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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Dr. Ivy Hamerly for not only overseeing the research and writing of this paper, but for having been and continuing to be such an invaluable mentor during my time at Baylor.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Holy See's role within the international order of states. Although viewed primarily as a religious institution, the Holy See's position as a sovereign state and head of a religious body allows it to have a prominent voice on the world stage. I examine the IR theories of constructivism and realism in relation to the Holy See's influence. This comparison illustrates how the Holy See can affect international action due to its emphasis on diplomacy and peace. I review the history and ability of the Holy See to implement a diplomatic approach to engage with states multilaterally and bilaterally. This paper argues that the Holy See uses soft power to work with other countries on shared concerns. Despite the traditional way of viewing states and power, the Holy See has an important role in global affairs, although lacking the abilities many large states have.

KEYWORDS

leadership, international relations, diplomacy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sovereign states that dominate in the world of international politics are usually those with a very large land area or population. It is easy to see this with examples such as the United States, India, Russia, and China. One state that has neither of these is the Holy See. The Holy See controls the very small territory that is Vatican City. It does not have the typical features of an influential global state, as it has a small standing army, no nuclear weapons, no GDP of its own, no natural resources, and a population of about 1,000 people. However, the Holy See does have extraordinary abilities that allow it to influence world politics: it is a permanent observer state at the United Nations, it has a seat at the UN General Assembly, the Pope and Roman Curia regularly meet with heads of states, and it acts as a member of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). I argue that the Holy See plays an important role in international affairs, both as a political and religious actor, due to its unique nature. Regardless of the factors that would inhibit the Holy See from having any sort of role in shaping what goes on in the world, its remarkable circumstances allow the Holy See and the Pope to be respected on the global stage. This paper explains how international relations (IR) theories view the power of the Holy See, what the Holy See is and how it operates, how it exhibits its power on the world stage, why the Holy See involves itself in world affairs, and how it can influence global politics in the future.

2. REALISM

One of the key questions that this paper addresses is: *How influential is the Holy See's role in international politics?* Two IR theories that can be contrasted with regard to the Holy See are the realist and constructivist theories. Realism views the world in a way that is concerned primarily with states. As it is a theory based on human nature, realism tends to see states and decision-makers as egoistic and looking out for their own interests. These nation-states are therefore expected to seek power, wealth and security for themselves, and they achieve those goals through military and economic might, which is also categorized as hard power.

The Holy See is clearly not a state that follows the realist model. It is a state that lacks many basic necessities for an influential global actor. Things like a lack of a strong or large army, having no nuclear weapons, and generating little, if any, economic output, all inhibit the Holy See from being powerful. A realist would thus view the Holy See as a very weak state, and one which would have little to no influence on the global stage. Furthermore, the manner in which the Holy See is run also hinders its influence and power according to realism. Hans Morgenthau, an influential realist thinker, argued that power is needed in international politics, while “[m]orality [is] something that should be avoided in policymaking” (Antunes & Camisão, 2017, p. 16). However, the Holy See as not only a state but a religious body, governs in a way consistent with the Catholic Church’s morality. It pursues ends that are based on morality such as respect for human rights, religious freedom, and social equity. Randall Schweller from Ohio State University in an interview about realism cautions that a state “is going to get involved everywhere” (Soomo Publishing, 2011) if it pursues a policy of crusading against certain human rights abuses. The Pope and the Holy See, however, do exactly this, proving once again that the Vatican does not fit the mold of a typical realist state.

3. CONSTRUCTIVISM

In sharp contrast to realism, the constructivist theory of IR would view the Holy See as quite a powerful institution. Constructivism asserts the importance of “actors [who] continually shape—and sometimes reshape—the very nature of international relations through

their actions and interactions”(Theys, 2017, p. 36). These changes, in turn, are based upon ideas, identities, and norms. The different ideas and norms the international system follows are constructed by the actors. Importantly, these actors do not have to be just states, but can be individuals or institutions.

The Holy See carries out certain actions and policies that are based on a set of mostly recognized norms and identities that other states and groups tend to follow. For example, the Holy See promotes the freedom of religion for all, not just Christians. This is recognized by different states, such as the U.S., and by institutions, such as the United Nations. Constructivists understand that as perspectives have changed in world politics, these ideas and beliefs are now widely accepted when previously they were not as accepted, which underscores the influence of the Holy See in world affairs.

