

Caesar and God
The Holy See and World Diplomacy

The Most Reverend Mark Coleridge
Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn

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I am no professional diplomat, and therefore it may seem impertinent for me to address a topic such as this. At the same time, my interest in diplomacy goes back a long way. It was even my intended profession when I left school. At the end of my schooling, I had not the slightest thought of the priesthood. It wasn't that I was against the idea; it simply wasn't on the radar screen. I had written off to the Department of Foreign Affairs asking for information about the diplomatic corps. They had replied with sheaf of information and off to the university I went thinking that diplomacy was the path for me to follow. In time however that changed, and I chose the priesthood.

Yet having chosen the priesthood and been ordained in 1974, I was drawn along a strange path that led me eventually to work in the Holy See's Secretariat of State; and it was there – as a very lowly official, let me say – that I learnt more of the role of diplomacy in world affairs than I ever thought I would learn as a priest. I also learnt more of why the Holy See is such a distinctive and creative voice in the great conversations that constitute international diplomacy; and that is what I would like to reflect upon here.

In more recent times, voices have been heard questioning the presence of the Holy See in world diplomacy and even calling for the Holy See's exclusion from representation to international bodies and agencies, in particular the United Nations. Such calls are usually driven by ideology of one kind or another, or even by something even less rational such as a loathing for the Catholic Church and all she stands for.

Certainly they are poorly informed on the score of history. Part of the answer to the question, Why is the Holy See involved in world diplomacy? is simply: Because the Holy See has *always* been a part of world diplomacy as we know it. The Holy See was one of the founding fathers – or mothers if you prefer – of the diplomatic system and culture which have evolved into what we have now. The Holy See was in on the ground long before the nation-state emerged from the ruck of history.

Its engagement has been configured differently from time to time as the political character of the Holy See itself changed. When, for instance, the Papal States were consolidated in the middle part of Italy and the Pope exercised considerable temporal power, indeed looked often enough like just another Renaissance prince, the Holy See could look like just another player in the game of diplomacy, no different from any other. But since the loss of the Papal States in 1870 – with the final blow coming at the end of a long process – the character of Papal diplomacy was forced to change, and that change continued through the twentieth century. The loss of the Papal States seemed a disaster at the time – certainly Pope Pius IX thought it was – but it has had the paradoxical effect of making the Holy See a more potent voice in world diplomacy rather than a prisoner of the Vatican, as the Pope was thought to be, or an ecclesiastical institution with some supposedly spiritual mission.

This was especially clear through the twenty-six years of John Paul II's pontificate. He was a Pope who was in some ways more at his ease with the Church *ad extra* than with the Church *ad intra*. By this I mean that he was more energised by questions of the Church's engagement with the wider world, the world outside the Church, than he was by questions internal to the Church herself. In that sense, he was not a churchy Pope. And the world listened to him, not necessarily on every issue, but on many issues of great moment. The extraordinary presence of world leaders at his Funeral was symbolic of the presence he had been on the world-stage and what weight he had given to the Holy See's voice in the field of world diplomacy.

Under Pope John Paul, the number of nations seeking diplomatic relations with the Holy See increased dramatically, to the point where it wasn't and isn't easy to find the resources and personnel to establish and maintain all the diplomatic missions. Nunciatures have to be built and the right people have to be found and trained to staff them well. The first puts a strain on Peter's Pence, and the second puts a strain on clergy resources at a time when vocations are not as plentiful as they once were in many of the traditional areas of recruitment for the Holy See's diplomatic service.

Why do so many countries seek to establish diplomatic relations with the Holy See? Part of the answer is that, as a clearing-house of information drawing upon the Church's network, the Holy See remains a unique listening-post in the diplomatic world. Then there is the distinctive view on situations and issues which the Church can bring. It's said that in a suburban area or a country town, if you want to know what's really happening among the people, then ask the Parish Priest. Take that to another level altogether, indeed to the international level, and you have a kind of wisdom noted by Madeleine Albright. As Secretary of State to the Clinton Administration, Albright was asked once why she visited the Vatican whenever she passed through Rome. Her answer was simple: "There's a lot of wisdom up there", and she was right. It's a wisdom born of long collective memory and a remarkable flow of information through the offices of the Holy See, drawing not only upon some 170 diplomatic missions throughout the world but also upon the vast grass-roots network of the universal Church which not even the greatest empires, past or present, could hope to match. That produces a kind of wisdom denied to a nation-state, but very useful to the nation-state nonetheless.

It seems to me that one of the most creative contributions of the Holy See to world diplomacy comes from the fact that it is not a nation-state. Yes, there is the 109 acres of the Vatican City State, the Vatican flies its own flag and even has its own Papal Anthem. But none of that makes the Vatican City State in any way a nation-state like Australia or the USA. The Holy See in world diplomacy is a presence of a different kind with a voice of a different kind.

The chief goal of the diplomatic activity of a nation-state like Australia is to defend and promote the national interest, which often intersects or coincides with commercial interests. In Australia, for instance, what was once the Department of Foreign Affairs is now the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Yet the Holy See has no trade interests to promote or defend. Nor does it have any national interest to promote or defend. It does defend the interests of the Church and of religion in general, but that is almost always to ensure the freedom of the Church and religion from state interference which has been an age-old problem and is very much a problem in certain countries today. These may sound like negative claims – that the Church has no commercial or national interests to promote or defend. Yet this is precisely why the Holy See makes a distinctive contribution to world diplomacy and why the Holy See should stay right where it is in the field.

