Vatican
Analysis



Pope Leo XIV speaks to apostolic nuncios and other papal diplomats during an audience at the Vatican on June 10, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Nearly a century ago, Soviet dictator Josef Stalin is said to have famously dismissed the Vatican's influence with a remark that has echoed through the decades: "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?" Though the phrase is historically debated in its exact origin, Winston Churchill attributed the quote to Stalin in his 1948 book *The Second World War: The Gathering Storm*.

The International Centre for Defence and Security explained Churchill's famous version, saying: "When the French foreign minister, Pierre Laval, went to Moscow in 1935 to enquire about the possibility of joint action against Germany and asked whether it was in his power to do something to improve the situation of Russian Catholics, Stalin reportedly replied with the famous quip."

Yet if Stalin's alleged quip was meant to ridicule the Vatican's soft power, its longevity only underscores the weight of papal influence on the global stage — even if it has no military power.

Fast forward to May 23, 2025: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov publicly cast doubt on the Vatican as an acceptable venue for mediation in the war with Ukraine. According to Reuters Lavrov said, "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 conflict]."

Despite the Vatican's long tradition of moral diplomacy and its recent efforts to open back channels between warring parties, its appeal to conscience appears, once again, to carry less impact than secular power at the negotiating table.

Just weeks after Pope Leo XIV's election, the global stage remains a troubled one. From the wars in Ukraine and Gaza to the simmering and ongoing crises between Israel and Iran, in South Sudan, Myanmar, and across Asia, the world seems more fractured than at any point in recent memory since World War II. Yet in the midst of this turmoil, the Vatican is determined to make its voice heard — not simply in prayer, but in active, engaged diplomacy.



Pope Leo XIV arrives for an audience at the Vatican with apostolic nuncios and other papal diplomats on June 10, 2025. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

On June 10, Leo gathered more than 160 apostolic nuncios and papal representatives from across the world at the Synod Hall in the Vatican for the Jubilee of Nuncios — a rare convocation originally planned under Pope Francis in preparation for the Jubilee Year. The meeting offered the pope his first occasion to articulate his vision for Vatican diplomacy in a world torn by war.

"I'm very encouraged, because I think he spoke very clearly, even christologically. His opening words were, 'Peace be with you.' And he made it very clear that that peace that Christ brings, he wants to bring to the world," said Archbishop Kevin Randall, the apostolic nuncio to Bangladesh, an American who was one of the nuncios taking part at the meeting.

In his address, Leo gave the assembled diplomats a renewed sense of mission. "He used a very important word," Randall told the National Catholic Reporter. "He said

that we're bridge-builders. And I've been meditating on that a lot. He said that our ministry was irreplaceable, which we weren't used to hearing that type of affirmation towards our work."

However, the Vatican faces increasing obstacles in its peacemaking role. After Lavrov's May 23 comments doubting Vatican mediation on Ukraine, some might question how effective the church's diplomatic voice can be in today's hardened international climate. But Randall insisted the mission of Vatican diplomacy remains vital.

"I think it can be. The Holy See has a long-standing tradition of willing participation in reconciliation processes. The only thing that they ask is that both of the parties ask them. They can't force it upon them. And that's already a bridge, because it gives them an opportunity," he said.



Archbishop Kevin Randall, apostolic nuncio to Bangladesh, visits the Diocese of Mymensingh in Bangladesh, in April 2024. (Courtesy of Kevin Randall)

"From the get-go, Pope Leo XIV has been very consistent," said Michael Driessen, professor of political science and international affairs at John Cabot University in Rome. "He seems to have consciously chosen international peace as the defining feature of his papacy so far."

In his first public statements, at least once a week since his election, Leo prioritized calls for peace in conflicts such as Gaza and Ukraine and condemned the arms trade — a thematic echo of his predecessor Francis, who often railed against the global arms industry.

But where Francis was known for bold, symbolic gestures, Leo may lean more toward institutional, formal diplomacy. "We're going to see less of the prophetic symbolic gestures that were a hallmark of Pope Francis and more institutional diplomacy," Driessen said. "It's an empirical question: Which one will work better?"

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Much of this effort will rely on the Vatican's unparalleled network of apostolic nuncios, namely the papal ambassadors stationed around the world. These representatives offer something few other diplomats can match: access to deep, credible grassroots information thanks to their close contacts with local church leaders, lay Catholics and missionaries.

"The Vatican has access to information that no other diplomatic corps has, about what everyday people are thinking," said Driessen. "Because of the unparalleled transnational networks the Catholic Church maintains, they can identify opportunities for peace and mediation others might miss."

This grassroots model was precisely the one Randall witnessed as a young Vatican diplomat during the difficult post-genocide years in Rwanda, under the guidance of then-nuncio, Archbishop Salvatore Pennacchio, who today heads the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy in Rome, where young selected priests from all over the world study to become Vatican diplomats and nuncios.