Another unique aspect constructivists would point out in regard to the Holy See’s power, is that the Holy See is not just a state. The Holy See represents and is the head of the Catholic Church, with about 1 billion adherents. As a result of this identity, the Holy See can influence many internationally, as they provide a set of moral norms for many across the world. A constructivist would argue that “actions of a state should be aligned with its identity” (Theys, 2017, p. 37). This is no problem for the Holy See, as its use and promotion of diplomacy and peace is in line with its core identity. The Holy See benefits from its nature as a religious institution, since its goal is to be a beacon of hope and peace for countless people. As a result, many can see the Holy See as a credible institution, which causes it to be prominent. Even without the threat of invading another country or forcing economic sanctions, the Holy See can still be an influential actor due to its ideals and its position.

4. HISTORY OF THE HOLY SEE

In order to appreciate the unique position and power of the Holy See today, one must understand the Catholic Church and its history. The Catholic Church is currently the largest Christian denomination in the world, with about 1.34 billion Catholics spread across the globe (Glatz, 2021). Not only is it an important religious institution, but “the Holy See is the oldest continuing international organization in the world” (Rychlak, 2011). The Holy See is not just older than organizations like the UN, but also many sovereign states. Even if Vatican City is a new creation, the Papacy is an ancient and historic institution.

The Church and its leader, the Pope, have been in existence since the 1st century A.D. The Pope’s leadership comes from the primacy, or preeminence, of Peter, an apostle of Jesus, although its early history is difficult to distinguish from mythology. In the Bible, specifically in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells Peter that he will be the “rock” that Jesus will build his church upon (Collins, 2013). This recognition of Peter gave him primacy not just over the other apostles of Jesus, but also over all the ensuing governing hierarchy of the early Christian Church. When Peter created an episcopal see in Rome, the city became the governing center of the new faith. It was also in Rome where Peter, along with Christianity’s another key figure, Paul of Tarsus, were later martyred, which gave even more spiritual significance to the city.

The Catholic Church rose to prominence with Emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire granting religious freedom to Christianity in 313 with the Edict of Milan. This was followed by the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, which declared Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman Empire: “We desire all people, whom the benign influence of our clemency rules, to turn to the religion which tradition from Peter to the present day to have been delivered to the Romans by the blessed Peter the Apostle” (Ehler, 1988, p. 7).It was

however later, starting in the 8th century A.D., that the Church's power became more than spiritual. It was then that a number of donations of sovereign land from different rulers were given to the Bishop of Rome. These land donations culminated in the creation of the Papal States in 756. Papal temporal power was further solidified when Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, 800 AD.

The Holy See was deeply involved in European affairs throughout the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Enlightenment. It maintained its power and influence even after the Protestant Reformation began. However, the Papal States became threatened during the *Risorgimento*, or Italian Unification. After Italy became a unified monarchy in 1861, Pope Pius IX “refused to bow down to the new kingdom” (Vatican News, 2020). Pius called himself a “prisoner in the Vatican” after King Victor Emmanuel II annexed Rome. The Vatican City as we know it now as well as the end of the Papal States both date to February 11, 1929. The Lateran Treaty established the independence and sovereignty of Vatican City, and made it completely distinct from the state of Italy (Vatican News, 2020). As a result, the Pope now controls the small territory centered around St. Peter's Basilica, with a number of extraterritorial holdings in Rome and Italy. Even with this small land ownership, the Pope directs the Holy See to be an important actor on the world stage.

5. FORM OF GOVERNMENT LIKE NO OTHER

The Holy See operates distinctively, in that it is a theocracy with a head monarch, albeit not in the traditional sense. It is unique not just as a religious entity but also as a political entity. The Holy See is an “ecclesiastical elective monarchy, self-described as an absolute monarchy” (CIA, 2021). The Pope is the head of this theocracy, as it is a state governed by Catholicism. Even as the Pope holds supreme power over the city-state of the Vatican, the Pope is an absolute monarch who is elected. This distinguishes the Holy See from other monarchies. Every time a Pope dies or resigns, the College of Cardinals or the body of the Church's cardinals, gather to elect a new Pope. A two-thirds vote elects the new Bishop of Rome. The Pope also holds “supreme legislative, executive, and judicial power and sends and receives diplomatic representatives” (Country Watch, 2020). As the Pope is just one man and must also oversee theological matters, he delegates others to carry out much of governmental and diplomatic work. Directly appointed by the Pope, apostolic nuncios are the Church's diplomats that represent the Holy See in other sovereign states and international organizations, including the United Nations. Nuncios are the Holy See's equivalent of ambassadors. The larger administrative group of the Holy See's governing body is known as the Roman Curia. The Curia “perform their duties in his [the Pope's] name and with his authority” (Paul VI, 1965). This body is the central organization that works with outside groups, organizations, and governments to advance the Church and Pope's interests. The Curia is broken down into many divisions, as not only is the Church a very large world institution, but it must address topics that vary. As many different peoples and groups fall under Catholic jurisdiction, and thus the Holy See's jurisdiction, the Roman Curia is broken up into secretariats, dicasteries, congregations, tribunals, pontifical councils and commissions, and the Swiss Guard. The secretariats can be viewed as the leaders of the Curia, especially the Secretariat of State. This Secretariat, currently led by Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin, “is similar to a head of government” (Country Watch, 2020). The Secretariat of State for the Holy See oversees all political and diplomatic activities of the Holy See. The Secretariat is further broken up into two sections, the first being General Affairs and the second being Relations with States. The second section is more of the diplomatic-minded

