the political realities of each epoch.

### 3. Vatican diplomatic network and apostolic nunciatures



St Peter's Basilica -<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2024-01/holy-see-diplomatic-relations-2023-overview.html>

A central pillar of the Vatican's global influence is **its extensive diplomacy**. The Holy See has one of the oldest and most widespread diplomatic networks in the world. As early as the 11th century, popes sent emissaries to royal courts, and from the 16th century states began to maintain permanent ambassadors in Rome<sup>9</sup>. The first **permanent nunciature** (papal embassy) was established in 1500 in Venice, and by the late 1500s there were already 13 nunciatures in Europe.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/podcasts/power-of-the-pope>

<sup>8</sup> <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign\\_relations\\_of\\_the\\_Holy\\_See](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_relations_of_the_Holy_See)

After a period of decline in the era of religious conflicts (when, for example, Gallican France challenged papal interference and the French Revolution and Napoleon drastically reduced the presence of nunciatures), the Congress of Vienna (1815) enshrined a special status for papal diplomats: the Vatican's apostolic nuncio is, *ex officio*, the **dean of the diplomatic corps** in the country to which he is accredited. This **protocol precedence** implicitly recognises the secular prestige of the Vatican in international relations .<sup>10</sup>

The **Holy See** currently **has full diplomatic relations with 184 countries**<sup>11</sup> , almost all the countries of the world. Only a few nations do not have official ties with the Vatican - notably the People's Republic of China, North Korea, Vietnam, Somalia or Saudi Arabia - while the Vatican diplomatically recognises **the Republic of China (Taiwan)** and the **State of Palestine**<sup>12</sup> . The diplomatic network encompasses both *residential* nunciatures (embassy with a local seat, in 110 countries) and *non-residential* nunciatures (where the nuncio covers several countries in another capital, in 74 cases)[aleteia.org](http://aleteia.org). These 184 relationships make the diplomatic reach of the Holy See comparable to that of the major powers: for example, the US has relations with 189 countries and China with 181[aleteia.org](http://aleteia.org). Nunciatures are headed by **apostolic nuncios** - career diplomats who are usually archbishops - appointed directly by the pope and representing the interests of the Holy See. In total there are around 95 apostolic nuncios active in [lumealeteia.org](http://lumealeteia.org). The role of a nuncio is similar to that of an ambassador, but often with a dual mission: in addition to the bilateral relationship with the accredited state, the nuncio liaises with the local Church (national bishops), having a major say in their appointment.



*The diplomatic machinery of the Holy See- <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>*

The importance of the Vatican's diplomatic network lies in **its universal and neutral character**. Independent of economic or military interests, the Vatican can open channels of communication where others cannot. For example, the Holy See is a **mutually accepted interlocutor** in international disputes, as reflected in its mediation in the territorial dispute between Chile and Argentina (Patagonia, 1980) or in the US-Cuba dialogue. The papal nuncio - thanks to his deanery status - often has privileged access to the leaders of the country in which he works, facilitating the transmission of papal messages. The Vatican annually hosts the Corps of Accredited Diplomats in Rome (some 90 foreign embassies are resident in Rome alongside the Holy See<sup>13</sup> ), where the Pope, in his **State of the World** address, sets out the Vatican's vision on major global issues. This vast "**network of nunciatures**" essentially functions as a diplomatic nervous system

<sup>10</sup> Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *The History of Medieval Spain*, Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 234.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2024-01/holy-see-diplomatic-relations-2023-overview.html>

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign\\_relations\\_of\\_the\\_Holy\\_See](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_relations_of_the_Holy_See)

<sup>13</sup> <https://aleteia.org/2024/01/12/5-key-stats-on-vatican-diplomacy>

that allows the Vatican to feel the pulse of the world and project its moral influence. The Holy See uses diplomacy to promote religious freedom, human rights and dialogue, continuing a tradition that combines **centuries-old diplomatic skill with spiritual mission**. It is no coincidence that the Vatican's diplomatic service is said to be **the oldest in the world**, remarkable for its continuity and adaptation to historical changes .<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. The Vatican in major international conflicts (Cold War, Middle East, Ukraine, etc.)

##### From Pius XII to John Paul II

Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) adopted an **active neutrality** during World War II. Although he was criticised for his lack of explicit condemnation of the Nazi regime, recent documents show his discreet involvement in the rescue of tens of thousands of Jews and his opposition to totalitarian ideologies.<sup>15</sup>

Pope John XXIII intervened quietly during the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), sending messages to Kennedy and Khrushchev and pleading for "peace among people of goodwill"<sup>16</sup>. His successor, Paul VI, became the first Pope to address the UN General Assembly (1965), calling for disarmament and global justice.