"I saw how he protected the local church when there were no bridges between the local church and the state," Randall said. "I saw his role as irreplaceable. A local church would find it very difficult to protect itself if the government isn't functioning well with the rule of law."



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Today, Randall brings that same experience and sensibility to his post in Bangladesh — an overwhelmingly Muslim nation where the Christian community is small and vulnerable. "The smaller Christian communities wouldn't be able to protect themselves," he explained. "I arrived in November 2023, and Pope Francis had a very clear mandate. He told me, 'Don't forget the Rohingya.' And so I took that very seriously."

Rather than staying behind a desk in the nunciature in Dhaka, Randall has made it a priority to travel, to see firsthand the needs of the church and the suffering of refugees. "I wanted to smell like my sheep, as the pope was telling us," he said with a smile. "So I left Dhaka and I was on the road visiting parishes, hospitals, and places where the sisters of Mother Teresa are. They have about 137 of them there. I've been visiting the dioceses and seeing the needs. I went to the refugee camps as well."

Archbishop Michael Crotty, apostolic nuncio to Nigeria, said, "The world is crying out for a center of gravity that is founded on moral principles. And no political authority can provide that." Crotty also met with Leo with his fellow nuncios on June 10

Sitting in his residence in Abuja, Crotty, a seasoned Vatican diplomat who previously served in Iraq, Canada and Spain, reflected on the enduring value — and challenge — of Vatican diplomacy in an age of cynicism and realpolitik. "There are limitations to the Holy See, and we're very frank about that," he told NCR.

"Even historically, take Pope Benedict XV during World War I. He denounced it in the strongest possible terms, yet the war went on. Or John Paul II in 2003, who did everything to stop the invasion of Iraq. But the war still happened. If you measure Vatican diplomacy by political outcomes, you miss the point," Crotty said.

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The real measure, Crotty said, is moral credibility and spiritual resonance. "We want to convert minds and hearts. Even in failure, we must always be a source of hope. The human heart needs to hear that voice, and that voice comes from the Holy Father, through us, his instruments."

Crotty also noted that the Vatican's moral stance often transcends religion. In his time serving in Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion, he witnessed how deeply John Paul II's opposition had impacted the Muslim world. "It was long remembered and appreciated. They saw the pope as the spiritual leader of all Christians," he said.

"There can be too much diplomacy by loud and public sound bites, but I think there has to be a role for quiet diplomacy," he said. "And I think the Holy See has excelled at that in the past, creating spaces where people can dialogue together."

Today's Vatican diplomacy has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability in a world of accelerating crises, said Pietro Sebastiani, former Italian ambassador to the Holy See and a veteran of postings in Moscow, New York, Paris and Brussels. "This is an organization that has lasted 17 centuries," he said.



Pietro Sebastiani, former ambassador of Italy to the Holy See (Courtesy of Telefono Azzurro)

"The Vatican Curia has demonstrated a great capacity for meritocracy and selecting capable people. Otherwise, it wouldn't have survived," Sebastiani said.

For secular diplomats, the Vatican's blend of spiritual mission and political acumen remains striking, he said. "We admire our colleagues in the Vatican Secretariat of State and the nuncios we encounter. They combine the harshness of diplomatic life with spiritual wisdom and reflection. And they understand something we often forget: the importance of time. In today's fast-paced world, they still value deliberation and patience."

"I see not only possibilities, but real opportunities," said Sebastiani when asked about the chances the Holy See governed by Leo has in terms of mediating today's conflicts. He pointed to the historical example of the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in Helsinki, which marked a high point of Cold War

diplomacy and included — for the first time since the early 1800s — the Holy See as a full participant.

"The Vatican's moral authority, its lack of territorial interests, and its standing on the global stage give it immense potential to contribute to new discussions on security — even 50 years after Helsinki."

"For instance, *Laudato Si*' was extraordinary — it heavily influenced the 2030 Agenda," he said. "When almost 200 countries, many of them secular and non-Christian, embrace principles rooted in Catholic social teaching, that's incredible."



Michael Driessen, professor of political science and international affairs at John Cabot University in Rome (Courtesy of John Cabot University)

Even in cases where parties refuse to recognize the Holy See as a formal mediator — as countries like Russia, North Korea and Afghanistan — Driessen said he sees room for influence: "That doesn't mean the Vatican won't have an important role in the background, facilitating talks or keeping channels open."

More broadly, Driessen argues that the Vatican still holds a singular moral voice on the world stage: "There is almost no other institution that has the public voice and authority the Catholic Church does, consistently speaking on behalf of international peace."

This approach reflects what Randall sees as a central strength of the Vatican's diplomatic service: not merely representing power, but embodying presence and moral witness. "We're not a worldly force, but I think the Vatican can appeal to the natural law, what's common to man's heart. The question is, does the person have an open heart? Is there willingness to dialogue?"

In this sense, the pope's vision of the nuncios as "bridge-builders" becomes even more crucial. "The Holy See has that apparatus. It's ready to go," Randall said.

"They can inform the global community about human rights or a lack thereof."