section, as current Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Paul Gallagher speaks on different political issues and topics from around the world. One recent example of Archbishop Gallagher's work and dealings with other diplomatic entities was from February 2021. He appealed, through a video message, to the 46th Session of the UN's Human Rights Council about the importance of protecting human rights (Mayaki, 2021). The current dicasteries and pontifical councils are the groups within the Curia that deal with specific issues the Church directly cares about, for example, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. This unique system differentiates the Holy See from other state governments as the members of the Curia are both political and spiritual leaders. These leaders focus on how the Holy See can use its power to promote the Church's teachings on the world stage.

6. THE HOLY SEE'S SOFT POWER

The Holy See displays its political power mainly through the use of soft power. Although the Holy See has an "army" in the form of the Swiss Guard, it is never used in an offensive manner, nor in helping partners in conflicts. It is solely the Pope's personal protection. Nor does the Holy See have much economic leverage in that it could produce sanctions and trade deals, as Vatican City is such a small state. However, the Holy See's specialty in international politics is using its soft power. Joseph Nye defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals" (Nye, 2003). He continues to say in the same piece that "attraction depends on credibility." The Holy See has both of these, the ability to use soft power and credibility. Its long history, as well as being the representative of a belief system of over 1 billion people, has allowed the Holy See to be quite respected. In fact, the Holy See has diplomatic relations with 183 nations (Holy See Press Office, 2019). This is quite a large number for a theocratic government. In comparison, the Islamic Republic of Iran has diplomatic relations with 97 states. The recognition of the Holy See coincides with the Pope's status as a large social figure. Dr. Timothy Byrnes, Professor of Political Science at Colgate University, states that "there is no 'non-governmental actor' that would attract as much media attention as the Pope does" (Byrnes, 2021).

This credibility of the Holy See and the Pope allows them to use soft power in several ways. According to Dr. Byrnes in a webinar on the Papacy hosted by Georgetown's Berkley Center, the Holy See asserts its soft power in two ways: directly and indirectly. The Holy See does this directly as a sovereign state actor. Influencing other actors by the "power of attraction," the Holy See can advocate for the interests of the Church. It exerts direct soft power through dialogue with other state actors, representation at international organizations like the UN, and through Papal visits. Direct soft power is the most obvious and tangible facet of the Holy See's power. The second way the Holy See uses its soft power is indirectly. Dr. Byrnes characterizes this as an "effort by the Pope in influencing the 1 billion Catholics across the world." Faithful Catholics will pay attention and obey the Pope, not just on theological matters, but with social and political matters as well. Evidence of this can be seen within the United States, as many American Catholics are quite active in the pro-life movement against abortion. The Pope, as Byrnes emphasizes in the webinar, "can make the same claims to Catholics as he does with world actors and government leaders." The exhibition of soft power is the Pope's distinctive specialty. The Pope's platform is one of the most prominent in the world today, due to the number of people who pay attention to what he has to say. Remarkably, the Pope's message can reach both global players and the common person, as he speaks to both because of the office he holds.

7. THE HOLY SEE'S MISSION

As the representative of the largest Christian denomination in the world, the Holy See wants to involve itself in global affairs to speak on behalf of its adherents and to effect change. The Holy See “articulates certain interests, teachings, political goals, and uses his [the Pope’s] office to advance those goals” (Byrnes, 2021). Byrnes maintains that there are three main reasons the Pope uses his power: to protect the institutional interests of the Church, to advance the moral teachings of the Church, and to argue in favor of structuring religious relationships a certain way. Being the leader of the Catholic Church, the Pope must push for policies and actions that advance the Church’s teachings and interests. Relating back to IR theory, this can be understood as the Pope trying to protect the Holy See’s national interest, which in this instance is also the Church’s interests.