##### John Paul II and the fall of communism

Pope John Paul II was the most influential religious figure of the Cold War. His visit to Poland in 1979 was followed by the emergence of the Solidarity movement, and his moral support for this movement was crucial in the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe<sup>17</sup>. The Pope advocated religious freedom, human dignity and peaceful dialogue, rejecting violence and ideological repression.

Although the Vatican has no military might, its moral voice and the prestige of its pontiffs have enabled them to play important roles in mitigating or mediating major conflicts in recent decades. **The Cold War** provided numerous examples. Pope John XXIII intervened quietly during the **Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)**, sending messages to US and USSR leaders and then publishing the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which emphasised the urgency of world peace. Pope John Paul II later became a symbolic figure in the opposition to communist regimes in Eastern Europe. His 1979 visit to Poland and support for the free trade union Solidarity galvanised the Polish anti-communist movement. One analyst noted that if Poland was the first "domino" to fall from the Soviet bloc, then John Paul II is unquestionably among the **top three architects of the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe**<sup>18</sup>. This assessment is also shared by secular leaders: Gorbachev himself remarked that without the role of the Polish Pope, the end of the Cold War would have looked different.

In the **conflicts in the Middle East**, the Vatican has used its influence mainly through appeals for peace, inter-religious dialogue and protection of the innocent. Since the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Holy See has consistently advocated respect for the rights of both peoples and a **two-state solution**. As early as 1948, Pope Pius XII called for special status for Jerusalem and the protection of holy sites, and his successors have continued to champion the cause of peace in the Holy Land. The Vatican did not establish diplomatic relations with Israel until 1993, at the same time recognising Palestine; in 2015, Pope Francis welcomed the presidents of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to the Vatican for a historic joint prayer, a powerful gesture of religious symbolism in the service of reconciliation.

<https://youtu.be/7oFuM3c7LSM?t=105>

The Vatican's official position has been clear: condemn terrorism and violence against civilians, respect *the status quo* of Jerusalem's holy sites and help refugees. In the wars in Iraq

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<sup>14</sup> <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Graham, *The Vatican and Communism in World Affairs*, Princeton University Press, 1959, pp. 212-215.

<sup>16</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 145.

<sup>17</sup> George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 54-57.

<sup>18</sup> <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>

(1991, 2003) and Syria (after 2011), the pontiffs (John Paul II and Francis respectively) strongly opposed military options, organising **days of prayer for peace** and offering themselves as intermediaries. For example, in 2003, Pope John Paul II warned that resorting to a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq would be "*a defeat for humanity*" and an "*act without legal or moral justification*", sending emissaries to Washington and Baghdad to try to avoid war<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, during the 2003 crisis, the Polish pope had become "*the most visible opponent of war*", condemning the conflict as "*immoral and risky*", which made him a landmark for global peace movements.

In the contemporary conflict in **Ukraine** (triggered by the Russian invasion in 2022), the Vatican is once again trying to play the role of peacemaker, although this has proved to be a particularly complex situation. Pope Francis has condemned the war as madness and "*sacrilege*", but has tried to maintain a diplomatic balance to keep channels of dialogue open with both sides. He made numerous calls for an end to hostilities and offered to mediate peace talks, sending special envoys to both Kiev and Moscow in 2023. However, the Vatican has sometimes been criticised for its caution: until May 2022, the Pope avoided explicitly naming Russia as an aggressor, focusing on the human suffering on both sides<sup>20</sup>. At the same time, Francis has taken a firm tone on the religious justification of war. In an unusually blunt public statement, he warned Patriarch Kirill of Moscow (the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, a Kremlin ally) "*not to become Putin's altar boy*", criticising the subordination of religious discourse to war propaganda.<sup>21</sup>



*Russian President Vladimir Putin meets Pope Francis at the Vatican 4 July 2019. Vatican Media/Handout via REUTERS*

The allegation, first aired in an interview in May 2022, stirred tensions with the Russian Church, but underlined the Vatican's clear stance against the instrumentalisation of religion in conflict. The Holy See's diplomatic efforts - such as prisoner exchanges facilitated by the nuncio in Kiev or calls for the "*courage of the white flag*" (a metaphor used by the Pope to urge Ukraine to negotiate) - show the Vatican's desire to end the bloodshed, even if its room for manoeuvre is limited.

