

The Mind of Francis: International Diplomacy

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Pope Francis

Like his two immediate predecessors, Pope Francis has no experience in international diplomacy. In the past, many popes like Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI came from the Vatican diplomatic corps. With many years of service as Vatican diplomats, these popes were comfortable as statesmen with a diplomatic roles. They already knew the Vatican line on international issues, and if they wanted to change it, they did it consciously.

Francis, on the other hand, has been thrust onto the international stage with little experience and limited knowledge of Vatican diplomatic negotiations. Luckily, Francis has said little in the past that would upset any country. In his book, *On Heaven and Earth*, he wrote little about international issues except globalization, which I treated in an earlier [posting](#) [1].

One country that could be upset with him is Turkey, since he refers to the "genocide of the Armenians." He compares what happened to them to what the Stalinist Communists did to the Ukrainians and the Nazis did to the Jews.

The Turks are unlucky with popes. As a cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger rarely spoke on international issues, but in contradiction to Vatican policy, he did oppose Turkey's entry into the European Union since it is not a Christian nation. As pope, Benedict changed his tune and during his 2006 visit to Turkey supported its application to the EU. Today, with the current economic crisis in Europe, many Turks are happy they did not get into the union and may consider Ratzinger a prophet.

A lack of experience can get a pope into trouble, especially if he does not consult. Pope Benedict severely harmed relations with Muslims when [what he said about Muhammad at Regensburg](#) [2] was badly received. Since Francis speaks off the cuff with colorful language, he may also get himself into trouble on sensitive international issues. However, he appears to be cautious when dealing with international issues. Although Rabbi Abraham Skorka spoke at length about the Arab-Israeli conflict in their book *On Heaven and Earth*, Bergoglio remained notably silent on the topic. Rather he talked in general about human relationships and conflict resolution. He did opine that "war must never be the path to resolution" of conflicts. He encouraged putting oneself in another's "seat" to see things from their perspective. Rather than seeking to get everyone to "affirm the same thing," citing Oscar Cullman, he proposed "that we walk together in a reconciled diversity."

Francis passed his first diplomatic test at the end of April when he had a successful meeting with the president of Israel. He made no mistakes and stuck to the official Vatican line.

But granted Francis's character and style of speaking, we should not expect him to speak bland diplomatic language all the time. In [speaking](#) [3] to new ambassadors to the Holy See on May 16, Francis showed that he is not afraid to throw some zingers when the topic is the economy. "The worship of the golden calf of old (cf. Ex 32:15-34) has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal," he told the ambassadors. He went on to lay out his understanding of the economy and role of government in the economy, which should give Catholic neo-

conservatives agita.

While the income of a minority is increasing exponentially, that of the majority is crumbling. This imbalance results from ideologies which uphold the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation, and thus deny the right of control to States, which are themselves charged with providing for the common good. A new, invisible and at times virtual, tyranny is established, one which unilaterally and irremediably imposes its own laws and rules. Moreover, indebtedness and credit distance countries from their real economy and citizens from their real buying power. Added to this, as if it were needed, is widespread corruption and selfish fiscal evasion which have taken on worldwide dimensions. The will to power and of possession has become limitless.

Francis, like Benedict, does not naively believe that the market is infallible and government is the enemy. But unlike Benedict, Francis knows how to use language that is clear, forceful and quotable. On economic issues, he is the voice of the poor, the unemployed, and the global south.

Three days later, Francis made the same points when speaking in St. Peter's Square. "Today, and it breaks my heart to say it, finding a homeless person who has died of cold, is not news," he said. "Today, the news is scandals, that is news, but the many children who don't have food - that's not news. This is grave. We can't rest easy while things are this way!" And in case you missed his point, he continues, "if investments in banks drop a little, it's a tragedy! But if people are starving, if they have nothing to eat, if they are not healthy, it does not matter! This is our crisis today! And the witness of a poor Church for the poor goes against this mentality.?"

On that same day he met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the European architect of economic austerity. She went away from the meeting expressing new concern for the victims of the European economic crisis. Most Europeans would consider that a homerun for Francis, although cynics would note she faces an election in September.

A pope does not make foreign policy on his own. What can save a diplomatically inexperienced pope is the well-trained and experienced diplomatic cadre in the Secretariat of State and in Vatican nunciatures (embassies) all over the world. These officials begin their careers as young priests studying at the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, the four-year training school of Vatican diplomats, where they study canon law, international law, ecclesiastical diplomacy, diplomatic history, languages and diplomatic writing (how to write a diplomatic report). The training is highly practical and lectures are often given by members of the Vatican diplomatic service. The graduates are then sent to nunciatures where they might spend three years in a country before moving to another or returning to Rome for work in the Secretariat of State. If they do well, they might become a nuncio (ambassador) by age 50.

The Vatican secretary of state is the top Vatican official under the pope. He is much more like a prime minister than a foreign minister. Whom Francis appoints as his secretary of state will have a profound impact on his papacy. John Paul II wisely kept Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, an experienced diplomat, as his Secretary of State until the pope became comfortable and experienced in his new job. Benedict's papacy, on the other hand, suffered because of the inexperience of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who was not liked or respected by many in the Vatican.

Under the secretary, the Secretariat of State is divided into two sections. The second section, for relations with states, is made up of about 40 staff organized by country desks, a pattern similar to that in foreign offices around the world. The second section is headed by Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the secretary for relations with states, who is the Vatican's foreign minister.

Granted his lack of experience and knowledge of international issues, Pope Francis will undoubtedly follow the advice of his diplomatic advisors and stay close to positions the Vatican has taken in the past. But when it comes to the economy, he is going to speak his mind forcefully.

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