The Holy See also involves itself in world affairs to speak for those who it may not represent as members, but whom it serves. In this, the Church serves the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable of the world. This is the message of solidarity and caring it wishes to emphasize. According to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, in an entry in a Seton Hall journal on international relations, “the Holy See has always been at the forefront of the church’s efforts to proclaim the Gospel of Christ” (Sodano, 2011, p. 88). Thus, many Popes have used their platform to speak for those who do not have a voice. Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* stated, “every precaution should be taken not to violate the rights of individuals and not to impose unreasonable regulations under pretense of public benefit.” Pope Leo XIII, through this encyclical, sought to stress the importance of respecting the rights of individuals, workers, and the poor. Although Leo’s encyclical emphasized the worker’s plight and labor, he focused on the dignity of the human person which is universal. Pope Francis today has taken this message of social solidarity with the marginalized of the world to an even higher level.

The Holy See uses its influence to push for recognition, awareness, and understanding of the impact many decisions have had on the poor of the world. Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, Archbishop Gallagher, said in an interview with Catholic News Agency, “it is easy enough for us to say things in Rome or say something in the international press, but the local people have to take the consequences” (Mares, 2018). The Catholic Church is one of the largest actors that provides education and medical support for the world’s poor. The strong emphasis on the poor can be seen in Francis’ encyclicals *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*. In *Laudato Si’*, he directs his attention towards the natural world and the environment, but stresses how the poor are the ones who suffer the most from climate change. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis accentuates what Pope Leo focused on, the rights of individuals. He underscores this by saying:

Closely observing our contemporary societies, we see numerous contradictions that lead us to wonder whether the equal dignity of all human beings, solemnly proclaimed seventy years ago, is truly recognized, respected, protected, and promoted. (Francis, 2020)

Pope Francis here directly challenges world actors, as he is alluding to the UN’s *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This push for a respect for all, human rights and social justice is a large component of why the Holy See is and will continue to be involved in global affairs.

8. TOOLS OF INFLUENCE

The Holy See can influence the future by working with governments and promoting certain policies on several issues the Church deeply cares about. The Holy See continues

to push for policies and programs that will bring about social justice and peace not just for Catholics but the whole world. As the leader of the Catholic faith, the Papacy's mission is to serve others and guide the faithful to this end goal. Topics and issues the Holy See will continue to work towards are things like nuclear disarmament, climate change, an end to conflicts, and interreligious dialogue. Advocating, educating, and writing will all be the primary tools for the Holy See in influencing global politics moving forward. With the example of Pope Francis, one can say that he stresses climate change, social fraternity, and the welcoming of migrants as his main causes. *Laudato Si'* not only focuses on the environment but the poor who are affected, as previously mentioned. Pope Francis is one of the first pontiffs to stress the seriousness of climate change. In the encyclical, he remarks, "we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach... so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (Francis, 2015). This emphasis is rare for a global actor, as international relations are typically focused on one or the other, if they are focused on the issue of climate change or the poor at all. The Holy See will use the Francis-created Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (IHD) to push for the message of *Laudato Si'* to be heard on the global stage.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis stresses the importance of social fraternity and peace among different groups who may have a conflict of interests. Pope Francis' trip to Iraq in March of 2021 built on the themes present in *Fratelli Tutti*, as well as underlining the importance of interreligious dialogue. Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor in chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, spoke in a webinar about how the meeting with the Ayatollah in Iraq was important. Ayatollah Al-Sistani is an important figure in Shia Islam who preaches that religious figures should abstain from direct political activity. Fr. Spadaro stated that "Francis destroys established narratives and geopolitical strategies [in Iraq]" (The Pope's Visit to Iraq, 2021). The two different leaders speaking about the importance of interreligious cooperation is a shift forward for the future of global politics, especially among differing actors. This furthers the steps Pope Francis took with Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb in signing the *Document on Human Fraternity*.

The modern Papacy is exceptional in that it has many tools to embark on this journey of working on issues the Church cares about. Dr. Byrnes noted that the Papacy's soft power can be used to shape global politics in the future. Pope John XXIII is considered to have begun this shift as he used global media to bring attention to the 2nd Vatican Council (Byrnes, 2021). John XXII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* was issued during the heat of nuclear tensions, and he spoke to both world leaders and Catholics alike. Pope John Paul II continued this practice as he used the global media and international travel "to influence and direct world affairs" (Byrnes, 2021). Pope John Paul II traveled to many countries to convince world leaders to believe in the teachings of the Church, not in a theological way, but more as the association of interests soft power speaks of.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The Holy See is a global institution like no other. On the one hand, it has the components of and acts as a sovereign state. On the other hand, it is also a religious institutions which represents 1 billion Catholics around the world. Given its dual role, the Holy See uses its influence and power—mainly soft power—to push for policies it views as beneficial not just to the institution of the Holy See, but also to the wider Catholic Church. In the realm of international relations, the robust diplomatic activity and global influence of the Holy See make it quite a powerful actor—a reality which is easily recognized by constructivists, in contrast to the realist view.

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