On the whole, **the Vatican's interventions in major conflicts** have been moral and diplomatic in nature: public condemnation of unjust wars, behind-the-scenes mediation efforts and

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/story/vatican-strongly-opposes-iraq-war>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/04/22/pope-francis-three-years-of-missteps-and-errors-in-judgment-on-the-war-in-ukraine\\_6740523\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/04/22/pope-francis-three-years-of-missteps-and-errors-in-judgment-on-the-war-in-ukraine_6740523_4.html)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-says-no-agreement-reached-possible-meeting-between-putin-pope-francis-2022-05-04/>

alleviating humanitarian crises. While the Pope's voice has not always been able to stop violence, it has provided an **ethical compass** that many have followed. In 2003, for example, John Paul II's uncompromising stance against the invasion of Iraq swayed global public opinion and strained Vatican relations with the US, but it confirmed the pope's status as the **world's moral conscience**. Likewise, Pope Francis' refusal to legitimise any offensive war in our times (he reiterated that *"every war is a defeat for humanity"*) keeps alive the tradition of the doctrine of peace promoted by the Holy See. From the Cold War to the Middle East and Ukraine, the Vatican has used its **spiritual capital** to defend human dignity and promote peaceful solutions, even if the practical results depend on the will of the great powers.

## 5. The moral and cultural influence of the Catholic Church worldwide

The Catholic Church is the largest religious community in the world, bringing together believers from every continent, from hundreds of cultures and nations. This widespread presence gives the Vatican a profound **moral and cultural** influence, manifested in shared values, education, traditions and social practices. Over the centuries, Catholicism has shaped cultural identity in vast regions: from Latin America (where celebrations such as Día de los Muertos or Semana Santa processions have Catholic roots), to Europe (the calendar of Christian holidays has structured the life of societies), to the Philippines or sub-Saharan Africa (where Catholic missionaries have helped to establish schools and hospitals since colonial times). **Unity in diversity** is one of the hallmarks of the Catholic Church - people of all races and languages are united in a common faith and loyalty to the Pope, giving the Vatican a unique platform to deliver messages with global resonance.

The Vatican's moral influence is exercised primarily through the **Church's social teaching** and network of Catholic institutions. Today, the Church runs a vast system of **education and charity** around the world: thousands of schools, universities (some of them highly prestigious), hospitals, orphanages and charitable organisations operate under the Catholic aegis. These institutions not only provide social services, but also transmit a set of values - the dignity of the person, solidarity, social justice, *caritas* (charity) - influencing mentalities and moulding leaders. For example, religious orders such as the **Jesuits** or the **Franciscans** have been operating colleges and educational centres around the world for hundreds of years, helping to educate many local elites in the spirit of Catholic ethics. In many developing countries, Catholic schools are recognised for their academic quality and the moral discipline they instil. For their part, charitable organisations such as **Caritas Internationalis** and **Catholic Relief Services** intervene in areas affected by war or disaster, providing impartial humanitarian aid. Through such actions, the Vatican *"promotes understanding, compassion and social justice on the grassroots level"*, putting Gospel values into practice and increasing its moral *"soft power"*.<sup>22</sup>

The Catholic Church is also a major cultural influence: the heritage of Catholic art, music, literature and philosophy has enriched global civilisation. From Michelangelo's masterpieces in the Sistine Chapel, to polyphonic sacred music, to literature inspired by faith (Dante, Tolkien, etc.), the Vatican has been a **custodian of culture** and a source of inspiration. The Vatican's museums house universal treasures, and protecting them is in itself a contribution to world culture. Moreover, through global events such as **World Youth Day** (which brings millions of young people together every few years in a different city) or papal liturgies broadcast live across the world, the Vatican creates a transnational culture of dialogue and fraternity. Such events are also exercises in public diplomacy: they reinforce a sense of common belonging across borders and convey moral messages (for example, at the 2019 World World Tourism Day Panama 2019, the Pope spoke about solidarity with migrants). The Vatican also influences contemporary cultural and ethical debates: the Church's views on the **family, bioethics, sexuality** or **social justice** often provoke heated discussions in society, marking value orientations in many communities. Even if sometimes in opposition to secularist trends, the Vatican's **moral positions** (such as the defence of unborn life or the definition

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<sup>22</sup> <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>

of the family) have influential followers and can influence legislation (e.g. in Latin America or Africa, where bishops have an advisory role in social policies). In conclusion, the Vatican's moral and cultural influence is mainly **indirect**, through the vast community of the Catholic Church and the **power of example**. Papal messages and encyclicals (doctrinal documents) shape consciences, and the Catholic institutional network propagates these values in society, helping to shape cultural identities and moral norms in countless countries.

