Pope Francis and Vatican Diplomacy

By Drew Christiansen, S.J.
Christ Church—Episcopal, Georgetown, D.C.
June 10, 2014

In a new book, Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, predicted that we can expect new diplomatic initiatives from Pope Francis. The interreligious prayer service this past weekend in the Vatican gardens is an example of the Pope’s personal diplomacy as was the Day of Prayer for Peace last year in advance of the projected US bombing of Syrian chemical weapon sites. But Francis has also opted for a more forthright use of Vatican diplomacy, sending off Vatican diplomats at the time of the chemical weapons crisis and to last February’s Geneva conference on Syria. The collaboration with the Church of England on anti-trafficking programs is another example of his activist policy.

In naming Parolin as secretary of state, the Holy Father also chose a man able to fulfill his aspirations for Vatican diplomacy. Cardinal Parolin is a modest man, a good listener, an effective negotiator and a quiet but decisive policymaker. He made progress in opening relations with Vietnam, prepared the ground for an opening with China, and worked less successfully to conclude long-running negotiations with Israel.

Pope Francis has also let it be known that the first step in the restructuring of the Roman Curia will be to focus the Secretariat of State on diplomatic affairs. That focus will not only be on symbolic religious events, though they have a role on which I will say something at the end, but also on more energetic diplomacy in the usual fora aimed at pragmatic results.

On a new opening with China, for example, I would not expect competing bureaucracies like the Congregation for Evangelization, staffed by anti-Communist eastern Europeans and Taiwanese, to be able to block forward movement, as they have done in the past. I would also look to see the informal collaboration worked out by Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli whereby there was joint appointment of bishops, which lasted several years, to be revived. Some of those appointments aided the reconciliation of approved and unapproved Catholic communities in China. That reconciliation between “the two faces of the Church” is a high-priority concern of the Vatican in advance of normalization of relations.

I also believe the Chinese rightly see in Francis as a Jesuit pope a certain openness toward cultural diversity that will permit greater accommodation with Chinese civilization on the model of Matteo Ricci, the seventeenth century Jesuit scholar-missionary. Ricci is still revered by the Chinese as the westerner who best understood and respected their culture.

Not all the Church’s international affairs, however, will be out of the Secretariat of State. The Pope’s close relationship with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew already constitutes a symbolic diarchy. In addition to strictly religious events like the celebration of the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in 2025, we shall probably see collaboration on secular problems like...
ecology, a matter of concern to both of them. Significant initiatives are also underway with the Russian Orthodox, especially through the two churches’ UN observer missions in Geneva.

Of course, the Muslim world presents an array of problems and opportunities. In his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Pope Francis showed an intuitive sense on how to escape the snares of previous papal missions, by bringing along his own Jewish and Muslim confidants, Rabbi Skorka and Sheik Abboud. But, much of the work on Islamic relations will belong to the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, headed by the veteran former secretary for relations with states Jean-Louis Tauran. Though Tauran is afflicted with Parkinson’s disease, he has already been an adviser and spokesman for Francis. An innovator at the Secretariat of State, I think that given Francis’ much greater openness to diversity, we shall see Tauran and his council work with greater freedom and initiative than it did under Pope Benedict, who narrowly prescribed what might be done with Muslims.

Finally, in the wake of the pilgrimage and Sunday’s prayer for peace, there has been a lot of speculation on the practical pay-off of symbolic religious initiatives. Let me recommend to you a column from today’s Times of Malta by Andre de Battista. De Battista makes two points. First, he quotes Arthur Schlesinger, “Success and failure must be defined against the opportunities to change the direction of events.” I think we can say that from visiting refugees on Lampedusa to kissing the hands of Holocaust survivors at Yad Vashem, Francis as shown an uncanny ability to seize on events to capture the imagination of the world.

Secondly, DeBattista explains the power of witness to change hearts and minds—and ultimately events. He quotes Cornell West. West defines prophetic witness as “human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust causes of human hurt and misery.” The goal, West argues, “is to stir in us the courage to care and to empower us to change our lives and our historical circumstances.” Seldom have we seen a leader so able to give witness even in the chance encounters of daily life as Pope Francis does. God willing, Inshallah, he will live long enough to rouse us from our indolent slumber to meet the pressing challenges of our day.

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