The fact that the Holy See is not concerned with its own commercial and national interests mean that it is free to promote and defend other interests. Under John Paul II, it became increasingly clear that the point of Vatican diplomacy was to defend the interests of the human person – whoever, however and wherever – and to promote whatever makes for true human flourishing in society. In other words, the Holy See's diplomacy is based upon a vision of the human person which is itself drawn from the vision of human dignity and possibility that comes from the vision of the Risen Christ who, in the words of Vatican II, "reveals man to man". This in turn gives rise to a particular understanding of the ecology of human society which makes for true human flourishing, by which I mean that human society doesn't become simply a war of the strong against the weak, of the rich against the poor.

This is a way of saying to the world that there is something before and beyond the nation-state – and that something is in the first place the human being. But it is also God, or to put it more obliquely, the transcendent. To have the Holy See as part of the fabric of world diplomacy is a way of intruding the transcendent into a world and a culture which can be not only brutally self-interested but also brutally self-enclosed and therefore one-dimensional. But the presence of the Holy See can set the business of diplomacy within a larger frame-work and therefore open up the possibility of other dimensions and give to diplomacy its proper measure in the scheme of things.

I said before that the Holy See's involvement in world diplomacy goes back before the emergence of the nation-state. This is worth recalling at a time when the nation-state itself is being reconfigured by the pressures and processes that usually go under the rubric of globalisation. Where is the nation-state as we have known it heading? I'm not sure; but it is certainly passing through a time of change. I doubt that it will vanish altogether, though given that it appeared at a particular time in history and under a particular set of pressures, that is not impossible. But even if it doesn't vanish altogether, things will change and are changing. It may not be as obvious in an island-nation like Australia, but in other parts of the world, less distant and less isolated, things look different. It may well be that, at this time when the nation-state is being reconfigured, the Holy See can make a distinctive and creative contribution to the discussion as to what alternatives we might have and what future we might be able to shape. The Holy See may help the world to see what lies beyond the constraints and interests of the nation-state, and also what lies beyond the constraints and interests of the great corporations who these days seem often to be the logical successors to the nation-state, the centres where real power lies.

In the end, the large question concerns what it means for the Church to be "in the world but not of it". The Catholic Church in particular has never been a Church that seeks to retire into some separate world in which supposedly pure religion can be practiced without disturbance: we are not like the Amish people. Because we take as our starting-point the Incarnation, the Catholic Church is committed to an immersion in the flesh of things, even the flesh of world diplomacy. But this requires that the Church maintain her distinctive presence and voice rather than become just like all the others. We are there only in order to be different. If the difference were to disappear, then I would agree with those who call for the Holy See's exclusion from the field of world diplomacy. To say that we must be "in the world but not of it" is to imply that the relationship between Church and State, God and Caesar, is not as cut-and-dried as it may seem and as some would want it to be.

Consider the story told in the Gospels of Jesus replying to the sticky question of whether it was in accord with the Torah, the Jewish Law, to pay taxes to Caesar. In absolutely typical fashion, Jesus refuses to meet the questioner on the ground that the question proposes. Jesus shifts ground (and invites the questioner to do the same) by asking for a coin: "Whose head do you see?" "Caesar's", comes the reply. Then we hear the famous admonition, "Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's". But what do these words

mean? They have often been taken to mean a radical separation of Church and State. But do they? What they seem to me to do is reduce Caesar to a mere tax-collector rather than glorify him as the divine authority which the totalitarian ideology of the Empire claimed the Emperor to be. Caesar has a role to play – collect and distribute the taxes for the good functioning of society as a whole; but Caesar is not God. The State has its role to play; but the State is not absolute. God alone is that; God alone is God. In these terms, the Holy See can perhaps help to keep the State in its place and to keep God in his place – in the belief that this sense of harmony and proportion is required for the good of the human being and for the good of human society.

Let me conclude by reflecting upon the figure of Thomas More after whom this Forum and this Parish are named. More was a man in a high position of political responsibility precisely at the time when the nation-state as we know it was coming to birth. That was at the heart of the issues which led King Henry VIII to break communion with the Holy See and to establish a national Church. The logic seemed impeccable: a new nation-state needed a new national Church without interference from the Holy See, conceived as one foreign power in cahoots with others, most of them hostile to England. In that sense, Henry was not dissimilar to those who these days call for the Holy See's exclusion from world affairs. However impeccable the King's logic may have seemed to many, Thomas More was one who rejected it. Why did he do so, given that it cost him his life? The answer is clearly more than some ideological commitment to the Romish faith or some disloyalty to the nation and the King whom he had served well. More understood with unusual clarity that there is and must be something beyond the political imperatives of the nation-state, imperatives which he understood better than most. If they are made absolute, then so too is the State; and that was something which More could not accept. His life depended ultimately upon something greater. He died saying that he was the King's good servant but God's above all. Here he was echoing one of the mottoes of the Coleridge family: "*Deum cole, rege serva*", "Worship God, serve the King".

What More died for is, I think, what the Holy See stands for in world affairs. The imperatives of politics, diplomacy and trade do matter, but they do not matter ultimately. They take their proper place within a larger scheme of things, a larger scheme which looks to God. The King is always to be served, but God alone is to be worshipped. To insist upon that may seem to be a vapid, irrelevant and unwelcome intrusion into a world where the Church has no place, especially the Catholic Church seen by some as the last bastion of a life-denying medieval obscurantism. But it may also be a unique contribution to the whole human family, a service to the human being – whoever, however, wherever. “How many divisions does the Pope have?” Stalin asked scornfully. A hundred Swiss Guard is the strict answer, and that wouldn’t have impressed Stalin. But the Holy See does have access to another power, and that power – I would claim, with Thomas More and others like him – has its special place in world affairs, for without it those affairs would become not only more or less Stalinist but also more or less satanic.