## 6. The Vatican's relations with international organisations (UN, EU, etc.) and world states

### The Holy See in international organisations



*Photo Courtesy: Papal artefacts*

The Vatican is an active participant in global governance, using multilateral fora to promote its vision of peace and human dignity. Since 1964, the Holy See has had **Permanent Observer** status **at the United Nations** (U.N.) Although it does not have voting rights in the General Assembly, this status allows it to speak in debates and contribute to the drafting of international documents. The papal representative to the UN (the Apostolic Nuncio in New York) lobbies states to introduce moral issues - from protecting religious freedom to including the concept of the right to life - into resolutions. The Vatican uses the UN forum to emphasise the link between **Christian ethics and global development goals**: for example, in 2015 Pope Francis spoke in the UN plenary on eradicating extreme poverty and environmental responsibility, influencing the Sustainable Development Goals agenda. Involvement in international organisations goes beyond the UN: the Holy See is a full member or observer in more than 20 bodies, such as **the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)**, **the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)**, **the Arab League** (observer) or **the Council of Europe** (observer). Through these channels, the Vatican *"influences policy discussions on human rights, economic justice and sustainable*

*development*", positioning itself as a **moral counterpoint** to strictly power-oriented diplomacy<sup>23</sup>. For example, the Holy See's delegation to climate conferences (COPs) has been a strong voice for *climate justice*, and at the **UN Human Rights Council**, its representative advocates for the right to life (including against the death penalty and abortion) and the protection of the family. This multilateral involvement makes the Vatican a **formalised global actor**, even if it is not a UN member state. The ability to speak on behalf of more than a billion people gives weight to its delegates, who often remind governments of their moral obligations.

**Relations with the European Union:** Although Vatican City is not part of the EU, historical and cultural links mean that dialogue with the EU institutions is close. The Vatican has a diplomatic mission to the EU in Brussels, and European officials regularly consult with the Holy See on issues such as migration, the future of Europe and the continent's Christian roots. In 2014, Pope Francis gave a remarkable speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 2014, in which he urged Europe to rediscover its spiritual heritage and put human dignity at the centre of its policies (denouncing Europe's "*spiritual old age*" and excessive bureaucracy). Pope John Paul II, during his long pontificate, also supported the integration of post-communist Eastern European states into the EU, seeing it as a reunification of "*the two lungs of Europe*" (the West and the Christian East). The Vatican-EU relationship has not been without tensions: debates over the mention of Christian heritage in the Preamble of the EU Constitution (2004) or diverging positions on family policies and sexual ethics have created differences of vision. Yet co-operation is strong in areas such as the fight against human trafficking, helping refugees and protecting cultural heritage. The European Union, for its part, maintains an **EU delegation to the Vatican**, recognising its role in international and inter-religious diplomacy.

**Bilateral relations with the world's great powers and states:** the Holy See maintains active diplomatic ties with states on all continents, often acting as a "*constructeur de ponts*" - bridge-builder between nations with divergent interests. One notable example of **successful papal diplomacy** has been the secret mediation between the United States and Cuba: in 2014, under the auspices of Pope Francis, discreet negotiations were held at the Vatican that led to the resumption of US-Cuba diplomatic relations after a more than 50-year break. This episode emphasised the credibility of the Vatican as a credible mediator - the only entity that enjoys the trust of both governments. The Vatican was also the link in the dialogue between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the 1980s and 1990s, organising high-level meetings (such as Yasser Arafat's visit to Pope John Paul II in 1987) that paved the way for the *Oslo Accords*.

With the **United States**, formal relations were established relatively late (1984), but interactions go back a long way - for example, President Wilson visited the Vatican after World War I. During the Cold War, Washington appreciated the Vatican's anti-communist steadfastness, collaborating informally, and after 1989, popes and US presidents met frequently to discuss global challenges (terrorism, poverty, pandemics). However, there have also been major disagreements, such as John Paul II's opposition to the invasion of Iraq (2003) which strained relations with the Bush administration. With the **Russian Federation**, the Holy See established diplomatic relations after the fall of the USSR (1990), and since then dialogue has been cautious: there is cooperation on issues such as protecting Christians in the Middle East or traditional family values (where Moscow and Vatican positions often coincide at the UN), but differences and mistrust persist, especially on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The historic meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill in Havana (2016) was an important step towards reconciliation after the schism of nearly a millennium.

A special case is **China**. The Vatican has diplomatically recognised Taiwan (since 1942) and is today the only European state to maintain this relationship - a sore point for Beijing<sup>24</sup>. At the same time, since 1951 (when the communist regime severed ties and expelled the Apostolic Nuncio) there have been no official relations between the Holy See and the PRC. However, in its desire to ensure religious freedom for the ~10-12 million Chinese Catholics, Vatican diplomacy has

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<sup>24</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign\\_relations\\_of\\_the\\_Holy\\_See](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_relations_of_the_Holy_See)

been engaged in difficult negotiations with the Beijing authorities. The result was a **Provisional Agreement** signed in 2018 (renewed in 2020 and 2022) on the appointment of bishops in China - a crucial issue, as the communist regime insists on controlling its own "Patriotic Church" while the Vatican claims the canonical right to appoint its bishops. The details of the agreement remain secret, but its signing has been hailed as a step towards normalising relations, although tensions persist (Beijing has broken the deal on several occasions, and in 2023 an "underground" bishop was arrested). Through dialogue, the Vatican hopes to bring about the reunification of China's Catholic communities and possibly restore official relations in the future. This example illustrates the Vatican's way of navigating **geopolitical dilemmas**: putting the good of the faithful and the freedom of the Church first, even if it has to make diplomatic concessions to authoritarian regimes.

In addition to the big powers, the Vatican cultivates relations with small and medium-sized states, sometimes with a **direct impact on** policy. Concordats signed by the Holy See with countries such as Brazil, France, the Philippines, Angola or Kazakhstan regulate the status of the local Church and ensure religious freedoms - these are instruments of "*small geopolitics*" that reinforce the Vatican's cultural and legal influence at the level of governments. In Africa and Asia, the Vatican has used diplomatic channels to advocate against religious persecution (e.g. defence of the Christian minority in Sudan or India) and for **development and social justice** (e.g. debt forgiveness for poor countries, a campaign supported by John Paul II at the Jubilee in 2000).

In conclusion, the relations of the Holy See with state and organisational actors are marked by **principled neutrality and moral involvement**. The Vatican strives to be "*friend to all and full ally to none*" - maintaining bridges even where others break them. Its global diplomatic network, participation in international forums and papal prestige make the tiny Vatican state a **hub of** global diplomacy. This unique position allows the Pope and his collaborators to act at times as the "**external conscience**" of the international community, reminding states of their moral obligations and bringing the perspective of the vulnerable to the table.

## 7. The role of the Pope as a global actor of influence (peace, environment, migration, human rights)

The Pope, as leader of the Catholic Church and head of the Vatican, is often referred to as the '**moral world leader**', with a platform from which he tackles issues that transcend denominational boundaries. In this section we will highlight the papacy's contribution in four major areas: **peace, the environment, migration and human rights**.

- **Promoting peace:** Pontiffs are actively involved in peace efforts, both through quiet diplomacy and strong **public appeals**. Pope John Paul II, for example, was one of the strongest opponents of the war in Iraq (2003), repeatedly denouncing the conflict as "*illegitimate and immoral*"<sup>25</sup>. He has sent envoys to both Washington and Baghdad to prevent hostilities and has said that "*war is a defeat for humanity*", galvanising global peace movements. Similarly, Pope Francis has become an influential voice for peace in the contemporary world: he has mediated the reconciliation between the US and Cuba, supported international conferences on nuclear disarmament, and in 2019 organised an unprecedented meeting in the Vatican with the embattled leaders of South Sudan, urging them to reconcile (he even kissed their feet as a gesture of humility and plea for peace). Papal Sovereigns are not just orators, but **peace brokers**: for example, John XXIII helped defuse the 1962 nuclear crisis, and Francis offered *good offices* in negotiating humanitarian corridors in Ukraine. Thus the Pope's role as peacemaker is globally recognised - from the Pope's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize (so far no pope has received it, although some have been nominated) to the popular appellation of "*peace ambassador*". In short, the papacy uses the Vatican's moral prestige to **prevent conflict and stimulate dialogue**, acting as a neutral and empathetic mediator in the most difficult crises.
- **Protecting the environment**

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/story/vatican-strongly-opposes-iraq-war>

<https://youtu.be/QLVdvLPeSKA>

Under the pontificate of Pope Francis in particular, **integral ecology** has become a pillar of the Vatican's agenda. Francis was the first pope to assume the name St Francis of Assisi - the patron saint of ecology - signalling his concern for the **climate crisis**. In 2015, he published the landmark encyclical *Laudato si'*, a landmark document that categorically affirms the reality of man-made climate change and the moral responsibility to act<sup>26</sup>. The encyclical has had a huge global resonance, bringing an "*influential voice*" to the climate discussion just as the Paris Agreement (2015) on reducing emissions is being finalised. Political leaders and environmental organisations have welcomed the Vatican's contribution to raising awareness of the issue; scholars have noted that *Laudato si'* blended scientific and ethical language, mobilising not only Catholics but also the general public and other faiths in the climate movement. Pope Francis continued the series of environmental initiatives: he organised synods on the Amazon (2019) to protect indigenous peoples and the rainforest, established the '*Time of Creation*' (an annual period of ecological prayer) and published *Laudate Deum* in 2023, a new document updating the climate emergency. Through his appeals, the Pope has criticised rich countries for polluting and called for a switch to renewable energy, saying that "*we cannot afford to fail in the face of the ecological crisis*". While not all global policies have changed, the pope's role as an **environmental advocate** is now firmly established: he has "united science, morality and faith" in a common message against the degradation of the planet. This involvement of the Vatican in environmental issues shows the extension of the concept of human rights to the *rights of nature* and intergenerational responsibility - a welcome ethical perspective in climate diplomacy.

- **Migration and Refugees:** A constant preoccupation of Pope Francis (and to some extent of his predecessors) has been the fate of migrants and refugees, amid the global migration crises of recent decades. Francis himself, being the son of Italian immigrants to Argentina, brought a personal sensitivity to the subject. He has vehemently denounced *the "globalisation of indifference"* towards migrants and has made memorable symbolic gestures, such as his first papal trip in 2013 to Lampedusa (the Italian island where thousands of migrants arrive) to commemorate the lives lost at sea. The Vatican emphasises that welcoming those fleeing war, famine or persecution is a fundamental **moral obligation**. Pope Francis said in 2024 that "*to reject migrants, to push them away, is a grave sin*", directly criticising policies that erect walls and militarise borders .<sup>27</sup>
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<sup>26</sup> <https://catholicclimatecovenant.org/encyclical/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/news/2024/pope-driving-away-migrants-grave-sin>



*Pope Francis kisses a baby as he rides in a popemobile around St Peter's Square at the Vatican ahead of his weekly general audience 28 August 2024. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)*

He has repeatedly called for legal and safe channels of migration, the fight against human trafficking and the dignified integration of refugees. These messages were conveyed not only verbally but also practically: The Vatican has directly provided shelter to Syrian refugee families, brought by the pope on the papal plane from camps in Greece, and has supported the *humanitarian corridors* initiative together with the Sant'Egidio community (a Catholic organisation). At the diplomatic level, the Holy See has supported the UN Global Compact on Migration (2018) and has collaborated with organisations such as the IOM and UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees), with their offices in Rome accredited to the Vatican<sup>28</sup>. The papal message - "*see the migrant as a brother, not a burden*" - seeks to counterbalance nationalist rhetoric in some countries. While the Vatican's voice alone does not change countries' policies, it **shapes consciences**: local bishops, Caritas organisations and millions of the faithful are inspired by the Pope to get involved in helping migrants, creating bottom-up pressure for more humane policies. Francis summarised the Christian attitude in four verbs: "to welcome, protect, promote and integrate" migrants - a programme that fully reflects his role as a **global defender of the voiceless**.

- **Human rights and human dignity:** Ever since Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which contained a list of human rights, the Holy See has positioned itself as a supporter of the fundamental rights of the person in the world. Of course, the Vatican's interpretation is influenced by Christian doctrine, emphasising the right to life, freedom of faith, the right to family and development, and correlative obligations (the common good). A notable example of the papal role in promoting human rights is **the firm opposition to the death penalty**. Under Pope Francis, the Catholic Church has taken a historic step: in 2018, the Catechism was officially revised to declare *capital punishment "inadmissible" as an offence against the inviolability and dignity of the person*<sup>29</sup>. The Pope called for the global abolition of executions, arguing that divine and genuinely human justice can never be reduced to mere retribution. This stance has influenced UN discussions and strengthened the worldwide abolitionist movement. Similarly, the Vatican defends **the right to life of the unborn and the vulnerable elderly**, and is against abortion and euthanasia - positions that are

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2024-01/holy-see-diplomatic-relations-2023-overview.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-08/pope-francis-cdf-ccc-death-penalty-revision-ladaria.html>

controversial in the West, but carry weight in many traditional societies and global forums (e.g. alliances with African and Middle Eastern countries at the UN to declare abortion not a human right). The papacy, on the other hand, has been a **champion of religious freedom**: from denouncing the persecution of Christians in the communist bloc (John Paul II said: "*Europe must breathe with two lungs - one is the freedom of faith*"), to defending the Yazidi or Christian minorities massacred by ISIS in the East (Francis spoke of an "ecocide" and "genocidal persecution" in Iraq and Syria). The Vatican has supported the creation of the concept of the "*right of religious minorities*" in international law. The Pope has also engaged on issues such as **social justice and economic rights**: he has called for debt forgiveness for poor countries, criticised modern economic colonialism and said that extreme poverty is a violation of dignity as grave as civil violations. Through documents such as *Caritas in Veritate* (Benedict XVI) and *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis), the Vatican advocates the right of every person to food, decent work and peace - thus extending the sphere of human rights beyond classical freedoms to social and solidarity rights. Finally, another area is the **fight against abuse and corruption**: the Pope has spoken out against torture, human trafficking (which he has called "*a plague on the body of Christ*") and political corruption, seeing it as a denial of the rights of the people. Although the Church itself has faced scandals (e.g. sexual abuse by clergy - an issue on which Pope Francis has initiated accountability measures and publicly apologised), the papal platform remains a major one in defining and promoting **global moral standards**. Thus, the Pope's role as an influential actor is seen not only in diplomatic actions, but also in shaping **international ethical discourse**, often putting uncomfortable but necessary issues of human dignity on the world's agenda.

## 8. *Soft power tools and religious symbolism in global politics*

The Vatican's influence is exercised largely through **soft power** - the power of persuasion and cultural appeal, rather than coercion. Unlike ordinary states with armies or economies, the Vatican's "armoury" consists of values, tradition and symbols. Its soft power rests on **the moral authority of the papacy and its vast cultural network**, allowing the Vatican to have a subtle but profound impact on the world.<sup>30</sup>

An essential element of this soft power is the **Pope's spiritual leadership**. A pontiff's personal charisma and symbolic actions can transcend religious boundaries: images such as the Pope embracing the sick, praying in conflict zones or asking for forgiveness for the Church's wrongs create a global narrative of compassion and reconciliation. International papal visits attract hundreds of thousands or even millions of people (e.g. over 6 million at the Pope's Mass in Manila, 2015) and focus media attention on key messages. One commentator noted that "*papal visits bring immense attention and generate dialogue on critical socio-political issues*", often resulting in spurring concrete action in those areas. For example, after the Pope's visit to Brazil (1980), the military regime there accelerated democratic reopening, and after his trip to Chile (1987), there was an increase in society's demand for free elections. The Pope thus functions as a **vector of conscience**: his presence in a country can legitimise civil society causes and put moral pressure on authoritarian leaders (without direct confrontation, but through the power of symbol).

The Church's global network - with **parishes in almost every corner of the world** - is another major soft power tool. Each parish or diocese acts as a small "*ambassador*" for the Vatican at the local level, relaying pontifical teachings and directives to the grassroots community. So when the Pope launches, for example, a campaign against global hunger, local churches in dozens of countries simultaneously mobilise in food collections and letters to governments - a synchronised worldwide movement made possible only by the centralised Catholic structure. In addition, **Catholic media** (Vatican News, Vatican Radio, Church-run social networks) amplify Vatican messages to a diverse international audience. Pope Francis, for example, has a Twitter account in 9 languages, with more than 50 million followers cumulatively, allowing him to instantly broadcast

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<sup>30</sup> <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>

morally charged messages (such as calls for prayer for a particular crisis or appeals for solidarity) to masses of people, including non-Catholics. This global media presence is an integral part of the Vatican's modern soft power.

**Religious symbolism** is another powerful tool of Vatican influence. In a secularised world, the Vatican remains one of the few places where symbols have remained vivid and relevant: the white papal vestments, the white smoke at the election of the new pope, the *Urbi et Orbi* (Blessing of the City and the World) rituals broadcast at Christmas and Easter - all capture the imagination of the global public. Popes know the power of these symbols and often use them deliberately in **public diplomacy**. When a pope prays in silence at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial or visits the Blue Mosque in Istanbul as a gesture of interfaith respect, those images are worth a thousand words in building bridges between communities. Likewise, when Pope Francis washed the feet of Muslim refugees in a Maundy Thursday ritual, the message of human brotherhood was conveyed in a symbolic way that few diplomatic speeches could match. The Vatican is thus using **the power of ritual and sacred imagery** to influence hearts and minds - a type of influence that is hard to counter, because it works on an emotional and spiritual level.

Another aspect of Vatican soft power is **continuity and value coherence**. While governments change and policies oscillate, the papal voice remains consistent in certain principles, which engenders **trust**. For example, the Vatican's consistent stance of condemning both sides when civilians suffer (whether the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the invasion of Ukraine) keeps it in the position of an impartial moral arbiter. It is this perception of moral integrity that causes many - even non-Catholics - to look to the Vatican as an **ethical yardstick** in moments of moral confusion.

In the sphere of international relations, the Vatican also excels in **diplomatic symbolism**: bestowing papal honours on peace figures, organising prayer meetings with leaders of hostile countries, visiting former conflict zones to heal memories - all these create a symbolic framework for reconciliation. An eloquent example is the prayer meeting for peace organised by Pope John Paul II in Assisi in 1986, where religious leaders from all over the world (Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, etc.) came to pray in their own rites for global peace. This image of unity in diversity under the aegis of the Vatican sent a powerful message of **inter-religious harmony**, reinforcing the pope's position as a **global spiritual leader** beyond Catholicism.

Last but not least, the Vatican's **cultural and historical heritage** amplifies soft power. The fact that the Vatican is seen as the successor to ancient Rome and the repository of a 2,000-year-old tradition gives it unique weight. In diplomacy, prestige counts - and a state that had Michelangelo as its ambassador (through the Sistine Chapel) or influenced the birth of medieval universities has a special *gravitas*. Heads of state who visit the Pope are aware that they are meeting a timeless institution, which commands respect and sometimes creates openness to reflection beyond immediate interests.

In summary, the **Vatican's soft power instruments** include: the Pope's *spiritual authority*, the Church's *global network, educational and charitable organisations, global media, religious symbols and rituals*, and *historical and cultural prestige*. These levers allow the Vatican to "*promote global co-operation and understanding*" in a different way from secular diplomacy<sup>31</sup>. Through them, the Vatican can influence behaviours and attitudes without legislating or imposing sanctions - an influence that is difficult to measure, but extremely pervasive. We can say that, while the great powers shape the course of history through political and economic decisions, the Vatican **shapes culture and consciences**, which in the long term has an equally real impact. Its soft power, founded on spiritual leadership and cultural heritage, has ensured that "*the Vatican remains a distinctive player on the world stage - one whose power is measured not in its armies or wealth, but in its enduring moral and spiritual authority*"<sup>32</sup>.

## 9. What profile should the new Pope have?

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<sup>31</sup> <https://primerogueinc.com/blog/vatican-geopolitics-power-and-influence-explained>

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**Ideally, the future Pope should be:**

- **A leader with a global vision**, able to tackle contemporary challenges such as climate change, migration and social inequality.
- **A mediator between tradition and reform**, continuing the process of synodality and promoting unity in diversity.
- **A promoter of interfaith dialogue**, especially in the context of current global tensions.
- **An effective administrator**, able to reform the internal structures of the Church and respond to financial and moral challenges.

In the current conclave, **Pietro Parolin** seems to be the candidate who best fulfils these criteria, with a combination of diplomatic experience, knowledge of the Curia and a moderate approach that could unify the different factions in the Church.

If we look at **these essential criteria** for a new Pope relevant in the 21st century - global vision, diplomatic experience, synodality, ecology, digitalisation, inter-religious dialogue and pastoral empathy - the candidate who meets them most balanced at this moment is:

**Cardinal Pietro Parolin (Italy) - Vatican Secretary of State**

**Why it would be appropriate:**

- **Career diplomat**: has over 30 years' experience in Vatican diplomacy, including complex negotiations with China, Venezuela and Iran.
- **Doctrinal balance**: he is perceived as neither ultra-conservative nor radical progressive - which gives him a chance of consensus.
- **A continuation of the Franciscan opening**, but with more structure and administrative authority.
- **Real global vision**: he knows Africa, Asia and Latin America well from his diplomatic missions.
- **Respect in the Roman Curia**, which is decisive for the effectiveness of internal reform.

**The risks involved:**

- It may seem "technocratic" and lacking in spiritual charisma.
- He is perceived as a man of the "curial system", which may generate opposition from those who favour a more radical break with the past.

**Alternativ:**

**Cardinal Matteo Cardinal Matteo Zuppi (Italy) - Archbishop of Bologna**

- If the conclave favours a **Pope of social and spiritual reconciliation**, Zuppi is the most credible option: a mediator in conflicts, close to peace movements, a good communicator with a clear synodal vision.
- He is more "pastoral" than Parolin, but with less international and curial experience.

**Conclusion:**

**Pietro Parolin** is the candidate who **best blends tradition with prudent reform**, diplomacy with authority, and **his chances are solid** if the conclave seeks a "balanced transitional pope".

**Conclusion:** The global influence of the Vatican and its geopolitical role are complex phenomena, arising from the unique fusion of religious power and diplomatic status. From the political muscle of the medieval popes to the *soft diplomacy* of modern pontiffs, the Vatican has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation and perseverance. Through its ubiquitous diplomatic network, the Holy See sits at the centre of the world's great issues; through the prestige and voice of the Pope, it steers the moral debate of the age; through the universally spread Catholic Church, it permeates culture and society with its values. The Vatican is often called "*the cradle of Christianity*", but as we have seen, it is also a **modern international actor**, using classical diplomatic tools alongside its spiritual influence. In a world fragmented and often lacking an ethical compass, the Vatican continues to act as a **moral beacon** and a **point of balance** in global relations - small in territory, but large in the power of the ideas and faith it represents

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